

Behold, I AM Making all Things New!

— Meditations on Revelation —

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Unless otherwise noted, direct Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).
References from the NIV are from the 1984 edition.

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Revelation (Rev 1.1-3)

Classic questions in philosophy include, “How do we know what we know?” and “How do we know that what we know is true or false?” The study of these questions falls within the realm of what is known as epistemology, which addresses the nature of knowledge, truth, belief, and the way we justify our beliefs.

Most philosophers (Christians and non-Christians) agree that there are a few basic forms of knowledge:

- Knowledge that we know innately—born with—that is not acquired through any form of reason or experience.
- Knowledge that we develop through rational thought processes (e.g., logical inference) from previous known facts.
- Knowledge that we acquire through experience and learning—that is, by observing events in our environment and conducting experiments.

A primary difference between Christian and non-Christian explanations for the origin of knowledge falls within the area of the first class of knowledge—that which is innate. A non-Christian philosopher or natural scientist claims that innate knowledge (e.g., instinctual responses such as suckling or the ability to process language) developed incrementally through millions of years of evolution. In contrast, a Bible-believing Christian contends that a person is endowed by God with innate knowledge at his conception. This innate knowledge includes the ability to perform physical processes such as breathing but also the ability to think logically and apply concepts such as sequence, ordinality, equivalence, and non-contradiction. In addition, Paul informs us that innate knowledge includes facts about non-physical reality, since all men are born knowing of the existence of God and of his righteous moral requirements (Rom 1.18-20).

Christian and non-Christian philosophers both agree that we can acquire knowledge through reason and experience. The difference of opinion between the two ‘schools’ lies in how we approach the nature of truth and fact and the validation of our beliefs. At the root of the discussion about knowledge lies a fundamental consideration about the ultimate source for establishing truth. For a non-Christian, the ultimate source must be his own opinion. What he learns through personal observation or experience or from the word of others, must be processed through his own filters before it is accepted as true—that is through his presuppositions. For example, a non-Christian presented with a book assumes that it was written by a human author and produced through a mechanical printing and binding process designed by human engineers. Whereas, because he assumes that there is no God, he foolishly claims that the information contained in the human genome was assembled by random coincidental alignment using biochemical assembly processes that came into existence without an intelligent originator—that is, he holds the absurd notion that the information content of the genome was created by blind chance.

A person who believes the Bible to be true, also believes that much of human knowledge comes ultimately from God. We refer to knowledge that comes directly from God, and cannot be obtained through reason or experience, as *revelation*. As we have noted, revealed truth can be innate and built into our spiritual essence—e.g., that God exists—or it can be provided by God to men through secondary means, such as words formed in the mind (Rev 1.10-11; 2 Pt 1.21); angelic messengers (Rev 1.1; Dan 8.16-17; Lk 1.26-38); dreams or visions (Rev 9.17; Dan 8.2); or the living Word, Jesus Christ (Rev 1.2; Jn 1.1, 14).

Revelation is truth that cannot be acquired by human reason or experience but can only be obtained directly from God—truth that we could not possibly know or infer, unless God communicated it directly to us. Examples include the nature of God as a tri-personal unity, the events of what happened during the creation week before Adam was created, and events which will happen in the future. These forms of revelation can also be called prophecy (Rev 1.3; Rev 22.7). Prophecy can refer to the revelation of God’s will such as the

requirement to observe a Sabbath rest (Ex 20.8-11). We refer to this form of prophecy as ‘forthtelling’. The other form of prophecy we call ‘foretelling’ (prediction), and it refers to revelation that tells of events before they occur.

John refers to the communication in this book as ‘revelation’, speaking of the contents of what he will communicate throughout it. He includes both types of prophecy (forthtelling and foretelling) within the scope of his disclosure. He says that those who keep (obey) what is written in the book are blessed, he also speaks of things which must soon take place. Thus, ‘revelation’ as John uses it here, is not speaking of the *form* of the communication, but the content. Thus, while we understand that the word ‘revelation’ is a translation of the Greek word ‘apocalypse’, it is not necessary to understand the word ‘apocalypse’ used here, to refer to the *form* of communication (i.e., visions) but to the *contents*—that is, truth that is disclosed by God to mankind (Lk 2.32; Rom 16.25; 1 Cor 14.6, 26; Gal 1.12; Eph 1.17). While we often use the term ‘apocalyptic’ to refer to truth that God reveals through visions of strange phenomena, it can also be applied to the unveiling of any truth which we need to know but cannot know unless God makes it known to us. All of the Bible is actually ‘apocalyptic’, not just the book of Revelation.

God Communicates to Mankind

(Rev 1.1-2)

John informs us that God communicated his revelation to make it known to his servants from among mankind. The fact that God communicates cannot be demonstrated through empirical study, such as with an experiment. It must be accepted as a presupposition and validated through God’s self-revelation in the Bible. Since man is the image-bearer of God, and we can communicate among ourselves, we infer that God must also be a rational, intelligent, and social communicator. The truth that God communicates is fundamental to our ability to know anything about him, the source of our ability to communicate, and the basis on which God holds mankind accountable.

Even though many men deny the existence of a personal and rational God who communicates with his creation, they know how important the ability to communicate is. We see this, for example, in mankind’s expectation that we will find extra-terrestrial beings who are also communicators. Scientists use radio antennas pointed at space and listen for signals from distant objects that appear to have been prepared by rational minds, rather than noise or repetitive pulses explainable by natural phenomena. It is expected that all intelligent beings will communicate their existence. The search for extra-terrestrial intelligence is an irony and a key indicator of the schizophrenia of natural man. On the one hand, he hopes to discover communication from beyond the earth because he thinks he could then declare mankind nothing more than a product of natural processes. Yet, he rejects the truth that communication has actually come to mankind from beyond the earth, from the Creator himself.

For there to be communication, there must be both a sender and a receiver of the communication. Thus, God communicates to mankind, and we receive that communication. We are able to receive God’s communication because we are his creatures, endowed with the ability to communicate. According to a commonly accepted theory, human language developed from grunts and other noises of pre-hominoid, ape-like creatures. However, careful analysis shows that this idea is flawed. It is impossible to explain how:

- Supposed pre-hominoids could agree on what sounds meant.
- The complexity of language grammar could have evolved.
- Humans could process any language if we did not know how to process one.
- The human language processing system could have evolved to support many forms of language.

Language processing is an example of what the proponents of intelligent design call an *irreducibly complex system*—that is, a system that is too complex to have evolved from simpler, less complex predecessors. The

irreducible complexity of language processing is rejected by the majority in the scientific community. But, in rejecting this idea, they must resort to unsupportable assumptions about the origin of human language processing. They try to get around the need to provide evidence to support their unwarranted assumptions by claiming that the emergence of language processing occurred in human pre-history, so there cannot be any historical evidence for its emergence. They also claim, conveniently, that no comparable emergence of language processing can be observed today.

Humans are distinguished, among other ways, from the animal creation by our ability to communicate abstract concepts verbally. And, to a significant extent, human personality, ideas, and society are determined by how we communicate. All of our conscious thinking and ability to form concepts is dependent on the use of words. Consider for example, concepts such as ‘city’, emotions such as ‘love’, or descriptions of physical attributes such as ‘red’. All of these depend on our ability to use symbolic communication in words. Even when we communicate in images, for example through a painting, we often need words to describe the meaning of the image—consider for example, a piece of abstract art, which requires a title and often an explanation for it to be understood. Humanistic scientists in their desperate attempt to demonstrate that man is no more than an evolved animal, teach some animals, such as apes and dolphins, to communicate in symbols. However, language is not a finite list of symbols (or even a combination of a few symbols) or a repertoire of warning calls, it is a program for constructing an unlimited number of meaningful sentences. In addition, human children have an innate ability to process complex grammars without any formal instruction and to use words to speak about language—both of which no animal will ever be able to accomplish.

If we were not image-bearers of God, we could not communicate with one another. Your thoughts and my thoughts would be entirely random. For example, if I pointed to something sitting in a bowl on a table and called it ‘apple’, you might conclude that I wanted you to crawl under a bed. Your interpretation of the noise coming from my mouth would be as valid as the meaning I intended to convey.

Because we are all created in the image of God, we think God’s thoughts after him. Christians know and believe this. Non-Christians deny it, and yet assume Christian presuppositions in order to think, speak, and act. As image-bearers of God, they cannot avoid using their innate revealed knowledge that God communicates. Since he communicates, we, who are his creatures, must listen to what he says.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev 1.1-2, 4)

John declares that the revelation recorded in the book of Revelation came ultimately from God and was communicated through a channel that consisted of Jesus, an angel, and John himself. When John speaks of God, he makes a distinction between God the Father and Jesus who is the God-man—the second person of the Trinity, in his mediatorial capacity. Within the economy of the Trinity, God the Father is the originator and source of all truth. Thus, as the God-man, Jesus taught only what he had received from the Father (Jn 7.16; Jn 17.7-8) and communicated only what the Father had authorized him to communicate (Jn 12.49; Jn 14.10). Therefore, the contents of this book is God’s word and is of heavenly origin.

John refers to the contents of this book as “the revelation of Jesus Christ”. This statement can be understood in two primary senses: 1) the revelation *from* Jesus, or 2) the revelation *about* Jesus. In the first sense, John informs us that Revelation contains specific information, delivered by Jesus, that Jesus wished the seven churches of Asia Minor to know and heed: about “things that must soon take place”, including the pending destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the coming persecution many believers in Asia Minor would have to face at the hands of the Roman administration; and how churches should engage with the pagan culture in which they were placed.

Jesus also communicates through this book to the Church in every generation. He wants his Church to:

- Be comforted as it faces persecution (Rev 2.10; Rev 7.17; Rev 21.4), with the promise that it will be victorious (Rev 15.2) and join Jesus at a glorious victory feast (Rev 19.9).
- Be committed to Jesus (Rev 2.4-5; Rev 3.15-16), as he challenges us to believe correctly (Rev 2.13-16) and live out correct belief in obedience (Rev 1.3; Rev 22.7).

We must consider seriously that this is a revelation from Jesus Christ which he wants us to understand and apply in our own lives.

In the second sense, “the revelation of Jesus Christ” is the revelation about Jesus himself. Thus, Revelation contains information about the nature and character of the risen Lord Jesus, the role he performs now from his abode in heaven governing and protecting the NT Church as it encounters the hatred of the world, and the role he will undertake as he brings history to its conclusion. In Revelation, we see Jesus in his resurrected glory and in his office as King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19.16), who will subdue pagan kingdoms (Rev 18.2), conquer his enemies (Rev 17.14), usher in the age of the new heaven and earth in which only righteousness will dwell (Rev 21.1, 27; 2 Pt 3.13), take his Church into his glorious presence (Rev 7.9), and consign forever Satan, sin, and death to hell (Rev 20.10, 14-15).

Many people think that Revelation provides a chronology of future events (e.g., when the battle of Armageddon or the rapture will occur) and miss the important truths that this book communicates about Jesus, in his glorious majesty, and the magnificent deeds he performs as he demonstrates his sovereignty over the created order. It should not surprise us that Revelation is about the person of Jesus. The entire corpus of Scripture is ultimately about Jesus and his role in redemptive history (Lk 24.44).

Thus, Revelation is the testimony (witness) from Jesus about Jesus. He is both the revealer of the mysteries of heaven and the subject of the mysteries. He is the living Word of God (Rev 19.13; Jn 1.1) who came to reveal himself to the world. The book of Revelation is not the revelation of John. John is but the channel through whom the message is communicated—he is the scribe, documenting the events in the visions, while Jesus is the author who sends the visions to John. Little of the John’s personality comes through in this book, compared with his gospel and epistles. After he has identified himself in the opening section (Rev 1.1, 4, 9), he refers to himself by name only once more near the conclusion of the book (Rev 22.8). Thus, as the visions unfold, the identity of the human author disappears into the background, so that the message from Jesus, about Jesus, is the central focus.

Since the message of Revelation is attributed to God the Father and to Jesus, as God, its message is true. Any writing that contradicts the message of Revelation must therefore be false, since two contradictory statements cannot both be true. For example, Revelation declares Jesus to be eternal (Rev 1.8; Rev 21.6; Rev 22.13), the God who is worthy of worship (Rev 5.12, 14), the Creator (Rev 3.14) and the son of God (Rev 2.18). Thus, the teachings of Jews, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Mormons must be false. For example, all four of these religions deny the eternal divinity of Jesus:

- Jews believe that Jesus is a [false messiah](#), but [could be considered a rabbi](#); the [messiah is still expected to come](#).
- The *Qur’an* declares that Jesus was created, ‘Indeed, the example of Jesus to Allah is like that of Adam. He created Him from dust; then He said to him, "Be," and he was.’ (ref: [3.59](#))
- Mormons say that [Jesus is the literal Son of God](#); and [a god](#).
- Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that Jesus is [the son of God, a god, but not the God; and the archangel Michael](#).

As we study Revelation, we will encounter Jesus, the God-man, in his glory.

God Communicates Through His Messengers

At times, God communicated the revelation that became part of his permanent record—the Bible—directly to people. For example, he spoke directly with Adam, Moses, and Paul. A record of these communications is included in the Bible. Direct communication from God to man is not limited to believers, since he gave words and visions to Balaam and Nebuchadnezzar. At other times he communicated through angelic intermediaries, such as when Gabriel spoke with Mary. We believe that since the incarnation of Christ, direct revelation with permanent authority ceased after the apostles concluded writing the NT (Heb 1.1-2). The book of Revelation is the final component of Scripture. Revelation continues today, since the Holy Spirit reveals Christ to every believer as a key step in the process of conversion. However, no revelation is given today that has equal authority with Scripture—not the *ex cathedra* pronouncements of a pope, the decrees of a council, the proclamations of a preacher, or the ‘charismatic’ utterances of a modern ‘prophet’. Our final, and only, authority for faith and life is the 66 books, in what we call the Bible.

Revelation was given through a chain of messengers—Jesus, an angel, and John. Thus, it is not easy to determine who is speaking in every case—God the Father, Jesus, or the angel (e.g., Rev 10.8; Rev 21.4; Rev 22.6). The angel who spoke in Revelation is not Jesus (Rev 22.8-9, 16). He may have been Gabriel who helped Daniel to understand the visions he received (Dan 8.16; Dan 9.21-22) and brought messages to Mary and Zechariah about the birth of their sons (Lk 1.19, 26). The John who recorded these visions is generally believed to be John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, the author of the fourth gospel and of the three epistles that bear his name. Typically, this identification of John has been questioned by ‘scholars’. But his authorship has been accepted since at least the days of Justin Martyr (c 100-165 AD), who attributed Revelation to the apostle in his [Dialogue with Trypho](#) (81). There is no conclusive evidence to support the rejection of the attribution to John the apostle. It is fitting that the record of the visions of thunder (Rev 4.5; Rev 6.1; etc.) should be associated with the apostle who was one of the ‘sons of thunder’ (Mk 3.17). However, the precise identification of the angel or of the human ‘author’ of Revelation is immaterial. As we noted in the previous meditation, John is the scribe who recorded what he saw, and not the author. The author is Jesus, who reveals to the Church what he wishes it to know in his final communication before he returns to wrap up this age. Thus, both the angel and John refer to themselves as servants (slaves) of Jesus Christ (Rev 1.1; Rev 22.9). John, places himself in the line of Israel’s prophets (Is 49.5; Mal 4.4) and in the context of the other apostles and the half-brothers of Jesus (Rom 1.1; James 1.1; 2 Pt 1.1; Jude 1) who also call themselves servants, to identify his role as a messenger of God.

Many people claim that they would believe in God if he would reveal himself directly to them through a word, such as Paul heard on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.4), or an act of intervention in the natural realm, such as striking a tree with lightning. This raises a question: why does God use messengers to communicate his permanent revelation to mankind, and not reveal himself directly to every person. Some of the reasons are, to:

- Give responsible roles to men (Rom 3.2; Rom 10.13-15).
- Make men accountable for the knowledge of his existence and moral requirements with which they are innately endowed (Rom 1.18-23).
- Invalidate sceptical empiricism (Gen 3.1).
- Avoid placing himself at the whim of a creature (Lk 4.12).
- Engender trust in the faithful and reliable eyewitness accounts of his servants (Rev 1.2, 9; Jn 19.35; Jn 21.24); the ones sent—the Greek word translated ‘sending’ is from the same root as ‘apostle’.
- Engender faith in the revelation of God given in the Bible (Lk 16.27-31).

John, along with the prophets and apostles before him, bore witness to the Messiah. In John’s case, he was a witness to all that Jesus did during his earthly ministry—from his baptism to his death and resurrection—and to what he had seen in the visions given in this book. He presents his account in his gospel and in

Revelation as that of a witness in a courtroom setting who testifies that the account of what he saw is “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”. He also presents his account as one consciously speaking on behalf of God. Thus, Revelation is true because it is the word of God.

This raises a second question: how can we know that the Bible is true? The correct answer is because the Bible says that it is the word of God and is true. Many people reject this answer and accuse Christians of applying circular reasoning. However, claiming that the Bible is self-authenticating is not irrational, since any attempt to prove that the Bible is true requires that we select a system of proof to demonstrate truthfulness. For example, if we subjected the historical statements of the Bible to a test of their historicity by comparing them with non-Biblical accounts of history, we would have to ask how we could prove that the non-Biblical writings are accurate. Any form of proof brought forward to defend a lower level of proof would have to be subjected to another, higher-level proof; and the argument would proceed into an infinite regress, with no hope of a solution. In addition, it is necessary to apply circular reasoning to validate *all* instances of ultimate authorities. For example, it is impossible to prove that logic is logical or true without assuming that the rules of logic are logical and true.

The Angels’ Roles in Revelation

(Rev 1.1)

In the Bible, we encounter angels for the first time in the third chapter of Genesis (excluding the account of Satan, a fallen angel, who possessed the serpent to tempt Eve), in the form of the cherubim who were appointed as honour-guards at the gate to the garden in Eden (Gen 3.24).

There is much wild and fantastic speculation about angels that has been fueled by Jewish Midrashic myths, Renaissance art, new-age infatuation with the spirit realm, and a misunderstanding of Scripture. From the limited information presented in the Bible, we can determine that angels:

- Are created, living beings (Lk 24.39 with Mt 8.16; Eph 6.12; Heb 1.7, 13-14), outside of our spatial-temporal universe. Because we cannot observe them with our senses, does not mean that they do not exist.
- May appear in different physical forms (e.g., with a lion-like body or a body that appears to be human).
- Are a separate order of creation and not elevated, glorified humans—human beings do not become angels at death.
- Were probably created on the first day of creation and observed the rest of God’s creative work.
- Were all created at one time; angels are not sexual beings and do not reproduce like humans (Mt 22.30).
- Are intelligent, rational, and moral creatures; but were not created in the image of God, as was mankind.
- Were able to sin. Some, led by Satan, rebelled against God and were cast out of heaven (Rev 9.11; Rev 12.9). However, those who did not sin with Satan are preserved forever as holy.
- Do not have native miraculous powers and cannot foretell the future.
- Are not to be worshiped by men (Rev 19.10; Rev 22.8-9).

In Revelation we find over sixty references to holy angels, considerably more (about three times more) references to angels than in any other book of the Bible. We come full circle from the closed gates at the entrance to the original paradise, to the open gates of the new, permanent paradise through the visions given to John. We will see heaven filled with a vast number of angels (Rev 5.11), who are assigned various roles, including:

- Delivering revelations in the form of visions to John in this book (Rev 1.1; Rev 10.9; Rev 19.9; Rev 22.1) and providing explanations about what he had seen (Rev 17.1, 7, 15). The term ‘angel’ is derived from the Greek word for messenger.
- Making announcements in heaven (Rev 5.2; Rev 7.2).
- Making announcements on earth about things which are to happen soon (Rev 14.8-10; Rev 19.17; Rev

22.6, 16).

- Announcing judgement on the wicked (Rev 5.11; Rev 8.2, 6).
- Administering judgement, as proximate agents of God's providential actions in worldly affairs (Rev 8.5, 6-8, 10, 12; Rev 9.1, 13, 14, 15; Rev 20.1).
- Holding back winds of judgement, until they are to be unleashed (Rev 7.1).
- Sealing the servants of God (Rev 7.1-3).
- Worshiping God with praise in a corporate assembly in his throne room in heaven (Rev 7.11; Rev 16.5).
- Serving in a priest-like capacity in the heavenly sanctuary by offering incense with the prayers of the saints (Rev 8.3-4).
- Waging war in the spiritual realm (i.e., outside of our current universe) against Satan and his demons (Rev 11.15).

Angels have other assigned roles documented in Scripture, that are not explicitly identified in Revelation, such as, comforting believers; ministering to the physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of believers and Jesus (e.g., after his temptation in the desert and in Gethsemane); protecting God's people from harm, in particular children; making important announcements (e.g., to the shepherds in the fields); carrying messages and commands from God to specific people (e.g., to Daniel, Zechariah, Joseph, and Mary); and escorting believers in Christ who have died into the presence of God.

Many theologians assert that angels are a higher order of creation than mankind; based on a particular reading of Psalm 8.5. However, alternate translations for that verse can be considered, when compared with Hebrews 2.7 which reads "You made him for a *little while* lower than the angels". Angels do have gifts or powers which men, at least in this spatial-temporal realm, do not have. However, mankind was created as the pinnacle of creation; mankind was created in the image of God, angels were not; angels are sent by God to be ministering spirits to men, men do not serve angels; Jesus did not take on angelic form, but became a man; Jesus loved mankind enough to die for them, he did not die to give eternal life to fallen angels; and men, in Christ, will judge angels (1 Cor 6.3). Therefore, it seems to be inappropriate to say that angels are a *higher* order of being than man. At best, we can say that mankind and angels are *different* orders of intelligent, rational *creatures*.

Although angels are present in most of John's visions, he shows no interest in their orders, names, or duties. Of more importance for him is their service for Christ and support for the saints. Following John's example, we are not to make angelology into a major area for our consideration or study. We should focus instead on ensuring that we have a relationship with God, in Christ.

God Communicates to His Servants

(Rev 1.1, 4)

An author, writing a manual for deploying robots in an automotive assembly plant, does not write it so that he can read it privately in his study. Rather, he hopes that it will be read by technicians in his target audience, and that his instructions will be used to guide the set up of an efficient production facility. Likewise, the authors of Revelation (the Father, Jesus, and John) intended the book to be read and applied (Rev 1.3) by their target audience, "his servants". Our word 'servants' does not have the strength of the Greek word, which is used by John, and means 'slaves' or at least 'bondservants'—those who are owned by another person and must obey their master's commands. We tend to avoid using the word 'slave' because of our culture's aversion to slavery due to the wicked form by which it was known in the US, from 1619-1865. The word 'servant', in our cultural context, has a voluntary sense to it. But John is not writing to those who have voluntarily decided for Christ and chosen to work for him, but to those whom Christ has purchased with his precious blood (Rev 5.9). Thus, the servants John is addressing belong to Jesus because he is the one who paid the price for their ownership.

The servants to whom this communication is directed are not explicitly identified in the opening verses. However, they are identified elsewhere as:

- *The 'angels' of the churches in Asia Minor* (Rev 2.1, etc.). The specific recipients were the messengers ('angels') or pastors of the specific churches who had responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel and applying the visions given through the angel to their congregations.
- *The churches in Asia minor* (Rev 1.3-4, 11). The book of Revelation has the form of an epistle or letter (Rev 1.4-8; Rev 22.21) from the 1st century, directed to a specific, intended audience. Any interpretation of Revelation that does not consider that it is designed to inform this primary audience will be at risk of misunderstanding the meaning and purpose of the book.
- *The NT Church* (Rev 1.3; 2 Tim 3.16-17). While Revelation has a specific application within the historical context of the 1st century Roman Empire, this does not exhaust the purpose and application of the book, any more than the prophecies given to Isaiah for Judah, Israel, and the surrounding nations exhausts the purpose and application of the book of Isaiah.
- *Congregations*. The message of revelation was to be read aloud in the seven churches, and in all churches. It is an open book that is to be read and understood by all the members of all congregations, not just by the intellectual or initiated elite who hold the revelation of the mysteries as if they provide a secret code for future prognostication.

Thus, Revelation is a communication directed to all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and who acknowledge his lordship over their lives (Rev 7.3; Rev 22.3).

For there to be any form of communication, there must be specified content. John tells us that the content that God communicates to his servants, through the visions he received and recorded in this book, has two purposes:

- *Prophecy*. Revelation was given to "show to his servants the things that must soon take place" (Rev 1.1; Rev 22.6).
- *Practice*. Revelation was given to inform his servants of what they must do, "to keep what is written in it" (Rev 1.3).

The book prophesies events, many of which were in the near future of its first recipients. It gave them insight to what challenges, such as false teaching (Rev 2.20), temptations (Rev 2.14), and persecution (Rev 2.10), the fledgling NT Church would face from a pagan empire and how they were to face those challenges. God considered that placing those trials before the Church was necessary for its spiritual growth, as indicated by the phrase, "things which *must* soon take place" (Rev 1.1). If events must take place, then they are in accord with God's decretive will, and will be fulfilled by his providential governance of the entire created order. This should encourage us. Even though God decrees events which will challenge his Church, yet he also decrees the demise of all pagan systems which hate his Son and his Church. God uses the trials he sends to build faith in his servants and bring glory to his magnificent name, as he confounds Satan and his hordes and destroys worldly kingdoms.

The book also addresses aspects of God's prescriptive will—that is, what he requires his servants to do as they obey his revealed commands, published in his word—the Bible. In Revelation, there are explicit statements requiring obedience (Rev 2.5; Rev 3.2), and ones which imply a precept that must be obeyed (Rev 3.4, 10). As servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are required to obey our master out of love (Jn 14.15).

In human palaces and households, servants (slaves) were often treated as if they were part of the background furnishings, as the court or household went about its business. Servants could not expect to receive any communication from their masters, other than direct commands. They could not ask for a reason or explanation for why they were being asked to do something. In contrast, God not only tells his servants

what he expects them to do but often gives them an explanation for why he is unfolding his commands and providences as he does. He is pleased to reveal matters to his servants because they are not only servants but sons (Rom 9.26; Gal 3.26). He treats them as if they were equals and reasons with them (Is 1.18). This is an extraordinary truth—God often shows his servants what he plans to do and why he is doing it.

Revelation Records the Fulfilment of Daniel’s Visions

(Rev 1.1-3)

Sir Isaac Newton, in his *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John*, observed that, “The *Apocalypse of John* is written in the same style and language with the Prophecies of *Daniel*, and hath the same relation to them which they have to one another, so that all of them together make but one complete prophecy. ... The prophecy is distinguished into seven successive parts, by the opening of the seven seals of the book which *Daniel* was commanded to seal up: and hence it is called the *Apocalypse* or *Revelation* of Jesus Christ.” His observation provides a key to understanding the book of Revelation.

Daniel was given visions that prophesied of events leading to the arrival of the Messiah and of the destruction of Jerusalem, in 70 AD. The visions in Daniel 2.31-45 and Daniel 7.1-8 and Daniel 8.1-27 provide a framework for interpreting the detail in the remainder of the book of Daniel:

Chapter	Babylon (605–538 BC)	Medo-Persia (538–331 BC)	Greece (331–146 BC)	Rome (146 BC – 476 AD)
Dan 2.31–45 Dream image	Head of gold (Dan 2.32, 37–38)	Breast, arms of silver (Dan 2.32, 39)	Belly, thighs of brass (Dan 2.32, 39)	Legs of iron /clay (Dan 2.3, 40–41)
Dan 7.1-8 Four Beasts	Lion (Dan 7.4)	Bear (Dan 7.5)	Leopard (Dan 7.6)	Strong Beast (Dan 7.7, 11, 19, 23)
Dan 8.1-27 Ram and goat		Ram (Dan 8.3–4, 20)	Goat with one horn (Dan 8.5–22)	

The vision in Daniel chapter 2 ends with the destruction of the statue that represents the four successive pagan kingdoms. Their destruction is achieved by the introduction of the kingdom established by the God of heaven, which will never be destroyed (Dan 2.34-35, 44-45)—the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Daniel 9.24-27 covers a 490-year period. It begins with the decree of Cyrus (or Artaxerxes I) to rebuild Jerusalem and includes the once-for-all-time atonement for sin in the crucifixion of Jesus (Dan 9.24-26). The prophecy in this section of Daniel concludes *after* the 490-year period, with the arrival of Rome’s armies led by the general Titus, and the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus confirms that the abomination of desolation (Dan 9.27) is the Roman armies. We see this when we compare three of the gospel accounts (Mt 24.15; Mk 13.14; Lk 21.20). In Luke 21.20, Jesus identifies the ‘abomination of desolation’ as armies surrounding Jerusalem.

Chapters 11-12 of Daniel cover essentially the same period as the other prophecies in Daniel, but with considerably more detail. The prophecy begins with the Persian kings that followed Cyrus (Dan 11.2-4), progresses through the Greek and Seleucid periods, and covers the time of Herod the Great and the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem (Dan 11.36-45). The events in this prophecy end with the “time of trouble” and persecution (Dan 12.1, 10-11) that was to occur at the time when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by Rome’s armies, and the sacrificial system was abolished (Dan 12.11).

Daniel is instructed to seal up the prophecies given to him (Dan 8.26; Dan 9.24; Dan 12.4, 9), because they refer a time many days (centuries) from when he wrote them down, around 550 BC. When we turn to Revelation, we discover that John is instructed *not* to seal up the revelation he received in his visions and

documented in the book (Rev 22.10). The things that John saw in his visions were soon to take place (Rev 1.1). Thus, John indicates that the fulfilment of most of the visions of Daniel were being fulfilled during the 1st century AD.

John uses allusions to Daniel throughout Revelation. For example, the phrase, “to show ... the things that must soon take place” (Rev 1.1) is a substitution for the phrase “made known ... what will be in the latter days” (Dan 2.28). Also, the Greek word for ‘reveal’, related to the Greek word ‘revelation’ (*apocalypse*), is used three times in Daniel (Dan 2.22, 28, 29) in the Greek translation of the OT, used at the time of John. Likewise, the reference to the ‘son of man’ (Rev 1.13; Rev 14.14) connects Revelation with Daniel (Dan 7.13).

Former Jews in Asia Minor, believing in Jesus as the Messiah, who were recipients of this book, would have understood John to be informing them that the prophecies of Daniel were being fulfilled. They would have taken note of the particular “time of trouble” Daniel prophesied and associated it with the crises of persecution that John speaks of in Revelation. Thus, the visions which John saw deal primarily with the fulfilment of the prophecies in Daniel which remained to be completed as the kingdom of Jesus Christ was inaugurated and encountered the fourth kingdom of the image in Daniel 2.40-43—the Roman Empire—and faced the tyranny of Titus and Nero.

However, not all the visions given to John in Revelation deal with the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom and the period leading up to the conclusion of the Jewish ceremonial system with the destruction of the temple. Clearly some of the visions deal with Christ’s second coming, the consummation of this age, and the advent of the new heaven and earth (referenced in chapters 20-22). These prophecies in Revelation are an expansion of Daniel’s brief references to the end of time, in chapter 12.2, 13.

The Time Is Near (Rev 1.1, 3; Rev 22.10)

There is a marked contrast between Daniel 8.26 and 10.14, and Revelation 1.1, 3 and 22.10. Daniel, prophesying of events leading to the arrival of the Messianic age and the end of the Jewish ceremonial system, speaks of “many days from now” and “in the latter days ... days yet to come”. In contrast, Revelation speaks of events which “must soon take place” for “the time is near”. Since the Messianic age had been initiated with the incarnation of Jesus and his death and resurrection, the only primary events prophesied by Daniel that remained to be fulfilled were those related to the end of the Jewish ceremonial system.

Daniel makes brief references that apparently speak about the end of time (Dan 12.2, 13). However, his prophecies deal mainly with the inauguration of Messiah’s kingdom and the period following the resurrection leading to the conclusion of the Jewish ceremonial system, with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Revelation expands significantly on the inauguration of Messiah’s kingdom, which was to break into pieces the pagan empires (Dan 2.34-35), but was also to be marked by persecution, as the pagan system fights against its demise. Revelation then provides (in chapters 20-22) additional information about the end of time and of Christ’s second coming, the consummation of this age, and the advent of the new heavens and earth.

The bulk of Revelation deals with events that were to be fulfilled in the near-term, during the lifetime of the recipients of this book. The word ‘soon’ is not to be understood merely to mean that the actions will be sudden when they do occur, but that the events are to occur imminently. John writes to the seven churches (Rev 1.4, 11), as representatives of Christ’s kingdom, to inform them of “things that must soon take place” and to encourage them to face with courage the challenges they would encounter.

The events prophesied in Daniel were to occur mostly within 500 years from the time he wrote the book. These are the “many days from now” and the “latter days”. Thus, when Revelation says that the events “must soon take place” and that “the time is near”, it must be speaking of events which will occur much sooner than within 500 years of when the book was written. Therefore, it makes no sense to interpret much of Revelation as applying to the distant future, relative to the time of the recipients of the book. This means that the book of Revelation does not provide a timetable for events which occurred from John’s day until our own day. While Revelation does speak of pagan religion (the false prophet) in general terms and the rise and fall of all forms of anti-Christ religion, it does not provide explicit prophecies about the growth of the papacy and the alignment of the church hierarchy with the political administrations of the kingdoms of Europe after the time of Constantine.

Likewise, Revelation certainly does not provide a timetable for events which are to occur in our future, until the second coming of Jesus. It does *not* give an outline of history, with datable events such as the following, which is often proposed by many today:

- The end of the church age (Rev 1.1 to Rev 3.22) on May 14, 1948, with the creation of the modern nation of Israel.
- A pre-rapture tribulation. We can supposedly find signs pointing to when the rapture will occur, in the political events happening now, such as global government (e.g., the European Union and the United Nations), ozone depletion and devastating storms, the New Age movement, etc.
- A pending rapture of the saints, that could occur any day from now.
- A seven-year period of persecution called the ‘great tribulation’ (Rev 4.1 to Rev 18.24), which will follow a rapture and conclude with the battle of Armageddon (Rev 19.11-21) centred in the Middle East.
- The rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem and the reinstatement of the priesthood and sacrificial system with a red heifer.
- The start of a future reign of Christ on earth, from Jerusalem (Rev 20.1-15).
- The return of Jesus and the establishment of an everlasting new heaven and earth (Rev 21.1 to Rev 22.21).

Revelation is also not to be understood as providing purely transtemporal symbols, relating to the ‘Church age’ and the general ebb and flow of history, with ongoing conflicts between God and Satan and between good and evil, until the final appearance of Jesus. Most of the visions given to John were to be interpreted by the early NT Church as warnings of events which would occur as Rome began to suppress Christianity and Titus and the Roman armies besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple (Rev 11.1-2).

Some of the events prophesied in Revelation can be associated with historical events in the ancient past—i.e., related to Titus, Nero and the destruction of Jerusalem. However, Christians living in the 21st century are to apply the prophecies related to the events in the last decades of the 1st century, in the same way as we would apply Isaiah’s prophecies (Is 13-23) about the nations around Israel. God controls all events, in all nations, throughout history. History is under the sovereignty of the Lamb, since he was appointed heir of all things through his death and resurrection (Phil 2.8-11). He will guide events until they conclude with the final judgement and the definitive realization of his kingdom.

The Primary Fulfilment Generation (Rev 1.1, 3)

We have noted that Revelation relates primarily to the fulfilment of Daniel’s prophecies about the inauguration of the Messiah’s kingdom and the end of the Jewish sacrificial system with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. We have also noted that Revelation was addressed to the Covenant people living at the time it was written, to encourage them to face persecution, as the pagan system fought against its demise.

Thus, we conclude that Revelation was written before 70 AD—likely before 65 AD—at the peak of Nero’s reign.

Most scholars claim otherwise, and state that Revelation was written in 95 or 96 AD, before the end of Domitian’s reign. They establish the ‘late’ date based on a statement of Irenaeus (130-202 AD), “We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision. For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian’s reign.” (*Against Heresies*; book 5, section 30, paragraph 3).

Having taken Irenaeus statement as gospel-truth, they provide circumstantial evidence to support their position. The ‘evidence’ they provide includes considerations such as the following:

- Emperor worship appears to be well established in Revelation—which, it is claimed, fits best with a late date. However, historians conclude that the Imperial Cult developed gradually and began under Augustus, who was emperor at the time Christ was born. A temple was built at Pergamum to honour Augustus, referred to as ‘Satan’s seat’ (Rev 2.13). By the time of Nero, emperor worship was already well-established.
- Persecution of Christians occurred under Domitian. However, Nero (54-68 AD) persecuted Christians; and Claudius (41-54 AD) probably did also, considering Christianity a sect of Judaism (Acts 18.2).
- The seven congregations in Asia had challenges (e.g., spiritual lethargy or pride over material wealth) which, it is claimed, would have taken time to develop; thus, this points to a late date for the book. Clearly people who make this claim have not read 1 Corinthians. Paul had been gone from them for five years, and the Corinthian church had a pack of problems.
- It is claimed that Revelation refers to a myth that Nero came back to life (Rev 13.3-4; Rev 17.8, 11). Thus, they say, that if Nero had not died before John wrote, then he could not have incorporated the myth. However, if these verses refer to Nero, John’s visions give prophesies of events shortly to happen, not history!

Evidence in favour of the early date for Revelation—that is, during the reign of Nero, includes the following:

- The [Muratorian Canon fragment](#) (c 170-190 AD), displayed in the Bibliotheca Ambrosiana in Milan, lists canonical books of the NT and states that John wrote to the seven churches in Revelation before Paul wrote to them, placing Revelation during the reign of Nero.
- The Syriac version of Revelation, translated in the 2nd c AD states that John was exiled under Nero and Epiphanius of Salamis (315-403 AD) says that John was exiled under Claudius—this could be a reference to the emperor who preceded Nero or to Nero himself, since Nero was also called Nero *Claudius* Caesar, as reported by Suetonius (c 69-122 AD).
- Revelation (Rev 17.9-10) refers to seven kings ruling in Rome (“the city on seven hills”). Five of these kings have died and the sixth is reigning at the time of the vision. According to Suetonius (*The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*), Nero was the sixth Caesar. The vision says that the seventh king was to “remain only a little while”. Galba, who followed Nero, reigned for less than a year.
- Revelation mentions that Jerusalem and the temple were to be trampled by the nations (Rev 11.1-2). This occurred in 70 AD when the Roman armies under Titus besieged and destroyed Jerusalem. Thus, Revelation was written before 70 AD.
- Rome is referred to as Babylon (Revelation 17-18). Peter who wrote before 70 AD uses the same epithet (1 Pt 5.13). Christians knew as early as 33 AD that Rome was going to destroy Jerusalem, within the lifetime of those who heard Jesus’ warning (Mt 24.15-28; Mk 13.14-23; Lk 21.20-24).

The claim that Irenaeus’ statement outweighs other statements and evidence must be revisited. Irenaeus could have been mistaken—no contemporaries of Irenaeus support the late date for John’s having written

Revelation. Thus, it could be that his statement has been misunderstood. The Greek (‘that was seen’) could refer to the John’s visions or to John himself. Thus, Irenaeus may not be referring to the visions having been seen towards the end of Domitian’s reign, but to *John* “*who* was seen ... almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian’s reign.” Clement (c 150-215) quoted in Eusebius’ *Church History*, indicates that John left Patmos “after the tyrant was dead” and conducted extensive ministry for many years. This supports a reference to Nero, since John would have been very old when Domitian died.

Thus, we conclude that the fulfilment of the temporal events prophesied in Revelation occurred around 70 AD. This conclusion is important for how we will interpret and apply the temporal prophesies in the rest of the book. They applied *primarily* to the generation living at the time John wrote Revelation.

Blessings from Reading, Hearing and Obeying

(Rev 1.3)

North American Christians have little understanding of what constitutes true happiness. We have been fooled by pervasive commercialism and incessant declarations that we deserve to be pampered with material comforts. We believe that we could be happy if we only had sufficient money to purchase fashionable apparel, replace our car every few years, eat out twice a week, fund annual adventures in exotic destinations, and indulge in regular entertainment. The suggestion that true happiness could be obtained from reading the Bible or from obeying its precepts is beyond our society’s comprehension. Yet John, in this first of seven beatitudes (see also, Rev 14.13; Rev 16.15; Rev 19.9; Rev 20.6; Rev 22.7, 14), tells us that the person who reads the book of Revelation (and by extension, the Bible) in a public worship assembly, and the hearers of the word being read, are blessed. He also indicates that those who keep (obey) what is written in this book are blessed. John uses the word ‘blessed’ to mean, objectively, those being favoured by God (compare, Lk 1.45; 1 Pt 4.14); and subjectively, those experiencing a sense of happiness and deep joy (compare, 1 Cor 7.40).

John says that “the one who reads aloud this prophecy” and, in general, the Bible, is blessed. He is probably not speaking about a person reading the text aloud to himself, although that was a common practice at the time he wrote. Rather, he is speaking of the word being read aloud by the pastor (‘angel’; e.g., Rev 2.1) or one of the elders during a church worship service. One reason why the word was to be read aloud is because a portion of the congregation would have been illiterate. However, another reason is that much of the Bible is designed to be read with the mouth (rather than just with the eyes) and to be heard with the ears. A person who reads the Bible aloud in public worship is blessed because he has to prepare to read it and gains a better understanding of what is written. When John wrote Revelation, written manuscripts did not include word divisions or punctuation (they contained only a continuous string of letters) as you see in the text you are now reading. A person who was asked to read aloud, called a lector, would have had to practice diligently beforehand, working through the text multiple times to ensure that he knew where to divide words and where to breathe and pause for emphasis. By doing this, he would have become intimately familiar with the information being communicated. In addition, it was considered an honour to read the word of God publicly, since the reader was declaring the words of God—not providing his own interpretation of that word. John knew that he was writing Scripture, the words of Jesus, and that the content of the letter was to be considered authoritative. Thus, he acknowledges the blessing associated with the privilege of reading it. The Church today needs to cultivate a greater sense of awe and reverence for the public reading of the word of God. When we do, we will be blessed.

Children enjoy having stories read to them, even after they have learned how to read. They particularly enjoy a story when the reader provides appropriate emphases—such as whispers or a loud voice and incorporating emotion and sounds. Similarly, we are moved when a passage of the Bible is read aloud by a skilled reader. This experience is rarer today than it was in the past, because churches rarely acknowledge the importance of public reading of the Bible, let alone of high-quality reading. Christian congregations

hearing Revelation read in John's day, would have had their imaginations exercised as they heard voices of thunder and saw in their minds the images described in the text. We find exercising our imaginations in this way difficult because we are used to the special effects in movies and TV shows that create virtual worlds. We also find listening to someone read for more than a few minutes a challenge, because we are conditioned to expect transitions, cuts, and different camera angles every few seconds. As evidence, consider a video of a speaker. If the camera never moves from his face, the talking head becomes distracting, even if the speaker has excellent content and delivery. We expect to see regular pans, zooms, and cuts to maintain our engagement. We need to discipline ourselves to hear and understand Revelation so that we can keep (obey) it, rather than setting it aside as a "riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma". One way to do this is to train our minds to hear what is being communicated as the Bible is being read aloud.

The primary blessings resulting from hearing Revelation (and the rest of the Bible) read in public, or from reading it privately, are that we learn what we must believe about God, hear the message of salvation, see how God is controlling the unfolding events of history, and determine what God requires of us if we wish to obey him. The book of Revelation was not given to the Church as a complex puzzle to test our intellects as we attempt to solve it, but to inform us how God wants us to live as we face the challenges presented by the Christ-hating world and as we watch God unfold his plan of redemption. The book is designed to encourage us to persevere in obedient service (Rev 1.3; Rev 22.7). Jesus says, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." (Jn 13.17) The blessings that Christians may experience from obedience include: growing faith and assurance of salvation (Rom 8.28-30); confidence that regardless of what God providentially sends our way, he is our loving Father (James 1.2-3); power to resist evil (Eph 6.10-18); strength to face persecution at the hands of Christ's and our enemies (2 Cor 4.7-11); and gracious temporal provisions (Mt 6.32-33). The converse is also true. Anyone who does not hear the message of Revelation (and the entire Bible) and does not keep what is written in it, will be cursed.

Reading the Word of God Aloud in the Church Assembly (Rev 1.3)

We once attended a service at a historic Presbyterian church in Savannah Georgia. During the service, there was no reading of the Bible, other than the short text associated with the sermon. There was considerable time allocated for singing during the service, and some for prayer; and there was also a 20-minute sermon. This is markedly different from our tradition. *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, contains a chapter related to the public reading of the Bible, in which the authors state that "all canonical books of the Old and New Testament ... shall be publicly read in the vulgar [common vernacular] tongue, out of the best allowed translation, distinctly, that all may hear and understand." They recommend that all the Bible be read systematically week-by-week, with reading of a chapter out of the OT and NT at each public worship service. This kind of systematic reading of the Bible appears to be out of fashion within the Evangelical church today. Scripture, creed, tradition and practice all indicate that the Bible is intended to be read aloud.

The text of the Bible, in its original languages, often shows that it was intended to be read aloud. There are many wordplays which are based on the similarity of the sound of two Hebrew or Greek words or phrases. Also, its use of puns, alliteration, and aphorisms indicates that the text was directed to the ears of the recipients more than to the eyes of the reader. In addition, much of the text of the Bible has a cadence intended for oral reading rather than for silent reading. The revelation in the Bible was delivered in the context of societies in which there was no printing press or internet for the mass dissemination of a text, the ability to read was largely confined to an elite class of scribes, and speeches and storytelling were the primary forms of communication and entertainment.

The practice of the scribes in the ancient world was to read aloud. This practice continued during the Middle Ages among the monks in the monasteries where the Bible was cherished, and copies produced. Augustine in his *Confessions* indicates his surprise when he saw Ambrose reading silently: "When he read, his eyes moved

down the pages and his heart sought out their meaning, while his voice and tongue remained silent.” The rule of Saint Benedict said: “after the sixth hour, having left the table let them rest on their beds in perfect silence; or if anyone wishes to read by himself, let him read so as not to disturb the others.” Benedict instituted this rule because people did not read with only their eyes.

When punctuation marks were included in manuscripts during the late Middle Ages, after the time of Charlemagne, their purpose was to indicate to the reader where to put emphasis, as the text was read aloud to an illiterate audience. These marks were intended for the ear and not for the eye. For example, the ‘?’ and the ‘!’ were both originally intended for the oral reader of a text to indicate points of emphasis which would help the listening audience to follow the reading and understand its meaning. Punctuation for silent reading began to be incorporated after the invention of the printing press, and it became focused on showing the syntax of a sentence rather than for providing cues for oral reading. We have lost sight of the origins of reading and do not realize that silent reading is a relatively modern phenomenon, covering a period of less than a quarter of the time since Christ's first coming.

John tells us that the Revelation was to be read aloud in the seven congregations to which it was directed. This is not surprising since Jewish practice included public reading of the text of the OT from the earliest days of God's covenant people. For example, Moses read the Book of the Covenant (Ex 24.7)—possibly the Ten Commandments or material that later became incorporated into Deuteronomy (Dt 4.13; Dt 31.11)—in the hearing of the people, and the people responded by saying that they would obey all that the LORD had spoken. Joshua followed the example of Moses (Josh 8.34), and Jeremiah directed Baruch to read the prophecies he had dictated before all the people (Jer 36.6). Nehemiah, laying the foundation for the synagogue form of worship—that is, worship with spiritual equivalents for the bloody sacrifices and symbols in the temple—had Ezra and the Levites read from the Book of the Law from early morning until midday (Neh 8.2-3, 8). Likewise, Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah before the congregation in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth (Lk 4.16-19). Oral reading from the OT was observed every Sabbath in the synagogues (Acts 13.14-15, 27; Acts 15.21). The NT writers continued the synagogue practice in the churches (Col 4.16; 1 Thess 5.27), and Paul exhorts Timothy to devote himself “to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Tim 4.13).

Paul declares that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10.17). When the Bible is read, it is the word of the living Christ that is being read. The modern Evangelical church puts too much emphasis on its ‘ministry of music’ and not enough emphasis on the public reading of the Bible. If we want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and the apostles, then we will recommit ourselves to the public reading of the Bible.

Reading the word of God aloud in the church assembly, and any other forum which is made available to us (e.g., on podcasts and in YouTube) is even more crucial today. Many of today's young people have grown up with earbuds sprouting out of their heads. They do not have the discipline to read anything with more text than a graphic novel. We need to make the word of God available to them in its oral form. The word of God was written down to preserve its important message from corruption. But it is intended to be read aloud!

The Alpha and the Omega

(Rev 1.4, 8, 17; Rev 2.8; Rev 21.6; Rev 22.13)

John uses more than thirty different titles to refer to God, God the Father, and Jesus throughout the book of Revelation. These titles refer to God the Father's and to Jesus' attributes (e.g., ‘almighty’, Rev 1.5; ‘faithful and true’, Rev 19.11), their offices (e.g., ‘King of kings’, Rev 17.14), and their roles (e.g., ‘he who searches mind and heart’, Rev 2.23). Some of the titles are metaphors (e.g., ‘Lamb’; Rev 5.5-9) and some use a figure of speech called a merism, in which opposites are stated, and it is assumed to include everything between the opposites. The titles, ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, the ‘beginning and the end’ (Rev 21.6; Rev

22.13), and ‘the first and the last’ (Rev 1.17; Rev 2.8; Rev 22.13) are all merisms. The latter two, of these three titles, help to define the first—all three are used in Revelation 22.13. The title ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ uses the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet to encompass all that is included. It is equivalent to our using the expression, ‘from A to Z’.

John uses the title ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ first to refer to the eternal nature of God. He defines ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ by using the adjacent expression, “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev 1.4, 8). Thus, God transcends time, existed before anything else came into existence, and will continue to exist after this universe is brought to its conclusion.

Another aspect of God’s eternity implied by the title ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, is his immutability, or unchanging nature and character (Ps 102.27; Mal 3.6; James 1.17). The writer of Hebrews refers to this immutability using a similar expression to ‘who is and who was and who is to come’, with the words, “the same yesterday, and today, and forever” (Heb 13.8).

John also uses the title, ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, to refer to God as the Creator of this current universe and the one who will consummate it in a fiery conflagration (2 Pt 3.10-13). That John is thinking of God as the Creator is evident by his use of ‘the first and the last’ and ‘the beginning and the end’, and by his explicit references to God as Creator (Rev 4.11; Rev 10.6). Thus, God is the master of history from beginning (Gen 1.1) to end (1 Cor 15.24), and of all that falls in between.

Finally, John defines the title, ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, by the addition of the word ‘almighty’ (Rev 1.8). The Alpha and the Omega is the sovereign God who actively rules all of creation. He is not a god of the deists who plants the ‘seed’ of the universe and lets it unfold as nature’s laws and human whims dispose. The Greek word (*pantokrator*) John uses for ‘almighty’ is used (nine times) only in this book in the NT—except for a quotation by Paul from the Greek translation of the OT (2 Cor 6.18). In the Greek translation of the OT, the term ‘*pantokrator*’ is used more than 100 times, to translate different terms. Its English equivalent appears as ‘almighty’ (Job 5.17); ‘hosts’ in the ESV, as in ‘LORD/God of hosts’, and ‘LORD/God almighty’ in the NIV (2 Sam 5.10); and ‘power’ or ‘strength’ (1 Chron 29.12). The concepts contained in the OT’s use of ‘*pantokrator*’ are: supreme and universal rule, and infinite power or strength. John emphasizes God’s sovereignty over all of creation (life, space-time, and energy-matter) to reassure his readers, despite how it may appear in the midst of their trials, that God is the God of history from beginning to end. Nothing unfolds in history without God’s explicit direction. Thus, in the conflict between the forces of evil and the Church, John’s readers can rest in the certain knowledge that God knows their needs as they face persecution and that God is working out the course of history to bring victory for his Son and for his Church.

To this point, we have applied ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ generically to God. However, when we consider the three occurrences of this title for God (Rev 1.8; Rev 21.6; Rev 22.13) we find that their context indicates that two of the instances appear to apply to God the Father (Rev 1.4, 8; Rev 21.6) and one to Jesus (Rev 1.17; Rev 2.8; Rev 22.13). To attribute ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ generically to God or only to God the Father reduces the importance of the title from John’s perspective. He reminds his readers that Jesus, to whom this letter is attributed (Rev 1.1), is God, equal in power and glory to the Father; or as the Athanasian Creed states it, “equal to the Father as touching his Godhead”. This is the same message that he communicates in the prologue to his gospel (Jn 1.1-18). With each of the occurrences of the title, we also find the opening words ‘I am’. This is an allusion to the covenant name for God (Jehovah, the LORD) used in the OT (Ex 3.14). That John is consciously connecting the title ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ with the name ‘LORD’ can be seen by comparing his use of ‘Lord God’ (Rev 1.8) with OT passages where Isaiah refers to God by his covenant name and associates the name with the expression ‘the first and the last’ (Is 41.4; Is 44.6; Is 48.12). Thus, John not only identifies Jesus as God, but as the Jehovah of the OT. Let be accursed (Gal 1.8-9) anyone who claims that Jesus is not, in his divine nature, the eternal, infinite, and omnipotent

God; and, in his human nature, the promised Messiah.

Jesus declared that all authority was given into his hands (Mt 28.18). Paul, likewise, asserts the same thing (Phil 2.9-11). Thus, we can be assured, that Jesus, *the* Alpha and the Omega, reigns. Regardless of how it may seem today as we face the beast of secular government and the false prophet of religions like Islam, Jesus, who is God Almighty, reigns!

Jesus Christ, the Victor (Rev 1.5-6)

In these verses, John alludes to Psalm 89.27, where the future descendant of David is declared to be a faithful witness (Ps 89.37) and the designated firstborn (Ps 89.27), who has an eternal kingdom (Ps 89.29, 36-37), in which he rules over the kings of the earth (Ps 89.27). John tells us that Jesus is the:

- *Faithful Witness*. Jesus faced severe trials by temptation—at the beginning and end of his public ministry—and persecution from Jewish and Roman rulers, but he never wavered from his stand for truth. The ‘ruler of this world’ offered Jesus earthly kingdoms if he would worship him (Mt 4.1-10). But, Jesus rebuffed Satan with the true word of God, by quoting from Scripture. He declared that he had come into the world “to bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18.37), and Pilate challenged him with the snide sneer, “What is truth?” Jesus, who was always ready to present truth to any sincere inquirer, did not deign to answer Pilate, because he knew that Pilate did not wish to hear the truth. Jesus refused to cast the pearl of truth under the feet of a Roman ‘pig’ (Mt 7.6). Jesus was the faithful witness to God’s truth (about God, sin, and salvation) in his trials, even to death. John encourages the churches in Asia to be like Jesus by being faithful in their witness as they faced their trials (Rev 2.13).
- *Firstborn of the Dead*. Psalm 89.27 refers to David’s descendant as the firstborn. Jesus was the firstborn of Mary and Joseph, both descendants of David, and held the honoured position of firstborn (Ps 2.7; Heb 1.5-6) and heir to David’s throne. John extends the concept ‘firstborn’ by adding the words ‘of the dead’. Jesus was not the first one raised from the dead. There had been reanimations of recently dead corpses (1 Ki 17.22-23; 2 Ki 4.32-35; 2 Ki 13.21; Mt 9.25; Lk 7.14-15; Lk 8.54-55; Jn 11.43-44). However, in these instances, they would die again. Thus, these ‘resurrections’ (resuscitations) hinted at a more permanent resurrection, which a few have already experienced (Mt 27.53). Through his resurrection, he conquered death and was declared to be the firstborn (firstfruits) from the dead (Rom 8.29; 1 Cor 15.20, 23; Col 1.18).
- *Redeemer from Sin*. In order for Jesus to rise from dead, he first had to die. John uses the word ‘blood’ as a metonymy to refer to the crucifixion of Jesus. Through the crucifixion, Jesus offered himself as a perfect sacrifice, which God the Father accepted as payment for the sins of the elect, thus freeing his people from the penalty and power of sin. There was no other possible way for God to provide forgiveness for sin and satisfy divine justice, than through the crucifixion (Heb 9.22), or God would not have subjected his Son, Jesus, to death.
- *Ruler of the Kings on Earth*. Through his obedience, death and resurrection, Jesus, in his mediatorial office as the Messiah, was awarded the highest possible honours (Phil 2.6-11)—death gave way to life, poverty gave way to riches, and humiliation gave way to exaltation. Jesus, as the God-man, is now ‘the ruler of the kings of the earth’. His kingdom is:
 - *Sovereign*. Jesus Christ has been granted all authority in heaven and earth (Mt 28.18) by the Father. He is the ultimate sovereign over all the kings of the earth. He is later said to bear the name, “The King of kings” (Rev 19.16). Thus, his will is absolute, providential decrees unassailable, commands indisputable, and rule irrevocable.
 - *Glorious*. The kingdom of Jesus Christ is glorious in its brightness (Rev 21.23; Jn 8.12), providing spiritual illumination to all who belong to it; holiness, open only to those who have been purified by the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7.14; Rev 21.27; Rev 22.14-15); and majesty, beyond anything we could describe from this world or imagine in the next (Rev 21.9-26).

- *Universal*. Jesus Christ is not just the Christian king, reigning over only the redeemed. He is the universal king, reigning over every power, authority, and ruler, in heaven, on the earth, and in hell. His reign includes those on the earth who are antagonistic to his reign (Rev 6.15; Rev 17.2; Rev 18.3, 9; Rev 19.19), and the demonic forces behind the rulers of this earth (Rev 16.14). Regardless of what men may think, their written constitutions do not stand above the Law of Jesus and their parliaments and senates do not supersede the government of Jesus. The Ten Commandments are the summary of God's Law, not the sharia or Talmud.
- *Conquering*. Jesus Christ is fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel 2.44, which indicates that the kingdom of the Messiah will break in pieces all human kingdoms and bring them to an end. We are often unable to see how this is happening now. However, the Kingdom of Jesus continues to expand as people from every nation stream into the Church. Also, the hand of Jesus is present when nations and their rulers turn away from pursuing wickedness. At the end of time, we will see what Jesus has done and be filled with wonder and awe.
- *Everlasting Ruler*. In Revelation, John quotes from, or alludes to, the book of Daniel at least 40 times. When Daniel gave the interpretation of the vision that Nebuchadnezzar had seen (Dan 2.31-45), he said that the kingdom of the Messiah will never be destroyed, and the reign of the Messiah will stand forever (Dan 2.44). The Greek translation of the OT has 'into the ages', where the English translations have 'forever'. John uses the same expression, 'into the ages' (translated, 'forever'), and then adds 'of the ages' (translated 'and ever'). The reign of the God-man, which began at his resurrection will continue forever and ever. Therefore, John finds it necessary to interject the declaration 'amen' at this point, and thereby assert that Jesus Christ is the ultimate victor.

Seven Churches, Seven Spirits

(Rev 1.4, 11)

John directs this letter to seven identified (Rev 1.11) churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The Greek word used for 'church' (*ekklesia*, from which we get the word, ecclesiology) was used in NT times for assemblies gathered for political or religious purposes (Acts 19.32). It was the word used to translate the OT Hebrew word for the assembly of God's people (Dt 23.2; Neh 13.1; Mic 2.5), and means, in Revelation, a congregation of Christians in a particular city.

John's list does not include all the churches that were in Asia Minor, before 68 AD. For example, the congregation in Colossae, to which Paul wrote, is not included, nor are Hierapolis (Col 4.13), Troas (Acts 20.5-6), or Miletus where there may have been a church (Acts 20.15-17). These seven churches may be ones with which John had had direct contact during his ministry in Asia Minor. The fact that he only mentions his name, without giving an Apostolic title—as Paul (Rom 1.1), James (Rev 1.1) and Peter (2 Pt 1.1) do—seems to indicate that he was well known to the recipients of this letter and may have had a degree of Apostolic oversight for them. It has been noted that the order in which the seven churches are named, traces a circuit from the coastal town of Ephesus, nearest to the island of Patmos (Rev 1.9), along the coast to Smyrna, and then through the inland cities, from north to south. John may have conducted a regular program of visitation to these churches before being imprisoned on Patmos. It is also likely that this is the order in which the letter would be delivered to the congregations by a messenger. At each location, a copy of the original letter would have been made so that the congregation would be able to read it again after the messenger had left.

The specific audience for Revelation was the seven listed churches in Asia Minor that faced various challenges, including persecution from Rome, the incursion of false doctrine, temptation to grievous sins, and an infatuation with materialism. Congregations have faced similar challenges throughout the 2,000-year history of the Church. Thus, it is not necessary to establish whether John wrote specifically to these seven churches because they were under his direct care, or if he identified them as a form of symbolic synecdoche to represent the Church universal. The choice of communicating to *seven* churches is probably

deliberate, since ‘seven’ is often used to express perfection or completeness in Scripture, both literally and figuratively—for example, days of creation, sprinkling (Lev 4.17), punishments (Lev 26.18), pillars in the house of wisdom (Prov 9.1), deacons (Acts 6.3), messages to the churches (Rev 2-3), seals (Rev 5.1), trumpets (Rev 8.2), and bowls of God’s wrath (Rev 15.7).

The Church recognized in its earliest years that Revelation was to be received as part of the NT Scriptures, with applicability beyond the bounds of Asia Minor. For example, a copy of the *Muratorian Canon* (from the 7th or 8th century), which is attributed to Caius, a presbyter in Rome (c 200 AD), includes Revelation in the list of received NT books and states, “And John too, indeed, in the Apocalypse, although he writes only to seven churches, yet addresses all.” Thus, while John addresses this letter to distinct contemporary congregations, it is no different from Luke addressing his gospel and the Acts to Theophilus, and Paul addressing a personal letter to Philemon. We understand that these books of the NT are useful for our instruction.

John indicates that the grace and peace, with which he desires the churches to be blessed, comes from the ‘seven spirits’ who are before God’s throne. This expression is only found in Revelation (Rev 1.4; Rev 3.1; Rev 4.5; Rev 5.6) and is not easy to interpret. It has been suggested that this refers to the seven angels who are associated with each church (Rev 1.20; Rev 2.1), or to the seven angels who stand before the throne of God and are sent out with the bowls full of God’s wrath (Rev 8.2; Rev 15.1, 6-8). However, many interpreters believe that the expression is a reference to the Holy Spirit—even though it is peculiar to refer to him in this plural manner, and John elsewhere refers to him directly, in the singular, as the ‘Spirit’ about ten times (e.g., Rev 2.7). It is unlikely that John would indicate that grace and peace came to the churches from an angel. It is through the Holy Spirit, who is before the throne of the Father to execute his assigned role as the one sent by the Father and Son (Jn 14.26; Jn 15.26), that God blesses believers with the grace and peace of conversion and salvation.

It has also been suggested that John was not referring to seven different persons, but that he had in mind the sevenfold gifts and operations of the work of the Spirit listed in the Greek translation (used at the time of John) of Isaiah 11.2-3, where the word ‘spirit’ is associated with: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, *godliness* (not in the Hebrew), and fear of the Lord. Others suggest that John has in mind the seven lamps that are the eyes of the LORD (Zech 4.2, 6, 9), to which he may refer later (Rev 1.12). Thus, it is possible that John uses the expression as a figure of speech, to refer to the working of the Holy Spirit in his manifold ways as he supports Christ’s Church in its battles with its spiritual and temporal enemies.

If John uses ‘the seven spirits’ as a reference to the Holy Spirit, then he may be deliberately including a Trinitarian dimension in his prologue. Thus, the book of Revelation comes from God the Father, the eternal God (Rev 1.4); from the Holy Spirit, the ‘seven spirits’; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness. The entire Trinity is involved in a sevenfold way, through the Holy Spirit, to support the sevenfold Church of Jesus, in all places and at all times.

Blessing that Christians Receive in Christ

(Rev 1.4-6)

John includes a traditional epistolary greeting in the opening portion of Revelation, which is also a prayer for his readers and a statement of their standing in Jesus Christ. He indicates that there are seven blessings that Christians receive in Christ:

- *Grace.* For the apostles, grace is not an abstract construct, like people today often use the words ‘love’ or ‘faith’ without objective content. Grace, in Apostolic teaching, is explicit. It is the undeserved and unmerited love of God which saves sinners from everlasting damnation (Eph 2.5, 8). It is also the promise that God will preserve his elect, help them to resist temptation and falling away, and bring them into glory (2 Thess 2.16).

- *Peace.* All of the epistles (13) in which Paul names himself as the author in the opening sentence, extend a blessing of ‘grace’ and ‘peace’ to the readers. Peter includes it in both of his epistles, as does John in his second letter. Peace is the result of saving grace through reconciliation with God—peace *with* God—and through the assurance of forgiveness of sin and of a place in God’s household forever—peace *from* God.
- *Hope of the Resurrection.* Jesus is the firstborn of the dead—he was raised from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion. Through his resurrection, he conquered Satan, sin, and death. Where there is a designated firstborn (or firstfruits) there must, of necessity, be second-born ones (Rom 8.29; 1 Cor 15.20, 23). Thus, Jesus did not die in vain; all for whom he died will be resurrected on the last day into new, imperishable, glorified, powerful, and spiritual bodies (1 Cor 15.42-43), fitted for an everlasting new heaven and earth; and not subject to decay, illness, or pain (Rev 21.4; Rev 22.3, 15; 1 Pt 1.4).
- *Love.* The supreme act of love has been displayed by God, “in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5.8). Nothing in our feeble human experience compares with this example of love. Our ‘love’ is always tainted by selfishness and petulance, and with an expectation of recompense. God’s love is freely offered and unwavering to those in which there is nothing lovely, who hate him, and are at war with him. If dying for sinners was not enough, Christ’s love toward us extends beyond the act of dying. His love preserves us through the valley of the shadow of death and brings us to the full realization of eternal life (Jn 3.16; Jude 21). In contrast, Jesus did not die for angels who left their first estate (Heb 2.5, 16) but cast them into hell (2 Pt 2.4).
- *Freedom from Sin.* You may note that modern translations have ‘freed’ whereas older translations have ‘washed’, in verse 5. In Greek, the two words sound the same, and only differ by spelling of a vowel sound. In the scriptorium, one scribe would read the text and other scribes would write what they heard. Thus, some manuscripts have one word and some the other. The ESV has ‘freed’—focusing on the redemption purchased by Christ, through his blood. However, the idea of having our sins cleansed by the blood of Christ is also supported elsewhere (Rev 7.14; Lev 14.14; Heb 9.22). Regardless, it is through the shed blood of Christ, on our behalf, that we obtain freedom from the enslavement, guilt, and consequences of sin.
- *Royal Standing.* John refers to God’s words delivered on Mt. Sinai, in which he declared to Moses that if the nation kept his covenant, they would be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex 19.6). Those who are united to Christ, through faith in his death and resurrection have a share in his offices. Some commentators suggest that we are to understand ‘kingdom’ as applying to the corporate organization (body) in which believers are citizens, and that it does not mean that believers are kings now. However, believers have been adopted into God’s household, are brothers and sisters of Jesus, share in his royalty, and reign with him now (he has ‘made us’; Rev 1.6; Rev 5.10; Rev 20.6; 1 Pt 2.9). It is difficult to determine what it means for believers to reign with Christ (e.g., over what or whom). We may obtain a hint from Genesis 1.28, when Adam was created as a sub-sovereign to reign over the rest of the created order. The full realization of how we will rule with Christ will not be made known until the end of time (Rev 3.21; Rev 22.5; 2 Tim 2.12).
- *Priestly Role.* All believers also have a priestly role—not just those ordained to an office within the Church. The prophetic office brings God’s word to the congregation. Whereas, the priestly role takes man’s offerings, confessions, and petitions and presents them to God. The tearing of the temple curtain, when Jesus died (Mt 27.51), symbolizes the unmediated access (by mere humans) all believers now have to God in his sanctuary. We fulfill our priestly role through praise and prayer, and by offering tithes and our lives (Rom 12.1). John’s reference to Exodus 19.6, indicates that the NT Church is the fulfilment of the promise made to Moses. The true Israel is not ethnic or cultural Jews (Rom 9.6), which are a synagogue of Satan and liars (Rev 2.9; Rev 3.9), but those who are spiritual descendants of Abraham (Eph 2.12; Gal 6.16).

These verses (Rev 1.4-6) are doxological—John praises God as he contemplates the wonders of the blessings that Christians receive in Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you should meditate on what

he has done for you in his love and grace, join John in praise of your redeemer with your lips, and glorify him with your life (1 Cor 10.31).

The Coming of Jesus with the Clouds

(Rev 1.7)

Commentators agree that this is the first prophecy in Revelation; however, they don't agree about what is the subject of the prophecy. How we interpret this prophecy will influence how we interpret the remainder of Revelation, since this prophecy is a key part of the introduction into the contents of the book—this verse has been referred to, among other things, as the 'thesis statement', 'motto', 'keynote', or 'theme' of Revelation. Many commentators claim that this prophecy relates exclusively, or at least primarily, to the second (or final) coming of Jesus on the clouds (compare, Acts 1.9-11; 1 Thess 4.17), and make statements such as, "It is an obvious reference to the second coming of Christ." Whereas others relate the words "he is coming" to a supposed future rapture of the Church, when it is claimed that unbelievers will be left behind on the earth. However, this prophecy refers primarily to the coming of Jesus in judgement on Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 AD.

The key for understanding what this prophecy refers to is found in Jesus' words, recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 24.29-35; Mk 13.24-31; Lk 21.25-33), and the fact that Jesus says that "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Mt 24.30). The Greek word used for 'generation' by the three gospel writers is used in nine places earlier in Matthew. In every instance, it refers to contemporary people and a period of roughly 30-40 years. Thus, Jesus spoke these words about events that the people living in Jerusalem in 33 AD would see unfold within their lifetime.

In the first part of this verse (Rev 1.7), John refers to words that Jesus spoke (Mt 24.30), and he recalled, since he was present during the Olivet Discourse. Jesus used words from Daniel (Dan 7.13) to indicate that he was the 'son of man' of Daniel's prophecy. The application of this text to Jesus shows that he is its fulfilment and emphasizes his kingship over the nations. John indicates that those who crucified Jesus will see him whom they have pierced (an allusion to Zech 12.10)—a reference that he also makes in his Gospel (Jn 19.37) to show the fulfilment of OT prophecy. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus answers the first of the disciples' two questions (Mt 24.3) relating to the signs of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Mt 24.4-35). In the *following* verses (Mt 24.36-51) he answers their second question, about when this age will end.

Since the larger Biblical context for this verse relates it to the destruction of Jerusalem, the coming in the clouds mentioned by John in this book (Rev 1.7) and Jesus (Mt 24.30), should probably be understood symbolically, accompanying the glory of Jesus (Mk 14.62), as he exercised judgement—the witness of Jerusalem to the nations (the 'sun') would be darkened and the 'moon' of the Jews' moral example would be covered (Mt 24.29). Jews living in Jerusalem from every nation or tribe of the earth (Acts 2.5), and the Gentiles, who had crucified Jesus and pierced his side, would see his visitation as the city was besieged by the Roman armies under Titus and levelled to the ground.

At the destruction of the city, a great wailing went up. Josephus records the famine, brutal sacking of the city, devastation of the temple, and the slaughter of its inhabitants. At one point he says, "While the holy house was on fire, everything was plundered that came to hand, and ten thousand of those that were caught were slain; nor was there a commiseration of any age, or any reverence of gravity; but children and old men, and profane persons, and priests, were all slain in the same manner; so that this war went round all sorts of men, and brought them to destruction, and as well those that made supplication for their lives as those that defended themselves by fighting." Jesus had warned the city that when the Roman armies came, there would be a great tribulation, which the world had not seen and would not see again, and would be cut short only because of the presence of some of the elect in the city (Mt 24.21-22).

John closes this brief prophecy with a double assurance—using the Greek word for ‘yes’ and the Hebrew ‘amen’. He is not only asserting the truth that the city and temple will be destroyed but is acknowledging his acceptance of the rightness of what is about to happen. Jerusalem had become full of wickedness (Josephus speaks to this, for example in *The Wars of The Jews*, bk 4, ch 9, sec 10) and apostate, and had rejected Jesus as the Messiah and forfeited their place, as a covenanted nation, in the kingdom of God (Mt 8.11-12; Mt 21.18-22; Mt 21.43; Mt 23.38; Lk 13.6-9). Thus, the city was ripe for its destruction and deserved to be cursed (1 Cor 16.22; 1 Thess 2.14-16). This does not mean that individual Jews cannot come to Christ, just as any other sinner can turn to him for salvation (Mt 23.39; 2 Cor 3.14-16; Eph 2.11-18).

John prophesies that the destruction of Jerusalem was going to happen shortly (Rev 1.1). Thus, the prophecy applies to those living in Jerusalem in 70 AD. However, this does not mean that it has no relevance for us, 2,000 years later. The destruction of Jerusalem is a sign of the pending destruction of this world, and what will happen to all who reject Jesus. But there is hope. The setting sun of the Jewish age and Jewish Church was a sad day for the earth. But it was not the end. We are in a new age, in which the peoples of the earth are being brought into the NT Church from the four winds (Lk 13.29), from peoples of every nation (Rev 7.9; Mt 28.19); and we now worship in a new spiritual form, no longer centred on the temple (Jn 4.21-24).

A Prisoner on Patmos

(Rev 1.9)

It has been the long-held historic position, that John was banished by Roman administrators to the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, roughly 60 kms off the coast of modern Turkey, because of antipathy to his preaching the Gospel. Support for this view comes from writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Eusebius, and Jerome. However, as is typical of much of modern ‘scholarship’, there is now disagreement with the historic position. Some claim that it is more likely that he was on the island for other reasons—for example, he voluntarily went to Patmos to preach to the inhabitants of the island, he fled difficulties in Ephesus on his own volition, or a congregation (e.g., Miletus) in Asia Minor banished him due to his ‘troublesome prophetic activities’. It is now claimed that accounts of John’s banishment by Rome is a legendary embellishment. However, we assume that the historic position is correct, since John indicates that he was on the island “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”; which means that he was exiled because he preached and taught about Jesus (Jn 15.20). Victorinus (d. c 303 AD), the first to write a commentary on Revelation, mentions (in his notes on 10.11) that John had been assigned to work in the mines on Patmos. John, as a persecuted exile, aligns himself with OT prophets who were also exiled—Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel—from whose writings he often quotes.

Some commentators claim that there is no evidence that emperors prior to Domitian banished Christians, and that this supports a ‘late date’ (c 95 AD) for the composition of the book, rather than during Nero’s reign, before 65 AD (see, [The Primary Fulfilment Generation](#)). However, Jews were banished from Rome as early as 53 AD, under Claudius (Acts 18.2). Christians would likely have been included in the banishments of Jews, since Christianity was considered to be a sect of the Jewish religion, in the early days of the Church. And, John may not have been exiled by the emperor to Patmos, but by city administrators in Ephesus. The city had been sent into an uproar because of Paul’s ministry there (Acts 19.21-41) and may have reacted in a similar way when John made his base of evangelism in the city and surrounding regions.

John mentions that Patmos was an island because his contemporary readers may not have been familiar with its existence, and to provide an historical context for later readers of the book. That the Romans used the islands off the coast of Asia Minor for political prisoners can be confirmed by reference to writers such as Tacitus in his [Annals](#) (ref: 3; 4), and Juvenal ([Satires 1](#)). Patmos is a relatively small island (15 kms X 10 kms) with a rugged topography. It would have been reachable only by ship and impossible to escape from, without access to a ship. Prisoners could not have escaped as long as the port was patrolled regularly to ensure that they did not board a departing ship. Archaeological remains indicate that at the time of John,

the island supported a sports centre and temples and oracle-shrines associated with the pagan cults of Artemis and Apollo. The population was likely not much different from the approximately 3,000 inhabitants it has today.

The rocky island with pagan temples, surrounded by a raging sea, provides an ideal setting for John's vision of the evil confronting the Church. He often refers to the sea (about 25 times)—more than any other NT writer—and mentions mountains and islands (Rev 6.14; Rev 16.20) and a monster coming out of the sea (Rev 13.1). His vision of the new heaven and earth excludes a sea (Rev 21.1).

John states that he was a “brother and partner” with the recipients of his letter in their sufferings. He didn't place himself in an elite class separate from them. Rather, he indicates that he is associated with them in the same way that Jesus is aligned with his people, as the suffering servant (Is 53.1-10). John says that he shared with them in their:

- *Tribulation.* His exile to Patmos was one instance of the persecution Christians can experience from the world that hates Christ and his people. The members of the seven churches may have been experiencing different types of persecution, but they knew that John, following the example of his Lord, was a sharer with them in their afflictions (Rev 13.10).
- *Kingdom.* Tertullian said in his [Apology](#) (ch. 50), “the more you mow us down, the thicker we rise; the Christian blood you spill is like the seed you sow, it springs from the earth again, and fructifies the more.” A hundred years before Tertullian, John indicates that tribulation (persecution) is one of the instruments that God uses for building his kingdom, as manifested on earth as the Church (Acts 14.22).
- *Patient endurance.* Paul informs us that suffering (from tribulations) produces endurance (Rom 5.3). One way by which God builds his Church is through the patient endurance of Christians facing trials (Rev 2.2-3, 19; Rev 3.10; Rev 14.12). Some unbelievers, when they see the steadfast endurance of true Christians and their non-retaliatory response, take note, and want to learn more about the Christians' source of hope and joy

In the Greek, the definite article appears only once, and the statement appears as, “the tribulation and kingdom and endurance”. It should be understood as a unit, which indicates that the three words work together synergistically. Thus, Christians who suffer with Jesus in patient endurance, for the sake of the kingdom, conquer the world of sin and the dominance of Satan and share in the everlasting inheritance with their Lord (Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 26; Rev 3.5, 12, 21).

In the Spirit on the Lord's Day

(Rev 1.10)

The term ‘the Lord's day’ occurs in the Bible only in this verse. There has always been speculation about what it means. For example, some people have claimed that John is speaking of a ‘day of the LORD’ prophesied in the OT (e.g., Is 13.6; Zeph 1.7). Others claim that it is a reference to the day of judgement at the end of time, and that John was transported in the spirit to that day. It has also been suggested that John was speaking of the annual festival that is called ‘Easter Sunday’. However, it is most likely that John is referring to the day that people, in nations with a vestige of Greco-Roman culture, call ‘Sunday’—the first day of the week.

Elsewhere in the NT there are references to Christians assembling on the first day of the week (Jn 20.19; Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2). It has been widely believed by most Church historians that, by the time John wrote this letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor, Christians had begun to refer to the first day of the week as ‘the Lord's Day’ in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection (Mt 28.1; Mk 16.2, 9; Lk 24.1; Jn 20.1).

Early Christian writers use the same term, ‘Lord's Day’, to speak of the first day of the week. For example,

Ignatius of Antioch (c 35 - c 108 AD), in his letter to the Magnesians, refers to the day commemorating the resurrection as the Lord's Day: "those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death." Likewise, to the Trallians, he writes, "At the dawning of the Lord's day He arose from the dead, according to what was spoken by Himself." Other early Christian writers (Melito of Sardis, Dionysius of Corinth, Clement of Alexandria, etc.), following Ignatius, referred to the first day of the week as the 'Lord's Day'.

By calling the first day of the week 'the Lord's Day', Christians declared their independence from paganism. In ancient Greece and Rome, the days of the week were named after gods in the mythological pantheon, and the planets that represented them. The first day of the week was called *dies Sōlis*, in the Latin of Rome, that is, 'day of the Sun'. Likewise, the second day was named for the moon goddess (*dies Lūnae*), the third for Mars (*dies Martis*), etc. Some of the names we use in the English-speaking world for the days of the week have been changed to represent Anglo-Saxon pagan gods (e.g., the fourth day is named after Woden and the sixth, after Frige), however the seventh day is still named after the god, and associated planet, Saturn.

By calling the first day of the week, 'the Lord's Day', Christians in the Roman Empire also declared their allegiance to Christ and defied the imperial cult, which venerated the emperor as a god.

The names of the week used in English have no significance for modern unbelievers. They generally have no idea what was the original meaning behind the names of the days of the week or of months—e.g., January is named after Janus, the god of the doorway. Nevertheless, Christians can make a similar declaration for Christ as Lord, by referring to the first day of the week as the Lord's Day, rather than using the common term 'Sunday'.

From the earliest days of the NT Church, Christians assembled for worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2), and to remember the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus in the observance of the Lord's Supper. Some early Christians, particularly those who were converted out of Judaism, also observed the seventh day of the week as a day for assembly and worship. Over time, Christians discontinued the observance of the Jewish Sabbath and assembled for worship only on the first day of the week.

John tells us that he was "in the Spirit" on the Lord's Day when he received the visions that he records. Most commentators assume that what John means by 'in the Spirit' is that he was in an ecstatic state, or that he fell into a trance—as Paul did when he was praying (Acts 22.17), and Peter did when he was praying on a rooftop in Joppa (Acts 10.10). While it is possible that John received his visions while he was in a trance, we cannot conclude this from the statement that he "was in the Spirit". Our English translations assume that John is speaking of being in the Holy Spirit and capitalize the word 'spirit'. However, if John were saying that he was in a trance, then it is inappropriate to capitalize the word as it would apply to his personal state—that is, in my spirit (the Greek has only 'in spirit', not 'in *the* spirit'). In Acts 19.21 Paul says that he "resolved in the Spirit" to go in a particular direction, and in Ephesians (Eph 6.18) he says that we should pray at all times "in the Spirit". He also says that believers are "in the Spirit" when the Spirit dwells in them (Rom 8.9). Thus, John is not telling us that he was in a trance (although he may have been). Rather, he is informing us that he was in an attitude and place of worship—his mind and will were attuned to the working and influences of the Holy Spirit. Every believer who comes before God with true worship can likewise be 'in the Spirit' and receive spiritual blessings as he hears the voice of God speaking to him through the read and preached word in the assembly of believers worshipping on the Lord's Day. Thus, Jesus says that those who worship correctly "must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4.24).

The Lord's Day is the Christian Sabbath

(Rev 1.10)

A commonly held view among modern Evangelicals is that ‘the Lord’s day’ that John mentions is not equivalent to, or a replacement for, the OT Sabbath. During the earliest period of the NT Church, some believers, primarily those with a Jewish background, kept the seventh-day Sabbath holy and observed the first day for worship and remembrance of Christ’s death and resurrection. However, the Church quickly formulated the position that keeping the first day of the week holy, fulfills the Sabbath principal (Ex 20.8-11) and is a replacement for the seventh-day Sabbath. For example, Ignatius of Antioch (c 35 - c 108 AD), who knew many of the apostles personally, said in his letter to the Magnesians, ‘If, therefore, those who were brought up in the ancient order of things have come to the possession of a new hope, no longer observing the Sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day ... let every friend of Christ keep the Lord's Day as a festival, the resurrection-day, the queen and chief of all the days [of the week]. Looking forward to this, the prophet declared, “To the end, for the eighth day,” on which our life both sprang up again, and the victory over death was obtained in Christ.’ Similarly, *The Epistle of Barnabas* (ch. 15), written around the end of the 1st century, speaking about the OT Sabbath, says that the first day of the week is now how the Sabbath is to be observed, “Wherefore, also, we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead.”

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (ch. 21, para. 7) provides a definitive summary of the Reformed understanding that keeping the Lord’s Day holy is a fulfilment of the perpetually binding command (Ex 20.8-11) to keep the Sabbath holy, “As it is of the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which in Scripture is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath.”

An antinomian lawlessness pervades the Church today, and many professing Christians do not like to hear the proposition that the Lord’s Day, the first day of the week, is to be kept holy. They are wedded to their creature comforts and use Sunday as a day for shopping, dining out, attending sporting events, and participating in recreational activities that undermine the worship of God. They also rationalize why it is acceptable for them to engage in activities associated with commercial employment. A few of the common arguments which are heard from Christians, against observing the first-day as a Sabbath for worship and rest, are:

- It is claimed that the Sabbath command is the only command of the Ten Commandments not repeated explicitly in the NT; thus, it must not be as important as the other commands. However, beside numerous references in the NT about the observance of the Sabbath by Jesus and the disciples, Luke 23.56 reiterates the Sabbath-keeping command. Luke wrote to a Gentile (Theophilus) and he mentions that the women rested “on the Sabbath in *obedience to the commandment*.” If the Sabbath-keeping principle had ended with the death of Jesus, it is unlikely that Luke, writing 20 years after the events, would not have mentioned obedience to the commandment, but would have referred to Jewish custom (Lk 1.19; Lk 2.42; Acts 6.14; Acts 15.1; Acts 21.21; Acts 28.17; see also Jn 2.6; Jn 19.40).
- It is claimed that the Sabbath was revealed to Jews and not written on Gentiles’ hearts. However, the Sabbath was revealed to mankind 2,500 years before the Ten Commandments were delivered through Moses (Gen 2.3). All people know, or sense, that they are to set aside a time to worship God, but they corrupt this with the rituals of worship for their false deities and in the ceremonies of their ‘civil religion’. It is ironic that it is hard to convince Christians of the obligation for, and importance of, observing the Sabbath and yet it is easy for them to adopt the observance of pagan festivals such as Christmas and Halloween.
- It is claimed that the Sabbath was part of the ceremonial laws of the OT that were abolished with the finished work of Christ on the cross. However, the restatement of the Sabbath principle in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20.8-11) includes aliens. This shows that the fourth Commandment was not an

essentially ceremonial law, that is, one pointing to Christ and spiritual separation and holiness. Uncircumcised aliens were generally not permitted to participate in the ceremonial rites of Israel (Ex 12.43, 45) and were allowed to eat unclean food (Dt 14.21) but were required to observe the Sabbath.

- Sabbath observance is excused if a boss requires a person to work on Sunday, with the stated (or implied) threat of being fired for non-compliance. However, if a boss required this person to do other things such as to steal or lie, or lose his job, we would expect him to refuse to comply. Yet, when it comes to the Sabbath command, it always seems to be easier to break than others of the Ten Commandments. Few Christians today are willing to take a principled stand for Sabbath observance. John writing to the churches in Asia Minor encouraged them to be strong when they faced persecution for their faith. Christians today need to be faithful to God's requirements for holiness and be willing to face persecution.

John's Commission to Write a Book

(Rev 1.10-11, 19)

Since the visions John received were delivered on the Lord's Day, John was likely engaged in corporate or private worship when he was commissioned for his task of communicating to the Church the revelation from Jesus. We should not expect to receive extraordinary visions, like John, since the revelation of Scripture is now complete. However, when we assemble for worship with fellow believers or are engaged in our private time of Scripture reading and prayer, we should expect to sense the Spirit's presence with us, communicating truth to our minds and strengthening the faith in our hearts.

John was commissioned by a voice that had the volume and resonance of a trumpet. Although John does not attribute the voice he heard to an identified speaker, it was undoubtedly that of the resurrected Lord Jesus (Rev 1.1, 12), and the same voice that Paul heard when he was travelling toward Damascus (Acts 9.4). The voice that Moses heard from the midst of the burning bush (Ex 3.2-5) when he was commissioned to lead the covenant people out of Egypt, was likely also the voice of Jesus—although in a pre-incarnate theophanic form. Jesus does not communicate directly through an audible voice to people today. But we can hear his voice as the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts (Jn 16.13) and as we hear his voice through reading the Bible (Jn 10.4).

The voice that John heard was loud, but not a mere rumble of thunder since it communicated an intelligible message. The volume of the voice indicates authority; and its being likened to the sound of trumpet indicates: 1) a call to assemble (Ex 19.13), 2) a call to action (Num 10.5-6), 3) a call to worship (Lev 25.9; Ps 81.3; Joel 2.15), 4) a sense of urgency and warning (Neh 4.18-20; Is 18.3; Ezk 33.3-6), 5) an announcement of great importance for the assembly (1 Sam 13.3; Is 58.1), 6) a symbol of the ingathering of the nations (Is 27.13; Mt 24.31), and 7) the announcement of the end of this spatial-temporal universe (1 Thess 4.16). The words of Christ in the Bible are a trumpet sound for mankind today, communicating all the same things as the audible sound of a trumpet communicated to the ancient people of Israel.

The voice and words of Jesus gave John a direct commission. He had already been commissioned as a disciple, apostle, and pastor/elder. However, he is now directed to write a portion of the revelation of Jesus that would become part of the Bible. Whether he wrote the book of Revelation before or after his gospel and his three epistles is debated. But what is clear is that he is specifically commissioned to write down the revelation he would receive. He alludes to the commissioning of prophets such as Moses (Ex 19.19-21), Isaiah (Is 6.8-9), Jeremiah (Jer 1.4-5), and Ezekiel (Ezk 2.2-3; Ezk 3.12) who were to deliver God's word to the people. Thus, he was conscious that he was writing a portion of Scripture that was to be communicated to the Church (Rev 1.3, 11). We believe that the authority to contribute to Scripture required a direct commission from God and that only those designated as prophets or apostles (or those under their authority, such as Luke) were permitted to provide content for inclusion in the Bible. Once the apostles had

died, the canon of Scripture was closed and no additional revelation of equal authority with the Bible is being produced—not by councils, popes, professors, or charismatic preachers.

John was commissioned directly by the Lord Jesus to *write* down what he was about to be shown, in the form of a ‘book’. The Greek word that is used (*biblion*), from which we derive the word ‘bible’, did not designate a bound book with pages and a cover—this form of book was adopted by Christians shortly after the time of the apostles for the easier dissemination of the Bible. Rather, John would have written Revelation on a scroll, made of cut rectangular animal skins stitched together, or strips of papyrus reed pith woven and glued, into a continuous roll about 30cm by 10m. He was told to commit the visions to written form for the purposes of preservation and transmission of their message.

John was also to *send* the book to the seven churches. A copy of Revelation would have been carried by courier to the recipient congregations in Asia Minor. It would have been read aloud to the congregations, and each would have made a hand-scribed copy for their permanent record and use. This allowed John’s message to reach a wider audience than could have been reached through personal visitation.

The recording of the God’s message to mankind—the Bible—began before the flood with Adam (Gen 5.1), Noah (Gen 6.9), and Shem (Gen 11.10) recording pre-flood and post-flood events. The development of the Bible continued with Moses (Ex 17.14), the prophets (Is 30.8; Jer 30.2), and the apostles (Lk 1.3). The contents of the Bible were not transmitted orally, as many liberal ‘scholars’ claim, and recorded centuries after the events had occurred. The Bible was committed to writing by men who were contemporaries, and often eyewitness, of the events they described. Manuscripts were copied with diligence and preserved by God so that we have over 10,000 manuscripts of complete (or portions of) OT books, including 200 among the Dead Sea Scrolls; and 5,800 complete manuscripts (or portions of) of Greek NT books. No other ancient texts have the abundance of support which the Bible has. We can be certain that the published Hebrew and Greek texts available to us today are essentially word-for-word what the original authors wrote under the direction of the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1.21).

Seven Golden Lampstands and Seven Stars

(Rev 1.12, 16, 20)

The book of Revelation uses numerous symbols to communicate its message. At times, it can be a challenge to determine when we are to understand it to be presenting truth in a literal form, versus using figurative language. For example, it is clear that when John said that Satan’s throne was in Pergamum (Rev 2.12), he does not mean that there was a physical throne in the city on which Satan sat, but that it was a city given over to pagan worship. However, when he describes the glories of the new heaven and earth, in chapters 21 and 22, we may rightly conclude that the tree of life (Rev 22.2) will be physically present in heaven, as it was in the first paradise. In addition, it can be a challenge to interpret each symbol John uses to describe the visions he received. We must be careful to extract the substantive meaning and purpose of each metaphor or image and not attempt to make every aspect of a description apply to a specific historical event or look for speculative allegorical interpretations. For example, we should not suppose that there is a distinct and deep meaning associated with each precious stone mentioned in Revelation 21.19-20.

In Revelation 1.12 we encounter the first symbol appearing in the visions recorded in Revelation—the seven golden lampstands. Associated with them are seven stars held in Christ’s hand (Rev 1.16). We are given insight into the meaning of these two symbols in Revelation 1.20, as Jesus provides an example of how to interpret the vision—similar to how he interprets his first parables (Mt 13.18-23, 36-43). This provides guidance for how to interpret other symbols in Revelation.

The seven lampstands stand for the seven congregations to which the book of Revelation was addressed. It

is an image likely drawn from a vision shown to Zechariah (Zech 4.2-6). In the OT economy, there was one congregation, which assembled in Jerusalem a few times per year, around the temple—although local synagogue assemblies were organized at the time of Nehemiah and continued until the NT congregations were organized around that model. Under the NT economy, the Church is found throughout the world with no geographic centre. Seven is a sign of completeness. Thus, the seven named congregations of Asia Minor (Rev 1.11) represent all the congregations of the Church of Christ.

Many commentators raise questions about the nature of the lampstands, wondering if John saw one lampstand with seven branches—like the menorah in the tabernacle, and temple—or seven separate lampstands, each of which had a single lamp or seven branches with lamps. The natural reading suggests that there were separate lampstands among which Jesus walked. His walking in their midst is a symbol indicating that he is always in the midst of his Church, until the end of time (Mt 28.20), building it (Mt 16.8) and protecting it (Jn 17.12, 15).

Any debate about the nature of the lampstands distracts us from the primary message. All congregations are to represent Christ by being lights in the spiritual darkness (Mt 5.14-16; Lk 8.16-17). And, like the golden lampstands bearing light in the vision, congregations are to be pure and display the light of the Holy Spirit and encourage men to come into the light (Jn 3.19-20).

Jesus informs John that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. The reference to ‘angels’ has engendered considerable debate. Various interpretations have been suggested; the most common ones are: 1) celestial angelic beings appointed as guardians of each congregation (Ps 91.11; Dan 10.13, 20, 21), and 2) human leaders or representatives of the churches. The most straightforward interpretation is that the ‘stars’ and ‘angels’ are the leading pastors (shepherds) or overseers of the seven churches. Some object to this interpretation, saying that the NT churches were not yet organized in this way—that is, a designated principal pastor among the elders. However, NT congregations likely followed the synagogue model with a ‘ruler’ over the body of elders (Acts 18.8, 17). Others object saying that the word ‘angel’ is used elsewhere in Revelation as a designation for celestial beings. However, the word ‘angel’ in Greek means ‘messenger’ and can be applied to human beings or celestial beings. For example, the Greek translation of the OT uses ‘angel’ in Malachi 3.1. This is a prophetic reference to John the Baptist (Mk 1.2). It makes more sense that the letters sent to each congregation in chapters 2 and 3 (Rev 2.1, etc.), would be addressed to the congregational representatives (the pastors), rather than to celestial beings. John likely use imagery from Daniel, who informs us that those who turn people to righteousness shall shine “like the stars forever and ever” (Dan 12.3).

Jesus is shown holding the stars in his hands. This indicates that he upholds and cares for the pastors/elders of churches as they faithfully execute their mission to provide guidance, like stars in the cosmic heavens, to those who are seeking spiritual direction. Both congregations and their spiritual leaders are symbolized as light-bearing bodies who are under the care of Jesus.

Jesus calls the vision a ‘mystery’. This does not mean that it is a deep secret to be shared only with an initiated elite. Rather, it is revealed truth from God the Holy Spirit about the wonder of God’s plan for saving a great multitude of mankind (Rev 7.9), by the God-man and through the instrument of his Church on earth (compare, Eph 1.9-10; Eph 3.1-13; Eph 5.32; Eph 6.19; Col 1.26-27).

One Like a Son of Man

(Rev 1.12-16)

In this first vision, John sees an image of the resurrected (Rev 1.18) and ascended Jesus, standing among seven lampstands holding seven stars in his right hand. He says that Jesus appeared like ‘a son of man’. This is an obvious reference to Daniel 7.13, and to the designation Jesus used most often to refer to

himself—for example, in Matthew’s gospel (Mt 8.20; and more than twenty-five other times). We are assured by this vision that although Jesus is glorified and residing in heaven, he is still also a man, sharing the essence of our human nature and form. The symbolic attributes John sees, similar to those seen by Daniel in a vision (Dan 10.5-6), are evidence of the divine majesty and glory of the risen Lord Jesus Christ:

- *Clothing.* The robe and sash represent his official position in the throne room of heaven. They could be the garments of a king (Is 6.1; Is 22.21-22) or a priest (Ex 28.4). In the case of Jesus, they could represent his filling both of these offices (Zech 4.14). He is a king ruling over all the nations of mankind (Ps 2.1-12), and a high priest interceding on behalf of his people (Heb 4.14).
- *Hair.* His white hair indicates that he is the holy and dignified ‘Ancient of Days’ (Dan 7.9)—the eternal one (Rev 1.4, 8, 17).
- *Eyes.* His eyes, “like a flame of fire” (Dan 10.6), are the all-seeing eyes (Ps 139.3) of the omniscient one, which penetrate to the depths of a human heart (Mt 9.4; Lk 9.47) and determine the appropriate form of judgement for mankind (Dt 4.24; Is 66.15).
- *Feet.* His feet, of “burnished bronze, refined in a furnace”, represent the moral purity and holiness of the God-man, whose walk is perfect (Ps 1.1-2; 1 Pt 2.22).
- *Voice.* His voice, that sounded like “the roar of many waters” (Ezk 43.2; Dan 10.6), is the voice of the Almighty God, who with a word created a universe (Gen 1.3), sentences sinners (Mt 7.23), saves his elect (Rom 8.33), destroys the reprobate (Ps 29.3-9), and raises the dead (1 Thess 4.16).
- *Sword.* The “sharp two-edged sword” proceeding from his mouth is a symbol of the effectual word of God—the Bible (Eph 6.17)—which declares the Law and the gospel, and blessings and curses, and cuts to the heart of man and exposes his inner nature.
- *Face.* The face of Jesus was displayed as shining like the sun at full strength. This is reminiscent of the glory that enveloped Jesus during his transfiguration (Mt 17.2). Jesus now abides permanently in heaven with his divine glory as the Sovereign Lord on full display.
- *In his Church.* The lampstands represent the Church and the stars the pastors of the congregations within the Church. Jesus is portrayed as walking in the midst of his Church and holding the pastors in his right hand. The ongoing work of Jesus, as head of his Church includes:
 - Building it, through evangelism (Mt 16.18; Mt 28.19-20)
 - Teaching it, through the Bible (2 Tim 3.16-17)
 - Commending and correcting its members (chapters 2-3)
 - Encouraging them in the face of persecution (Mt 5.10-12; Acts 14.22)
 - Comforting them through the Holy Spirit (Jn 14.16)
 - Protecting and preserving them (Rom 8.29-30)
 - Interceding with the Father of their behalf (Rom 8.34)
 - Receiving them into the glories of heaven (Mt 25.21, 23; Jn 14.2-3).

Only in Revelation are we given a physical description of Jesus—and then only in his glorified state, and only in symbolic form. We are not to think that the resurrected Jesus actually has white hair, feet of bronze, and a sword protruding from his mouth. The NT Gospels do not describe what Jesus looked like. God is silent about the physical appearance of Jesus while on the earth because Jesus is the visible representation of the eternal God (Jn 1.14; Col 1.15; Heb 1.3), and it is inappropriate for us to make representations of God in any form (Ex 20.4; Is 40.18; Acts 17.29)—whether with a stone carving or painting, or by an actor representing Jesus in a movie. John’s intention in providing this information is not so that we would attempt to portray an image of Jesus among the lampstands with artists’ media, but that we would come to appreciate his glory as the God-man full of grace and truth (Jn 1.14), and majestic beyond all sinful human conception and expression.

John said that when he heard the voice, he turned to *see* the voice—that is the one speaking to him, where the voice is a metonym for the person (Gen 3.8). He presents these symbolic attributes of Jesus so that we will turn with him toward the Lord Jesus Christ. As we read Revelation, we should not focus our attention

on the events described but on the person of Jesus, who is the glorious God, and who rules and governs the universe. Revelation is not given to us to serve as a prognostication device but to point us to Jesus. John does not say, “the revelation of *future* events” but “the revelation of (about) Jesus Christ” (Rev 1.1)

Revelation has been a comfort to suffering Christians throughout the ages. It assures us that Jesus is God; he reigns supreme, governing the nations and limiting their petty attempts to usurp his authority; walks continually among the congregations of his Church; provides ultimate protection for his people, even when they face hatred and persecution in this age; and will take them into the glories of heaven to be with him forever.

John Fell at the Feet of Jesus

(Rev 1.17)

To illustrate a reaction to certain classes of events, a director of a movie will often have an actor faint. For example, if a superstar appears unexpectedly at a fan’s door, the person opening the door will stutter a few incomprehensible words and then collapse in disbelief. In a movie in the horror genre, a person seeing a frightening sight will fall to the ground senseless. Or, in a sci-fi thriller, when the ramp on the flying saucer opens and an ugly alien exits an observer’s knees will buckle under him and he will swoon. These examples illustrate the reaction that we often expect if a person sees something that is truly amazing or awesome and beyond our natural experience.

The vision of Jesus that John saw (Rev 1.13-16) was so incredible that it caused him to faint out of fear. He experienced the same reaction as the prophets Daniel (Dan 8.17, 27; Dan 10.9) and Ezekiel (Ezk 1.28) who had seen perplexing visions. Paul had a similar reaction on hearing the voice of Jesus (Acts 9.4). In our current mortal and sinful state (even if converted), if any one of us saw a vision of Jesus in his glorious state in heaven, or heard his voice from heaven, we would also collapse (Is 6.1-5). The glory of the resurrected Lord Jesus is a muted or veiled form of the pure divine glory, since God says that no one who sees his unmasked glory can live (Ex 33.20); but it is still beyond anything that we could bear without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. If we think that we would not react by fainting if we saw such a vision, it indicates that we have no appreciation or understanding of how powerful the glory of God, shining through the resurrected God-man, truly is.

The reaction of John on seeing the vision illustrating the glory of Jesus is the only proper response we can make at the appearance of God. It teaches us how we ought to behave when we come into the presence of Jesus, who is the visible representation of the eternal God (Jn 1.14; Col 1.15; Heb 1.3). We should fall at the feet of Jesus who is the:

- Creator of the universe (Col 1.16).
- Ruler of the nations, to whom all kings and commoners should bow as his subjects (Ps 2.10-12; Ps 110.1; Phil 2.10).
- Holy One of God (Mk 1.24; Jn 6.69) who is without sin, while we are depraved sinners (Is 6.5; 1 Tim 1.15-16).
- Lawgiver who requires full obedience (Mt 5.22; Jn 15.14; James 4.12).
- One whose name is above every other name (Acts 4.12; Phil 2.9).
- One worthy of worship (Rev 4.11; Phil 2.11).

Peter understood how vast the distance is between Jesus and men, when he fell at the feet of Jesus and declared that he was a sinner (Lk 5.8). We need to ask ourselves if we know how glorious Jesus really is and what it means to honour him by falling at his feet.

Paul informs us that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow (Phil 2.10). All men will bow—either in adoring fealty or in abject fear. Believers in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord, will bow before him because

they adore him as the one who is holy and pure, worthy of worship, and their Lord and Saviour. Ways in which we, as Christians, can bow before Jesus include the following:

- Worshipping him with proper praises—using his own words recorded in the Psalms.
- Honouring him through our prayers and petitions.
- Preserving his name as holy.
- Declaring him to be the only means of salvation from sin.
- Hearing his words, as declared through the Bible and Biblical preaching.
- Obeying his commands.
- Keeping his day—the Lord’s Day (Rev 1.10)—holy.

Many professing Christians today think that they are falling at the feet of Jesus when they claim to be worshipping him with their praise bands and lyrical compositions. Instead, they do the opposite. They stand boldly in his presence and declare, “Look at me, aren’t I somebody special!” Ironically, there are hymnic compositions with titles such as “We Fall Down” (Chris Tomlin) and “I’ll Worship Only At The Feet Of Jesus” (Gaither). But all offerings of worship not expressly endorsed by Scripture are unacceptable offerings (Gen 4.3-7) and false fire (Lev 10.1-3); and a blatant disavowal of the sovereignty of Jesus and an act of rebellion against his majesty and holiness. We need to respect the awesome otherness of God by worshipping at his feet only in ways that he has authorized.

Another irony is that many people will fall at the feet of movie stars, business tycoons, popular politicians, and sport celebrities, while refusing to bow before Jesus, who exceeds them all in power and majesty. The apostle John had been a dear friend of Jesus and had been present at the transfiguration, where he had seen the glory enveloping Jesus. Yet, he could not stand in the presence of Jesus in his full heavenly glory. How will it be for those who have shown no respect for God, and have no desire to be near Jesus when they are called to give an account for a life full of sin? Unbelievers are preparing for a heart-stopping surprise. When they meet Jesus face-to-face on the day of judgement, they will fall before him in utter terror. Then, they will call on the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of Jesus (Rev 6.16). It is a fearful thing to think of the terror that awaits these people.

Fear Not! (Rev 1.17)

Fear is a natural reaction to sudden surprising events; to the appearance of previously unexperienced phenomena; and to known potential dangers. Fear in itself is not sinful, because the fear ‘instinct’ helps to keep us from facing potential danger such as going too close to the edge of precipice or entering a dark alley, and it can trigger an enhanced flight response. However, fear is expressed in people only because of the presence of sin. Without pervasive sin in the world, and its consequences, there would be no need for man to fear anything. In the original sinless paradise, there would have been nothing to fear, and mankind would have experienced no fear.

While fear, as a natural response to some trigger events, may not be sinful, it can be a sinful response to events that should not normally cause fear—for example, a person might be unreasonably afraid to go outside because he thinks that a bird could peck out his eyes. Some people become overwhelmed by events and are afraid to act. Sinful fear can also arise when we refuse to trust those whom we should trust. For example, a person on a sinking ferry who refuses, out of fear of falling, to strap on a harness hanging from a hovering helicopter so he can be airlifted to safety, has an unjustified fear. Likewise, a person who claims to be a Christian, and has entrusted his everlasting happiness to Jesus Christ, but refuses to trust him to provide for his welfare in this life, displays a sinful fear about what might happen today or tomorrow. People who succumb to unjustified fears often have deep psychological and physical problems such as paranoia, phobias, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, high blood pressure, or heart conditions. Unjustified

fearful responses to events are an indicator of an underlying spiritual problem—unbelief and a lack of faith in God’s providential governance of all that transpires (Mt 10.31).

John fell to the ground after seeing the manifestation of Jesus in his heavenly glory. Then Jesus reached down, touched him with his right hand, and said, ‘fear not’. Jesus showed compassion for John’s situation with a touch and a word of encouragement, and then provided an explanation for why John should take courage (Rev 1.18). John had previously felt the touch of Jesus (after his transfiguration) and had heard the same word of encouragement (Mt 14.27; Mt 17.6-8). After any physical or mental anguish—a severe scare, a traumatizing accident, a deep disappointment, or a grievous loss—we need to be comforted by both a touch and a word. As humans, with two constituent parts (body and spirit), we need both dimensions of our persons comforted when we are confronted with challenging circumstances. This comfort needs to come in two forms, physical and mental/spiritual—a hug, a pat on the back, or a firm hand placed on our arm or shoulder; and sincere words of love, sympathy, or condolence.

As we have already seen in our study of chapter 1, John often alludes to the prophet Daniel. His experience of falling down on seeing the vision mirrors Daniel’s experience. Twice, Daniel saw visions that frightened or distressed him and caused him to collapse, and he had to be assisted by a touch and a word of encouragement (Dan 8.17-18; Dan 10.9-10, 18-19). This is a further indication that John was conscious that what he was writing in Revelation was from God and that he was writing with the authority of a prophet of God.

Following the touch and word of encouragement, Jesus explains to John why he should not be afraid (Rev 1.17-18)—because he: 1) is the living God; 2) identifies with John’s sufferings, “I died”; 3) has conquered death, and is the firstborn into a resurrected life; and 4) holds sovereign authority over the gates of hell. We will consider this explanation in our next meditation.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus displayed compassion toward the crowds that followed him (Mt 14.14) and healed their sick, often with a touch. He also healed Peter’s mother-in-law with a touch (Mt 8.14); and he blessed the children by laying a hand on them (Mk 10.16). He showed his personal care for Mary and Martha and encouraged them to trust him about the death of their brother Lazarus (Jn 11.23-26). While he was hanging on the cross dying, he provided for his mother Mary with a word of comfort (Jn 19.26-27). Likewise, he showed compassion toward the repentant thief hanging on a nearby cross (Lk 23.42-43). Most significantly, he displayed the ultimate example of compassion when he died in the place of sinners (Rom 5.8; Eph 5.2). John was an eyewitness to all of these examples of the love of Jesus, and many more. He knew that Jesus displayed amazing love toward all the people that he encountered—even toward his enemies (Lk 23.34). In addition, John had seen Jesus transfigured (Mt 17.1-2) and later in his resurrected form (Jn 21.1, 14), and had seen him depart for heaven (Acts 1.9). If this were not enough, John knew of a special fondness and affection that Jesus had toward him (Jn 13.23). Therefore, John, of all people, should have known that Jesus cared greatly for him and should not have been afraid when he saw him in his heavenly glory. However, we will not blame John for showing fear. We, who are believers, also know that Jesus loves us and yet we exhibit little faith that he cares for us and is truly working events for our good. Jesus tells us not to fear, because it is the Father’s good pleasure to give us everlasting rewards (Lk 12.32). Thank God, that in the new heaven and earth all causes of fear will be removed forever!

The Living One Died and Yet Lives (Rev 1.18)

After John had fainted, Jesus laid his right hand on him and declared to him that he is the eternal God—‘the first and the last’ (Rev 1.17). We have already considered that statement (see, [The Alpha and the Omega](#)), so will not address it again. He then added that he is the “living one” who died and is “alive forevermore”. With this three-fold truth—living, dead, living—he injects his eternalness into the spatial-

temporal realm to encourage John.

You and I declare that we are alive since we can do things such as breathe, move our fingers, and process the electrical signals flowing from our sensory organs into our craniums. However, our definition of what it means to be *alive* is often limited to physical attributes. This is not correct since *life* is not something material and cannot really be defined by physical attributes. God and angels are alive (living beings) but have no physical aspects to their essential existence. Notice that Jesus does not say that he is ‘alive’, but that he is ‘the living one’. He is not saying that he had a physical body that came into existence through the conception in Mary’s womb. Rather, we ought to understand ‘the living one’ to be a title for Jesus, and should render the verbal, present, active participle form as, ‘the Living One’ (NIV). This is a unique title for Jesus, used only here. Thus, Jesus declares that existence is a necessary part of his being, that he is uncreated, and that his life and existence are derived from no one else. He exists from, of, and for himself; and he gives life to others and sustains all created life (Col 1.16-17). This is another declaration (along with his being the ‘first and last’) of his divinity.

Jesus follows with a statement that appears to present a paradox—“I died”. Since life in its essence is non-material, rational spirits are everlasting and cannot die, and Jesus is himself eternal, then how is it possible that he could die? The explanation lies in the fact that Jesus is also man—he became man through the virgin conception. As a man, Jesus died—his eternal spirit was separated from his physical body, and his body ceased to function. Thus, Jesus refers to his incarnation and crucifixion, and reminds John that the person he knew on earth for three years is the same person who was standing before him as the glorious Son of Man. The incarnation is the only way that the self-existent, eternal, and immutable God could die and act as a vicarious substitute for those who deserved to experience eternal death.

Next, he says, “I am alive forevermore”. He is alive because he is the “living one” who cannot die, and he is alive because he was raised from the dead into a new glorious body. He says that his ‘aliveness’ is *forevermore*—the Greek reads, “into the ages of the ages”. By this expression, he places himself outside of, and above, history and time in this created universe; and is again declaring that he is God (Dt 32.40; Dan 12.7). He bookends his humanity with his deity.

John is known for recording in his gospel, the “I am” statements (Jn 6.35; Jn 8.12, etc.), that Jesus made during his public ministry. It is possible that Jesus continues to declare here that he is the ‘I AM’, with the statement “I am alive” or, better, “I am the Living One”. If this is another “I am” statement, then we should note that Jesus is reinforcing his declaration to be the eternal God. The Hebrew consonants YHWH, which are derived from the root of the verb ‘to be’, or ‘I am’ (Ex 3.14)—specifically from the imperfect form—mean ‘he who is’. It is one of God’s unique ways of referring to himself, and preceded all manmade religions, since it was used before the flood by God (Gen 2.4). The name “I AM” is not derived from the Egyptian, Sumerian, or Babylonian definitions or names for their gods. No manmade religion uses the name ‘I AM’ for one of its gods, even though they use terms such as ‘god’ and ‘lord’. For example, Islam uses the Arabic expression *allah*, ‘the god’, which is a cognate of the singular form of the word *elohim*. God has providentially preserved the universal term ‘I AM’ for attribution to the one true God. Probably every language ever used includes the verb ‘to be’ or the expression ‘I am’. This ensures that the LORD can be known in every culture, and that Jesus can be declared to be the ‘I AM’.

While delivering words of encouragement to John, Jesus says ‘behold!’, or ‘see!’ The ESV, NASB, and NKJV do not indicate that in the original Greek the imperative form is used. The NIV includes an exclamation mark after ‘for ever and ever’ and starts a new sentence with ‘and’. Jesus demands that John and his readers pay attention to what he is communicating. John knew that Jesus is God (Jn 1.1; Jn 20.28), that he had died and been raised from the dead (Jn 19-20), and that he has authority over death and the grave (Rev 1.19; Jn 3.35; Jn 5.27; Jn 17.2). However, in the midst of a fear-response John needed to be reminded of these things. If John needed this reminder, we need it even more. When we face persecutions

for Christ; have doubts about our health, finances, careers or interpersonal relationships; or are afraid of death; we need to rest in the assurance that our very existence and everlasting salvation are in the hands of Jesus, who has promised to care for us (Heb 13.5). When we have a deep confidence in the sovereignty of Christ over everything that happens now, as we pass through death, and as we enter the new heaven and earth, we can declare “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Heb 13.6) and be better equipped to resist compromise with the world’s temptations.

Jesus Has the Keys to Death and the Grave

(Rev 1.18)

Keys are a sign of authority—e.g., to open doors and invite people in, to lock doors to keep intruders and thieves out, and to bind criminals with chains and locks. Keys are also symbols of honour. Mayors of cities award a key to the city to those whom they wish to honour. For example, Toronto mayors have awarded a ceremonial key about 50 times, from 1998 to the present. Some of the recipients include: Mickey Rooney, Nelson Mandela, Celine Dion, Yo-Yo Ma, Mickey Mouse, Neil Young, Donald Sutherland, J. K. Rowling, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Joni Mitchell, Sylvester Stallone, Cassius Clay, and Drake Graham. In Revelation, Jesus is said to hold “the keys of Death and Hades”, “the keys of David” (Rev 3.7; Is 22.21-22), and “the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit”, which he delegates to an angel (Rev 9.1; Rev 20.1). Thus, Jesus uses his keys of authority directly and he assigns them to others to apply.

Jesus declares first that he has the “keys of Death”. The ESV capitalizes the word *death*, personifying death as the ‘owner’ of Hades. However, it may be better to understand *death* as it is used here, as the event which separates the human spirit from a person’s spatial-temporal body. Jesus declares that, as ‘the Living One’ (Rev 1.18), he is the one who grants existence to mankind, including physical and spirit life, and sustains all created life (Col 1.16-17). Since he has authority to create life, he also has authority to appoint death. Thus, when Jesus says that he holds the keys of death, he means that he determines when and how each person shall die.

Jesus also says that he has the keys to Hades. The older Tyndale (1536), Geneva (1560), and King James (1611) versions of the NT state that Jesus has the keys to “hell and death”. Modern versions do not translate the Greek word *hades* as ‘hell’ but transliterate it into our Roman alphabet. Thus, we need to determine what Jesus meant when he chose the word *hades*. Other Greek words (*gehenna* and *tartarus*) are translated in the ESV as ‘hell’. So, it is probable that *hades* is used to refer to something other than hell. The word *sheol* is used often in the Hebrew OT. When the OT was translated into Greek, before the time of Jesus, the word *sheol* was translated as *hades*. Without conducting a complex word study, on *sheol* and *hades*, it appears that the most straightforward way to render, in English, what Jesus says is as, “death and the grave” (compare, Rev 20.13-14). Jesus, in this instance is not speaking of a place of everlasting punishment nor is he speaking of a temporary spiritual place of residence for those who have died. Rather, he is speaking of his power to raise the dead from the grave.

Jesus has the authority and power to open the graves (Rev 20.13; Ps 9.13), restore physical life to all people—believers and unbelievers (Jn 5.28-29)—and cast death and the grave into the bottomless pit (Rev 20.14). However, his authority extends beyond death and the grave. Jesus is sovereign over the entire created order (Mt 28.18; Col 2.10; Phil 2.10), and the keys which he holds extend beyond life, death, and the grave. He has authority to judge all mankind (Acts 10.42; 2 Tim 4.1, 8), welcome the believing elect into glory (Mt 25.21, 23), and sentence unbelievers to everlasting damnation (Mt 22.13; Mt 25.30).

Jesus delegates the keys of the bottomless pit to an angel (Rev 20.1) and commands his angels to conduct unbelievers into the pit of hell (Mt 13.30). Likewise, he delegates the temporal keys to the ‘angels’ of the churches (Rev 1.20) who are the pastors/elders. Jesus speaks of this delegation when he declares that he will build his church (Mt 16.18-19). Since death will be destroyed by Christ, it is not the final arbiter of a

man's destiny. Man's standing before God in *this* life determines his standing in the next life. So, God invests authority in human officers (as symbolized by the keys of the household steward) to rule in his Church and to dispense teaching, the sacraments, and discipline. Peter in this instance represented all the apostles and elders to whom the keys of the Church are delegated (Mt 18.18; Jn 20.22-23). We are not to conjure up the image of Peter standing at the pearly gates determining who may, or may not, enter heaven. Rather we are to understand this delegation of authority to apply in the temporal realm. When the elders admit a person into a congregation through baptism and the Lord's Supper or when they remove the privilege of access, they are binding and loosing. Peter was the first to exercise this authority in the NT Church—on the Day of Pentecost and over Ananias and Sapphira, Simon, and Cornelius' household (Acts 2.14; Acts 5.1-11; Acts 8.21; Acts 10.28). The administration of the kingdom in this world by church officers is recognized in heaven. This does not mean that elders can ultimately determine who is, or is not, saved. But it does mean that when elders act in the will of God, their decisions with respect to the difficult matters of admission and demission are ratified by Christ himself. This teaches us that we must respect and obey the elders in the Church to whom Jesus has delegated his authority (1 Thess 5.12-13; 1 Tim 5.17; Heb 13.17).

Jesus hold the keys to physical life and death, to the grave and to resurrection, and to eternal death and eternal life. Thus, it is imperative that we understand and have reckoned with his authority and role. In the end, our life and death, and our destination after the resurrection are in the hands of Jesus, to whom we all must give an account (Rom 14.11-12; Phil 2.10-11). Our everlasting welfare depends on what we think of Jesus (Mt 22.42) and on our relationship with him (Jn 3.16).

Symbolic Visions (Rev 1.19)

John is commanded to create a written record of the symbolic vision that he had just seen, and its interpretation; and whatever else of the mystery that was to be revealed to him in subsequent visions. Since the risen and glorified Lord Jesus revealed himself to John in the opening vision and gave this command, John knows that what is being revealed is important and to become part of the Scriptures (see, [*John's Commission to Write a Book*](#)), along with the Gospels and epistles which were already circulating among the early churches. He is commanded to write down what he has heard and seen so that he would not forget the contents of the vision and its interpretation; so that he could make it available to a wide audience (the seven churches in Asia); and so that it would be preserved for all time, to be made available to the broader Church. Revelation is not a miscellany, rather it is a carefully crafted and structured record of what John saw and heard—with associated commentary from Christ, an angel, and John himself—with perpetually relevant instruction in theology and for how we are to walk as Christians in a hostile world.

Jesus refers to three temporal categories associated with the revelation that John was receiving—"what you have seen", "what are", and "what is about to be after this". What Jesus intends to include in these three categories is the subject of much deliberation among commentators and scholars—one author said that this is a "notoriously difficult three-fold clause" to interpret. Some believe that Jesus is speaking of three periods of history—the past, present, and future. They conclude that the second clause ("what are") refers to events occurring around the time John wrote (e.g., Rev 1.1-8.6) and that the third clause ("what is about to be after this") refers to future events (e.g., Rev 8.7-22.21). Some extrapolate from this conclusion and state that the third clause refers (primarily) to remote eschatological events which will occur at the end of this current age. Others suggest that the temporal categories identify three divisions of the text of Revelation. They suggest, for example, that the 'what you have seen' applies to the vision that John had just received (Rev 1.12-18); the 'what are' refers to what he is about to hear—the letters directed to the seven churches (in chapters 2-3); and the remainder of the book (chapters 4-22) provides information about an unspecified future ('what is about to be after this'). However, the contents of chapters 4-5 and 12 appear to contain

references to John's current time and possibly to future events. Others suggest that the statement 'what you have seen' refers to the visions themselves, and the 'what is about to be after this' to the interpretation and application of the visions. Some have hypothesized that Jesus is speaking of three literary genres—visions, interpretation, and eschatological prophecies. There is no clear consensus on how to understand this verse.

Taking the statements in this verse in their plain sense, Jesus appears to be telling John that the visions relate to events that he personally had seen and experienced, would see and experience shortly, and would see and experience later—not necessarily confined to some distant eschatological future. We should not attempt to divide the book of Revelation into three sections to represent these three temporal categories. Rather, the entire book deals with events that affect the Church in every age—the rise of false religions and of governments that are antagonistic to the Gospel and the Church, the dangers of heretical movements entering the Church, the prospect of persecution for the cause of Christ, the sovereignty of Jesus over the nations, and the victory of Christ and his Church over the forces of evil.

The difficulties associated with interpreting this verse and many other parts of Revelation, and the use of visions of strange phenomena to communicate its message, leads us to ask, why is the book of Revelation so difficult to understand? We might wonder why God did not communicate the mysteries he reveals in this book with simple propositional statements or narratives. For example, Daniel 2.31-45 provides a vision similar to the visions in Revelation. In contrast, Daniel 11.1-45 provides a straightforward historical narrative of events—but written centuries before they occurred. We might think that if Jesus wanted us to understand the future challenges the Church was going to face, he could have said, something like this, "Thirty years after the death of Emperor Nero, such and such will happen." Since God could name Cyrus (Is 44.28; Is 45.1), about 150 years before he was born, he could have done the same with the Roman emperors, such as Nero and Titus. A logical extension of our question, is why did God use various forms of literature (e.g., historical narrative, parables, poetry, proverbs, stories, and symbolic visions) to communicate his revelation to man, and not confine it to straightforward propositional statements? Possible reasons include the following:

- To engage our minds, as rational beings, created in his image.
- To make us dependent on God the Holy Spirit for illumination and understanding, and to remind us that we are finite creatures.
- To make the contents interesting, stimulating, and memorable.
- To increase our faith, by making us acknowledge that we cannot know everything that God has done or plans to do.
- To encourage us to approach the study of his word as a systematic whole, not focusing on a single verse or passage but putting everything into the context of progressive revelation and historic fulfilment.
- To remind us that our hope is to be placed in the living Christ, not in our abilities to decipher a text or belief that we can predict the future.

Letter to the Church in Ephesus – Abandoned First Love (Rev 2.1-7)

Jesus commences to dictate to John letters directed to seven churches in Asia Minor. The first was addressed to the pastor of the church in Ephesus, who represented the congregation. Ephesus was a significant centre of commerce and the main port of transfer for travellers and goods arriving from throughout the Roman Empire. The congregation was founded by Paul about 30 years before this letter was sent to them, and shortly after Paul wrote his own letter to them. Extra-Biblical historical records indicate that Timothy became the pastor of the congregation after the death of Paul, and after the book of Revelation was written. He is reported to have suffered martyrdom during a festival in honour of the goddess Artemis, whom the residents of Ephesus held in high esteem and served as temple guardians (Acts 19.21-41).

Jesus reminds the Ephesians that he holds the pastors/elders of the Church in his hand and walks among their congregations. By this, he indicates that he upholds and cares for the pastors/elders as they faithfully execute their mission to provide guidance, like stars in the cosmic heavens, to those who are seeking spiritual direction. He also indicates that in his omniscient knowledge he knows all that is transpiring in every congregation.

Jesus begins his observation of the state of the congregation in Ephesus with a commendation of their good work, before addressing the problem that they had. He uses a good practice for encouraging people to correct and change their behaviour—focus on the positives before mentioning the negatives. The commendations were that they:

- *Knew how to work hard.* They had learned to continue in the Christian life of worship, obedience, and service; not growing weary, even when facing the challenging circumstances of a city filled with all the luxuries of the world, worshippers of mammon, and pagan deities.
- *Endured suffering patiently.* Based on Paul's mistreatment in Ephesus, we can surmise that the populous continued to be antagonistic to the preaching of the Gospel that proclaimed the uselessness of pagan deities, and to persecute Christians.
- *Maintained correct doctrine.* Faced with challenges to their beliefs, they were unwilling to compromise and were hostile to heretical teachings and the claims of false apostles, which they were skilled at discerning. Their diligence was likely the result of the foundation Paul had laid when he organized the congregation, and the warnings he gave about false teachers who would attempt to deceive them (Acts 20.28-32).
- *Hated evil.* They hated what God hates—sin, and those who attempt to defend lawlessness. No one seems to know precisely who the Nicolaitans were. However, the consensus seems to be that they taught a form of antinomianism—which claims that as long as a person professes belief in Jesus, it doesn't matter how he lives. For example, they likely said that a Christian could participate in pagan festivals and consort with temple prostitutes. Paul dealt with the same issue in Corinth (1 Cor 6.12-20).

Jesus charged the Ephesians with a single deficiency—they had abandoned the love they had had at first. Some suggest that the love they had abandoned was a passion for witnessing to those outside the Church. However, this is reading into the meaning of the text, rather than reading what it says. If they were not witnessing to Christ in Ephesus, they would not have suffered persecution. Christians are to have two great loves—for God and for their fellow men (Mt 22.37-40). Jesus emphasized the first when he reinstated Peter (Jn 21.15-19), and Paul, the second (1 Cor 13.1-13). Jesus is saying that within about two decades since they received salvation, the intensity of their love for him (Jer 2.2-13) and for one another had diminished. Like the Galatians (Gal 1.6) and Israel of old (Ex 32.1), it doesn't take long for individual Christians and a congregation to drift into a lassitude toward their Saviour. This rebuke is a reminder to us that it is possible to hate gross sins and yet be unloving. And, it is possible to be doctrinally accurate and ritually correct and yet be unloving. As Paul says, without love we gain nothing (1 Cor 13.3).

The danger of a Christian's first love waning is real for every one of us. Jesus exhorts the Ephesians, and us, to:

- *Remember.* Continue to call to mind the sacrificial love of Jesus by which we have been saved and in which we are called to serve. We need to recall the depraved depths from which we have been saved and the great spiritual heights to which we have been raised in union with Christ.
- *Repent.* Confess our sins (James 5.16; 1 Jn 1.9) of haughty disregard and lack of concerned compassion for Christ and his brothers in the Church.
- *Return.* Demonstrate our love for Christ and his Church through works of loving service to others; not through mushy emotions, expressed with mindless mantras.

A congregation that does not display love, will be visited in judgement by Jesus. He will remove its lampstand—its light-bearing witness to himself and the Gospel. The Ephesians appear to have heeded

Jesus' warning for a time, since Ignatius in a letter to them (chapters 6 and 8) praises them for their exemplary faithfulness. However, their passion for Christ waned and the Church in Ephesus ceased to exist long ago. Today, the area around the ruins of Ephesus is shrouded in the spiritual darkness of Islam. The consequences of being an unloving congregation of Christ are dire indeed!

A Hearing Ear

(Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 29; Rev 3.6, 13, 22; Rev 13.9)

In the conclusion to each of the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, Jesus says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." The Synoptic Gospels record Jesus concluding a number of his parables with essentially the same counsel (Mt 11.15; Mt 13.9, 43; Mk 4.9, 23; Lk 8.8; Lk 14.35). John does not repeat the phrase in his gospel since he does not record any of the parables. However, he uses a similar admonition, later in the book of Revelation, when he directs his readers to consider the beast that came out of the sea (Rev 13.9).

The meaning of the statement appears to be easy to understand, since it basically tells the one hearing the book being read to pay attention to what he is hearing and to apply the exhortation. However, there is more below the surface of the words, since we could observe that everyone has ears, and yet Jesus implies that some do not, since they do not hear—that is, "If you have ears, then hear". It is therefore helpful if we consider the larger Biblical context for the statement. When Jesus used the statement in the conclusion of some of his parables, he appears to be drawing it from the prophecy of Isaiah (Is 6.9-10), with allusions to the prophetic voices of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer 5.21. Ezk 3.27; Ezk 12.2). These three OT prophets warned Judah of divine judgement if they followed in the footsteps of the apostate northern kingdom and gave themselves over to its idolatrous practices. Direct declarations of the pending disaster were often scoffed at by the stiff-necked populous. Thus, the prophets often resorted to the use of symbolic parables (e.g., Is 11.1-9; Jer 24.1-10; Ezk 17.1-24) and visions to present their message. This form of communication was used when direct warnings were ignored by the spiritually blind and God chose to reveal his truth only to the spiritually enlightened (Mt 13.10-15).

Within this broader context of the OT and the Synoptic Gospels, we observe the following about the recurrent admonition used in Revelation:

- The letters are addressed to individual congregations, but this concluding statement is addressed to all the churches. What is said in each letter to one congregation applies to all congregations. The book of Revelation is a universal message intended for every congregation, in every age. The NT Church is the continuation of the true Israel of God (Gal 6.16).
- The message given by Jesus to the churches will enlighten the minds of some but be spiritually opaque to others. Like Israel in the OT and the Jews at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, there are some in the visible Church who are devoid of spiritual enlightenment and others who have their minds attuned to the mind of the Spirit (Gal 5.25).
- The book of Revelation is directed primarily to the *Church*—to admonish and encourage it. It is not intended to convey the evangelistic message announced in the Gospels. Thus, we should not attempt to communicate the message of salvation from sin to pagan unbelievers by directing them to a study of the book of Revelation, since it can only be understood by those who have already been converted by the Holy Spirit. Christians are mistaken when they attempt to use supposed end-time fulfillments of Revelation's visions as a means of awakening the unconverted.
- Israel in the OT compromised God's worship with idolatrous practices. The religion of the Jews at the time of Jesus was essentially a formalistic observance of ritual, with no understanding of the spiritual significance of the ceremonial system—in particular, of how it applied to the Messiah. The Church in every age tends to introduce syncretic elements, imbibe false worship, and decline into formalism. Congregations become as spiritually lifeless as the idols they honour—with no eyes that can see or ears

that can hear (Ps 115.4-8). Revelation is a warning to us, since the human heart is perversely directed toward false worship and we always live in the midst of an idolatrous generation, just like 1st century Rome.

- Each letter, all of Revelation, and all of Scripture is from the Holy Spirit—we are to hear what the *Spirit* says. God communicates through the written word, the Bible, which was written under the direction of the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1.21) and makes us wise unto salvation and is profitable for our training in righteousness (2 Tim 3.15-17).
- While the letters are addressed to congregations, the closing admonition is addressed to individuals (third-person, singular). Therefore, each person must hear and heed for himself. We need to listen to each of the seven exhortations and apply them to our situations. We can also expect to benefit from the associated promises, if we overcome temptation.
- The study of science or psychology (etc.) can have merit, especially if our study increases our usefulness within our community. However, we cannot employ our ‘ears’ to anything that is of more value for this life and for the next life than the study of Scripture. Adapting, and countering a common quip, we must conclude that we can never be so Biblically minded so as to be of no earthly good.
- Jesus says that we are to *hear*, not to feel. Hearing implies that we are to apply mindful processing of the information communicated by the Holy Spirit. Christians are expected to reflect on what they hear, apply critical judgement by testing it (Rev 2.2; Acts 17.11), and then to guide their wills, emotions, and actions by correct thoughts and beliefs. If we are unthinking, and undisciplined in our thoughts, we will not hear what the Spirit says, no matter how wide we open our ears.
- We must now hear what is said; there may not be another opportunity.

Letter to the Church in Smyrna – Encouragement in Suffering

(Rev 2.8-11)

Smyrna, on the Western coast of modern-day Turkey, about 60 kms north of Ephesus, was considered to be one of the most beautiful cities in Asia Minor; except after heavy rains when its streets turned into open sewers. It was a prosperous city due to an excellent harbor and fertile surrounding farmlands, which produced abundant grape harvests. It housed a temple erected (in 26 AD) by the Roman senate to honour Tiberius (14-37 AD), who was emperor at the time of Jesus’ ministry (Lk 3.1), and contained temples and shrines dedicated to a number of gods. In addition, an annual festival was held in honour of Dionysus (or Bacchus), the god of grapes, winemaking, and wine, and of religious ecstasy and wild parties. Today’s inhabitants of wealthy San Francisco and the nearby Napa Valley, would have felt comfortably at home in ancient Smyrna. There is no record of who founded the church in Smyrna, but it is valid to conjecture that Paul organized it during his three years’ residence in Ephesus (Acts 19.26).

In the opening of his address to the church in Smyrna, Jesus refers to himself as the source of life (‘first and the last’) and as the one who was resurrected or revitalized (‘who died and came to life’). These were appropriate self-references in the context of the pagan city where the festival of Dionysus celebrated life and fertility, and the associated rites were based around a seasonal death-rebirth theme. At the time of the exodus from Egypt, God sent plagues which demonstrated that the Egyptian gods were powerless (Num 33.4)—for example, the goddess of fertility, Heqet, was portrayed with the head of a frog, and the god of creation, Khepri, was portrayed with the head of a fly. Likewise, Jesus declares that Dionysus is not God. Jesus is the true source of life (Jn 11.25) who can encourage a struggling church, facing poverty and tribulation, because he was acquainted with material deprivation (Mt 8.20) and knows what it means to resist persecution ‘unto death’.

Of the seven churches to which letters were directed in Revelation, only two did not receive a rebuke from Jesus—Smyrna and Philadelphia. However, the church in Smyrna is challenged by Jesus, who knew of their sufferings, to continue faithfully facing:

- *Tribulations.* Christians suffered persecution from government officials, Jewish leaders, and hostile crowds throughout the Roman Empire (Acts 13.45, 50; Acts 14.2-7, 19; Acts 16.16-24; Acts 17.5-9; Acts 19.23-41; Acts 24.1-27). This consisted of confiscation of property, beatings and torture, imprisonment, exile, and execution. Polycarp (69–155 AD), who was a pastor of the congregation in Smyrna not long after Revelation was written, provides an example of the persecution about which Jesus speaks. Irenaeus gave a description of his martyrdom, in [The Martyrdom of Polycarp](#), and presents Polycarp as an example of a person who heeded Jesus' exhortation to "be faithful unto death".
- *Poverty.* Even though Smyrna was a wealthy city, the Christians living there were poor in material terms. Their poverty was the result of the persecutions they faced, not from a lack of industriousness on their part. They may have lost their livelihoods because they observed the Lord's Day as a Sabbath, or because they would not participate in pagan rituals. As a form of persecution, their neighbors shunned them and no longer purchased their products or merchandise, or engaged their services.
- *Slander.* Christians have been subject to slander (Greek: 'blaspheme') since the beginning of the NT Church (Acts 2.13)—following the Lord's example (Mk 15.3; Lk 23.10). Governments accuse them of treason and disloyalty (e.g., refusing to reverence the State or to fund abortions in corporate health plans) and society condemns them as intolerant (e.g., for referring to Islam as a false religion and to homosexual practices as sin).
- *Imprisonment.* Jesus does not identify the *human* instigators (that is, civil authorities or Jews) of the persecutions in Smyrna. However, he mentions a particular instance—imprisonment—and identifies Satan (the devil) as the instigator, who acted through government officials to imprison some of the Christians in Smyrna.

Jesus strengthens them with messages of encouragement:

- *You are Rich.* He reminds them that Christians are truly rich—in the favour and love of God (Rom 1.7) and gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12.4; Heb 2.4), and heirs of treasures and positions in heaven (Mt 6.20; Mt 25.34). In our society, where wealth and status are as important as they were in Smyrna, we need to cultivate our understanding that true riches lie in the arms of the Almighty, not in the belly of the beast.
- *Fear Not!.* Even if they face persecution unto death, they are not to be afraid of what men or the devil can do to their bodies or possessions. Their lives are in the hands of the risen and living Saviour who has conquered death, sin and Satan; and who will bring them through persecutions and death into his glorious presence (see, [Fear Not!](#)).
- *Limits to Persecution.* He assures them that, as a congregation, their persecution will be temporary and enduring—for "ten days". While this could refer to an actual ten days, it could also be symbolic for "a little while" or a "brief time". Whatever the amount of time, it will end.
- *Promised Rewards.* As in all of the letters, Jesus promises them victory if they conquer. We will consider all of the promised rewards as a separate topic (see, [Promised Rewards](#) for Conquering).

Satan, in Revelation

(Rev 2.9-10)

The first mention of Satan, in Revelation, is in the letter Jesus sent to the Church at Smyrna. In this letter, he is also called 'the devil'. Elsewhere in Revelation, he is given various other names and titles—such as Abaddon or Apollyon (Rev 9.11), Accuser (Rev 12.10), Ancient Serpent (Rev 20.2), Angel of the abyss (Rev 9.11), Deceiver (Rev 12.9), Dragon (Rev 12.7), and Star (Rev 9.1).

Through a survey of Revelation, we learn that Satan is:

- *The tempter of mankind.* Satan makes his first appearance in Genesis 3.1, where he uses a possessed serpent as his instrument to tempt Eve to taste the forbidden fruit. In Revelation, Satan is associated with the serpent (Rev 12.9; Rev 20.2), and thus as the source of Eve's temptation. Satan has not changed in 6,000 years. He, and his legions of demons, continue to direct people to consider the tantalizing

‘fruit’ of sin (e.g., illicit sexual encounters, expressions of anger, or prideful self worship) and question God’s prohibitions against sin; and they suggest arguments for how men can rationalize disobedience (Mt 16.22-23; Mk 4.15; Lk 4.1-13; Lk 22.3).

- *The accuser of the brothers.* The name Satan is a Hebrew word, and a title given to the prime opponent of God. His God-given roles, in his rebellious state, are to provide temptations and then to accuse those who succumb to temptation (Job 1.6-12; Job 2.1-7; Zech 3.1-2). In Revelation, his role as accuser is reiterated (Rev 12.10). He wants believers in Christ’s redemptive work to doubt the assurance of their salvation, and the full remission of sins, by dwelling on their past sins.
- *The source of false religion.* Hypothetically no religion could be true. However, assuming that there can be an instance of true religion—that is, one which represents and honours the true God correctly—then there can only be one true religion. If Christianity is the true religion, then all other religions must be false since they are blatantly inconsistent with the teachings and practices of Biblical Christianity. For example, Islam and Judaism cannot be true since they deny the Trinity and the deity of Jesus. And, Hinduism cannot be true because it posits many gods. All religions that are not founded on Christ are false, and come from Satan (Rev 2.9, 13, 24; Rev 3.9). Satan’s demonic spirits are the empowering force behind false prophets (Rev 16.13-14). This is not a ‘politically correct’ statement, but it is based on Scripture—we must state emphatically that all other religions, besides Christianity, are demonic.
- *The deceiver of the world.* Satan’s falsehoods extend beyond the explicit domain of ‘religion’. As the deceiver of the world (Rev 12.9; Rev 20.10), his falsehood extends into every other area of life—including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, science, and economics. He deceives people so that they believe that mankind is nothing more than an evolved ‘ape’, who is from birth good, and that men can solve all their problems without consideration of God or his laws.
- *The power behind the imperial monster.* Satan is the evil spiritual force behind governments which oppose Christianity (Rev 13.2-4; Rev 16.13-14). For example, he drives politicians who enact laws to regularize same-sex ‘marriage’, endorse the murder of the unborn through abortion and the slaughter of the infirm through euthanasia, permit commercial activities on the Lord’s Day, ban the Bible, and outlaw Christian worship services.
- *The enemy of the Church.* Satan was created as an angel to serve God in heaven and among men. However, shortly after his creation he rebelled. Rather than obeying God by ministering to those inheriting salvation (Ps 91.11; Heb 1.14), he became the avowed enemy of Christ and his Church (Rev 12.3-6, 16-17). He does everything he can, in ways he conjures up, to discourage believers, sow discord in congregations, and spawn heresies.
- *The instigator of persecution against Christians.* When Satan is unable to deceive believers in his attempts to weaken their faith in Christ and the word of God, he uses instruments of physical coercion to remove them from the battlefield. He cajoles uncivil magistrates and unruly mobs to silence a Christian witness in the public forum—through imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom (Rev 2.10).
- *Expelled from heaven.* At one time, Satan, as an angel of light, had access to heaven. After his rebellion, he waged war against the heavenly host. But, he was defeated by the angels that remained loyal to God, and was thrown out of heaven (Rev 9.1; Rev 12.3-9)—in a manner similar to Adam’s expulsion from the garden of Eden.
- *Bound for a thousand years.* At the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, he conquered Satan and neutralized his power over death. During the interval between Jesus’ incarnation until his second coming, Satan’s powers have been severely limited (Rev 20.2-3, 7-8). However, this does not mean that his wiles can be ignored. He is no less cunning today and his powers of deception and temptation are still strong. Although defanged, he is still a “roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pt 5.8).
- *Consigned to everlasting hell.* His prospect is torment in an everlasting hell (Rev 20.10). However, no regrets arise in his mind. His hatred is only increased, and his resolve hardened as he seeks to drag those who hear the Gospel into his gloomy abode (Mt 13.19-22).
- *King of hell.* He knows that his destiny is sealed, and in hatred against God, he attempts to fill his kingdom, the abyss of hell (Rev 9.11), with as many reprobates as he can. His wish is to shake his fist

at God and say to him, “You have failed, look at all the men I have claimed for my realm!”

A Synagogue of Satan

(Rev 2.9; Rev 3.9)

In his letters to the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, Jesus says that there are liars who say that they are Jews and are not, but belong to a synagogue of Satan. These individuals slandered (Greek: ‘blasphemed’) those in the church in Smyrna. Thus, the individuals of whom Jesus is speaking were outside of the congregation of true believers. They were those who aligned themselves with ethnic Israel—that is, physical descendants of Abraham (Jn 8.33, 39; Rom 4.1)—but were not part of spiritual Israel—children of the promise made to Abraham that through his offspring all nations on earth would be blessed (Gen 26.4; Mt 3.9; Rom 9.6-8).

Paul uses the term ‘Israel’ with two senses—ethnic and spiritual (Rom 9.6). Likewise, Jesus implies that the term ‘Jew’ can be used with two senses—ethnic and spiritual. A true Jew is anyone who has believed that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) and has professed faith in him, even if he is uncircumcised and not demonstrably a physical descendant of Abraham. Thus, all true Christians are spiritual Jews.

Many Christians today do not agree with the identification of Christians as spiritual Jews. They believe that we must maintain a distinction since, they claim, God has a distinct salvific future for ethnic Jews. However, there is considerable Biblical evidence that there is only one Church—in the OT it was represented by those who placed their faith in the Messiah who was coming. Today it is being filled with those who place their faith in the Messiah who has come. Paul says that all believers in Christ, who worship by the Spirit are ‘the circumcision’ (Philip 3.3); there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gentile) in Christ, and all in Christ are “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3.28-29); there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for God bestows riches on all who call on him (Rom 10.12-13); and the Church is the Israel of God (Gal 6.16). Also, John indicates that the Church, which is made up of people from every nation, is the spiritual fulfilment of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 7.4-9). He also identifies the NT Church as the continuation of the Jewish nation of king-priests (Rev 1.5b-6, with Ex 19.6; compare 1 Pt 2.9).

God no longer deals with ethnic Jews (direct descendants of Jacob—named ‘Jews’ after Judah) as a people. They have been cut off and are now treated as pagans (Mt 8.11-12; Mt 21.18-19, 28-46; Lk 13.6-9; Acts 18.6; Acts 28.25-28; 1 Thess 2.14-16). The destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 AD) is the decisive indicator that God has ceased dealing with the Jews as a nation. This of course does not mean that individual ethnic or cultural Jews cannot come to Christ, just as any other sinner can turn to him for salvation (Mt 23.39; 2 Cor 3.14-16; Eph 2.11-18). In addition, the physical descendants of Jacob’s twelve sons can no longer be identified. Those who call themselves ‘Jews’ today may have blond hair and blue eyes, dark skin and black curly hair, or olive skin and dark brown hair. No person today who calls himself a ‘Jew’ is able to demonstrate that he is descended from Jacob. To be Jewish is something cultural; it is not even adherence to particular religious beliefs (some cultural Jews claim to be atheists), nor is it provable physical descent from Jacob. The people Paul is concerned about (Rom 10.1-3) no longer exist as an identifiable people. Israel according to the flesh no longer exists.

Some argue that the term ‘Jew’ used here provides strong evidence for an early date for Revelation. While we agree that Revelation was written ‘early’ (see, [The Primary Fulfilment Generation](#)), the use of the term ‘Jew’ does not provide any evidence for dating the book. Jesus is informing John, the congregations in Asia, and us that anyone who has rejected him as the Messiah is not a true Jew and not part of the true Israel. They are Jews in name only and are in reality pagans—opponents of the Gospel and not worshippers of the true Trinitarian God revealed in the Bible, and as revealed in the God-man, the Messiah.

At the martyrdom of Polycarp in Smyrna, not long after Revelation was written, Gentiles and ethnic Jews

demonstrated their rebellion against God by participating in the condemnation of Polycarp to death, gathering wood with which to burn him, and persuading the Roman soldiers to burn him alive. They joined in the cry, “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, and the overthrower of our gods, he who has been teaching many not to sacrifice, or to worship the gods.” Jews claimed that Christians perverted the Law, committed blasphemy by worshipping a mere man who had made blasphemous statements (Mk 2.7; Mk 14.64), and was crucified as a criminal (Lk 22.37). The ethnic Jews who attacked the church in Smyrna rejected Jesus as their Messiah and denied that Christians are God’s people, and thus were members of a synagogue of Satan.

Anyone today who claims to be a Christian and yet rejects Jesus as God and Lord is also part of Satan’s global synagogue. Most people in Unitarian assemblies or associated with liberal denominations fall into this category. They use the name ‘Christian’ but do not believe in the Trinity, that Jesus is God, that he was born of a virgin, and that he died and rose again from the dead. They often become virulent haters of true Christians and slander them by calling them ignorant ‘fundamentalists’. As in John’s day, all ‘Jews’ were not Jews, so in our day all ‘Christians’ are not Christians.

Letter to the Church in Pergamum – A Syncretistic Church (Rev 2.12-17)

Pergamum was near the coast of modern Turkey (southwest of Istanbul). It was situated on a hill on the north side of a river, above a fertile plain. At the top the hill, and around it, was a cluster of temples dedicated to the Greek gods, Zeus, Apollo, Athena (the goddess of wisdom), Dionysus, Aphrodite, and Aesculapius (the god of medicine and healing)—it was known in the ancient world as ‘the city of temples’. It was the birthplace of Galen (about 60 years after John wrote Revelation), the most accomplished physician, surgeon, and medical researcher of the ancient world. It had a large library, designed to circulate air to preserve the manuscripts, with a statue of Athena standing in the main reading room. Plutarch says that the library contained 200,000 volumes, second only to Alexandria. However, Mark Antony (83-30 BC) removed all the books and took them to Egypt as a gift for Cleopatra. Pergamum dominated the manufacture of parchment (‘parchment’ is derived from the Latin *pergamenum*) in the Hellenistic period. Legend has it that Pergamum invented parchment to replace the use of papyrus, the production of which was monopolized by its rival, Alexandria. Thus, the city served as a royal residence, ‘college’ town, research centre, centre for advanced manufacturing, and the focal point for religious rites. A modern near-equivalent could be a city like metropolitan Boston, which is a state capital, has over 50 universities and colleges (including theological schools, like Gordon-Conwell), three research hospitals, and many high-tech facilities.

Jesus refers to Pergamum as the city where Satan has his throne and dwells. This is a fitting appellation for a city full of temples for the gods of the Greek pantheon, including one with a large throne for Zeus. In addition, it is appropriate since a live serpent was kept in the temple of Aesculapius, who was called “man’s saviour and champion against diseases” by Claudius Aelianus (c 2nd c). Serpent-worship and healing ‘miracles’ were prominent in the city. You can view examples of coins from Pergamum, listed on e-Bay for a few hundred dollars, which show the healing staff of Aesculapius with a twined serpent. Elsewhere in Revelation, Satan is referred to as a serpent (Rev 12.9). Pergamum was the epitome of the *City of Man*, given over to pagan idolatrous practices, care for the human body, the knowledge of man, and the development of technology. It was opposed to the *City of God* in every way. Men may look on cities like this with awe, but Jesus exposes the problem at their core—they are where Satan places his throne.

Jesus declares that he has a sharp two-edged sword, to remind them that:

- While the civil magistrate has the delegated power of the sword (Rom 13.4), Jesus is the supreme ruler over the *City of Man*, sitting on his throne (Ps 2.2, 4; Ps 9.4) and executing justice with his sword (Ps 45.3)
- His word is the sharp sword of the Spirit (Eph 6.17) that discriminates between good and evil in the

hearts of men (Heb 4.12-13).

Jesus' commendation of the church in Pergamum is brief. They had not denied the faith, even when one of their members, Antipas, had suffered martyrdom. We know nothing more about Antipas, which is surprising because the Church honoured many of the early martyrs. However, he is known to Jesus, who recognizes his faithfulness. Since only Antipas is mentioned as a martyr, the Pergamenes likely had not experienced systemic persecution from external enemies. The reason appears to be that they were willing to make compromises by eating foods sacrificed to idols so that they could participate in the social and cultural life of their neighbours.

Jesus lays a serious charge against them. They had in their midst some who held to the false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. Balaam had enticed Israelite males to consort with Moabite women and to sacrifice to their gods (Num 25.1-2). Some in the church in Pergamum appear to have rationalized that visiting temple prostitutes was not a moral problem for Christians, if they believed that Jesus was Lord and that all their sins were covered by his blood-sacrifice. The Church at Ephesus also had some who held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We noted that this was likely a form of antinomianism, which claims that if a person professes belief in Jesus, it doesn't matter how he lives—allowing Christians to participate in pagan festivals and consort with temple prostitutes. They claimed that their freedom in Christ overrode the limits imposed by the moral Law and permitted them to commit sin, as long as they believed in Jesus and believed that idols were false gods. They turned the grace of God into sensuality (Jude 4). In paganism, idolatry and sexual immorality are found together (Col 3.5). However, Christians must have both right beliefs (orthodoxy) and right practice (orthopraxy); and must guard against the world creeping into the Church and corrupting it—for example, when denominations permit practicing homosexuals to be ordained or to be members. Proper toleration does not condone openly perverse sins.

Jesus exhorted the entire congregation in Pergamum to repent of allowing members to participate in idolatry and sexual sins. They needed to exercise congregational discipline against open sins and expel the evil persons (1 Cor 5.13). Repentance involves more than a change in belief; it must include a sincere desire for moral reformation and a striving after proper worship and sexual purity in the Church. If they did not repent, they would experience the visitation of judgement by the 'sword' of God's word against them.

Letter to the Church in Thyatira – Moral Purity is Required (Rev 2.18-29)

Thyatira was a town in Asia Minor, situated on a river and near a Roman road. It was resettled with Macedonians by Alexander, after the Persian campaign. It was a city of craftsmen, with prominent guilds representing the different crafts. Among its more significant crafts were wool and linen weaving, production of a reddish-purple dye (likely made from the Madder Root rather than from the Murex mollusc, since Thyatira was not on the coast), and fabrication of items made of copper and bronze. Lydia, a seller of dye, was from Thyatira and living in Philippi, a city of Macedonia (Acts 16.14). The Roman government was not supportive of guilds but overlooked them when they produced products useful for its militaristic ambitions. A favourite god of the guilds in Thyatira was Apollo Tyrimnas (the sun-god).

In the opening of his letter to the church in Thyatira, Jesus addresses their contemporary context. He refers to himself as the "Son of God". In the earlier vision, John refers to Jesus by his self-referential title 'son of man' (Rev 1.13). However, Jesus changes it to 'Son of God' here. Clearly, he places himself in contrast to Apollo, the son of the mythical god, Zeus. He mentions his eyes of shining flames of fire. He is the true source of light who created light (Gen 1.3; Col 1.16) and the sun (Gen 1.15), which the Greeks associated with Apollo and worshipped. In addition, he uses a unique Greek word (translated 'burnished bronze'; also, in Revelation 1.15) to refer to his feet. It is a different word than is used to refer to bronze generically in Revelation (Rev 9.20; Rev 18.12) and was used when Daniel 10.6 was translated into Greek. The Thyatirans

would have recognized this as an allusion to their locally made product. Thus, Jesus stood on feet made from the metal they would have used to honour their gods. His opening remarks are a polemic against the pagan deity honoured in Thyatira. Jesus is the true patron of his people, not the pagan deities of the guilds.

Jesus briefly commends the Thyatirans, by mentioning their “love and faith” and their “service and patient endurance”. The focus of their commendation is on their works—which are not identified but may have included care for the sick and destitute. They patiently withstood ridicule for their kindness, which had become more evident than when they were converted. While the Thyatirans displayed love, they were careless about doctrine and being holy. Their emphasis was on the ‘social gospel’. They stand as a marked contrast to the congregation in Ephesus, which was commended for its orthodoxy and moral purity, but was rebuked for its lack of love. All congregations of the Church must be doctrinally pure *and* loving (Jn 13.35).

The presence of guilds in Thyatira presented a problem for Christians, since they often required participation in pagan religious rites, eating food offered to idols, engaging in debauched events, and ritual prostitution, held in their temples. The rebuke of Thyatira is the longest and most solemn among those given to the churches that are rebuked by Christ. Their overwhelming problem was that they tolerated the evil and immorality of those in their midst who participated in the rites and attended the orgies of the guilds.

How could such a thing happen in a church of professing believers? A ‘Jezebel’ had seduced the congregation. This woman is symbolically named Jezebel by Jesus, to class her with Ahab’s wife who encouraged him to sin through idol worship (1 Ki 16.31). She would have been known by her real name to the congregation. She arrogated to herself prophetic and teaching authority on matters doctrinal and moral. However, she had no right to this office (1 Tim 2.12); and Jesus says that she “*calls* herself a prophetess”, indicating that her claim was false. We can infer that her teaching was similar to that of the false teachers in Pergamum—proponents of “the teaching of Balaam” (Rev 2.14) and the Nicolaitans (Rev 2.15). She claimed that Christian liberty permitted a licence to eat meat sacrificed to idols, as long as Christians did not honour the false gods, since the gods had no real existence; and to consort with cult prostitutes since acts of the body could not pollute a holy spirit. The Council of Jerusalem explicitly prohibited these sins (Acts 15.28-29).

Jesus says that he had given her time to repent of her sin, but she despised his commands and had not repented. So, he declares emphatically (‘behold’) that he will punish her—her bed of sin will be her bed of sickness—and will visit those who adhered to her teaching with great tribulations, leading to death, if they also refuse to repent, on hearing this letter of rebuke read to them. Her retribution will serve as a warning to all who think that they can be licentious and ignore God’s command to be holy (Lev 11.44-45; 1 Pt 1.16).

Some in the congregation had not yet been led astray by the teachings which the false teachers called ‘the deep things of God’, but Jesus sarcastically called them by what they really were, ‘the deep things of Satan’. Paul labels this teaching as falsely called philosophy and knowledge (Col 2.8; 1 Tim 6.20). The mystery cults (e.g., Sibylline oracles) and the incipient Gnosticism in their day claimed to initiate novices into a deeper spiritual awareness—which was often nothing more than the equivalent of a drug-induced stupor. Jesus ridicules this supposed knowledge and encourages the Thyatirans to do nothing other than to hold fast to what they had—the truth that they had learned when they came to faith and their dedication to love, faith, service, and patience, in Christ’s name.

Jesus Knows Our Works (Rev 2.2-3, 9, 13, 19; Rev 3.1, 8, 15)

Jesus informs each of the seven churches that he knows their works, or trials. He uses the word ‘works’ in a broad sense, as it is used elsewhere by John (Jn 3.19-20; Jn 5.36; Jn 7.3; Jn 8.39; 1 Jn 3.8). Thus, he informs the seven churches that he not only knows about their conduct and the trials others inflict upon

them, but also knows their character—their weaknesses and strengths, their fears and courage, and their doubts and faith. He knows both the inner source and the outer manifestation of their works, as they live their lives as Christians in the hostile environment of a world in rebellion against its Creator.

On reading the statement “I know your works”, we might think that Jesus is informing them that he knows what is transpiring on the earth because he sits in heaven and observes everything that is happening among the nations of men. This idea could possibly be supported by the mention of eyes of shining flames of fire (Rev 1.14; Rev 2.18; Rev 19.12), which some interpret as a reference to the power of his eyes to penetrate the deepest caverns of the human heart and reveal the moral temperature of man. However, this interpretation of the imagery is not accurate. Jesus does not know what is in man because he *observes* what man does. This would make his knowledge contingent rather than absolute.

We are told that during his earthly ministry, Jesus responded to the actions of men in specific ways because he knew what was in their hearts (Mt 9.3-4; Lk 9.46-47; Jn 2.23-25). The knowledge Jesus had of what was in their hearts was not because there was something that could be observed, since their intimate and unrevealed thoughts were not necessarily knowable through their outward actions. For example, we are aware that there are people who are such experienced actors that they can feign sincerity or concern, and yet are devils incarnate. Nor was his knowledge based on a general understanding of sinful human psychology. Rather, the knowledge he had, while on earth, went deeper. The temporary veil between his infinite and eternal divine nature and his acquired human nature was lifted and Jesus as a man accessed the depths of the infinite omniscience of the Trinity.

The Greek word used here is *oida*, rather than *ginosko* (from which we obtain the English word ‘know’). The two words overlap significantly in their usage. However, it appears that we can detect a subtle difference between them. The first word is applied more often to innate knowledge and facts (Mt 25.12-13; Mk 10.19), whereas the second is applied more often to knowledge acquired through observation or experience (Mk 13.28-28; Lk 1.18). Thus, the choice of word used here may indicate that Jesus is emphasizing that his knowledge of each church’s works and trials is based on his omniscience rather than on his having observed events.

There may also be a deeper meaning indicated by his statement, “I know your works”. He may be speaking of his foreknowledge and divine predestination of all that transpires in the created realm. We will not take a digression into defending the doctrine of predestination (attested in Scripture: Acts 4.27-28; Rom 8.29; Eph 1.4-5, 11) or consider how man can be held responsible for his actions when they are predestined. Rather, we observe that Jesus, in his divine nature, does not acquire knowledge as we do. His knowledge is complete—he knows *all* things, possible and actual; simultaneously, not sequentially. There is nothing that he does not know and must learn—e.g., through observation. He does not use instruments of sensory perception; does not observe processes, events or states; and does not use empirical methods as we do. Nor is there anything that happens within the universe that is beyond the realm of his knowledge or is a surprise to him. Our past, present and future are not past, present and future to him. They are all one ever-present component of his total knowledge. Jesus’ foreknowledge is not based on his looking into our future to see how we will act toward him, so that he can then make decrees (e.g., about our election or reprobation) based on that foresight. That is a parody of what divine foreknowledge means.

Foreknowledge has another meaning than ‘foresight’. Thus, there is another sense in which we can understand what Jesus means when he says, “I know your works”. The word ‘know’ is often used in Scripture in a way that includes an element of intimacy—for example, as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (Gen 4.1, 25). Therefore, Jesus could be informing each church that what he knows of their situation is embedded in his foreknowledge—his ‘fore-love’; they have been loved and held close to his heart from eternity. Jesus, the infinite, eternal Creator of the universe has a special concern for each congregation in his Church and for each member of it. His declaration that he will build his church (Mt

16.18) is settled in eternity because he gave his life for his people (Jn 10.15) and will ensure that each one of them is successfully brought through every trial and through death itself, to be with him forever (Jn 10.29).

Knowing that we are known by Jesus, how will we respond? Will we attempt to hide from him in shame, as Adam did (Gen 3.10)? Or will we rest in the understanding that, despite our weaknesses, fears, and doubts, Jesus knows and accepts our works—our actions, courage, love and faith—because he has first loved us (1 Jn 4.19).

Letter to the Church in Sardis – A Dead Church

(Rev 3.1-6)

Sardis was at one time the wealthy inland capital of Lydia, a province in Asia Minor. It was supposedly an impregnable city; but was captured by Cyrus in 586 BC as he expanded the Persian Empire. It was the northwestern terminus of the Persian royal road that extended from Persepolis (in today's western Iran). It was burned during the Ionian revolt against Persian rule (c 495 BC). Alexander annexed it into his empire in 334 BC. It was unexpectedly sacked by Antiochus III in 214 BC and absorbed into the Roman Empire in 133 BC as control of Lydia was taken from the Seleucids. It was devastated by a major earthquake in 17 AD. Archaeological remains indicate that it was rebuilt after the earthquake—apparently funded entirely from its own wealth. During the Islamic conquests of the 11th century it went into decline and was destroyed in 1402 AD by Tamerlane, the Turco-Mongol warlord. At the time of John, the city contained a prominent temple to Artemis and housed a significant Jewish community. The history of the city illustrates the contents of the letter from Jesus—it was a spiritually dead, pagan city.

Jesus informs the Sardians that he holds the “seven spirits of God”, along with the seven stars (Rev 1.16, 20; Rev 2.1), which represent, collectively, the pastors/ elders and congregations of the Church. Jesus adds the description about his holding the ‘seven spirits of God’ to the vision that John had seen (Rev 1.12-20). We determined that the expression ‘seven spirits of God’ probably refers to the Holy Spirit (see, [Seven Churches, Seven Spirits](#)), and may be used in the sense of ‘the sevenfold Spirit’, referring symbolically to the completeness or perfection of his activity. The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus to bring spiritual light into the pagan darkness of this world (Rev 5.6; Jn 14.26; Jn 15.26), like that which engulfed the city of Sardis.

The church in Sardis was living a lie—it was spiritually dead but had a reputation for being alive. When the church was founded, it had been alive—true believers lived by faith and worshipped the Lord. However, its works were not complete before God the Father's sight. The church had not produced fruit in the form of a subsequent generation of true believers. And, many of those who were in the congregation had succumbed to the idolatrous practices around them—as is indicated by the reference to ‘soiled garments’ (Rev 3.4). Even though it applied the name ‘Christian’ to its assembly and congregants it was no more Christian than were the participants in pagan temple cults of John's day or the later adherents of Islam in the city. Sardis represents dead churches throughout history and the world. For example, many denominations (e.g., the United Methodist Church in the US and the United Church of Canada) are spiritually dead. They claim to be Christian, and may have a few true believers in their midst, but their official doctrinal statements on topics such as the deity of Jesus and the resurrection, same-sex unions, the reality of everlasting damnation of the reprobate, and the uniqueness of Christianity and the Gospel are anti-Biblical, blasphemous, and an offence in the sight of God. It is a sad situation when those who have had the word of life (1 Jn 1.1), have known the living Saviour (Rev 1.18), and have had a mission to the lost world are now spiritually dead. They wear the garments of Christ but are wolves in sheep's clothing, they claim to be soldiers in his army but are traitors like Judas who fight on Satan's side.

The church in Sardis receives limited praise from Jesus. He observes that there were a few who had not abandoned the faith and had not been polluted by participating in idolatrous practices. Their currently pure

‘garments’ and their worthiness are not of their own doing but are derived from the holiness and merit of Jesus who graciously holds them in his hands—they had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7.14; 1 Jn 2.2). The presence of true believers in a dead church should cause us to be cautious about what we declare about the salvation of individuals—only God knows those whom he has called. Just as at the time of the Reformation there were true believers in a largely apostate Church, a church today may be dead but individuals within it may be under the protective eye of the Saviour.

Jesus exhorts the Sardians to overcome their spiritual deadness, by taking action—in particular, the following:

- *Wake up.* Since he tells them to ‘become one watching’ (Greek), this indicates that, by the grace of God, spiritual deadness can be overcome. Their normal state has been spiritual lethargy and sleep. Instead they are to become alert and on-guard against the ease with which a person can fall into sin in the midst of a pagan culture.
- *Strengthen.* The flicker of faith remaining in the congregation needs to be fanned into a full flamed passion for service in the name of Jesus.
- *Remember.* They need to reflect on the truth that they had heard in the past and their reception of it.
- *Obey.* They are to retain the correct doctrine and to keep the associated commands which they had received from the apostles.
- *Repent.* They need to confess their sin of complacency and unbelief.

If they do not take these actions, Jesus says that he will come against them suddenly, like a thief. This is likely an allusion to the suddenness of the historic attacks of Cyrus and Antiochus. The demise of the church in Sardis is a type for the visitation Jesus has in store for every denomination and congregation which drifts into a smug disregard for Christ and his word.

The Lamb’s Book of Life

(Rev 3.5; Rev 13.8; Rev 17.8; Rev 20.12, 15; Rev 21.27)

The Lamb’s book of life is one of three classes of metaphorical books mentioned in Revelation—the three are: the record of the works of mankind (Rev 20.12; Ps 139.16), plagues against unbelievers (Rev 5.1-9.21), and the Lamb’s book of life that records the names of the elect. The book of life has OT precedents (Ex 32.32; Ps 69.28; Is 34.16; Dan 12.1) and Paul also refers to it (Phil 4.3). It is the citizenship roll of the heavenly Zion. We now consider what we can learn from the six references to the book of life in Revelation.

The book of life includes the names of a specific group of individuals from mankind, since not every person’s name is written in it (Rev 13.8; Rev 17.8; Rev 20.15; Rev 21.27). Some commentators argue that it is not possible to determine the grounds upon which a person’s name is included within the book of life. For example, one writer suggested that the names are included in it on the basis of “divine foreknowledge rather than divine will”—i.e., that God sees that individuals will choose to believe at some point in the future and that he then includes their names in the book. In his attempt to defend the psychological fiction that sinners have free wills—they don’t (Jn 8.34)—he claims that God’s foreknowledge is not his will, and ignores the reality that God states that he elects and predestines some individuals to eternal life (Acts 13.48; Rom 8.28-30; Eph 1.4-5, 11), and does not elect others. The idea that God only foresees what men will choose to do but does not decree (predestine) their actions is an impossibility. In a world of truly contingent events, no one could know with certainty what would happen in the future. So, unless God were to make events happen, he could not foresee them. However, God decrees all things, and ensures that his plans unfold with absolute fidelity (Ps 139.16; Prov 16.33; Is 14.24; Acts 2.23; Acts 3.18; Acts 4.28). Nevertheless, men are still truly and fully responsible for their actions (Jer 17.10; Ezk 18.20; Rom 6.23; Mt 16.27). God even states that events are both predestined and the actions of responsible agents (Gen 50.19-20; Ex 9.34-10.1; Acts 2.23; Acts 4.27-28).

The names of the elect—those who will be saved—are written in the book of life, from the foundation of

the world (Rev 13.8; Rev 17.8). The names of the rest of mankind—that is, those who are inveterate rebels and refuse to repent (Rev 9.20-21)—are not included, since they are not among the elect, but are those who are predestined to everlasting reprobation (Rom 9.11-13, 21-23). Someone might object, saying that God dispenses judgement on mankind on the basis of their works and not on the basis of election. It is true that God will judge mankind on the basis of what they have done (Rev 2.23; Rev 20.12-13; Mt 16.27; Rom 2.6; 2 Cor 5.10; 1 Pt 1.17). However, this judgement is rendered on whether a person's name is written, or not written, in the book of life (Rev 20.12, 15; Rev 21.27). There is no contradiction between these two statements. Intrinsically all of mankind's works are sinful (Gen 6.5; Jer 17.9). People can do nothing of themselves that is worthy of consideration before God, or which could repay their debt of sin. Thus, any good work that a person does is because he has been elected, saved by God's electing love ('foreknowledge'), and declared righteous in the blood of the Lamb. No one is saved based on his works (Eph 2.8-10). Rather, those whose names are written in the book of life have Christ's works credited to their account and, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, are enabled to perform works that are pleasing to God.

Those who conquer in the Christian life will not be blotted out of the book of life, but have Jesus confess their names before the Father and his angels (Rev 3.5). Some infer from this statement that it is possible for a person to lose his salvation and have his name removed from the book of life. However, this is a mistaken understanding of what Jesus states. If it were possible for a person to do something that could cause him to lose his salvation, then there could be no election from the foundation of the world, no assurance of salvation, and our salvation would depend on our works and be a contradiction of salvation by God's grace alone—salvation by grace is clearly what Scripture teaches. The statement in Revelation 3.5, is an example of a hypothetical warning (such as that given in Heb 6.4-8) used to encourage perseverance to the end. Rather than focusing on the apparent support for the belief that true Christians can lose their salvation, we should focus on the positive aspect—all Christians who persevere to the end will be welcomed into heaven and declared righteous in the great assembly. True believers simply cannot lose their salvation (Jn 5.24; Jn 6.37; Jn 10.26-29; Rom 8.28-39). Nothing can separate them from the love of Christ. It is impossible for Christ's work to fail. If a person is elected by the Father, and his name is written in the book of life, he will be saved! Does this mean that a saved person can go and freely commit grievous sins, since he cannot lose his salvation? Absolutely not! Paul is emphatic about this (Rom 6.15-19). God who saves also works to purify the lives of his people and to preserve them as they face temptation. Of course, Christians still sin during their lives on earth. There is no perfection in this life. But they do not persist in sin (1 Tim 5.20; 1 Jn 3.9) and they repent of their sins.

The list of the names written in the Lamb's book of life is known only to God. However, you can know if *your* name is there. If you have repented of your sins and have believed in Jesus as your saviour, then your name is in his book. It is foolish to worry about whether you have done enough to be saved or to think that you might lose your salvation. Rather move forward with the assurance that your name is written in heaven (Heb 12.23).

Letter to the Church in Philadelphia – A Faithful Flock (Rev 3.7-13)

The 'City of Brotherly Love', in the Roman territory of Lydia (the western portion of modern Turkey), is believed to have been named after a Lydian king, Attalus II Philadelphus, who ruled from 159-138 BC. He was called *philadelphia* ('brother-lover') because of his faithfulness to his brother Eumenes. The part of Turkey in which Philadelphia is located is in an area of volcanic activity, and subject to earthquakes. Philadelphia and nearby Sardis were destroyed in an earthquake in 17 AD, about 50 years before this letter was written. It is probable that Jesus makes an indirect reference to the destruction of the pagan temples in the city during that earthquake when he assures the Philadelphians that they will be a pillar in the temple of God and go out and in forever (Rev 3.12). Despite the earthquakes, the city continues to be inhabited

because the rich volcanic soils are ideal for growing grapes. At the time of John, the Philadelphians recognized Dionysus, the god of wine and the harvest, as a titular deity. Today, the city (now called Alasehir) produces Sultana raisins and is the source of a popular mineral water. Of the seven churches to which Jesus wrote, Philadelphia is the only one left today with a strong Christian presence (surrounded by adherents of Islam). In this letter, the church is not rebuked by Jesus, but only encouraged. Thus, it may be that the promises of verses 8 and 12 have temporal as well as spiritual fulfilment.

Jesus refers to himself with two titles, by which he declares his deity:

- *The Holy One*. This is a frequently applied name for God. It occurs about 40 times in the OT; most often in Isaiah [27 times]. The only other uses of this title in the NT are by John (Rev 16.5; Jn 6.69; 1 Jn 2.20), and from the mouth of a demon-possessed man (Lk 4.34). Holiness is an essential attribute of God (Rev 4.8; Is 6.3). It separates God from the false gods of the pagans (Ex 15.11) who were capricious, filled with lusts, and debauched. For example, we can align the Olympians with sins—Zeus or Hades with greed, Hera with envy, Aphrodite with lust, Ares with wrath, Athena with pride, Dionysus with gluttony and drunkenness, and Hermes with sloth.
- *The True One*. This is the only place that this title is applied to Christ (or God). However, God is the true God (Jn 17.3; 1 Jn 5.20), and only tells the truth (Titus 1.2; Heb 6.18). Jesus is the true light (Jn 1.9), true bread (Jn 6.32), true vine (Jn 15.1), and only source of truth (Jn 14.6). He stands in stark contrast to the false gods of the pagans whose mouths are full of lies. For example, Zeus deceives his wife Hera, goddess of marriage, by attempting to conceal his affairs with nymphs and mortals.

Jesus also declares that he holds the key of David, which he alone uses to open and shut. This is a reference to Isaiah 22.22. By this statement, Jesus claims to be the legitimate representative of the house of David and the one who has ultimate royal power. His sovereignty extends beyond the kingdom of Lydia or the Roman Empire, to absolute authority over those who will be admitted into the kingdom of heaven, the Church (Mt 16.19), and over death and the grave (Rev 1.18).

The Philadelphians receive unadulterated praise from Jesus. They had to contend with paganism, Jewish hostility (Rev 3.9; [Ignatius to the Philadelphians](#), ch. 6), and materialism. Although they were a small assembly of believers and had little worldly power, they had obeyed Jesus, endured their sufferings with patience, and not denied his name. Thus, they are promised immediate:

- *Success in evangelism*. The opened door, that cannot be shut, appears to be a reference to the congregation being granted an opportunity, of which they would not be deprived, to preach the Gospel (1 Cor 16.9).
- *Reversal for ethnic Jews*. Noah blessed Japheth with a promise that his descendants would dwell in the tents of Shem (Gen 9.27). Throughout the OT era this was understood as Gentiles having to become part of Israel to receive blessings from God (Ps 86.9; Is 45.14; Is 49.23; Is 60.14). But, since ethnic Jews had rejected their Messiah, they were no longer Jews, but only said that they were. True Jews are believing Christians (see, [A Synagogue of Satan](#)). An ironic reversal has occurred. Now those who claim to be ethnic Jews fill the former role of Japheth's descendants and can become true Jews only by acknowledging that Jesus is the Messiah (the Christ). After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, many Jews fled to Asia Minor. As witnesses to the fulfilment of Jesus' prophecies (Mt 24.15-35) and God's love for Christians, some of the ethnic Jews joined the fledgling church in Philadelphia and, figuratively, bowed at their feet.
- *Preservation through trials*. Some understand verse 10 to be speaking of an eschatological rapture, based on a faulty interpretation of what Jesus teaches (e.g., Mt 24.3-21; Lk 17.34-37). Rather, Jesus promises that they would be kept—protected, or possibly exempted—through the soon to occur persecutions. This is consistent with his prayer (Jn 17.15), which has the only other NT occurrence 'kept from'. Jesus does not ask for their physical removal but for their protection from temptations of the evil one.

To realize these blessings, they must persevere in their profession. Thus, he exhorts them to hold fast to the crown which they already possessed—the truth, and their faith and salvation. Trials were to come soon—Jesus visited the unbelieving Jews with the destruction of Jerusalem and tested his Church through the Roman persecution of Christians throughout the Empire. The fact that he tells them to ‘hold fast’ is an encouragement that they will survive.

Letter to the Church in Laodicea – A Nauseating Church (Rev 3.14-22)

Laodicea, a city in Lydia (western Asia Minor, modern Turkey), was at first called Diospolis (i.e., ‘god’s city’) after its tutelary deity, Zeus; but was later renamed by the Seleucid king, Antiochus II (261 to 246 BC), in honour of his wife, Laodice. It was located at the intersection of major highways (one was a Roman road that led to Damascus). With the continual flow of trade goods, it became a prosperous financial centre. It was subjected to an earthquake in 17 AD, and again around 62 AD, just prior to when John wrote Revelation. Because of its pride, it rebuilt the city out of its own resources. Archeological remains show it had a significant infrastructure—including temples, a large stadium and amphitheatres, a gymnasium and bath complex, and aqueducts. It supported a prominent medical school, known for ophthalmology, which produced an eye salve. Its primary export industry was the production of a soft wool from a breed of black sheep, used for making tunics. Laodicea was close to both Hierapolis and Colossae. Paul told the Colossians to have his letter to them read also to the church in Laodicea (Col 4.13, 16), and that they read his (no longer extant) letter to the Laodiceans. Epaphras was ministering in Laodicea as well as in Colossae at the time Paul wrote (Col 4.12).

Jesus introduces himself to them with three titles, again declaring his deity:

- *Amen*. This is the only place where ‘amen’ is used as a name for Jesus. It is usually understood to mean ‘truly’ and may be used as a synonym for ‘truth’ (Jn 14.6), as the English and Greek translations render the Hebrew ‘amen’ in Isaiah 65.16.
- *Faithful and true witness*. Our English translations are inconsistent. The same expression (in the Greek) appears in Revelation 21.5, where it is translated as “trustworthy and true”. This indicates that Jesus as a witness is true (what he reports can be relied upon) and what he speaks is the truth.
- *Beginning of God’s creation*. There is much speculation about how to interpret this expression. The Arians attempted to disprove the deity of Jesus by interpreting this statement passively and claimed that Jesus was the first thing God created. Even if it is understood passively, it does not need to mean that Jesus was created, but can be understood as speaking of his position of pre-eminence over creation (Col 1.15)—the NIV has ‘ruler’ instead of ‘beginning’. Some interpret it passively and argue that we should understand Jesus to be the first (beginning) of a *new* creation (that is, through his resurrection; Col 1.18). However, when it is interpreted in the active sense, Jesus is the beginner or source of all of creation, who caused it to exist (Jn 1.3; Eph 3.9; Col 1.16-17).

The Laodiceans needed to stop compromising truth and become trustworthy and true witness to it. Their Christian profession was nominal, because it was:

- *Lukewarm*. They were proud of their material wealth and believed that it extrapolated to spiritual wealth. Congregations are often impressed by those who are ‘successful’ in the world and believe that that makes them qualified for positions of leadership within the Church. This form of pride produces a lack of sincerity in our service for Christ.
- *Repulsive*. They were like the tepid, nauseating water that arrived on their aqueducts, which a person wanted to spit out rather than drink. Jesus did not want them to be ‘hot’ with passion for him or ‘cold’ with indifference toward him. Rather, he wanted them to be like the wholesome and healing hot waters of the mineral springs of Hierapolis or like the cold, clear, refreshing waters of Colossae. They needed

to be those who could heal, mediate, and comfort; or be those who could challenge, exhort, and energize.

- *Self-deceived.* They were choked by the deceitfulness of their love of riches (Mt 13.22; 1 Tim 6.10; Heb 13.5) into a false sense of security, ease, and self-sufficiency. However, Jesus forcibly bursts their bubble, calling them wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

As an antidote to their nauseating condition, Jesus counsels them to give up their independence and to buy from him, at no cost (Is 55.1):

- *Refined gold.* Spiritual and everlasting riches, that are far superior to the best of the metallic gold of their mines and markets (Mt 6.20).
- *White garments.* The white robes of righteousness (Rev 4.4; Rev 6.11; Rev 7.9, 13-14) that are infinitely better than robes sown from the black cloth woven on their looms. Only these could cover the nakedness of their guilt and shame (Gen 3.7).
- *Eye salve.* The Laodicean church, as many self-proclaimed ‘prophets’, would have claimed that it had insight into deep religious truths and worldly wisdom (Rev 2.24). However, Jesus declares that their spiritual blindness needs to be healed with the salve of the wisdom granted by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 1.20-21; 1 Cor 3.19; Col 1.9).

Jesus warns them that he will—is about to—vomit them out. This means that he gave them a period of grace as he reproved and disciplined them out of his love for them. They listened to his voice, opened the door to his council, heeded his rebuke, repented, and resumed true fellowship with Jesus as they observed the agape-feast of the Lord’s Supper—history informs us that the church at Laodicea continued to exist for centuries after Revelation was written. For example, a general Church council was held there in 363-364 AD. However, their witness eventually waned, and the city was overrun by Islamic Turks, leaving only ruins today.

Names and Titles for Jesus Used in Revelation

(Rev 1-22)

There are over twenty names or titles used for Jesus throughout the book of Revelation. We will now consider most of them, in a survey form:

- *Jesus* (Rev 1.1; etc.) – It may seem to be obvious that John would identify the name of the person from whom he received the visions in this book. However, opening with the name ‘Jesus’ rather than another appellation reminds us that Jesus is called by that name because it means ‘saviour’ (Mt 1.21), and that he was sent by the Father to save his people. Revelation is a message to God’s saved ones—the saints.
- *Christ* (Rev 1.1; etc.) – He is also called Christ (derived from the Greek word for ‘anointed’) because he is the Messiah (derived from the Hebrew word for ‘anointed’). Jesus is the fulfilment of the OT prophecies, beginning in the midst of the curse on the woman (Gen 3.15), that God would send a redeemer from her descendants who would be anointed as a priest (Heb 5.6), king (Ps 2.2), and prophet (Lk 24.19).
- *Faithful and True Witness* (Rev 1.5; Rev 3.7, 14; Rev 19.11) – Jesus cannot lie and can only tell the truth (Jn 17.3; Titus 1.2; Heb 6.18; 1 Jn 5.20). All that he says about himself in the Bible is true and must be received as truth by his hearers, because he is the only source of truth (Jn 14.6) and came into the world to bear witness to the truth (Jn 18.37). He stands in stark contrast to the ‘prophets’ of false religions whose mouths are full of lies.
- *Firstborn of the dead* (Rev 1.5) – Jesus was not the first to be raised from the dead (1 Ki 17.22-23; 2 Ki 4.32-35; 2 Ki 13.21; Mt 9.25; Lk 7.14-15; Lk 8.54-55; Jn 11.43-44). However, in these instances, they would die again. Thus, these ‘resurrections’ (resuscitations) hinted at a more permanent resurrection, which a few have already experienced (Mt 27.53). Through his resurrection, he conquered death and was declared to be the firstborn (firstfruits) from the dead (Rom 8.29; 1 Cor 15.20, 23; Col

1.18).

- *Alpha and Omega, First and Last, and Beginning and End* (Rev 1.8, 17; Rev 2.8; Rev 21.6; Rev 22.6, 13) – These three titles indicate that Jesus is eternal, with an existence that precedes the creation of this universe and will extend eternally beyond the existence of this universe.
- *Son of Man* (Rev 1.13) – Jesus applied the title ‘Son of Man’ to himself more than twenty-five times during his earthly ministry and used it more than any other self-designation. By so doing, he declared himself to be the fulfilment of the one who was to be given an everlasting kingdom by the Ancient of Days (Dan 7.13).
- *The living one* (Rev 1.18) – Jesus is the source of all life; spirit-physical life (Gen 2.7; Job 33.4; Acts 17.25) and eternal life (Jn 3.15-16, 36; Jn 4.14). Nothing continues to exist and live without his constant sustaining force (Acts 17.28; Col 1.17).
- *The Holy One* (Rev 3.7) – Jesus established the moral Law, obeyed it perfectly, and is without sin (1 Pt 2.22; Heb 4.15).
- *The Amen* (Rev 3.14) – Generally the word ‘amen’ in the Bible is used as an adverb (e.g., ‘truly’). However, in this instance it is used as a noun, and it means that Jesus is the absolute and final one.
- *The Beginning of God’s Creation* (Rev 3.14) – It may be better to translate the word ‘beginning’ in an active sense, declaring Jesus to be the *beginner* or source of all of creation, who as the Creator (Rev 4.11), caused everything that exists to come into being (Jn 1.3; Eph 3.9; Col 1.16).
- *God* (Rev 4.11) – Jesus is a man, the *Son of God* (Rev 2.18), and he is God—he is the only God-man. He is fully God in every aspect of what it means to be God (a spirit who is infinite, eternal, omniscient, and almighty), and fully a man in every aspect of what it means to be a man (born of a woman with a physical body and a reasoning soul).
- *The Lion of the Tribe of Judah* (Rev 5.5) – As a ‘lion’, Jesus is a warrior-king and the rightful heir of Judah and the fulfilment of the Messianic promise (Gen 49.9-10), who can claim the privilege of bearing the royal sceptre of authority as he defeats his enemies.
- *The Lamb* (Rev 5.6, etc.) – John is the only Biblical writer who explicitly identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God (Jn 1.29, 36). As a sacrificed ‘lamb’ he is the fulfilment of the OT ceremonial system of sacrifices that pointed to his final, once-for-all sacrifice (Heb 7.27; Heb 9.12, 26; Heb 10.10).
- *Lord of Lords and King of Kings* (Rev 17.14; Rev 19.16) – As *Lord* (Rev 4.11; etc.), the *Root of David* (Rev 5.5; Rev 22.16; Ps 110.1-2), with the key of David (Rev 3.7), and as *Ruler of kings on earth* (Rev 1.5), Jesus is sovereign over all the rulers of this earth (Ps 2.7-12; Phil 2.9-11) and the fulfilment of OT prophecies that declared his ultimate reign (Is 9.6-7; Dan 2.44-45).
- *The Word of God* (Rev 19.13) – Jesus is the living Word of God (Jn 1.1, 14), who declares through his person and teaching what God wishes mankind to know about his character and attributes. As the Word, Jesus is the *God of the Spirits of the Prophets* (Rev 22.6) who has revealed all that man needs to know about God in the Scriptures of the old and new testaments.
- *The Bright Morning Star* (Rev 22.16) – Jesus displays the brightness of the glory of God (Rev 1.16; Mt 17.2; Jn 1.14), has the light of spiritual wisdom (Jn 8.12; Jn 9.5) to give to mankind, and shines perfect light (Rev 21.23; Rev 22.5) in the new heaven and earth.

Other descriptions of Jesus, which some consider to be titles and we consider in their context, include: he who holds the seven stars in his right hand (Rev 2.1; Rev 3.1), walks among the seven golden lampstands (Rev 2.1), has a sharp two-edged sword (Rev 2.12), searches mind and heart (Rev 2.23), and opens and shuts (Rev 3.7).

The State of the Church in Every Age

(Rev 2-3)

Some interpreters claim that the seven churches (and their strengths and weaknesses) describe seven [ages](#) of Church history—Ephesus represents the Apostolic age; Smyrna, the period of Roman persecution of

Christians; Pergamum, the time from Constantine to Gregory the Great; Thyatira, the Papal age from Gregory to Leo X; Sardis, the Reformation; Philadelphia, the mission age to WW I; and Laodicea, the present era. This scheme is pure speculation; would have been meaningless to anyone in previous centuries, including the original recipients of the letters; and all these churches with their strengths and weaknesses existed in the 1st century.

Each of the seven letters is addressed to a specific congregation. However, as a set, they describe the range of problems which afflict the Church in every generation. Every congregation can be afflicted with one or more of the problems which Jesus identified as being present among the seven churches and can exhibit one or more of the strengths which Jesus commended. What Jesus says when speaking to Thyatira about his judgement becoming known by all the churches (Rev 2.23), applies to his message to each of the churches. The strengths and weaknesses that Jesus identifies among the seven churches in Asia Minor can be summarized as follows:

Church	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ephesus	Endured suffering patiently Correct doctrine Moral purity	Lack of love Formalism Antinomianism
Smyrna	Strong faith Faced persecution bravely	None
Pergamum	Did not deny the faith	Syncretism, idolatry, sexual sins
Thyatira	Some remained faithful Love, service, patient endurance	Antinomianism Sexual sins
Sardis	None	Spiritually dead hypocrisy
Philadelphia	Evangelistic Obeyed Jesus	None
Laodicea	None	Lukewarmness, materialism

Each congregation in every generation needs to be constantly on its guard to ensure that it cultivates the strengths that Jesus commends and avoids and purges out the weakness that he condemns.

The potential weaknesses (sins) that Jesus identifies, and we must avoid and, if they are present, purge out of our congregations, are the following:

1. *Lack of love*. An absence of sincere love for Jesus and our neighbours.
2. *Lukewarmness*. An indifference toward the advance of the Gospel, with no concern for those who are heading toward hell.
3. *Formalism*. Going through the motions of religious ritual without a sincere belief in Biblical teachings or faith in Jesus.
4. *Syncretism*. Accepting false teachings, whether from ‘Christian’ sources (e.g., Prosperity Gospel or Open Theology) or other religions (e.g., Judaism or Islam), and placing them on par with the Bible’s teaching.
5. *Idolatry*. Introducing or accepting any practices as worship of God that are not expressly required by God or demonstrably derivable from God’s directions for what constitutes valid elements and modes of worship.
6. *Sexual sins*. Permitting members to participate in fornication, adultery, homosexual practices, or invalid forms of divorce; or endorsing the creation of human laws which permit these actions.
7. *Antinomianism*. Claiming that a Christian’s freedom places him beyond the requirements of God’s Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments.
8. *Spiritually dead hypocrisy*. Claiming a personal belief in Jesus while harbouring unbelief in the heart.
9. *Materialism*. Trusting in money and things that can be acquired with it.

We must be careful that we do not place these sins in a hierarchy of ‘badness’ and think that our congregation is not as bad as others, because our sins are not as overt as theirs. Before Jesus, a lack of love, materialism, and formalism are as egregious as are false worship or participating in deviant sexual acts. Instead of congratulating or excusing ourselves we need to repent of all sin and fix our attention on what Jesus requires. We must:

1. *Maintain correct doctrine.* Believe and teach only what is consistent with a systematic theology based on Scripture.
2. *Adhere to the faith.* Not introduce novelties but subscribe to the core ecumenical creedal statements.
3. *Obey Jesus.* Keep the Ten Commandments.
4. *Foster moral purity.* Avoid any form of sexual depravity.
5. *Endure suffering and persecution bravely and patiently.* Boldly declare that we are not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
6. *Serve in love.* Demonstrate a sincere concern for fellow Christians and our neighbours through acts of kindness.
7. *Evangelize.* Present the Gospel of Life at every opportunity.

It is sad to observe that most of the seven churches in Asia Minor no longer exist. They were judged by Jesus as Islam swept through the region. If we do not heed his warnings, our congregation will face the same judgement.

Common Elements in the Letters to the Seven Churches (Rev 2-3)

The letters are addressed to seven churches with specific needs; yet, because they apply to the Church in every age, we can identify common elements in the letters:

- *An epistolary format.* Jesus wrote a ‘love letter’ to each congregation, reminding them of their relationship with himself and his concern for them, and encouraging them to remain steadfast in their love for him. Contemporary epistles were generally structured with: 1) the names of the author and recipient, 2) an opening greeting and blessing, 3) the main message, and 4) a closing greeting and blessing. Jesus uses a modified structure. He: 1) addresses each congregation through its pastor; 2) names the recipient congregation by the city in which it is situated; 3) identifies himself by a glorious personal attribute (e.g., his eternality or his role as judge), which are mostly extracted from the preceding vision (Rev 1.12-20); 4) commends the recipients, where there is something commendable; 5) rebukes those needing correction; 6) identifies a needed response (e.g., repentance); and, 7) closes with a promise for the one conquering.
- *A mix of symbolic and plain language.* His self-identification and the promises are generally given in a symbolic or figurative form, whereas his commendations and rebukes are largely stated with plain language. There can be no misunderstanding about the strengths and weakness in the churches. How he will manifest rewards is yet to be fully revealed.
- *A mix of personal and general language.* The first part of each letter is in the second person plural (‘you’), referring to specific situations of the churches; whereas the promises are presented in the third person singular (‘him’), which gives them a broader application.
- *Nothing is new.* Solomon observes that “What has been is what will be ... and there is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecc 1.9) This applies also to the Church. What Jesus identified as the strengths and weaknesses in these seven congregations in the 1st century, are the same things he identifies in congregations today. Thus, his instruction to the seven churches, and his comprehensive communique, in the Bible, continue to be relevant today in the 21st century.
- *A display of intimate knowledge.* Jesus declares, in each case, that he knows their works or the trials they face. His knowledge about each congregation and person is exhaustive (see, [*Jesus Knows Our Works*](#)). Thus, his response to their situations is based on fact and not hearsay.

- *Reference to specific situations.* He places each letter in the contemporary context of its recipients, such as recent earthquakes, pagan deities honoured in the city, or their prominent industries. When he was on earth, he used illustrations from nature, farming, and current events to position his message. He established a good practice for communicating the Gospel into each generation.
- *Allusions to OT history and prophecy.* In the letter to Ephesus, the tree of life is mentioned, referring to creation and the original sinless state. In the letter to Smyrna, death and resurrection are mentioned, with an allusion to Genesis 3.19 and the introduction of death. In the letter to Pergamum, Balaam, Balak, and manna are mentioned. These refer to the Israelites' time of wandering in the wilderness. In the letter to Thyatira, mention is made of a symbolic Jezebel and the Davidic kingdom (with a quotation from Psalm 2.8). These are allusions to the time of the monarchy. In the letter to Sardis, the white garments of the righteous and the book of life are mentioned. These are allusions to the prophetic message of prophets like Daniel (Dan 11.35; Dan 12.1, 10), who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah's kingdom. In the letter to Philadelphia there is a reference to judgement coming on the whole earth, the new temple, and the new Jerusalem. These appear to be allusions to the eschatological prophecies such as those in Isaiah (Is 65-66) and Ezekiel (Ezk 40-48). Finally, in the letter to Laodicea, there is an application of Isaiah 55.1. Jesus encourages the readers to receive freely and embrace the Gospel message. The sweep of the allusions to the OT in the seven letters reinforces the relevance of the OT for the NT Church as a guide for our instruction (2 Tim 3.15-17), and should encourage us to apply ourselves diligently to understand what it says and how it applies to us.
- *Specific needs are addressed.* While all the strengths and weakness are found throughout the Church in every generation, each congregation and each person in the Church has specific needs which Jesus addresses. Through the Holy Spirit, he works to convict us of sin and lead us to repentance using rebukes, disciplines, and encouragements suited to our situations and personalities.
- *The letters focus on spiritual development.* Jesus commends, rebukes, and warns the churches with the objective of reformation. He expects spiritual improvement and growth to be evident in each recipient church. A congregation that is stagnant is a dead church. He desires his Church to be continually growing and maturing (Mt 16.18; Mt 28.19-20; Heb 5.12-14).
- *A sense of urgency.* The letters display a sense of imminent danger and fulfilment, with words such as 'about', 'I will come', 'I ... knock', and the use of the imperatives 'repent' and 'hear'. We must act in response.
- *Rewards are promised for conquering.* Each congregation is promised rewards for conquering. Although these promises appear to be specific to their particular circumstances, they apply to every believer who remains faithful to the end (see, [*Conquering in Christ*](#)).

Conquering in Christ

(Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 26; Rev 3.5, 12, 21)

In each of the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, Jesus promises rewards for "the one who conquers". Other translations have 'overcomes' in these verses. The ESV also translates the Greek word (*nikao*) as 'overcomes' elsewhere (e.g., Lk 11.22) and as 'prevails' (e.g., Rom 3.4).

The address, and rewards promised, to the ones who conquer are not limited to those who suffer martyrdom for their faith (Rev 2.10-11) or who stand firm under persecution, since the same refrain occurs in all seven letters and not all of the churches in Asia Minor were facing imminent persecution. Rather conquering, in the context of these letters includes:

- Declaring Jesus as the Sovereign God (Jn 20.28), the promised Messiah or Christ (Mt 16.16), and as the Saviour (Rev 2.13).
- Repenting of sin (Rev 2.5, 16; Rev 3.3, 19).
- Obeying Jesus' commands—not just his spoken words in the NT but all his words, including all the Ten Commandments (Rev 3.8).

- Demonstrating love for Jesus through faithful service to our brothers and sisters in the Church and our neighbours (Rev 2.19).
- Avoiding idolatry, in every form it is practiced by men, whether within the Church or in the world (Rev 2.20).
- Abstaining from sexual immorality (Rev 2.14, 20).
- Separating from overt sinners (Rev 2.20), refusing to associate with them (1 Cor 5.11), and expelling them from the assembly if they refuse to repent and continue practicing evil (1 Cor 5.13).
- Maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy; not succumbing to false teaching (Rev 2.2).
- Witnessing for the truth (*the* faith) in the face of persecution (Rev 3.8).
- Trusting God in every circumstance (Rev 2.2), believing his promise that all things work together for good for those whom he has called (Rom 8.28).

These actions define what it means to be a Christian—to persevere in faith in Jesus *and* to exercise good works on behalf of him (1 Jn 2.13-14; 1 Jn 5.4-5). Therefore, conquering in Revelation (and when mentioned elsewhere in the NT) is living the Christian life until Jesus calls us home (Rev 2.26).

Conquering in the Christian life is counter-intuitive to the world's thinking. The world thinks of conquering as subduing others with physical weapons and making them subject to a 'great' leader—like a 'William the Conqueror'. In contrast, the Christian life is spiritual conquering that overcomes temptation, sin, selfish desires, and a desire to have dominance over others. It also means that, at times, Christians will be conquered by others—such as persecutors who confiscate their possessions, incarcerate them, exile them, or send them to the gallows. This irony is exhibited primarily by the victory of Christ (Jn 16.33). He conquered Satan (crushed his head) by submitting to 'defeat' by death on a cross (a heel-bruising). He conquered death by succumbing to it and rising again. Thus, like Christ, even when a Christian appears to be defeated from the world's perspective, by persecution or death, he is in fact a true conqueror because he lives in Christ and will dwell with Christ forever. As it is for Christ and individual Christians, so it is for congregations in his Church; Congregations which are destroyed by anti-God governments or by adherents of false religions are not defeated. They are ultimately conquerors because they have been faithful unto 'death' (Rev 2.10).

Since Jesus specifies that his exhortations and encouragements are for 'the one who conquers', this indicates that for Christians at least the following are part of the defined reality for conquerors:

- Conquering is what Jesus expects from true believers. Therefore, it must be theoretically and temporally possible, through the support of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the preserving power of Jesus as our mediator, that we can conquer (Rom 8.35-37).
- Conquering is actually possible. The promised rewards for conquering are not offered falsely. We can join with the great multitude (Rev 7.9) who have successfully conquered. In Jesus, we have already won the battle and are guaranteed to join his triumphant victory parade (2 Cor 2.14). So, we must never despair, Jesus will reward everyone who marches forward in his 'army'.
- Conquering is not limited to those whom we think of as 'saints'. All true believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, sanctified by the blood of Jesus, and members of God's family, and are saints (1 Cor 1.2).
- Conquering is an individual responsibility. Each person is distinctly and personally responsible to Jesus. Congregations may succeed or fail, but believers cannot use the state of their congregation as a substitute for personally striving to conquer or as an excuse for a failure to conquer.
- Conquering is challenging, particularly when a congregation is poisoned by syncretism, false worship, or worldliness. Enemies surround each Christian within and outside the Church and the struggle is strenuous and unending throughout this life.
- Conquering precedes the inheritance of rewards. There are no rewards where there is no conquering. No one can slide through into glory who is not a conqueror.
- Conquering is glorious; the rewards are abundant and amazing and will be given to everyone who conquers.

Promised Rewards for Conquering

(Rev 2.7, 10-11, 17, 26-28; Rev 3.4-5, 12, 21)

In each of the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, Jesus promises a reward to “the one who conquers”. These promises are *not* given to each congregation in its entirety, since in some of the congregations only a few of the members would conquer, and in the others not every person would conquer. Rather, the promises are given to individuals in each congregation who would hear his rebuke or counsel and remain faithful to the end.

The various promises are directed to specific congregations in the context of their particular strengths and weakness. Nevertheless, as a set, they describe all of the rewards that every believer who conquers will receive as he is ushered into the presence of the Lord Jesus at the end of time. The promises of Jesus are declaratory; indicated by expressions such as, “I will give ... write ... confess”. There can be no doubt; the rewards that every believer will receive are the following:

- *A new paradise.* A renovated heavens and earth (2 Pt 3.13), which will be entirely a paradise (Lk 23.43; 2 Cor 12.3), better than the original antediluvian garden and the Greek’s mythological Elysian Fields; which can never be spoiled by man’s sin.
- *Access to the tree of life.* The curse that barred Adam from access to the tree in the midst of the garden will be lifted, and all saved persons will receive everlasting sustenance and refreshment from the tree of life (Rev 22.2, 14). A cedar tree was associated with Artemis of the Ephesians and Jesus may be contrasting the false promise of paganism with a Christian hope.
- *A Crown of life.* The victors of the Hellenic games, triumphant warriors, and retiring pagan priests were all awarded wreaths or garlands of woven leaves. In contrast, Christians will receive crowns of righteousness on the last day (2 Tim 4.8; 1 Pt 5.4)—a metaphor for eternal life in the glories of heaven.
- *Escape from the second death.* The prospect of everlasting death in the lake of fire is no longer a threat for the believer (Rev 20.6, 14; Rev 21.8). He can pass through the valley of the shadow of death—that is, die physically (the ‘first death’)—with confidence that he rests securely in the hands of the Saviour (Jn 11.25-26) and will receive eternal life. We have no need to fear pagan persecutors of Christians who can kill the body but cannot destroy us in hell (Mt 10.28).
- *Hidden manna.* Pagan temple rituals included feasts, open only to those initiated into their cult. Faithful Christians could not have participated in these feasts. However, in contrast to the perishable food of the temples, we have a better feast with imperishable food—Jesus, symbolized by the manna of Israel’s wilderness wanderings (Jn 6.31-35, 49-58). He calls it ‘hidden’ because his presence, in heaven, is currently hidden from us.
- *A white stone.* There are a number of possible explanations for what this means. The one that seems to fit the context best is an allusion to pebbles used to cast votes in Greek cities for elections or in a judicial setting. Jesus is confirming the Father’s eternal election of the saints.
- *A new name.* Inscribed on the white stone is the new name assigned to the believer, which identifies us as having a new status and as belonging to Christ—‘Christian’—and to the family of God (Rev 3.12), as his brothers and sisters. Only one who has been adopted into God’s family can understand what this name means.
- *Participation in Christ’s reign.* The allusion to Psalm 2.8-9 (in Rev 2.26-27), is not a reference to Christians ruling with Jesus over unsaved heathen, in a supposed earthly kingdom. Rather, we will reign with him in the new heaven and earth (2 Tim 2.12) and, in union with him, sit on his throne (Rev 3.21). How this rule will be manifested is yet to be revealed. However, it will be a reinstatement of the creation mandate (Gen 1.26).
- *The morning star.* In the ancient world, a star was a symbol of royalty or sovereignty (Num 24.17; Mt 2.2). Julius Caesar claimed that Venus, the ‘morning star’, was his ancestor. Jesus declares that his people will be given the morning star—the radiance of his royal majesty.

- *White garments.* We will be endowed with total moral purity and holiness. Never again will we experience temptation, sin (Rev 21.8; Rev 22.14-15), or the ravages of sin (Rev 21.4).
- *Permanent citizenship.* From eternity, the names of the elect have been recorded in the book of life—the census record of heaven, the new Jerusalem (Rev 3.12; Rev 21.27; Is 4.3; Ezk 13.9; Dan 12.1). Their names can never be expunged (Jn 6.36; Jn 10.28-29), like those disenfranchised from a Greek city.
- *Recognition in heaven.* Jesus will confess the name of all for whom he died; publicly declaring, before the Father and his angels, that they are his friends (Jn 15.15) and welcomed to join him at his banquet (Rev 19.9).
- *Unmovable Security.* In contrast to the temples of Asia Minor that were subject to earthquakes, Christians in heaven stand forever as unmovable pillars in the spiritual temple—the Church. Their probation will end; they will never need to run for the exits for fear of falling rafters and lintels.

All these rewards, and more, await those who have repented of their sins and die believing that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour, who waits to receive them into everlasting glory. What is persecution by enemies of Christ, compared with these promises? What is contempt from the world, compared with this compensation? What is the world's wealth compared with these wonders?

Heaven (Rev 4.1-2)

John tells us that he was invited into heaven to obtain additional revelation. The first mention of heaven in Revelation is in the letter addressed to the church in Philadelphia, in which Jesus tells that congregation that anyone who conquers has his name registered as a citizen of heaven (Rev 3.12).

Heaven is a physical, created place; not merely a state of mind, where God chooses to make his presence known in a visible form—e.g., as light (Rev 4.5; Rev 21.23) and in the incarnational form of Jesus (Rev 4.2; Rev 5.1; Acts 1.10; Col 1.15; Heb 9.24). It was probably created at the same time as the first components of the universe were created, since Genesis 1.1 refers to 'heavens', which could include the atmosphere, the celestial heaven, and the abode of angels (Mt 18.10), God in his divine essence (Ps 11.4; Is 66.1), and Jesus in his resurrected bodily form. However, it is not part of the universe we inhabit.

Heaven has physical aspects, is not purely a spirit realm, and consists of:

- *Space and Matter.* Some form of what we call 'space' and 'matter' exist in heaven, since bodies have material substance and spatial dimensions—at least Jesus and some believers (e.g., Enoch, Elijah, and probably the resurrected saints; Mt 27.52-53) have physical bodies in heaven; and all believers likely enter heaven with new resurrected bodies (2 Cor 5.1-5). Also, objects in heaven are described as having dimensions and spatial relationships with one another (e.g., Rev 21.1 to Rev 22.21).
- *Energy.* Light, a form of energy, is propagated (Rev 21.23; Rev 22.5; 1 Tim 6.16), and other forms of energy probably exist in a non-entropic state.
- *Time.* Heaven does not exist in a timeless (that is, eternal) state; only God exists in a timeless state. Processes or sequence of events occur in heaven, because conversations and praise take place—the utterance of a sentence requires that one word follow another, and that 'before' and 'after' concepts exist. Thus, a form of time also exists in heaven.

Heaven exists in an alternate form of physical reality—with different forms of life (that is, 'eternal life'), space, time, energy, and matter. It is considered to be 'up' from our world (Rev 4.1; Acts 1.1), but beyond the cosmos and outside of our universe. In the NT, we are taught that this current universe, including its form of time, will end on the last day, to be replaced by a new form of physical reality, of which heaven, as it currently exists, will become a part (2 Pt 3.10-13).

Heaven already (*not* ‘will’) includes the restored paradise (Lk 23.43; 2 Cor 12.3), and is:

- *Where God’s reign is acknowledged.* God reigns over the universe (Col 1.16-17) and the nations of men today (Ps 22.28; Ps 47.8), even if men do not acknowledge his reign. However, in heaven, his reign is not only acknowledged, men and angels rejoice over it (Rev 4.11; Rev 11.17).
- *Without sin.* No sin or consequences of sin (e.g., pain, suffering, or death) exist in heaven (Rev 21.4, 8, 27; Rev 22.15). Only moral righteousness and complete obedience to the Law of God are found in it.
- *Glorious and magnificent.* Heaven is so glorious and magnificent that it is almost beyond description. The descriptive images John provides (chapters 21-22) use examples from our spatial-temporal realm, but they are at best approximations of what heaven is like. Paul implies that its glory is beyond anything that we can understand within our current frame of reference (2 Cor 12.4).
- *Filled with true worship.* Since the beginning, the Church has been steeped in an idolatry and a syncretism that seeks to honour man and his inventions (Gen 4.3-7). In contrast, in heaven, only true worship is offered—worship that honours God as the Creator (Rev 4.11).
- *A city.* Heaven is a magnificent city—the new Jerusalem—with a garden (Rev 21.9-22.5), which has been carefully prepared for its final destination on a restored, pristine earth (Rev 21.2).
- *A place of felicity.* Heaven is a place of blessings with perfect peace, harmony, happiness, and joy. No one in heaven experiences doubts, false hopes, or unfulfilled desires.
- *The fulfilment of man’s mandate.* Most people think that heaven will be boring—and they want to stay in this world as long as they can. They picture heaven as a place where the saints sit in white robes and do nothing other than pluck harps and sing. They think that without sin and its consequences there cannot be challenges for human minds to conquer. This is so far from the truth that it is laughable. In heaven, humans will realize their full potential as image bearers of God (Gen 1.26-27)—using their intellects, creative abilities, and manual skills to bring glory to God and to enjoy him forever.
- *Accessible through a portal.* Normally death is the portal into heaven. However, access to heaven has been opened occasionally to those alive on the earth (Gen 5.24; 2 Ki 2.11; Ezk 1.1). Earlier in the NT we read of a door into heaven being opened at Jesus’ baptism (Mt 3.16), at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7.56), when Peter saw a vision of ‘unclean’ animals (Acts 10.11), and when Paul visited heaven (2 Cor 12.3-4). Here, a portal is opened again to John as he is invited to go up—whether in the body or out of the body, we cannot know (see, [*In the Spirit on the Lord’s Day*](#))—to receive revelation to impart to congregations and individual believers to help them understand how God is working his providences.

What Must Take Place *After This*

(Rev 4.1-2a)

After John had seen the first vision (Rev 1.10-20) and had received the dictated contents of the letters to be sent to the seven churches, he received additional revelation, in the form of a vision. What is included in this second vision, versus subsequent visions, is not easy to establish. It is possible that all of Revelation (from Rev 1.10) was delivered as a single vision on one Lord’s Day (Rev 1.10). His statement, “I was in the spirit” (Rev 1.10; Rev 4.2) could indicate that he received two visions. Or, he could be using the statement, “after this” (Rev 4.1; Rev 7.1, 9; Rev 15.5; Rev 18.1; Rev 19.1), to demarcate a series of different visions.

John indicates that he heard a loud voice, “like a trumpet”, which was a sign to him that an announcement was about to be made. The voice came from the same person who had spoken previously with him, also with a loud voice like a trumpet (Rev 1.10). Although we are not told explicitly the identity of the speaker, we identified him as Jesus (see, [*John’s Commission to Write a Book*](#)). The first time the voice addressed John with a command, it told him to write a book, this time it commands him to come up into heaven to receive additional revelation through a vision that will be shown to him.

God’s formal written revelation to mankind is not ongoing and endless. He reveals to us only what we need

to know at any particular time, and only what is required at each stage of revelation to enable mankind to turn away from sin in repentance and to God through belief in the promised Messiah. The first portion of the Bible was delivered through Adam (Gen 1.1-5.1a) and was sufficient for men to know about their origin, their responsibilities to their Creator, and the hope of redemption through a redeemer (Gen 3.15). In each subsequent stage of revelation, God has included what is necessary for us to know. Thus, when Jesus says to John that “I will show you”, we can be sure that what he reveals is what he wanted the Church to know at the time it received the revelation; and what we must believe and apply in our lives.

Jesus opens a door into heaven to make visible things which we could not normally observe—because they take place outside of our spatial-temporal realm or because they will take place in the future. In this instance, he tells John that what he is about to be shown relates to “what must take place after this”—that is, in the future relative to the time when John received the vision. The time of the future which the vision reveals is not stated. Thus, there is considerable debate, and misunderstanding, about which future Revelation reveals. Some of the distinct interpretive views are the following:

- *Extreme future fulfilment.* All of the contents of Revelation, from at least Revelation 4.1 onward, speaks of a time far-distant from the first recipients of John’s letter—that is, it speaks of events which are to occur around the time of Christ’s second coming.
- *Progressive fulfilment.* Revelation 1.10-19.21 refers to events which began to unfold after Christ’s ascension and will continue until his second coming. The remainder of Revelation (chapters 21-22) relates to the immediate time of the second coming of Christ. The seven letters, seals, bowls, trumpets, and visions relate to historic ages. Proponents of this view associate historic events (e.g., the formalization of the Roman Catholic Church’s papacy, the Reformation, or the establishment of Israel in the 20th century) with prophecies in Revelation.
- *Symbolic interpretation.* Revelation 1.10-19.21 refers only symbolically to events which occur repeatedly in the Church in every age.
- *Historic fulfilment.* The bulk of Revelation (Rev 1.10-19.21) describes events which occurred before the destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 AD) or before the destruction of Rome (e.g., in 410 or 476 AD), and the remainder (chapters 21-22) refers to the time of Christ’s second coming.
- *Extreme immediacy.* All of revelation describes events which occurred before the destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 AD), and chapters 21-22 refer to the establishment of the Church as the new Jerusalem.

Jesus tells John that he will show him *events* that must take place. Thus, a purely *symbolic interpretation* does not appear to fit the spirit of the revelation John receives. The similarity between the wording in Revelation 4.1 and Daniel 2.28-29, 45 seems to indicate that the fulfilment of the visions would begin immediately ‘after this’ (as they did for the then reigning king, Nebuchadnezzar), and could continue for some time; which rules out the *extreme future fulfilment* view. The book was written to encourage 1st century believers in fledgling congregations who were facing persecution. Therefore, the meaning of the visions must have been relevant to their immediate situations. The *progressive fulfilment* view places too much of the book outside of immediate situation of the initial recipients and is too fraught with interpretive difficulties (e.g., which events prophesied in Revelation can be aligned with the rise of Nazism in Europe). Jesus differentiates between events around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt 24.1-35; Mk 13.1-31; Lk 21.5-33) and his second coming (Mt 24.36-44; Mk 13.32-33; Lk 21.34-38). If he structures the visions of Revelation in the same way, this rules out the *extreme immediacy* view. Thus, the *historic fulfilment* view appears best to fit with the immediate challenges faced by the first recipients of the letter, the events which occurred around the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, and Jesus’ declaration, “I am coming soon” (Rev 3.11; Rev 22.7, 12). However, this view also presents interpretive challenges.

What *Must* Take Place (Rev 4.1)

Regardless of the differing views about how we should understand the timeframe for the fulfilment of the

vision-prophecies in Revelation, Jesus states that what John would be shown, “must take place”. These prophesied events must necessarily and inevitably take place.

Jesus clearly indicates that everything planned by God will happen (Is 14.24). The only possible way for this to be true is if God *makes* happen that which he purposes. If events are truly contingent, then they are indeterminate, and if indeterminate, they are unknowable in advance. There is no way that anyone, even God, could have predicted the events shown to John, any more than he could have predicted hundreds of years before that a pregnant virgin in the line of David, living in Nazareth, would give birth in Bethlehem because she was summoned there by a Roman census, or that her son would be crucified while men gambled over his clothing, unless he made it happen. God knows, and can reveal, the future because he makes it certain.

Everything that happens, including all intermediate second causes and conditions necessary for something to happen, in the spatial-temporal realm, unfold according to God’s eternal plan. His eternal plan is manifested through predestination; which is his decreeing and controlling all events (Acts 4.27-28; Eph 1.11; Eph 3.11). Most people think of the word predestination in the immediate context of God’s saving the elect (Rom 8.28-30; Eph 1.4-5). However, it must logically apply to his decreeing *all* events, since nothing happens in the world which is disconnected from every other event. For example, assume that a person from a previously ‘unreached’ native tribe in the jungle hears a Gospel presentation, believes in Christ, and repents of his sin (Acts 13.48). His presence at the moment he heard the Gospel is connected to a long chain of events including his being rescued from a canoe accident the week before, the day of his conception, and the year in which his distant ancestors began their migratory trek from the vicinity of the Tower of Babel. Likewise, the presence of the missionary at that moment is linked to a similar chain of events, which includes his parents taking him to Sunday School, the Protestant Reformation, a liaison between Charlemagne and a milkmaid, and Noah’s son Japheth moving north-west from Shinar. Predestination does not apply merely to the identification of who will and will not be saved, but to every event leading up to the salvation of the last elect person, identified in God’s eternal plan, who remains on the earth moments before Jesus returns to wrap up history and renovate the cosmos.

When we state that God predestines man’s actions, most people object with the claim that this removes man’s freedom of will, and that a person becomes nothing more than a programmed carbon-based computer who cannot be held accountable for his actions (e.g., for sin). They even go as far as to say that if God predestined man to sin, then God is the author of sin. Yet, God tells us without an equivocation that he predestines everything that comes to pass (Ps 139.4, 16; Prov 16.33; Acts 13.48; Rom 8.29-30; Rom 9.10-29), and at the same time that man is a responsible agent, fully accountable for his actions (Ezk 18.20; Rom 6.23). God even states that events are simultaneously predestined and the actions of responsible agents (Gen 50.19-20; Acts 2.23; Acts 4.27-28).

Some people try to protect man’s ‘free will’ by suggesting that God knows the future but does not control future actions of men—that is, he looks into the future and sees every free action of men. They say that foreknowledge is not the same as fore-determination; being able to predict that something will happen is not the same as making it happen. For example, they say, God can have foreknowledge of those who will believe in Jesus and in response he loves them in advance. This allows man to act freely and God to see in advance the events (repentance) that are contingent on the free will of man.

However, man’s free will is a psychological fiction. Men believe that they act entirely from their own rational self-determination. In fact, their actions are determined by their inborn natures (Jn 8.34). Man cannot behave contrary to his nature physically, morally, or volitionally. Man, as a sinner, is not free to choose to do either good or evil, because he has an evil heart that ever inclines him to sin (Rom 7.7-24). If we were truly free agents then we could choose not to sin—but everyone born, by natural generation, throughout all history has sinned. If we were truly free agents, we also could choose the time and

circumstances of our birth and death or choose not to die (excluding suicide). Since we cannot do any of these things, it is clear that we are not actually free agents. The biggest lie that has ever been told is that men are born as free moral and volitional agents, but the Bible nowhere teaches this.

Most attempts to reconcile God's sovereignty and human 'free will' bog down in definitions and convoluted conditions and end up either limiting God and giving man too much volitional freedom or turning man into a mere puppet. We must avoid the universal tendency to go to one extreme or the other—to view God as a super-human being, but with limited knowledge; or to view men as mere puppets and the victims of fatalistic forces. Instead of trying to explain something that our finite minds cannot understand, it is better for us simply to accept truths that God states: he predestines all things and men are responsible for their own actions.

The Throne Room in Heaven

(Rev 4.2b-3, 5-6)

John describes what he saw after he had been invited into heaven. We need to navigate through his description with care. On the one hand, we need to avoid the dangerous currents of a pure symbolism. John did not see a mere dream world, like something Alice might have seen in Wonderland. Heaven is a real, physical place, and John saw actual objects and persons, not fictional entities presented for literary effect. On the other hand, we need to avoid the rocks of a bare literalism. John does not necessarily inform us how objects and persons in heaven would actually appear if they were seen with our current bodily eyes. John must use earthly language to describe the glories of heaven, in a different spatial-temporal reality, which are bewildering to us and beyond our understanding. Objects in the OT tabernacle (e.g., the altar, ark, atonement cover, and lampstand) were all real, physical objects that had spiritual significance as pointers to a greater reality—Jesus Christ. Likewise, objects described in heaven are real—but essentially indescribable, since they are heavenly—and may also have spiritual significance.

John informs us that he was again 'in the Spirit', which enabled him to look deep into mysteries that are normally hidden from our eyes. He observed the following in heaven:

- *A throne.* The throne is the symbol of God's everlasting reign over all of creation (Ps 45.6). His providential governance includes the inanimate order; the human, angelic and demonic realms; the nations of men; and the Church (Ps 2.1-12; Eph 5.23; Col 1.15-19).
- *One seated on the throne.* God makes his presence known by sitting on his throne in heaven. John does not identify which person of the Trinity is seated on the throne. Some argue that it is a visible representation of all three persons, others conclude that it is the Father (from whom the Son takes the scroll; Rev 5.8), and others say it is Jesus in his resurrected form. John describes seeing the person as having the appearance of precious stones. There is much confusion about which minerals are represented by the words John uses. For example, jasper, as we know it, is opaque, not transparent (Rev 21.11). Some believe that the stones were identified to associate the vision with priest's breastplate (Ex 28.17-20) or with Ezekiel's vision (Ezk 10.1). Rather than focus on the identification of the stones, we should note that John informs us of the resplendent beauty and precious majesty of the one seated on the throne.
- *Beings surrounding the throne.* We will consider the nature of these beings in our next meditation.
- *An emerald bow.* The Greek word (*iris*) translated here as 'rainbow' should probably be translated as 'bow' or 'halo'. John likely saw an emerald green halo around the throne, rather than a multicoloured rainbow caused by the diffraction of light through a prism. Therefore, it is probably not appropriate to speculate, as many do, that the bow that John saw was a symbol of the universal covenant made with Noah and of God's continued faithfulness to his promises. Rather the halo of light could be understood as a symbol of holiness or purity—even as popular imagery associates halos with angels.
- *Lightning and thunder.* From the throne proceeded flashes of light and the rumbling sounds that are theophanic symbols of God as the righteous lawgiver—as was manifested on Mt. Sinai (Ex 19.16)—

and of God's judgement against all unrighteousness (Rev 8.5; Rev 11.19).

- *Seven lights.* We encountered seven lamps in John's first vision (Rev 1.12, 20), and concluded that they represent the seven congregations to which the book of Revelation was addressed; thus, indicating that Jesus is always in the midst of his Church. Commentators note that a different word is used here for the 'lights' than is used for the 'lampstands' in Revelation 1.12, and suggest that the seven lights ('torches') John now sees represent a sevenfold operation of the Holy Spirit. However, the seven lights identified here could also represent the universal Church as it carries out its Spirit-empowered work of bringing the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the spiritually darkened nations of the world (Rev 5.6).
- *A sea of glass, like crystal.* Some suggest that the sea is nothing more than a magnificent expanse of pavement before God's throne, with no symbolic meaning. Others suggest that the sea could be similar to the basin that was set up at the front of the temple, in which sacrifices were washed before they were offered to God (1 Ki 7.23-26), or a laver that could hold water for a baptismal washing. These suggestions give the sea a meaning that is inappropriate for the heavenly setting—in which all is pure, and without blemish. Everywhere else in Revelation, 'sea' appears to refer to a large body of water that may be subject to tempestuous storms. The sea in other places in Revelation appears to be a symbol for the restless nations that are in rebellion against God (Rev 17.1, 15), as it appears to be in some places in the OT (Ps 65.7; Is 17.12; Is 23.11). Thus, the sea of glass in this vision could be a symbol for those who have been brought out of the nations and purified and are now at peace before the throne of God.

John presents the majesty of God and magnificence of heaven so that his readers will be assured that, while they may be subject to turmoil on earth, they can place their trust in the Prince of Peace who governs the universe and know that he has the power to rescue them from their distress.

Elders and Living Creatures Around the Throne

(Rev 4.4, 6-8)

In his first vision of heaven, John sees two groups of beings gathered closely around God's throne—twenty-four elders and four living creatures. In a subsequent vision, he will see the entire host of heaven assembled around the throne (Rev 7.9). The elders and living beings he saw are representatives of the rational orders of creation: human and angelic. However, the angels may also, indirectly, represent humanity.

First, he describes the situation and appearance of the twenty-four, who:

- *Were elders.* The Greek word translated elders is *presbyteros*, from which we obtain our term 'presbyterian'—referring to the form of church government in which elders are elected to provide governing oversight in a local congregation. This Greek word, when used in the NT, can refer to an older man (1 Pt 5.5; 2 John 1), a ruler in a synagogue (Lk 7.3), a member of the Sanhedrin (Mt 21.23), or a member of a congregation's ruling council (1 Tim 4.14). Our form of church government is modelled on the form practiced in the synagogue at the time of Jesus and the apostles and endorsed Jesus' attendance in the synagogue and by Apostolic example and instruction (Acts 14.23; Acts 15.6; Acts 20.17; 1 Tim 5.17; Titus 1.5).
- *Sat on thrones.* Their sitting on individual thrones indicates that they had been granted authority to rule. This is likely a fulfilment of the promise that believers will reign with Christ (Lk 22.29; 2 Tim 2.12).
- *Were clothed in white garments.* When angels appear in human form, they are clothed in white (John 20.12), a symbol of purity. Likewise, references to white garments in Revelation are commonly used as a symbol of a believer's redemption and holiness.
- *Had golden crowns on their heads.* These crowns ('wreaths') are a symbol of the victory that all believers have in Christ, and the promised reward of being with Christ forever (1 Cor 9.25; 2 Tim 4.8).

Interpreters have provided various suggestions, some of which are fanciful, to identify the twenty-four elders. Examples include: 1) Stars, as metaphors for angels, from an astrological or Jewish apocalyptic

background; 2) A symbol of the Jewish tradition that twenty-four scrolls (with 39 books) made up the OT canon of the Scriptures; 3) Angels, a view favoured by many, since Revelation has references to many forms of angels. 4) Representatives of OT saints, modelled on the twenty-four courses of priests (1 Chron 24.3-19); 5) representatives of the OT patriarchs of the tribes of Israel and the NT apostles, who together represent the saints of all time. The two most widely accepted views are that they are angels who represent all believers. In light of the description given by John, it appears that they are not angels, since angels are not identified elsewhere in the Bible as having a governance structure that includes elders. In addition, angels will not reign with Christ; rather believers in Christ will have a form of rule over angels (1 Cor 6.3). And, angels are not awarded victor crowns, as human believers are (1 Pt 5.4; James 1.12) since they do not have to face ongoing temptation and persecution and conquer (Rev 2.7). Rather, the twenty-four elders represent the twelve sons of Israel from whom arose the tribes making up the OT Church, and the twelve apostles charged with founding the NT Church. Thus, John saw the throne in heaven encircled by the representatives of the two Messianic economies, brought together as one Church.

John refers to another class of being that he saw around the throne as ‘living creatures’. He uses this term, not to indicate that they were mere irrational beasts or animals, but to distinguish them from humans. They appear to be part of the angelic class, which elsewhere includes cherubim (Ezk 1.5-25; Ezk 10.3-22) and seraphim (Is 6.2-3). They were covered with eyes, which seems to symbolize their watchfulness of God’s person and of his mighty works of providence exercised throughout creation; rather than his omniscience, as suggested by some. Their six wings probably symbolize their humility, reverence, and continual service before God, as may be indicated by the way they use of their wings (Is 6.2). Their number and appearance has generated much speculation, which includes the following suggestions: 1) the four Gospels; 2) the apostles Peter, Matthew, James, and Paul; 3) the divisions of the tribes of Israel camped around the tabernacle (Num 2.1-34); 4) the patriarchal churches of Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople; 5) primary virtues or human emotions; 6) attributes of divinity or of Jesus in his humanity; and 7) the orders of living beings that God created: wild beasts, domestic or clean animals, humans, and birds. The presence of four living creatures may indicate that the angels observe what God is doing in every direction—north, east, south, and west. And, their appearance may represent attributes of divinity communicated to rational creatures such as: governance, service, intelligence, and creativity.

Collectively the elders and the four living creatures represent saved humanity and the angels who did not rebel in the great schism led by Satan (Rev 12.7-9). Their presence before the divine throne provides an assurance to the immediate generation to whom this letter was directed, and to every later generation, that despite the challenges we may face from God-hating persecutors, all the promises of God—to be our God and we his people—will reach their final glorious fulfilment in the throne room of heaven.

Meditations on Revelation (by Jim Hughes) [50/241]

The Seraphim Worship Ceaselessly (Rev 4.8)

John saw four living creatures, probably seraphim of the more general class of cherubim (Ezk 1.5-25; Ezk 10.3-22), around God’s heavenly throne, whose assigned purpose is to worship God. The remnants of sin that war against our spirit-endowed natures (Rom 7.23) make it difficult for us to grasp the concept that intelligent creatures could be designed for ceaseless (day and night) worship—even if they rotated their station. Our sinful natures want to scream: “That is not fair! It is slavery! God is selfish!”

People who believe that man is nothing more than an evolved bag of salty water cannot provide a reason for why the universe exists or why man exists. The cynic would say that man’s purpose is to provide genetic material. The hedonist would say that man’s purpose is to grab the gusto. The pagan would say that man is

a slave to the gods. The pantheist would say man's purpose is to fulfill his astrological destiny. And, the nihilist would say that the attempt to define a purpose is meaningless. Only a Christian can answer the question, why does mankind exist. The answer is succinctly given by the *Shorter Catechism's* answer to the question, what is man's primary purpose. Man's primary purpose "is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever".

If, according to the materialistic naturalist, life is a graded continuum from amoeba to 'Adam', then we have no more purpose in existence than a bee or a tree. However, from a Christian perspective, every entity in existence has a unique purpose. For example, the earth's moon was designed to give a derived light at night and to produce tidal currents. Plants were designed to provide fruit, wood for construction of houses, and fiber for manufacturing paper, and to process carbon dioxide into vegetation to feed animals. Likewise, rational creatures (men and angels) have God-defined purposes.

A man who understands his purpose for existence does not become frustrated if he is not a superstar athlete or an accomplished musician. He is happy fulfilling his God-designed and God-designated role. Likewise, the angels who were created to fulfill various roles, including being messengers to men and to worship God, delight in knowing that their roles honour their Creator. Thus, these seraphim (Is 6.2, 6), the most majestic of the cherubim, rejoice that they have the honour of being in God's throne room, are privileged to see his majestic glory, and can honour him with their constant praise. They have not even a passing thought that they are forced to do something that makes them unhappy. They were created to worship, and they love every moment of it!

That God would create creatures to glorify, honour, praise, and worship him (Ps 29.2; Ps 96.8; Mt 4.10), and that he desires that his creatures worship him, strikes a God-hater as blatant pride and selfishness. However, to suggest that God is proud or selfish is blasphemous, and logically false. Men believe that it is proper to praise certain kinds of people, such as heroes who rescue children from burning buildings or the wounded on the battlefield, successful businessmen whose policies are 'environmentally friendly', great athletes, philanthropists, or masters of diplomacy and statecraft. We have a tendency to create 'saints' of those who are 'good' and 'just' in our own eyes. Yet, God is the only entirely morally good person, the only truly just person, and the only source of anything that is truly good. As the ultimate good, God is worthy of all praise (Rev 4.11). Since there can be nothing more good than God, he must expect that the goodness in himself be praised—otherwise no goodness can be praised—and we are to praise him for his goodness.

The seraphim acknowledge and declare the goodness of God in his:

- *Holiness*. Many commentators conclude that the angels observed by John and Isaiah speak of the Trinity when they repeat the word 'holy' three times. If all three persons of the Trinity are represented by the person seated on the throne, then this is a possibility. However, if the person is the Father or Jesus, then it is less likely that they are using the declaration to indirectly allude to the Trinity. Rather, the expression may be a Semitic idiom (comparable to our use of adjectives such as 'very'), in which a three-fold repetition of a word or its synonyms indicates a totality, or the absoluteness of something (e.g., Est 7.4; Est 8.16; Dan 4.34; Dan 7.14; Jer 22.29; Ezk 21.27; Mt 22.37). Thus, God is more than the holy of the holy (that is, *very* holy); he is the holy of the holy, of the holy (that is, *supremely* holy, above anything in all creation).
- *Omnipotence*. The divine person seated on the throne in heaven is both sovereign—the over-ruler—and all powerful. The seraphim continually praise him because of who he is and for what he does, creating and sustaining his creation.
- *Eternality*. The divine person exists of himself outside of the created spatial-temporal realm. Eternality goes beyond 'living forever', since the redeemed will have this blessing. The depths of eternity (that is, without time) are unfathomable and not something creatures can understand. So, the angels must use time-based constructs to describe his eternal nature— by, 'was', past; and 'to come', future.

It would serve us well if we would follow the example of the seraphim. We should pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5.17)—by mediating regularly on his holiness (and our sinfulness), omnipotence (and our frailty), and eternity (and our creaturehood); and by living each moment to glorify him.

Holiness (Rev 4.8)

The four seraphim around the throne in heaven, continuously declare that God is holy. And, Jesus teaches us that when we pray we are to petition that God's name—a metonym for his person or essence—would be honoured as holy (Mt 6.9). This leads us to consider what holiness is. The English word 'holy' is used in the Bible (over 600 times). It appears to have been derived from the Old English *hālig*, which had the meaning of 'wholeness' or 'health'. It is a translation of the Hebrew word which means 'set apart' or 'consecrated', and possibly 'brightness'; and a translation of the Greek word which means 'dedicated', 'consecrated', or 'pure'. Thus, we can understand 'holiness' to apply to that which is good and is set apart as 'wholly other', in particular from anything that is sinful. Thus, God, in his essence is holy. He is the original perfection, without any sin, and the source of moral purity—the standard against which all purity is measured.

The song of Moses and of the Lamb, sung by those who had conquered the beast, declares that God alone is holy (Rev 15.4). This means that he has an *underived holiness*. His moral perfection and separateness are due to his quintessential nature (Ex 15.11)—nothing *makes* him holy; he *is* holy (Is 5.16; Ezk 20.41). In other places in Revelation, his holiness is associated with his truthfulness (Rev 3.7; Rev 6.10) and justice (Rev 16.5). In other places in the Bible, all three persons of the Godhead are referred to as being holy (Ps 51.11; Mt 1.18; Mt 12.28; Mk 1.24; Lk 1.35; Jn 17.11). We will not take the time to detail all the ways in which God is holy; but will only note that he is holy in every aspect of his being—in his person, name, works, thoughts, and words. Thus, he is the "holy of the holy, of the holy" (that is, *supremely* holy). Because of this, he is worthy of our complete devotion.

In the Bible, other entities (concepts, objects, and persons) are also declared to be holy. They all have a *derived holiness*, which is always dependent on their association with the holy God. In Revelation, Jerusalem—the City of God—is called 'holy' (Rev 11.2; Rev 21.2, 10; Rev 22.19), as are angels (Rev 14.10; Ps 89.5-7) as are believers saved out of sinful mankind (Rev 20.6; Rev 22.11; 1 Pt 2.9)—called 'saints' (Rev 5.8), another translation of the Greek word that is translated 'holy'. The first thing that God declared to be holy beyond himself was the seventh day (Gen 2.3)—the Sabbath. Thus, this day holds a special place in the council of God, and we should reverence it—in its NT form, as the Lord's Day—above all other days. Other entities that have a derived holiness are the ground where God makes his presence known (Ex 3.5), the temple in which he made his presence visible in the OT economy (1 Chron 29.3; Ps 24.2-3; Dan 11.28), and the associated vessels (1 Ki 8.4), priestly garments (Ex 28.2), and offerings (Ex 30.10; Lev 2.3). In the NT economy, the Church where he makes his presence known, is holy (Eph 5.27). God also declares that the Scriptures (Rom 1.2), the prophets who delivered his word (Acts 3.21), and his Law (Rom 7.12) are holy, as is the common faith that all believers espouse and place in their Saviour (Jude 20).

God is supremely holy. However, this does not mean that he cannot be approached. He dwells with his people who are contrite and humble (Is 57.15; Hos 11.9). He calls sinners to come to him to receive the gracious blessings of salvation (Is 40-55). In addition, in the person of Jesus, he demonstrated his compassion as he drew near to destitute sinners (Mt 9.10-11; Lk 18.16). We are invited to approach him through prayer and praise. When we sing the Psalms, we join with the seraphim in declaring his holiness, since the Psalms often (over fifty times) speak of his holiness. In contrast, we must avoid using the word

‘holy’ as a blasphemous adjective for anything in the created realm.

While God is entirely holy, holiness is far removed from sinful creatures in their natural state—in fact, it is non-existent (Rom 3.10-11). Yet, it is God’s design to call out, separate, sanctify, and make holy a people who will be with him forever (Ex 19.5-6; Is 62.12; 1 Pt 2.9). He declares that those whom he saves are forensically innocent and therefore holy (sanctified; Jn 13.10; 1 Cor 1.2; 1 Cor 6.11). He then expects his people to reflect his holiness and to become experientially holy, as he is holy (Lev 19.2; Eph 1.4). The process of our becoming holy is gradual and takes place throughout our lives; it is never fully achieved in this life because our old nature of sin continues to battle against our new nature of righteousness (Rom 7.23). The process of becoming holy is powered by the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom 8.14) and is demonstrated through a renewed mind (Rom 12.2), obedience to God’s commandments (Ex 20.1-17; Dt 26.18-19), God-honouring worship, sincere love to our neighbours, and the promotion of justice and peace in all our relationships (Rom 6.19, 22; Eph 4.23-24; Titus 1.8; 1 Pt 1.15). We do not become holy through obedience and good works. Rather, we demonstrate the degree to which we are holy through a holy life (Rom 12.1; 1 Thess 4.3-4, 7).

When a Christian leaves this spatial-temporal realm and enters the glorious paradise, he sheds his old nature of sin, along with his old sin-spoiled body, and becomes objectively holy, because he becomes like Jesus and our Father in heaven (1 Jn 3.2). Thus, throughout Revelation those who have reached heaven are referred to as ‘saints’ (Rev 5.8; Rev 8.3-4; etc.)—that is, ‘sanctified ones’, those who have been made holy.

True Worship

(Rev 4.9-11)

Here we find the word ‘worship’ used for the first time in Revelation (Rev 4.10). Typical answers to the question, “What is worship?” include statements such as, “Prayer is worship,” “Worship is what is done in church,” “My praise-band worships on Sunday evening,” or “The whole life of believers should be worship.” This last example is often presented in response to someone putting a boundary around the elements of worship. For example, if we said that we would not allow a drama production during a church service because it isn’t permitted as NT worship, someone is sure to challenge the statement with the claim that all things that a Christian does (if they are not sinful) are worship. It is true that our lives are to be lived in homage to God (Rom 14.7-8; 1 Cor 10.31; Col 3.17, 23). In addition, a few passages refer to worship as how we live before God (e.g., Rom 12.1). However, even if there is a general sense in which the Christian’s life is worship, this is not the prevailing sense in which the word is used in the Bible. Even though all of life may occasionally be referred to as ‘worship’, this does not mean, necessarily, that all non-sinful actions are worship. We are to live before God with a subjective reverence for him, and in all that we do, but the objective acts or elements of worship are precisely defined by God and separated from the daily actions of life.

The verses we consider now (Rev 4.9-11) indicate that the twenty-four elders and the living creatures engaged in *acts* of worship. There are many passages that show that acts of worship are separate from the other activities of daily life (Gen 24.26, 48; Gen 47.31; Ex 4.31; Ex 12.27; Ex 33.10; Ex 34.8; Lev 23.3; 1 Sam 1.19; Ps 22.22, 25; Ps 87.2; Mt 2.11). Advocates of ‘contemporary’ worship challenge the idea that worship is a defined set of holy activities. They do not like to make a distinction between what we do as worship and what we do at other times, because this would require them to account for God’s definition of what actions properly constitute worship. What defines an action as true worship is not that we do it on Sunday and not on other days of the week, but that God has set it apart as a holy act. This distinction is like the regulation God made concerning the clean and unclean animals (Lev 11.26). Some animals were clean (holy), and others were not. Some actions are holy, and some are not. All animals are devoted to God and are for his glory (Ps 50.10), but only some animals could legitimately be offered as worship, and others could not be. In the same way, all of life is to be devoted to God and for his glory (Rom 11.36; 1 Cor 10.31),

but only some acts are true worship, and others are not.

A study of the Hebrew and Greek words translated into the English as ‘worship’ shows that it is an activity that is distinct from other activities of life. All of life can be divided into three classes: true worship, false worship, and non-worship. Worship is an act of reverence such as kneeling before God, praising him, or offering a prayer to him. Worship also includes the state of mind of the worshipper—the acts are to be performed reverently with awe and respect. But worship is not just an attitude. It consists of specific actions, performed for, and directed toward, God; and performed with a correct attitude—worship is attitude in action.

The Bible often uses the word ‘worship’ without providing an indication of what the specific actions are that are performed. Also, we do not find examples where it says that a specific action *is* worship—for example: ‘prayer is worship’ or ‘singing Psalms is worship’. However, we can infer from the context that specific actions fall within the definition of worship:

- Tithe offerings (Acts 7.42; see also Josh 22.27; 1 Chron 16.29; Is 19.21).
- Singing praise (Ps 100.2).
- Sacrifices (Heb 10.1) or their NT equivalent, singing Psalms (Heb 13.15).
- Ordinances of the tabernacle/temple (Jn 4.19-24; Jn 12.20; Heb 9.1).
- Offering incense (Ex 30.8) or its NT equivalent, prayer (Rev 7.11-12).

We can refine an emerging definition of true worship by noting that worship consists of the following:

- Actions not offered to false gods (Dt 12.1-4, 31).
- Actions not invented by men. The human heart, even in its regenerated form, cannot be trusted to provide valid acts of worship of God (Is 29.13; Mt 6.1; Mk 7.6-13; Col 2.18-23).
- Reverential action offered in a right spirit—that is, governed and enabled by the Holy Spirit (Jn 4.23-24).
- Actions that are not performed to please men but God (Mt 6.2, 5, 16).
- Actions performed by God’s people. Act designate by God as worship, performed by unbelievers, and even by believers with an improper attitude, are not true worship (Prov 15.8, 29; Jn 4.24).

Thus, we can formulate a definition of worship:

True worship consists of reverential acts authorized by God, that are directed to him and that are performed to honour him or his name (Ps 96.9).

Because someone calls an action by a name, does not mean that that it is what it is—e.g., when homosexual activists redefine the word ‘marriage’ this does not make it marriage as God defines it (Gen 2.24; Mal 2.14-15; Mt 19.5-6). Similarly, if a congregation introduces a new ritual or action and calls it ‘worship’ that does not make it worship. Even performing the action on Sunday morning at the 11:00 AM service does not make the action magically become worship. God alone defines the actions that constitute true worship.

Worship of God – Modelled in Heaven

(Rev 4.9-11)

John describes the actions and words that are presented to God as elements of heavenly worship. These should serve as a model for our worship on earth. We observe that the four living creatures and twenty-four elders:

- *Ascribe glory and honour to God.* The representatives of the human and angelic kinds praise God with never-ending (Rev 4.8) words of adulation.
- *Give thanks to God.* Paul declares that pagans do not give thanks to God (Rom 1.21). Not being thankful

toward God is as wicked as any of the other sins Paul catalogues, including adultery, murder, kidnapping, or perjury (Rom 1.29-31; 1 Tim 1.9-10). Elsewhere, Paul exhorts Christians to be thankful in all things (Eph 5.20; Col 3.15).

- *Fall down before God.* To fall prostrate before a magistrate (2 Sam 14.22) or elder (Ruth 2.10) was considered a sign of submission and reverence. If this is so in the earthly realm, then it certainly applies in the heavenly. All rational creatures should bow before their Lord (Phil 2.10).
- *Cast their crowns before God's throne.* Whether their crowns are symbols of a delegated reign or of a procured victory, the residents of heaven recognize the supreme authority of God and acknowledge that every rule and victory over sin and Satan has ultimately been procured by Jesus.
- *Declare God to be worthy of adulation and adoration.* They worship God because of who he is and what he does in creation and providence. His innate and absolute holiness, infinite power, and eternal existence (Rev 4.8); and goodness displayed toward mankind by providing a means of redemption from sin and hell, make him worthy of worship and deserving of all adulation and adoration.
- *Acknowledge God as the Creator.* We marvel at times at what men can accomplish—building computers, designing cars, or constructing 100-storey buildings. However, these are puny accomplishments compared with what God did when he created the universe from nothing that pre-existed, purely out of his own infinitely innovative mind.

Jesus teaches us to pray that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt 6.10). We can assume that in the sinless state in heaven, all that is offered as worship before God is perfect. Thus, this example of heavenly worship informs us how our worship should be ordered and offered up to God from the earth. We can identify a few principles from this example:

- *God should be worshipped.* God is worthy of worship, and all rational creatures should worship their Creator. No one is excused from this obligation and privilege. The 'atheist' who claims that there is no God is a fool (Ps 14.1)—an intellectual fool (denying the obvious; Rom 1.19-20) and a moral fool (suppressing truth and pursuing evil; Rom 1.18, 24-32).
- *God alone is to be worshipped.* There cannot be two objects of worship, or there will be a divided allegiance, with one being loved and the other hated (Mt 6.24). Since there is no other real God, and only the I AM is the true God, he alone should be worshipped (Ex 20.3-6; Mt 4.10). A pagan who venerates a created object (celestial, animal, or carved artifact), a natural force or a non-divine person (human, angelic, or demonic) as a god is deluded in his thinking that any of these entities can provide redemption from sin, temporal blessings, or eternal life. Likewise, the rituals of proponents of a monotheism (e.g., Unitarianism, Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Judaism) that denies that Jesus is God do not worship the true God, but an invention of their sin-polluted minds.
- *We worship God by praising his attributes.* We honour God when we enumerate his exalted character (e.g., his loving kindness and goodness), names (e.g., 'The Almighty', 'King of Glory'), and his works of providence. The Psalms are full of examples of praise of God, which we can use to honour him (e.g., Ps 95-98; Ps 100.1-5; Ps 145-150).
- *Worship directs us to Christ.* Since Jesus is God, the Creator, and our saviour, any worship we offer to God edifies the Son of God.
- *Worship should humble us.* This example of the worshippers in heaven falling before the throne and casting their crowns before the throne, indicates that the worship of the true God is to be an act of humility. There is nothing humble about the professed worship of 'praise bands' and CCM composers and performers. Their egos are puffed by the adulation of their audiences, despite their protestations otherwise. These performances are not worship of God, but of man, because they are not what God has asked men to offer as worship and they do not humble the creature but exalt him. The only possible way for praise worship to remove this element of idolatry is by singing the Psalms (God's own compositions), *a cappella*, in the corporate assembly.
- *Worship should encourage us.* John was shown this act of worship so that he could communicate it to his readers. Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, wants us to view the heavenly worship so that we can see

that his sovereignty transcends the events that transpire in this spatial-temporal realm. Taking such a perspective enables us to face suffering and persecution knowing that our afflictions are light and momentary (2 Cor 4.17), and that shortly we will pass through the valley of the shadow of death and join the great multitude of grateful worshippers in heaven.

- *Worship opens heaven's door.* When we assemble with other believers and offer correct worship to God, we open a door into the glories of heaven. With the eye of faith, we see Jesus seated on his throne and we join with the angels and saints in exalting our King.

Worshipping the Creator

(Rev 4.11)

The foundation of true worship is acknowledging that God is the Creator. All forms of false worship and idolatry arise because men do not acknowledge their creaturehood before the sovereign lord of the universe and believe that their wills are the standard for determining morality. The assembled worshippers in heaven recognize that the worthiness of God to receive adoration and praise rests foundationally on his being the Creator, and that his will is supreme over the lives of all creatures.

The worship of the Church today, including that of Evangelicals and the Reformed wing of the Church, is often idolatrous because it offers up its own inventions as worship to the holy God. The underlying cause of this idolatry is that men want to play at being God (Gen 3.5-6) and they reject the truth that God is the Creator. It is calamitous when professing Christians say things like: “The universe cannot be only 6,000 years old.” “Genesis 1.1-31 is a poetic account, not an historical record of what happened.” “The days in Genesis cannot be twenty-four-hour days.” “There was no single person named ‘Adam’.” Or, “Fossils are from animals that were buried millions of years before Adam sinned and introduced decay and death into the universe; not the result of the flood.” When professing Christians make such statements, they deny the omnipotence of God, the historicity and truthfulness of the Bible, and the reliability of Jesus and the apostles (Mk 10.6; 1 Tim 2.13; 2 Pt 3.5). In addition, acceptance of the evolutionary long-ages paradigm espoused by atheistic, secular scientists is no different, in principle, from believing in the Babylonian, Hindu, Greek or Islamic creation myths—for example, the *Rig Veda* says that the universe was created out of the parts of the body of a cosmic man, Purusha, when his body was sacrificed. The *Qur'an* has multiple creation myths, including that the first man was created from a drop of sperm or out of water or clay. Hebrews 11.3 begins the account of examples of faith, by stating as a first principle that we are to understand that the universe was created by the word of God, not from anything that pre-existed. Everything in the universe, other than Adam and Eve, was created directly from nothing pre-existing by the word of God—Adam and Eve were each partially created using pre-existing materials (specifically dust and a rib), as we are informed by God.

There are only a few possible ways for explaining the universe's existence:

- The material realm **doesn't** actually **exist** and everything is a projection of someone's mind. No one actually believes that he is only another's dream.
- The material realm **created itself** or came into existence from nothing without any causal agency. However, it is total nonsense to say that *nothing* generated something.
- The constituents of the material realm are **eternal**. However, this view flounders on the fact that entropy increases as the universe decays and dies. If it were *eternal* it would already be cold dead.
- The material realm was **created** by an eternal, non-material entity, not subject to physical laws, such as the second law of thermodynamics.

The Bible tells us that the entity who created the universe is God, not a force. The fact that God created could only have become known if God revealed it to mankind—it cannot be proven by deductive logic. The account we have in Genesis 1.1-31 had to come from the mouth of God himself. Therefore, the very existence of the first verse of the Bible informs us that the God who created the universe is both a personal

being and an intelligent agent—an impersonal, non-intelligent entity cannot create anything and certainly does not determine to communicate anything about its actions.

Because it is impossible to prove that God created the universe, it must be accepted on faith. However, this faith is not naive or blind as some suggest. It is based on the truthful, self-authenticating, revelation of the God who created all things. The fact that knowledge of creation is based on revelation bothers anyone who says that it must be possible to test all claims empirically and provide explanations for how the universe came into existence without intervention of the supernatural. However, the real naivety and hubris rests with those who stand above Scripture with their ‘scientific’ method. They hide behind their supposed objectivity and ignore the fact that all religious, philosophical, and scientific systems must rest on unproven axioms. For example, the idea that only materialistic mechanisms can be permitted to explain ontological causation is an assumption which must be accepted on faith.

The world rejects the fact that God created the universe; not because it is against the idea that someone could be a masterful craftsman, but because of the moral and accountability implications that follow from God being our Creator. It is utter foolishness for man, the creature—who cannot *create* an atom or even explain where anything came from without God—to reject the account from God, the Creator. God’s record of creation stands above man’s foolish theories and opinions which rule out God having created the universe in six twenty-four-hour days, about 6,000 years ago.

The first obligation of the worshipping Church is to acknowledge God as the Creator. One way that we can be sure that we worship the Creator correctly and reverently is by singing the Psalms, which often declare that God is the Creator (e.g., Ps 8.1-4; Ps 19.1-6; Ps 90.2; Ps 95.6; Ps 100.3; Ps 102.25; Ps 104.5-9; Ps 139.13-16; Ps 148.5).

A Sealed Scroll (Rev 5.1)

Daniel was told to seal up the record of the prophetic visions that he had received, until the “time of the end” (Dan 12.4). He was to attach his official seal to the scroll, so that it could not be tampered with, and store it in the archives, to be preserved for the future. This instruction does not mean that the book was to be kept hidden as a secret until the “time of the end”. Copies would have been made for immediate use, while the official copy was safely stored. The book of Daniel was known to the Jews after it was written, since it was translated into Greek sometime in the 2nd century before Christ. Jesus refers to its prophecy (Mt 24.15). And, according to Josephus, a copy of Daniel was shown to Alexander the Great when he came to Jerusalem, to inform him that God had prophesied about his conquest of the Persian Empire.

The prophecies in Daniel do not refer primarily to the end of the world. Rather, they refer to the end of the OT ceremonial system, at the time of the incarnation of the Messiah, when the events (other than the final resurrection) recorded in Daniel’s visions would be fulfilled and the kingdom of the Messiah established. At that time, the knowledge of the events prophesied by Daniel would increase—that is, became clear—as they were fulfilled in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes, Herod the ‘Great’, and Titus.

John now sees the heavenly equivalent of Daniel’s scroll, which was to be opened at the “time of the end”. It was in the right hand of the one seated on the throne in heaven (Rev 4.2). The ‘right hand’ is figuratively the sign of prestige and authority. This indicates that the information it contains is authoritative.

The scroll was sealed with seven seals, which also reinforces the importance of its contents. The seals are opened in succession, and the contents of the scroll revealed—as we will see as we study chapters 6 through 9. It is not necessary for us to determine how the seals on the scroll (or, as some suggest, a book) could be visible at one time and yet be opened sequentially, and the contents of each section revealed. It is better if

we understand that what John sees, as each seal is broken, is a vision that unfolds before him, even while the other seals remain on the scroll.

John also tells us that the scroll had writing on both sides. He would not have known this before the scroll had been opened, so he is reflecting on what he had seen after the seven seals were removed. Some suggest that the writing on both sides of the scroll is an indicator that the scroll takes the form of legal document—such as a contract, title deed, or a last will and testament—which required multiple witnesses to seal it (with seven being a complete or perfect number). Others suggest that a summary of the contents was written on the outside of the document. However, if a scroll had writing on the entire surface of both sides, then it would not have been a summary on the outside. It is probably better to understand that the writing on the two-sided scroll was like the writing on the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments, which were inscribed on both sides (Ex 32.15-16). Both sides of the tablets and scroll were filled with the text revealed by God, indicating that the contents were complete and that there was no room for man to add anything.

The scroll, with its visions, has been thought by some to be a symbol for: 1) The mysteries of the OT which Jesus would ‘unlock’ through his person and ministry. 2) The entirety of God’s written revelation, with the OT on one side and the NT on the other. 3) The “Lamb’s book of life” (Rev 3.5; Rev 13.8; Rev 20.12, 15; Rev 21.27)—a book containing the names of the elect, predestined to salvation in eternity. 4) The whole of God’s plan for history—from beginning to end—focused around the unfolding of the redemption procured by the Messiah. 5) A prophecy about events which were to occur in the distant future from the time of John—that is, at the eschatological conclusion of our age, focused around the time of the final tribulation for the Church. Or, 6) a prophecy about the ongoing confrontational relationship between the Church and the world, from the time John received the visions until the end of time.

However, since the primary audience for Revelation was the seven churches in Asia Minor, during the Apostolic era, we need to understand the visions as providing information relevant to their situation and the immediate trials they would have to face as Messiah’s kingdom was established among the Gentiles in a hostile pagan environment. Of course, the contents are relevant, and apply, to the Church in every age, just as every other part of Scripture do.

In the past, when a legal document was to be executed, the seals were broken, and the contents read and acted upon. Thus, since the “time of the end” had arrived, Messiah’s work would conclude the old ceremonial economy, based around physical figures and types, and inaugurate a new economy, with its focus on the fulfilment in the antitype—Christ—and spiritual worship. The time had arrived in which the prophecy about Messiah’s kingdom received by Nebuchadnezzar would be fulfilled. A stone “cut out by no human hand”, would arise at the time of the kingdom with feet of iron and clay—the Roman Empire—and would break in pieces the kingdoms of this world and scatter them like chaff (Dan 2.34-35). The visions revealed, as the seals are opened, warned and encouraged Jews and Gentiles, living when the NT Church was inaugurated, who had received the truth that Jesus is the Messiah of OT prophecy.

No One was Worthy to Open the Sealed Scroll (Rev 5.2-4)

In the previous meditation, we noted that the visions which John saw, as each of the seals on the scroll were opened, are best understood as the symbolic fulfilment of the prophecies in Daniel. Daniel’s prophecies do not refer primarily to the end of the world. Rather, they refer to the end of the OT Levitical ceremonial system—the “time of the end” (Dan 12.4)—at the incarnation of the Messiah, when a stone “cut out by no human hand”, would arise at the time that the kingdom with feet of iron and clay—the Roman Empire—was in its ascendancy, and would break in pieces the kingdoms of this world and scatter them like chaff (Dan 2.34-35).

After John sees the scroll which was sealed with seven seals in the right hand of the one seated on the heavenly throne, he hears an angel asking in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” This question is followed by John’s observation that no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll. He tells us that, in response, he began to weep loudly. These observations inform us that:

- *The scroll must be opened.* It is necessary that the events associated with each of the visions be fulfilled, as the seals are opened. From John’s perspective, if these events do not happen, then the prophecies of Daniel will not be fulfilled, and the Messiah’s kingdom cannot be established.
- *Mankind remains without hope if Messiah’s kingdom is not established.* Even though most of mankind will not acknowledge it, men must be rescued from their sins. They know this in the deepest recesses of their minds, but outwardly they refuse to acknowledge their need. When the need to be rescued from sin bubbles into their consciousnesses they invent their own ‘solutions’, which fall into one of the following general response categories:
 - *Denial.* They suppress the truth that there is a God to whom they are ontologically and morally obligated. They replace the Creator with myths, such as pantheism and evolutionary determinism, and deny the idea that man is by nature a sinner and that he does anything that is contrary to God’s normative standard for morality.
 - *‘Drugs’.* They attempt to escape from the truth, embedded in their innate knowledge, that God exists and that he has placed upon them accountability for breaking his righteous requirements. They use all-consuming work, constant entertainment, addiction to consumption, or the dulling effects of alcohol or drugs to distract their minds from the truth. These means of hiding truth are as useless as the fig leaves Adam and Eve used in attempt to hide their guilt before God.
 - *Duties.* Men are endowed by God with a religious sense. They know that God must be worshipped. However, because they are in rebellion against God, they refuse to worship him in spirit and truth. Instead, they invent myriad forms of false worship that include veneration of things such as self, Satan, stars, snakes, or saints and rituals of service and sacrifice. Every religion invented by humans—that is, every religion which is not Biblical Christianity—is based on two false premises: 1) Man, in his sin-polluted nature, can determine what is required to provide a solution to sin and how mankind can reach out to God and enter heaven. 2) That men can appease God and assuage their sins by doing something, rather than depending on the grace of God who offers salvation freely to anyone who trusts in the Messiah who died in the place of mankind to pay the debt of our sin.
- *The one who breaks the seals and opens the scroll must be worthy.* This means that there are necessary qualifications for the one who will be permitted to open the scroll and usher in Messiah’s kingdom. Neither the angel nor John identifies the qualifications of worthiness. However, we can infer what they are from the context of the angel’s question:
 - *Holiness.* In the preceding vision, John had heard the four living creatures declare that God is the most holy being (Rev 4.8). We are told, elsewhere, that without holiness it is impossible to see the Lord (Heb 12.14). By inference, we can conclude that anyone who is worthy to take the scroll from God and open it must be holy.
 - *Human.* Since the angel asks who is worthy to open the scroll, it must be the case that even the holy angels are not worthy. Also, the events associated with the opening of each seal relate to human history. This implies that only a person who is a man, or has a human nature, can break the seals and open the scroll.
 - *Horological.* The events associated with each of the seven seals occur in our temporal realm—as the NT Church is established. Thus, a worthy person must exist within the measures of our time.
- *No one was found who was worthy.* John states that no one could be found in heaven, on the earth, or under the earth—that is, in all of the created order—who could meet the necessary qualifications. Angels were not qualified; although they are holy, they do not have a human nature. The priests of the OT ceremonial system were human and had a reflected holiness through their association with the sanctified elements but were not innately holy. The rest of mankind on the earth, although human and

in this temporal realm, is far from being holy. The saints in heaven, while holy and human are not in this temporal realm.

Thus, we are left in temporary suspense: will the scroll be opened? and “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?”

One Who Can Open the Sealed Scroll

(Rev 5.5-7)

John tells us (Rev 5.2-4) that no one in all of creation could be found who was worthy to open the scroll, sealed with seven seals, that was held in the right hand of the one seated on the heavenly throne. He tells also that he wept over this situation, because he knew that the scroll must be opened to fulfill the prophecies of Daniel about the establishment of Messiah’s kingdom at the “time of the end”—the dissolution of the OT ceremonial system. In the previous meditation, we identified three conditions for someone to be accounted worthy to open the scroll: 1) perfect innate *holiness*, 2) a *human* nature, and 3) existing in our *horological* (time-based) realm. No man in earth or heaven, and no angel, is able to meet all three of these conditions.

However, one of the elders seated around the throne (Rev 4.4), a representative of the OT and NT Messianic economies brought together as one Church, speaks with John. He tells John not to weep and encourages him by indicating that there is a person who meets all three conditions. Who might this be? There is only one being with innate holiness—God. Only one with innate holiness and a human nature—the God-man, Jesus. And, only one who can meet the third condition—Jesus, as he came into our spatial-temporal realm at the right time (Rom 5.6) through the incarnation. The elder speaking with John identifies Jesus as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” and the “Root of David”.

Jesus is worthy to release the seals and open the scroll because he meets the three conditions identified by the angel that no mere man could possibly meet. In addition, Jesus is worthy because of additional attributes identified by the elder. He is worthy because of his:

- *Sceptre*. Jacob prophesied that the sceptre would not depart from Judah, who was called a lion’s cub (Gen 49.9-10). The elder speaking with John informs him that Jesus, as the warrior-king, is the rightful heir of Judah and the fulfilment of the Messianic promise, who can claim the privilege of bearing the royal sceptre of authority as he defeats his enemies.
- *Spirit*. Isaiah (Is 11.1-2, 10) prophesied that the Messiah would be a descendant of Jesse—and by extension, of David (Rev 22.16), Jesse’s son—upon whom the Spirit would rest (Mt 3.16-17). Jesus fulfilled this prophecy as none other could (Mt 1.2-16; Lk 1.27; Lk 3.31-32; Rom 1.3).
- *Success*. The elder declares that the individual who could open the scroll had conquered. He uses the same word that Jesus used when he wrote to the seven churches (Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 26; Rev 3.5, 12, 21). Conquering, in this context is counter intuitive to the world’s thinking—which is subduing others with physical force. Rather, what qualifies one for opening the scroll is spiritual conquering that overcomes temptation, sin, and a desire to have dominance over others. Jesus conquered by resisting temptation in the wilderness (Mt 4.1-11) and on the cross (Mt 27.39-44), living a sinless life (1 Pt 2.22; 1 Jn 3.5), being a servant (Mt 20.28; Phil 2.8), paying the debt of man’s sin (Col 2.12-13), and depriving death of its victory through his resurrection (1 Cor 15.54-55).
- *Strength*. The elder also declares that “he can open the scroll and its seven seals”. This indicates that Jesus is not only qualified to open it but has the power to do so. Since he has conquered, he has been exalted to the highest place of authority and power (Mt 28.18; Phil 2.9).

As the one qualified to open the scroll, he stepped forward—a fulfilment of Daniel 7.13—and took the scroll from the hand of the Father. Notice that the text does not say, he ‘received’ the scroll, but that he

‘took’ it. His coequality with the Father allows him to approach closer to the throne than any created being could. Then, since he has conquered and earned his position as the mediator, through his death on the cross, he can act on behalf of his people and take the scroll that reveals events that were sealed until the “time of the end” (Dan 12.4). Thus, as he takes the scroll and opens its seals, he indicates that he is establishing his kingdom that will rule over all worldly kingdoms (Dan 7.14; 1 Cor 15.27; Eph 1.20-22). He can now set his people free from their sins and welcome them into everlasting glory.

We are not told of John’s reaction on hearing that there was a person who was qualified and capable to open the scroll. We can surmise that he dried his tears and looked with eager anticipation to what would happen as the scroll was opened. We are, however, told of the reaction in heaven—it burst into praise (Rev 5.8-14). On hearing of the qualifications of the Messiah, our response should be like that of the assembled host in heaven, and display:

- *Confidence.* Our Lord Jesus Christ is victorious and presides over all the kingdoms and governments of this earth. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Rev 19.16). In addition, “as head over all things to the church” (Eph 1.22), he subdues his enemies and fills his kingdom with a great multitude that no one can number (Rev 7.9).
- *Conviction.* The basis of our hope is the reign of Jesus. Our conviction is that because he reigns his plans will be fully executed. Our expectation is that he will not only redeem his people but glorify them (Rom 8.29-30) and will renovate the entire non-rational created order by making all things new (2 Pt 3.13).
- *Celebration.* Thus, we should join with the everlasting praise in heaven, as we “tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.” (Ps 78.4)

The Lion-Lamb

(Rev 5.5-6)

An elder told John that the Lion of the tribe of Judah was able to open the scroll. So, John expected to see a lion before the throne. Instead, he saw a lamb. However, Jesus is both a ‘lion’ and a ‘lamb’, at one time, and could appear as both at the same time in a vision. How this could be possible should not perplex us. We experience natural phenomena that allow us to see two images in one scene. For example, in a classic optical illusion such the old woman and young woman, our eyes see one or the other, as our focus changes. A better analogy may be a hologram. Depending on the angle at which we observe a hologram, we can see two different images (for example a side view and front view) of one object. So, John could have seen Jesus in two forms simultaneously in a shimmering or pulsating image.

As a ‘lion’, Jesus is a warrior-king and the rightful heir of Judah and the fulfilment of the Messianic promise (Gen 49.9-10), who can claim the privilege of bearing the royal sceptre of authority as he defeats his enemies. As a ‘lamb’, Jesus is the fulfilment of the OT sacrificial system, by which God directed the Jews to focus their attention on the promised future Messiah. John recognized this when he reported in his Gospel the words of another John (‘the Baptist’), “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1.29) John reports what he observed about the lamb in his vision of the heavenly throne room, and tells us that the lamb was:

- *Slain.* Modern translations report that the lamb appeared, “as if/though it had been slain”. This is not accurate. The Greek has a perfect passive participle, which should be translated as, “as having been slain”. The lamb didn’t appear to John *as if* he had been slain, it appeared *as* slain. John knew what a slaughtered lamb looked like—he was from the priestly line and would have seen thousands of slaughtered animals in Jerusalem. Verse 9 confirms that Jesus, the Lamb, was slain, with the words, “you were slain” (see also, Rev 7.14; Rev 12.11). It is not *as if* Jesus had been crucified, he truly was crucified; and in his glorified human form he retains the marks of his crucifixion (Jn 20.20, 27).
- *Sacrificed.* This lamb was not any arbitrary slain animal, among the millions that had been offered up

over the previous two millennia. This lamb was the one designated by God to serve as the propitiatory offering for sin, as a penal substitute for the elect (1 Cor 15.3; Gal 1.4; 1 Jn 2.2; 1 Jn 4.10), in fulfilment of the Scriptures (Is 53.7-8). Jesus was sacrificed to death like a sacrificial lamb; however, not as a victim but as a victor, like a lion. His death paid the debt of sin for his people and redeemed them from Satan, the power of sin, and everlasting death.

- *Standing*. Dead men can't stand. Yet the Lamb was standing between the throne and the living creatures and elders surrounding the throne. He was dead, but not defeated. He is alive, because he conquered Satan and death through his resurrection, and now stands in the centre of heaven, where every eye can behold him. He likely stands on the sea of crystal (Rev 4.6)—a symbol for the elect who have been saved out of the nations, purified, and given peace before the throne of God.
- *Sovereign*. The lamb is portrayed as having seven horns, which symbolize the perfection of Jesus' absolute royal power (Dt 33.17; Ps 75.4; Zech 1.18-20). Therefore, he can declare that he has all authority in heaven and earth (Mt 28.18).
- *Seeing*. The lamb is also portrayed as having seven eyes, symbolizing the perfect omniscience of God (2 Chron 16.9; Zech 4.10). Previously, we determined that the expression 'seven spirits of God' probably refers to the Holy Spirit (see, [Seven Churches, Seven Spirits](#)), and may be used in the sense of 'the sevenfold Spirit', referring symbolically to the completeness or perfection of his activity. The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus to bring spiritual light into the pagan darkness of this world (Jn 14.26; Jn 16.7-11; Jn 15.26).

Jesus is the God-man—he has an eternal divine nature and, through the incarnation a derived human nature. It is beyond our ability to explain how he maintains both of these natures at one time. Likewise, we are challenged to understand how he can have the nature of both a lion and a lamb at one time. However, this conjunction of attributes provides at least the following blessings for those who have placed their trust in Jesus as the Messiah:

- *Salvation*. As the sacrificed lamb, Jesus procured forgiveness for sin and uncontested justification for his people. Nothing can be more important than being declared righteous before the throne of God's judgement.
- *Sanctification*. As a perfect sacrificial lamb, Jesus exhibits the attributes of total holiness. He imparts his holiness to his people both forensically (1 Cor 6.11) and experientially (Heb 10.14), through the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit.
- *Support*. As the lamb destined for suffering and slaughter from eternity, he knows our temptations, weaknesses, and challenges; and is able to sympathize with us and provide comfort to us (Heb 4.15-16).
- *Success*. As the victorious lion, he has defeated all his enemies (Heb 10.12-13). By conquering the last enemy—death—he provides for us the greatest measure of success—eternal life.
- *Supremacy*. As the lion of the tribe of Judah (i.e., 'Jews'), he shares his victory with all spiritual 'Jews', making them joint heirs in his kingdom.

Praise God for the Lion-Lamb—the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Rev 5.6-7)

The book of Revelation does not use the word 'resurrection' when speaking about Jesus. However, it refers to his resurrection indirectly. For example, in Revelation 1.5, Jesus is called the "firstborn of the dead", since through his resurrection, he conquered Satan, sin, and death and was declared to be the firstborn (or firstfruits) from the dead. In Revelation 1.18, Jesus declares that he died and yet is alive forevermore. In this vision, John sees Jesus as having been slain (Rev 5.6) but also alive—standing (Rev 5.6) and acting (Rev 5.7)—indicating that though slain, he is alive, through the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus is not a myth or a metaphor, but a miracle. It is a foundational truth of Biblical Christianity; which Paul declares to be of first importance (1 Cor 15.4). No truth is *more* important to believe than the truth about the resurrection of Jesus; although there are other truths which are *as* important, such as the deity of Jesus and his coequality with the Father.

In this vision, John is shown that a person must be found who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals—otherwise Messiah’s kingdom will not be established. Jesus is declared to be worthy because he was slain but is now the risen one. Through his work on the cross, and his conquering death by the resurrection, he has paid the debt of sin charged against his people and can approach the Father on the throne and open the scroll and establish his universal reign. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus is assumed of be of first importance in the councils of heaven because it is the basis upon which Jesus is credited with having completed his assigned work on the earth.

Other reasons why the resurrection is a foundational truth, which we must receive in faith, include the following:

- *Proof.* Paul tells us that Jesus “was declared to be the Son of God in power” by his resurrection from the dead (Rom 1.4). The resurrection is proof that Jesus is God.
- *Purpose.* Without the resurrection of Jesus, our faith in him is in vain (1 Cor 15.14, 17), the Christian religion has no purpose, and those who have placed their hope in Jesus are deluded fools, believing a lie.
- *Prophesied.* Jesus was raised on the third day, as prophesied by the OT Scriptures (1 Cor 15.4), in specific prophecies (Ps 2.7 with Acts 13.33; Ps 16.9-10; Ps 22.12-21; Is 52.13-53.12; Hos 6.2). If these prophecies have not been fulfilled in Christ’s death and resurrection, then not a single word of the OT can be trusted.
- *Pronouncement.* The apostles, and other eyewitnesses declare that they saw the risen Lord Jesus in a glorified bodily form. If their word is not accepted as truth, then not a single word of the NT can be trusted. Then, Christianity must be considered a pernicious lie and Jesus a deluded narcissist because of his claim to be equal with God and his acceptance of worship from his followers.
- *Power.* A denial of the resurrection is a denial of the power of God (Acts 26.8). Without the resurrection, death has not been defeated and it continues to hold authority over all sinners, and there is no salvation from sin. If Christ has not been raised, then all believers in him are still dead in their sins (1 Cor 15.17) and remain under the power of Satan.
- *Preaching.* The only hope for mankind is in a risen Saviour who is a living sovereign over death and the grave (Rev 1.17-18). All other religions are false because their gods are figments of polluted human minds and their founders’ bones lie decaying in putrid graves. We declare a risen Christ, because it is the message of truth that all men must hear.
- *Promise.* Without the resurrection, there can be no hope beyond this life. However, there is hope. Jesus’ resurrection, as the firstfruits (1 Cor 15.20, 23), is the promise that physical death is not the end of our corporeal existence. There will be a general resurrection (1 Cor 15.52), there is a next life, and God will provide believers with new bodies suitable for the glories of heaven (1 Cor 15.44; Phil 3.20-21).

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an essential truth, not only for professing Christians, but for all mankind. Anyone who claims to be a Christian but expresses doubt about the physical resurrection of Jesus on the third day cannot be a true believer in Jesus (about 25% of people who say that they are Christians deny that the resurrection occurred, according to survey results reported in the UK in 2017). Those ‘churches’ which formally deny the resurrection or admit those into teaching offices who turn the resurrection into a subjective feeling (e.g., ‘Christ risen in people’s hearts’) are part of the synagogue of Satan (Rev 2.9; Rev 3.9).

Anyone who denies the historical existence of Jesus or rejects the truth that he is the God-man, the second person of the Trinity, and the saviour of mankind, obviously does not believe that he was raised from the dead. For these people (including, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and secular humanists), there can be no hope beyond this material, mortal existence. However, we declare Christ Jesus, crucified and risen. Each Lord's day, the first day of the week (Mk 16.9; Jn 20.19; Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2), we assemble to recognize and proclaim that the tomb is empty because, "He is not here, for he has risen!" (Mt 28.6). Praise God that we can say truthfully, "He has risen!" "He has risen indeed!" (Lk 24.6, 34).

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation

(Rev 5.6)

The gracious work of the Holy Spirit is recognized and recorded in all the sections of the Scriptures—beginning with Genesis (Gen 1.2). However, some commentators have noted that the term 'Holy Spirit' does not appear in the book of Revelation. Nevertheless, the words 'the spirit' occur over a dozen times. In most of these occurrences we understand John to be referring to the Holy Spirit and, accordingly, translators capitalize the word 'spirit'. Some commentators have wondered why Revelation is less explicit about the work of the Holy Spirit than other parts of the NT—for example in Acts or Paul's epistles. Some have even argued that the impersonal 'the spirit' and the absence of a reference to his sitting on the throne implies that John views the Spirit as an impersonal entity and not a member of the Godhead. This is a faulty interpretation since John certainly understood Jesus to have spoken of the Holy Spirit as a person (Jn 14.16-17, 26; Jn 16.7). In addition, John:

- Recognizes the Spirit as a member of the Trinity in his formulaic greeting (Rev 1.4), where he refers to the Holy Spirit as "the seven spirits who are before his throne", which is a figure of speech used to refer to 'the sevenfold Spirit', working in his manifold ways as he dispenses grace and peace to the Church. Similarly, in his conclusion he refers to the three persons of the Trinity—Jesus (Rev 22.16), the Holy Spirit (Rev 22.17), and the Father (Rev 22.18).
- Sees the Trinity represented in the throne room of heaven, with the Father seated on the throne (Rev 5.1), Jesus—the Lion-Lamb—standing before the throne (Rev 5.5-6), and the Holy Spirit—under the symbol of the 'seven spirits' (Rev 4.5; Rev 5.6)—sent out from the Father and the Son.

The primary reason that references to the Holy Spirit are less explicit in Revelation than in other parts of the New Testament, is that the book is focused on the Messiah's work, as he defeats his enemies and establishes his mediatorial kingdom. The Holy Spirit veils his behind-the-scenes activities like a stage director, as he applies salvation to the saints and reveals God's truth to mankind. The role of the Holy Spirit in the divine economy is to focus our adoration on Jesus Christ, the primary actor in defeating evil and redeeming mankind, not on himself.

In Revelation, we can discern that the work of the Holy Spirit is to:

- *Create*. Life comes from God when he breathes a person into existence (Gen 2.7). In both the OT and NT, the word that is used for 'breath' is the same word that is used for 'spirit'. The 'breath of life' or the 'spirit of life' comes from God, and the Holy Spirit is the creator of life who animates all living beings, even those who are evil (Rev 11.11).
- *Convert*. Since Revelation is designed to encourage believers and is not intended to provide a guide for how to be saved—John's Gospel and other portions of the Bible provide that information—there are no explicit or even implied references to the converting work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation. Nevertheless, we can infer that since the Holy Spirit is the source of spirit-endowed physical life (a 'living creature'; Gen 2.7), so he is the source of spiritual eternal life (Jn 3.7-8).
- *Call*. As the one who converts, the Holy Spirit also calls people into the kingdom of Jesus Christ (Rev 22.17). Jesus builds his Church through the calling and converting work of the Holy Spirit.

- *Challenge*. In the conclusion to each of the letters to the seven churches, the Holy Spirit challenges the recipients to hear and heed the message from Jesus and overcome the difficulties which they encounter in their specific contexts (Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 29; Rev 3.6, 13, 22). Likewise, he challenges us to persevere in the faith, when we face trials or persecution, since the seven letters have general applicability to the entire Church throughout all ages.
- *Comfort*. In the messages that challenge the seven churches, the Holy Spirit also promises numerous blessings to encourage and comfort those who persevere and conquer throughout their lives as believers. Some of the blessings include a new paradise, access to the tree of life, and a crown of life (see, [Promised Rewards for Conquering](#)). Elsewhere in John's writings, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as the 'comforter' (Jn 14.16-17, 26)—also translated and 'helper' and 'counselor'.
- *Consecrate*. The Holy Spirit blesses those who die in the Lord and promises them rest from their labours and that their good works will be recognized (Rev 14.13).
- *Carry*. John indicates that he was carried by the Holy Spirit to the place where he would receive additional revelation about the Church and the new Jerusalem (Rev 17.3; Rev 21.10). Likewise, the Holy Spirit 'carried along' all those who were entrusted with writing Scripture (2 Pt 1.20-21).
- *Communicate*. This leads to another work of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who communicates truth to mankind, as the sevenfold spirit (Rev 1.4; Rev 3.1; Rev 4.5; Rev 5.6)—both as the ultimate author of Scripture (Rev 19.10) and as the one who reveals the truth about Jesus to individual hearts at their conversion.
- *Commission*. John tells us that he was "in the Spirit" on the Lord's Day when he received the visions that he records (Rev 1.10; Rev 4.2), which means that he was in an attitude and place of worship—his mind and will were attuned to the working and influences of the Holy Spirit.

The book of Revelation may not use the term 'Holy Spirit'; nevertheless, it is full of the manifold and multifaceted work of the Holy Spirit.

Worshipping the Lamb

(Rev 5.8-14)

Jehovah's Witnesses claim that they are worshippers of the true God even though they deny that God is a Trinity and that Jesus is God. When pressed, for example, to explain how Thomas can declare of Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20.28), they say that Jesus is 'a god' or 'godlike', and thus divine. They tie themselves in definitional knots because they reject the plurality of persons in the Godhead and have to postulate a polytheistic hierarchy. This passage illustrates the foolishness of their belief system. Jesus said explicitly that the Lord God (that is, Jehovah) alone is to be worshipped (Mt 4.10). Yet, in the heavenly throne room he—as the Lamb—receives worship from the entire assembled creation. Either Jesus is *the* Lord God (that is, Jehovah; not as the Father, but as the Son), and worthy of all worship, or he is the most duplicitous hypocrite who ever walked the earth, who deserves only ridicule.

John observes a series of worshipping audiences, in concentric rings, around the Lamb, who is standing before the Father who is seated on the throne. First, there are two classes of rational creatures (Rev 5.8), whom we have encountered previously (see, [Elders and Living Creatures Around the Throne](#)), who are the guardians of the throne:

- Four living creatures, who are representatives of a class of angels that includes cherubim and seraphim.
- The twenty-four elders, who are representatives of the two Messianic economies, brought together as one Church.

Then, there are two larger audiences:

- An uncountable host of angels (Rev 5.11).
- The entirety of (or representatives of) the redeemed, physical created order (Rev 5.13).

This vast audience is assembled to worship Jesus as he takes the scroll from the hands of the Father (Rev 5.7) and is prepared to break the seven seals and to open the scroll. By assembling at this time, all classes of the rational (angelic and human) created order acknowledge that the redemptive work of Jesus is the most significant event in history, since the creation of the universe—he has defeated Satan, sin, and death through his resurrection; completed the demands of the Jewish ceremonial system of figures and types; and definitively inaugurated his mediatorial kingdom.

This heavenly worship assembly incorporates a number of dimensions of praise of Jesus, as they:

- Fall down (Rev 5.8, 14) in obeisance before him—as we are told by David, Isaiah, and Paul that every knee will do (Is 45.23; Ps 110.1; Phil 2.10).
- Offer up spiritual sacrifices of praise and prayer—typified by harps and bowls of incense (Rev 5.8).
- Reflect on the redemptive work he has accomplished, through his blood and death on the cross (Rev 5.9).
- Sing a ‘a new song’—the song of people who have been redeemed from sin, from every nation, and who have been granted everlasting life and a joint inheritance with him as priest-kings in a new nation (Rev 5.9-10).
- Declare his worthiness to receive by right, all possible honour; identified by a list of seven honours (Rev 5.12-13), including the receipt of the wealth of the nations (Ps 72.10; Is 60.6) and a recognition of his omnipotence and omniscience. The identification of seven honours, prefixed in the Greek with a single article (‘the’), indicates a complete set of honours.

There are some, even among true Christians, who deny that it is proper to ascribe worship directly to Jesus. However, the examples of the NT Church and this heavenly assembly indicate otherwise. The man born blind (Jn 9.38), the women on the way from the garden (Mt 28.9), and Thomas worshipped Jesus (Jn 20.28); and Jesus accepted these acts of veneration. We are to pray in the name of Jesus (Jn 14.13-14; Jn 15.16) but can also pray to him as Stephen (Acts 7.59-60) and Paul (1 Cor 16.22; 2 Cor 12.8) did. And, in this scene in Revelation 5.8-14, the vast assembly ascribes the same worship to both the Lamb and to the Father (Rev 5.13). Jesus is the object of universal adoration in heaven, so who would dare to claim that the heavenly host is unenlightened or mistaken in offering praise to him. It is impossible to worship God the Father without worshipping in and through the Son (Jn 14.6), in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2.9). The worship of one is the worship of the other. It is equally impossible to render too much honour to Jesus.

All created beings, throughout all the created realms, are to join with this heavenly choir in harmonious praise of the Father and of the Son. We join them when we assemble for worship on the Lord’s Day and raise our voices in praise through singing of the Psalms. We also participate in this chorus when we offer up our private and corporate prayers (Rev 8.3-4; Ps 141.2), as we thank the Father for loving us from before the foundation of the world despite our sin (Eph 1.4), and as we thank the Son for loving us by enduring the shame and pain of the cross on our behalf (Jn 15.13; Rom 5.8).

When we reflect on what has been done for us by God the Father and God the Son, we should be beyond incredulous that any believer in Jesus could go through a single day without bursting into spontaneous praise of the God who alone is worthy to receive all our worship!

Harps in Heaven (*Part 1 of 3*)

(Rev 5.8; Rev 14.2; Rev 15.2)

Revelation contains the only NT references to musical instruments used in worship. Thus, these verses are often appealed to as a rationale for the use of musical instruments in the NT Church. Other arguments that proponents give for the use of musical instruments in worship today include:

- *Instruments were used in OT worship.* Since there is no prohibition against their use in the NT, they can be used today. However, if the NT must explicitly prohibit elements of worship, then we may include the use of incense, sprinkling with hyssop, and dancing in our worship today.
- *The Psalms direct us to sing them with instrumental accompaniment.* However, you will likely never hear anyone arguing that we should inflict vengeance and punishment on pagan nations with the sword and fetters (Ps 149.6-9). Yet people will use the same Psalm to argue for the use of instruments to accompany the singing of praises (Ps 149.3). The Psalms also command us to offer sacrifices (Ps 4.5; Ps 107.22; Ps 118.27). Yet, Christians do not sacrifice sheep. It is clear, that the argument from the Psalms proves too much, and is therefore worthless.

We cannot examine all of the evidence for or against the use of musical instruments in the NT Church, in this meditation. For an extensive analysis, please refer to, [In Spirit and Truth: Worship as God Requires](#). Rather, we will consider only the primary reasons for excluding instrumental accompaniment from the worship of the NT Church.

The use of musical instruments in the organized worship of God's assembled people was invariably associated with the offering of sacrifices. Although there were no musical instruments with singing used in the tabernacle worship, a trumpet announced the time of the offering of the sacrifice (Lev 23.24, 25; Num 10.10; Num 29.1-4). While the ark was being moved to Jerusalem, there was a continuous offering of sacrifices accompanied by music and singing (2 Sam 6.2-5, 13-18; 1 Chron 15.14-28). When David established temple worship, instruments were consistently associated with sacrifices (1 Chron 16.37-42). Throughout the temple era, musical instruments accompanying singing were used only during the offering of animal sacrifices (2 Chron 29.25-28; 2 Chron 30.15, 21, 24). When the sacrifices ended, the music ceased. When musical instruments were used outside the temple, after the time of David, they were used in conjunction with sacrifices (2 Chron 7.1, 5-6; Neh 12.36, 40-43). Even when God rebuked the Jews for their misuse of songs and musical instruments, he associated them with the misuse of the sacrificial elements of worship (Amos 5.21-23), showing their intimate connection. Likewise, the references to musical instruments in the Psalms are found in the context of the temple and animal sacrifices (e.g., Ps 27.6; Ps 43.4).

When there was no temple, the Jews did not use musical instruments to accompany singing in worship, even though they sang Psalms that called for the use of musical instruments. For example, the Levites hung up their harps (Ps 137.2)—that is, they did not perform their liturgical duties—while in captivity in Babylon, since there were no sacrifices being offered. When Jews met for worship outside of the temple (e.g., in synagogues), they did not use musical instruments in worship. It is clear that they understood the use of musical instruments to be part of the temple liturgy and did not use them unless the offering of sacrifices was present.

The evidence is overwhelming that musical instruments were universally excluded from worship in early NT congregations. Most NT congregations included Jews, who followed the synagogue model and who knew that musical instruments were part of the temple liturgy and associated with the bloody sacrifices, replaced with the final sacrifice of Christ. Those who spoke against the use of musical instruments in worship include Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, Athanasius, and John Chrysostom. It was not until into the Middle Ages that musical instruments came into the Western Church, and even then, their use was not universally accepted. The churches associated with the Swiss and Scottish Reformation discontinued the use of musical instruments to return to the purity of the early NT Church.

The context of these passages includes incense and references to the altar (Rev 6.9; Rev 8.3, 5; Rev 9.13; Rev 11.1; Rev 14.18; Rev 16.7) and temple (Rev 7.15; Rev 11.1, 19; Rev 14.15, 17; Rev 15.5-6, 8 ["tabernacle"]; Rev 16.1, 17). Also, the sacrificed Lamb is present (Rev 5.6). John is using symbolic images taken from his experience in temple worship to portray events in this vision. Since Revelation was written

before the destruction of Jerusalem, the use of the temple liturgy in symbolical form makes sense. However, later in the book (chapters 20-22), when the new order of the renovated heavens and earth is described, there is no reference to the temple or to musical instruments. In fact, we are told explicitly that there is no temple in the new order (Rev 21.22). The situation described in Revelation cannot be considered normative for us since it uses symbolic images derived from the temple in Jerusalem. With the completion of Christ's work on the cross and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, we no longer observe any of the specific rituals that went along with the temple (animal sacrifices, incense, playing of musical instruments), except in their spiritual form. Psalm singing unaccompanied by musical instruments—the fruit of lips—is the form of ceremonial sacrifice appropriate for the NT covenantal economy (Heb 13.15).

Harps in Heaven (*Part 2 of 3*) (Rev 5.8; Rev 14.2; Rev 15.2)

Previously, we considered two arguments people give for including the use of instrumental music in worship: they were used in OT worship, and the Psalms direct their use. A common additional argument is to refer to these passages in Revelation and to state, “If musical instruments are good enough for use in the worship of heaven, then they must be good enough for use on earth.” However, as we observed, references to musical instruments used in worship, throughout Scripture, are in the context of temple worship and associated with bloody sacrifices. We should also note that the reference (in Rev 5.8) to the use of harps is associated with “bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” These bowls are held by the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. Some have argued from this part of John's vision that the saints in heaven act as intercessors, taking our prayers before God's throne—and have extrapolated that to praying through the saints. This faulty interpretation reinforces why we must not assume that John's vision provides normative guidance for how we are to worship in the NT Church today.

Despite the evidence that musical instruments used in Biblical worship were universally associated with sacrifices, most people in Evangelical churches assume that ‘everyone’ uses musical instruments in worship and that since God blesses congregations that use them, their use must be proper. However, majority opinion does not establish right or wrong and is often wrong. If majority opinion were right, the Church would be Arian (claiming that Jesus is a deified man); believe in transubstantiation and the veneration of Mary; Wycliffe and Tyndale deserved censure since they insisted that the Scriptures should be made available to the people in common English rather than in Latin; and Luther should have stopped preaching when Eck told him that everyone disagreed with him about grace and indulgences. In addition, God may bless the work of a congregation despite its sinful behaviour (Phil 1.18).

However, not ‘everyone’ has used, or uses, musical instruments in worship. An objective review of the history of the Church shows that musical instruments were not used in the Church (and then only in part of the Church) until around the middle of the eighth century. Most Reformed congregations from the sixteenth century until about the mid-nineteenth century did not use musical instruments. They understood that their use is invalid under the NT covenantal economy, because of their association with OT sacrificial liturgy. During the nineteenth century, musical instruments were introduced into the Reformed Protestant churches, from which many of the Evangelical churches of today are descended. People cannot see beyond their current practice because they are ignorant of the sweep of the historical practice in the Church. The Church in the twenty-first century does not have the monopoly on valid beliefs and is not the standard or measure for proper practice.

Many people are convinced that the use of musical instruments in worship is required for evangelism. They believe that their use is a key way to draw the unsaved into the Church. However, the notion that musical instruments are *necessary* for evangelism, is not supported by evidence. Even if some people are saved through a ‘ministry of music’, this argument is a form of pietized pragmatism that says, “If it brings people to Christ, it's good.” A study of effective evangelistic churches indicated that music ranked only seventh in

the methodologies for evangelism. Ranked higher in perceived effectiveness were preaching, prayer, Sunday School, relational evangelism, weekly outreach, and youth ministry. There was no correlation between the use of music and effective evangelism. In addition, the study found that targeting populations with event evangelism (including evangelistic concerts) scored very low as an effective technique for leading to conversions and baptisms.

When we consider the success of evangelism from the perspective of history, we see that musical instruments are not required. The missionaries from Celtic Christianity associated with Columba (521-597) and his followers did not use musical instruments. Yet they brought the truth of Christ to much of Northern Europe. Most of the people reading this meditation are the spiritual heirs of Celtic Christianity from the sixth and seventh centuries. Columba and his cohorts would frown at the notion that musical instruments are required for evangelism. It is not the case that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were so different from the sixth and seventh centuries that only the use of musical instruments could be successful in bringing the gospel to modern pagans. To the contrary, much of the ‘ministry of music’ ends up being taken over by the world. It is much more an honouring of man than of God.

An advocate for the use of musical instruments in worship must:

- Provide a warrant for their use, derived from Scripture, which overrides the arguments showing their typical nature in the OT sacrificial system.
- Demonstrate why he may not also introduce other aspects of the OT ceremonial system (e.g., sacrifices, burning incense, priests, vestments, lighting lamps, etc.), and on what grounds he makes the distinction when God clearly associated musical instruments with the sacrificial system.
- Prove that the early church (for the first seven-to-eight centuries) was wrong when it excluded musical instruments from worship because they were part of shadows and types that pointed to Christ, and part of the “worthless elementary principles” that enslaves the Church (Gal 4.8-10).

Harps in Heaven (*Part 3 of 3*)

(Rev 5.8; Rev 14.2; Rev 15.2)

Classical paintings and sculptures, and modern cartoons, often illustrate heavenly scenes that depict angels or saints playing harps. The idea that when Christians arrive in heaven, they will be assigned harps (or other musical instruments) and will fill their endless time by playing these harps, is derived from these verses in Revelation. For example, one cartoon shows a middle-aged gentleman in white robes and sandals, with wings and a harp. He says to his companion who looks at him with scepticism, “But this is eternity ... you’ve GOT to have a hobby!” This stereotypical view of heaven leads us to ask the question, “Will we play musical instruments in heaven?”

As we noted in the first of the three meditations entitled *Harps in Heaven*, the image which John describes, with the twenty-four elders holding harps, is symbolic, and is likely taken from his experience with the temple worship. Revelation was written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the discontinuance of the sacrificial system, in which harps were still in use in the OT ceremonial liturgy. Later in the book of Revelation (Rev 20-22), when the new order of the renovated heavens and earth is described, there is no reference to a temple or to musical instruments. Thus, we cannot use these verses to make the case that there will be musical instruments in heaven.

The first mention of musical instruments in the Bible is from the period before the flood, when “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Gen 6.5) The creators of the first musical instruments (lyre and pipe) were the descendants of Jubal (Gen 4.21), who was of the rebellious line of Cain. Thus, musical instruments were invented by the wicked, for the purpose of furthering their continual evil. Besides being used for entertainment at their

debauched gatherings, they were likely also used in pagan rituals directed toward their false deities, similar to the way Nebuchadnezzar included musical instruments of various types in the idolatrous observance he established on the plain of Dura (Dan 3.5).

In the ancient world, after the flood, musical instruments were also used for entertainment (Gen 31.27), to stir up emotions (Josh 6.4-5), and for soothing a distressed spirit (1 Sam 16.16, 23). They are used in the same way today. God redeemed this human invention and appropriated musical instruments for his own purposes when the Holy Spirit directed David to include them in the temple worship as part of the sacrificial ceremonies. This is not the only instance where God appropriated a human invention and sanctified it. The nations around Israel had kings, and the Israelites asked Samuel to give them one like those nations (1 Sam 8.5, 20). In asking for a human king, they rejected God as their king (1 Sam 8.7). Their first experience with a king—Saul—chosen for his stature among men, was a disaster. Nevertheless, God appropriated this form of rule and established an everlasting dynasty through David, which realized its zenith in the kingship of Jesus. Likewise, although God does not dwell in temples (another pagan invention) made by men (Acts 7.48-49; Acts 17.24), nevertheless he appropriated the temple concept to make his presence known (2 Chron 7.1) and as a type for the greater ‘temple’—Jesus (Jn 2.21) and his Church (1 Cor 3.16). Another example is the city. The first one was built by Cain (Gen 4.17), and cities are often portrayed as evil in the Bible. Yet, Abraham looked for a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God (Heb 11.10), and the last and ultimate city, the New Jerusalem (Rev 3.12; Rev 21.2, 10, 14-23), is being prepared by God as an inheritance for his people.

We cannot logically infer that because the elders in John’s vision used harps in their worship of the Lamb that there will be actual harps used in heaven, particularly since their use in worship is consistently associated with the ceremonial sacrificial system that has been fully realized in the antitype, Jesus Christ. The context for the scene in heaven, where harps are used, is associated with the sacrifice of the Lamb (Rev 5.6).

However, we may be able to make a logical argument that musical instruments will be used in heaven, from a different perspective. The ability to create music is a gift from God (James 1.17) and singing is to be used for his glory (Eph 5.19). There likely will be singing in heaven (Rev 5.9; Rev 14.3; Rev 15.3) in the everlasting state. It is also possible that the music used to accompany the lyrics of the songs sung in heaven will be composed by glorified humans who will be called upon to exercise their creative gifts to the fullest. And, since God redeemed musical instruments for use in temple worship, we may discover that there will be some among those in heaven who are given the gift of music and the accompanying ability to craft musical instruments. However, it is not the device that is used to make musical sounds—e.g., a harp versus the human lips—that is essential for the spirit of music to be present in heaven. Music will certainly be present as the fruit of lips that acknowledge and praise God’s name (Heb 13.15).

The key lesson that we should derive from John’s visions of harps being used in heaven is that there is vocalized harmony in heaven, as the vast assembly around the throne declares the praises of the Father and the Lamb. When we sing the Psalms—the perfect compositions from the mind of the Holy Spirit, which speak of the glories of Christ (Lk 24.44)—in our worship assembly, our voices are carried upward to join with the voices of the heavenly choir.

Harps and Incense – Physical Types for Spiritual Realities (Rev 5.8)

Accompanying the praise-worship directed to the Father and the Lamb by the multitude of assembled creatures in heaven, John observes two components of the OT ceremonial system—harps and incense. While animals were being offered as sacrifices during the temple liturgy, musical instruments were played by the Levite musicians (2 Chron 29.25-28). At the time of the burning of the incense in the temple, the

people offered prayers (Lk 1.9-11).

Some interpreters have mistakenly understood the association of the bowls of incense with the prayers of the saints, and have claimed that the angels and elders observed in this vision act as intermediaries, by carrying the prayers of the saints (that is, believers who have been sanctified and set apart to salvation; Lev 11.45; Ps 34.9; Acts 9.13; 1 Cor 1.2; 1 Cor 6.1; Eph 1.1) on earth into heaven and presenting them before the Father, as if they served like the Holy Spirit who makes intercession on our behalf with our prayers (Rom 8.28). However, the angels and elders do not carry the *prayers* of the saints, they carry bowls of incense that *represent* (in a typical manner) the prayers that individual believers offer directly to God (Ps 141.2; Lk 1.10). This incense is offered with the prayers of the saints (Rev 8.3-4).

These representative elements of the OT liturgy are included in John's vision because he observes the final events in the God-sanctioned sacrificial system, which ended with the slaying of the Lamb (Rev 5.6). Thus, John observes the declaration of the completion of the OT economy and the transition from a system that included several types or figures to the NT system that is based primarily around the spiritual forms that the types represented.

The ceremonial observance of the OT has been changed under the NT economy in a number of ways:

- There is no longer a separate priesthood. All believers are members of the new priestly class (Rev 1.6; Rev 5.10; Rev 20.6; Ex 19.6; Heb 10.11-22; 1 Pt 2.9) with Christ as the only high priest.
- All believers have direct access to God, not just a separate priestly order that enters the holy places in the temple (Heb 10.19-25).
- All believers (not just males, as with circumcision and the Passover) can participate in the non-bloody ceremonial sacraments and offerings, which are baptism, the Lord's Supper, tithes and offerings, and fasting.
- Jesus is the antitype for the tabernacle and temple (Mt 12.6; Jn 1.14; Jn 2.19-22), and in him all believers are part of God's holy temple (1 Pt 2.5). When believers assemble to worship corporately (that is, in public worship), they are assembling as the temple of God.
- All believers are called to live lives of spiritual holy separation. The Mosaic laws of separation have been discontinued (Acts 10.9-16; Acts 11.7-9) and replaced by their spiritual equivalents which they typified (Mt 5.8; Mt 16.11-12; Acts 10.28; 2 Cor 6.14-18; Titus 1.14-15).
- All believers are to offer spiritual sacrifices to God (1 Pt 2.5), without the mediation of human priests.

These spiritual sacrifices include:

Incense	=	Prayer	Rev 5.8; Rev 8.3-4; Ps 141.2; Lk 1.9-11 Ps 27.6; Ps 69.30-31; Ps 107.22; Heb 13.15-16; Eph 5.18-19; Col 3.15-17; 1 Pt 2.5
Sacrifices with Instruments	=	Psalms of praise	Rev 7.9, 13-14; Rom 12.1; Rom 15.16- 17; Phil 2.17; 2 Tim 4.6
Holy garments	=	Dedicated lives	

We are to understand all of the components of the OT ceremonial system as types pointing to Jesus Christ and to continue to observe them only in their spiritual forms which they represented.

Incense used in the temple was an outward type or sign for an inward spiritual reality—a heart lifted toward God in thanksgiving and petition. Likewise, the harps (and other instruments) used during the offering of the OT sacrifices in the temple were combined with the choir's praise—a sacrifice of the fruit of lips (Heb 13.15)—that ascended into heaven along with the smoke from the burnt offerings. In the OT economy, both the physical slaughtered animals and the accompanying strumming, plucking, or blowing of instruments were an outward type or sign for an inward spiritual reality—a heart lifted toward God in thanksgiving and praise. The voiced prayer and praise continue in the NT economy, but the physical types have passed out of use since the final, once-for-all sacrifice—the death of Jesus—was accepted in the heavenly throne room

by the Father.

We can debate about whether harps and incense will continue to be used in heaven, or if the vision John saw was of a one-time event, when the slain Lamb came forward and took the scroll with the seven seals from the Father. However, what cannot be debated is the ongoing occurrence of praise and prayer in heaven. Heaven will be filled forever with corporate praises in melodious harmony and individual prayers of the saints, being offered to the Father and Son. Death will not terminate the saints' use of prayer. Certain aspects of prayer—e.g., asking for forgiveness or for deliverance from temptation—will no longer be required in heaven. However, the saints will continue to offer up prayers of thanksgiving for what God did in rescuing them from Satan's grip, redeeming them from sin, giving them eternal life, endowing them with a restored and better paradise, and continuing to provide for them from the river of life and the tree of life (Rev 22.1-2).

Worship Jesus for Your Ransom

(Rev 5.9)

Did you thank Jesus this morning for ransoming you from Satan's dominion and sin's power? People who are converted out of lives of destitution and despair are initially overflowing with thanksgiving. However, over time, they tend toward a spirit of complacency. The wonder of what it means to be ransomed becomes dulled, the privilege of salvation becomes viewed as an entitlement, and the promise of eternal life becomes an assumed right. This is not the attitude of those who throng the heavenly throne room in heaven. Our representatives overflow in ceaseless praise for what Jesus has accomplished. They declare, "you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people". This indicates that they are praising the Lamb for a particular historical act—which is, of course, Jesus' death by crucifixion. The price of our ransom was the death of the sinless Son of God (Rev 1.5; Mt 20.28; Rom 3.25).

The Greek word, translated 'ransomed', means 'to buy' or 'to pay a price' (1 Cor 6.20). It was applied in the Hellenistic world to the purchase of a slave's freedom. The concept of ransom and the purchase of our freedom, involves:

- *Captivity.* By nature, we are slaves to Satan and sin (Jn 8.34; Rom 3.10-18), must acknowledge our captivity, and our freedom must be acquired. However, the debt of our sin is not owed, or paid, to Satan (as was the position held in much of early medieval theology). Rather, the debt is owed to God, against whom we have sinned. Each sin that we commit compounds our debt. James says that if we break one law, we have broken the entire Law and are guilty of all of it (James 2.10). Our debt has become so great that it is impossible for us ever to pay it; effectively our debt is infinite—even everlasting death cannot *pay* the debt of our sin.
- *Champion.* Because we can never pay the debt of our sin, we need a champion—a kinsman-redeemer (Lev 25.25)—with infinitely deep 'pockets' who can pay off our debt. The only person with the resources to pay the debt of sin is God himself. Only he could do it, and only in this way. His way is different from all the 'ways' concocted by human religions. It is unique and involved "sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin" (Rom 8.3). Our champion had to be God himself as a man—the God-man, Jesus—who could keep the Law perfectly and earn a right to offer a perfect sacrifice.
- *Cost.* The debt has been paid on our behalf by Jesus, at the cost of his life. He voluntarily and lovingly sacrificed his life on the cross. He had to be slain and his blood had to be poured out to pay off entirely the debt of our sins. There was no other possible way, or the Father would not have subjected his Son to the tortures and torment of the cross (Lk 22.42). No mere man, because of original and actual sin, could stand in the place of another, and God himself could not wave off our debt of sin and fulfill justice. The spotless Lamb of God had to stand in our place.
- *Compensation.* A compensatory transaction had to be enacted to pay off our debt of sin. The transaction

consisted, firstly, in the substitutionary atonement on the cross. The sacrificed life of Jesus paid our debt (Col 2.14). The transaction consisted, secondly, in Jesus collecting the reward for his having redeemed his people (Phil 2.8-11). It is during this scene in heaven, which John observes, in which Jesus collects his reward. He appears standing before the Father as the slain Lamb, displays his nail-torn hands and pierced side, steps forward, takes the sealed scroll, and establishes the final form of his mediatorial kingdom.

- *Consequence.* The result, from God's perspective, is a reconciliation between his Law and justice and his love and mercy. All are satisfied in the single transaction undertaken by Jesus (Ps 85.9-10). Through his sacrifice, peace between God and man had been restored, human rebellion has been forgiven, the image of God in man has been restored to its sanctified original, and the fellowship of paradise reinstated.
- *Citizenship.* The result, from man's perspective, is that all those for whom Christ died—the elect who repent of their sins and believe in him—are blessed beyond measure. Just as a ransomed slave held a new status and could exercise the rights of citizen, so we hold a new status as sons, not as slaves (Gal 4.7), and as citizens of the heavenly kingdom (Rev 5.10; Eph 2.19). We no longer have any debt for sin—we are free from its curse and its guilt.
- *Claims.* Because the debt of our sin has been paid by Jesus, he now owns us as his sacred possession (Rom 6.15-23) and has a claim on our lives and obedience (Jn 10.27; Jn 14.15; Heb 9.14). However, we also have a claim on him, as our Saviour. He has promised to grant us eternal life and to preserve us (Jn 10.28-29), and to supply us with an imperishable inheritance of resurrected bodies and a new paradise (Rom 8.23; Eph 1.14; 1 Pt 1.4) in which we will enjoy intimacy with him (Jn 14.3).

What should be our response to this amazing ransom? Dr Martin Luther King Jr., in his *I Have a Dream* speech (Washington DC, 1963-08-28), quoted the Negro Spiritual and said, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty we are free at last!" How much more should the words of this declaration pour from our lips—free, free at last, thank God Almighty! For more than 4,000 years mankind waited for the promised redeemer (Gen 3.15). He has arrived and we are free, free at last! Raise your voice in a new song, and declare with the host in heaven, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Rev 5.12)

They Sang a New Song

(Rev 5.9; Rev 14.3)

Does the word 'new', used as an adjective to 'song', refer to the words or to the spirit with which the words were sung? The Greek word used here, refers to a qualitative newness (e.g., taking on a new significance) and is different from another Greek word, also translated 'new' which means 'new in kind', or 'of recent origin'. In the OT, a 'new song' is always used with an expression of thanksgiving and joy for what God has accomplished in defeating his enemies and rescuing his people (Ps 33.3; Ps 40.3; Ps 96.1; Ps 98.1; Ps 144.9; Ps 149.1; Is 42.10). Thus, the song the host in heaven sang is new because it is only as the Lamb steps forward to demonstrate his victory and to claim his kingdom, that the rational creation fully realizes the extent of his accomplishments in redemption. It is a new song because the promises of the old covenant have now been fully realized in the new covenant.

Many people who are against the exclusive use of the Psalter in praise-worship point to these verses and to the commands to sing a new song in the Psalms, and claim that this means that we are commanded to compose new hymnic offerings to be used as worship. However, this argument does not follow logically from the word 'new'. Jesus told the disciples that he was giving them a 'new command' (Jn 13.34), which he said was to "love one another." He used the same Greek word as is used in these verses (Rev 5.9; Rev 14.3). The essence of his command is found in Leviticus (Lev 19.18; Lev 19.34). Jesus, in using the word 'new', did not mean new in essence, or even new in form. Rather, he means new in spirit or application.

Compare also John's instructions in 1 John 2.7-8, where he indicates that his new (the same Greek word) command isn't really new. In the same way, some of the Psalms that speak of singing a 'new song' may not be referring to a composition, but rather may be exhorting a renewal of spirit in those singing (Ps 96.1; Ps 144.9; Ps 149.1). The other references in the Psalter to 'new songs' (Ps 33.3; Ps 40.3; Ps 98.1) and in Isaiah (Is 42.10) may also be referring to a renewed spirit.

The primary lesson we should derive from the reference to the singing of a 'new song' in heaven, is not that we should compose new hymnic offerings, but rather that we should have a renewed sense of joy, commitment, and enthusiasm each time we consider the accomplishments of Jesus Christ. When we assemble for worship, a 'new song' should pour out of a new heart. We have been redeemed by the Lamb, who has purchased our ransom with his precious blood (1 Pt 1.19) and has made us a kingdom of priests (Rev 5.10) and is thus worthy of the worship that belongs only to God.

Even if the saints in heaven sang (or sing) a truly new composition, their practice does not apply to us living at the end of the last days, under the NT Apostolic economy. The saints in heaven are under a different covenantal administration (the Eternal Covenant) in the same way that the saints in the OT were under different covenantal administrations (e.g., Abrahamic, Mosaic, or Davidic) and looking forward to another (Jer 31.30-34). They would have had no right to introduce elements of the New Covenant worship (e.g., the bloodless sacraments) in anticipation of what was to come.

In addition, the writers of the Psalms (and Isaiah) were members of the OT prophetic office, wrote under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and were authorized to write new compositions as part of the unfolding revelation of God. Any new song written in heaven will be produced by fully sanctified (that is, perfect) individuals, and will not be tainted by human foibles and sin.

In heaven, we will likely be introduced to a new order of worship as part of the covenant administration of the Eternal Covenant. For example, the Lord's Supper will likely be replaced with the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19.9), and the covenantal signs will include the tree of life and the everlasting Sabbath. The songs of heaven will be different from those found in the Psalter (e.g., we will no longer need to ask for cleansing or forgiveness, as in the Psalms (Ps 19.12; Ps 25.11; Ps 51.2, 7; Ps 79.9). It is possible that all believers will fill the office of prophet and write truly new songs to praise God for ever. But, that does not apply in the covenant administration that we are now under.

To contend that new song compositions can be offered on a par with, or as a substitute for, the God-breathed Psalms is to advocate essentially a form of idolatry. In John 1.14, the living Word—Jesus—is attributed with having the glory of God. The written word of God—the Bible, including the Psalms—is the breath of the living Word (2 Tim 3.16) and is therefore glorious (perfect, holy, etc.; Jer 23.9; Ps 18.30; Ps 19.7; Rom 7.12). Paul tells us that men in sin exchange the glory of God with human substitutes (Rom 1.23). To substitute human words for Christ's words in the worship of God, is idolatry and is the behaviour of fools claiming to be wise (Rom 1.22).

To offer new song compositions in the worship of God requires the belief that normative revelation did not cease with Christ and the apostles and that the canon of Scripture is not closed. This leaves the Church with a serious problem of knowing what is to be our standard for faith and practice. It is unacceptable to respond that what is sung in worship does not need to be part of the closed canon of Scripture, since what we are *told* to sing by the apostles is the Psalms (Eph 5.19; Col 3.16; James 5.13 [Greek]) which are part of the canon of Scripture and the song book for the Church in every age.

Salvation for the Nations

(Rev 5.9)

John was a universalist! Of course, he did not believe or teach that every single person would be saved. Rather, he expressed a concern for all others, regardless of their national association, through his representation of Jesus as the one who died for the sins of people from every classification of mankind, in every tribe, language, people and nation. John's record of Jesus' words in his Gospel (Jn 3.16-18) express clearly his belief—God loves the *world*, not only the chosen nation of the Jews; and anyone who believes in the Son of God has been ransomed and has eternal life.

How far did the Lamb's purchase of a ransom extend? Jesus did not ransom one or two, or only a few. He ransomed "a great multitude that no one could number" (Rev 7.9). He did not ransom only those who were circumcised Jews, or physical descendants of Abraham, but a great multitude from "every tribe and language and people and nation". His redemptive work on the cross is what enabled the fulfilment of the covenant promise made to Abraham—that all nations would be blessed through his offspring, Jesus (Gen 18.18; Gen 22.18).

A universal perspective is expressed often in Revelation (Rev 5.9; Rev 7.9; Rev 10.11; Rev 11.9; Rev 13.7; Rev 14.6; Rev 17.15). This indicates that after the death and resurrection of Jesus, history had reached the end of the Jewish era of ceremonial types—including the type of a single called-out people who were representative of the sanctified multitude of mankind. Now there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither circumcised nor uncircumcised; but all who believe in Jesus are one in him (Gal 3.28;). The idea that God would end his special relationship with the Jews was thought to be impossible to the Jewish mindset at the time the NT was written (Mt 3.9; Jn 8.39). Likewise, many today think that God still favours the Jews as a nation. This view is a result of a faulty eschatology that looks for a mass conversion of the Jews before Christ returns and the reestablishment of the OT sacrificial system in a restored temple in Jerusalem. The idea that there will be a mass conversion of those who are called Jews, is based on a misinterpretation of Romans 11.26, which claims that the 'all Israel' to be saved will be the last generation of Jews—a paltry sample of Jews who have lived over the past 2,000 years, and clearly not 'all Israel'—rather than the fullness of spiritual Israel, who are all the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who believe in the same Messiah that he did.

Jews thought exclusively and believed that a person (male) could only be saved if he were circumcised. However, the idea of the Gospel being opened to the uncircumcised nations should not have been a revolutionary concept for them. The Psalms have many prophecies indicating that the Gospel would be brought to the nations and that the Messiah's universal rule would be recognized by all the nations (Ps 67.2; Ps 72.11, 17; Ps 82.8; Ps 86.9; Ps 148.11-13). Jesus indicated that the Gospel was open to the nations (Mt 15.21-28; Lk 7.9; Jn 10.16). And, immediately after the resurrection, the apostles realized that the faith of a circumcised heart, not physical circumcision, is the demarcating factor for inclusion in the Kingdom of the Messiah (Acts 10.34; Col 3.11).

The worship of the elders in heaven celebrated the manifestation of the new era—the era of the Gospel going out to all nations has been realized. Today, we have a clearer understanding than the Jews, or even John, had of what it means for the Church to be universal. We see the Great Commission (Mt 28.19-20) being gloriously fulfilled. Jewish missionaries went out from Jerusalem and Judea to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8). After them missionaries went out from the Roman Empire, then from Europe, and eventually from North America. The Gospel has permeated every corner of the earth and there are believers in Jesus Christ in every nation on earth.

This glorious reality of the composition of the universal Church of Jesus Christ should be reflected in the makeup of individual congregations—as far as possible. Paul informed the proud Athenians that they were nothing special, despite their belief that they were the descendants of demigods. He reminded them that God had made from one man every nation of mankind (Acts 17.26). Thus, any form of prejudice is evil. It stems from the days of the Tower of Babel and the spirit of confusion that God sent among men to punish

them, and to ensure that they would disperse (Gen 11.7-9) and not be able ever again to unite as one people in their attempt to unseat God from his sovereign throne. This spirit of confusion manifests itself in many ways: ethnocentrism, tribal wars, nationalism, cultural vanity, phenotypic prejudices, and linguistic elitism.

Ultimately, the reversal of the consequences of the Tower of Babel requires an eschatological fulfilment. However, this does not mean that Christians today should not strive for a temporal (if incomplete) realization of the unity of mankind. The tendency to sin and the effects of sin will only be overcome once we reach glory. Yet, this does mean that we are to give up the quest for holiness in this life. Therefore, we should be striving to see all mankind brought into communion in the one, holy, apostolic, and catholic Church of Jesus Christ. The Church is to be a model, type, and foretaste of what God intends to establish in a restored paradise. Local congregations should not be founded upon linguistic, ethnic, or cultural differentiators from the ‘old country’, but should be open and inviting to the people of all nations.

A Kingdom of Priests

(Rev 5.10)

In his opening address to the seven churches, John says that believers have been made a kingdom and priests (Rev 1.6). As he wrote Revelation, he may have been echoing what he heard in this vision, from the heavenly multitude as they praised the Lamb for ransoming people from every nation and making them a kingdom of priests. The worshippers in heaven express a reversal of the OT economy of salvation. God chose Israel “among all peoples” (Ex 19.5), or ‘out of all nations’, to become a “kingdom of priests” (Ex 19.6). Once the Messiah had arrived and completed his work on earth, the typical nature of the called-out Jewish people ended and the Gospel flowed out to all nations (see, [*Salvation for the Nations*](#)). Thus, the elect from all the nations are included in the kingdom of priests. Everyone united to Christ, through faith, in his death and resurrection has a share in his offices of king and priest.

In Revelation 1.6, John did not mention where the saints would reign. However, the worshippers in heaven refer to their reigning “on the earth”. It would seem that there are three possibilities for this reign on earth—reigning now, reigning in a future temporal kingdom, or reigning in the new extra-temporal heavens and earth. Since the translators of the ESV follow the Greek manuscripts that states that they ‘*shall* reign’, they appear to be referring to a future reign, relative to the Lamb’s taking the sealed scroll. However, this does not mean that believers do not reign now with Christ. They have been adopted into God’s household and share in Christ’s royalty (‘made us/them’; Rev 1.6; Rev 5.10; 1 Pt 2.9). However, our reign is not fully realized as long as we remain in our mortal bodies. So, it is likely that the worshippers are referring to an aspect of a future reign, yet to be realized. There are many who believe that this reign of the saints will be fulfilled in a future temporal kingdom, for a calendric 1,000 years (based on their understanding of Rev 20.6). We will deal with the idea of a supposed 1,000-year earthly reign by Jesus (particularly when we reach chapter 20). However, this reference to a reign appears to apply to those already in heaven with the Lamb and points to an everlasting participation as rulers in the new heaven and earth (Rev 21.1; Rev 22.5; Mt 19.28; Lk 22.30).

We noted (Rev 1.6) that it is difficult to determine what it means for believers to reign with Christ (e.g., over what or whom). Many make the same mistake that the disciples made, in assuming that the reign of Christ (and of the saints) is to be manifested as a worldly, visible reign with actual subjects who are dominated by Christ and his saved people—that is, Christians ruling with Jesus over unsaved heathen, during a supposed earthly thousand-year reign. Others attempt to apply the concept of reigning to the saints in heaven ruling over others. This interpretation is difficult to sustain since there will not be anyone in heaven to whom reign has not been granted. Thus, it may be better to think of our reign with Christ in a sense other than reigning over other people. Some therefore suggest that this reign refers to a reign over self and our passions. However, given that there will be no sin in heaven and no possibility of anyone sinning, a reign over our passions would seem to be a rather inconsequential form of reigning with Christ.

It appears best to consider our everlasting reign in Christ in the context of the first paradise in which Adam was created as a sub-sovereign to reign over the rest of the created order, including animals (Gen 1.26). The full realization of how we will reign with Christ will not be made known until the end of time (Rev 3.21; Rev 22.5; 2 Tim 2.12). However, we can surmise that our reign in the new heaven and earth (a paradise better than the one in Eden) will involve the application of the original gifts with which Adam was endowed before he sinned. It will likely include the exercise of advanced creative talents that will be used to produce a heavenly civilization to the glory of God.

All believers also now have a priestly role and will continue to exercise this role in heaven. In the current Church economy, the prophetic office brings God's word to the congregation, and this role continues to be assigned to ordained elders (1 Tim 5.17; Titus 1.5). In contrast, the priestly role takes man's offerings, confessions, and petitions and presents them to God. In the OT economy, this was accomplished through a human mediator. Even the prayers and praises, offered by the lips of the congregation, were symbolically lifted into heaven on the smoke of incense and sacrificed animals. However, with the tearing of the temple curtain, when Jesus died (Mt 27.51), direct access to God in his sanctuary was made available through the non-physical mediation of Jesus (Jn 16.26). Today, we fulfill our priestly role through praise and prayers of thanksgiving and confession, and by offering tithes and our lives (Rom 12.1). In heaven, we will continue to fulfill a priestly role through spiritual sacrifices of praise and prayers of thanksgiving (1 Pt 2.5).

Being given roles as king-priests is a great honour and privilege. Instead of being left in the gutter of the *City of Man*, to rot forever in our sores and raw wounds (Is 1.6), we have been lifted lovingly onto the King's white horse (Rev 19.11), carried into his city and palace, washed of our wounds (Jn 13.10), given new garments (Rev 7.9, 13) and crowns (2 Tim 4.8), and invited to sit at his feast table (Rev 19.9). However, with honour comes obligation. We would not think highly of Queen Elizabeth if she only received accolades and gifts. We appreciate her reign because of her sense of duty and benevolence. Our duty is to join the festal crowd in heaven and serve our Saviour with our lives.

Angels Worship the Lamb

(Rev 5.11-12)

John observed a series of worshipping audiences around the Father seated on the throne and the Lamb standing before the Father. Closest to the throne, he saw representatives (i.e., cherubim or seraphim, and elders) of the two classes of rational creatures (Rev 5.8)—angels and saved humanity. The next ring of worshippers was an angelic host, who adored the Lamb. These worshipping angels are the ones—possibly two-thirds of the created number (Rev 12.4)—who did not rebel with Satan (2 Pt 2.4; Jude 6).

The Greek word 'myriads', also used in English, was the largest number with a name in the Hellenistic world, and referred to a unit of 10,000. In English, we also have a word for the largest named number—googolplex, which is a 1 followed by 100 (a googol) zeros. Since John didn't have such a large named number, he tells us that he saw "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands"—an allusion to the vision of Daniel (Dan 7.10). In other words, the angels in heaven are so numerous that they cannot be counted. We can only begin to imagine this scene. A US football stadium might hold 100 thousand fans. But the heavenly throne room has more than 100 *million*, and possibly billions, of worshipping angels assembled around God's throne.

Angels are appointed to serve God in various ways—to worship their Creator, carry messages to mankind, protect mankind, and fight against the forces of darkness spewing out of Satan's lair. Although the angels observe the face of God and have significant knowledge about his works of creation and providence, they are not omniscient, nor are they able to predict the future. They are observers of God's unfolding plan of redemption for mankind (Eph 3.10-11), desire to know more about it (1 Pt 1.12), and are amazed by what

God has done through the Lamb ransoming the elect from among mankind by his work on the cross. In this vision, they also are in great anticipation at what Jesus would shortly undertake in establishing the permanent form of his mediatorial kingdom.

Thus, as he steps forward to take the scroll and to open its seals, this massive assembly of angels bursts into a roar of praise. Each time a sinner repents this vast crowd rejoices (Lk 15.7, 10). Meditate for a moment on this reality. The moment you confessed Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, and repented of your sins, Jesus announced your salvation over heaven's broadcast network. Then, your conversion was celebrated with the voices of millions, or billions, of angels. This should dispel any doubts you may have about your prospect of reaching heaven—Jesus doesn't waste his breath announcing the salvation of a sinner unless he plans to make the sinner into a saint and take him home to be with him in glory (Jn 6.39). It should also silence any false pride that you may have about your earthly accomplishments. Even if all the citizens of Canada were to congratulate you on winning the Stanley Cup or inventing a new antiviral drug for Ebola, Zika or SARS-CoV-2, their praise would be nothing compared with the praise the angels lavish on Jesus for what he has accomplished in ransoming us from the pit of hell.

They acknowledge that Jesus Christ—the God-man, the slain Lamb, the King of kings and Lord of lords—as he commences his mediatorial reign (Rev 11.17) is worthy to receive seven (an indicator of perfection) accolades:

- *Power.* Jesus is the omnipotent God. He created the universe by the word of his power, and holds the universe together at the subatomic level (Col 1.16-17).
- *Wealth.* Satan attempted to beguile Jesus into worshipping him (Mt 4.8-9), but failed, partly because Jesus is the ultimate owner of the entire universe (Ps 50.10), including all the kingdoms of earth and the riches of men. Nevertheless, we are to honour him with a tribute from the gifts he gives us (Ps 72.10; Mal 3.10).
- *Wisdom.* This is the first time the word 'wisdom' appears in Revelation. Jesus, as God, is omniscient, the final prophet, and the living Word of God. In him are all the treasures of wisdom (Col 2.3).
- *Might.* Might can be understood as the capability to exercise raw power effectively and efficiently. Everything that Jesus does is in accord with the eternal plan of the Godhead and the advancement of their glory.
- *Honour.* Regard and reverence for the three persons of the Trinity is channeled through the Son who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1.15) and the one to whom every knee must bow, and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil 2.9-11).
- *Glory.* As our *Catechism* reminds us in the first question, our primary purpose is to glorify God (Is 60.21; Rom 11.36), because he is the ultimate good and does only that which is loving, right, and just.
- *Blessing.* The Greek word (from which we derive our word eulogy) means to bestow favour upon someone in word or deed. It is proper that the angels end their eulogy of praise by declaring Jesus to be worthy of all blessing.

Clearly the angels view Jesus as the infinite and eternal God and render the worship that is due only to God (Mt 4.10). Those who claim that he was a mere man or is a 'created god' are deluded fools. If the angels, who behold the face of the risen Jesus, offer such a rendition of praise, how much more should our praise redound to his glory for what he has done by ransoming us!

All Creation Worships the Lamb (Rev 5.13-14)

John's vision expands to encompass the final cohort of worshippers. He tells us that he *heard* every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea worshipping the Lamb. It may be relevant that John does not say that he 'looked' and 'saw' (as he did earlier; Rev 5.1-2, 6, 11) this cohort of worshippers, but only

heard their voices. If this is the case, his vision extends beyond the heavenly precincts into the entire universe, which lifts its voice in praise to both God the Father and God the Son—the Lamb—simultaneously.

This dimension of the vision combines the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ aspects of the manifestation of Christ’s kingdom, often intermingled in Revelation. Jesus is already King and, since the resurrection, he has established his everlasting mediatorial reign. But the fullness of his kingdom will not be entirely realized until the consummation of the ages. The universe redounds to his glory today but will do so even more at the end of time. Therefore, John is reflecting on a state of which Paul speaks, in which the entire created rational order offers praise to Jesus (Phil 2.10-11), whether out of reverential awe or abject fear. Men, angels, and demons will either submit willingly or be willed to submit, but all will bend their knees to the King of kings.

John mentions four locales from which he heard the voices of praise. The voice that arises from heaven is obvious since the unfallen angels and ransomed saints delight in honouring and worshipping God. He also refers to creatures on the earth and in the sea. He includes people living throughout the earth and animals, since he includes creatures living on (or in) the sea. Animals do not literally sing praises to God, yet their voices—the chirp of a bird, the roar of a lion, the pings of a whale, or the purr of a kitten—reflect the glory of God and display the majesty of his creative power. Trees and flowers also ‘sing’ to God—as their leaves and blossoms burst forth each spring. Thus, the Psalmists calls upon the entire created realm—including inanimate objects—to praise God (Ps 96.11-12; Ps 148.7-13; Ps 150.6).

The song of the universe goes beyond the present manifestations of praise. Paul tells us that the entire created order is waiting for its redemption (Rom 8.19-23). When the ‘not yet’ becomes the ‘already’ the new heaven and earth will burst out in the praise of an everlasting spring. All the inanimate and non-rational creation will rejoice at its deliverance from the bondage of its current corruption. Tears come to our eyes when we see a little bird with a broken wing or a baby fox dying of hunger. We reflect on the devastation that has been wrought upon the earth through Adam’s sin. But then we think of the glory that is to come when all the created order will share in the redemption that was purchased by Christ. Then our soul sings on behalf of these little creatures

John extends the scope of the creaturely worship to the realm ‘under the earth’. This includes the grave, the ‘land’ of the shadow of death (Job 10.21-22; Is 14.9). We are not to infer from this statement that John believed in some form of intermediate state (e.g., a purgatory) where spirits reside before the final judgement. Rather he is using a common image to refer to the domain of the un-redeemed—hell. Even hell praises God. The demons know that God is God and acknowledge this with trembling (James 2.19). They also acknowledge the Son to be “the Holy One of God” (Mk 1.24). Even Satan and his demons can do nothing without the express permission of God (Job 1.6-12; Lk 8.30-33). By seeking permission from God, they acknowledge his sovereignty and thus offer him praise. Even Satan, as proud, rebellious, and hateful he is, will fall on his face—a creature before the eternal Creator. Hell itself declares the glory of God because it displays his righteous justice.

The words offered in praise are fourfold—‘blessing’, ‘honour’, ‘glory’ and ‘might’. We encountered all of these terms in the praise-worship of the angels (Rev 5.11-12). The fact that the rest of creation uses only four terms of adoration compared with the seven of the angels does not mean that the non-angelic created order is less thankful or less worshipful than the angels—after all, the representatives of the angels and the Church offer only three accolades (Rev 4.11). The difference in the list of praise attributes may be nothing more than an avoidance of repetition or an indicator that the praise was coming from the four corners (winds) of the created realm (Rev 7.1; Rev 20.8)—i.e., from everywhere.

The praise of God the Father and of the Lamb, arising from heaven, earth and hell, is closed with a mighty

‘amen’ from the four angelic representatives, followed by the agreement of the twenty-four elders—the representatives of the Church—falling in silent worship. We know that ‘amen’ is brought over from the Hebrew language (first appearing in Numbers 5.22) and means ‘so be it’. A voiced ‘amen’ and silent bowing before God (Rev 8.1; Lev 10.3; Ps 62.1) are both appropriate responses to conclude our worship. Today, we are in the presence of our Creator and redeemer, who lives forever and ever (Rev 4.9-10). Our response should thus be three-fold—lift our voices with the congregation and offer, joyfully and thankfully, our Psalms of praise; conclude our time of corporate worship with a deep voiced ‘amen’; and remain seated in silence, with our heads bowed, for a few moments and meditate on what Jesus Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Then we can go out and face the horrors of this insane world of rebellious mankind.

The First Seal – a Rider on a White Horse (Rev 6.1-2)

John witnessed the universal assembly rejoicing over the redemptive work of the Lamb. His vision continues as the Lamb begins to open the seven seals on the scroll. We concluded previously (see, [A Sealed Scroll](#)), that the contents of the scroll provide information that the primary audience for Revelation (1st century NT churches in Asia Minor) would need to know as Messiah’s kingdom was being established among the Gentiles, and thus in a hostile pagan environment. Of course, the contents are relevant, and apply, to the Church in every age, just as every other part of Scripture does.

As the first seal is opened, one of the living creatures (a representative of the angelic cohort in heaven) says in a voice of thunder, ‘Come!’ There is a question about the object of the command. Some suggest that the command is directed to the rider on the white horse and, if it is Jesus, he is addressed in a similar manner later (Rev 22.17, 20). Others suggest that the command is addressed to John and that he is being told to come and *see* what was revealed in the scroll behind the first seal. Thunder (or a similar loud sound) often accompanied special acts of divine revelation (Rev 10.3; Rev 14.2; Ex 19.16; Acts 2.2). Therefore, it is likely that John is the addressee, who is privileged to receive this next phase of the vision.

John describes what he saw—a rider on a white horse with a bow, a symbol of military power (Ps 45.4-5; Is 41.2; Zech 9.13; Hab 3.8-9); and wearing a crown, a symbol of military victory and royal authority. There is debate about who the rider on the white horse is, and about who the riders are on the other (red, black, and pale) horses. Suggestions about the identification of the rider on the white horse include:

- Christ himself at the inauguration of the NT Messianic, or Gospel age; or in the future when he establishes a thousand-year kingdom on earth.
- A symbolic representation of the Church as a victor over Satan.
- A personification of war as an ongoing curse on mankind—like famine (Rev 6.6) and death (Rev 6.8) are personified—or of a specific battle (Rev 16.16).
- A specific human conqueror in history, like Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 21.7; Jer 32.36); or a future world ruler expected to appear before Christ returns.
- The Roman Empire—as the ram was a symbol of Persia (Dan 8.3) and the goat a symbol for Greece (Dan 8.5).
- Apollo, with his bow serving as a caricature of the sword of Christ, who comes in the spirit of false oracular prophecy.
- Satan or his agent—the antichrist or beast (Rev 11.7; Rev 13.7)—imitating Christ by riding on a demonic parody of goodness.

Weighing the various arguments about the identification of the rider on the white horse, it seems best to conclude that the rider is Jesus himself, riding out to establish his Messianic kingdom. Reasons for this conclusion are:

- Jesus is shown riding a white horse elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 19.11-16).

- White is a symbol for holiness and heavenly things everywhere else in Revelation (Rev 1.14; Rev 2.17; Rev 3.4-5, 18; Rev 4.4; Rev 6.11; Rev 7.9, 13; Rev 14.14; Rev 19.11, 14; Rev 20.11), and in the NT (Mt 17.2; Mt 28.3; Mk 9.3; Mk 16.5; Jn 20.12; Acts 1.10)—the two exceptions refer to natural phenomena (Mt 5.36; Jn 4.35).
- The rider came out conquering. Conquering by Christ and his Church is a theme running throughout Revelation (in the seven letters, e.g., Rev 2.7; Rev 5.5; Rev 17.14; Rev 19.11). This is the key to understanding both Revelation and this vision. All earthly kingdoms are temporary, and they will be conquered by his kingdom (Dan 2.44). Ultimately, only Christ and his kingdom can conquer. Satan and his hordes make only temporary advances against the Church.
- The rider wears a victor's crown. Elsewhere in Revelation crowns are worn by Christ and his Church (Rev 2.10; Rev 3.11; Rev 4.4, 10; Rev 14.14; Rev 19.12); although there are exceptions (Rev 9.7; Rev 12.3; Rev 13.1).
- The opening of the seals on the scroll are a fulfilment of OT prophecy about the Messiah (Gen 3.15; Ps 45.3-5; Ps 144.6; Is 9.6-7; Dan 2.44).
- Only the Lamb is worthy to open the seals on the scroll. Thus, any resulting action are his own or those of his direct agents.

We can consider the actions of Jesus Christ, the rider on the white horse, by:

- *Who* he conquers. Although they are not identified in these verses, his foes are Satan and his demons (Eph 6.12; 1 Pt 5.8); sin (1 Pt 3.18) and death (Rev 2.18; 1 Cor 15.26); and all evil men, who are the children of Satan (Jn 8.44; 1 Jn 3.8), who hate Christ and his Church.
- *How* he conquers. Jesus conquers through various means but does not depend on earthly armaments (Ps 20.7; Ps 33.17; Is 31.1). His primary instruments for victory are spiritual (Eph 6.13-18)—such as preaching of the Gospel. However, as we will see, Jesus uses temporal means such as war among nations, famine, and death to advance his kingdom.
- *Why* he conquers. Jesus “came out conquering, and to conquer” to save his people from their sins (Mt 1.21), so that he can establish his universal reign and declare his right to rule (Phil 2.9-11). He did not come out to *try* to win or to fail in his mission, but to become the victor. He already wears the victor's crown. Thus, those who are among his people can rest in the assurance that he has paid their debt of sin (ransomed them; Rev 5.9), has justified them, has sanctified them by declaring them holy, will sanctify them by making them holy, and will glorify them.

The Second Seal – a Rider on a Red Horse

(Rev 6.3-4)

In the previous meditation, we identified the first rider, on the white horse, as a symbolic representation of Jesus Christ. Because we associated that rider with a person, does not mean that we must associate the next three riders with persons. While there is debate about whom the first rider symbolizes, there is general agreement that the rider on the red horse is war personified—although some believe that it refers only to a persecution of Christians. Both the red colour—the colour of blood—and the large sword in the hand of the rider support the association of the second rider with war (and persecution).

Jesus, as the one going out “conquering, and to conquer” (Rev 6.2), conquers through various means. He engages primarily in spiritual warfare with Satan and his demonic and human henchmen. However, Jesus also uses the instruments of war and the associated famine and plagues as his arrows, to advance his everlasting kingdom. Jesus indicated that war, and persecution of believers, would be one of the means whereby his kingdom would be realized—when he said that he did not “come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Mt 10.34).

It may present a challenge for us to think of Jesus using war, famine, and plagues as means for advancing

the Gospel of reconciliation and peace. His method is *not* to advance the Gospel by directing Christians to wield a sword against infidels, as adherents of Islam use the ‘sword’ (mainly, bombs today) to force conversions and compel adherence to its evil *sharia* practices. Rather, John sees in his vision of the red horse, that it is through pagans slaying one another that Christianity is advanced. It is possible that this vision is a prophetic allusion to the civil wars and strife that would break out after the suicide of Nero (in 68 AD), beginning in 69 AD (the year of the four emperors), that ended the *Pax Romana* (the ‘Roman peace’), established by Caesar Augustus. We see this manifested today among the adherents of Islam. They have an avowed hatred against Jews and Christians and wish to exterminate them from the face of the earth. Yet, their violent acts of terror kill other Muslims as often as they slaughter those of other religions.

Through his providential governance of the universe, God uses *all* things to advance his purposes and glory, and for the good of his Church (Rom 8.28), including disasters like war, famine, and plague (Is 31.2; Amos 3.6). We should notice that John tells us that the rider on the red horse was *permitted* to take peace from the earth. Just as God permitted Satan to afflict Job, so he permits Satan and his hordes to afflict the world, including Christians, by taking temporal peace away from the nations of men. The peace that Satan is permitted to remove is not the true peace that comes from knowing Christ and being reconciled with God the Father, but the pseudo peace that nations constantly strive for with their summits and treaties.

John’s vision is a reminder of the words of Jesus that the Church will suffer persecution through war and its collateral effects (Lk 21.12; Jn 15.20). We don’t fully understand at present why God allows his people to suffer at the hands of evil persecutors—why, for example, he permits adherents of Islam to blow up a building with Christian worshippers inside or a bus carrying Christian children. Yet, we know and trust that he has a benign and gracious purpose behind even these apparently gratuitous acts of violence.

As the faithful undergo persecution they bear witness to the world that faith in the true God overcomes all adversity. God uses the persecution of his people to draw others into the church. Tertullian (2nd c) wrote that “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church,” teaching that the death of believers leads to the conversion of others. Likewise, the faithful lives of Christians facing persecution leads others to align with Christ. Persecution always opposes its own objectives. For example, Muslim groups which persecute Christians may slaughter many and drive even more from their homelands, but the witness of the persecuted adds more to the Church daily. Until Christ returns, his Church will continue to grow and be the most visible worldwide institution (Dan 2.34-35, 44-45; Mt 16.18; Mt 28.19-20).

We must not limit the scope of the rider on the red horse to literal war. His remit includes all dimensions of harassment of Christians that Satan directs toward those who have been loved by Jesus from eternity. John writes to Christian congregations who were already facing ridicule and rejection from the pagan world and from Jewish leaders; and would soon face grievous persecution officially sanctioned by Roman authorities. He encourages them by saying that nothing happens without God’s foreknowledge, decree, and permission. And, he reminds them of the ironic outcome that God heaps on the heads of his enemies. What they intend for evil, God uses for the good of his people and for the ultimate destruction of unbelievers (Gen 50.20; Mic 4.11-12). The greatest example is the death of Jesus. Satan, not being able to predict the future, figured that he had won the war when Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27.46). Instead, he had advanced God’s redemptive plan, and brought about his ultimate defeat—the crushing of his own head (Gen 3.15). The sword of hell directed against the Church in every generation will never destroy it (Mt 16.18). Instead, in God’s providence, it becomes an instrument for the conversion of the world.

The Third Seal – a Rider on a Black Horse

(Rev 6.5-6)

Famine, an extreme scarcity of food, can be caused by variations in weather patterns. For example, weather

changes (particularly drought over a number of years) has been a primary initiating factor for the famines experienced in the past half-century in east Africa. However, a more significant causal factor (particularly with the famines in Russia, China, North Korea, and the Horn of Africa) has been war. The world produces more than enough food to feed the entire population at above subsistence levels. It is estimated that about a third of the food produced in the world for human consumption every year is lost, wasted or deliberately destroyed. The primary reason people suffer from malnutrition and starvation is not a lack of food world-wide, but because of greed and selfishness that are endemic in oppressive totalitarian systems that espouse communism, socialism, or Islam. They use food deprivation as a weapon as they engage in civil wars (e.g., in South Sudan and Rwanda) or oppress their populations by controlling access to the food supply (e.g., in Cuba, Venezuela, and Syria). In the days of the Roman Empire, people suffered in the same way, as armies stole their grain and livestock, destroyed their orchards and vineyards, and polluted their wells. Thus, the collateral effect of war, the second horse in John's vision, is followed by famine, the rider on the black horse—with black being a symbol for troubles, woe, and mourning; in contrast to the white horse of the conquering victor.

Some writers, from the Middle Ages to the present era, have allegorized the rider on the black horse, and claim that it symbolizes a famine of faith. Some have claimed that the horses follow one another sequentially; and that after the end of the Roman persecution of the Church (1st to 3rd centuries), the Church went into a period of spiritual scarcity in which heresies arose (e.g., Arianism), after Constantine consolidated power and officially recognized Christianity. These interpreters over spiritualize this vision and ignore the fact that famine and plagues can follow war in every age.

On the other hand, some suggest that the vision may refer to a specific famine that had occurred about a decade before Revelation was written, during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11.28). However, the scarcity of food symbolized by the rider on the black horse is a concurrent phenomenon with war and is indicative of the general recurring hardships inflicted by war that will continue until the end of time.

The rider had a pair of scales in his hand. These symbolize a scarcity of food, that must be weighed carefully to establish its cost (Lev 26.26; Ezk 4.10, 16). Food is available, it is just expensive because of the oppression caused by war. In his vision, John hears a voice that tells him what amount of grain can be obtained for a denarius—the generally accepted daily wage for a hired worker (Mt 20.2). A quart (the Greek measure is closer to a liter) of wheat that normally would sell for an eighth of a denarius, would cost one denarius. Barley, a coarser and less desirable food, was obtainable at one-third of the price of wheat; but a man could not provide enough food to feed his family, even by spending his entire daily wages, and certainly would have had nothing left over to purchase other necessities.

We conclude that this vision denotes famine in the commonly understood sense. It is a trial that Christians, along with others, will experience as members of a nation engulfed by war. However, Christians may suffer privations more than some others in a pagan society. The voice arising from the midst of the four living creatures tells the rider on the black horse not to harm the oil and wine. Some conclude from this that even though food was scarce, those who could afford to purchase it were able to have not only the wheat and barley, but even oil and wine. Christians who, when John wrote, were largely drawn from the poorer strata of society (Rev 2.9) would not have been able to purchase basic foods (wheat and barley) at the inflated prices and would have had nothing left over to purchase more expensive commodities (oil and wine). In addition, pagans in their society would have made it difficult for them to earn an adequate income—for example if they refused to engage in economic activities on the Lord's Day or to participate in pagan temple rituals honouring patron deities (those not bearing the mark of the beast; Rev 13.16-17). For example, Christians living in nations dominated by adherents of Islam suffer as *dhimmi*, an inferior status, in which they (and Jews) have no legal rights and are taxed exorbitantly.

However, there may be a positive aspect to the statement “do not harm the oil and wine.” It may be similar

to the prohibitions limiting Satan's harassment of Job (Job 1.12; Job 2.6). Sparing vines and olive trees, which require a number of years to become productive (e.g., it can take ten years for a live cultivar to bear fruit), would limit the long-term effects of famine. By this prohibition, God may be indicating that famines are to be limited in their extent. If this is the case, it could be a restatement of the general covenant promise which God made with Noah, when he said that, "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Gen 8.22) As a manifestation of his general grace toward mankind, God will restrain evil and ensure that the world will always provide enough food to feed mankind. And, when famines resulting from war occur, even if serious, they will nevertheless be limited in their damage.

The Fourth Seal – a Rider on a Pale Horse (Rev 6.7-8)

As the fourth seal is opened, John is shown the next stage of the vision, and he sees a pale horse. The word 'pale' has appeared in English Bible translations since the days of the *Geneva Bible* (1560). It is a translation of the Greek word from which we get our words 'chlorophyll' and 'cholera'. It is a pale greenish-yellow colour, the pallor of flesh-toned skin when a person is stricken with a horrible disease and is near death.

John tells us that the rider on the pale horse is a personification of death. Wherever the riders Conqueror, War, and Famine go, Death is sure to follow. Death is itself followed by the 'hound' of hell, Hades (a personification of the grave). Hades, used here, cannot refer to 'hell' (usually a translation of the Greek word 'tartarus'), since Christians and unbelievers are both subjected to the four torments identified by the fourth living creature (sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts). In the Bible, death and the grave are inextricably linked (Rev 1.18; Rev 20.13-14; Job 17.13-16; Job 33.22; Ps 6.5; Ps 49.14; Song 8.6; Is 53.9). The body of the one who dies is destined for the grave, and the grave consumes the bodies of all who die.

Death and Hades are given authority to kill a fourth part of those on the earth. However, since death comes to all men (Ecc 3.2, 20; Heb 9.27) we need to determine what is meant by a 'fourth part'—indicating a portion of mankind. It may be that the idea being conveyed is that even though all men are mortal, some (figuratively, a fourth) do not die 'natural' deaths but are consumed by the evils associated with war. These evils are the sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts. The sword is an obvious form of death associated with war, and it represents all instruments of war, including bows, bullets, or bombs. We saw in the previous meditation that famine often accompanies war as armies consume the food of their enemies or withhold food as a means of inducing surrender or increasing their control over a subject nation.

This section of the vision adds pestilence, or plagues, explicitly and through this associates the pale horse with the spread of diseases. **The title of a book published in 2017, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How it Changed the World***, recognizes the widely held view that the fourth rider on the pale horse is associated with plagues. The author associates historical influenza plagues with war—using as examples, an epidemic that struck during Rome's siege of Syracuse in 212 BC and one that infected Charlemagne's troops in the ninth century.

How wild beasts are associated with war may not be obvious. However, in the ancient world, when nations were gripped with war, the energies and efforts of the people under attack were focused on self-defence and not on controlling the encroachment of wild animals into their lands. Also, in the Roman Empire, slaves were taken from among those who were conquered in war and were often required to fight wild animals in the arenas for the entertainment of the crowds.

John often uses OT imagery to communicate what he sees in the visions of Revelation. In this instance, there appears to be a direct influence from a passage in Ezekiel (Ezk 14.21), which occurs within the context of a warning about the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, because of Judah's sin. This allusion fits well in the

context of Revelation, since it deals with the chastisement of God's OT covenant people, to purge the wicked and purify the faithful, and promises that a remnant will be preserved (Ezk 14.22). Jesus had warned a number of the churches in Asia Minor, God's NT covenant people, that they would also face chastisement for their sins of indifference, accepting false doctrine, and idolatry (Rev 2.4, 14, 20; Rev 3.1, 16), but promised that anyone who persevered and conquered sin would be abundantly rewarded (see, [Promised Rewards for Conquering](#)).

The four chastisements mentioned by Ezekiel and John do not provide an exhaustive catalogue of what can (and will) befall mankind, including Christians, as a result of wars. They are typical of the challenges that we all will face, until Christ returns, because of the on-going presence of sin in the world. The choice of four examples may be to reflect the idea of the four winds or four corners of the earth (Rev 7.1; Rev 20.8)—i.e., representing all forms of evil consequences that can arise from any direction.

We are not to understand this portion of the vision about the opening of the seals as sending a discouraging message about the universal consequences of war (sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts)—as if there is no hope. We all know that death is inevitable and that wars bring hardship for people. Rather, we are to find hope in the message because the devastation is:

- *Planned*. The prophecy of the devastation of Death and Hades indicates an unfolding of God's eternal plans for advancing his glory and kingdom.
- *Permitted*. John notes that there is divine permission through his words 'given authority'. Nothing, including the death of any person, transpires in this world without the explicit permission of God.
- *Partial*. The evil persecution of Christians is limited since a boundary (a fourth) is placed on the destruction that Death and Hades can wreak.
- *Purifying*. Since persecution comes upon Christians, God must have a purpose for it—to purge and purify the Bride of Christ, the victor.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

(Rev 6.1-8)

The riding out of the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse” is probably the best-known scene from the book of Revelation. Even if people know nothing about Revelation or the Bible, they know that the riders on the four horses are supposed to represent some form of apocalyptic disaster. A Google search on the term, results in over 1.5M hits. The four horsemen have been depicted, or referenced, in NT scribal manuscripts, paintings, novels, sports (e.g., Notre Dame football), the US judiciary, and movies (e.g., *Now You See Me* [2013], and *X-Men: Apocalypse* [2016]). One of the oldest extant representations is the [Bamberg Apocalypse](#) manuscript illustration (11th c), and one of the well-known artistic depictions is in the [woodcut](#) by Albrecht Dürer.

Why there are four horsemen, among seven seals, is a subject of discussion. Some (early and modern) interpreters associate the four horsemen with the four Gospels. For example, associating the rider on the black horse with Luke and the pale horse with John. However, this approach seems arbitrary, and one would need first to explain why there are four Gospels (vs one, two, or three), and how the Gospels individually represent one of Conquest, War, Famine, or Death. To the contrary, the Gospels are full of hope and life—not destruction and woe. We noted that the presence of the four living creatures around the throne (Rev 4.6) may indicate that the angels observe what God is doing in every direction—north, east, south, and west. Likewise, the four horsemen may represent the four winds or four corners of the earth (Rev 7.1; Rev 20.8), indicating that Conquest, War, Famine, and Death arise from every direction.

Interpreters have attempted to place the four horsemen into historical periods. Some have associated them with the four beasts mentioned in Daniel (Dan 7.1-8), identifying the four horsemen as symbolic counterparts for the ancient kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, which persecuted God's

covenant people. Others propose that they cover a period of persecutions of the Church by Roman officials, until the time of Constantine, the duration of the Roman Empire, or of other specified historical epochs. However, these schemes are arbitrary and would identify the rider on the white horse as Nebuchadnezzar rather than Christ. Also, this association cannot satisfactorily explain the relevance of the four horsemen to the seven churches in Asia minor in the 1st century, to whom Revelation was written, or the general applicability of the horsemen to all subsequent eras. These horsemen should not be associated with specific historical periods.

At the other end of the interpretive time scale, many of today's commentators and self-proclaimed prophets place the four horsemen into our future. They misinterpret Matthew 24.5-7 as a prophecy about events which are to occur shortly before Christ's second coming, rather than as signs of events which occurred immediately prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD; and associate the four horsemen with future events. Contrary to Jesus' guidance about the impossibility of predicting final events and his return (Mt 24.36; Acts 1.7), they look for signs in the current affairs of nations and expect that soon the four horsemen will be seen rampaging across the globe, as precursors of worse judgements that are to come in a final great tribulation. Just as the four horsemen do not apply exclusively to events in the past, they do not predict specific events in the future. Rather, they symbolize the ongoing woes of all kinds that confront humanity, including Christians, throughout the remainder of time until Christ returns. We should not engage in perplexing attempts to map the horsemen to specific events but understand their applicability to all current events.

An important consideration for understanding the meaning of the seven seals, and of Revelation, is that Jesus *has* (not 'will') established his mediatorial kingdom. He is reigning now (Ps 93.1; Ps 96.10; Ps 97.1; Ps 99.1; Phil 2.9) and is bringing all things into subjection to his reign, and at his return will deliver all things to the Father (1 Cor 15.24). He rides out "conquering and to conquer" (Rev 6.2), and uses as his agents, for temporally judging sinful mankind and for purifying his Church, the woes symbolized by the other three horsemen of the Apocalypse and by the other woes (e.g., martyrdom), symbolized by the opening of the remaining seals on the scroll. He uses Satan, the forces of evil, nationalistic aspirations, and false religious as well as the Church, the preaching of the Gospel, and Christian service to execute his purposes.

Jesus Christ is conquering now. He *is* (not 'will') defeating paganism, all false religions, socialistic dictators, materialistic naturalism, evolutionary teachings, hedonistic practices, Planned Parenthood (and similar abortion mills), and everything else that is contrary to his word. Since he is the conqueror, he knows nothing but success. His eternal plans are being fulfilled in exacting detail. From our finite perspective, his progress of conquering may appear to be hindered. But that is because we are unable to see the 'big picture' of what he is doing. In the end, every knee will bow to him, and every tongue will confess that he is Lord (Phil 2.10-11). Thus, the Church in all ages (that includes us!) is encouraged by the opening of the seals to worship joyfully, serve patiently, suffer persecution when necessary, and wait expectantly for the final revelation of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let this be your comfort and hope.

The Fifth Seal – Martyrs in White Robes (Rev 6.9, 11)

The vision of the seven seals on the scroll taken and opened by the Lamb, continued with the opening of the fifth seal. The opening of the preceding four seals provided a vision into events that transpire continually on the earth, between the resurrection of Jesus and his second coming. Some suggest that the opening of the fifth seal takes a different perspective and focuses our attention on life in the world to come. However, John saw those "who had been slain for the word of God" during the trials and persecutions associated with the four horsemen. An organic connection between the first four seals and the fifth seal is implied by the verbs used to describe the consequences of the trials—'slain' (Rev 6.4, 9) and 'killed' (Rev 6.8, 11). Also,

the fifth seal is opened immediately after the previous four. Thus, the vision continues to show the outcome, from an earth-based perspective, for Christians persecuted for the profession of their faith.

The image which John sees is reminiscent of the tabernacle, where the blood of the sacrificed animals was poured out at the base of the altar (Lev 4.7, 18; Lev 8.15). Christians who are slain by their persecutors are like the Lamb (Rev 5.6), who was offered as a substitutionary sacrifice for his people. Their deaths are viewed by God as equivalent to a sacrifice which has been offered up by delivering their lives for his kingdom (Phil 2.17; 2 Tim 4.6).

The slain believers are described as being “under the altar”. The Greek word used here generally means ‘beneath’ (Mt 22.4; Mk 4.21; Mk 7.28; Lk 8.16; Jn 1.48) but could be translated as ‘on’ (Mk 6.11). John may be suggesting that he saw their blood running down the altar to its base after having been poured out upon the altar. However, he doesn’t say that he saw their *blood*, but that he saw the actual persons under the altar. So, it may be better to interpret the meaning of the symbolic imagery as he describes it. The slain saints under the altar may allude to their being in a protected position, under the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus.

John does not indicate exactly who the ‘slain’ are. He only tells us why they were under the altar—they were those who were slain “for the word of God” and “for the witness they had borne”. Thus, it has been concluded by most interpreters that John sees those who have been slain as martyrs because of the testimony that have borne to Jesus Christ—they had professed publicly their faith in Jesus, refused to deny their Lord, and had remained faithful in their profession even if they were facing execution by the enemies of Christ.

A question has been raised about whether OT saints are included among those seen under the altar. John gives the reason for the saints’ slaughter, as their witness to truth, rather than as an explicit profession of faith in Jesus. Of course, OT saints such as Abraham, David, Anna, and Simeon, looked forward to the coming of the Messiah (Christ), but they did not have a full understanding of what it means to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved (Acts 15.31). However, since they lived by faith, faced persecutions, and were willing to give their lives in defence of God’s truth (Heb 11.1-40), they are included under God’s altar. In addition, John may use ‘slain’ as a collective term, which includes all believers who have been persecuted for their faith, whether or not they died a martyr’s death.

Throughout the centuries, God’s covenant people have been persecuted, and many killed, for their profession of faith. It began with Abel who professed his faith through proper worship and continued with the prophets (Mt 5.12; Acts 7.52), the Babylonian captivity (Dan 3.1-30; Dan 6.1-28; Est 3.8-9, 13), the Maccabean martyrs (Heb 11.36-38), being fed to lions for the entertainment of the crowds in the Roman arenas, and the Waldensians, Huguenots, and Covenanters. Persecutions and martyrdom continue today—with thousands being driven from their homes and killed each year by Muslims and totalitarian regimes (e.g., North Korea) in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

To each of the martyrs God gives a white robe and grants everlasting rest. The white robes do not refer to resurrected, glorified bodies but are a symbol of righteousness (Rev 3.5, 18; Mt 17.2), sanctification (Rev 7.13-14), blessedness (Rev 4.4; Rev 7.9-10), and victory (Rev 6.2). White robes are given to every believer who has conquered (Rev 3.4-5), not as reward—their reward is eternal life—but as a declaration of their faithful perseverance through the testing of their faith and their perseverance through the purifying fires of persecution. The white robes differentiate all believers from those who have not believed in Jesus and repented of their sins. Unbelievers are clothed in garments soiled (Rev 3.5) by every form of indecency, debauchery, and wickedness.

Those who have been persecuted on earth for their profession of faith are granted rest. We should not think of this as being received into the glory of paradise. Every believer in Jesus, even if he was a reprobate until

near death, and professed his belief only a few minutes before passing out of this scene (Lk 23.43), is rewarded with the rest of the everlasting Sabbath (Heb 4.9-10). Rather, the rest which the martyrs receive is a promise that they no longer have to face trials on the earth and have ceased from their faithful labours (Rev 14.13; Mt 11.28; 1 Cor 16.18; 2 Cor 7.13; Philm 7, 20).

The Fifth Seal – Those Who Had Been Slain

(Rev 6.9; Rev 20.4)

Most English translations (from Wycliffe to the present) say that John saw the ‘souls’ of those who had been slain. How could John have seen the *souls* of the martyrs since souls are considered to be non-material and do not reflect light or cast shadows? Few commentators consider this matter. Those that do, state that John was not observing events with his physical eyes. Rather, he was seeing a spiritual vision (Rev 4.2), and “was somehow made conscious of the existence of the souls”. They suggest that asking the question causes embarrassment for those who apply a literal exegesis of Revelation.

Even those who interpret Revelation entirely as symbolic are confronted with the same issue. When they comment on earlier portions of the vision of the throne room, the heavenly worshippers, and the scroll with the seven seals, they note that John describes spirit beings as having physical bodies. The one seated on the throne (Rev 4.2)—God the Father—and the living creatures (angels) around the throne (Rev 4.6) are described with physical attributes. Therefore, to be consistent, we must understand that John did not see ghost-like or ephemeral entities under the altar. Rather, he saw the martyrs with some form of physical appearance that showed that they had been slain, and he saw that they were dressed in (physically appearing) white robes (Rev 4.10; Rev 6.11).

Most interpreters of this passage assume that the martyrs are shown to John in a *disembodied* state, because the translators have used the word ‘soul’. However, the word ‘soul’ in Greek and English does not require that the person to whom it refers is in a disembodied state. For example, the well-known appeal for help, “SOS” (“save our souls”), is not referring to saving a dead person’s spirit but to rescuing a living person whose physical *life* is in peril. The ESV translators have often translated the Greek word as other than ‘soul’. It is translated in numerous places as ‘life’ (Mt 2.20); and also, as ‘mind’ (Acts 14.2; Phil 1.27), ‘being’ (Rom 2.9; 1 Cor 15.45), ‘me’ (2 Cor 1.23), ‘heart’ (Eph 6.6), ‘heartily’ (Col 3.23), ‘selves’ (1 Thess 2.8); and in ‘fainthearted’ (Heb 12.3). In Revelation, it is translated as ‘living creatures’ (Rev 8.9), ‘lives’ (Rev 12.11), ‘living thing’ (Rev 16.3), ‘human lives’ (Rev 18.13, footnote). In two other places, it is translated as ‘soul(s)’ (Rev 18.14; Rev 20.4). Clearly the Greek word does not require the translation ‘soul’, as synonymous with ‘spirit’, since Jesus did not give his disembodied spirit as a ransom for man; rather, he gave his *life* (Mk 10.45). Likewise, James does not mean a disembodied spirit when he uses ‘soul’ (James 5.20), because a spirit cannot die; rather, he means ‘person’—which is how it could be translated in a number of places, including in Acts (Acts 2.41, 43; Acts 3.23). In fact, the ESV also translates the word explicitly as ‘person’ in four places (Acts 7.14; Acts 27.37; Rom 13.1; 1 Pt 3.20). So, we can translate John’s statement as, “the persons who had been slain” or as “those who had been slain”. As an example, the *Common English Bible* (2011) does not use the word ‘soul’ but provides the translation “those who had been slaughtered”. Likewise, we can translate revelation 20.4 as, “the persons who had been beheaded”. Thus, it is not necessary to conclude (or assume) that the martyrs who John saw were in a *disembodied* state.

Other than the two verses in Revelation (Rev 6.9; Rev 20.4), there are few passages in the Bible which could suggest that those who die, exist in a *disembodied* state after they leave this earth. Hebrews 12.23 refers to the spirits of the righteous made perfect in heaven. However, it could be referring to ‘persons’ or more precisely, ‘spiritual persons’ (1 Cor 2.15), rather than to disembodied spirits. 1 Peter 3.19-20 presents interpretive challenges and has been used to support the concepts of purgatory and *limbus patrum*. However, it can be understood as speaking of those who were metaphorically in prison because of unbelief at the time

of Noah, and that Peter speaks about ‘persons’ when he uses ‘spirits’. He uses ‘souls’ in verse 20, which is translated as ‘persons’.

Verses that speak of the separation of our mortal bodies and spirits (Ecc 12.7; 2 Cor 5.6, 8), do not deal with the intermediate state or with the resurrection. They contrast being in this present state, with being in a different state. In contrast, Paul (2 Cor 5.1-4) appears to state that one body is replaced by another (i.e., ‘our heavenly dwelling’ and ‘further clothed’), immediately as we leave this realm. Also, Jesus’ parable about Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16.24) suggests that a person remains in an embodied state after death, in heaven and hell (as do, Gen 5.24; 1 Sam 28.13-14; 2 Ki 2.11; Mt 17.3; Mt 27.52-53). Verses such as 1 Thessalonians 4.16-17, which refer to believers waiting for the resurrection, could be thought to imply that those who have already left this earth are waiting for the resurrection in a disembodied state. However, these verses are based on a forward-looking view from our time-based perspective, and do not necessarily speak about what is happening in the heavenly realm—which likely exists in a different temporal dimension (see, [*The Fifth Seal – Do Saints in Heaven Observe Events on Earth?*](#)).

It is possible that at physical death we arrive immediately at the resurrection and final judgement (Heb 9.27). This would make unnecessary the concept that a person is received into heaven, or sent to hell, up to thousands of years before the day of judgement. It also allows a person to remain fully a human being, with body and spirit (Gen 2.7), by putting off one body and immediately putting on another (2 Cor 5.1-4). In addition, it precludes the ‘need’ for the false concepts of purgatory and *limbus patrum*.

The Fifth Seal – The Martyrs’ Plea for Vengeance (Rev 6.10)

The martyred and sanctified saints call for vengeance on unbelievers dwelling on the earth, who had shed their blood—possibly an allusion to Psalm 79.10; and reminiscent of Jesus’ words about the “righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah” (Mt 23.35). This presents a problem for many commentators who believe that such a plea is inconsistent with the spirit of the NT. Therefore, some suggest that this plea comes from OT saints—as if the OT and NT have a different message about God’s Law, justice, and vindication of God’s persecuted people. One commentator has even stated, “The cry of the martyr in heaven is not for vengeance, for all heaven is full of love; but the cry is rather for information when justice will be done.” This is pure semantics. Their cry is for their blood to be *avenged*. That is a cry for vengeance. Almost every commentator makes the point that these martyrs are not asking for personal revenge, which they say is irreconcilable with the exemplary prayers of Jesus (Lk 23.34) and Stephen (Acts 7.60) but are only requesting the termination of the evils on the earth by the exercise of God’s everlasting justice. Let’s put an end to the idea that men can be more just or loving than God!

Jesus and Stephen pray that God would forgive those who murdered them. Their desire was that these wicked men would repent and be saved—this is always God’s desire (1 Tim 2.4; 2 Pt 3.9). But this must be balanced by the fact that when men refuse to repent, God must punish them. Jesus and the apostles call for a vindication of God’s justice against evil (Mt 16.27; Mt 23.1-36; Acts 1.18-20 [Ps 69.25]; Acts 17.30-31; Rom 11.9-10 [Ps 69.22, 23]; 1 Cor 16.22; 2 Tim 4.14; 1 Pt 1.17 [Ps 28.4]). Asking God to avenge abuses of his righteousness and holiness (Dt 32.35; Rom 12.17-21), and even asking God for a vindication against those who have personally affronted us (2 Tim 4.14), is entirely different from *acting* in a personally vindictive manner and taking vengeance into our own hands.

We should notice that the appeal of the martyrs is directed to Jesus, who is the holy and true one (Rev 3.7), and therefore God (Dt 32.3-4). Their request, that he avenge their blood, is prefaced by a declaration of attributes of his divine nature that are related to justice—sovereignty, holiness, and truth. Their appeal is

based on three facts:

- *Jesus is sovereign.* He establishes moral absolutes in his Law (Jn 14.21; Jn 15.10). His judgements and justice are not arbitrary, but always measured against the standards he has declared in his word. The Greek word that the martyrs use (from which we get the English word, ‘despot’), could be translated ‘master’. This is a reminder that Jesus, as God, is sovereign and that we are creatures who are to be fully subservient to him.
- *Jesus is holy and hates sin.* The martyrs’ request for vengeance, by bringing the wicked to justice, is a request for Jesus to demonstrate to the world the holiness of his nature (1 Pt 2.22; 1 Jn 3.5). We ask the same thing of the Father when we say to him in prayer, “ ... hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come”.
- *Jesus is true.* The martyrs ask Jesus to make his judgements on the basis of his moral absolutes, his omniscient knowledge about human sinful behaviour (Jn 2.25; Lk 9.47), and his absolute truthfulness (Jn 1.14).

It is a form of false piety to ignore or malign God’s retributive justice—to be exercised through Jesus (Mt 25.31-46). The Church today is too soft on wickedness. But God is not soft on wickedness and will punish those who are not covered with the blood of Christ. The saints in heaven praise God for his retributive justice (Rev 19.1-3). Likewise, it is a glorious thing for us to ask God to defend his righteousness and holiness, to punish sinners, and vindicate his people. Likewise, it is proper that we rejoice over the demise of those who continue to their dying breath in rebellion against God.

Most of us inwardly rejoice when we read of the demise of wicked people like Haman or Jezebel. We rejoice because their sin caught up with them and they were executed. Our response is similar to that displayed across the West when it was announced that Osama Bin Laden had been killed by a US Navy SEAL. Many people who otherwise would have spoken out against capital punishment, were nevertheless pleased to hear of his demise. There is a similar response when people hear that leaders of ISIS have been killed in a bombing raid. All men know in their hearts that wickedness must be dealt with through retributive justice. They retain an element of indignation against evil, particularly when it has a direct impact on their lives (e.g., a family member is hurt). Likewise, we should rejoice over God’s judgement of all the wicked. We know it is just and what ought to be.

Many Evangelicals object to the use of some of the Psalms as worship—in particular, the approximately ten percent (e.g., Ps 69.23-28; Ps 70.2-3; Ps 137.8-9) that speak about the destruction of God’s enemies or call down curses on them. This type of Psalm is often called an imprecatory Psalm. However, by using these Psalms, we learn to praise God for his judgements as well as his mercies, and we learn how properly to ask him to avenge our cause and curse his, and our, enemies. These Psalms are God’s own words, they are quoted by the apostles, and they keep God’s hatred of sin and his justice before our minds and the minds of those who come into our midst. Our tone should be God’s tone!

The Fifth Seal – Do Saints in Heaven Observe Events on Earth?

(Rev 6.10-11)

Movies sometimes portray children, left without one of their parents, being encouraged by the other parent with words such as, “Your mother is looking down from heaven and is pleased to see your ...” It is almost universally assumed, among those who believe in heaven, that the saints in heaven observe, in real time, events transpiring on the earth. These verses appear to support this belief, and many assume that they support the ideas that:

- Those in heaven continue to have an ongoing interest in events on the earth and of the struggles faced by the believers remaining behind.
- The martyrs in heaven experience a need for comforting words and are encouraged to be patient and to

rest as they wait for their vindication.

- Persons in heaven are waiting for others to join them.
- Time passes in heaven, and that it passes in parallel with time on earth.

These ideas present potential theological challenges. First, the Bible does not state that people in heaven observe events on the earth. Regardless, some suggest that there are verses in the Bible that indicate that the saints in heaven can observe what is happening here. For example, it is claimed that Hebrews 12.1 speaks of witnesses in heaven observing our perseverance in faith. However, it is better to understand their faith as a witness *to* us, rather than their being witnesses *of* our faith—what we see in them, not what they see in us. They are not watching and cheering us on; rather we are to look to their example and display faith and persevere like they did. Others claim that Jesus' parable about Lazarus and the rich man indicates that people in the after-worlds can see what is going on in other realms (Lk 16.23). However, nothing in the parable indicates that people in heaven or hell observe what transpires on the *earth*. Also, nothing in the martyr's question, directed to God (Rev 6.10), supports the idea that they are watching events on earth.

The saints in heaven do not experience anything distressing. Heaven is a place of total peace and joy (Rev 21.4). Even if they could observe some events happening on earth, their minds are entirely attuned to God's mind, and anything observed is interpreted through a sinless perspective. Thus, a person in heaven does not miss those left behind and is not concerned about their welfare. For example, a Christian on earth may pray for the conversion of an unbelieving spouse. However, there is nothing in Scripture that indicates that once he has departed the earth, he will continue to offer intercessory prayers for his spouse remaining behind. This may sound like a cold indifference on the part of the saints in heaven and may be difficult for us to accept. However, if it is not the case, then those in heaven could be disturbed by evil events on earth, such as the remaining spouse refusing to repent of sin and believe in Jesus. The saints in heaven have fully acquiesced in the knowledge that the judge of all the earth does what is just (Gen 18.25).

Many interpreters make the mistake of assuming that time is a universal constant and runs in parallel in heaven and on earth. Einstein revolutionized our thinking about time. He theorized, in his Relativity models, that time is variable, rather than a constant. Some of his ideas about time have been demonstrated empirically. For example, Relativity predicts that clocks in a stronger gravitational field will 'tick' at a slower rate. The clocks in GPS satellites run faster than identical clocks on earth, by about 46,000 nanoseconds a day, and must be re-calibrated regularly or airplanes and ships will steer off course. So, today the concept of time as a constant has been rejected by much of scientific and philosophical thinking.

Jesus has a physical body in heaven (Acts 1.9-11). Thus, heaven is a physical place, and a form of physics operates there (e.g., light is propagated; Rev 21.23; Rev 22.5; 1 Tim 6.16). Since matter and energy exist in heaven, presumably some form of space exists—objects in heaven are described as having dimensions and spatial relationships with one another. Some form of process or sequence also occurs in heaven, because conversations and praise take place—the utterance of a sentence requires that one word follow another, and that 'before' and 'after' concepts exist. Thus, a form of time also exists in heaven. The Bible does not teach that heaven exists in a *timeless* eternity—rather it teaches that the final state will be endless. Even though all the constituents of physical reality as we know it (life, space, time, energy, and matter) exist in some form in heaven, we do not need to conclude that time runs in parallel between heaven and earth. Heaven exists as an alternate physical reality, and time is intimately associated with the physics of its reality. After all, GPS satellite clocks, close to the earth, do not run in parallel with clocks on earth.

We should also note that a martyr's death is avenged immediately upon the death of his persecutors. They are charged with the sin of persecuting Christ's Church and sentenced to everlasting torment (Mt 13.42).

With these thoughts in mind, we can attempt to understand what it means for the martyrs to ask God how long it will be before their deaths are avenged. It may be that we are to understand their reference to time,

to refer to time as it passes on earth, not in heaven. We might rephrase their question as, “How much time is left to the earth before you will judge ...?” God’s reply is, “Once the full number of the elect (your fellow servants, who will be killed like you, and their brothers) is complete, then the avenging angel will lift his sword.”

The Sixth Seal – Temporal Fulfilment

(Rev 6.12-14, 17)

Interpreters have associated the opening of the sixth seal with a number of past and future events, including the Jewish war with Rome or the end of the Roman Empire; a specific natural disaster that occurred in the past (e.g., the eruption of one of the volcanoes visible from the island of Patmos around 60 AD, or of Vesuvius in 79 AD); a general statement about natural disasters that will occur during the period between Christ’s first and second comings; a great manmade calamity before Christ returns, such as a nuclear holocaust; or the final judgement. Some interpret this section as fully literal—e.g., including an actual physical world-wide earthquake—whereas others give it a purely symbolic interpretation, claiming that it speaks metaphorically of world-shaking events as the time for Christ’s return draws near, or suggesting that the darkening of celestial objects speaks about the decline of prophecy or of the Church’s witness to the world as adherence to the faith grows cold.

The two most likely explanations, which are both supported with reasonable arguments, are that the opening of the sixth seal represents the:

- *End of this age and world, leading to the final judgement of all mankind.* Those who support this view argue that nothing has been seen in history that is as convulsive as what is described here. Therefore, they conclude that it must be in our future, and will immediately precede the return of Christ. They suggest that the earthquake mentioned here parallels the one mentioned later (Rev 16.18), and that the pouring out of the seventh bowl speaks of a literal globe-shaking earthquake that will be part of God’s final judgement of the world. They also suggest that there is a relative chronological order to the seven seals—the first four refer to events that have occurred, or will occur, during the last days (i.e., the era between Christ’s first and second comings). They suggest, further, that the fifth seal relates to the state of believers in heaven who are looking for their vindication. This is followed with the natural disasters mentioned here, just prior to the final judgement. They suggest that the seventh seal refers to the final judgement which must be faced by all men at the end of time. They argue that since the sun, moon, and stars will be destroyed entirely, not a third of them as in the temporal afflictions (Rev 8.12), and the sky will be rolled up, this section must refer to events associated with the last minutes of this earth (2 Pt 3.10, 12). Therefore, under this interpretive framework, the natural phenomena described here apply to an actual historical event (called by some, ‘the great tribulation’) which will cause men to cry out in agony (Rev 6.17) that will occur before the end of the age.
- *Jewish war with Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus.* It has been observed that the calamities mentioned here are similar to the signs of the arrival of the last days that Peter mentions in his sermon (Acts 2.16-20) and that apply figuratively to the end of the Jewish age and the commencement of NT era. It has also been observed that there are striking parallels between these verses and Jesus’ description of events associated with the arrival of Titus’ army outside of Jerusalem, and the city’s destruction in 70 AD (Mt 24.29-35). Jesus differentiates between the events associated with the destruction of Jerusalem (Mt 24.1-35; Mk 13.1-31; Lk 21.5-33), and his second coming and the end of the world (Mt 24.36-44; Mk 13.32-33; Lk 21.34-38). Thus, much of the teaching that Jesus delivered on the Mount of Olives refers to events that happened about 40 years after his resurrection, when God overthrew unbelieving Judaism and closed the OT era with the destruction of the temple and the ceremonial system based around the sacrifice of animals. For the majority of Jews, this was a great day of God’s wrath, because they had rejected their Messiah, and were in turn rejected by God. Thus, a proximate fulfilment of many of the OT prophecies alluded to in Peter and Jesus’ sermons (Joel 2.30-31; Is 13.13; Is 34.3-4; Is 50.3; Jer 4.23–26; Ezk 32.7-8; Hag 2.6) is paralleled by the vision of the sixth

seal.

Since there is significant overlap between Jesus' Olivet discourse and John's vision of the opening of the sixth seal, we should interpret the two passages in a consistent manner. Since Jesus was forecasting the way things would be leading up to, and at the time of, the destruction of Jerusalem, the opening of the sixth seal likely refers specifically to the destruction of Jerusalem. This conclusion is supported by the fact, as we have observed previously, that the book of Revelation was addressed primarily to Christians living before the destruction of Jerusalem, to encourage them as they faced persecution from Jews and Gentiles and from pagan and anti-Christian religious systems.

However, as with much of Revelation, it is difficult to identify a specific fulfilment of the prophetic vision included in the sixth seal. It is possible that both the events associated with the destruction of Jerusalem and with the final judgement of all mankind can be included within the scope of the vision of the opening of the sixth seal. This is an appropriate conclusion since the destruction of Jerusalem, and the judgement of the Jewish people who broke the covenant by denying the Messiah, is a type for the ultimate judgement which will befall all mankind who have broken the covenant made with Adam and have denied Jesus as the God-man and Saviour. And if God's anger was poured out on the unbelieving Jews—members of his covenant community—how much more severe will be his wrath when it is poured out on the mass of ungodly humanity when Jesus comes again with a sword.

The Sixth Seal – Symbols of Judgement on the Nations

(Rev 6.12-14, 17)

In the previous meditation we noted that there are two primary, reasonable, interpretations for the opening of the sixth seal: 1) Events which will occur before the end of this age and world, followed immediately by the final judgement of all mankind. 2) The Jewish war with Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. The latter is probably the correct *primary* focus of the vision, given the historical context in which Revelation was written:

- The immediate audience was the seven churches in Asia Minor, to whom the visions were given for their encouragement when facing persecution.
- The temple in Jerusalem was still standing and the ceremonial sacrificial system had not yet been abandoned, even though the crucifixion of Jesus was the final sacrifice.
- The Jews, as a covenant nation, had not yet been formally rejected by God for their disavowal of the Messiah, and the city of Jerusalem had not yet been punished for its role in condemning Jesus to death. But their rejection was imminent (Mt 8.11-12; Mt 21.18-22; Mt 21.43; Mt 23.38; Lk 13.6-9; 1 Thess 2.16).
- Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24.29-35 identifies the same kinds of events, which were to precede the destruction of Jerusalem.
- Allusions to the same phenomena, as are found in the vision of the sixth seal, in OT passages (Is 13.10-13; Is 34.4; Jer 4.23-28; Ezk 32.6-8; Joel 2.10, 30-31; Hab 3.6-11) are generally interpreted metaphorically as speaking of the end of sinful kingdoms by divine judgement—shaking of the earth, darkening of celestial objects, a blood-moon, the fall of stars, rolling up the sky, and the removal of mountains and islands—even if they may also refer to the ultimate dissolution of this sin-polluted order.
- Peter's statement (Acts 2.16, 19-20), that these events had been realized on the Day of Pentecost, indicate that the kingdom of Jesus Christ would begin to shake the nations of men and their political systems.
- Jesus prophesies that the Jews who rejected him would call on the mountains to cover them (Lk 23.30) when Jerusalem's temporal punishment would arrive. The same request is uttered by the leaders and people of the nations in the vision of the sixth seal (Rev 6.15).

If this interpretative context is correct, then we can understand the various ‘natural’ phenomena that John observes, even if they will be actual events at the end of time (2 Pt 3.10), to be figurative symbols of God’s judgement on idolaters, beginning with the rebellious covenant breakers in Jerusalem (1 Pt 4.17) and extending to the nations of the earth.

These idolaters and covenant breakers are “those who dwell on the earth” (Rev 6.10). Revelation uses this (or a similar) expression to refer exclusively to idolaters and wicked persecutors of Christians (Rev 3.10; Rev 8.13; Rev 11.10; Rev 13.14; Rev 14.6-9; Rev 17.2, 8). Their lives are focused on things of the earth—sensual pleasures, grasping for power, and the acquisition of property. They have no serious or valid concern for true spiritual matters and salvation from sin—although many feign an interest in the spirit world or the next life through the practices of their false religions. For example, Muslims claim that their god (Allah) will reward those who commit atrocious acts of violence against Christians, ‘the people of the cross’; Hindus claim that a polytheistic manifestation of an impersonal absolute will be auspicious to them, after a thousand purifying reincarnations; and Buddhists claim that the impersonal, material universe will repay them through their *karma*. All religions, other than Christianity, are idolatrous. And, all people, other than Christians, are idolaters. They worship and serve a terrestrial (e.g., a carved piece of stone, a cast image, an acquired or coveted possession, a sports or entertainment celebrity, physical sensations, or themselves, etc.) or a celestial object or force (e.g., an alignment of planets, or the sun at summer solstice, etc.), rather than the Creator (Rom 1.25).

Since elements of creation have become idols, they must be removed along with those who worship them. Thus, God uses the destruction of the ‘stable’ and ‘permanent’ objects within the natural order as symbolic of the destruction of idolaters and their false belief systems. There are seven elements of nature that are identified by John that men consider to be permanent and stable—the earth, sun, moon, stars, sky, mountains, and islands. Men claim that the celestial objects and the earth are billions of years old, and the geological formations (mountains and islands) are hundreds of millions of years old and thus permanent. It may be significant that John lists seven objects—the idea of completeness. All of these supposedly stable and permanent objects will be shaken and destroyed in an instant, under the coming wrath of God. Thus, the securities that men depend upon—their idols—money, insurance policies, medical advances, religious rituals, political systems, government programs, evolutionary theories, etc. will be exposed as useless before the God who proclaims truth through his Son (Jn 1.14), through whom he judges all mankind (2 Tim 4.1).

Unbelievers’ idol refuges are phantoms that will be vaporized instantly in the heat of the Son’s judicial gaze. In contrast, believers, who are strangers on this earth (Heb 11.13), with no permanent abode in this realm, and who look forward to receiving their truly permanent home (Jn 14.2; Heb 11.10) in the next world, already have a secure anchor for their souls in Christ (Heb 6.19).

The Sixth Seal – The Response of the Judged (Rev 6.15-17)

John identifies seven classes of people who respond in fear to God’s exercise of judgement—kings, great ones, generals, rich, powerful, slaves, and free ones. Of course, individuals can fall into more than one of these classes; for example, a great one could be a military general, rich, powerful, and a free citizen. Regardless, John’s choice of seven terms to identify a spectrum of humanity is probably symbolic—with seven classes, covering all idolaters, covenant breakers, and persecutors of Christians, from every social class, being included within the scope of judgement. This reminds us that God is not a respecter of persons, and his judgement is the great leveller.

Whether we apply this vision to the events which will occur just prior to the end of this age, to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies, or to both, is irrelevant. Both can be considered a “great

day” of God’s wrath (Mt 8.12; Mt 24.21). Everyone who is visited by God’s judgement will be full of consternation and fear. Their response will be two-fold:

- *They will hide in the mountains and rocks.* This statement is probably an allusion to Isaiah 2.19, which is found in Isaiah’s prophecy about the day of the LORD, in which idolatrous Judah would be punished—fulfilled in 586 BC with the deportation to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar, and again with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies. Men attempt to hide themselves from God’s anger against sin. Adam and Eve began the practice with their attempt to hide among the trees in the garden (Gen 3.8). People are just as unsuccessful today at hiding from their guilt, behind their material possessions and feeble rationalizations.
- *They will hail the mountains and rocks.* The plea of the damned, to have the mountains fall on them, is probably an allusion to Hosea 10.8, a prophecy about the deportation of the northern kingdom (Israel) by the Assyrians, and to Jesus’ prediction that people of the restored southern kingdoms (Judah) would utter this cry when they saw their temporal punishment arriving (Lk 23.30). Idolaters plead for the protection of their lifeless gods. But, when their gods fail to provide support to them, they plead for their gods to destroy them. People would prefer extermination than to face the anger of the living and true God. The irony is that death does not free them from judgement but propels them *into* judgement. It is infinitely better to turn to God from idols now and be delivered from the wrath that is to come (1 Thess 1.9-10).

Men are clueless! They have no idea about how angry God is against sin. They console themselves with the foolish notion that they are not as bad as others they know, and that God will weigh their ‘kind’ and ‘charitable’ acts against their indiscretions and peccadillos. The anger which men face is said to come from both the Father—he “who is seated on the throne”—and the Lamb who is before the throne. Thus, the Trinitarian Godhead expresses its anger against sin. (As is often the case, the Holy Spirit is not explicitly mentioned but he applies his background role in the work of salvation and judgement.) A lamb is one of the gentlest of God’s creatures, not like a roaring lion or raging bull. We would never expect to see an enraged lamb. That the Lamb displays anger (wrath) against sin should provide all the evidence we need about the enormity of our sin, the extreme cost—the death of the Son of God—of the means of atoning for our sin, and the fact that God does not let a single one of our sins go unrecognized and unpunished. However, if we are believers in Jesus, he has borne our punishment (Is 53.5).

Those who are in Christ desire to see the face of the Lamb (Rev 22.3-4; Lk 24.32). It is a face that inspires confidence and hope. Those who hate Christ, dread to see his face. It is a face that instils sheer terror and abject fear. We find his face full of compassion and welcoming (Mt 11.28); they find it full of condemnation and war (Mt 10.34). We want to be in its presence; they want to be as far from its presence as east is from west. We find in it pleasure; they find in it punishment. What is it that men fear so much from the face of the Lamb? It is to have their sins exposed and judged. All men know God’s righteous decrees and what they deserve for breaking his commands, but they willfully suppress this truth until their dying breath (Rom 1.18-23).

When judgement comes upon the wicked, they will ask, “Who can stand?” Then they will realize that their excuses and defensive arguments for why they ‘deserve’ to be admitted into God’s glorious presence will be as useless as a Chinese paper lantern in a hurricane. They will be constrained to fall on their knees and confess their sins (Phil 2.10-11). However, when the great day of judgement comes, it will be too late. The Jews living in Jerusalem in 70 AD, who ignored Jesus’ warning to flee from the city when they saw the Roman armies approaching (Mt 24.15-20), suffered atrocities and a massacre that has gone unequalled in the annals of human conquest. The city was surrounded and there was no chance of escape. Likewise, all unbelievers in Jesus, will be called before the judgement seat of the Lamb (Acts 17.31), and there will be no chance of escape. They will be consigned to everlasting torment by fire, in utter darkness (Rev 14.11; Mt 25.41; Jude 13). The visions of judgement that John recorded in Revelation are not intended to alarm God’s holy ones. They know that they are clothed in the white robes of Christ’s righteousness. However,

they should alarm every unbeliever, who should raise a conscience-stirred inquiry, “Who can stand?” No one, without Jesus!

The Angels’ Role in Sealing the Servants of God

(Rev 7.1-3)

Angels appear often in Revelation. John reported seeing them in his first vision, in the form of four ‘living creatures’ (Rev 4.6). We determined that these were representatives of an angelic class that includes cherubim and seraphim. John now observes four angels, probably of this class, in a new vision. These angels were standing on the four corners of the earth. The presence of the four angels, on the four corners, indicates that they are assigned a role on the earth to be executed in every direction—north, east, south, and west—a symbolic image used also in the OT (Is 11.12). In this vision, the angels are holding back the winds of judgement, until God’s purposes in redemption are completed.

This vision occurs as a hiatus in the sequence of visions associated with the Lamb’s opening the seven seals on the scroll. Those who suppose that the meaning of the sixth seal must apply to the final judgement rather than the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, conclude that the withheld judgement described in this vision must occur before the arrival of the plagues associated with the opening of the second, third, and fourth seals. However, since we determined that the opening of the sixth seal refers primarily to the destruction of Jerusalem, which is a type for the final judgement, we can understand the opening of the six seals to refer to events that are on-going, from the time of Christ’s first coming to the end of time, when he returns to the earth. Thus, we see, in this vision, that God withholds the final judgement until the number of the elect have been sealed in this spatial-temporal realm.

This vision is separate from, but related to, the vision of the opening of the sixth seal. In that vision of the great day, when the wrath of the Father and the Lamb falls upon the wicked, the unbelievers ask, “who can stand?” (Rev 6.17). In this vision (Rev 7.1-8) and the subsequent one (Rev 7.9-17), God answers their question by showing how vast the number of the elect is whom he enables to stand before his presence in everlasting bliss. Thus, Revelation chapter 7 offers great comfort to Christians who are suffering at the hands of their persecutors. We live in this interlude in the action of opening the seven seals. The dramatic tension is heightened because we don’t know when the end will be, but we see and believe that God is working out his purposes on earth before the end of time.

John sees the angels holding back the four winds. These winds are the agents of God’s judgement. As with much of the imagery in Revelation, there can be both a temporal and physical dimension and a symbolic interpretation and application. Wind (like earthquakes) is used by God as an actual destructive force (Job 1.19; 1 Ki 19.11; Acts 27.14) in time, or at the end of time with the destruction of the elements and a roaring wind (2 Pt 3.10). Wind also figuratively represents the judgement of God (Ps 1.4; Is 41.16; Jer 49.36; Dan 7.2)—with *four* winds referring to God’s universal judgement of mankind and the rest of creation.

John sees a fifth angel coming out of the east, who charges in a loud voice the other angels not to harm the earth, sea, or trees until the servants of God have been sealed. This angel has authority over the other four, and thus is at least an archangel, who participates (‘we’, in Rev 7.3) in the sealing of the servants of God, but may be Jesus himself. His arising from the east is likely symbolic of the light of salvation which blazed forth on the first day of the week at the resurrection of the Son of Righteousness. The physical entities (earth, sea, and trees) have been interpreted in various ways—some quite fanciful, such as representing three continents. A symbolic interpretation includes the sea as denoting the nations of mankind; which is possible since the sea in other places in Revelation appears to be a symbol for the nations that are in rebellion against God (Rev 17.1, 15), as it appears to be in some places in the OT (Ps 65.7; Is 17.12; Is 23.11). However, we would then need to determine what is symbolized by the earth and trees (some suggest kings). It is probably best to understand the angel’s charge to refer to withholding the dissolution of the created

order which will occur at the end of time.

God is withholding the total destruction of the created order, in fulfilment of the covenant he made with Noah (Gen 9.8-17) that he would not destroy the earth again until he concludes his purposes for this current earth. While judgement is pending, it is withheld until the total number of the elect have been sealed on their foreheads. This sealing cannot refer to their election, which is certain because it is based on the eternal, immutable will of God. Rather, this sealing is an outworking, *in time*, of their election, administered by angels. The image of the angels sealing the elect from mankind appears to be drawn from Ezekiel's vision of a man with a writing case, who was told to pass through Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of the righteous who were to be spared from the execution of the idolaters (Ezk 9.3-4).

Jesus has delegated to angels the role of sealing the elect through the harvest of souls, and with removing the reprobate (Mt 13.30, 39-42; Mt 24.31); just as God used them in the OT to fulfill his purposes in judgement (2 Sam 24.16-17; 2 Ki 19.35). They are charged with sealing the elect, holding back the winds of judgement until they have been sealed, and releasing the winds once they all have been sealed. We should be encouraged by the truth that God is withholding the final judgement, giving men time to repent, as he completes his mission to save a great multitude that no man can number (Rev 7.9).

God's Seal on the Servants of God

(Rev 7.2-3)

In the previous meditation, we observed that a fifth angel in John's vision announced the sealing of believers into Jesus Christ. We will now examine this sealing in more detail.

The angel's announcement states that the seal will be applied to the servants of God. The title 'servant of God' (actual or inferred) is applied to prophets (Gen 26.24; Ex 14.31; Neh 10.29) and apostles (2 Cor 6.4; Titus 1.1; James 1.1). But it does not apply exclusively to those who have a formal role in the Church, since it is also used for all believers (Rev 1.1; Col 4.12; 1 Pt 2.16). The title, although derived from the same word as 'slave', is to be understood as a title of honour. It is applied to those who know their master's business and delight in serving their Lord—Jesus Christ.

All true believers in Jesus Christ, who have ever lived and who will ever live, have been elected to eternal life from eternity. In one sense, their election is the seal of their salvation, since it is irrevocable—God the Father guarantees that he will save every one whom he has elected to eternal life (Rom 8.29-30), and not one of those given to Jesus by the Father will ever be lost (Jn 6.39; Jn 18.9). However, the angel is carrying the 'seal of the living God' which is to be applied to the servants of God. Thus, it appears to be something other than election by the Father. Since we are not told what the seal is, we need to infer what is meant. Commentators generally suggest that the seal is the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1.21-22; Eph 4.30), who as the life-giving Spirit imparts new life to believers. This agrees with the expression 'living God'. Some suggest that the fifth angel is Jesus himself, who applies the Holy Spirit to believers.

The sealing of believers indicates:

- *Possession*. A seal is used to mark and authenticate ownership. Thus, the ones sealed are God's purchased possession (Rev 5.9)—his covenant community (Ex 19.6), over whom he has sovereign authority.
- *Pardon*. A person sealed to Jesus by the Holy Spirit is one who has been granted pardon (justified). His sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ and he is made ceremonially pure through his union with Jesus.
- *Protection*. A person sealed as one of God's servants is protected by the Lamb's blood, just as the houses of the Israelites in Egypt were marked as protected by a lamb's blood, and not killed by the

destroying angel (Ex 12.13, 23). This includes protection from physical harm (Ps 91.1-16), from demonic forces, and from the coming wrath on the Last Day.

- *Perseverance*. God's seal on believers means that they will persevere to the end. No true believer can lose his salvation. God ensures that the believer desires to obey and when he fails to obey repents and is forgiven. Perseverance of the saints includes the empowering of them to contend for the faith (Jude 3) without compromise. In contrast, unbelievers cower before the wrath of the Lamb (Rev 6.17).
- *Provision*. This seal also results in sanctification. The sealed believer in Christ is made holy (definitive) and is being made holy (progressive). The image of Christ is imprinted upon him, and he is clothed in white robes and is designated a minister in God's courtroom (Rev 7.13-15).

We cannot seal ourselves by an act of our wills, through obedience to the Law, or by righteous works. This sealing is the work of God and is applied to those who have experienced the new birth—being born of the Spirit.

We are told that the seal is applied to the foreheads of believers. Thus, it appears that the action of the converting work of the Holy Spirit becomes visible in the lives of the servants of God. Thus, we can add another result of sealing—*Profession*. Those who are baptized upon profession of faith have the sign and seal of their profession literally applied to their foreheads, as the water is sprinkled on them. However, all Christians show the mark of their profession on their 'foreheads'—indicating that they have transformed minds (Rom 12.2)—through their lives (Mt 7.15-20). The seal of the living God upon believers is that they display the character of Christ through their lives.

In contrast, those who do not have the seal of the living God upon their foreheads *must* have the seal of Satan upon them—the mark of the beast (Rev 13.16-17; Rev 14.9, 11; Rev 16.2; Rev 19.20; Rev 20.4). There can be no middle ground—either a person belongs to Christ and displays his character, or he is against Christ (Mt 12.30). Those with the seal of living God upon them belong to the *City of God*, and they worship the Father and the Lamb (Rev 5.9-10; Rev 22.3). Those with the mark of the beast, belong to Babylon (Rev 17.5), and worship the beast and his image, and Satan behind them.

The fifth angel includes the other four angels in the action of sealing the servants of God with his words, "until we have sealed". Since the seal is the Holy Spirit, who also applies the sealing (of himself) to believers, how can angels participate in the sealing? God does not delegate the work of election or salvation to angels. However, as we noted previously, Jesus has delegated to angels the role of sealing the elect through the harvest of souls. This may be accomplished through: 1) their joyous recognition of the accomplishment of redemption (Lk 15.7, 10), 2) their being assigned to believers as guardians (Ps 91.11), and 3) their acting as the doormen and ushers for those being admitted into the everlasting paradise (Mt 24.31).

Withholding the Winds of Judgement (Rev 7.1-3)

When will Jesus return? And, when will be the last day of this created order? The universe is not 14B years old, as most cosmologists claim. It is just over 6,000 years old—based on clear chronological markers that are provided in Scripture (Gen 5.1-32; Gen 11.10-26; Gen 12.4; Gen 21.5; Gen 25.26; Gen 47.9; Ex 12.40; 1 Ki 6.1, 37-38; 1 Ki 11.42; Ezk 4.4-6; Acts 7.4; Gal 3.17). Before the sin of Adam, God likely maintained an energy stasis through a constant injection of high-order energy (similar to how he created light on the first day) and a removal of low-order energy (heat). Now, God operates the physical universe as a closed system—the total amount of energy in the universe does not change (the first law of thermodynamics) and entropy increases through time (the second law of thermodynamics). Increasing entropy is now a universal norm, and decay appears to be accelerating—for example: 1) the rate of transcription errors in human and animal genomes is increasing with each generation, 2) galaxy and planetary systems are falling apart (e.g., stars explode, the sun is burning up, the earth's rotation is slowing down, and the moon is moving away

from the earth at about 4cm/year), and 3) physical systems are weakening (e.g., the earth's protective magnetosphere is decaying). The universe (with the earth in it) is not chronologically old but is growing old quickly as it groans under God's curse (Rom 8.23). Projections of this decay indicate that the end is coming relatively soon—i.e., on the order of less than a thousand years from now, which represents less than one-sixth of the current age of the universe.

Many people are dissatisfied with this level of uncertainty about the date for the end of this created order and turn to Revelation hoping to find clues that will enable them to pinpoint the date for Christ's return; but every prediction with a fixed date has been a false prophecy, discrediting the 'prophet' (Dt 18.22). However, the fifth angel in John's vision identifies the point at which the wrath of the Lamb (Rev 6.16) will unleash the winds of destruction. He doesn't give a date but does tell us of the event that will trigger the beginning of the end. Once every servant of God has been sealed, then the winds of judgement that are currently being withheld will be unleashed.

As we have noted, the opening of the sixth seal primarily depicts events that were to be associated with the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. Jesus had foretold that this would occur within a generation from his day (Lk 21.32). The Jews were incredulous, and thought it impossible that Jerusalem, God's city, and the temple could be destroyed, as Jesus had predicted (Mt 24.2). So, they generally ignored Jesus' warnings. In contrast, Christians who heeded his words, fled the city when they saw the Roman armies approaching, and escaped the destruction. These elect (Mt 24.22) were sealed and protected—an immediate temporal fulfilment of John's vision—before the winds of judgement were unleashed on the unbelieving Jews. Since the destruction of Jerusalem is a type for the ultimate judgement which will befall all mankind, we can also apply the prophecy in this vision to the end of time. God is withholding the judgement of mankind until all of his elect are sealed.

The angels are restrained from unleashing the winds of judgement by a mediator—the fifth angel, possibly Christ. This angel not only withholds judgement for a time but announces grace through the sealing of the servants of the living God. This has been God's plan and pattern from the beginning. Instead of annihilating Adam and Eve because of their rebellion, he withheld their physical death for hundreds of years and offered a redeemer (Gen 3.15) who would seal many unto salvation (Jn 3.16-17). When the wickedness of men had become so great that God had to act, he unleashed the winds of judgement (Gen 6.5-7). However, the elect were still being sealed (Gen 6.8). So, it is today. Wickedness abounds, but God continues to withhold the winds of judgement, and is saving many out of their wicked circumstances every day. Jesus, as the mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2.5) continues to restrain judgement because the work of sealing the elect is not yet complete.

God knows every one of the elect and their exact number. After all, if every hair on the heads of every person is known to God (Mt 10.30), he certainly knows who his chosen ones are, and knows everything about them—from their conception and birth to the time of their new birth through conversion, to the moment when they will leave this temporal realm and be welcomed into the heavenly paradise by the guardian angels (Gen 3.24; Mt 24.31). Just as 1st century Christians who fled Jerusalem were spared from its destruction, so the prophecy of this vision provides comfort to the persecuted Church and to all those who wonder why God permits evil to abound—the end is coming, but only once the Holy Spirit has secured the everlasting safety of all those for whom Christ shed his blood and gave his life. This prophecy speaks as much about the salvation of believers as it does about judgement upon unbelievers. God is actively working to save every one of the elect.

Final judgement is coming when the winds of judgement will be freed for a final time. The result will be total destruction—not just the demolition of walls and buildings. *Everything* will be destroyed, as Peter tells us (2 Pt 3.10, 12). How should we respond? Realize that judgement is being held back for a season—as in Sodom, until Lot could reach safety. Repent! Live in joyful anticipation that God will wipe out the mess on

earth and replace it with a new paradise (2 Pt 3.13). Then, pray with John, “Come Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22.20)

Sealing the 144,000

(Rev 7.4-8)

A majority of commentators conclude that the number 144,000 is symbolic, and not to be understood as an actual count of those who are sealed at a particular time. The number can be derived from the multiplication of $12 \times 12 \times 1,000$. Some suggest that the two 12s correspond to the twelve sons of Jacob and the twelve apostles, who are the gates and foundation of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21.12-14). They represent the OT and NT forms of the Church, the Bride of Christ (Rev 21.2). Others suggest that each 12 is derived from a multiplication of 3×4 , which are the numbers of the Trinity and the directions of the world—indicating that God operates in the world of men. The 1,000 is a perfect cube ($10 \times 10 \times 10$) like the new Jerusalem, the Church, which is also a perfect cube (Rev 21.16). Thus, the 144,000 indicates that God seals an exact number of individuals, that the number sealed is precisely those whom God has sovereignly chosen in election (Rom 9.11) by name (Rev 2.17), and that he is providentially caring for and protecting his people as they face persecution from the enemies of Christ and his Church.

Many believe that the 144,000 is a symbolic representation for the elect Jews, who are distinct from the elect Gentiles, who they claim are accounted for in the ‘great multitude’ (Rev 7.9). They claim that their position is supported by the reference to the names of the OT patriarchal tribes (Rev 7.5-8). They claim that this indicates that God treats elect Jews as a separate group of believers from Gentile believers—with a special place for them in the eschatological kingdom. Thus, they argue that the 144,000 is a representation of: 1) the OT Church, 2) believing Jews saved from the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, 3) a remnant of ethnic Jews who are being saved between Christ’s first and second coming, or 4) Jews from the last generation of mankind, who will be saved prior to the second coming. Some support this last option with an appeal to Romans 11.26. However, Paul declares that all ethnic Jews (Israel) are not spiritual Jews (Rom 2.28-29; Rom 9.6) and that when all the elect Gentiles are brought into the Church, then the entire number (*all*) of spiritual Israel will be saved (Rom 11.25-26), not a tiny remnant of ethnic Jews in the last generation, at the end of time.

The idea that the 144,000 represents ethnic Jews, particularly those from the last generation of mankind, is difficult to support. Elsewhere in Revelation, John does not make a distinction between believing Jews and believing Gentiles. Rather, the distinction he makes is between *spiritual* Jews (i.e., all Christian believers) and physical Jews, Jews in name only, who reject Jesus as the Messiah (Rev 2.9; Rev 3.9). He also identifies NT believers as the continuation of the Jewish nation of king-priests (Rev 1.5b-6; Rev 5.10; also supported by Peter, 1 Pt 2.9). Paul reinforces the association between ‘Israel’ and the Church. He states that all believers in Christ, who worship by the Spirit are ‘the circumcision’ (Phil 3.2); there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gentile) in Christ, and all in Christ are “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3.28-29); there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for God bestows riches on all who call on him (Rom 10.12-13); and the Church is the Israel of God (Gal 6.16). In addition, the list of the tribes in this section does not include Dan or Ephraim. Those who support the idea that this section refers to ethnic Jews suggest that these tribes are excluded because the tribes died out, Ephraim is subsumed in Joseph, these tribes were associated with idolatry and John wanted to portray the Jewish church as pure, or there was a manuscript transcription error. However, all of Israel was complicit with idolatry and all the tribes were deported by Assyria and Babylon, not just two. Also, the northern tribes have long been extinct—with no national identity. There is not a single person alive today who adheres to Judaism who could demonstrate that he is a descendant of Jacob, let alone of one of the northern tribes. In addition, if we are to understand this section to be speaking of the physical tribes of Israel, then, to be consistent, we should interpret other sections as speaking of a literal Babylon, Egypt, Sodom, Gog, and Magog (Rev 11.8; Rev 18.2; Rev 20.8). But it is clear that these sections are speaking figuratively of the enemies of the Church.

In this section, John is not speaking of the physical descendants of Jacob. He is referring to those sealed within *spiritual* Israel, the believing Church. He lists the tribes beginning with Judah, who was neither the firstborn nor the recipient of the birthright (1 Chron 5.1-2), because the Messianic king (the Lamb) came from Judah (Gen 49.10; Rom 1.3; Heb 7.14). Jesus is the head (Eph 5.23) and king (Rev 1.5) over a new nation of Israel—the Church.

Some commentators suggest that John may use the concept of the tribes of Israel as a parallel to the covenant people as they exited the persecution of Egypt. They were the firstfruits of the redeemed, covenant people. Thus, the 144,000 could be understood to be the firstfruits (like a tithe) saved from mankind for God the Father and for the Lamb (Rev 14.4)—not just from a final generation of the Jews!—who represent the great multitude of the entire covenant people of God—the Church. Others suggest that this section refers to the totality (a ‘perfect number’) of the redeemed and is co-extensive with those John saw in the great multitude (Rev 7.9) but viewed from a different perspective. They suggest that a later reference to the 144,000 (Rev 14.1-5) supports this interpretation, since all believers have been redeemed from the earth and marked with the name of God on their foreheads.

An Innumerable Multitude

(Rev 7.9)

If you were asked to pick a few verses from the Bible which you consider to be the most encouraging, what might they be? Most Christians would include John 3.16-17. I suggest that two verses which should be included in the list are Genesis 3.9 and Genesis 3.15 with Revelation 7.9. Adam and Eve had sinned grievously and deserved everlasting damnation, and God could have justly annihilated the human race. However, we encounter a ‘but’—‘But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”’ (Gen 3.9) Adam and Eve had rejected God, *but* God went searching for them and offered them redemption and hope (Gen 3.15). Then we come to this verse in Revelation, and we find that God has fulfilled the promise he made to Eve and has saved not a tiny remnant—like Noah, who alone was righteous in his generation—but a great multitude, that no one can count, from every nation on earth. He has fulfilled the promise he made to Abraham to multiply his spiritual offspring and to bless every nation of mankind (Gen 22.17-18).

John observes a new phase in the vision between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals on the scroll. His sight is directed away from the firstfruits of redemption (symbolized by the 144,000)—those who had been sealed on the earth (Rev 7.4-8; Rev 14.3-4) and identified as belonging to the Lamb—to the plentiful harvest of all believers gathered into heaven (Rev 7.9). The firstfruits represent a tribute (like a tithe) of the entire harvest of mankind from every generation. But our attention is now directed away from the earth to the continually increasing number of the redeemed being assembled before the throne of God in heaven. Thus, this second phase of the vision changes our attention away from the trials faced by the Church in each generation, to the glorious end-state, when the entire Church is gathered in one great multitude to receive its reward for conquering (see, [Promised Rewards](#) for Conquering).

The persons observed in this multitude are clothed in white robes and hold palm branches in their hands. These are symbols of purity and victory. The white robes of righteousness appear multiple times elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 3.18; Rev 4.4; Rev 6.11; Rev 7.13-14); so, we won’t consider their meaning in detail here. Palm branches are mentioned only here and in John 12.13, in the NT. The presence of the palm branches may allude to the triumphant arrival of the Messianic king and his army. Alternatively, the palm branches may allude to the Feast of Tabernacles, which was the final feast in the OT liturgical calendar. It was observed partially as a means of thanking God for a fruitful harvest and for his protection. It was also known as the Feast of Ingathering (Ex 23.16), which is an appropriate analogy for celebrating the gathering of all of the redeemed before the throne in heaven. Thus, the white robes and palm branches indicate that the redeemed have been justified and sanctified, persevered through their trials in this life, and received

into the glorious presence of God.

The disciples had asked Jesus, “[W]ill those who are saved be few?” (Lk 13.23). At that time, Jesus did not answer them directly. Instead, he indicated that the way of salvation is through a narrow door and that many who ask to enter will be sent away. Now he answers their question, along with the question of those who are among the unredeemed, “[W]ho can stand?” (Rev 6.17). The answer is, “many will be saved”, in fact, “a great multitude that no one could number”. Jesus does not answer the disciples’ question directly, because we are not to pursue a course of ‘easy-believism’. However, this does not mean that God is niggardly about providing salvation to mankind.

The Jews at the time of Jesus were a relatively small cohort within the Roman Empire, being the remnants of primarily the tribes of Judah and Levi that had returned from the Babylonian captivity. In their history, they had probably never significantly exceeded the few million people at the time they entered the promised land (Num 26.51). However, the reality is now quite different. The “little flock” (Lk 12.32) has grown, as the Gospel has gone forth from Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8). Today, the number of *spiritual* Israel exceeds the devout practicing adherents of any other single religion (except possibly materialistic humanism), and millions upon millions have been ushered by the angels into the everlasting paradise.

As a cautionary consideration, we should note that John does not provide a relative number compared with the count of the unsaved—he does not say, for example, half of mankind will be saved. Some have incorrectly inferred from the ‘great multitude’ that God’s plan is to save nearly everyone, or even every last person. This is contrary to the teachings of Scripture (Mt 7.22-23) and a false universalism. Rather, the universalism taught by Jesus (Jn 3.16-17) and by John (1 Jn 2.2; 1 Jn 4.14) and seen by John in this vision is that the great multitude will be composed of people from every nation, tribe, people-group, and language-group. John probably uses this fourfold description to indicate that the true Israel of God is worldwide (arriving from the four directions of the compass). Thus, *spiritual* Israel is not composed of Jews and a few circumcised proselytes, but of people from every class of men, women, and children who are descended from the one man, Adam (Acts 17.26). In heaven there are no divisions on phenotypic, ethnic, or linguistic differences because Jesus, the last Adam, is the saviour of the world. This inclusiveness should also be embraced in his Church on earth—the courtyard of heaven.

The Great Multitude Praises God for Salvation (Rev 7.10)

John saw a great multitude from every people-group assembled in the throne room of heaven, clothed in white and holding palm branches (Rev 7.9). He heard their joyful praise for what God had done for them, followed by the adoration of God by an assembly of angels (Rev 7.11-12). In a previous instance of praise, which would have included humans, John heard every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea worshipping the Lamb (Rev 5.13). However, this verse (Rev 7.10) records words spoken exclusively by redeemed people in the precincts of heaven. This reinforces our earlier conclusion that this great multitude represents the redeemed—the entirety of *spiritual* Israel (Jew and Gentile) who have been received into the everlasting paradise.

Words can have multiple meanings, often only determinable by their context. For example, the word ‘god’ can be used to refer to the only true God or to a false god, like those of Hindu or Greek mythology. Likewise, the word ‘lord’ can be used to refer to a household owner—as in ‘the lord of the manor’—to a member of the upper house of the British parliamentary system, to Jesus (we capitalize the word), or to the “I AM” (we use all upper-case letters). Therefore, we should observe carefully the words in their context, that the Holy Spirit used when he guided John in writing Revelation. In this verse we encounter for the first time the term ‘salvation’ in Revelation. The Greek includes the definite article before the word. Therefore, it

may have been better to translate the Greek as ‘*the* salvation’, as is done in Revelation 12.10 (but not in Rev 19.1). It is evident that those praising God associate a specific meaning with the word ‘salvation’. They are not speaking of a general form of being saved—which could include a rescue from a ship in a storm (Acts 27.34)—but are referring to the state of being redeemed and rescued from sin—being transformed from slavery to freedom, from doing wrong to obedience, from impurity to holiness, from sadness to joy, and from hell to heaven. The word ‘salvation’ is used in the same sense in the other occurrences in Revelation (Rev 12.10; Rev 19.1).

The saved multitude proclaims that their salvation belongs to God, thus attributing it to him as the author and source. The salvation of which they speak is fully and only the work of God. They have reached heaven through their salvation, but not an iota is attributed to their own efforts or faith—it is based entirely upon the work of God the Father seated on the throne and of the Lamb, who stands before the throne. The work of the Father in salvation is the gracious act of election, by which he eternally declared by name (Rev 2.17; Rev 3.12) those whom he loves (Rom 9.13). God the Son, as the sacrificed Lamb (Rev 5.6), has worked out the salvation of his people in space and time. The Lamb is praised along with the Father, which indicates the divine nature of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is not named or explicitly honoured in the praise of the redeemed. Nevertheless, he also plays a key role in the salvation of the redeemed. He provided them with the white robes of justification and sanctification and the palm branches that indicated their victory over sin and their preservation until they were ushered into glory (Rev 7.9).

The salvation worked by Jesus has a world-wide effect (Jn 3.16-17), saving men, women, and children from every people-group, in every generation. Therefore, it is the theme song of the redeemed. They praise him for what he has done through the means of salvation, his substitutionary death on the cross, and for applying it to them by the Holy Spirit whom he sends (Jn 15.26). Their praise may consist of two aspects (as Matthew Henry suggests), a *hallelujah*, which means ‘praise God’ and reflects on the objective nature of salvation by directing praise to its author; and a *hosannah*, which means ‘save us’ and reflects on the subjective, personal nature of salvation (Ps 118.25; Mt 21.9), as they offer thanks to God for what he has done for them individually. The palm branches they hold allude to the Feast of Tabernacles which commemorated the harvest ingathering. Thus, the spiritual Israelites celebrate an eschatological feast as they praise God for the plentiful harvest—the great multitude that he has redeemed.

People who attend rock concerts know that the screaming of the crowd is usually loud from the moment the band arrives on stage. And, the volume of the crowd can be as loud as the amplified sound of the music, that can go beyond the dangerous 85 decibel level. Rock concerts are deliberately staged to be loud, to induce the immersive experience of the participants. The Psalmists encourage God’s people to shout with a loud voice for the salvation he has provided (Ps 20.5), not to induce an artificial ‘high’ but to give an outward demonstration of our inner joy (Ps 32.11; Ps 33.1, 3). Thus, John tells us that the assembled multitude in heaven renders their praise with a *loud* voice. The word translated ‘crying’ (‘shouting’) in the Greek has the sense of continuous action. The praise in heaven is not formal or temporary but passionate and enduring. The heavenly ‘concert goers’ do not leave the ‘arena’ and experience an emotional letdown the next day. Their hearts will continue to overflow in thanksgiving for their salvation, for ever and ever.

We stand in the courtyard of heaven when we assemble for worship on the Lord’s Day and our praise goes into heaven and joins with the voices of the departed saints. Thus, our praise, in Psalms, should follow their example, with continual thanks for our salvation (Ps 30.11-12; Ps 98.1-2; Ps 118.1-29).

Angels Rejoice because God Works Salvation

(Rev 7.11-12)

We have previously encountered the angelic host (including the four living creatures—who are probably cherubim or seraphim), surrounding the throne, and worshipping God the Father and the Lamb. In the first

instance (Rev 4.9-11), they declare that God is worthy to receive honour because he is the Creator of all things. In the second instance (Rev 5.11-12), they direct their praise specifically to Jesus, the Lamb who was slain, and declare that he is worthy to receive worship because of his divine attributes; they list seven attributes, to indicate his perfection. In this third instance (Rev 7.11-12), they worship the Father seated on the throne and also identify seven attributes of the divine nature. The only difference between the two lists is that in the preceding instance they attributed wealth to the Lamb—Jesus is the ultimate owner of the entire universe—and in this instance they substitute *thanksgiving* for *wealth*. [For a consideration of the six common attributes, see, [Angels Worship the Lamb](#).]

Anyone who reads the doxological statements in Revelation (Rev 5.12; Rev 7.12) must notice that essentially the same attributes are assigned to God and to the Lamb. Since these are the attributes of divinity, they are both worshipped equally as the God who exists eternally (“forever and ever”). This is a clear indication that Jesus, the Lamb of God (Jn 1.29, 36), is God. If someone claims that Jesus is a created god, a man elevated to divine status, or a mere man, he has clearly not read and understood what John says in Revelation, and in his opening of his Gospel (Jn 1.1-18). Or he is reading a different ‘holy book’ or is blinded by his antagonism toward Jesus. By definition, a created entity cannot be God; at best it can be a mythical demigod. And, anyone who believes that Jesus was merely a kind and moral rabbi who taught fine things, should not ignore the fact that the heavenly host of angels and redeemed saints worship Jesus as God. Religions which speak about Jesus as anything other than the eternal God and the incarnate God-man—such as Islam, Judaism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormonism—clearly contradict the Bible, are wrong in their view of Jesus, and are therefore false religions. There is only one true religion, the one that declares Jesus to be the God-man and the Christ (Mt 16.16; Jn 14.6).

God alone has the power to redeem fallen mankind from their sin. The heavenly angels recognize this and worship God for what he has done in saving men. This is an amazing reality. Unlike Satan and the other fallen angels, who want all men to perish in their sins, the heavenly angels rejoice that God has a redemptive plan for lost mankind. This indicates that these angels are holy and humble.

The *holiness* (sinlessness) of the heavenly angels is demonstrated by the fact that they are seen standing around the throne—only holy beings would dare to stand in the presence of the august majesty of the holy God. They have been granted access to the throne room of God, whereas the envious and hateful angels have been expelled from heaven (Rev 12.7-9). The heavenly angels are attending God, waiting for their next commission—e.g., carrying messages (Rev 22.6; Lk 1.19), ministering to those inheriting salvation on earth (Ps 91.11; Heb 1.14), gathering the elect and removing the reprobate (Mt 13.30, 39-42; Mt 24.31), welcoming with joy saved sinners into heaven (Lk 15.7, 10), or contending with demons in the spiritual realm (Rev 12.7; Dan 10.13; Jude 9). While they wait, they worship God.

The *humility* of the heavenly angels is demonstrated when they ‘fall on their faces’ as they begin to worship God—they kneel and place their foreheads on the floor. Although they are majestic beings, who have never sinned and have been given great honours, they are still creatures and do not consider it degrading to bow down in reverence before their Creator. Also, we observe that they move from a state of non-worship to one of worship. This reinforces our previous conclusions that worship is a distinct act (see, [True Worship](#)); distinct from other things that we do. True worship consists of reverential acts authorized by God, that are directed to him and that are performed to honour him or his name. Their worship consists in declaring the glorious attributes of God and praising him for who he is and what he has done. The Psalmist does the same thing (Ps 40.5; Ps 64.9; Ps 66.3, 5; Ps 150.2).

The angels specifically address *thanksgiving* to God. Paul tells us that the foolish and darkened hearts of sinners do not give thanks to God (Rom 1.21). In contrast, angels with truly wise and enlightened hearts, pour out profuse thanksgiving to God. We might wonder what they give thanks for. It could be for having been given existence and for the fact that God continues to sustain them. But they do *not* give thanks for

their own salvation, because they never sinned and have not been redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ. However, in this instance, their thanksgiving is not focused on what God has done for them. Rather it is centered around what God has done for the innumerable multitude of saved humanity. The angels glorify God for redeeming, protecting, and providing victory to humans. This is another demonstration of their humility and love for God. They marvel at what God the Father has done in sending the Son as a propitiation through his blood (Rom 3.25) and endorse it with a hearty ‘amen’. This makes us wonder why we are not as thankful as we should be for our own and our friends’ salvation.

Amen!

(Rev 1.6-7; Rev 3.14; Rev 5.14; Rev 7.12; Rev 19.4; Rev 22.20-21)

The word ‘amen’ appears nine times in Revelation, in the ESV:

- Jesus uses ‘amen’ once as a declaration of a personal attribute (Rev 3.14)—the only place in the Bible it is used in this way. He may use it as a synonym for ‘truth’, which elsewhere he applies to himself (Jn 14.6).
- John uses it three times, to emphasize his own statements about Jesus (Rev 1.6-7) and as he closes the letter with a benediction (Rev 22.21). He also ratifies Jesus’ statement that he is coming soon, with an ‘amen’ (Rev 22.20).
- The angels and the elders in God’s throne room use ‘amen’ four times when they rejoice over the person and work of God (the Father) and the Lamb (Rev 5.14; Rev 7.12) and rejoice over the destruction of Babylon (Rev 19.4). It is used uniquely twice in Revelation 7.12, where it appears at the start and end of the angelic doxology. They may use it to express their agreement with what the saved multitude declared—that salvation belongs to God (Rev 7.10). The first ‘amen’ in Revelation 7.12 could be translated as ‘truly’.

It seems that the OT patriarchs may not have used the word ‘amen’, since there are no instances of the word recorded in the oldest books of the Bible (Genesis and Job). The first time it is used is when a woman is required to offer it as an emphatic statement of concurrence with the conditions in the test for adultery (Num 5.22). Similarly, it is used as a ratification for the curses pronounced on disobedience (Dt 27.15-26).

Even though ‘amen’ is a Hebrew word, it appears much more frequently in the NT than in the OT. It appears in the OT 27 times, in the ESV (30 times in Hebrew). In the Greek NT, it appears 129 times, and is transliterated into English 29 times as ‘amen’ in the ESV. Originally *amen* was used as an adverb and had the meaning ‘truly’ and was applied to solemnly affirm the truth or emphatic nature of the word that preceded or followed (1 Ki 1.36; 1 Chron 16.36; Neh 5.13). This is how it is commonly translated in the NT; for example, when it is used by Jesus to open a didactic or prophetic statement (Mt 5.18; Jn 1.51). Other than in the Psalms (Ps 41.13; Ps 72.19; Ps 89.52; in each of these instances it is used twice, to emphasize finality), it does not appear that it is used in the OT to close a prayer. In the NT, it is left untranslated as ‘amen’ when used to seal prayers, benedictions, and doxologies (Rom 11.36; Rom 15.33; 2 Tim 4.18; Heb 13.21). Following the Apostolic example, it has become a universal practice within the Church to close our prayers with *amen*. Sadly, in much of the Church, an ‘amen’ offered at the end of a prayer has lost its ‘punch’. Instead of being understood to have a meaning such as, ‘let it be’, or ‘so be it’, it is often understood to be little more than a statement like ‘the end’. It is often used mechanically and viewed as a signal that a long a wearisome prayer has been completed and we can resume doing whatever else we find more interesting.

The word ‘amen’ should not be degraded through casual use; but treated with respect as a holy word, full of spiritual truth, since it:

- *Unites us with other believers on earth.* ‘Amen’ is one of a few words that have been transliterated from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek that are known in most languages in their Biblical

from. Other words in this category include, ‘Christ’, ‘Jesus’ and ‘hallelujah’. In Revelation 19.4 ‘amen’ and ‘hallelujah’ appear together. Two Christians from entirely distinct cultures, with no common language, could identify themselves as Christians and worship together with just these few words: “Jesus Christ, hallelujah! Amen!”

- *Unites us with the angels and saints in heaven.* The ‘amens’ we offer up in private or public worship, merge our words of praise and prayer with those of the sinless beings in heaven congregating around the throne, and declare our unity with them.
- *Provides a simple means for believers to express concurrence.* We often hear a pious believer use the word ‘amen’ to express his agreement with a statement made by another believer (1 Cor 14.16). For example, we might hear it when a preacher makes a particularly pertinent point in a sermon, or when a member in the congregation wishes to express agreement with a prayer petition, or when a Christian brother is encouraged by the testimony of another believer.
- *Is a form of worship.* When we vocalize an ‘amen’, after praising God’s majestic greatness, placing a petition before him, or thanking him, we worship him as God. For example, if we say, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6.10), followed by an ‘amen’, we acknowledge that God is the one who has the authority and power to make our petitions real.
- *Is an appeal to Jesus for his help.* Jesus indicates that we are to offer prayer in his name (Jn 14.13-14; Jn 15.16). An ‘amen’ after such a petition is a seal of the promise he has made.
- *Is a declaration of truth.* When we say ‘amen’ we state that the words which follow, or those that preceded, are true. We find many examples of this in the NT when Jesus says, “Amen, amen, I say ...”. It is equivalent to our saying “I swear I am telling the truth.” Likewise, when a preacher reads a passage from the Bible, and ends the reading with an ‘amen’ he is declaring what he has read is true. John closes Revelation with the word ‘amen’, thereby signifying that all that he had seen and reported is true.
- *Is a name for Jesus.* Jesus is the Amen (Rev 3.14), full of grace and truth.

The Ones Coming Out of the Great Tribulation

(Rev 7.13-14)

Many people who comment on these verses focus their attention on the ‘great tribulation’ and attempt to establish what it is or on when it occurred or will occur. [We will address those questions specifically in the next meditation (see, [The ‘Great Tribulation’](#))]. However, they generally pay less attention to the important message about salvation contained in the words of the elder who addressed John.

An elder, a representative of the founding patriarchs and apostles in the OT and NT Church (see, [Elders and Living Creatures Around the Throne](#)), asked John who the people were who made up the great multitude surrounding the throne of God (Rev 7.9). This is the second time that one of the elders, rather than an angel, has addressed John. In the only other instance, one of the elders encouraged John to dry his tears because the Lamb was worthy to open the scroll (Rev 5.5). The elder does not ask John to identify those who are around the throne to gain information but to focus John’s attention on the explanation for how the multitude came into heaven. John replies, respectfully, with an implied statement that he would like to know how it is possible that this great multitude had come to be present in heaven.

We determined previously (see, [An Innumerable Multitude](#)) that the multitude is not composed specifically of martyrs, but is made up of the continually increasing number of the redeemed, from every nation, tribe, people and language, who are assembling before the throne of God in heaven, to receive their reward for conquering. Notice that the ESV translation states, correctly, that they ‘are the ones coming out’—a continuous action, rather than a past tense—since people who are being saved are being added to the multitude in every generation.

The elder informs John that the people that he sees have come out of the great tribulation and “have washed

their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”. John is directed to consider the amazing mystery of salvation—how a world filled with sinners and sin could produce such a holy multitude! From the elder’s statement we determine that the redeemed have:

- *Been identified.* The elder refers to ‘these ones’. They are not a faceless crowd. They are specific individuals who have been known (Jn 10.14), loved (Rom 1.7), and named (Rev 2.17; Rev 3.12; Is 43.1; Jn 10.3) by the Father from eternity. It is also these named ones for whom Christ died (Jn 10.11, 15) and calls homeward (Jn 14.18).
- *Come out of tribulation.* The triumphant multitude has come out of the great tribulation. While on earth their portion in life included struggles with personal sin and with the trials associated with being persecuted for their faith. Now they are out of danger, and never again will have to deal with sin or its evil consequences.
- *Washed their robes.* Those who have washed their robes are those who have been saved by placing their faith in Jesus Christ, as the one who bore their sins on the cross and is now their mediator in heaven. Their filthy garments of sin have been stripped off and they have been clothed in the righteousness and holiness of Jesus (2 Cor 5.21).
- *Washed their robes in the blood of the lamb.* The expression ‘blood of the lamb’ is a reference to the sacrificial death of Jesus as a payment for a person’s sins (Rom 3.25; Rom 5.9; Eph 1.7). How something could be made white by washing it in blood is a paradox, and clearly points to a spiritual and supernatural process, which includes:
 - God’s provision of a covering and protection for his covenant people through the Lamb’s blood (Ex 12.21-23).
 - A believer’s identification with the death of Jesus through shedding blood in persecution (Rev 6.9; Rev 12.11; Rev 17.6; Rev 18.24).
 - Being washed and purified from sin (Rev 1.5; Lev 5.9; 1 Jn 1.7; Heb 9.14).
 - Consecration to holiness (Lev 8.15).
 - Payment of a blood debt (Rev 5.9; 1 Pt 1.18-19); where the blood debt that must be paid is the sin of genocide of the human race committed by Adam
 - Reconciliation and restoration of peace between God and mankind, through the acceptance of the payment transaction (Col 1.20).
 - Participation in Jesus’ victorious conquering of Satan and his demon hordes (Rev 12.11; Rev 19.11-16; Gen 49.10-12 with Rev 5.5-6).
 - Vengeance on those who persecuted believers (Rev 6.10; Rev 14.20; Rev 16.4, 6; Rev 19.2).
 - Punishment of the wicked by blood (Rev 8.7-8; Rev 11.6), like the first plague on Egypt (Ex 7.14-24).

Thus, the shed blood of Jesus is more than an incidental aspect of the process of his crucifixion, it is a symbol of the objective reality that sin must be judged by death (the shedding of blood; Heb 9.22) and that believers have been redeemed through a payment transaction, purified from their sins, identified with Jesus in his death (which may include persecution unto death; Rev 2.10), and included in his victory over Satan and death.

- *Persevered.* Despite facing trials because of the profession of their faith, they have patiently endured and continued to believe in Christ and testify to his promises to their last breath and are now receiving their reward for conquering (2 Tim 4.7-8).

The ‘Great Tribulation’

(Rev 7.14)

The elder speaking with John about the ones clothed in white robes, informs him that “these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation”. The identification of the ‘great tribulation’ has created significant speculation and many give emphatic declarations about its meaning. Interpretations that are assigned to the ‘great tribulation’ include the following:

1. Some suggest that the unidentified tribulation refers to a trial or affliction that God sends upon unbelievers, not on the people of God. Proponents of this view refer to Matthew 24.21-22 and argue that since the elect were warned to flee from Jerusalem and would be spared from the tribulation of which Jesus speaks, then it is not imposed upon believers. They also refer to the encouragement given to the church in Philadelphia (Rev 3.10) and argue that those who kept the word of Christ, would be kept from the trial that is coming on the whole world. However, the Greek word translated 'trial' in Revelation 3.10 is not the same word as is translated 'tribulation' in Revelation 7.14. In every other instance in Revelation, the Greek word translated 'tribulation' (Rev 1.9; Rev 2.9-10, 22) speaks of troubles faced by professing believers, not by the unbelieving world.
2. Another possibility is that the 'great tribulation' refers specifically to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Proponents of this view also refer to Matthew 24.21-22. Jesus states that the tribulation in those days would be unequalled in the history of the world. That would certainly qualify as a great tribulation. However, Christians who remembered Jesus' words fled Jerusalem (many went to Pella) and avoided the evils associated with the destruction of the city and the temple. Also, it is not clear how this verse (Rev 7.14), if it relates specifically to Jerusalem, could be of relevance to the churches in Asia Minor who would be called upon to face persecution in the future. In addition, since those who come out of the persecution are from every nation, tribe, people-group, and language (Rev 7.9). This means that it is unlikely to apply to Christians (former Jews) living in Jerusalem.
3. Some suggest that the 'great tribulation' refers to local persecutions (e.g., in Asia Minor in the 1st or 2nd centuries), or to later particular persecutions such as that endured by believers under the Italian or Spanish inquisitions. We can apply essentially the same responses to this suggestion as to the previous one.
4. The most popular view today is that the 'great tribulation' refers to an intensified persecution of Christians which will occur in the final days of this age, just prior to the return of Jesus. It is ironic that many who hold to this view also claim that there will be a sudden rapture of the last generation of believers, which will remove them from the earth so that they are spared persecution. However, if the 'great tribulation' refers only to an event which is to occur during the last generation on earth, then the vision of John has little relevance to the churches in Asia Minor to whom he wrote or to subsequent generations over the past 2,000 years.
5. Another possibility, and the most likely one, is that the 'great tribulation' is not specific in time, but specific to God's covenant people, through all time. It refers to the persecutions of Christians that began after Christ's ascension (Acts 8.1; Acts 13.50) and will continue until he returns to the earth. Someone might argue that the trials and tribulations that Christians face today are not really great, and do not equal the intensity or difficulty of the tribulation that seems to be implied in this verse. However, such a retort displays an ignorance of history and even of current events—from within the sheltered cocoon of early 21st century North America. The persecutions Christians suffered during a wave of antagonism from Roman emperors has been equalled or exceeded for many in the church, in every generation. Protestant believers were subjected to the horrors of the Inquisition and Huguenots were slaughtered by a Roman Catholic mob. Presbyterian Covenanters were decimated by Anglican prelates and representatives of the Crown. An estimated 1.5M Armenian Christians were massacred by Islamic Ottomans. And, Islamic jihadists have exterminated thousands of Christians over the past 50 years, and are systematically driving them out of Muslim-dominated lands such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. The ESV translates the Greek correctly as 'coming out', as a continuous action, rather than the past tense, since the great multitude (Rev 7.9) is being continuously augmented by new arrivals from every nation, tribe, people-group, and language who are coming out of the 'great tribulation' on earth.

Persecution is the common portion for all believers (Mt 5.11; Mt 10.23; Jn 15.20; Jn 16.33; Acts 14.22; 2 Tim 3.12). No generation is spared. God has wise and loving purposes (sometimes unclear to us) for permitting his people to suffer persecution—including causing us to dispose of worldly commitments, increasing our faith and dependence on him (Rom 5.3; 1 Pt 4.12), and substantiating our witness to unbelievers. However, that is not the end of the story. As this vision illustrates, persecution is a light and

momentary affliction preparing us for an everlasting weight of glory, that is beyond compare (2 Cor 4.17-18). The Church, consisting of all true believers in Jesus Christ, will pass safely through (come out) of the ‘great tribulation’ and be assembled together in the throne room of heaven. This is what we should focus on, rather than on the prospect of tribulation. The same God who promises that he will never leave or forsake us (Heb 13.9), promises to see us through the tears of our trials into the joy of eternal life (Rom 8.31-39).

Rewards of the Redeemed (Rev 7.15-17)

Have you heard someone say, “I am dying to know”? Of course, he doesn’t mean that he would be willing to actually die in order to learn the facts he seeks. However, there are things that we can only learn about fully once we die. Some of these include what our life, service, and joy will be like once we reach heaven, if we are Christians. Paul tells us that what he heard in his visionary access to heaven could not be explained (2 Cor 12.4). The information that John provides from his vision begins to open the mysteries of heaven, but we must die in order to understand them fully. Nevertheless, we can consider the hints John provides about what heaven is like.

We note a connector (‘therefore’) to what has preceded. Heaven is not the destination for every person. It is reserved for those who meet the ‘therefore’ qualifications—for those who have been redeemed by the Lamb and cleansed of their sins. Reprobates hide from the wrath of the Lamb and cannot stand before him (Rev 6.15-17). In contrast, those who have faith in the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb and come through the great tribulation (Rev 7.14), are permitted to *stand* in his presence (Rev 7.9), indicating their recognition as holy citizens of heaven and not servile slaves—an amazing truth worthy of an ‘amen!’ Not only are they permitted to stand but they are rewarded with the cessation of their earthly trials, God’s protective covering over them, and great joy as they perform their worship and work in heaven. It is the Lamb’s position “in the midst of the throne” (Rev 7.17) that makes this all possible. Jesus is the one who worked redemption, provided the means of reconciliation between God and man through his payment of man’s sin-debt, mediates perpetually on believers’ behalf, and dispenses the rewards of the redeemed.

The multi-fold blessings enjoyed by the redeemed multitude, include:

- *Service.* Unbelievers create a caricature of heaven, and sadly many Christians have accepted it as true. The caricature presents heaven as a listless place where the saints sit in white robes and do nothing other than pluck harps. The reality is that heaven is an energizing place where the redeemed are challenged to use their intellects, creative abilities, and manual skills to bring glory to God and to enjoy him forever. Believe what Paul tells us, not what the world says: no eye has seen, ear heard, or heart imagined what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor 2.9).
- *Shelter and Shade.* From his throne, God now provides shelter and shade—from uncomfortable natural elements and from the assaults of tyranny. In heaven, a restored paradise, the curse on nature has been lifted and there is no inclement weather of unbearable heat. These natural phenomena are also symbolic representations of the storms of persecution and oppression which rage against God’s people on earth. In heaven, his wings overshadow his people and provide them with shelter (Ps 121.5-7; Is 49.10). John uses a Greek word that is derived from the same root as ‘tent’. He may have had Psalm 61.4 in mind when he described what he saw.
- *Sustenance.* Likewise, in heaven there is no hunger or thirst—neither physical nor spiritual. The energy required for physical bodies to function will be provided, probably in the form of physical food, since the original paradise included trees with delightful fruits for man’s consumption. Also, there certainly will be spiritual sustenance, as symbolized by the elements of the Lord’s Supper we observe now, and by access to the tree of life in the new paradise (Rev 22.2). This spiritual sustenance will dispel any psychological longings which enervate us here.

- *Shepherding*. Jesus is the Lamb of God (Jn 1.29, 36) who paradoxically has become the Good Shepherd (Ps 23.1-3; Is 49.9; Jn 10.11, 14; Heb 13.20). As a shepherd, he leads his people into the calm pastures of paradise, which has both physical and spiritual implications. The new paradise will be a pleasant garden in the midst of the new Jerusalem (Rev 22.1-2). As our spiritual shepherd he provides for our souls (1 Pt 2.25).
- *Springs*. As the Good Shepherd he leads his people to springs of living water (Is 49.10; Jn 4.14; Jn 7.38)—which both assuage physical thirst (Rev 7.16) and symbolize eternal life (Rev 21.6).
- *Succor*. A child who has fallen and scraped his knee turns to his mother or father for comfort. The kind parent hugs the child and wipes away his tears. So it is with those who have reached heaven. Their real tears of loneliness, discouragement, and pain have been wiped away by the loving hand of almighty God. Every trace of the sadness we encounter in this life has been removed and replaced with the blessedness of the highest possible joy.

John tells us that the redeemed multitude in heaven serves God “day and night”. Elsewhere he tells us that there is no night in heaven (Rev 21.25; Rev 22.5). So, he uses the expression ‘day and night’, not to indicate that the saints stay up all night, but as an idiom for continually (Rev 4.8; Rev 12.10; Rev 20.10)—like we use the expression ‘24X7’. He is telling us that the life of the redeemed in heaven is perpetual. Notice the shift in latter part of verse 15 (through verse 17) to the future tense. He switches from describing what he has seen to what is implied about the future. Eternal life includes our being given resurrected immortal bodies, in which we will dwell in a perfect and blessed state of everlasting rest, service, praise, fellowship, friendship, and love—surpassing anything we can imagine!

The Temple in Revelation

(Rev 3.12; Rev 7.15; Rev 11.1-2, 19; Rev 14.15, 17; Rev 15.5-6, 8; Rev 16.1, 17; Rev 21.22)

Revelation refers to a temple sixteen times. In four of these instances, the Greek is translated, in the ESV, as ‘sanctuary’ (Rev 15.5-6, 8). In Greek, the word refers to a building or shrine in which a god is believed to reside and in which the god is worshiped. Words are often used with nuanced meanings, and we need to observe the context to gain an understanding of what an author means. Also, a single word can mean more than one thing even when used within a single verse. For example, Paul says that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom 9.6). It is clear that he uses ‘Israel’ in two different senses; the descendants of Jacob and believers in the Messiah who make up the Spiritual Israel of God—the Church (Gal 6.16). Likewise, John uses ‘temple’ in two different senses in Revelation 21.22 (a physical temple and a spiritual temple). Thus, when we read that there is a temple in heaven (Rev 11.19) and that there is no temple in heaven (Rev 21.22) we need to understand the context so that we understand how John is using the word ‘temple’ in each instance and not accuse him (or the Holy Spirit) of being inconsistent.

There is much debate about what is meant by the various uses of the word ‘temple’ in Revelation. However, the following seems to be the most likely meanings for the various uses of the word:

- *A physical temple on earth*. John wrote Revelation before the destruction of Jerusalem (see, [The Primary Fulfilment Generation](#)). Thus, the temple that John was told to measure (Rev 11.1-2) was the one still standing in that city, that would be destroyed shortly after by Titus’ armies, which would trample the city (Rev 11.2); not as some claim, a future temple that will supposedly be built in Jerusalem during a thousand-year reign of Christ on this earth. The act of measuring the physical temple is symbolic for measuring the extent of the Church. When John says that he saw no temple (Rev 21.22), he is indicating that the Jewish ceremonial system with its bloody sacrifices has been completed and abrogated, and that there is no need for a temple for offering sacrifices in the new heavens and earth.
- *Heaven*. The great multitude standing before the throne serves God as ‘king-priests’ in whatever roles that they have been assigned (Rev 7.15). This verse develops a concept introduced earlier (see, [A Kingdom of Priests](#)), since it indicates the extent (temporal and spatial) of their service. They serve

“day and night”, which means that it is continual service. And they serve in his temple, which means that their service is not necessarily performed exclusively in the throne room, but throughout heaven. Thus, it would seem that the ‘temple’ in Revelation 7.15, is a reference to heaven in its entirety, not to a specific locale within heaven.

- *An inner sanctuary.* It appears from a number of passages in Revelation, that within the wider domain of heaven there is an inner sanctuary that is translated as ‘sanctuary’ (Rev 15.5-6, 8) and ‘temple’ (Rev 11.19; Rev 14.15, 17; Rev 16.1, 17). This may be equivalent to the throne room of God; or an inner court within the throne room, equivalent to the inner sanctuary (the ‘most holy place’; Heb 9.3) within the earthly tabernacle and temple. If ‘temple’ used in these verses refers to the throne room of God, then it is the place where he makes his presence visible in heaven, and where he is worshiped collectively by the saints. In the design of our church buildings, we refer to the place where we assemble for worship as the ‘sanctuary’.
- *The Church.* Believers in heaven and on earth are living stones out of which the temple of God is built (Eph 2.19-22; 1 Pt 2.4-5). John refers to believers as ‘pillars’ in the temple of God (Rev 3.12). All believers make up the body of Jesus (Eph 5.23).
- *God.* In the second occurrence of the word ‘temple’ in Revelation 21.22, John tells us that the Lord God the Almighty is the temple. Paradoxically, God chooses to dwell in a temple, but he is himself that temple. This may refer to the ontological nature of God—i.e., that he is fully self contained and does not need to dwell in temples, whether created by his own word or by human hands (Acts 17.24), but ultimately dwells within himself.
- *The Lamb.* John also informs us that the Lamb is the temple (Rev 21.22). This refers to the typical nature of the tabernacle and temple associated with the OT ceremonial system of sacrifices. Both of these facilities, and the objects within them, pointed to the coming Messiah. For example, Jesus is the tabernacle (Jn 1.14; the Greek word translated ‘dwelt’ comes from the same root as ‘tabernacle’; also used in Rev 7.15, translated ‘shelter’) and temple (Jn 2.19-21), lampstand (Jn 9.5), table with the bread of the presence (Jn 6.35), altar of sacrifice (Heb 13.10), sacrifice placed on the altar (Jn 1.29; 1 Jn 2.2; 1 Jn 4.10), and the sprinkled blood (1 Pt 1.2). In Jesus all aspects of the OT ceremonial system are fulfilled and there is no need any longer for a physical temple or its associated sacrifices (Heb 9.12). Jesus is the final temple and final sacrifice. This is the key reason why a physical temple will never be built again in Jerusalem.

The word ‘temple’ is used in a number of ways in Revelation. However, there are consistent themes that run throughout. The temple is a place where God:

- Makes his presence known (in heaven, in Jesus, in the Church)
- Governs and issues his decrees
- Is worshiped by the assembled saints on earth and in heaven
- Is worshiped with sacrifices—in the past animal sacrifices; now the fruit of our lips that acknowledge his name (Heb 13.15).

Opening the Seventh Seal (Rev 8.1-5)

When the previous six seals on the scroll (Rev 5.1) were opened by the Lamb (Rev 6.1), the visions revealed to John showed the conquering Saviour (Rev 6.2); three instruments of war (Rev 6.3-8); the martyrs in heaven in white robes, slain for their testimony (Rev 6.9); and the great day of God’s wrath poured out upon the wicked (Rev 6.12-17). What constitutes the events associated with the opening of the seventh seal is not stated. The events could fall exclusively within the half hour of anticipatory silence in heaven, that John observed. The temporal connector ‘then’ (Rev 8.2) in the ESV (compared with other translations that have ‘and’), could support this interpretation. In contrast, some interpreters believe that the opening of the seventh seal includes all the following material presented in the visions of the seven trumpets (Rev 8.2-

11.19), and that all of what is contained in the blasts of the seven trumpets represents events that take place during the half-hour period of silence. This of course would indicate that John's estimate that the silence lasted about 'half an hour', actually refers to a period of hundreds or thousands of years of earth history.

The opening of the seventh seal likely revealed more than just the silence in heaven, but not the entire scope of events associated with the seven trumpets. The vision associated with the seventh seal probably also includes the action of delivering the seven trumpets to the seven angels, and the arrival of an additional angel who filled the golden censer with fire from the altar. If this is the case, then the opening of the seventh seal sets the stage for the blasts of the seven trumpets. The trumpeters are poised to reveal a series of key providences. However, their blasts are preceded by this period of solemn, silent reflection in heaven—a calm before a storm—because the angels and saints know, in general, of the judgement that will be the result of each trumpet blast. The trumpet blasts are also preceded by an angel co-mingling incense and coals from the altar with the prayers of the saints, thus sanctifying their prayers by association with the sacrifice of Christ. Silence and prayer are fitting precursors to announcements of terrible judgement.

The blasts of the seven trumpets are not included in the vision of the seventh seal. Rather the blasts of the seven trumpets reveal the contents of the scroll that has been completely opened by the Lamb. The events in the visions associated with the trumpets operate in parallel with the events associated with the visions of the seals; both sets of visions cover the same period, but from different perspectives. The book of Revelation does not provide a series of visions that occur in a chronologically sequential manner. Rather, each of the series of seven things mentioned in Revelation—seals, trumpets, plagues, and bowls—covers the same period of history, that terminates with the return of Jesus Christ. Thus, Revelation covers only one period of history, but iteratively—from Christ's death and resurrection until the end of time—and from multiple perspectives. The contents of the scroll provide an independent overview of events that occur continually during the last days (from Christ's first coming to his second coming).

The visions associated with the opening of the seals is from the perspective of persecuted Christians waiting for the return of Christ. These visions are intended to provide believers with assurance that the conquering Lamb is vindicating the cause of his people and will have the ultimate victory over sin and Satan, and to strengthen their endurance while they suffer persecution on earth and await their final reward. The visions of the first six seals reveal the majesty of the conquering Saviour and the instruments that he uses to advance his everlasting kingdom—the martyrs in heaven—and the vindication of his people as he pours out his wrath on sinners on the earth. The opening of the seventh seal shows the saints waiting for the consummation of the ages. The visions of the seals provide suffering Christians of all ages with the assurance that events on earth are not out of control but are included in God's eternal purpose that is being unfolded through his providential dealings on earth and in heaven.

The visions associated with the blasts of the seven trumpets, cover the same period as the visions associated with the seven seals—spanning the millennia from the first to the second comings of Christ—but from the perspective of unbelievers on the earth who face a series of judgements aimed at bringing them to repentance and into subservience to the Lamb. The visions of the trumpets provide more detail on the providences associated with the sixth seal—God's wrath being poured out upon the wicked throughout this age. In the set of visions of the seals, the punishment of the wicked is a secondary consideration; included to provide encouragement for those being persecuted. However, in the visions of the trumpets, punishment of the wicked is a primary consideration. Thus, we find that the events associated with the sixth seal have parallels in the events associated with the trumpets—for example, the sun and moon are darkened (Rev 6.12; Rev 8.12), the stars fall to earth (Rev 6.13; Rev 8.10), and the people react with frustration as they seek death (Rev 6.15-16; Rev 9.6).

The message underlying the visions of both the seals and the trumpets is provided to encourage the faithful. A warning to the pagans and apostates provides hope for the righteous because they can know with certainty

that God is continually judging the wicked.

Silence in Heaven

(Rev 8.1)

Until this point in the visions of heaven revealed to John, they have been filled with loud, joyful, and continuous praise (Rev 4.8-11; Rev 5.9-14; Rev 7.9-12). This is the first, and only, instance in which we encounter silence in heaven. It should not surprise us that heaven is filled with sound. On earth, when folks are truly happy, they chatter with their friends, emit exclamations of pleasant surprise, or even burst into song. How much more should we expect a similar situation in heaven, which is a place of joyful reunion, ardent thanksgiving, and creative industry. There is never a dull moment in heaven! Yet, in this vision, John sees all of heaven observe a ‘moment’ of silence. Everyone in heaven stops what he is doing—everyone from the highest rank of angel to vast army of angels, and the great multitude of the redeemed—covers his mouth and emits no sound.

When we observe a moment of silence, for personal reflection or prayer (e.g., at a memorial service), the duration might be for thirty seconds, or a minute at most. But John notes that the duration of this ‘moment’ of silence is for about half an hour. From one perspective, half an hour is a short time. In half an hour we can read maybe ten pages or walk a few kilometers. But from the perspective of heaven, half an hour of silence is a long time. For heaven to be silent for even a minute would be surprising, but to experience total silence for half an hour is astounding!

Thus, John describes a singular moment in the annals of heaven. This half-hour pause in the boisterous worship and fellowship occurs at the moment the Lamb opens the seventh seal. This indicates that something so rare, awesome, and momentous is about to transpire, that every creature pays attention with bated breath. When the first seal was opened and revealed the majesty of the conquering Saviour (Rev 6.2), heaven was not silenced. When the second through fourth seals were opened to reveal the instruments of war and the associated famine and plagues that Jesus uses to advance his everlasting kingdom upon those who refuse to acknowledge him (Rev 6.3-8), heaven did not pause its noisy worship, but rejoiced all the more. When the fifth seal was opened to reveal the martyrs in heaven in white robes, slain for their testimony (Rev 6.9), heaven rejoiced over their perseverance and victory. And when the sixth seal was opened, heaven went ‘wild’ with anticipation that the great day of the wrath of God (Rev 6.17) has come upon all those who reject the Messiah and persecute his people. But with the opening of the seventh seal, heaven goes silent.

Some interpreters suggest that the silence in heaven was necessary so that the prayers of the saints on earth (Rev 5.8; Rev 8.4) could be heard in heaven. This is not a reasonable suggestion since if God can hear the prayers of his saints over the cacophony of the nations, he can certainly hear them over the praise in heaven. The voices of sinful persons on earth or the saints in heaven cannot drown out even the feeblest prayer of anyone appealing to God. Also, silence is not needed in heaven to hear the prayers of those on earth, because those prayers are not intended for the ears of a creature, but only for the Creator who knows all things (Mt 6.8). Another suggestion is that the silence is a symbol for the everlasting peace of heaven. However, this makes little sense, since the peace of heaven brings out a joyous sound, not silence.

The event that triggers the silence appears to be the distribution of seven trumpets to the seven angels who stand before God (Rev 8.2). The ESV opens this verse with a temporal ‘then’, which implies that the seven trumpets were supplied to the angels after the half-hour of silence. However, other translations (NIV, NASB, NKJV) open the verse with ‘and’ which could indicate that the time of silence coincided with the distribution of the trumpets or with the angels having lifted the trumpets to their mouths. It is an anticipation of the blasts of the seven trumpets and what they symbolize that holds the host of heaven speechless.

The silence in heaven is a silence of anticipation such as we might see when people wait to hear a jury verdict or the announcement of a talent-show winner. The inhabitants of heaven know that God is about to release his judgement on the earth, since he must answer the pleas of his people and avenge himself against those who have shed their blood (Rev 6.10). Thus, every creature in heaven feels compelled to bow in silent awe before God as he prepares to act. Their silence provides them time for a sober and serious reflection on what is pending. They know that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires that they will turn to him in repentance (Ezk 18.32). However, God will not permit wickedness to continue indefinitely and must exercise justice and bring judgement on those who perpetrate evil. The silence in heaven is the lull before the storm; before the divine warrior rides out to unleash the judgement associated with each of the trumpet blasts.

Since there is silence in heaven in anticipation of the judgement of God upon evil, so there should be silence on the earth. Men drown out the voice of their consciences with earbuds channeling the inane sounds of a spiritually dead culture or with the incessant drone of the 24X7 news channels. Instead, they should pause and reflect on their spiritual situation and God's displeasure with their sin. God calls all men to submit to him in silence, since he is exalted above the nations (Ps 46.10; Hab 2.20; Zeph 1.7; Zech 2.13).

The Golden Censer (Rev 8.3-5)

John saw an eighth angel, who joined the seven holding the trumpets and stood before an altar in the heavenly throne room. He held a golden censer and was given incense to place in it. He then took coals from an altar to light the incense. The smoke of the incense went up with the prayers of the saints. We are not told who this angel was, but we can surmise that since he was given significant responsibility and honour, he was one of the chief angels, such as Gabriel or Michael. Some Protestant commentators in the past suggested that the angel was Jesus, to counter the Roman Catholic belief that angels can act as intercessors for the prayers of believers. However, since every other mention of an angel in Revelation refers to a creature and not to Jesus, it is best to conclude that 'angel' used here means a created angel.

In the OT ceremonial system, a gold censer was to be filled with incense of a specified mixture of spices that was reserved for a holy use in the tabernacle and temple (Ex 30.8, 34-38; 1 Ki 7.50; 2 Chron 4.22). The burning incense sent an aromatic smoke toward heaven that was a symbol for a spiritual reality—the prayers of the people of God (Rev 5.8; Ps 141.2; Lk 1.9-11). Note that the angel did not place incense of his own choosing in the censer. He was given the incense, presumably by God the Father or the Lamb. This is a simple reminder that the contents of worship must come from God himself and not from the wills or minds of creatures—even holy ones. The imperfect prayers of the saints must be incensed, so as to be typically pure and acceptable to God. The 'much incense' that John saw, which was given to the angel for the censer, is a symbol of the abundant work of the Holy Spirit who makes our prayers acceptable before the Father (Rom 8.26; Eph 6.18).

Incense only becomes efficacious when it is set burning and effuses smoke. There is much discussion in the commentaries about whether this section mentions one or two altars. Some believe that the golden altar before the throne (Rev 8.3) is the altar of incense (Ex 30.1, 6) and the one mentioned later (Rev 8.5) is the altar of sacrifice on which the bulls, sheep, and goats were offered up. Others believe that only one altar is mentioned, and that the one from which the coals were taken to throw on the earth was the altar of incense. If John saw two altars, a question that is raised is, from which altar did the angel take the coals to light the incense? Although the sequence is unclear, particularly since the ESV (and other modern translations) uses the temporal 'then' (Rev 8.5), implying a sequence, rather than an inclusive 'and' (e.g., KJV), it appears that the coals used for lighting the incense were taken from the altar of sacrifice (Rev 8.5) and the incense was presented before the altar of incense (Rev 8.3). If this is the case, the events John saw in the vision followed the Mosaic provisions (Lk 15

.12-13), with which he would have been familiar from his time observing the ceremonies in the temple in Jerusalem. Regardless, since both altars are types for Christ—since all aspects of the ceremonial system pointed to him—we can conclude that the fire to light the incense and make the prayers of the saints efficacious was based on Christ’s atoning work. It is because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the physical altar of the cross, that the Holy Spirit can take the prayers of the saints into heaven. The angel does not act as a mediator for the prayers of the saints. He does not carry the prayers of the saints into heaven, rather he adds to their ascending prayers the smoke of the incense as a symbol of sanctification; just as a pastor does not mediate grace when dispensing the elements of the sacraments but adds the symbols to the dispensation of grace by the Holy Spirit.

The word ‘smoke’ occurs for the first time in Revelation in this passage (Rev 8.4). This is the only instance that ‘smoke’ is used in connection with a positive thing—the prayers of the saints. In the other eleven instances in which the word ‘smoke’ appears, it is used in the context of judgement and punishment being administered by God (Rev 9.2-3, 17-18; Rev 14.11; Rev 15.8; Rev 18.9, 18; Rev 19.3). However, we come full circle with the first and last instances of ‘smoke’. After the destruction of Babylon (Rev 18.1-24) the multitude in heaven rejoices and their praises go up to heaven with the smoke of its burning (Rev 19.3).

The prayers of the saints, accompanied by the incense, are received in heaven. God hears the prayers of his people and answers them. In this case, their prayers likely focus on a plea for deliverance from persecution and for God to avenge his people against the wicked (Rev 6.10). The answer to their prayers, in this case, arrives with a spectacular display of holy glory. Additional coals are taken from an altar and placed within the censer. This would cause all the ‘much incense’ to ignite at once and generate a lot of smoke. The filled censer is then flung upon the earth (this may be an allusion to Ezekiel 10.2), which generates physical phenomena that are symbols of judgement (thunder, lightning, and an earthquake), which accompanied, at times, the LORD’s presence on the earth (Ex 19.16, 18-19; Ex 20.18; Ps 68.7-8; Ps 77.16-18). This indicates that God has answered the prayers of the saints and is about to judge the wicked on the earth—the seven trumpets are about to be blown.

This section of Revelation reinforces the truth that God is governing the affairs of men and that he is cognizant of all that transpires. It also teaches us that the prayers of the saints are effective in producing changes not only within the lives of individuals but in the affairs of nations—encouraging us not to become weary in presenting our petitions before our Father in heaven.

Prayers of the Saints (Rev 5.8; Rev 6.9-10; Rev 8.3-4)

We are exhorted to make prayer a regular component of our lives (Mt 6.7; Lk 18.1; Eph 6.18; 1 Thess 5.17). Yet, many Christians wonder why we are to pray. In particular, if God knows all things why should we direct our petitions to him? Jesus tells us that even before we ask anything in prayer the Father knows what we need (Mt 6.8). Then, he gives us an example of how we are to pray, in what we call, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Mt 6.9-13). In this model prayer, we find petitions directed to the Father. This indicates, that even though the Father knows what we need, we are to voice our petitions in prayer.

Prayer is not an action that is limited to sinful creatures on earth who need forgiveness and God’s help to get through their difficult days. John observes angels and the glorified saints in heaven praying as well as believers on the earth. He had also observed Jesus praying while he was on the earth (Lk 22.40-45; Jn 17.1-26). Thus, prayer is a characteristic of all holy persons, wherever they are found. Prayer is a proper action for us because it:

- *Is an act of worship.* We are commanded to worship God (Rev 19.10; Rev 22.9; Mt 4.10), because he is the Creator and we are creatures. Prayer is a form of worship. When we bow our heads or bend a knee before God and raise our voices in prayer, we declare God to be God and worthy of all praise and

honour (Rev 4.11). In prayer, we honour God when we declare his name (Mt 6.9), extol his holy attributes, and marvel at his works. Since prayer is an action by which creatures worship the true God, prayer can only be offered to him by those who understand who he is—the Triune God. The rituals of Hindus chanting the *Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra* or Muslims performing *Salah* are not true prayer and should not be called ‘prayer’ by Christians but referred to as the utterance of empty words (Mt 6.7).

- *Renders thanks to God.* When we were children and our mothers made our dinner, we would thank them for their kindness to us. Likewise, God provides us with blessings every day (James 1.17), for which we are to thank him. We have so many things to be thankful for that we could never exhaust the list. Even if we were never to ask God for anything, we should still pray constantly to thank him for what he has given to us. This is why Paul indicates that pagans, who are thankless, are without excuse before God (Rom 1.21). Even in heaven, we will forever render thanks to God for giving us eternal life and all of its associated blessings.
- *Acknowledges our dependence on God.* When we ask God for anything that is according to his will, even though he knows already that we need it, we admit that we are not self-sufficient. Since our very existence depends on God continually sustaining us (Acts 17.28; Col 1.17), we need to ask for the ‘small’ things such as our daily bread (Mt 6.11), as well as for the ‘big’ things such as protection and support during times of danger. As sinners, we also need to ask for forgiveness (Mt 6.12). This is a request that can arise only from believers on the earth, and is not shared with the saints in heaven,
- *Pleases God when we ask God for help that he can provide.* God is pleased when we are obedient and ask him for his help and support. He is a gracious father who delights in helping his children and bestowing good gifts on them (Mt 7.11). One of the provisions he supplies is vindication, as implied by the angel filling the censer with the fire of judgement (Rev 8.5), as an answer to the saints’ prayer (Rev 6.10).
- *Includes us in fellowship with God.* Since you enjoy having a time of conversation with a friend, you should also enjoy conversing with God. While on earth, Jesus prayed often. He understood that he was having a conversation with the Father. So, we should follow his example, and carry on an ongoing conversation with our heavenly Father. Someone might respond, “But it is all one way!” This is not true. Those engaged in real prayer with God sense the presence and encouragement of the Holy Spirit and hear his answers through Scripture and see God’s response through his works of providence.
- *Is offered in the name of Jesus.* True prayer is mediated by Jesus. When it is offered in his name (Jn 14.13), it is incensed by the Holy Spirit (Rev 5.8; Rev 8.3) and set aflame by coals from the altar of Christ’s sacrifice.
- *Includes us in fellowship with other believers.* Prayer, whether personal and private or corporate and public, identifies us with the collective Church around the world and in heaven. All the prayers of God’s people converge on one point—the throne in heaven.
- *Is the means God uses to work his providences.* Prayer is one of the second causes—including human actions (Ex 9.16) and natural phenomena (Jonah 1.4)—that God uses as a means of working out his purposes on the earth. The prayer of a righteous man is effectual (James 5.16-18). This is demonstrated by the answer to the saints’ prayer that is worked out in judgement on wicked men through the seven trumpets. God hears the prayers of his saints that are suffering persecution and they move him to act on their behalf.

No person born of the spirit is born mute. Every believer, even if his voice appears to be unheard and ineffective among men, speaks with the voice of a trumpet in the throne room of heaven. The world may think prayer is a foolish discipline, but mighty things happen when the people of God pray passionately and persistently. Prayer is a work that taps into the Divine source that drives the universe. Why then, are we so reticent in our prayers?

Trumpets (Rev 8.2, 6)

Musical instruments were invented before the flood (Gen 4.21). At least one of the sons of Noah probably had musical abilities and carried the inventions through the flood, since musical instruments such as bone flutes and whistles, animal skin drums, bronze bells, and multi-stringed plucked instruments reappeared shortly after the flood, as evidenced by artifacts found in archaeological digs and observed in ancient cave paintings and ceramic art.

Musical instruments serve various purposes, including to:

- Accompany the words of a sung melody.
- Soothe or calm a wearied spirit—e.g., elevator ‘mood muzak’.
- Heighten an emotional response—e.g., the beat of a base drum at a rave.
- Stir up loyalty—e.g., the German national anthem set to Haydn’s *Austria*.
- Communicate—e.g., a signal to advance in a battle charge.

Ancient pagan religions from Egypt, Sumer, Ur, and Babylonia appear to have used musical instruments in temple rituals and for funeral processions. Daniel attests to their use for idol worship (Dan 3.5). There is no evidence that the patriarchs (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) used musical instruments in their worship. A ram’s horn trumpet was used in the tabernacle to announce the time of the sacrifice to the assembled worshippers (Lev 23.24, 25; Num 10.10). David, as a prophet under the direction of the Holy Spirit, introduced other musical instruments for use at the time the sacrifice was being offered (2 Chron 29.27-28). The use of musical instruments in true worship appears consistently to be associated with animal sacrifices. Throughout the Temple era, the collection of musical instruments (i.e., trumpets, harps, cymbals, lyres, etc.) accompanying singing was used *only* during the offering of animal sacrifices (2 Chron 29.25-28; 2 Chron 30.15, 21, 24). When the sacrifices ended, the playing of musical instruments stopped.

Beyond the use of musical instruments to announce and accompany the offering of sacrifices, they were used by the Jews for such things as soothing a harmful spirit (i.e., when David played for king Saul; 1 Sam 16.23) and to accompanying soldiers going into battle, such as when Gideon defeated the army of Midian (Judges 7.20-21) and Joshua and Israel brought down the walls of Jericho with the blast of seven trumpets (Josh 6.13, 20).

The trumpet (or horn) is the most mentioned musical instrument in the Bible. Trumpets used in ancient Israel were made from a ram’s horn or from metal such as a bugle (Ps 98.6; Hos 5.8; 1 Cor 14.8). The trumpets given to the seven angels were likely clarions—a long metal tube with a mouthpiece and a flared end, but having no valves—that were used for signalling or calling attention before an announcement.

God wished to announce something important from his throne, so he gave seven trumpets to seven angels to herald his message. The loud notes of the trumpets would have been understood by John’s readers as indicating:

- *Assembling.* A trumpet blast was used to call people to gather for various reasons, including civic or religious assemblies or celebrations (Lev 25.9; Is 27.13; Jer 4.5). A vast multitude of saints and angels was assembled in the throne room (Rev 7.9, 11) in anticipation of the announcements which would be delivered with each trumpet blast.
- *Proclamation.* A trumpet is used as a prelude to a solemn proclamation of a new law or a judgement, or to deliver news or to herald a significant event (Mt 24.31; 1 Cor 15.52). There was silence in heaven as the crowd waited with bated breath for the announcements from the throne (Rev 8.1).
- *Warning.* A trumpet-blast is loud, clear, and startling, and captures the attention of everyone. Thus, trumpets were used to provide life and death warnings (Neh 4.20; Ezk 33.1-6; Joel 2.1; Amos 3.6). The watchmen were to sound the trumpet or be guilty of not letting the people know of danger. John acts as a spiritual watchman as he relays the message of the seven trumpets to the world of rebellious mankind.

- *War.* A trumpet blast was used to announce the commencement of a battle (Zeph 1.16; Zech 9.14). The Lord Jesus, riding on the white horse, is riding out to battle to conquer sin and Satan (Rev 6.2).
- *Terror.* Trumpet blasts portended momentous or calamitous events (Ex 19.16). As terror seized the Midian army when they heard Gideon's trumpets, so terror will seize mankind when it hears the trumpet blasts of judgement (Rev 8.7-13). The Bible contains God's trumpet blast against sin (e.g., the Ten Commandments). Men cover their ears and do not want to hear its message (Jn 16.8-11).
- *Joy.* Trumpet blasts were used to announce joyous events such as a significant battle victory or a festival such as the feast (Num 10.4). Thus, the seven trumpets of Revelation are a symbol of joy for believers who know that their prayers are answered, have victory with Jesus (Rev 2.26; Jn 16.33; 1 Jn 5.4), and are called to join his everlasting feast (Rev 19.9).
- *Irresistible power.* The stone walls of Jericho tumbled down at the blast of seven trumpets. Likewise, the graves will be opened at the blast of the final trumpet (1 Thess 4.16).

He who has an ear, let him hear what the blasts of the seven trumpets (Rev 8.6-11.18) have to say. They speak clearly to our generation—judgement is coming, and men in every age need to heed the warning given by God.

The Seven Trumpets

(Rev 8.2; Rev 8.6-9.21; Rev 11.15-19)

Seven angels were each given a trumpet (Rev 8.2), which they expected to blow immediately to announce their respective warnings of the judgement which would be unleashed on rebellious mankind. However, before the angels could blow the trumpets, there was an abrupt interruption as the prayers of the saints were heard in heaven (Rev 8.3-4). Then, the blasts of six of the trumpets followed (Rev 8.6-9.21). We are told that after the fifth of these trumpets had sounded, a first woe (probably better translated as 'horror' or 'disaster') had passed, and there were still two more woes to come (Rev 9.12). Before the seventh trumpet was blown, there was another interruption as an angel carried a scroll to the earth (Rev 10.1-11), John was told to measure the temple and was introduced to two witnesses (Rev 11.1-14), and an earthquake shook the holy city. The earthquake is referred to as the "second woe", with a third yet to follow (Rev 11.14). Finally, the seventh trumpet was blown, and its judgement unleashed (Rev 11.15-19), which was presumably the third woe.

This is an exceedingly complex section of Revelation, that has engendered much exegetical speculation and abuse. Yet, it is full of revelation directly from Jesus (Rev 1.1), through the Holy Spirit, that warns sinners and encourages believers. So, we must attempt to understand and apply it. God demonstrates in this section that he hears the prayers of his persecuted people and responds to their pleas by unleashing disaster on those who refuse to repent.

One area of speculation, that we can easily dismiss, is that the seven angels are the seven archangels mentioned in non-Biblical Jewish writings—Enoch I and Tobit. Jesus and the Holy Spirit did not quote from, or allude to, Judaic mythology when communicating the visions of Revelation to John—as they do the OT Scriptures. The seven angels, who stand before the throne of God may be archangels or some other class of specialty angels with roles similar to the four angels holding back the winds of judgement (Rev 7.1), but we cannot determine their class from the text (or from myths). Seven angels are selected for the role of announcing judgement because seven is a Biblical symbol for completeness—beginning with the seventh day Sabbath that crowned the six days of creation and illustrated by the seven days of trumpeting which portended the fall of Jericho.

A second area of speculation that we need to address, relates to the question of *when* the events occurred, are occurring, or will occur, that are revealed by the blasts of the seven trumpets. Many writers, in the past

and at present, believe that they can identify specific events that relate to each of the trumpets, such as wars that occurred in Rome in the second and third centuries, until about 325 AD (e.g., the First Jewish War, 66-73 AD), or wars that occurred after the fall of Rome until the time of the person devising the mapping. There have been attempts to associate the judgements of the first six trumpets with a series of events such as the incursions of the Goths, Vandals, and Huns led by Alaric, Genseric, and Attila that occurred between 395 AD, when the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire were separated, and when Constantinople became the capital in the east. Also, trumpets have been associated with Mohammad and the siege and fall of Constantinople led by the Islamic Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed, in 1453 AD.

Modern writers, who follow the same line of thinking associate the seven trumpets with more recent events. For example, some claim that the first two trumpets were World War I and II, the third trumpet was the nuclear disaster that occurred at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986, and the fourth trumpet was sounded after President Ronald Reagan called upon Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall” in 1989.

There is not, as is often claimed, a “remarkable correspondence between the symbolic pictures in the text and the recorded facts of history” that we cannot question. To be blunt, this type of association of the trumpets with specific historical events is pure nonsense. It reads into Revelation interpretations that are not intended by Jesus, causes end-time fever among duped believers, and provides absolutely no support for creating a predictive timeline for when Jesus will return—speculation about which Jesus specifically cautions against (Mt 24.36; Mt 25.13; Acts 1.7). Each generation creates a different list of associations between the trumpets and world events, showing the futility of the attempted correlation.

The trumpets are a message about judgement on wicked mankind, that is synchronous with the message of the seals (Rev 6.1-8.5) and the bowls (Rev 15.7-16.21)—covering events that must occur *continually* between Christ’s ascension and his return. God is at war with the enemies of his Church and continues to subdue their rebellion with increasingly terrible warnings and plagues, similar to the escalating plagues inflicted on ancient Egypt. He uses these plagues to call the ungodly to repentance and to deliver judgement on those who remain unrepentant. The vision of the seven trumpets provides mankind with a figurative indication (although particular events may be *partial* fulfillments) of God’s extreme displeasure with their sin, but also gives them an opportunity to respond to the warning through repentance. Every day that disaster is withheld is a sign of God’s general grace that shows that God’s goal in sounding the seven trumpets is not destruction, but salvation.

The Figurative Nature of the Trumpet Blasts

(Rev 8.2; Rev 8.6-9.21; Rev 11.15-19)

As with much of the interpretation of Revelation, there is a wide range of opinion about how we are to understand and apply the warnings of judgement given to John in the vision of the trumpets. For example, some commentators state that the prophesied events are to be understood literally and that there will be physical events in the future, in which hail and fire mixed with blood will fall upon the earth, a large stone (e.g., a meteorite) will land in the ocean, and many springs will be polluted (e.g., with radiation). Others interpret the vision allegorically but apply it to the physical realm; for example, interpreting the wormwood (Rev 8.11) as poisonous radiation and the locusts (Rev 9.7) as assault helicopters. Still others completely allegorize the vision seeing in the trumpets, fanaticism, embitterment, apostasy and heresy, spiritual darkness, psychological confusion, and demonic spiritual activity. Proponents of a literal interpretation claim that a symbolic-allegorical approach leads to “nothing but arbitrary guesswork”. However, a physical ‘literalist’ interpretation is equally subject to arbitrary guesswork.

It will help us to understand the vision of the seven trumpets if we consider it within an interpretive framework, that includes the following principles:

- The vision associated with the seven trumpets does not follow the vision of the seven seals

chronologically. Both visions run in parallel and cover the same time period—from the resurrection of Jesus and the founding of the NT Church to his return to wrap up history. Thus, the visions do not deal with events that have occurred exclusively in the past or will occur only in the future, but with events that continually occur throughout the last days—the age between the advents.

- It is a mistake to associate each visual image in the vision of the trumpets with a definitive event—e.g., the fall of Rome, the arrival of Islam, WW II, etc. The imagery is provided to represent symbolically, or figuratively, the concept of judgement, not the specifics.
- The vision does not deal with events which will occur only immediately before the return of Jesus or at the final judgement. The fact that a number of the trumpet blasts refer to partial judgements (i.e., a third of the grass, trees, rivers, moon, and stars), indicates that they occur in the earthly realm at various times and in various places, and not at the final judgement, at which time *everything* will be consumed (2 Pt 3.10-12).
- The purpose of the trumpet blasts is not to exact the final judgement on wicked men, but to provide signs pointing to the final judgement and to call mankind to repentance. By the imagery of disturbances in the natural world, mankind is warned not to place its trust in passing things, which are subject to shaking and destruction, instead of in God. The warnings and subsequent judgements awaken men to their depraved spiritual condition by using the analogy of unstable natural elements that cannot be depended upon to provide security or to supply their physical needs. The vision of the trumpets presents more than a dream—it is a harrowing nightmare that displays the terrifying results of attempting to live without God and without giving him thanks for the blessings that he provides.
- The similarity between the judgements associated with the trumpet blasts and the plagues inflicted on the Egyptians before the exodus, indicates that the blasts are directed at unrepentant unbelievers, not God's covenant people who are covered by the shed blood of the Lamb, sealed (Rev 7.1-3), and protected from the wrath that is unleashed on the world's wicked. Notice that the same three objects (earth, sea, and trees) are protected for believers (Rev 7.1) but harmed by judgement for unbelievers (Rev 8.7-8). The vision of the trumpets teaches that if men continue to offend God like the Egyptians did, they will be punished in a similar way the Egyptians were.
- The judgements associated with the trumpets are intended primarily to afflict the ungodly. Thus, they are limited to one third of the earth for the sake of the elect. Some believers (within the thirds subjected to the judgements) become collateral damage, but they are not the primary target. The troubles associated with each trumpet blast indicate that God is continually judging the wicked for their sins, warning them to repent, and reminding them of the final judgement, which is inescapable.
- The darkening of a third of the sun, moon, and stars should be interpreted within the context of the NT fulfilment of OT prophecy. Peter indicated that the prophecy of Joel, which speaks of signs in the heavens, including the sun and moon being darkened (Acts 2.19-20), had been fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, not with actual changes to the celestial objects but through a spiritual fulfilment. Thus, the visual images provided in the vision of the trumpets point to spiritual realities—symbolic types rather than instances of physical realities. The symbolical meaning of the trumpet vision is reinforced by the use of similes (Rev 8.8, 10; Rev 9.2-3, 5, 7-10, 17, 19) and figurative language (e.g., a mountain-like object falling on a third of world's fresh water). Also, the symbolic nature of the trumpet vision is supported by the undoing of the elements God made during creation week by the judgements of the first four trumpets—the earth (Rev 8.7), plants (Rev 8.7), sea (Rev 8.8), sea creatures (Rev 8.9), humans (Rev 8.11), sun (Rev 8.12), moon (Rev 8.12), and stars (Rev 8.12), are all undone.

The seven trumpet blasts teach that God is avenging his elect (dealing with sin now), calling upon wicked men to forsake their evil, and encouraging the faithful to persevere in righteousness.

The First Trumpet Blast

(Rev 8.7)

The first angel blew his trumpet, and the first of a series of judgements proceeded from the throne room of God upon rebellious mankind. This devastating judgement of hail and fire mixed with blood destroyed one third of the earth and its vegetation. It is reminiscent of the seventh plague of hail and fire (Ex 9.24) that afflicted the ancient Egyptians when they refused to let Moses and God's covenant people leave Egypt and return to Palestine. It also echoes the semi-eschatological prophecy issued by Ezekiel against Gog in the land of Magog, in central Anatolia north of Israel, in which God indicates that he will rain down hail, fire, and burning sulphur, and there will be much bloodshed (Ezk 38.22).

The plagues inflicted on Egypt destroyed the entire land, except for the portion where the Israelites lived. The plague of the first trumpet affects not just a single rebellious nation, but a third of the entire earth. The effect has been universalized to all nations, but there remains a portion of the earth that is not affected, for the sake of the elect—the true Israel of God (Ezk 5.2, 12). In some cases, both the righteous and the ungodly suffer from judgement on the wicked, but for the righteous the judgement is a refining trial (James 1.2), while for the wicked it is a devastating punishment.

How we are to understand the nature of this terrible storm has been the subject of debate for two millennia. Interpretations which have been offered include the following:

- A storm of heresy, such as Gnosticism or Arianism, that fell upon the NT Church in the first few centuries.
- A judgement on heresies in the Church, with the judgement falling on a third of the clergy ('earth') and laity ('grass'); with the trees representing people of high rank (either in government or the church hierarchy).
- A dispensation of worldly zeal, sensuous piety, and fanaticism (Lk 9.54), during the churchly form of the Kingdom of God.
- A hail (icy coldness) in men's souls toward spiritual matters and a fire of superstitious passions mingled with a fanaticism resulting in blood. This could be a description of a heretical movement in the Church or of Islam.
- Years of burning drought, erratic weather, and accompanying famine that afflicted the central and eastern parts of the Mediterranean in the 1st century (63-68 AD).
- The invasion of the western portion (a 'third') of the Roman Empire by Alaric, king of the Goths (a 'hailstorm' from the north), at the end of the fourth century.
- A figurative illustration of the fire of false devotion (e.g., of Islamic jihad) and the hailstorm of hatred against Christians. issuing in bloodshed.
- The wars of the Roman emperors, Trajan and Hadrian; or World War I, that incorporated a portion (a 'third') of the nations of the earth.
- A pending ecological catastrophe (e.g., a nuclear bomb delivered from the sky on an ICBM) that will affect a major portion of the earth, and that will occur shortly before Christ returns.
- A final end-time battle (Armageddon) in which Gog (i.e., at one time thought to be Russia, now thought to be Iran) will be defeated.

Some interpreters state that we must stick to the 'letters of the text'—i.e., that we must understand this passage in a literal physical sense, with actual fire, hail and blood falling on the earth. Others, noting the many abortive attempts to interpret this passage, insist that we must interpret the text allegorically or symbolically. Considering all the wildly different interpretations that have been offered we must not be dogmatic about which is the correct interpretation. Nor should we get caught up in the current end-time hyperventilation which reads the ever-changing news headlines into this passage.

It may be best to take our guidance for how to interpret this verse from how Peter understood and applied the prophecy of Joel, which he quoted on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2.19). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Peter tells us that the prophecy of Joel, which speaks of "wonders in the heavens and on the earth,

blood and fire and columns of smoke” (Joel 2.30), was not referring to physical phenomena in the sky but of a spiritual revolution wrought by the Holy Spirit. Thus, this judgement is probably not referring to a chemical fire that will burn up parts of the earth. Rather it is likely speaking in metaphorical terms about spiritual and associated temporal realities. This interpretation is supported by other instances in Revelation which mention fire and apply it figuratively (Rev 1.14; Rev 2.18; Rev 4.5; Rev 10.1; Rev 19.12). The association of fire with the seven spirits of God (likely a reference to the Holy Spirit) in Revelation 4.5 is particularly relevant because this ‘fire’ is before the throne, and it is from the throne that the judgement of ‘fire’ emanates (Rev 8.5).

Since we can infer that the first trumpet blast affects the earth’s ability to produce food, which would result in famine (Rev 6.6), this judgement could be understood as the ruin, in general terms, that is wrought by world’s nations as they war against God and his Church and against one another. They suffer divine judgement as a consequence of their lust for power and their use of the sword, that results in shortages, plague, and famine. The first trumpet judgement is not primarily intended to induce repentance but to punish unrepentant idolaters (Ezk 5.9, 11) who worship power, prestige, and pleasure, and thus receive the due penalty for their error (Rom 1.27).

The Second Trumpet Blast (Rev 8.8-9)

Various manifestations of natural phenomena have been presented as a literal interpretation of this trumpet blast. They are often presented with absolute certainty. For example, interpreters make statements such as, “Obviously the results of these judgements are literal.”, “The text, contains nothing of an allegorical nature.”, and “It is best to interpret these events literally.” Then, their speculation often turns into fantasy when they offer explanations for the meaning of this trumpet blast. Historically, a popular explanation was that this trumpet blast foresaw or referenced (depending on the writer’s view about when Revelation was written) the explosion of Mt Vesuvius (in 79 AD) or was based on general knowledge of a catastrophic eruption of another volcano in the region, such as that at Santorini on an island of Thera in the Aegean, a couple of centuries before John wrote. The most common literalist interpretation today is that the burning mountain falling from the sky will be a meteorite. One writer even asks his readers to consider what it will be like when the unbelieving world must deal with the disposition of millions of marine corpses.

Those who defend a literalist interpretation observe that in the vision the sea becomes blood. This is an allusion to the first plague of blood (Ex 7.20-21) that afflicted the ancient Egyptians when they refused to let Moses and God’s covenant people leave Egypt and return to Palestine. In the plague on Egypt, the Nile was turned into blood and the water became undrinkable. Thus, it is claimed that, to be consistent, we should interpret the second trumpet as an account of an actual physical phenomenon. Exodus recounts history and events that, although some have an associated typical nature, actually happened to the people in Egypt. However, Revelation does not recount historical (or future) physical events *per se* but uses visual imagery and figurative language to represent moral and spiritual reality and truth. In addition, the catastrophes associated with the seven trumpets are based on OT exemplars, which are largely figurative. For example, the vision of a large mountain associated with this trumpet is reminiscent of the stone that grew into the large mountain in Nebuchadnezzar’s vision (Dan 2.35, 44-45). Likewise, the LORD speaks through Jeremiah of Babylon and refers to it figuratively as a destroying mountain (Jer 51.25). Furthermore, the sea is used as a symbol for nations that are in rebellion against God (Rev 17.1, 15; Ps 65.7; Is 17.12; Is 23.11).

Figurative interpretations of this trumpet judgement have included:

- A burning mountain of fanaticism that led to the historical destruction of Jerusalem and the fall of Judaism, which was cast into the sea of the nations and destroyed the life of those nations.
- Rome, depicted as a wicked mountain and equated with Babylon in the OT, was flung into the nations,

represented by the sea. At its demise there was much destruction among the nations around the Mediterranean Sea.

- The invasion of the Roman Empire by the Goths and Vandals over a period of almost 140 years, that was accompanied by devastation of Roman commerce and national life.
- Wars, whether the Jewish Wars or World War II. It is claimed by some that about one third of the ships that participated in WW II were sunk, and that the bomb that was deployed on Hiroshima appeared like a mountain of fire.
- Naval calamities such as those that are reported to have occurred at the time of Nero.
- The destruction of Christian national life by a false fire-mountain of heresy—with specific heresies in view such as Arianism or Islam that shook the Roman Empire (the sea), the sea creatures (mankind; compare Hab 1.14), and the ships (commerce or villages and towns).
- The mountain-like object was a fallen angel or perverse heretic (e.g., Marcion or Mohammad) that caused spiritual devastation in the Church or among the nations.

We noted previously that we should interpret the blasts of the seven trumpets figuratively, (see, [*The Figurative*](#) Nature of the Trumpet Blasts). So, despite the wide spectrum of figurative interpretations, and the apparent arbitrariness of them, we should attempt to identify an interpretation that is faithful to the spirit and purpose of the book of Revelation. When we consider the parables of Jesus, we must not attempt to find a hidden meaning in every component of the parable but focus on the intent. We should apply the same principle when interpreting this vision. Therefore, it seems that the best way to interpret this trumpet blast is to understand it as containing the following key messages:

- God observes the ways of the wicked nations and sends judgement upon them. They may roar and foam against the LORD and his anointed (Ps 2.1-3), but the LORD has the last laugh (Ps 2.4) and visits them with his terrifying wrath (Ps 2.5).
- A form of judgement God uses is to disrupt human economic systems and their profit aspirations (symbolized by the destruction of ships).
- Although there may be particularly spectacular instances of this form of judgement, we should not apply this trumpet blast to a specific event. This form of judgement is continuous, between Christ's two advents.
- This judgement is a warning (a type) for a greater judgement that is yet to come, when God will punish all the nations that are not subject to his Son (Ps 2.6-12).

The Third Trumpet Blast

(Rev 8.10-11)

The trumpets of judgement continue to sound, like the booms of mortars being launched from an artillery battery. There is no rest for those being assailed and no place to hide from the onslaught. The sounding of the third trumpet brings a blazing star that, upon falling on the earth, poisons a third of the fresh water. This falling star is called Wormwood, which is understood to refer to a woody shrub. Its oil is used as an ingredient in vermouth and absinthe and in some cosmetics and perfumes, and as a traditional medication to treat digestive disorders (including worm infestations) and insect bites. Ingesting low dosages can induce mental alertness, and thus it became popular among early 20th-century artists and writers. Dosages at a higher concentration can be lethal. Our word 'wormwood' appears to be derived from an Old Saxon word that means 'bitter'. When used as a metaphor, 'wormwood' refers to a source of personal bitterness and grief (Prov 5.4; Lam 3.15, 19; Amos 5.7; Amos 6.12).

As with the imagery associated with the previous trumpet blasts, there is a wide variation in the interpretations suggested for this judgement. Those who adhere to a literalist interpretation expect that in the near future a large celestial object will enter the earth's orbit and crash onto the land and cause much devastation that will pollute many fresh water sources. Some literalists claim that since 'chernobyl' is a

Russian name for a species of plant (*Artemisia vulgaris*) related to wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), the explosion of the nuclear plant at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986 was the primary fulfilment of the judgement resulting from this trumpet blast. This is a clear example of how we should not interpret the visions of Revelation—forcing details from current events onto the text. This approach to interpreting Revelation is not supported by the principles of good exegesis and applied hermeneutics.

The symbolic and allegorical interpretations that have been proposed includes the following:

- The most common view is that the star refers to a prominent political or clerical personage. For example, it was once suggested that the star represents Romulus Augustus, called a usurper, who ruled the Western Roman Empire for a year and was deposed by Odoacer in 476 AD. This is the traditional date for the end of the western portion of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Middle Ages in Western Europe. Other suggestions in this category include Nero, Julian, and Gregory the Great.
- A fallen angel representing the Roman Empire (compare Dan 10.13, 20), or possibly Satan himself (which is the most likely explanation).
- A symbol for the king of Babylon (Is 14.12), or Imperial Rome as the NT incarnation of Babylon (Rev 14.8; Rev 18.2).
- False heresies and doctrines, including Arianism and particular Roman Catholic teachings, such as on the Mass. Thus, the Gospel, the spring of spiritual life, is polluted by the introduction of error, leading to ruin for a large portion (figuratively, a third) of mankind.
- The decay of morals in monastic communities during the Middle Ages, after the time of Constantine.
- Just laws (the foundation of liberty, equity, property rights, and personal safety) being poisoned by tyranny.
- Men are given over to a spirit of bitterness because they refuse to thank God for life's blessings and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator.

All attempts to associate the imagery of this trumpet blast with a specific *human* person, historical event, philosophy, doctrine, or natural phenomenon will fail. Each suggested association will be superseded by another in the next generation. This is not how we are to understand the figurative imagery that John observed in his vision of the seven trumpets. We are to understand the entire vision as providing a cohesive set of judgements (seven, representing a complete number) that are continually being directed toward the unrepentant, between the time of Christ's resurrection and his return to bring mankind to the final judgement.

We should notice that the first trumpet blast appears to be directed at the earth's ability to produce food. The second blast appears to be directed at the sea's ability to produce food and also against ships, the primary channel for trade in the NT era, and thus against commercial activities. The third trumpet blast is another blow against the earth's productivity—with the polluting of the waters. Thus, collectively, these three judgements appear to indicate that God continues to sustain the curse on the ground and on man's labours (Gen 3.17-19) and compounds the difficulty men face producing food, which leads to bitter affliction, famine and death, because of mankind's ongoing rebellion against God. As long as this decaying, created realm exists, there can be no rest for mankind. There remains a Sabbath rest only in the new heaven and earth (Heb 4.8-9).

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that he was the source of living water (Jn 4.10). John hears that those who are covered by the blood of the Lamb and come out the great tribulation have received these living waters (Rev 7.16-17; see also Rev 21.6; Rev 22.1). In contrast, the wicked have only the bitter water of death.

The Fourth Trumpet Blast

(Rev 8.12)

In this trumpet-judgement, one third of the celestial objects are darkened. It is as if John sees a black veil being pulled across portions of the sky to block the light from some of the stars and to cause a partial eclipse on the sun and moon. Part of the judgement of this trumpet blast also includes the darkening of a third of the day and of the night. We can understand how a third of the daylight could be darkened, for example, if the light of the sun was blocked by a total eclipse for three to four hours. So, it is possible that John observed that the moon and the stars were also blocked for a third of the night, so that the night became even darker than normal. Darkness in Biblical prophecy is often a sign of God's direct judgement on sin (Is 13.10; Is 34.4; Ezk 32.7-8; Joel 2.2, 10, 31; Joel 3.15).

This judgement appears to allude to the plague of darkness that fell upon the Egyptians when they refused to let the Israelites leave (Ex 10.21-29). Most (possibly, all) of the plagues visited upon ancient Egypt were directed at their pagan deities—to demonstrate that the Egyptian gods were not real and had no power, and that worshipping them was foolish. In contrast, John's vision demonstrates that the LORD has control over the elements of nature, including the celestial objects, which he created (Gen 1.14-19; Is 40.26), named (Ps 147.4), and governs (Ps 8.3; Ps 104.19). The plagues in Egypt were direct challenges against pagan idolatry. Likewise, this judgement directs our attention to the reality that God confronts the sin of idolatry in our day by darkening the minds of those who place their hope in anything other than the true God—those who worship and serve the creature, rather than the Creator (Rom 1.25).

As with the other trumpet blasts, there have been numerous interpretations offered for this one. An interpretation that depends on physical phenomena does not seem to be appropriate. By saying this, we are by no means suggesting that there is a limit to God's power. The God who by speaking made all the celestial objects in the entire universe appear instantaneously in one actual day, could certainly do today what he did in Moses' and Joshua's days—sending darkness and extending daylight. However, as we have noted many times previously in this series, the visions of Revelation are to be understood largely as figurative and not applied literally. We do not need to suggest, as some do, that God has begun the deconstruction of the physical universe with this judgement, and that the day of judgement must be coming shortly. This goes contrary to what God promised when he established his covenants with Noah and David (Gen 8.22; Jer 33.20, 25)—there will be no significant diminishing of the natural light of the sun, moon, and stars shining upon the earth until instantly everything is consumed on the last day.

Some of the other interpretations of this trumpet blast are equally suspect. We cannot limit this judgement to a particular historical (or current) event such as the political disorder resulting from the attacks of Goths, Vandals, or Turks. At least one writer has suggested that this judgement refers to actual solar or lunar eclipses that supposedly occurred in the Mediterranean world in 68 AD. There were two total [lunar eclipses](#) (no partial ones) in 68 AD. However, the only [solar eclipses](#) in that year (both partial) were visible only in central Asia and in the Pacific Ocean, south of Australia. Nor does this trumpet sound refer to a particular instance of infidelity, heresy, or apostasy. For example, some extend the symbology too far, into the realm of allegory, and view the sun as the Roman Emperor, the moon, as an ecclesiastical leader (e.g., the pope), and the stars as bishops whose minds are darkened by unbelief.

Rather than focusing on the cause or means of judgement in the vision (the veiling of celestial objects) we should focus on the effect or consequences which it portends. Without doubt, we are to understand this judgement to be referring to a spiritual darkness that afflicts a portion of mankind continually during the inter-advental period. Paul refers to this situation when he says that people who suppress truth are foolish in their thinking and have darkened hearts, and while claiming to be wise become fools because of their idolatry (Rom 1.21-23). The plague of darkness in Egypt before the exodus, was a polemic against the sun god, Ra, of whom Pharaoh claimed to be an incarnation. Likewise, the judgement of darkness arising from the fourth trumpet blast is a polemic against all hardened unbelievers who obscure truth with false religions, philosophies, beliefs, and theories. In contrast to the spiritual and moral darkness that God sends on a portion of mankind in every generation, to punish them for their idolatry, he sheds the light of the Gospel

everywhere—to enlighten the hearts and minds of those he makes willing to receive salvation.

We can derive some lessons from the judgement associated with the fourth trumpet blast:

- God created the celestial objects and uses them to fulfill his purposes (Job 9.7; Jer 31.35)
- We should not worship celestial objects (sun, moon, stars, planets) they are mere created entities which perform their appointed role assigned by God and have no control over the lives of men on earth.
- Spiritual and moral corruption in society and the church are themselves a judgement into which God hands over those who persist in their idolatry and who refuse to receive the Gospel.

The Cry of the Vulture (Rev 8.13)

Four of the seven trumpets of judgement have sounded; the blasts of three are yet to be heard. However, before the remaining trumpets are blown, there is a brief dramatic pause, as a voice is heard crying out a three-fold ‘woe’ on the inhabitants of the earth.

The ESV states that an ‘eagle’ called out the woes. However, in two of the other four instances of the Greek word translated here as ‘eagle’, occurring in the NT, it is translated as ‘vulture’ (Mt 24.28; Lk 17.37)—the Greek word can be translated as either ‘eagle’ or ‘vulture’. Also, the ESV has ‘vulture’ in Hosea 8.1, which is translated into the Septuagint Greek OT using the same Greek word as John uses here. The context of the pending woes associated with the final three trumpet blasts, supports the translation ‘vulture’—a bird of prey that hovers in the sky waiting for corpses to appear, before it swoops in for a feast. It is also consistent with the curse that Israel was warned about. If they were disobedient to the covenant, their dead bodies would be eaten by birds (Dt 28.26; Jer 7.33; Jer 16.3-4; Jer 19.7; Jer 34.18-20).

If you compare English translations, you will notice that N/KJV has ‘angel’ instead of ‘eagle’. I have rarely noted manuscript differences in this series of meditations since such considerations can become quite technical. Also, I believe that the careful and considered work that has been done over the past four centuries, comparing and contrasting the hand-scribed NT manuscripts, has resulted in the production of an exceptionally reliable text that is consistent with (if not identical to) the autographs. However, the manuscript of Revelation upon which Erasmus (a Roman Catholic humanist) based his printed Greek edition of the NT, from which the KJV was primarily translated, was relatively recent (9th c., or later) and not of the best quality. It has been suggested that the scribe who copied an earlier manuscript of Revelation could not endorse the idea that a ceremonially unclean bird (Lev 11.13) would be used by God as his messenger of judgement and changed the word to ‘angel’. Some commentators get around the ‘problem’ of the difference by proposing that an angel appeared in the form of an eagle, which is supported by at least one late manuscript that reads, ‘angel as an eagle’.

The vulture hovering overhead made a screeching cry of ‘woe, woe, woe’, which in the Greek is onomatopoeic, and would sound something like ‘oi, oi, oi’ to our ears, which is similar to the harsh sound a bird of prey would make. By repeating the word ‘woe’ three times, the vulture indicates that a far worse calamity, than has already been visited upon the wicked, is about to be poured out with the blasts of the remaining three trumpets. The increased severity of the remaining three judgements is indirectly indicated by the length of John’s description (Rev 9.1-21; Rev 11.15-19), compared with the short description he gives of the first four (Rev 8.6-12). Another indication that the last three trumpet blasts are more catastrophic is that while the first four were directed primarily at the natural world (e.g., trees, land, sea, stars, etc.) and humans suffered indirectly, the last three blasts are directed specifically at wicked mankind (Rev 9.4-5, 15, 18; Rev 11.18). The three-fold repetition of the word ‘woe’ is thought by some to be a Semitic form for indicating a superlative (compare, Rev 4.8), that emphasizes the degree of devastation of the judgements. This is a possibility; however, since two of the three remaining woes are explicitly associated with the fifth and sixth trumpet blasts (Rev 9.12; Rev 11.14), it is more likely that each of the woes corresponds to one of the last three trumpet blasts.

The cry of the vulture is provided as a wake-up call to those who ignore the four preceding warnings of judgement and refuse to repent. God doesn’t suddenly, as it were ‘out of the blue’, capriciously and vindictively send lightning bolts on his enemies—like a pagan deity such as Zeus might do. Rather, he gives ample and sufficient warning of judgement to come. For example, he gave the people before the flood a warning of 120 years (Gen 6.3) during which Noah built the ark and proclaimed to them the pending judgement (2 Pt 2.5). Likewise, he gave some of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, through Lot, a warning that their cities would be destroyed (Gen 19.14) because of their homosexual practices (Gen 19.5).

He also gave the Canaanites time to repent (Gen 15.12-21; Josh 2.8-14) of their abominations—sexual deviance, witchcraft, and idolatry—but they ignored God’s gracious warnings.

So, it continues today. God repeatedly sends out relatively milder, localized, and limited judgements on wicked mankind—in the form of financial difficulties, health problems, and personal relationship issues. However, instead of heeding the corrective and restraining hand of Providence, men foolishly mock God, indulge their perverse passions, and ignore the warnings of a greater judgement that is soon to be unleashed on them. The judgements associated with the first four trumpets are designed like an early warning system, similar to what we encounter when we place our hand on a hot stove. The first twinge of pain shooting up our arm causes us to pull back and avoid a severe burn. However, men who ignore the warnings of the trumpets have the moral and spiritual equivalent of congenital analgesia, and cannot feel pain, and become subject to the severe damage to body and soul, ending with burning in hell fire. Blessed are those who see the hovering vulture waiting to descend on dead carcasses and become alive through faith and repentance.

The Fifth Trumpet Blast – Apollyon, a Fallen Star (Rev 9.1, 11)

There is a wide spectrum of opinions about the meaning of this ‘star’ that had fallen from heaven to earth. However, even those who claim that we are to interpret other trumpet blasts with physical literalness generally concede that an actual star did not fall from its place in the galaxy and land on the earth. We know that even the smallest stars are many orders of magnitude larger than the earth, and that if a real star collided with the earth, the earth would be vaporized. Thus, most commentators conclude that the ‘star’ is to be interpreted figuratively or metaphysically. This should influence how we interpret the other entities that John saw in the vision of the trumpets and exclude interpretations which adhere to a false form of literalness.

Some interpreters spiritualize this trumpet blast; for example, viewing the locusts as a symbol for heresies or false doctrines, and the fallen star as remorse without a true faith. Some suggest that the ‘star’ does not refer to an individual, but to any person who has held a high position and destroyed the unwary with false teachings. However, most interpreters conclude that this trumpet blast symbolically represents a specific angelic or human person—who are sometimes referred to as ‘stars’ (Rev 1.20; Num 24.17; Job 38.7; Dan 8.9-11). Some suggestions for who this person is, include the following:

- Nero or another Roman emperor: with the locusts being the Roman army, and the ‘five months’ (Rev 9.5) being a time of persecution or the Jewish Wars. Others have suggested a more recent ruler such as Napoleon.
- A Jewish priest: with the Jewish nation “acting as possessed by seven thousand demons” during the generation between the resurrection of Jesus and the fall of Jerusalem.
- Mohammad: with the locusts being the demon-spawn of jihadi armies, and the ‘five months’ of disaster being the sudden rise of Islam until it met its first pushback from a nominally Christian army.
- An apostate leader (pope or bishop) in the Church. For example, the first bishop of Rome who claimed to have primacy over the whole Church—some believe that this claim was made by Pope Boniface I (418-422), who is reputed to have said that the church of Rome, relative to other churches, stood “as the head to the members”. Others believe that it was Pope Boniface III (603-606), with the approval of the emperor Phocas.
- A good or evil angel. Some appeal to Jewish mystical mythology and mention one of the supposed archangels such as Uriel, the angel of repentance, or Sariel, who watches “over the spirits that sin in the spirit”.

This spectrum of suggestions illustrates the danger that many fall into—attempts to localize (in time and geography) all the visions of Revelation.

If we are to associate this ‘star’ with a particular person, it seems that the most likely candidate is Satan.

The identification of this fallen ‘star’ with Satan is supported by the following considerations:

- John indicates that the star ‘had fallen’—it did not fall while he was observing the vision; so, it was a past event, not in his future or ours.
- Jesus uses a similar expression to describe Satan’s judgement (Lk 10.18).
- This ‘star’ is an angel (Rev 9.11), who is king over the bottomless pit.
- Jesus identifies Satan as the ruler of the demons (Lk 10.17), which are represented in this vision by the locusts (Rev 9.3, 7).
- Elsewhere in Revelation, John sees Satan thrown to the earth (Rev 12.9).

In addition, the angel is identified with names that are applicable to Satan and reinforce the association of the ‘star’ with Satan. He is identified as:

- *Abaddon*, from the Hebrew word meaning ‘destruction’, which was used in the OT to refer to the domain of the wicked in death (Job 26.6; Job 28.22; Job 31.12; Ps 88.11; Prov 15.11; Prov 27.20).
- *Apollyon*, which is how the Greek OT (the Septuagint) translates the word ‘abaddon’.

By these names, Satan’s personality and character is clearly exposed—he is the destroyer of mankind—body and spirit (Jn 8.44). Some commentators have noted that the names, ‘Apollyon’ and ‘Apollo’, come from the same Greek root and can be used synonymously (e.g., Aeschylus, [Agamemnon 1082](#)). John may use a form of a *double entendre*, hinting that the Greek mythological gods are figuratively evil tormenters and that the emperors who claimed to be an incarnation or descendant of Apollo (such as Nero) are persecutors of Christians, in the same class as Satan.

The fact that Satan fell from heaven and was thrown out onto the earth, indicates that at one time he was a holy angel and heaven was his abode. Through his rebellion against God’s authority, he became a demon. He may have continued to have had access to heaven for a time (Job 1.6-7; Job 2.1-2). But his access has now been revoked (probably with Christ’s victory over Satan, the grave, and death, at his resurrection). Satan is now consigned to dwell in the bottomless pit. However, we observe that he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit, also known as the ‘abyss’, from the Greek. Satan did not steal the key, nor did he win it in battle; it was given to him. This indicates that Christ, who ultimately owns the keys of Death and Hades (Rev 1.18), has granted Satan authority over the domain of demons, and temporary access (until the renovation of the physical universe) to the world of mankind. With this key, he unleashes his army of demon destroyers, to persecute Christians and claim as many humans as he can for his domain of darkness.

The Fifth Trumpet Blast – Smoke from the Abyss

(Rev 9.1-2)

The expression ‘bottomless pit’ first appeared in the English Bible in Tyndale’s NT translation (1536). It is a rendering of the Greek word ‘abyss’ (see, the ESV’s footnote and Luke 8.31), which means ‘without bottom’. Wycliffe’s earlier English translation (late 14th c) has ‘pit of deepness’. Since a pit could not really be bottomless (i.e., infinite), it is a hyperbolic way of saying that the pit of hell is very deep—and from a human perspective unfathomable. It is wise that we consider the depth of this pit since it provides a solemn warning that any demon or human assigned to the pit of hell forever can never escape from it.

The abyss should generally not be understood as equivalent to ‘hades’, a commonly used expression for the realm of the dead, which in most instances could be translated as ‘grave’ (although Paul appears to use ‘abyss’ in the sense of ‘grave’, in Romans 10.7). Some argue that ‘abyss’ is also not equivalent to ‘hell’. However, it appears that the term ‘abyss’, as used here, describes part of the characteristics of hell—i.e., its dark polluted fiery depths and inescapable nature—whereas other Greek terms such as *tartarus* (2 Pt 2.4) *gehenna* (Mt 10.28), and ‘lake of fire’ (Rev 19.20) draw our attention to other aspects of hell; including everlasting torment, and pain.

John observes a shaft leading into the abyss. This appears to be a visual representation of the channel through which the demons (symbolized by the locusts; Rev 9.2-3, 7-10) traverse from the hellish realm into our universe. Covering the shaft there is a gate (Mt 16.18), implied by the presence of a key. From our time-bound perspective, it appears that the gate is currently open, so that humans who are consigned to hell can be led to their everlasting destination (Mt 25.41). However, no human, once assigned to hell, can ever pass through the gate in the other direction (Lk 16.26). It is also the gate through which Satan and his demons traverse from the spiritual realm into the spatial-temporal realm. At the end of time, when Jesus returns, and the final judgement of all mankind has been completed, the gate of the shaft to hell will be closed forever. Then Jesus, who ultimately holds the key to the gate (Rev 1.18), will lock and seal it so that it can never be opened again; and not even Satan and his demons, who can temporarily leave the pit to inflict damage on earth, will ever be able to leave hell and enter the new heaven and earth.

John also observes smoke, as from a great furnace, emanating from the shaft leading to the abyss. This smoke is so thick that it obscures the sun. We should not associate the smoke with a particular entity in the created realm. Rather, we should understand the smoke to be figurative of evil influences that spew out hell and Satan and darken human minds and hearts (2 Cor 4.4). The smoke of the incense burned in heaven (Rev 8.4) sanctifies the prayers of the saints, making them acceptable before God. But the smoke that ascends out of the abyss obscures the light of truth, blinds men's minds and darkens their understanding, and pollutes the air with fear and ignorance. The smoke of the furnace of hell signifies at least the following:

- *Idolatry and false religions.* Nothing is more enervating than worshiping the creature rather than the Creator (Rom 1.23, 25). All darkening of the human mind begins with worship of demons, nature, physical objects, other people, and self. It results in a cult of death that includes human sacrifice, abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, genocide, and jihad.
- *Denial of truth.* Darkened minds deny that absolute truth exists, sup from the fountain of relativism, and claim that the quest for truth is more important than discovering truth.
- *Scientism.* A denial of truth, as revealed in Scripture, causes superstitions to flourish and deceives men and destroys rationality. Men believe all kinds of nonsense such as: homosexuality and transgenderism are natural, men and women are identical in every respect, and all of life developed through natural selection from a primitive proto-cellular entity.
- *Unjust laws.* Men throw out the foundation for just law, which is a single absolute moral standard (summarized in the Ten Commandments). They believe the pluralistic myth that different legal systems (including Islamic *sharia*) can co-exist harmoniously.
- *Evil practices.* Minds are polluted with an addiction to pornography and with mind numbing drugs. Man's conscience is dulled and seared (1 Tim 4.2) so that he is filled with all manner of unrighteousness and approves of those who practice evil (Rom 1.29-32).
- *False doctrine.* Within the Church false teachings darken the Gospel and move its practices toward the 'social gospel', and its teaching to no-gospel.
- *Hopelessness.* Spiritual derangement, despair, and depression, arising from the blackness of hell, are so pervasive that men are without hope (Eph 2.12).
- *Spiritual blindness.* Most tragic of all is that men are blind to their guilty spiritual condition and are plummeting toward the shaft of the pit of hell.

Each of these instances of the darkening of human understanding and wills illustrates what Paul declares to be true about people steeped in ungodliness and unrighteousness—they claim to be wise but become fools (Rom 1.22). Only the clear air of the Gospel can dissipate the smoke and dispel the darkness. Thank God that he has provided the fresh wind of the Spirit to clear the smoke. Ask him to send the fresh breeze of reformation and revival into his Church and into our land and clear away the smoke of the abyss.

The Fifth Trumpet Blast – Demons of the Abyss (Rev 9.3, 7-10)

How would you describe something terrible and fear inducing? Directors of horror movies know that the things that people once found scary in films (Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, the phantom of the opera, or the creature from the black lagoon) elicit only a yawn from modern audiences. Likewise, zombies, jump scenes, ugly space aliens, toy clown heads, and sharks barely raise the blood pressure of most people today. John encountered a similar challenge—how to describe the creatures streaming out of the smoky shaft of the abyss in a way that would induce true fear in his readers. We don't find the description of locusts with human faces, long hair, lion's teeth, and crowns particularly scary. However, in John's day the image would have invoked a response of fear and aversion that we can't understand.

Locusts were feared as a horror in the ancient world. Their advancing 'army' would darken the sky, fill the air with the terrifying sound of the rumble of their wings, and leave behind a wasteland of denuded vegetation. In the OT they are associated with God's wrath and judgement (Dt 28.38; 2 Chron 7.13; Ps 105.34; Nah 3.15). They were included in the plagues on Egypt (Ex 10.10-15; Ps 78.46). Men in the ancient world were helpless against the devastating power of locusts and feared the destruction they left behind. Thus, John's imagery appears to allude to Joel's prophecy of an invading army, that is like locusts but with lion's teeth (Joel 1.2-10).

John describes the locusts streaming out of the abyss, with imagery intended to invoke fear in his readers. He uses 'like' nine times so that we understand that he is speaking metaphorically. He is not describing a physical entity like an assault helicopter or a natural earthly creature, but supernatural spiritual evil beings in their worst form. John describes these demons in graphic terms to illustrate their fierce and destructive nature. They appear like they have:

- *Bodies of war horses*. They are trained to be fearless and frightening.
- *Crowns*. They claim to have authority and posture their intent to conquer.
- *Human faces*. This is an indication that they are intelligent, rational, but malevolent creatures.
- *Long hair*. This is not a reference to the gorgeous locks of a beautiful woman, but an allusion to long dishevelled, and shameful (1 Cor 11.14), mess on the heads of uncouth barbarians on the borders of the empire.
- *Lion's teeth*. They are intent on tearing apart and devouring their prey.
- *Breastplates of iron*. Locusts have a hard thorax made of hardened cuticle. The Roman armies used breastplates made of leather and bronze but these demonic 'locusts' have breastplates (the Greek is *thorax*) made of iron, indicating their military preparation and apparent invincibility.
- *Noisy wings*. A single grasshopper makes a loud snapping sound when it is flying. The noise of a cloud of flying locusts can reach 130 decibels, about the noise level of a jet taking off from an aircraft carrier, at 15m.
- *Scorpion stingers*. They inject an evil poison of depravity and despair.

These demonic 'locusts' are more terrible than natural locusts could ever be. Nothing in nature can compare with their viciousness. Yet, most of us will have a challenge understanding how frightening this imagery is intended to be. The closest we might be able to come to understanding the impact of this vision on John's readers is to envision a raging swarm of goblins from Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movie versions of Tolkien's fantasy novels.

These demonic 'locusts' are "given power" to hurt people on the earth for a time (five months). They are not granted this power by Satan (who has no authority of his own to execute judgement or to delegate to others), but by Christ. This follows the historic example of the locust plague inflicted on rebellious Egypt, which was sent under the authority of God (Ex 10.13). The demonic swarm is commissioned by God to bring judgement on the earth. However, this judgement is not directed against Christians. For example, we are not to understand this trumpet blast to be a prediction of ISIS slaughtering Christians in Iraq. Without question Islamic jihad is an earthly manifestation of demonic influence, but the judgement of the seven

trumpets is not directed at Christians but against men who do “not see fit to acknowledge God” (Rom 1.28). The effect of this trumpet blast is directed at “those men who have not the seal of God on their foreheads” (Rev 9.4). Demons cannot possess or harm those who are protected by the blood of Christ and cannot destroy their genuine spiritual life or derail their progress toward heaven. Thus, the objective of the demonic swarm is to inflict judgement on unbelievers. God hands them over, or gives them up, to “a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (Rom 1.28). The ungodly are punished, and punished severely, by means of a demonic poison that causes them to:

- Darken their minds with false religions and philosophies so that they embrace superstitions and myths and practice idolatry (Rom 1.22-23).
- Commit abominable acts, such as murder and unnatural sexual practices (Rom 1.24-27).
- Harden their hearts in rebellion (Ex 8.15, 32)—God sends the hardening (Ex 7.3; Ex 10.1) that destroys their souls and fills them with hopelessness.
- War among themselves (Rev 6.4); for example, Parthians warring with Romans or Sunni Muslims slaughtering Shia Muslims.

These alarming judgements are a warning to unbelievers of their pending everlasting torment in hell, if they do not repent. They should fear the demons that are dragging them, body and soul, into hell (Mt 10.28).

The Fifth Trumpet Blast – Torment for Five Months

(Rev 9.3-6, 12)

Previous trumpet blasts affect elements of the natural order (Rev 8.6-8, 11, 12), and are intended to disrupt food production, manufacturing, and commerce; but are not intended to have a direct impact on the earth’s inhabitants—although some perish as collateral damage (Rev 8.11). However, the fifth trumpet blast is directed specifically at recalcitrant sinners; then the sixth is appointed to kill a portion (a third) of mankind (Rev 9.15). This indicates that since people refuse to repent, when confronted with limited or localized disasters, God intensifies the judgements upon them. The increased intensity of the judgements delivered by the final three trumpet blasts is indicated by their being referred to as ‘woes’; or, more accurately, ‘horrors’ or ‘disasters’.

Yet, God remains merciful, displaying a desire that the wicked will repent and be saved. Thus, he limits the extent of the fifth trumpet blast in:

- *Extent.* The locusts sent in the Egyptian plague destroyed all vegetation (Ex 10.15). However, the ‘locusts’ of the fifth trumpet are obviously not natural insects, since they are not permitted to touch the vegetation but, with their scorpion-like stingers, are to torment mankind. This indicates that the torments wrought by the demons, that the locusts symbolically represent, are primarily spiritual and psychological, not physical.
- *Impact.* The ‘locusts’, like Satan when he afflicted Job (Job 1.12; Job 2.6), are not permitted to kill, but only to torment. Since most men do not turn to God after they experience the torments of the fifth trumpet blast (Rev 9.6), God uses the sixth to awaken those who survive to the everlasting death that they will have to face if they do not repent.
- *Duration.* The demons’ authority to torment people is limited to five months. Some believe that this is stated because locusts usually appeared in the Middle East during a five-month dry season. Others suggest that the five months represent half of ten, and thus a portion of a complete period. The five-month duration for the torments is not a one-time event. It cannot be specifically associated with a period of Gothic rule in Europe or a rapid conquest of Christian or Jewish lands by Mohammad’s Islamic armies. Nor will it occur only once, just prior to the final judgement when Jesus returns. The judgement associated with the fifth trumpet is symbolically represented as a period of five months (i.e., a relatively short time) to indicate that God withholds final destruction for a time. However, the five-months of torment has occurred many times in the lives of individuals and nations who have rejected Jesus as Lord; and it will continue to occur until earth’s final day.

These limitations on the torments of the fifth trumpet blast demonstrate that they have been decreed by God and issue from his throne room, and that he controls their disposition.

These torments are directed at “only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads”—that is, only against those who are not genuine believers in Jesus and do not confess his lordship over their lives. This indicates that the torments are spiritual and psychological in nature, since there is not even collateral damage on those who are true believers. The demons of the abyss cannot harm those who have the blood of the Lamb sprinkled on the doorposts of their hearts (Ex 12.22-23). Jesus promised that his people could not be hurt by the poison of demonic scorpion stings (Lk 10.18-19). These torments afflict every unbeliever, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout his or her life. God uses them to expose their sinful natures and, if possible, to turn them from their wicked ways.

That the torments are primarily spiritual and psychological is also indicated by the presence of the demons. Their figurative scorpion stingers poison unbelievers’ minds in many ways, including:

- *Fear of physical dangers.* Probably close to 10% of the North American population has some form of a debilitating phobia.
- *Fear of death.* Many people are willing to spend vast amounts of money to extend their lives by a few months.
- *Depression and guilt.* Psychiatrists’ couches are filled with people who are wracked with feelings that they cannot resolve without true repentance.
- *Doubt.* Motivational speakers earn their livelihoods directing people to overcome their insecurities with positive thinking.
- *Hopelessness.* Unbelievers have no hope beyond their allotted 70-80 years of material existence and live out their gloomy days in despair.

God sends these torments to remind the ungodly that they are separated from him, reflect on their hopeless spiritual condition, awaken their consciences to their guilt and need of salvation, and warn them of the final judgement.

The first woe has been revealed and its torments, as bad as they are, have not changed hearts and minds. Most unbelievers do not repent. Rather, they blame God for their condition and, with uplifted fists against God, continue in their rebellion. They would rather die in their sins than bend the knee to their Lord and Creator, Jesus Christ. There are two more woes to be revealed. Will they be sufficient to awaken the minds and hearts of unbelievers? Sadly, the answer is no. The threat of punishment will generally not convince a calloused heart (2 Pt 3.3-4). Thus, we should be thankful that we have been given a new Spirit-filled life through conversion and that we have Jesus guarding our hearts and minds (Phil 4.7).

The Sixth Trumpet Blast – Releasing the Four Demon ‘Generals’ (Rev 9.13-15)

When we read the word ‘angel’, we usually associate it with holy beings. This presents a minor interpretive challenge. The direct translation of the Greek word that John uses here, is ‘angel’. However, most interpreters conclude, from the immediate context, that the four angels of judgement, associated with the sixth trumpet, are demons—which are fallen angelic beings—since they have been bound (see, Jude 6). Even if these angels are holy, this would present nothing that is inconsistent with God’s providential actions in history or with his word given in Scripture, since he can (and does) use holy angels to carry out his decrees of judgement against the wicked (Rev 7.2-3; Gen 19.1, 13; Ps 78.49; Is 37.36). Since it makes no practical difference whether God uses holy or demonic angels to execute his plans, we should focus on the purpose of the judgement, not on the agents used.

These angels are bound and constrained, which indicates that they are under God’s control, can be loosed

only at his command, and, even if evil, can only execute duties that God has assigned to them and for which they have been prepared by his eternal foreknowledge. The demonic powers of evil are under God's control, as are objects in the inanimate realm (e.g., the planets and stars appointed by him mark of seasons; Gen 1.14), and as are the hearts of wicked mankind (Ex 9.16; Prov 21.1). Regardless of what men and demons may think, they can prosecute evil only because of God's decretive and permissive will. Thus, the demons cannot escape prematurely to undertake their own ambitious scheme of destroying mankind, but are fulfilling God's eternal plan precisely, to the exact hour, day, month, and year. This should assure all believers in Jesus, that events are not out of control. Every event and every world leader, in every nation, whether in the 'free' West, the Middle East, or on the Korean Peninsula is under the control of the Lord God Almighty (Rev 1.8; Rev 4.8). The forces of evil are restrained and cannot hurt believers or unbelievers unless God has turned them loose for his purposes, at his appointed time (Lk 22.53). However, we should not assume that their loosing is a one-time event—whether at some eventful time in the past, or to be experienced at a key point in the future, for example, just before Christ returns. Rather, the time of the angels' release is constant and ongoing. As with the other judgements of the trumpets, this judgement is executed in every generation.

John hears a voice coming from the four horns of the altar (Ex 27.2), commanding the angel with the sixth trumpet to release the four demons. The command assigns to the angel the task of releasing the four demons to initiate the judgement that follows his blowing the trumpet. The voice of command is not angelic, but divine. It issues from the horns of the golden altar, on which have been placed the prayers of the saints (Rev 8.3)—which indicates that God uses the judgements of the seven trumpets to answer the request of the saints to vindicate them against their enemy persecutors. Horns, throughout Scripture, are symbols of power and authority. And, since altars are inanimate objects and do not speak, the altar is a personification of a person of ultimate power and authority—that is God himself, represented by Jesus. This indicates that this judgement is highly significant.

The four demons who were to be released had been bound "at the great river Euphrates". This is not to be understood in physical terms. There were not, and are not, four demons tied up along the banks of a river in Turkey or in Iraq. The reference to the Euphrates is symbolic. Beyond the Euphrates were the pagan nations outside of the promised land, given to the seed of Abraham (Gen 15.18; Dt 1.7). Later the enemies of Israel (the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians) came from beyond the Euphrates. Also, the Euphrates formed the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire, beyond which were the Parthians (Persians), the avowed enemies of Rome. Thus, the four demons are like generals who will lead out a vast army of demons (Rev 9.16) from beyond the Euphrates. This alludes to the OT prophecies that God would send armies from beyond the Euphrates (from the north) to judge sinful Israel (Is 7.20; Ezk 38.15) and anticipates the armies of the sixth bowl (Rev 16.12). The sixth trumpet and the sixth bowl likely describe the same judgement, but from different perspectives.

The vision of the vast army of judgement from beyond the Euphrates must have had meaning for the churches in Asia minor, to whom Revelation was delivered. Therefore, we are not to think that this trumpet blast is a prophecy about some far-distant future event which would occur only near the end of time (such as a Chinese army attacking the West). Nor does it apply to a more proximate, but specific historic event (such as the development of the papacy or the Islamic incursions into Europe). As we have noted previously, when John sees a vision of four angels (Rev 7.1-2, 11), we are to understand that this demonstrates that their activities are universal, encompassing the whole earth (from the directions of the four compass points).

The armies led by the four angels were sent out to kill a third of wicked mankind. This is not an army sent against believers, but against unbelievers who persecute believers. It is a message of spiritual judgement and death for those who commit idolatry, and equally heinous abominations (Rev 9.20-21). Its purpose is to give wicked men a foretaste of everlasting death and to induce them to repent before they must arrive at the day of final judgement. But, as we shall see, the warning of the sixth trumpet blast has no salutary effect

on the majority of mankind (Rev 9.21).

The Sixth Trumpet Blast – Mounted Troops of Judgement

(Rev 9.16-17, 19)

John is informed that the number of the mounted troops that he saw in his vision, which came from beyond the Euphrates (Rev 9.14-15), is “twice ten thousand times ten thousand”, or 200 million. It is obvious that he had to be informed of the number of this vast multitude since it would take a person about 50 years, nonstop, day and night, to count such a large army. John’s informant doubles the multiplication of the largest named number used in Hellenistic Greek (*myriads of myriads*); not so that we can associate it to an actual human army, but to indicate that the mounted troops of judgement are so large as to be essentially beyond our comprehension. The number in this evil army is twice the vast multitude of the redeemed around the throne (Rev 5.11), which indicates the excessive magnitude of evil that fills hell and erupts out of the shaft of the abyss onto the earth.

Commentators who take an extreme literalist interpretation of Revelation, have attempted to explain how such a large army could be assembled. In the past, no nation (or Empire) had a sufficient population from which to recruit or conscript an army of this size. For example, the ancient Persian Empire, that fought against the Greeks could, at its peak, have mustered around 1 million troops. So, some interpreters in the past have suggested that these mounted troops represent waves of attacks against Rome (east or west) or Europe, over decades or centuries, by Parthians, Asians from the north-east (e.g., the Huns), or Islamic armies sacking Jerusalem (637 AD or 1187 AD) and Constantinople (1453 AD), and eventually besieging Vienna (1529 AD). Since about the 1960s some interpreters have suggested that the communist Chinese could muster an army of 200 million. Today, the People’s Liberation Army, the largest army in Asia, has about 1.6 million active-duty troops. Likewise, with the advent of ISIS, some interpreters today make the assertion that an assembled horde of 200 million Muslims (10-15% of the world’s population of Muslims) will cross the dried-up Euphrates River (Rev 16.12) and swarm into Europe, shortly before Christ returns to establish a thousand-year earthly reign. However, these interpretations are misguided since they:

- Attempt to force figurative language into historical or current events; and each generation dismisses the previous generations’ explanations and purposes new ones.
- Appeal to naive Christians who believe that Revelation was provided so that we can create a timeline for events leading up to Christ’s return.
- Are proposed by self-appointed prophets who wish to impress us with their ‘ability’ to untangle the complexities of Revelation, by proposing even more complex interpretive schemes.
- Misunderstand the purpose of the trumpets of Revelation. The trumpet blasts do not describe pagan attacks directed against ‘Christian’ Rome or ‘Christian’ Europe but provide visions of world-wide judgements against *unbelievers*, throughout history, who engage in idolatry and practice sexual immorality (Rev 9.4, 18, 20-21).
- Ignore the symbolic nature of this vision, which describes in vivid terms the demonic legions that God sends out to harass and punish unbelievers, with the intention of showing them the extent of their depravity so that they might repent and be saved.

John describes what he saw in this vision—riders upon horses. Some try to separate the descriptions of the riders from the descriptions of their mounts, since it is necessary for John to describe each part sequentially. Some even suggest that the riders (interpreting them as heretics) are not as evil as their mounts (which they say are the heresies)—making the irrational beasts more culpable than their masters. However, it would seem that John sees each member of the cavalry unit as a single entity, with each horse and rider figuratively representing a powerful demon. The riders and the horses both appear to have breastplates in three colours—red, purple-blue, and yellow. Likewise, out of the horses’ mouths emerge fire (red), smoke (purple-blue), and sulphur (yellow). The fire, sulphur, and smoke collectively represent fatal judgements

sent by God against the wicked (Gen 19.24, 28; Ps 11.6; Ezk 38.22). The horses are described as having heads like those of lions, indicating the ferocious nature of the demonic forces. The horses also have tails with heads of serpents on their tips. The locust demons of the fifth trumpet blast have the stingers of scorpions on their tails (Rev 9.10). In contrast, the demons of the sixth trumpet blast have the fangs and poison of serpents on their tails, indicating the increasing intensity of the judgements as each trumpet is blown.

We should not allegorize each element of this description, or read deep meaning into them—for example, suggesting that the fire represents fanaticism, the smoke mental confusion, the sulphur poisonous ideologies, and the lions' heads arrogance. If we wish to assign a specific meaning to the emissions from the horses' mouths, we can compare them with the sword of truth and judgement that comes out of the mouth of Christ (Rev 1.16) and conclude that they collectively represent falsehood that God uses to deceive idolatrous mankind.

We should view the imagery as whole. John's purpose in describing these monstrous composite creatures is to present an image that holistically will inspire awe and fear. Revelation does not provide coded messages that are to be interpreted to identify historical events or to predict future events. Rather, the images are designed to stretch our imaginations so that we will understand how vicious the demons are which come out the abyss, and the doom that awaits those who persist in their sins.

The Sixth Trumpet Blast – Demonic Deception (Rev 9.17-19)

John refers to the fire, smoke, and sulphur coming out of horses' mouths, as "three plagues". Most commentators agree that John is not describing real physical fire-breathing creatures, with horses' bodies, lions' heads, and serpents' tails, that will someday march out of the east and cross the Euphrates River. Since he is using symbolic language, we need to establish what the meaning is of the plagues of the sixth trumpet. Some commentators associate the creatures with physical entities—for example, claiming that John uses the image of fantastical horses to describe the tanks or other armoured vehicles of modern warfare, that spew out fire with their shells or spray stinging bullets. Others have applied the metaphorical language to an army of human soldiers—for example, of an Islamic caliph who could shoot arrows while advancing or retreating on horses; or cavalry followed by foot soldiers (represented by the serpents' tails). However, these kinds of suggestions are purely guesses and there is no means of objectively selecting one correct interpretation over the others. A more sensible approach is to realize that John is using colourful language to describe a demonic incursion into the human realm. Thus, the correct meaning of the sixth trumpet blast must be found primarily in the spiritual and psychological dimensions.

Assuming that John is using figurative language to describe demonic forces, we must be careful not to wander into the realm of fantastical allegory. For example, we shouldn't posit the idea that the fire, smoke, and sulphur should be treated as three distinct entities—such as the fire representing fanaticism, the smoke mental confusion, and the sulphur poisonous ideologies. We would then have to supply a distinct particular meaning for the wounds caused by the serpent heads on the horses' tails or for the poison that they inject into the wounds. Nor should we suggest that the smoke is a metaphor for the punishment of deception and the fire and burning sulphur a metaphor for lethal judgement. And we are not to think of the horses as false prophets that spew out doctrinal heresies or false religious teachings that drag false teachers behind them. When we dissect the imagery in this way, and attempt to associate specific meanings to the parts, we push the interpretation too far.

It seems preferable to consider the vision as a whole and to conclude that the three discharges from the horses' mouths are a three-fold plague of darkness, delusion, lies, confusion, foolishness, irrationality, and ignorance (Ps 4.2; Jer 14.14; Rom 1.21; Eph 4.18; 2 Pt 2.12), accompanied by the poison of perversion

ejected from the serpent heads on the horses' tails (Prov 23.32-33). Thus, the chimera-like creatures of the sixth trumpet vision are a symbol for what we can summarize as *demonic deception*. However, this deception is not primarily doctrinal error or heresies within the Church, as some suggest—as dangerous and destructive as these are, even as Jesus warned the churches in Asia Minor (Rev 2.6, 14-15, 20-21). Rather, the plagues of deception which John describes through the vision, are a deception which consumes unbelievers who practice idolatry, murder, sorcery, and sexual immorality and refuse to repent (Rev 16.9, 11). Deception is a form of judgement that God visits upon the wicked (Is 6.10; Is 29.9-10, 13-14; Rom 1.21-22; 2 Thess 2.9-12). The hardening of Pharaoh's heart at the time of the exodus is an example of how God judges sinners by sending them plagues of deception.

John sees that a third (a figurative number, meaning a portion) of mankind was killed by the plagues coming out of the horses' mouths and many were wounded by the delusions from the serpent heads on the tails. The demonic plagues of deception can lead to death—death of the whole person, spiritually and forever, and at times premature physical death. We have space to consider only two of the demonic deceptions which God sends upon the wicked, that lead to their sin-induced death:

- *Substance Addictions*. The allure of alcohol and drugs is deceptive. Demons tempt the naive with the suggestion that getting 'high' or a 'buzz' occasionally will dull the pain of a perceived meaningless existence and bring a little excitement into a dull life. The *Words of the Wise* tell us that an abuse of alcohol is stupefying (Prov 23.31-33). And we all have some idea of the evils resulting from drunkenness, such as accidents and deaths caused by those driving while impaired, the *delirium tremens* of the addict deprived of his 'fix', and families that are ruined by addiction of one of their members. In Toronto more than twice as many people die annually of drug overdoses as die in automobile accidents and ten times as many as are killed by guns.
- *Sex Abuses*. The demonic temptations and deceptions associated with sex are legion—from the commonly held assumption that sex outside of marriage is the norm, to the allure of internet pornography. The results are catastrophic; and include jealousy, lies, divorce, prostitution, sexual addiction, sexually transmitted diseases (including AIDS), sterility, abortion, and unnatural sexual perversions (Rom 1.24-27).

Sin *always* results in guilt, shame, and a troubled conscience (even if guilt is suppressed), and usually results in additional troubles, either immediately or eventually. Sin never brings true happiness and peace. The punishment for sin is often a plague of deception that leads to more sin (Rom 1.28-31), aggravated troubles, and premature death. This is a foretaste of the hell (as symbolically represented by the fire, smoke and burning sulphur) hardened sinners can expect to receive, and a warning to all unrepentant unbelievers.

The Sixth Trumpet Blast – Not a Corrective for Sin

(Rev 9.20-21)

The reason that the judgement of demonic deception is sent by God against 'the rest of mankind' (hardened unbelievers, not killed prematurely as a direct result of their sin) is because of their obsessive commitment to sinning. The objectives are multifold:

- To demonstrate God's patience with sinners. This is the sixth trumpet blast, but mankind has ignored the warnings of the previous five.
- To provide a foretaste of hell (as symbolically represented by the fire, smoke and burning sulphur; Rev 9.17), as a warning about the state and condition in which men will forever remain if they do not repent.
- To encourage some to repent. God's warnings and judgements are a blessing for those who heed them and turn to him for forgiveness.
- To hold mankind accountable for their sins and unwillingness to repent; thus, giving them no excuse and increasing their guilt (Rom 1.20).
- To increase their judgement. Through demonic deceptions God hands mankind over to commit

additional sin (Rom 1.24-31; Rom 2.4-5).

This sets the stage for the judgement of the seventh, and final, trumpet blast.

Despite the warnings of six trumpet blasts, and seeing their relatives, friends, and associates die because of their sinful actions, the majority of rebellious mankind (represented by the ‘two thirds’) does not repent of their sin. There are various reasons for their continuing rebellion, including that they:

- Are deceived by demonic temptations (1 Tim 4.1).
- Chose to ignore God’s warnings (Jer 8.6) and assume that his judgements can be attributed to secondary causes.
- Are like frenzied sharks chasing the smell of blood and are greedy to do evil (Ps 52.3; Jn 3.19; 2 Tim 3.4; Rom 1.31).
- Have hardened hearts and seared consciences (Jer 5.3; 1 Tim 4.2) and harden them even more as they witness God’s judgement against sin.
- Have no fear of God and live as though he does not exist and will not judge transgressions against his Law (Ps 14.1; Rom 3.18).
- Think that since, so far, they have been able to get away with their sin, they will continue to avoid the consequences of sin and judgement.
- Believe that their lives are ‘good enough’ and that they have done nothing of which they need to repent; and that God will weigh their ‘goodness’ against their faults and welcome them into heaven.
- Have not been born again. No one can come to Christ and to repentance without having been eternally elected by the Father and by experiencing the converting work of the Holy Spirit (Jn 6.44, 65).

The tragedy is great, temporal judgements against sin rarely bring repentance.

The principal sin that men practice, in every generation, is idolatry. However, if you suggested to most people that they are idolaters, they would laugh in scorn. Idolatry is practiced by anyone who refuses to acknowledge the true God as the Creator, or to accept his (i.e., the person’s) own creaturely status. John includes worshiping demons and objects that are the work of their hands as idolatry. Thus, today men practice idolatry in at least the following ways:

- *False religions.* Every religion that defines a god, other than how he reveals himself in the Bible (as one God in three eternally divine persons) worships demons. This includes Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Mormonism, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The concept that all religions lead to one God is a demonic deception.
- *Professed or practical atheism.* Men who live as if there is no God to whom they are accountable, and who assume that they are masters of their own fate, are idolaters since they make a god of their own wills.
- *Personification of objects.* Anyone who bows to an image of a Buddha or a picture of Krishna, raises his eyes to an object in the sky, or reads a horoscope is an idolater, since he worships a material object.
- *Humanistic materialism.* Proponents of cosmological and biological evolution are idolaters because they deny the Creator and proclaim that matter and energy are their own creators.
- *False worship.* Those who use human ‘praise’ compositions in the place of the Psalms commit idolatry by elevating the work of human minds and hands to the level of God’s breathed-out word.

John indicates that idolatry is irrational, when he says that idols cannot see, hear, or walk; echoing other portions of the Scriptures (Ps 115.4-8; Ps 135.15-18; Is 44.9-20; Hos 13.2-3; 1 Cor 8.4-5). He refers specifically to manmade objects of veneration. But the worship or veneration of demons, celestial objects, people, mythological beings, or concepts created by the mind of man, is just as stupid. Idolatry is a deception encouraged by demons to hold mankind in the slavery of falsehood.

John indicates here, and elsewhere in Revelation, that idolatry, a sin against the first portion of the moral law (summarized in the Ten Commandments), is the root cause of sins that break commandments in the

second portion of the Law and destroy our relationships with our neighbours, whom we are to love (Lk 10.27). He includes murder, sorcery, sexual immorality, and theft. These are all practices that have been (or are) associated with false religions—human sacrifice (Rev 18.24; Rev 19.2), occult practices (Rev 18.23), cult prostitution (Rev 2.15, 20-21; Rev 17.2, 4; Rev 18.3, 9; Rev 19.2), and robbing temples (Rom 2.22).

The Angel and the Little Scroll

(Rev 10.1-3)

The first six trumpets have sounded in succession. Thus, we might expect that the seventh would immediately follow. However, there is an interlude in the narrative before the seventh trumpet is blown (Rev 10.1-11.14)—in a similar way as an interlude occurred between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals (Rev 7.1-17). This interlude is not primarily a chronological delay, but a pause to: 1) make a solemn declaration that the end of all things is coming without delay (Rev 10.6), 2) describe the nature of the word of God (Rev 10.8-10), 3) recommission John to expand the prophecy of the book directed to all peoples (Rev 10.11), and 4) establish the role of Church in bearing witness to Christ to the opponents of the Gospel (Rev 11.1-13). From the perspective of the wicked inhabitants of the earth, the first six trumpets blow continually, between Christ's incarnation and his return in resurrected glory. At the end of time, on the great day of judgement, the seventh trumpet will blow.

From an oblique perspective, John observes a gigantic angel coming down from heaven and resting with his legs straddling the earth and the sea. His descent from heaven indicates that God initiates his providential actions that are directed toward mankind. The angel's position on the earth, with one leg on the land and one on the sea, indicates that God's purposes, message, and actions are directed at the entire world (Ps 146.6; Jonah 1.9). In contrast to previous trumpet blasts which affected a portion (e.g., a third) of wicked mankind, the pending seventh trumpet blast will be universal.

This angel is not one of the seven who hold the trumpets. He is not named; nor are we told if he is among a particular class of angels—e.g., cherubim, seraphim, or archangel. However, a description of his majesty is provided, and we see that he:

- Appeared in a cloud, which is a symbol for divine majesty and transport (Ex 16.10; Ps 97.2; Ps 104.3; Dan 7.13; Mt 17.2; Lk 21.27; Acts 1.9).
- Had a bow (likely a green halo, rather than a multicoloured rainbow; see, Rev 4.3) over his head, which is symbol of holiness or purity.
- Had a face shining like the sun, which is a physical manifestation of the presence of God (Mt 17.2; Jn 1.4-5; 1 Jn 1.5), or a sign that a person has been in his presence (Ex 34.35).
- Had legs like pillars of fire, which is a symbol for immovable strength.
- Had a voice like the roar of a lion, which is symbol for the voice of God (Amos 3.7-8; Hos 11.10). Also, Jesus is called a lion in Revelation (Rev 5.5), as a fulfilment of the Messianic promise (Gen 49.9-10).

Thus, we learn that this angel represents God and his authority and what he announces must be heeded.

Based on the similarity between this description and the attributes of Jesus given elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 1.7; Rev 4.3; Rev 5.5; Rev 10.3), and the association of these attributes with the LORD in the OT, many commentators have concluded that this angel is Jesus himself. However, others argue that this angel cannot be Jesus, since:

- There are other mighty angels identified in Revelation which are not Jesus (Rev 5.2; Rev 18.21).
- John generally refers to Jesus in a manner that cannot be mistaken for a creature—even a magnificent one
- John appears not to use the term 'angel' to refer to Jesus anywhere else in Revelation.

- The angel swore a vow in a form that Jesus would likely not make (Rev 10.6).

Others argue that this angel could be Michael (Rev 12.7-9; Dan 10.13; Dan 12.1) or Gabriel (Dan 8.16; Dan 9.21; Dan 10.5; Dan 12.7). If we assume that this angel is a created being, the description of him clearly indicates that he has heavenly dignity, is closely associated with Jesus, and is Jesus' representative sent to John with additional revelation. Thus, whether it is Jesus himself or a created angel, the importance of the angel's actions and message are the same.

The angel held a little, open, scroll in his hand. John indicates that it was 'little' by apparently inventing his own word to describe its diminutive nature (like we might use 'booklet' to refer to a small book). We can also infer that it was small since John was able to eat it (Rev 10.9-10). The smallness of this scroll distinguishes it from a previous larger scroll that he had seen, which was large enough to contain seven seals on it (Rev 5.1). That previous scroll contained the revelation of the judgements that God sends on the wicked in every generation, which had been revealed to John in the preceding visions. Reasonable suggestions for what the scroll in the angel's hand symbolizes, are: 1) the additional revelation that John was given, which he recorded in his scroll (Rev 10.11) that became the book of Revelation; or 2) the New Testament. We will consider the nature of the scroll in more detail in a subsequent meditation (see, [*The Bitter-Sweet Scroll*](#)). However, for the moment we note that it represents additional revelation sent from God which is to be delivered to mankind throughout the entire world (Rev 10.11). The fact that the scroll is open, indicates that this revelation is available to all and that it is clear. Even though God's revelation contains deep truths that can challenge the intellects of the most brilliant of men, it presents truth that the most humble readers can receive, comprehend, and believe. God has made his word plain to men so that they are without excuse (Rom 1.19-20).

A Command to Seal Up the Word of the Seven Thunders (Rev 10.3-4)

John hears voices but does not tell us what he had heard. The first voice that he heard was that of the angel holding the small scroll, who called out. Whatever the angel said, induced the seven thunders to speak. Some suggest that the angel *commanded* the seven thunders to speak, thus concluding that the angel is a divine person—Jesus. However, the text merely says that “he cried out”, with the implication that his cry related to something unpleasant. In response, the seven thunders sounded, with intelligible content since John was about to write down what he had heard. Then John heard a third voice which commanded him not to write down what the seven thunders had said.

The expression ‘seven thunders’ appears only here in the Bible and has engendered considerable discussion and speculation. John refers to them with the definite article (*the*) implying that the seven thunders were known to his readers. Yet his meaning appears to be lost to us. Some commentators seek for an explanation in Jewish apocryphal and mystical writings. However, we generally should disregard this type of explanation since John, guided by the Holy Spirit, would have drawn his quotations and spiritual allusions from canonical sources. Likewise, we can dismiss interpretations that point to historic events (e.g., seven cycles of persecution, crusades, or periods of reformation), since the meaning of the seven thunders had to be relevant to John's 1st century readers. Some suggest that the seven thunders are seven angelic beings. However, John would have been more likely to have said something like, “I heard seven angels speaking with voices like thunder” (Rev 6.1; Rev 14.2; Rev 19.6), than to refer to the seven angels as ‘thunder’. More probable explanations for the meaning of the seven thunders, include the following:

- Psalm 29.3-9 speaks of the voice of God and uses the word ‘voice’ seven times. This Psalm speaks of the power and majesty of God's voice and of his sovereignty over creation and the dispensation of judgement.
- God's voice is sometimes referred to, or accompanied by, thunder in the OT (1 Sam 2.10; Job 37.2; Ps

81.7; Ps 104.7). The thunder is also often associated with judgement. Thus, the seven thunders may be a symbolic way of referring to the voice of God's judgement on sinners, coming directly from his throne, and not mediated through an angel.

- We noted earlier that the "seven spirits" (Rev 1.4; Rev 3.1; Rev 4.5; Rev 5.6) appears to be a reference to the Holy Spirit (see, [Seven Churches, Seven Spirits](#)). Thus, the voice of the seven thunders may be a communication from the 'seven spirits' who is the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the expression 'seven thunders' is likely a reference to the fullness of the voice of God (with seven a symbol for completeness), giving direct revelation from the throne in heaven (Jn 12.28-29).

John prepared to write down what the seven thunders had communicated, so that he could preserve their message for the Church. This may indicate that he composed the book of Revelation, in obedience to his commission (Rev 1.11, 19), in a series of stages after each cycle of visions, rather than after all had been revealed. However, something in the nature of the message of the seven thunders was such that a voice (presumably from Jesus; Rev 1.11) commanded him not to write down what he had heard and instead to seal it up.

Many commentators refer to an apparently similar command given to Daniel to shut up and seal the scroll containing the words he had written (Dan 12.4), with the suggestion that it was to be opened only at some distant time in the future. However, this is an inappropriate comparison. Daniel was instructed by Gabriel to complete the writing of the book and then attach his official seal to it and store it in the archives to be preserved for the future (Dan 8.26; Dan 12.9), in a safe manner as a valued treasure which could not be tampered with or changed. Normal procedure would have been to make a copy of official documents available for immediate use, while the official copy was stored in the archives (Is 8.16; Jer 32.9-12). This instruction did not mean that Daniel's book was to be kept hidden as a secret until the end of time, as is demonstrated by the fact that a copy of the book was shown to Alexander the Great when he came to Jerusalem, to show him that God had prophesied about his arrival in the city.

Daniel was command to write down what he had seen and to preserve it for future generations. In contrast, John was commanded *not* to write down what he had heard but to keep it a secret. Possible reasons for this may be:

- The seven thunders spoke of judgements far worse than what had been communicated in the visions of the seven seals and seven trumpets, and Jesus does not want the Church to be discouraged by such a message.
- The seven thunders spoke of blessings for the Church which cannot yet be revealed because they are too wondrous for us to understand or to receive in our sin-stained state (2 Cor 12.4).
- There are things about God's purposes that we are not privileged to know in the spatial-temporal realm (Acts 1.7), or because aspects of his plans are far greater than visions and prophecies could ever communicate.

Regardless of the reason, the command that prohibited John from writing down what he had heard, reminds us that what God has communicated to us, while not exhaustive, is sufficient for us to be saved and to walk obediently before him. We must be humble before his sovereign providences; not seek to know more than he has revealed; and walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5.7).

An Angel Swears an Oath (Rev 10.5-6)

We noted previously that there is a debate about whether the angel holding the little scroll (Rev 10.2) is Jesus or a heavenly creature. One consideration that supports the argument that this angel is not Jesus is that the angel raised his right hand and swore an oath by the eternal Creator. When God makes vows or swears oaths he does so by himself, because there is no greater by whom he can swear (Gen 22.16; Ex

32.13; Is 45.23; Jer 49.13; Amos 6.8; Heb 6.13). Jesus is God (Jn 1.1; Jn 20.28), eternal (Rev 1.8; Jn 8.58), and the Creator (Jn 1.3; Col 1.16). So, if Jesus was the one holding the little scroll and taking the oath, we find that he did not swear by himself but by another person in the Trinity—which may lead some to the dangerous suggestion that Jesus is not equal in every respect with the Father (Phil 2.6). For this reason, it is better to conclude that the angel in this section is a created, holy being.

The angel raises his right hand toward heaven, the abode of God, as he makes his vow. God himself, figuratively raised his hand when he made a vow (Dt 32.40). This was a practice in the ancient Middle East (Gen 14.22; Dan 12.7) that has carried through into our culture—for example, when a person is sworn in at a trial, he is asked to raise his right hand. Thus, in our practice, the raised right hand pointing toward heaven, where God dwells, calls God as a witness to our oath to tell the truth.

The angel swore his oath by referring to two key attributes of God—his eternality and his creative power. There are other attributes of God that we might think could equally, or better, serve in oath taking such as his truthfulness, holiness, or justice. Yet, the angel focuses on these two. One reason may be that other attributes, such as truthfulness, holiness, and justice are attributes that God communicated to man in his sinless state and are not unique to God. God alone is infinite, eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient. By focusing on the eternality and creative power of God, the angel identifies God as the one who is (i.e., who exists in and of himself) and the one who acts sovereignly, with full wisdom and knowledge. These correspond to two of the most common names God uses to refer to himself: the “I AM” (translated LORD), and “God”, the one who created (Gen 1.1) and sustains his creation (Col 1.17). His oath also demonstrated that God is above all the false gods invented by men. For example, he dismisses Hinduism, which considers the material universe to be eternal. Likewise, he relegates atheistic naturalism to the intellectual garbage heap by declaring cosmological and biological evolution, which claim that there is no need for God, to be mere myths. Thus, the angel’s oath draws our attention to foundational truths that all men must accept—God: has always existed and will always exist; is non-material (a spirit); is transcendent, beyond the universe; is the Creator of the universe, including men, who are mere creatures; and has absolute sovereignty over his creation. These two attributes should encourage Christians who are facing persecution and suffering from the hands of wicked men, since they can be certain that God is working out events for his glory and our good (Rom 8.28), and they can be assured that when the angel states that there will be no more delay, we can believe him.

God himself took oaths by himself, and this holy angel took an oath by God. In addition, Paul used oaths (Rom 9.1; 2 Cor 1.23; Gal 1.20; 1 Thess 2.5; 1 Thess 5.27); and Jesus did not denounce using God’s name in a serious oath but answered his accusers only when God’s name was invoked (Mt 26.63-64). This demonstrates that it is proper and right to take oaths (to make a solemn promise to speak truth or to fulfill a duty) in the name of God and his infinite attributes. Some people do not believe that it is proper to take an oath in the name of God. Even some within the Church make this claim, pointing to the words of Jesus when he says, “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” (Mt 5.37) They misunderstand Jesus. He condemns the Pharisees who made false distinctions about when it was legitimate to swear an oath (Mt 5.33-36), and teaches that swearing an oath by *anything* other than God is wrong. Swearing by a created thing is to place a creature above the Creator. Instead, as Jesus teaches, our words are to be truthful at all times.

We can derive guidelines from the Bible for oaths taking:

- We are not to take a false oath (Zech 8.17) or swear one rashly (Lev 5.4).
- Oaths are voluntary (Dt 23.21-22), but binding (Num 30.2; Ps 76.11).
- We are forbidden from taking an oath in the name of idols (Josh 23.7) or any created thing (Mt 5.34-36). For example we should not say: “I give you my word as an Englishman ...”, or “I swear as a knight of the realm ...”, or “I swear on my mother’s grave ...”, etc.

- We are to use God's name alone when taking oaths (Dt 6.13; Dt 10.20). Invoking an oath in the name of something other than God, is idolatry.
- We must not trivialise oath-taking. People do this when they make casual statements during a conversation such as, "I swear to God ..." (Ex 20.7) Taking oaths is a serious matter for serious times. In all other settings we are not to use oaths or invoke the name of God casually (Mt 5.33-37).
- It is a sin to refuse to take a lawful oath or vow. To claim one's own veracity (e.g., averring to tell the truth), instead of taking an oath is to declare one's self 'holier' than God, Jesus, and the apostles, and is equivalent to setting up one's self in the place of God.

Announcement of the Fulfilment of the Mystery

(Rev 10.6-7)

An angel swore an oath saying that "there would be no more delay". The key question we need to consider is what he means when he says there will no longer be a delay. Various suggestions have been presented about what would no longer be delayed, including:

- The fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, after the Roman siege led by Titus.
- Another historical event, such as the sacking of Constantinople or Rome.
- The end of the seven thunders.
- The exhaustion of God's patience with the wicked, and the removal of his mercy which allows sinners to repent.
- The sounding of the seventh trumpet and the accompanying destruction of the wicked.
- The appearance of the antichrist.
- The inauguration of the final tribulation.
- The return of Christ to set up a thousand-year kingdom on this earth.
- The completion of the salvation of all the elect, which was to be realized in "yet a little time" (Rev 6.11).
- The cessation of time, as we know it; the translated Greek text reads, "time no longer will be".
- The assembly of mankind at the final judgement and the determination of all of mankind's final destinies.
- The commencement of the everlasting state.

How we are to determine what the Holy Spirit and John mean by the words "no more delay" is made more challenging because:

- These suggestions arise from considerably different views about how Revelation is to be interpreted—our eschatological views determine how we interpret this passage. If our interpretive framework is wrong, our determination of the meaning of this passage will likely also be incorrect.
- Of attempts to recast the translation, such as: "there will be no more delay in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound the trumpet", so that the 'no more delay' does not apply to an event relative to a general time horizon but to the sounding of the seventh trumpet. However, this does not really solve the problem, since it only compels the interpreter to ask when the seventh trumpet will sound.
- The fulfilment of the 'no more delay' had to have some meaning to the recipients of the book in Asia Minor, to whom John wrote, or it would have been contrary to the stated primary purpose of Revelation (Rev 1.1). This seems to rule out future events which occurred, or are believed to have occurred, later than the 1st or early 2nd century (e.g., the appearance of a particular individual deemed to be the antichrist).
- The overriding context of Revelation seems to imply that the events prophesied by the statements and visions within the book would largely be fulfilled within the lifetime of its initial recipients (Rev 1.1, 3; Rev 2.16; Rev 3.11; Rev 6.11; Rev 10.6; Rev 22.6-7, 10, 12, 20). This seems to exclude interpretations that place the events in our future (e.g., the final judgement). From the perspective of 1st

century readers, a fulfilment that would be 2,000 years in their future is not realistically a good explanation for ‘no more delay’.

A way forward to a correct interpretation may be found in the words of the last part of verse 7. The ‘no more delay’ appears to apply to the fulfilment of the mystery of God that was announced by the prophets. We cannot undertake an exhaustive study today of the way ‘mystery’ is used in the NT. However, we are not to think of the ‘mystery’ referred to here as an obscure truth known only to God that has been hidden from previous generations of believers—particularly since the angel says that it was announced by the prophets, which means that it was revealed to them (Amos 3.7).

The primary meaning of ‘mystery’, as it is used in the NT, applies to:

- The good news—the Gospel—that God redeems his people through the work of Jesus Christ (Gen 3.15; Col 2.2).
- God’s eternal plan to redeem Jews and Gentiles through faith in Christ (Gen 22.18; Rom 11.25-32; Rom 16.25-26; Eph 2.11-3.11; Col 1.26-28).

The angel probably alludes to the vision given to Nebuchadnezzar, and interpreted by Daniel (Dan 2.31-45), which uses ‘mystery’ numerous times (Dan 2.18-19, 27-30, 47). In this context, the fulfilment of the ‘mystery’ spoken of by the angel refers to the fulfilment of the plan of God to save a great multitude (Rev 7.9) from every nation (Jew and Gentile), through the shed blood of the Lamb (Rev 5.6, 9; 1 Cor 2.7), and incorporate them into Christ’s kingdom, which will rule over the nations (Rev 11.15-18; Dan 2.44). Thus, the fulfilment of the mystery was no longer delayed in John’s day—he saw it being fulfilled as the Gospel message was declared beyond the territory of Judea. The seven churches in Asia Minor were a direct evidence of the fulfilment of the ‘mystery’, since they included many Gentiles and were established in a region that had not belonged to ancient Israel. The fulfilment of this ‘mystery’ continues today, as more individuals are saved daily throughout the world. It will continue until the last elect person repents of his sin and professes faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour. This is truly good news, for “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5.20), just as God “announced to his servants the prophets”.

The Bitter-Sweet Scroll

(Rev 10.9-11)

Speculative interpretations of the symbolic meaning of the little scroll in the angel’s hand associate it with a document produced much later than the time of the original recipients of this letter, such as the codification of Roman law ordered by the Byzantine (Eastern Rome) Emperor Justinian, in the early 6th century. However, reasonable suggestions for what the scroll symbolizes, are: 1) most likely, the additional revelation that John was given (Rev 10.11), which he recorded in his scroll that became the book of Revelation; 2) the entire New Testament; or 3) possibly, the entire Bible. Thus, the majority opinion among commentators is that whatever the exact contents of the scroll may be, it represents revelation from God that is to be communicated to mankind.

We probably do not push the symbolic nature of the vision too far if we understand the scroll’s attributes to teach that this revelation is:

- *The word of God.* The contents of the scroll (whether the Bible, the NT, or the book of Revelation) is unique and not like any other book. The contents cannot be derived from a study of natural systems or from a series of logical deductive or inductive inferences or created by the inventive minds of men. What God wishes us to know about himself, our created and sinful state before him, and his plan of redemption, can only be obtained by revelation.
- *Delivered by angels.* An angel delivers the scroll to John. While most revelation from God came directly from the Holy Spirit to the Biblical authors (Is 8.5; Gal 1.12), some revelation was delivered through

angel intermediaries (Rev 1.1; Dan 8.16; Dan 9.21-22; Acts 7.53; Gal 3.19; Heb 2.2).

- *Open.* That the scroll is open (Rev 10.2, 8) means that it is understandable by anyone who reads it, and not darkened by hidden mystical meanings such as those proposed by numerologists or self-proclaimed prophets.
- *Little.* The scroll is small enough that John could eat it entirely. It is not large like the scroll containing a portion of God's eternal decrees (Rev 5.1), or voluminous like the laws of men. It contains precisely what God wants us to believe concerning himself and the duties he requires of us.
- *To be received.* John had to approach the angel, request the scroll, and take it (Rev 10.8-9). God's revelation does us no good if it is left sitting on a shelf. We must be responsibly proactive and pick it up and read it or it is as if it were a closed book. There is nothing that we can do that is more important than looking into the revelation that God has given to mankind.
- *To be taken into the soul.* John was instructed to eat the scroll. This command is based on a similar incident from the life of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezk 2.8-3.14) and illustrates the principle that just having a copy of God's revelation or even just reading it is not sufficient. It must be figuratively eaten. The word of God must be 'eaten' in the same way as we are to 'eat' the living Word (Jn 6.53). When Revelation was read aloud to its first recipients in the seven churches in Asia Minor, they would have heard the imperative to take and eat and would have associated this with Jesus' instruction relating to observance of the Lord's Supper (Mt 26.26). To properly eat the word of God means that we will study it (Josh 1.8), believe it (1 Thess 2.13), memorize it (Ps 119.11, 16), and apply it in our lives (Col 3.16; 2 Tim 3.16). Unless we 'eat' it we cannot gain any spiritual nourishment from it and cannot be of use to other believers or in the presentation of the Gospel—we cannot feed others if we are starving ourselves.
- *Sweet.* As John eats the scroll containing the word of God, he finds that it is sweet in his mouth (Ps 19.7-11; Ps 119.103). The word of God, as it reveals the Gospel—the good news that there is a solution to man's problem with sin—is the sweetest truth we can ever hear. When a person first encounters the love of God as revealed in Scripture his life is filled with the sweetness of conversion. More mature Christians taste the sweetness daily as their confessed sins are forgiven and as they experience increasing assurance of their promised rewards in glory.
- *Bitter.* The angel warned John that eating the scroll would make his stomach bitter. The word of God is not like an unpalatable medicine that tastes bitter but cures an illness. Rather, it tastes good but gives us a stomach-ache. The reason is that if we have truly ingested the word of God our lives will be changed—converted and purified. In ourselves we know of a post-conversion bitterness because of the remnants of sin that continue to afflict us—we continue to struggle against the temptation to sin (Rom 7.13-24). In addition, Satan and the world take notice of anyone who lives according to God's word. They hate sincere Christians and they try to destroy them through harassment and persecution. The Bible informs us that this is the way of life in this world for true believers—in this life we will face persecution (Rev 2.10; Jn 15.20; 2 Tim 3.12). If we are not prepared for the joy-sorrow and sweet-bitter reality that accompanies the receipt of God's word, we will be like the person in the parable of the sower (Mt 13.18-23) who heard the word and received it with joy, but when tribulation or persecution arose he demonstrated that he was not a true believer.
- *To be shared.* When the word of God is 'eaten', it causes believers to grow spiritually and qualifies them for sharing the word through witnessing about Jesus. John is recommissioned to prophesy (Rev 10.11), but the general principle applies—anyone who has fed on the richness of the word of God, wants to share this food with the starving souls around him.

John's Recommissioning (Rev 10.8-11)

The first six trumpets have sounded in succession, and we might expect that the seventh would immediately follow. However, there is an interlude in the narrative before the seventh trumpet is blown (Rev 10.1-11.14).

One reason for this interlude is to recommission John to expand the prophecy of this book, directed to all peoples (Rev 10.11).

He is commanded to take a scroll from the angel's hand and eat it and then to prophesy. These commands constitute John's formal recommissioning as a prophet (his first commissioning is recorded in Revelation 1.10). His recommissioning as a prophet comes from God—he is not a self-appointed prophet. This may appear to be obvious to those who understand the Reformation teaching that the office of prophet ended with the completion of the NT canon, and there are no new revelations given by God to the Church. However, there are many today in the Church who believe that God continues to communicate through the prophetic office. Some of these 'prophets' are self-appointed and are often ones who lead their followers astray with faulty interpretations of Revelation. John went forward, took the scroll, and ate it without hesitation, showing his readiness, like Isaiah (Is 6.8), to fulfil his duties as a prophet.

The command to eat the scroll symbolizes that a prophet receives his message from God, in the form of revealed truth. John's commissioning echoes the commissioning of Ezekiel who was also instructed to eat a scroll (Ezk 2.8-3.15). It is the receipt and careful ingestion of God's word which prepares the prophet for his mission to the peoples of the earth. It is no different today. Although we no longer have prophets who are God's channel for new revelation, those who are commissioned by God to preach must be prepared through ingestions and digestion of the Bible. No one should be a teacher or preacher in the Church, unless he has first been taught by the Holy Spirit and by other elders in the Church and through diligent study and preparation (2 Tim 2.2, 15; 2 Tim 4.2; James 3.1).

Once he is recommissioned, John is told emphatically to prophesy. The word 'prophesy', as used in the NT, means to speak under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with or without making a prediction about future events—a distinction is made between '*forthtelling*'—speaking God's word (Mt 26.68; Lk 1.67)—and '*foretelling*'—speaking of future events. Portions of the prophecy in Revelation address distant future events. However, contrary to what many interpreters claim, much of the book speaks to events current in John's day (Rev 1.3; Rev 22.7-10, 18-19) or to events that are ongoing in every generation, between Christ's ascension and his return on the last day of history, such as the plagues associated with the six trumpets, which have already sounded and continue to sound. Therefore, the book of Revelation includes direction for sanctified living in the present as much as hopeful living for the future.

John is told to prophesy about the nations. The Greek word, translated in the ESV (and NIV) as 'about' ('concerning'; NASB), was translated as 'before' (KJV), 'among' (Tyndale), or 'to' (Wycliffe) in older translations. The Greek preposition (*epi*) can take any of these translations, but in the context of the grammatical form of the surrounding words, the ESV's 'about' (or 'against') is probably more accurate than a translation 'to'. The peoples of the nations are the object of the prophecy (Rev 11.9; Rev 13.7-8), not the audience for it. John is told to add to the prophecies he has already given about the judgements coming upon the wicked nations that do not acknowledge God, rather than to send his message to them. Revelation is written mainly as book to encourage those within the Church to be faithful; not as a warning or evangelistic tool for those who are outside of God's covenant community. Much of the remainder of the book is a continuation of the polemic against the *City of Man* (Rev 17.15-18) and the anti-God governments and false religions that it spawns.

The fourfold listing of the audience about which John is to prophesy—"many *peoples* and *nations* and *languages* and *kings*"—indicates the breadth of God's ownership of the nations and his providential control over them. God is not the God of the Jews or only of people who claim to be Christians. He is the God of all the earth, who holds all men accountable to his laws (Gen 18.25) and redeems men out of every nation (Rev 7.9). Christians need to believe and embrace this truth and not be caught in the snare of a modern pluralistic thinking that suggests that there are a number of 'great' world religions that lead to God.

We can note, in addition to what we considered previously, that the mission John has been assigned, to prophesy against the nations, is:

- *Sweet*. It provides a message of encouragement for us. Since God controls the nations, we know that he works out his providences for the benefit of the Church (Rom 8.28) and will punish all those who persecute his people. It is sweet to know that the just God will not absolve the wicked of their sins, and that we can rejoice over the demise of Satan's kingdom and that Christ's final victory is assured (Rev 19.1-4).
- *Bitter*. However, there is also bitterness associated with the message about the overthrow of the wicked. John would have been conscious of the terrible burden of his prophecy. We should not take pleasure knowing of the harrowing future awaiting unrepentant mankind.

Measuring the Temple

(Rev 11.1-2)

The first task John was assigned after being recommissioned (Rev 10.8-11) was to measure the temple of God, the altar, and all those who worship there. The purpose is to deliver a message of hope to the Church and of judgement about those who reject the witness of Christians and persecute them. This acted-parable follows the precedent of the vision which the prophet Ezekiel saw of a man (or, angel) who measured the eschatological temple (Ezk 40-42)—the Church in the Messianic age. John's task was figuratively to demarcate the boundary of the true worshipping Church (the elect, called-out, and sanctified ones) and enumerate its membership, composed of everyone who believed in the coming promised Messiah ('anointed one') or who now believes in the Christ ('anointed one') who has come. Thus, the Church is composed of both Jews and Gentiles (Rev 7.9). The equivalency between the temple ('shrine') and the Church is demonstrated elsewhere in the NT (1 Cor 3.16-17; 1 Cor 6.19; 2 Cor 6.16; Eph 2.21-22; 1 Pt 2.5).

John did not measure a physical building—either the one still in existence in Jerusalem or a projected one to be built during a supposed future thousand-year reign of Christ among converted ethnic Jews in Jerusalem. Rather, the temple imagery, drawn from John's experience with the Herodian temple still standing at that time in Jerusalem, provides a model for how God deals with sinful mankind. This model was first displayed during the antediluvian period, with the inner temple being the garden of Eden guarded by cherubim, an altar of worship established at the gate, and sinful mankind scattered beyond the altar at the gate. The tabernacle reflected a similar model, with the most holy place, representing the heaven-like earthly abode of God, surrounded by the cherubim. Beyond that, there was a court where believers offered sacrifices of worship. Outside the entrance to the tabernacle was a mixed multitude that included God's covenant people; and beyond that, the pagan nations. The Herodian temple included an explicit court for the Gentiles, where Jesus overturned the money changers' tables (Mt 21.12-16; Jn 2.14-16).

John is instructed not to measure the outer court, because that is given over to the nations. This indicates that there is a distinction between those within and those without. Many commentators suggest that this distinction implies that those within the boundaries of the measured temple are protected from the nations that trample the outer court. Thus, the measuring John undertakes is a symbol for God's sanctification and preservation of his Church—but not necessarily from temporal evils, since Christians suffer from persecution and the ravages of sin as long as they are in this world. Rather, the protection that is symbolized is the promise that Jesus will bring his people safely through the valley of the shadow of death and into his everlasting presence (Ps 23.4-6).

We must be careful not to stretch the meaning of this vision too far and create a subjective allegorical interpretation. However, there may be merit in the idea that the outer court represents the visible Church on earth, in every age, which contains both true believers and unbelievers—a mixed multitude—that may include nominal professors (Rev 3.16) and apostate elements (Rev 2.14-16, 20-23); whereas the inner court, with the worshippers at the altar, represents the true spiritual Church that is elect from eternity. The visible

Church on earth is subjected to trampling by the nations that are antagonistic to the true religion.

The angel instructing John to measure the temple changes his metaphor when he refers to a prophecy that Jesus made, while teaching his disciples on the Mount of Olives during the week leading to his crucifixion. Jesus said that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed by the Roman armies under Titus (Mt 24.15-28; Mk 13.14-23; Lk 21.20-24)—an explicit fulfilment of Daniel’s prophecy (Dan 9.27; Dan 12.11). The nations, represented by Rome and its subject peoples, would besiege and destroy the physical Jerusalem, which is a symbol for God’s covenant community—the Church. The nations would continue to persecute the visible Church (the ‘outer court’) throughout the ages, between the resurrection and Christ’s return to judge the nations. The temporal ‘Jerusalem’ is to be replaced with a new Jerusalem (Rev 21.2, 9-10; Rev 22.19) in which there will be only righteousness and glory, in the everlasting presence of God (Rev 21.3-4).

The voice from heaven indicates that the trampling of the holy city will last for forty-two months—which is the same period as 1,260 days (Rev 11.3; Rev 12.6; thus, $42 \times 30 = 1,260$), 3.5 years ($12 \times 3.5 = 42$), or a “time, and times, and half a time” (Rev 12.14). This expression, drawn from Daniel (Dan 7.25; Dan 12.7), is applied symbolically. Interpreters view the 42 months as: (1) the entire period of the world’s existence; (2) the Gospel age; (3) the period between Christ’s advents, as suggested by Revelation 12.5-6; (4) the duration of the period of escape by Christians from Jerusalem to Pella, as the Roman armies approached the city; (5) an indeterminate period of persecution; or (6) the actual length of a future great tribulation. It is probable, that we are to understand the forty-two months as figurative for a period that is half of seven—a complete time—and thus, a period of unspecified but finite duration. The expression ‘forty-two months’ thus identifies a period of time much as our expression ‘nine-to-five’ indicates that someone works fulltime, without necessarily meaning that he actually works between those specific hours. The forty-two months indicates that the trampling of the Church by the nations is of a limited duration.

Jesus’ Two Witnesses

(Rev 11.3-4)

Jesus had instructed John to measure the temple—representing the elect, worshipping Church. He continues speaking and tells John that he has two witnesses who will prophesy for 1,260 days. Some of the suggestions for who (or what) these two witnesses are, include:

- Two congregations in Asia Minor, represented by their lampstands (Rev 1.20; Rev 11.4), about which Jesus says nothing negative—Smyrna (Rev 2.8-11) and Philadelphia (Rev 3.7-13).
- Two persons from the OT who did not die but were translated into heaven—Enoch (Gen 5.24) and Elijah (2 Ki 2.11).
- Two persons from the OT who had prominent roles bearing witness to God before pagan kings and nations—Moses and Elijah.
- Two sections of the OT—the Law and the Prophets (Mt 7.12).
- Two significant apostles—Peter and Paul.
- Two Jewish high priests, killed in 68 AD.
- The two covenant documents—the old and new testaments.
- “The word of God” and the “testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1.2).
- Christ (Rev 1.5) and his Church, which testifies to the Saviour (Rev 6.9; Rev 12.11, 17).
- Any of a number of different divisions of the Church—e.g., the Eastern and Western or Latin and Celtic.
- Reform movements such as those of the Waldensians and Albigensians.
- Two reformers—Luther and Melancthon, or Luther and Calvin or their representative strands of Protestantism.
- Two future prophets that will arise shortly before the end of time.
- The two covenantal communities (Jews and Gentiles) making up the Church throughout history.

It seems unlikely that two OT saints would leave heaven and return to earth to live among sinful men and even die again (Rev 11.7-8). Even if the witnesses are intended to be OT saints, the fulfilment would be figurative, just as the OT prophecy of the coming of Elijah (Mal 4.5) was fulfilled by John the Baptist (Mk 11.13-14). However, it is equally unlikely that the two witnesses are distinct individual persons who have lived since Christ's resurrection, or persons who will appear at a future time. There are no historical examples of individual martyrs ('witnesses') who died, were left unburied (Rev 11.9), and were raised back to life three and half days later (Rev 11.11). Likewise, it is unlikely that two individual prophets will be granted power at some time in the future to spew fire from their mouths to consume their foes (Rev 11.5), stop rain from falling, turn water to blood, strike the earth with plagues of every kind (Rev 11.6), die in Jerusalem (Rev 11.8) and be raised again before the general resurrection. The NT elsewhere indicates that *everyone* who has died since Christ's resurrection will be raised at one time on the last day (Jn 5.28-29; 1 Cor 15.52; 1 Thess 5.16). Thus, we rule out interpretations that suggest that the two witnesses are individual persons. Interpreters who claim that the witnesses are actual people, object and say that the fact that the witnesses die and are resurrected is an indication that they are individuals. However, congregations can figuratively die (Rev 3.1) and be revived (Rev 3.2).

Jesus calls the two witnesses 'my witnesses', which implies that John and the recipients of Revelation are expected to know what the witnesses are. A viable alternative is that they represent the two testaments of the Bible or the word and testimony (Rev 1.2). However, it is difficult to explain how the remainder of chapter 11 applies to the Bible or a similar conceptual entity. Thus, the most probable interpretation is that the witnesses are some form of the collective people of God who speak and act on behalf of Jesus. This interpretation is supported by John's reference to the seven lampstands in chapters 2 and 3 and to two lampstands in this instance (Rev 11.4). It is possible that the two witnesses are the congregations—Smyrna and Philadelphia—that represent a faithful remnant of the visible covenant community. Two out of seven would indicate that, though the number is small, there will always be a witness to the Gospel. However, it is more likely that the two witnesses are the two covenant communities that make up the one witnessing Church—the holy city (Rev 11.2), composed of those (primarily Jews) who believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah ('anointed one') and anyone (primarily Gentiles) who now believes in the Christ ('anointed one') who has come and died as a substitute for their sins. The collective interpretation is supported by the fact that the Church is visible to unbelievers who persecute the Church everywhere on earth (Rev 11.9-11).

Since Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus make up one Church, we could wonder why there is not but one witness, and the voice from heaven does not say, "I will grant authority to my witness [i.e., the Church], and he [it] will prophesy". Or we might wonder why Jesus does not refer to seven witnesses—thus indicating a complete number. Many have suggested that Jesus refers to his two witnesses to fulfill the requirement of the Law, that any testimony must be supported by two witnesses (Num 35.30; Dt 17.6; Dt 19.15; Mt 18.16; Jn 8.17; 2 Cor 13.1; 1 Tim 5.19). This suggestion is appropriate within the context of the chapter and book. The word 'witness' (also translated 'testimony') implies a judicial forum in which Christians have made a profession of their faith before the world and are punished (persecuted) because of that profession (Rev 1.9; Rev 6.9; Rev 11.7; Rev 12.11, 17; Rev 20.4).

The Two Witnesses Prophecy (Rev 11.3-6)

In the previous meditation, we determined that the two witnesses are the OT and NT believing and worshiping covenant communities (Jews and Gentiles) that make up the one witnessing Church throughout all ages. Jesus states that the Church, moving forward ("they will"), is to prophesy. This does not mean that the role of the Church is to divulge new revelation from God or to make predictions about when Christ will return—everything that mankind needs to know about what to believe and how live has been provided in

the completed canon of Scripture, and Jesus identifies the foolishness of any attempt to seek signs to predict end-time events (Mt 24.36). Rather, the primary propose of the Church is to bear witness to Jesus Christ before all mankind, teaching them to observe all that he has commanded (Mt 28.19-20).

Jesus states that the duration of the Church's witnessing is 1,260 days; the same as the forty-two months of persecution that the Church, the holy city, will endure (Rev 11.2). This period is probably not to be understood as a calendric three and a half years, but as figurative for a period that is half of seven—a complete time—and thus, a period of unspecified but finite duration. During the same time that the nations are trampling on the Church, the Church will be prophesying against the nations. It has been suggested that the reason the period is given in days [1,260], rather than in months [42] or years [3.5], is because the Church is commissioned to prophesy to the world every day.

The Church is pictured as wearing sackcloth as it prophesies. Elijah and John the Baptist, as representatives of the witnessing Church, both wore sackcloth (2 Ki 1.8; Mk 1.6). Sackcloth is a garment that indicates mourning (Gen 37.34) and woe (Est 4.1-3) in Scripture. Here it is a symbol of the Church's:

- Sorrow, as it proclaims God's laws against sin and calls for people to repent, and the world responds with antagonism.
- Lamentation over the state of the sin-plagued world that suppresses truth.

The Church becomes a powerful force for good and the Gospel when it figuratively wears sackcloth, by being humble and confessing its own and the world's sin.

The Church is also referred to as an olive tree and a lampstand, an allusion to Zechariah 4.1-14. The olive tree supplies the oil which is burned in the lamps on the lampstand. The oil is the enabling power of the Holy Spirit (Zech 4.6) and the lampstand is a symbol for the Church's role of providing light to the world through the proclamation (prophesying) of the Gospel (Mt 5.14). The Church becomes a bright light in the world when it depends on the fuel—the word of God in the Bible (2 Pt 1.21)—supplied by the Holy Spirit.

When the Church prophesies faithfully, the world attempts to stop its witness. In the past, Roman emperors, the Inquisition, and communism have tried to destroy the Church. Today, the persecutors include Islam, governments endorsing evils such as same-sex unions and abortion, and universities injecting the poison of evolution into captive minds. Individual Christians may suffer, even to death, at the hands of the Church's persecutors but the Church can never be destroyed (Mt 16.18). Christians who suffer for their testimony (witness) to truth may depart for heaven prematurely from our vantage point; but never too early in God's timing, and they are welcomed into glory with commendation (Mt 25.21, 23). Meanwhile, on earth, the Church calls down fire from heaven that consumes its foes—those who ridicule and blaspheme Christ, his Church, and his prophets (2 Ki 1.10). This is a symbolic fire of words of condemnation (Jer 5.14) and a promise of temporarily delayed, but certain, everlasting punishment by physical fire (Rev 21.8; Mt 25.41; Lk 16.24) if they do not repent.

In addition, the Church has been entrusted with the power to petition God to stop the rains, turn the waters into blood, and strike the earth with various plagues. These powers allude to the days of Elijah and Moses. Elijah held back the rains (1 Ki 1.11) to demonstrate to wicked Ahab who is the true God, and Moses inflicted severe plagues on ancient Egypt, including turning the water of the Nile River into blood (Ex 7.20), because Pharaoh and his subjects would not acknowledge the true God. The temporal punishment of the wicked today is mediated by the Church at prayer and administered by God. It parallels the punishments associated with the blasts of the first six trumpets (Rev 8.12; Rev 9.20), which we observed are to be understood as symbolic for various economic, political, health, and relationship difficulties and hardships that God sends upon the wicked because of their continuing sin and refusal to repent. These are specific troubles that could be avoided if men would listen to the witness of the Church, repent, and obey God's laws.

The plagues associated with the trumpets (and later in Revelation, with the bowls), while having temporal consequences, foreshadow the everlasting plagues that will engulf all those who depart this spatial-temporal realm without having embraced Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Sooner or later, the judgement of God catches up with every rebellious sinner (Heb 9.27). Those who attempt to kill Christ's witnesses—i.e., to destroy his Church, prophets, and people—will themselves be killed with everlasting death. In God's court of justice, the punishment always fits the crime (Ex 21.24; Heb 2.2). Let us be encouraged by this promise—Jesus will vindicate his people (Rev 6.10).

The Lord of The Earth

(Rev 11.4)

The voice speaking with John declares that the two witnesses stand before 'the Lord of the earth'. This phrase appears to be derived from a similar phrase 'the Lord of *all* the earth', used six times in the OT (Josh 3.11, 13; Ps 97.5; Mic 4.13; Zech 4.14; Zech 6.5). The phrase declares that God is not a god of the hills or of the valleys (1 Ki 20.28), not a god only of the harvest or of storms, not a national god, not a god of one ethnic group of mankind (Rom 3.29; Rom 9.24), and not a god that is identified with a manmade religion; but *the* God over all mankind, in all places, and in all times.

The phrase 'the Lord of the earth', occurs only here in the NT. However, the concept of God's universal rule over the earth is clearly expounded elsewhere in the NT. For example, Jesus prays to the 'Lord of heaven and earth' (Mt 11.25) and Paul, before the Athenian council, declares God to be 'Lord of heaven and earth' (Acts 17.24). It is appropriate that Jesus and John use the phrase 'the Lord of the earth' in Revelation, where we read of the Church being made up of ones called out from all the nations (Rev 7.9) and of punishment from God being sent against all wicked mankind (Rev 10.11). The God who created all things (Gen 1.1-31) is the same God who will wrap up history on the final day (Acts 17.31).

The phrase 'the Lord of the earth' is loaded with important messages for our day, because it teaches directly or indirectly that:

- *There is only one God.* The Bible teaches that there is only one God (Mk 12.32; Rom 3.30; James 2.19). There cannot be two (or more) gods of *all* the earth, or they would share sovereignty and divide responsibility for different parts. Polytheism (the concept that multiple gods exist) is antithetical to Biblical teaching, and Paul declares the other gods to be 'so-called gods' (1 Cor 8.5-6). Religions such as the ancient Greek and Nordic mythology, Hinduism, Druidism and its modern equivalent, animistic environmentalism (with the mother earth goddess Gaia), and Mormonism cannot true, because there is only one God.
- *God is transcendent.* He is separate from, above, and beyond the physical creation. This means that pantheistic religions are vain imaginations, since they identify God (or a seminal 'force') with the universe or view the universe as a manifestation of God. Religions that are pantheistic include African and North American tribal religions, New Age spiritualism, Hinduism (also polytheistic), Buddhism, and materialistic naturalism.
- *He is the Creator and sustainer of the world.* Since God is transcendent (and infinite and eternal), it logically follows that everything else (visible and invisible) was created by him; as is clearly taught in the Bible (Rev 14.7; Gen 1.1-31; Is 45.18; Col 1.16; Heb 1.10). Not only is God the Creator of all things, but in the person of Jesus he is the sustainer who holds all things together (Col 1.17), from quarks to galaxy clusters, gives us every breath that we inhale and exhale (Acts 17.28), and triggers the electric pulses that control our heart beats.
- *Only the God revealed in the Bible is God.* A number of religions claim that they hold to the belief that there is only one God. However, their definitions of God are radically inconsistent with the definition of the God revealed in the Bible. The most significant difference is their denial that God is tri-personal—one God in three persons. God has revealed his nature in the Bible. Thus, the Allah of

Islam and the Jehovah of Judaism and of the Jehovah's Witnesses are not the true God.

- *He is the governor of his creation.* The earth belongs to the Lord (Ps 24.1; Ps 50.12; 1 Cor 10.26) and he rules over it through his eternal decrees, providential actions, and revealed will in the Bible.
- *He is the only law giver.* Because God created, sustains, and governs the universe, he is the ultimate source for law. He delivered through his prophets the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, to mankind (not to the Jews only). Men, regardless of their national or religious affiliations, are required to obey God's Law. For example, the nations beyond Israel were held accountable to obey God's Law: Nineveh was commanded to repent of sin, as defined by God, Nehemiah enforced the Sabbath law on non-Jews (Neh 13.15-22), and John the Baptist rebuked Herod for adultery.
- *God alone is to be worshipped.* Since there is only one God, it clearly follows that to define, create, or manufacture any other god and to worship such a creation, is an abomination before the true God. God does not equivocate—men are not to have any other gods before him, are not to create idols, and are to worship him alone (Ex 20.3-6).
- *He is the judge of mankind.* All mankind is accountable to the one God, who will execute judgement against all those who refuse to repent of their sins against him or to keep his commands (Is 26.21; Rom 9.28).
- *Pluralism is a nonstarter.* The idea that false religions can co-exist with the true religion is absurd. This idea fails when challenged by the clash of two conflicting beliefs that are opposite. One view eventually has to prevail over the other and generally it is the majority's (whether or not it is valid)—reduced to its simplest form, man's opinion becomes supreme.

The voice speaking from heaven declares a foundational truth—there is one God who rules the universe, and all men are accountable before him.

The Beast from the Abyss

(Rev 11.7)

A Google query on 'beast of Revelation' produces over 10 million hits. The number of opinions about the identity of the beast seems to be almost as numerous. Suggestions for the identity of the beast have spanned a range of interpretations, including: the ancient Roman Empire, Nero, the papacy, particular popes, the Roman Catholic Church, apostate sections of the Church, a yet to be revealed antichrist, a modern banking cartel, a future Roman Empire, and government in general. The idea that the beast is a particular individual has failed to gain consensus as it is too subjective and new suggestions are often brought forward. Also, it seems more appropriate to equate forms of apostasy within the Church or false religions with the false prophet of Revelation (Rev 16.13; Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10).

The beast is portrayed as arising from the abyss (bottomless pit). This clearly identifies it as a demonic instrument of Satan out of the smoky gloom of hell (Rev 9.2). Later instances of the beast are seen coming from the sea (Rev 13.1) and the earth (Rev 13.11), indicating the worldwide influence of the beast on the peoples of the earth. The form of the Greek for 'rises' (present active participle) refers to an action that is currently taking place or one which takes place repeatedly. This means that the beast does not arise once from the abyss (for example, at the end of time), but is continually rising. The beast rises continually from the abyss through the period of the Church's witness. Thus, the beast is made manifest in every generation (Rev 13.7) as it attempts to destroy the Church.

John refers to the beast as a specific entity, by his use of the definite article ('the')—indicating that he expects that his readers know who or what the beast is. He may be implying that this is a fulfilment of the prophecy of Daniel (Dan 7.3, 21). John provides additional information about the nature of the beast later (Rev 13.1-10; Rev 17.7-18). We should probably understand the beast as Augustine identifies it, as the

ungodly *City of Man*, “the community of unbelievers set in opposition to the faithful people and the city of God.” (*City of God*, bk 20, ch 9). Thus, the beast of Revelation should most likely be understood as a symbolic representation of governments and nations, collectively, that set themselves in opposition to the Lamb—Jesus Christ—and his kingdom. At the time Revelation was written, the beast could be identified with the Rome—the city and the empire—that persecuted the Church. A twentieth-century parallel was the Third Reich that made war against Christ and his Church. A modern parallel is nations that have established the false religion of Islam, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. We can extend the application to include any nation in the West (including the US and Canada) that has created laws that support anti-Biblical practices such as abortion, same-sex unions, and commercial activities on the Lord’s Day; and through coercive means (e.g., excessive taxation, over-legislation, and policing powers) compel citizens to give their obeisance to the state rather than to Christ.

The voice speaking with John indicates that when the two witnesses (Rev 11.3) “have finished their testimony” the beast makes war on them. This statement causes many interpreters to assume that this vision must refer to a future last day, just prior to Christ’s return, when the witness of the Church has been silenced and little faith is found on the earth (Lk 18.8). If that interpretation is correct, then the nations’ war against Christ’s kingdom is to be a single event, rather than an ongoing onslaught (Ps 2.1-2). Therefore, it seems better to understand the statement as applying to a continuous activity of the Church as it bears witness to Jesus. Each time a pastor preaches the Gospel, a Christian politician speaks against evil in government, a pregnancy care centre counsels a woman to preserve the life of her unborn child, and a Christian reminds his family or friends of righteousness and the coming judgement, the beast rises against them.

The completion of each act of Christian testimony triggers an antagonistic reaction from the beast. As long as Christians remain silent and read their Bibles behind closed doors Satan doesn’t concern himself with stirring up the beast to attack. However, the moment a Christian makes a statement that offends pagan sensibilities, the fangs and claws of the beast are exposed, and he attacks. Consider a few examples: a Christian teacher raises doubts about the theory of evolution and he is hauled before the school board, a Christian baker states that he cannot in good conscience decorate a cake for a same-sex union ceremony and a human ‘rights’ commission levies a fine, a Christian grandmother stands outside an abortuary with a sign saying ‘abortion is murder’ and she is arrested and thrown into jail, or a few Christian high-schoolers convene a daily time of prayer at the flag pole and the police are sent in to remove them from public property. These responses from the beast are relatively innocuous compared with what follows as the beast becomes enraged—for example, a Christian who states that the *Qur’an* is not the word of God is beheaded by adherents of Islam who are not charged with a crime.

The beast and the false prophet are the two major forces that the Dragon (Rev 13.2) uses in his attempt to silence and destroy the Church. But his attempts will ultimately fail since the gates of the abyss cannot conquer the Church (Mt 16.18), and he along with the beast and the false prophet will be thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented day and night forever and ever (Rev 20.10).

The Great City Rejoices Over the Silencing of the Witnesses (Rev 11.7-10)

This section presents an interpretive challenge—determining what is meant by the expression, ‘great city’. Since it is stated that it was the city in which “their Lord was crucified” (i.e., of the two witnesses, the Church; Rev 11.1-2), many interpreters conclude that the ‘great city’ refers to the literal city of Jerusalem. Thus, they look for historical instances of Christians being persecuted to death and then being resurrected (Rev 11.11), which they are unable to find. Or they place the events in our future and state that the fulfilment of this vision will occur shortly before the time of Christ’s return to the earth. However, it is likely incorrect to conclude that the city being referred to is the Jerusalem that was, is, or will be, found in the territory called Israel at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, because:

- The city is called ‘great’, but not ‘holy’ as we would expect (Rev 11.2; Neh 11.1; Dan 8.24; Mt 4.5; Mt 27.53). The word ‘great’ does not mean that the city is good or holy. For example, individuals in history who have been given the appellation ‘great’, but were wicked—including Darius I (550–486 BC), Alexander (356–323 BC), Antiochus III (c 241–187 BC), Herod (73/74–4 BC), Askia Mohammad I (c 1442–1538), and Catherine II (1729–1796).
- Elsewhere in Revelation, ‘Jerusalem’ is used as a symbol of holiness. The only references to a city called ‘Jerusalem’ in Revelation are to the new Jerusalem (Rev 3.12; Rev 21.2, 10).
- The title ‘great city’ used everywhere else in Revelation (Rev 16.19; Rev 17.18; Rev 18.10, 16, 18, 19, 21) refers to the ungodly city called Babylon (Rev 18.1–24).
- The city is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt—Sodom because it is full of perverse instances of pleasure-seeking wickedness; and Egypt because of its adherence to a pantheon of demon-deities dedicated to natural objects and to the enslavement of the souls of men.
- The word ‘symbolically’ can be applied to everything in the sentence that follows—to Sodom and Egypt and to the place that the Lord was crucified. He was physically crucified outside Jerusalem, but figuratively in the great city of the vision.
- The city is not geographically localized since some from every people, tribe, language, and nation see the dead bodies of the witnesses. The fourfold enumeration indicates that the enemies of the Church are everywhere on earth.

The ‘great city’ is the worldwide *City of Man*, that from the beginning (Gen 4.17; Gen 10.8–11; Gen 11.1–9) has set itself in opposition to the City of God. It is the anti-God coalition of world powers (the beast) aligned with false religions (the false prophet) that crucified Jesus, are antagonistic to true religion, and persecute the Church. It is the city of entertainment, emporiums, and epicureanism. It is John Bunyan’s ‘Vanity Fair’, that Satan uses to suck darkened minds and spiritually dead spirits into the abyss.

When the Church prophesies (Rev 11.1), the *City of Man* responds with murderous intent. The world enslaved by Satan does not want to hear the Gospel or what the Bible says about righteousness and judgement to come. They suppress truth, stop their ears, believe lies, and carry out designs to silence those who discomfort them with the proclamation of God’s Law (Ps 2.1–3). Christians are fired because they speak against abortion or evolution; they are fined because they refuse to endorse same-sex unions; they have their property confiscated and are driven from their homelands because they worship in the name of Christ; their church buildings are burned to the ground; they are slaughtered, and their bodies cast into mass graves instead of being given proper burials; and entire congregations disappear from lands which once had a vibrant Christian witness.

The bodies of the witnesses—believers and congregations—are left lying in the streets of the ‘great city’. This is symbolic of the contempt which the world has for the witnessing Church, since refusal to bury a corpse is a sign of shame (Ps 79.3). The bodies of the witnesses are left for the world to see for three and half days—symbolizing an indefinite, finite (half of seven, that represents completeness), and short time—in contrast with the three and a half *years* of the Church’s ongoing tribulation (Rev 11.2).

During the three and half days of scorn heaped on the Church by the world, its enemies throw a street party—like lewd parades held in many cities under the rainbow flag—congratulating one another on their supposedly gaining the upper hand against God and finally ridding themselves of the torment that the preaching of God’s word has stirred in their consciences. This rejoicing over the apparent demise of the Church reveals the power of its witness to truth and the reality that many unbelievers will not repent (Rev 9.20–21; Rev 16.9, 11), even when confronted with the plagues of the horses, seals, trumpets, and bowls that are continually being poured out on them because of their wickedness.

However, as we shall see (Rev 11.11), God is not dead! The witness of the Church cannot be silenced! The

time of rejoicing of the Church's enemies lasts only for a few days and is cut short, because the Church cannot be destroyed, even by the gates of hell rising up against it (Mt 16.18), and will be vindicated by its King. God will have the last laugh at their foolishness (Ps 2.2-6) when he reveals the final form of the Church—the new Jerusalem (Rev 21.9-22.5).

The Resurrection of the Two Witnesses

(Rev 11.11)

Who or what we understand the two witnesses (Rev 11.3) to be, will determine how we interpret this verse, and the entire section (Rev 11.1-13). We concluded previously (see, [*Jesus' Two Witnesses*](#)) that the two witnesses are the two covenant communities that make up the one witnessing Church—composed of those who believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah ('anointed one') and anyone who now believes in the Christ ('anointed one') who has come and died as a substitute for their sins.

Thus, it is the Church that appears to be dead (Rev 11.7-8). This has happened throughout the past 2,000 years in various locations, for example:

- Turkey, the Middle East, and North Africa, which at one time had vibrant witnesses to the Gospel and produced great preachers and theologians, have become spiritual deserts since the advent of Islam.
- The dark days of the wicked papacy during the late Middle Ages left much of 'Christian' Europe in spiritual darkness before 1500 AD.
- The dramatic decline, during the past 100 years, in Europe and North America in church attendance and the increase in the percentage of people claiming adherence to non-Christian religions or no religion.

Although, at times and in various places, the Church may appear to be defeated, destroyed, and even dead, she is not; because Jesus is building his church, which cannot be destroyed, even by the gates of hell rising up against it (Mt 16.18). Jesus demonstrates his love for his Church (Eph 5.25) by breathing life from God the Holy Spirit into it in every generation. Thus, after three and a half days—symbolizing an indefinite, finite, and short time—the Church rises again and stands on its feet.

The resurrection of the two witnesses is an allusion to Ezekiel 37.1-14. In Ezekiel's day the true church appeared to be small and insignificant and to have its voice silenced, just as it does in much of North America today. But God encouraged Ezekiel by asking him if the dry bones could live again, and by breathing the Spirit into the dry bones (Ezk 37.5, 9-10). God has revitalized his Church many times in the past and continues to do it today. Consider a few examples:

- Diocletian (r. 284-312) attempted to destroy the Church throughout the Roman Empire, by killing Christian leaders and razing church buildings. All hope seemed lost for Christians. But a remarkable and sudden change occurred with the arrival of Constantine who established Christianity. The once persecuted religion became praised and preferred.
- Luther posted his 95 theses at Wittenberg (1517) seven months after the fifth Lateran Council concluded its failed attempt to reform the Church. The clouds were very heavy, but revival and reformation broke through with a brightness that had not been seen for over 1,000 years.
- Many parts of Latin America have been steeped in a superstitious syncretism between animism and Roman Catholicism for 500 years. But the dead bones are now alive! Consider Columbia as one example. In the 1980s it was one of the most dangerous countries on earth. However, the Evangelical revival in that land has turned it into an almost peaceful and prosperous country. Likewise, China, a former bastion of communistic atheism, has more Christians today than there are people in Canada

As one writer stated, "The church of martyrs can never lie dead for long." God demonstrates his covenant commitment to the Church, revives his cause, cuts short the victory celebrations (Rev 11.10) of the anti-God coalition of the beast (anti-God government) and false prophet (false religions), and silences the

naysayers among the nations who ask, “Where is their God?” (Ps 79.10)

The Church is called to follow Jesus’ footsteps (Mt 16.24) and is granted experiences that are similar to what he encountered. Jesus faced persecuting antagonists, so does the Church (Jn 15.20). Jesus was sentenced unjustly to death for declaring God’s truth, so is the Church (Rom 6.5). The enemies of Christ rejoiced over his death (Mt 27.42), and so the enemies of the Church rejoice when it appears to die (Rev 11.10). Jesus was raised from the dead after a short interval (on the third day), likewise the Church is raised again after three and a half days. After some time Jesus ascended into heaven, and the Church will also be called to its final abode in heaven (Rev 11.12; 1 Jn 3.2).

The ‘triumphs’ of the enemies of the Church are brief and temporary. They declare God to be dead, that organized religion will become obsolete, and that Christianity is dying out. But their joy is short lived, and their predictions are proven false, when the witnesses take the field once again, with spiritual armour and weapons, they disarm the cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil (Eph 6.11-17). Then a great fear falls on those who see the resurrection of the Church. This fear is not one of reverence for God or a fear that leads to faith and repentance. Rather, it is a fear that causes the enemies of Christ to flee from his presence and call upon the mountains to cover them (Rev 6.15-16). This should encourage and strengthen us. God will not allow the witness of his Church to fade away. At the beginning he had witnesses to the evil world (2 Pt 2.5), this continued through the age of the patriarchs, the delivery of the Mosaic law, the prophetic age, and the era of the apostles. This witness continues to the present day. Be strong in faith, God can and will revive his cause even when it appears to be the darkest hour. Victory belongs to Christ!

The Glorification of the Witnesses

(Rev 11.11-12)

In God’s order of salvation, ascension into heaven and glorification of the righteous will follow immediately after their resurrection (1 Thess 4.17). However, when the ascension of these two witnesses (Rev 11.3) will occur is a subject of debate. Some interpreters conclude that verses 11 and 12 refer to a special resurrection and ascension that will be applied to a select group of martyrs (or possibly only to two individuals), during a final tribulation, shortly before the return of Christ. Others conclude that these verses speak of a future rapture of the entire born-again Church, which will leave behind apostates and unbelievers, who will suffer in a great tribulation and witness the arrival of the antichrist. A few commentators suggest that the ascension is purely an interim spiritual (out-of-body) phenomenon similar to what John (Rev 4.2) and Paul (2 Cor 12.2) experienced. There is some merit in the idea that these verses speak of an event in the temporal realm, because the ascension of the witnesses is to be visible to their enemies, and because subsequent judgements will be poured out on unbelievers (Rev 11.13) before the final resurrection of all mankind. However, many interpreters appear to understand the invitation to ascend into heaven as applying to the harvest of all the elect on the Day of Judgement. Thus, they view verses 11 and 12 as equivalent to what Paul states will occur when time and the world come to an end.

We determined previously that the two witnesses are the collective OT and NT Church. We also concluded that the resurrection spoken of in verse 11, is not the final resurrection of every individual, but the revitalization of the Church in various locales and in different generations. This presents us with an interpretive challenge: how does the world witness the ascension of the revitalized Church into heaven on a cloud? If we are to be consistent with our previous interpretation, we should probably understand the ascension spoken of here as primarily figurative, rather than as a physical phenomenon. The evidence that the Church has been revitalized is that its worship, witness, and works become manifestly heavenly. The Church is no longer bogged down in the mire of worldliness and idolatry but ascends to a spiritual plane. Jesus indicates this when he spoke to the Samaritan woman and he said that the true worshippers will no longer worship here (i.e., in a physical locale) but will worship the Father in spirit and truth (Jn 4.23). Thus, interpreters who view this passage as symbolic conclude that we are to understand ‘heaven’ in this instance

as grace manifested through the Church to the world. This form of heavenly mindedness can be experienced by any congregation in any time, as they seek to honour God with proper worship.

We should observe that the voice from heaven issues a command and tells the Church to, “Come up here!”. That it is a command indicates that the Church:

- Is not to presume on the grace of God by inventing its own approach to heavenliness. For example, Paul tells us that we are to let the word of Christ dwell in us as we teach and admonish one another with the wisdom of the collection of songs in the Psalter (Col 3.16). The use of the Psalter will put us in the heavenly frame. Whereas offering mere human compositions leaves us in the worldly frame of pride and self will.
- Is to obey the command’s invitation and strive to honour God through all that will truly please him as it serves as his witnesses before his enemies.

The resurrected Church is displayed as ascending heavenward on a cloud. In Scripture, a cloud is the means of divine transportation (Rev 1.7; Rev 14.14; Ps 104.3; Is 19.1; Dan 7.13; Mt 24.30; Mt 26.64; Acts 1.9). The Church is granted the honour of being lifted into heaven on a cloud as it follows its Lord. This indicates that the witness of the Church has the Father’s approval, is Christ’s representative on earth, and is empowered by God the Holy Spirit.

While we have concluded that the ascension of the Church on the clouds is symbolic of its heavenly role in the worldly sphere, we must not neglect the truth that the symbolic points to a spatial-temporal event that will occur at the end of time. The entire believing Church will be resurrected at once and will be taken into glory to be with the Lord forever. Jesus will not leave his Church destitute and as orphans but is coming back to take his Church to its permanent and everlasting home (Jn 14.18). This truth is given so that we can encourage one another (1 Thess 4.18) as we display blameless and innocent lives in the “midst of a crooked and twisted generation”, among whom we are to reflect the light of heaven (Phil 2.15). Those who suffer now with Christ, will also be glorified with him (Rom 8.17).

The resurrection, ascension, and glorification of the Church is a vindication for the saints. It declares to the world that living faithfully as a Christian in the face of trials and persecution is not a waste of time. Jesus will declare before the watching world, “Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of you master and into everlasting rest from your labours.” (Rev 14.13; Mt 11.28; Mt 25.21). The glorification of the Church also declares the faithfulness of God, who declared that he would save completely those whom he has elected from the depths of eternity (Rom 8.29-30). Thus, the Church’s vindication is also God’s vindication—he is able to save! Finally, the Church’s glorification is a warning to the world. Just as God is faithful in rewarding his Church, he will be faithful in judging the wicked—the Church’s hour of glorification becomes the world’s hour of judgement (Rev 11.13).

The Second Woe

(Rev 11.13-14)

While the two witnesses (the OT and NT Church) are being glorified (Rev 11.11-12), the wicked *City of Man* is being judged for its premature rejoicing over the death of the Church (Rev 11.10). The *City of Man* has ignored multiple warnings sent to it, as the seals were opened and as the trumpets were blown. Therefore, the Lord sends against them another wave of punishment. We find this pattern repeated throughout history. The antediluvian world was filled with all manner of wickedness (Gen 6.5) and ignored, and likely mocked, the warning of Noah (2 Pt 2.5), so God visited them with the flood. The men at Babel quickly forgot the lesson of the flood, even while Shem was still alive as a witness to that terrible reality of universal judgement and rebelled in their attempt to usurp God’s authority. So, God visited them with the confusion of language. The enemies of Judah rejoiced over Judah’s apparent demise (Mic 7.8) and mocked her, but God judged them, and vindicated his covenant people (Mic 7.9-10). Wave after wave of warnings

and judgement has followed since then, and yet men persist in their rebellion against their Creator and Lord (Prov 1.24-32; Jer 5.3).

In this instance, the judgement consists of a great earthquake that results in the destruction of a tenth of the city and the death of seven thousand people. The earthquake is not to be understood as an actual ground-shaking event in Jerusalem or Rome in the 1st century that caused buildings to tumble, or an equivalent that will occur in the future in a physical city. The suggestion that the seven thousand who were killed represents one-tenth of the population of Jerusalem in the 1st century AD is mere supposition not supported by any verifiable evidence. Nor are we to associate the earthquake with a particular historical event, such as the start of the Reformation that shook the Roman Catholic Church to its foundations, as some have suggested. Rather, the earthquake is to be understood symbolically, for severe trials that God sends upon the recalcitrant among mankind. These two forms of judgement are not separate but are synonymous parallels. Each gives a symbolic number of completeness. The tenth of the city is equivalent to a tribute (tithe) that is paid to the sovereign God. The seven thousand killed is representative of a significantly large number (indicated by ‘thousand’ in contrast to ‘thousands of thousands’; Rev 5.11) and a complete portion of mankind (the ‘seven’) within the *City of Man*, from which those assigned to judgement cannot escape. When the witness of the Church is revived, the earthly minions of Satan face the torment of judgement (Rev 11.10) they are terrified by the expectation of the final judgement that temporal judgement portends. God views the rebellion of his enemies with contempt and holds them in derision as he establishes the eternal reign of his Son (Ps 2.1-12).

The statement “gave glory to the God of heaven” has elicited much discussion among commentators. They offer two primary interpretations:

- *Bowing in reverence.* Some suggest that the earthquake, and the destruction and deaths that follow, are finally sufficient to engender a true spirit of repentance in a population that until then had refused to repent. They turned from superstitions and idolatry, acknowledged God’s righteous judgements, and embraced him as their sovereign. Proponents of this interpretation point to the apparent repentance of Nebuchadnezzar after his humbling experience of living like an animal for seven years (Dan 4.28-33). They suggest that this giving of glory reflects a mass conversion of nine-tenths of the last generation on the earth—some apply this to a mass conversion of the last generation of Jews—and is reflected later by the nations that give glory to God (Rev 15.4). However, this is inconsistent with the tenor of Revelation which indicates that most people will not repent even after many tribulations of warning (Rev 9.20-21; Rev 16.9, 11).
- *Bowing with resistance.* The alternative interpretation is that most unbelievers remain antagonistic against God until their dying breath. Nevertheless, they are forced to bend their knees before their Creator, and thus give him glory through the acknowledgement that he is the ultimate sovereign and the righteous judge of all the earth. Examples of the wicked giving glory to God include Achan’s confession (Josh 7.19-20) and the superstitious Philistines’ returning the ark of the covenant with idols (1 Sam 6.5). Even the wickedness of the wicked brings glory to God because it fulfills his eternal purposes (Prov 16.4), and their shuddering in terror before him is an acknowledgement that he is the only God (James 2.19). Paul confirms this reality when he says that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord (whether voluntarily or involuntarily), “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2.10-11). Also, John’s use of the appellation ‘God of heaven’ reinforces the conclusion that this act of giving glory to God is universal. Outside of its use here (and in Rev 16.11), this expression is used about twenty times in the OT. It indicates that God is not the God of the Jews only but is the supreme God over all mankind (Ezra 1.2; Dan 2.37; Jonah 1.9). Men recognize God’s sovereignty, and believe that he is God, but continue to suppress this truth and persist in their trespasses.

The second woe—the trials of the sixth trumpet (Rev 9.13-20) and the heavenly response for the mistreatment of the witnesses (Rev 11.7-13)—has passed. The scene is now set for the final and greatest

woe to befall rebellious mankind, the day of judgement at the end of time (Rev 11.15-19).

The Seventh Trumpet – Christ Reigns (Rev 11.15-17)

With the blast of the seventh trumpet, the end of this created order has arrived. It represents the trumpet blast of which Paul speaks (1 Thess 4.16), which will announce the end of time, the resurrection of all the dead, the judgement of all mankind (Rev 11.18), the renovation of the created order, and the allocation of rewards and punishment to the assembled hosts of mankind. This trumpet blast represents the fulfilment of the third woe—everlasting torment—that John indicated would be experienced by rebellious mankind who refused to repent (Rev 9.12; Rev 11.14). The primary evidence that the seventh trumpet is the announcement of the last day is the statement that, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” At this point, God has accomplished his plan for history, his promises have been fulfilled (Is 9.6-7; Ezk 21.26-27; Dan 2.35, 44; Dan 7.14, 26-27; Zech 14.9), Christ’s enemies have been definitively defeated, and human governments (the ‘beast’) have been replaced by the fully-established kingdom of Jesus, which will endure forever and ever (Rev 11.15; Dan 4.3; Dan 6.26; Dan 7.27).

The source of the voice from heaven that announces the full realization of the Messiah’s kingdom is not identified. However, it is likely not a voice of an angel—even though angels announced his arrival on earth (Lk 2.11). It is more likely that the Father takes great delight (Mt 3.17; Mt 17.5) announcing that his Son has perfectly completed the work of redeeming his people from the clutches of Satan.

Christ has reigned as king from the moment of creation—after all, the universe was created through him and for him (Col 1.16). His earthly throne was established through his birth, death, and resurrection (Ps 110.1; Lk 1.31-33; Jn 1.49). And, he has been reigning as the mediatorial king, from heaven, since his ascension (Mt 28.18-20; Acts 2.32-36; Eph 1.20-23). Nevertheless, his kingdom has not been fully realized in this sin-defiled temporal realm. This is why we continue to pray, “Your kingdom come” (Mt 6.10). It is only with the final overthrow of Satan (Rev 12.10), the transfer of Satan’s purported lordship over the world to Jesus (Rev 11.15; Mt 4.9; Jn 12.31; Jn 14.30), the abolition of all opposition (Ps 2.2-6), the sentencing of all his enemies to the abyss (Mt 22.13), and the annihilation of death, that his reign will be fully realized and recognized throughout the renovated created order. Since the blast of the seventh trumpet announces the establishment of the everlasting reign of Christ, it cannot refer to the establishment of a supposed 1,000-year reign in this spatial-temporal realm. This conclusion is supported by the words of the worshippers who say, “who is and who was”. At this point, they omit the future aspect of Christ’s reign—“is to come” (Rev 1.8)—because at the last day his reign is a fully realized reality. In this everlasting kingdom:

- The supremacy of Christ will be universal (Rev 11.15; Phil 2.10-11).
- Truth will be universal (Hab 2.14).
- All vestiges of sin will be removed (Rev 21.4; Rev 22.15).
- Believing mankind will live forever in glorified bodies (1 Cor 15.42-49).

In response to the announcement that the everlasting reign of Christ has commenced, the representatives of the elect Church (the twenty-four elders) respond with praise. First, they thank God for applying his great power through the reign of Jesus. They thank God for:

- Answering their prayers that the kingdom would come (Mt 6.10).
- Crowning the Christ as King of kings (Rev 19.16), which declares his ultimate victory for his Church.
- Assuring all believers that their persecutions and sufferings have been completed (Rev 6.10).
- Establishing the right of their Lord and Saviour to rule and reign over them and over all the kings and kingdoms of the world (Rev 4.11; Rev 11.15).
- Publicly vindicating their cause before their enemies.

- Justly punishing those who opposed them with a final act of everlasting judgement (Rev 11.18).
 - Fulfilling Jesus' promise to return (Acts 1.11) and take his people to be with him forever (Jn 14.18).
- No unregenerate man will ever be able to demonstrate thankfulness toward God for his mercy and goodness. However, they all will declare the rightness of his justice and judgements and the righteousness of his reign.

The twenty-four elders declare that it is the “Lord God Almighty” who has commenced his reign (Rev 11.17). Previously the voice from heaven has stated that the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdom of the “Lord and of his Christ”. Thus, by their statement, the elders declare that Jesus, who commenced his visible and victorious reign at the end of time, is Lord God Almighty. The Father reigns through the Son (Ps 110.1). Together they reign as an inseparable unity from one throne (Rev 22.3).

Let us remember that Revelation was written to encourage the Church that suffers persecutions in every generation. Thus, these verses teach us that God controls history and that we must not judge the progress of the Church by its present state that we can observe. Rather, we are to rest in the assurance that Christ reigns now, that he will reign into the ages of the ages, and that we will reign with him if we endure until he calls us home (2 Tim 2.12).

The Seventh Trumpet – The Final Judgement (Rev 11.18)

At the blast of the seventh trumpet, we are provided with a brief glimpse at the end of history and of this world. When the final trumpet is sounded, the dead will be raised to appear before the Lord, who is seated on his throne of judgement (Mt 25.31-32). This will occur at the “time for the dead to be judged”, which indicates that God has appointed a time when he will bring about the consummation of this age. Many people attempt to discern signs from Revelation as to when Christ will reappear physically in this world. Instead of concerning ourselves with the ‘when’ question, we ought to focus our attention on the certainty that all the dead will be judged (Heb 9.27), in God’s appointed time—‘*the time*’. All classes of mankind—believer and unbeliever, rich and poor, great and small, adult and child, Jew and Gentile—will appear before the God who rules in heaven, on the earth, and over hell. There will be no one missing, and no one will be able to escape this final event of history that will require every person to give an account of his life (Rev 20.12; Rev 22.12; 2 Cor 5.10). God has given three sequences of warnings in Revelation (the seals, trumpets, and bowls of judgement) to establish the certainty that all of history is marching resolutely to the judgement day and that we all must be prepared to face God on that day (Amos 4.12).

John does not describe in detail the events that occur on the day of judgement or the rewards and punishment which will follow. They were not shown to him at this time because they are not the essential point of the seventh trumpet blast—which is to announce the day of judgement, not to deal with events that follow judgement. Although John does not identify the rewards for believers at this point, they certainly include vindication over persecuting enemies, reigning with Christ, and spiritual and material blessings. Later, he will be shown a vision of the glory of the post-judgement new heaven and earth (Revelation 21.1-27 and Revelation 22.1-4) and will make passing references to the punishment of Satan and those whom he has deceived (Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10, 15). Jesus gives slightly more detail about how he will judge the nations when he speaks in parabolic language of the separation of the goats from the sheep and of the issuance of sentences (Mt 25.33-34, 41). He also describes the nature of hell (Mt 13.42), more than any other prophet. And, he identified the rewards in his letters to the seven churches (see, [*Promised Rewards*](#) for Conquering). Paul also gives some insight into the future punishment of unbelievers (2 Thess 1.5-10).

The voices of the twenty-four elders inform us that the initiating event for the time of judgement is when God’s wrath against the nations’ rebellion has reached its fullness—“your wrath came”. Every occurrence of the word ‘wrath’ in Revelation (where the Greek word is the same as the word used here) is associated

with the outpouring of judgement at the end of time (Rev 6.16-17; Rev 14.10; Rev 16.19; Rev 19.15). God is long suffering, giving men many warnings about the coming judgement and much time to repent. However, as he showed when he judged the antediluvian world (Gen 6.1-7), eventually his patience expires, and he brings everlasting judgement upon his enemies (Gen 15.16; Rom 2.4-5; 2 Pt 3.8-10).

The voices of praise also inform us that there are only two categories of mankind—the same two that Jesus speaks of metaphorically as goats and sheep. There are not three categories as many believe and hope—the extremely wicked such as psychopaths and sexual perverts, saints, and the muddled middle. There are also only two destinations—the lake of fire (Rev 20.15) or paradise (Rev 2.7)—for those who come before the judgement seat of Christ. Also, there are only two outcomes from the day of judgement—everlasting punishment or glorious rewards.

Those who are sentenced to everlasting punishment are described as being raging nations—an allusion to Psalm 2.1—and “destroyers of the earth”. These are people who refuse to acknowledge God as Creator and Jesus as lord, invent their own gods and religions, establish laws that are contrary to God’s Law, abuse their stewardship role (Gen 1.26), corrupt others in their generation, and persecute God’s people in an attempt to hinder the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. That God will *destroy* the *destroyers* indicates that their punishment is equal to their crimes (Ex 21.24-25; Heb 2.2) and that their sins have returned on their own heads (Ps 7.14-16).

John identifies those who will be rewarded on the last day as servants, prophets, saints, and those who fear God’s name. Other than the prophets, the three other terms are synonyms for Christians. Every true Christian is a servant of Christ (Mt 25.35-40), reverences the name of Jesus, and has been sanctified (‘saintified’). The prophets likely represent a special subclass of Christians who have been assigned specific duties such as delivering new revelation and writing Scripture (now a discontinued role), teaching, and preaching. All earthly distinctions (“small and great”) will vanish before the throne, as Christ lavishes rewards on his faithful people.

Satan is an intelligent creature, and he can read the Bible. He is a far better scholar than many who are in our churches and seminaries today because he knows that God’s word is true. He knows what is in store for him and the masses of mankind that are his slaves. Thus, he does what he can to prevent people from reading the Bible and heeding the warning of the seven trumpets.

The Seventh Trumpet – The Ark Revealed in the Open Temple

(Rev 11.19)

John observed that the temple in heaven had been opened to reveal that the ark of the covenant was inside it. Although we are given limited information about the layout of the heavenly scene, it is possible that he saw the temple behind the throne (Rev 4.2) and the altar (Rev 6.9; Rev 8.3), around which the vast multitude assembled in a semicircle.

We are to understand by the vision of the *open* temple that the way into the most holy place is not restricted as was access to the inner sanctuary in the temple of the old covenant. In Solomon’s temple, only the high priest was permitted to enter the inner sanctuary where the ark with the atonement cover (‘mercy-seat’) had been placed, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. The veil of the Herodian temple was torn at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion (Mt 27.50-51) indicating that access to God had been procured through the sacrifice of the perfect Lamb of God. The vision of the open temple teaches us that:

- The OT ceremonial system of shadowy types has been completed. Atonement has been procured, once for all time (Heb 9.23-26), and it is no longer necessary to approach God with animal sacrifices.
- Every believer is declared holy (sanctified) and has direct spiritual access to the inner sanctuary, where he may offer up his prayer and praise.

- The shadows of the old economy have been dispelled by the light of full revelation of the Gospel, which is shining throughout the world to the men of every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev 7.9).
- God now dwells with his people in a more intimate and intense way than he had in previous generations (Jer 31.33; Jer 32.38). All believers, ‘small and great’ (Rev 11.18), can enjoy God’s presence in their lives.
- God dwells among mankind in the approachable God-man Jesus, who is the ultimate temple that was typified by the earthly one (Jn 2.18-21; Heb 10.19-20); and the Church in him is God’s temple (1 Cor 3.16).

John would have known that the ark of the covenant made at the time of the exodus from Egypt had been destroyed over 600 years prior to the time of this vision. It may have been taken by Shishak, the Egyptian pharaoh (1 Ki 14.25), or by Nebuchadnezzar at the time of the Babylonian captivity (2 Chron 36.7). Contrary to popular mythology, the ark was not preserved beneath the temple mount; at Luxor, Tanis, or Elephantine in Egypt; or in Aksum in northern Ethiopia. The ark had been destroyed long before John’s day, and a replacement had apparently not been made for the second temple. Yet he sees a vision of the ark in the open temple in heaven. The ark in the earthly tabernacle, and later in Solomon’s temple, served as a copy and shadow of heavenly things (Heb 8.5). Thus, the presence of the ark is included in the heavenly temple vision to encourage believers, since it:

- *Displays the faithfulness of God to his covenant promises.* When John wrote, the OT ceremonial system was still operating in Jerusalem, but would soon be destroyed. Thus, God shows that his promise never to desert his people (Jer 24.7; Heb 13.5) is not dependent on the presence of physical objects on earth, but on the surety of his presence in heaven.
- *Shows God’s abiding presence with his people into the everlasting ages.* When the ark went before the people at the time of the exodus (Num 10.33; Josh 3.3), they knew that God was leading them. When it was placed in Solomon’s temple, they knew that a glorious kingdom had been established and they had reached a place of rest. With the revelation of the ark in heaven, the Messianic kingdom has been fully established and Christ leads his people of the new exodus to their final resting place.
- *Declares that the saving work of grace is complete.* The ark enshrined God’s holy Law and was covered with the mercy-seat. The presence of the ark in heaven declares that the work of grace—the atoning death of Jesus—covers the curse of the Law forever. On the Day of Atonement (Lev 16.1-34) sacrificial blood was sprinkled on the mercy-seat as a covering for the people’s sins. That the ark is in heaven means that it is no longer needed on earth because atonement has been procured once for all time.
- *Ensures victory over all Christ’s foes.* When the ark was taken by the Philistines, the Israelites were discouraged and defeated (1 Sam 4.1-11). The presence of the ark in heaven means that Christ has defeated his enemies and they will never be able to rise up against him again.

The open temple, without a veil, and the presence of the ark of the covenant declare that salvation is complete—it is finished! (Jn 19.30)—and that the work of Christ has been fully accepted by the Father in heaven. However, the presence of the ark also speaks of the judgement of the ungodly. When the Law was delivered on Sinai, it was accompanied by thunder and lightning and an earthquake (Ex 19.16-18). The ark carried the tablets of the Law, delivered on Sinai, as a permanent reminder of the threat of judgement against sin. When the ark was taken captive by the Philistines, they suffered judgement (1 Sam 5.1-12). And, the tearing of veil of the temple was accompanied by an earthquake (Mt 27.51). Likewise, signs of judgement accompany the vision of the ark in the heavenly temple. Thus, the unveiled ark in the temple is a suitable symbol for both grace and judgement, for rewards and punishment. The ark of the covenant in the open temple encourages us to draw near with thanksgiving to our saviour and warns those who have not repented of their sins that the last trumpet will sound and there will be a day of reckoning.

The Woman and the Dragon – The Woman (Rev 12.1-2)

With the expression ‘great sign’, John reminds us that the visions he had seen are symbolic. He uses the term ‘sign’ more than a dozen times in his Gospel (e.g., Jn 2.11) and will use it seven times between Revelation 12.1 and Revelation 19.20. This indicates that we are to understand the visions recorded in Revelation as figuratively pointing to spiritual and temporal realities. A physical woman did not appear in history, clothed in the sun and standing on the moon. Nor are we to expect a physical woman to appear above the earth. So, we need to determine what is symbolized by the woman of this vision.

Some commentators claim that the woman in this vision is Mary, the mother of Jesus. However, the majority opinion is that she represents the Church. Yet, as obvious as this seems to be correct, there are different opinions about which part of the Church she represents, for example:

- OT Israel (Is 54.1-6; Is 62.1-5; Is 66.7-13). Some defend this interpretation by referring to Joseph’s dream where his father is the sun, his mother is the moon, and the other sons of Jacob are eleven stars (Gen 37.9). However, this is an attempt to force-fit a correspondence between the imagery of John’s vision and Joseph’s dream. They also argue that Christ (the male child of this vision) was not born of the NT Church but only from the OT Church.
- The NT Church (Jn 3.29; 2 Cor 11.2; Gal 4.26–27; Eph 5.25-32; 1 Jn 1.5-10), or the 1st century portion of it. This interpretation is too restrictive since it excludes believers in the OT covenant community who are clearly represented by the Messiah of this chapter.
- A remnant of physical Israel from the generation when Christ establishes a thousand-year reign on earth. This interpretation is also too restrictive and does not properly address the overall message of chapter 12.
- The Church, which includes all believers through all time. This seems to be the best interpretation within the context of the remainder of chapter 12, particularly Revelation 12.17.

This vision and most of the subsequent ones (found in Rev 12.1-18.24), do not follow chronologically from the previous vision of the seven trumpets. Rather, they cover the same period (all of history from Adam to the final judgement day), but from a different perspective. The previous visions of the seals and the trumpets identified the judgements which are directed at those who persecute the Church of Christ. A number of the later visions focus on the spiritual conflict between the Church and specific enemies, including the dragon (Satan), the beast (anti-God governments), the false prophet (false religions), and the *City of Man*. They show what will happen to the enemies of Christ and record his ultimate victory over those who hate God.

John tells us that the woman appeared in heaven. He probably does not mean the otherworldly dimension, which is the abode of God the Father and the lamb, where he has seen their throne, the altars, the temple, and the vast assembly of saints at worship. Rather he likely refers to the canopy over the earth (the sky), since the subsequent conflict between the woman and her male child takes place on the earth.

The woman is described with picturesque and evocative language. There is much speculation in the commentaries and on the internet about what the aspects of her appearance mean. We must be careful not to dissect visions with a scalpel and attempt to find a hidden meaning in every part of the imagery. Rather, we should generally focus on the overall message—which in this instance is to show the glory and beauty of Christ’s bride, the Church. However, considering the suggested interpretations, we can conclude that the components of the description may be understood as follows:

- *Clothed with the sun*. She is resplendent and holy through the imputed righteousness of Jesus (Ps 37.6), who is the ultimate sun of righteousness (Mal 4.2).
- *The moon under her feet*. The interpretative options seem to be the most unconvincing for this part of the description. Since the moon reflects the glory of the sun, maybe the way to interpret this part of the vision is to view it as the Church’s role in presenting God’s truth to the world or as the Church’s reflected glory (Ex 34.34-35) that is seen by the world.

- *A crown of twelve stars.* Her crown represents the Church's share in Christ's victory (Rev 2.10; Rev 3.11; Rev 6.2; Rev 14.14), The stars in her crown represent those who bear witness to truth (Dan 12.3), and their number (twelve) likely represents the organized Church in either the OT or the NT—the tribes of Israel and the apostles.

The woman is pregnant and giving birth when John sees the vision. This indicates that the Messiah, the male child (Rev 12.4b-5) who is the offspring of the woman (Gen 3.15), came through the line of the covenant community (Lk 3.23-38). However, it also appears to have a second meaning. All believers in Christ are children of the Church. The birth pains of the Church represent the persecutions of the covenant community in every generation; as is indicated by John's choice of the Greek word, translated as 'agony' in the ESV. Elsewhere in the NT it is translated as 'suffering' (Mt 8.6), 'torment' (Mt 8.29; 2 Pt 2.8), and 'beaten' (Mt 14.24). Elsewhere in Revelation, John uses the word exclusively for the torment that the wicked receive under the judgement of God (Rev 9.5; Rev 11.10; Rev 14.10; Rev 20.10).

The Woman and the Dragon – The Dragon

(Rev 12.3-4)

John saw a dragon appear in the sky (heaven) above the earth and the woman. The ancient world knew of dinosaurs because their kinds had been in the ark with Noah. The descendants of the pairs taken into the ark were eventually hunted to extinction or died out (e.g., during the ice age). However, their existence, at least until the late Middle Ages, is undoubtedly the source for the legends and stories about dragons that are prevalent in many cultures throughout the world. The historical accounts of dinosaur (dragon) sightings are too numerous to list in this meditation. However, a few examples include: Alexander the Great reported seeing a dragon in India; Chinese accounts include reports of people raising dragons for food; and Marco Polo recorded (in his *Travels*) seeing huge 'serpents', ten paces in length, with short front legs, each with three claws, and jaws wide enough to swallow a man. There are also numerous examples of rock paintings, stone carvings, sculptures, and mosaics that include animals which look like modern renderings of dinosaurs and do not resemble any living animal. The word 'dragon' only appears in Revelation in the NT. However, in the Greek translation of the OT, used by John, it is applied to fearsome sea or land creatures (e.g., 'leviathan', Ps 104.26; 'monster', Jer 51.34). So, John likely saw a creature that appeared similar to what we believe a *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, *Carnotaurus*, or *Mosasaurus* might have looked like.

A number of (mostly modern) commentators attempt to associate the vision of the dragon with a pagan myth and suggest that John adapts such a myth for his purposes. However, John is not the ultimate author of this account. The vision is provided by Christ, via the Holy Spirit, to John. It is inappropriate to suggest that the Holy Spirit uses pagan myths to communicate truth. Rather, since Revelation provides a clear polemic against idolatry and pagan cults and institutions, the visual portrayals in the visions are original and not an adaptation of a pagan myth.

The dragon John saw in the vision is a representation of Satan (Rev 12.9; Rev 20.2). He appeared as being red, which is likely symbolic for oppression and war (Rev 6.4). It also had seven heads, which wore seven crowns (diadems), and ten horns. Much speculation has resulted from this portion of the description of the dragon. For example, some have suggested that the seven heads represent seven historical periods. Others have suggested that the seven heads represent the seven hills of Rome and the seven crowns and ten horns, a series of Roman emperors (Rev 17.7-14; Dan 7.7, 24). Without doubt, 1st-century Rome is an instance of the anti-God paganism that oppresses the Church. However, it is probably best not to confine the interpretation of the symbolic description to a single nation in a limited, specific timeframe. Rather, the heads, crowns, and horns represent Satan, as the ruler of this world (Jn 12.31), working in the world, in all ages, through human kingdoms—with the seven representing a fullness of scope (universal sovereignty), and the ten representing complete, or total, tyrannical power. Thus, Satan is identified as the force that

supports the wicked kingdoms that oppose the true “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19.16) and persecute his covenant people.

John observed the dragon sweeping down a third of the stars from heaven to the earth. This is probably a retrospective allusion to an event that occurred centuries in the past and not an account of something that occurred in the 1st century or in a subsequent century, or something that will occur in our future. Also, the ‘stars’ in this instance are likely not the true saints of God (Gen 15.5; Dan 12.3) who are persecuted by Satan. Rather they are likely the angels—angels appear to be referred to as ‘stars’ elsewhere in Scripture (Job 38.7; Ps 148.2-3)—who followed Satan in his rebellion and were cast out of heaven (2 Pt 2.4; Jude 6). As we have noted previously (Rev 8.7-12) a reference in this book to a third part of something does not speak of an absolute number but is a rhetorical device for speaking of a significant portion of the whole.

The dragon is seen standing before the woman, waiting for her to give birth so that he could devour the child she bore. We will identify the specific child she births as the Messiah—Jesus—in our next meditation. However, we can apply this part of the vision in a general sense. We see here that Satan:

- Is the initiator of all hatred against God. He knows that he has been decisively defeated and will be consigned to the everlasting lake of fire (Rev 20.10)—he can read the Bible! In the meantime, he rages against Christ and Christians (Rev 12.13).
- Uses the beast of government, the false prophet who espouses false religion, and the prostitute of the *City of Man* to execute his destructive schemes on earth against the church. We see numerous examples today as governments rule against Christians who defend Biblical morality against same-sex activities, and endorse the practices of false religions.
- Is vigilant, watching and waiting for every opportunity to harass and oppress the Church. Peter says that he “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pt 5.8). Through his schemes he attempts to prevent the continuance and growth of the true religion in the world, looking for opportunities to prevent people from being born again.

We should not be deceived; the dragon is real! He is actively working to cause us to doubt our saving faith, stumble in our walk, grieve the Holy Spirit, and deny our Lord. If he can accomplish this, he believes that he can hinder God’s plan to redeem a multitude from his clutches.

The Woman and the Dragon – The Woman’s Male Child

(Rev 12.4-5)

The child referenced in these verses is clearly the Messiah or, in NT terms, Jesus, the Christ. Evidence supporting this conclusion includes the following:

- The explicit reference to a ‘male child’ alludes to Isaiah 9.6 (“a child ... a son”) and narrows the focus from the general children of the Church.
- The statement that the child will rule the nations with a rod of iron alludes to Psalm 2.6, 8-9, which speaks of Messiah’s rule.
- The one who rules the nations, as King of kings, with a rod of iron, is referred to later in Revelation as the Word of God (Rev 19.13, 15-16) who John mentions in the preface to his Gospel (Jn 1.1).
- Jesus is the firstborn of the Church (Rom 8.29; Gal 3.16; Heb 1.6), among his collective brothers and sisters who make up his Church (1 Cor 15.23; Gal 3.29; Heb 2.17; Heb 12.22-23).

Satan (the dragon) is portrayed as standing before the woman waiting with an expectation that he might be able to devour the Christ child as he is born. His desire to destroy Jesus was worked out explicitly in history through his agent, Herod, who killed all the infants in Bethlehem (Mt 2.16). Satan tried again to devour Jesus when he tempted him after he had fasted for forty days (Mt 4.1-11). He tried for a final time at Christ’s crucifixion, when the naysayers loaded ridicule upon Jesus (Mt 27.40) and Jesus died.

Indirectly, Satan tried to exterminate the child of the woman through Rome's persecutions against the early Church. Satan continues his vain attempts today to devour the male child through attacks on his Church, by tempting and persecuting them. Those who attack Jesus' people, attack him (Mt 10.16-25; Mt 25.45). The attacks perpetrated by adherents of Islam against Christians come to mind first when we think of overt persecution today. However, we are seeing an increasing level of animosity against Christians in the West, whether from advocates of deviant sexual practices, those who deny the created distinctions between males and females, or supporters of evolutionary origin myths. These opponents of Christianity profess to be wise in their foolish notions (Rom 1.22) because their minds have been blinded by Satan, the god of this world (2 Cor 4.4).

At the crucifixion, it appeared that Satan had successfully devoured the male child and had defeated God's plans for redeeming his elect people. But John saw that the child "was caught up to God and to his throne". The Greek word translated "caught up" has the force of 'being seized' or 'snatched'. The resurrection of Jesus snatched Jesus from the jaws of death and his ascension into heaven snatched him from the claws of the dragon. Jesus was caught up to God, which indicates that he was called home to the Father, since his work of redemption was finished (Jn 19.30) and accepted by the Father. He was also caught up to the throne in heaven (Rev 5.13), which indicates that his rule over the created physical realm continues, but from the precincts of heaven (Acts 2.33). His resurrection and ascension are the firstfruits (Rev 1.5; Col 1.18) of what his people will also experience. Paul uses the same word 'caught up' (1 Thess 4.17) when he describes the resurrection and following ascension of believers. When our work here is finished, and when God's redemptive work is complete, Jesus will call home all of his brothers and sisters who make up the woman's (the Church's) children.

This vision compresses the life of Jesus from his birth to his resurrection and ascension, skipping over his earthly ministry and his death. This is not because his life and death are unimportant—they are of ultimate importance, since without his perfect life he could not have died a perfect atoning death. In revelation John does not refer directly to the crucifixion and does not use the word 'cross'. He alludes to the crucifixion by his use of the word 'blood' (Rev 1.5; Rev 7.14; Rev 12.11; Rev 19.13) and includes passing references to the death of Jesus (Rev 1.18; Rev 2.8). The purpose of Revelation is not to replay the Gospel message—salvation through belief in the death of Jesus as our substitute—but to recount the victor's story. The focus of Revelation is on the exalted and glorified Christ, who was born to rule (Mt 2.2; Lk 1.31-33) and who has defeated his and our enemies (Rev 12.10). He has ascended on high to assume his throne in heaven, from which he rules the cosmos.

In the day and culture in which Revelation was written, Imperial Rome ruled with iron (Dan 2.40; Dan 7.23) and looked invincible. But the Messiah had arrived, and his rule would overcome that of all earthly kingdoms (Dan 2.45). The ESV and NASB state that he "is to rule", the N/KJV states that he "was to rule", and the NIV states that he "will rule". A person reading the account might become confused about the status of Christ's rule, depending on the translation he uses. Some may think that his rule has not commenced or that it was cut short as he was caught up into heaven at his ascension. However, Christ is ruling now over the nations (Rev 1.5; Mt 28.18-20; 1 Cor 15.25-26) from his heavenly throne (Eph 1.20). His rule is more or less visible in every generation, depending on the state of the Church and the adherence of the nations to his commands. When he returns to earth and re-creates the natural realm, his reign will be clearly seen by all mankind, who will then bow before him in reverence or abject fear (Phil 2.9-11). Imperial Rome is now gone, and all usurpers and rebels against Messiah's rule—whether tyrannical dictators or elected panderers—will likewise be cast down to be replaced with his glorious ultimate reign (Is 9.7). We receive assurance of this from this vision and elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 19.11-16; Rev 21.5-22.5).

The Woman and the Dragon – The Woman in the Wilderness (Rev 12.6)

We determined previously (Rev 12.1-2) that it is best to understand the woman of this vision to represent the Church of all believers through all time—i.e., both OT and NT covenant people. Out of this community was born the Messiah, the male child (Rev 12.5). The dragon (Satan) has harassed and persecuted the Church through history, seeking to devour her offspring (Rev 12.4)—for example, Pharaoh’s killing of the Hebrew male babies; Athaliah’s murder of all the princes, except for Joash who was protected by his aunt; Haman’s plot against the Jews; and Herod’s slaughter of the male infants in Bethlehem. Since the ascension of Jesus (Rev 12.5), Satan has intensified his attacks against Christians because he hates to see the expansion of the Church. But God watches over his Church, protecting it from Satan (Mt 16.18).

One of the ways God protects the Church is by providing her with a place of escape within the wilderness. This is not to be understood as a literal exodus of Christian refugees from Jerusalem before 70 AD, when the inhabitants saw the Roman armies approaching. Nor is this a reference to a future flight of converted Jews during the last generation of mankind. Rather, this is a descriptive way of referring to the state of the Church as it exists now—in the wilderness, but not of it (Jn 17.14-16).

Some interpreters have suggested that this vision alludes to the wilderness wanderings of the OT Jews after their exodus from Egypt, during which time they faced many hardships while God cared for them (Dt 2.7). Others suggest that it alludes to the 40 days of fasting and temptation experienced by Jesus at the start of his public ministry, or to the flight of Elijah from Jezebel after he had confronted the priests of Baal. These possible allusions provide examples of the Church’s flight into the wilderness to a place prepared by God for her protection. The wilderness is a dangerous locale for the covenant community, but in it is also a place of refuge, it is an environment of persecution and of provision (Dt 8.15-16). The wilderness itself is not the place of protection from the dragon’s fangs and claws—it is a place of vicious animals (Satan and his demons) and of danger from attacks (temptation)—but in it God has provided a place of protection. This indicates that the Church, like Abraham, has escaped from the *City of Man* and its pagan gods; but like refugees (pilgrims, Heb 11.13) heading to a new land it can find no final resting place in the wilderness of this world. The Church is consigned to wander in the wilderness until it follows its Lord and arrives in the promised land.

Meanwhile, God has provided a place of safety—a tent, tabernacle, or temple—in the wilderness (Num 1.1; 1 Chron 21.29), where he welcomes his people into fellowship and meets with them in the midst of the hostile desert. This place is ultimately Jesus himself, since John states elsewhere that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1.14). The word translated ‘dwelt’ could also be translated as ‘tented’ or ‘tabernacled’. As Immanuel, God is dwelling with us (Mt 1.23; Jn 4.20 with Jn 2.21) and covers us and protects us from physical and spiritual dangers (Dt 32.10-11; Ps 91.1-16; Ps 121.1-8).

While the Church is symbolized by the woman who flees to the wilderness, it is also referred to as the body of Christ (Eph 5.23). Therefore, in a proximate sense, the Church is the place of protection for God’s people in the wilderness. Christians are intended to be actively engaged in an assembly of other believers for prayer, teaching, fellowship, and encouragement (Acts 2.42; Heb 10.25). When believers assemble regularly together, they are provided with nourishment to strengthen them as they face the desolation of the spiritual wilderness around them. They are strengthened by the presence of the Lord Jesus in his Supper, taught by the Holy Spirit through the read word, exhorted by the preached word, comforted and inspired by singing of the Psalms, and challenged to live in faith and obedience through the fellowship of likeminded brothers and sisters.

The place of nourishment in the wilderness has been prepared by God. This indicates that it is his intention that the Church will continue its existence throughout the 1,260 days of its duration. We have previously concluded that the 1,260 days (42 months, 3.5 years) is figurative for a period that is half of seven—a complete time—and thus, a period of unspecified but finite duration. If we feel compelled to associate dates

with the 1,260 days, it is probably most appropriate to apply it to the time from Christ's ascension until his return, at the end of time when he will judge the nations, and not to a literal three and half years of severe persecution during a pending 'great tribulation', as many suppose. During this time, while the nations are trampling on the Church (Rev 11.1) and driving it into the wilderness, the Church is being nourished by Jesus, who is fulfilling his promise that he will never leave or forsake his people (Jn 14.26-27; Jn 16.7; Heb 13.6) and will bring them safely through the valley of the shadow of death.

We can extend our consideration of the place of nourishment beyond the spiritual (Christ himself) and temporal (the Church in this world) realms, into the dimension of the new heaven and earth. Jesus told his disciples that he was going into heaven to prepare a *place* for them (Jn 14.1-3). So, the place in the wilderness is a type for the heavenly place in which God's people will receive everlasting nourishment (Rev 19.9; Rev 22.14).

War in Heaven and the Expulsion of Satan

(Rev 12.7-9)

John introduces a digression (Rev 12.7-12) into the account of his vision of the woman and the dragon, which provides some background about the dragon's intense hatred of the woman—the Church. He resumes his account of the woman's flight into the wilderness in verse 13. This digression deals with a battle in heaven between Michael and Satan and the joy expressed by the Church over the victory of Michael.

Commentators have attempted to identify when this battle occurred, or when it will supposedly occur. Some believe that the digression is a retrospective reflection about the expulsion of Satan from heaven before the advent of Jesus, such as: 1) at the beginning of time before Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent; or 2) sometime during the ages covered by the OT, since Satan appears to still have had access to heaven to discourse with God about his saints (Job 1.6-12; Zech 3.2). Others place the expulsion during the time Jesus was on the earth: 1) during the mission of the seventy (Lk 10.18); 2) at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Jn 12.31); or 3) following Jesus' resurrection or ascension (Col 2.14-15). Others place the battle in our future, when, at the end of time, Satan will be barred from the new heaven and earth and consigned to an everlasting abode in the abyss. The proponents of each of these views marshal their arguments for their views and against other views. However, all of these views encounter problems with consistently including all the data, because they are based on a faulty assumption—that events in heaven occur in the same 'flow' of time that we experience on earth and that events on earth and in heaven can be strung together into a chronological sequence. We have noted previously (see, [*The Fifth Seal – Do Saints in Heaven Observe Events on Earth?*](#)) that time is relative and intimately associated with the space, matter/mass, and gravity of our universe. Whatever form of time heaven experiences, it does not occur in parallel with, or in sequence with, our time. The war in heaven occurred in an entirely different dimension, where time is 'flowing' very differently from time in our dimension. Thus, it is meaningless to ask the question, when did the battle in heaven occur since that assumes that it occurred in our form of time. The best that we can say, with John, is that a war arose in heaven between Michael and his angels and Satan and his angels, Satan was defeated, and Satan and his army were expelled from heaven. The battle did not occur in our time. From one perspective (within our framework of time), the war between Michael and Satan is an ongoing battle. From another perspective, the battle is complete—Satan has been vanquished and Michael, representing Christ, is the victor.

The two parties in the war are identified as Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels (Rev 12.4). Michael is one of only two named angels in the Bible—the other being Gabriel. He is mentioned in Daniel (Dan 10.13, 21; Dan 12.1) and Jude. Some suggest that he is Jesus in a theophanic form. However, since he is called an archangel (Jude 9), his name means 'Who is *like* God?', and is *one of* the chief 'princes' (i.e., angels) of heaven (Dan 10.13), he is an angel assigned significant duties in God's heavenly kingdom. He leads the host of angels who did not rebel with Satan and wages spiritual warfare against Satan and his

fallen angels on behalf of the Church (Dan 10.21; Dan 12.1).

The other party in this battle is the dragon, who is called here:

- *The great dragon.* The adjective ‘great’ is applied to him because there is no one who is more evil and focused on destroying the Church than him.
- *The ancient serpent.* This is an allusion to Genesis 3.1, where at the beginning of creation (1 Jn 3.8) Satan possessed a serpent as his physical instrument to tempt the woman to commit the first sin. John may also use this appellation as a polemic against a number of Greek cults, known to his readers, which associated snakes with their pagan rituals.
- *The devil.* The Greek word (*diabolos*) means ‘slanderer’. It is applied to Satan because he is the one who accuses God’s people of sin (Rev 12.10; Job 1.9-11; Zech 3.1-2).
- *Satan.* The Hebrew word ‘satan’ is transliterated into NT Greek (and English). It means ‘adversary’ (2 Sam 19.22; 1 Ki 11.14). In his venomous hatred against God, he is *the* primary opponent of Christ Jesus and his Church.
- *The deceiver of the whole world.* Satan is a liar from the beginning (Gen 3.4) and the father of lies (Jn 8.44). He uses overt falsehoods and subtle insinuations (Rev 13.14; Rev 19.20; 2 Jn 7) to tempt mankind into every form of perversity and evil, and to blind them against truth (2 Cor 4.4).

Michael is portrayed as the instigator in the war. God assigned him and his angels the task of expelling Satan and the fallen angels from heaven (the Greek can be translated as, they ‘had to make war’). We cannot understand the nature of war in the spiritual realm, but hints elsewhere in the Bible indicate that it is intense (Dan 10.13; Eph 6.12). Michael succeeded in his task, and Satan and his demons no longer have a place in heaven, or access to it. However, Satan was not yet consigned to the everlasting abyss. He and his angels were thrown down to the earth. He has been permitted by God to continue his work of deception in this realm while God demonstrates the power of his saving grace. However, Satan is not invincible. Because Michael won the war and Christ has conquered death and purchased redemption for his people, Satan knows his time is short (Rev 12.12). This assures us that Satan can be resisted and beaten, even by us (James 4.7) with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Christ’s Kingdom Has Come – Christ’s Reign

(Rev 12.10)

An unnamed loud voice in heaven announces the arrival of Christ’s kingdom. It is probably the voice of the large assembly of the glorified saints, because of the third person references to God (the Father) and Christ and to “our brothers”. The heavenly inhabitants celebrate the triumph of Christ, who has conquered Satan through his resurrection and ascension (Rev 12.5), expelled Satan and his demon hordes from heaven (Rev 12.9), nourished (Rev 12.6) and vindicated (Rev 12.10) his people, and established his rule over the nations with a rod of iron (Rev 12.5). John pauses his account of the vision, as it were to take a breath, as he reflects on this glorious outburst of praise.

The heavenly voice renders up a coronation speech (similar to the message of Psalm 2.8-9), that reflects on a fuller manifestation of Christ’s kingdom, which is reported to have arrived with:

- *Salvation.* Only Christianity addresses the need of mankind to be saved from *sin*. This is accomplished by the work of God (Rev 7.10; Rev 19.1)—through the vicarious death of the Lamb and the application of faith by the Holy Spirit (Jn 3.8; Eph 2.8). In all other religions—which are idolatrous—‘salvation’ (e.g., escape from endless punishment) is based on an individual’s earned merit. Since God is the author of salvation, the saints in heaven rejoice at the work that has been wrought by Jesus.
- *Power.* Jesus is the almighty Creator of the universe (Col 1.16) and the ultimate victor over Satan, sin, and death. When the saints declare that his power has come, they are not suggesting that he did not have the power previously, but that it has been fully exercised in every domain of the created order.

- *Kingdom.* No kingdom or king on the earth rules independently from Christ (Ps 2.10-12; Dan 7.14). His rule is holy, just, and unerring (Is 9.6-7). His rule is not acknowledged by most men (Ps 2.1-3; Rom 1.22, 28), but this does not remove mankind's obligation to acknowledge Christ's universal rule—even over the pit of hell.
- *Authority.* Christ has been granted full authority, or the legal right, to rule (Mt 28.18; Phil 2.9-11) by the heavenly Father, because he completed perfectly the work of redemption that he was assigned. Satan claims to have authority to rule in this realm (Mt 4.8-9), but all the authority he has, has been granted temporarily to him by God (Rev 13.5-7; Jn 19.11).

Christ has reigned as king from the moment of creation. His earthly throne was established through his birth, death, and resurrection (Ps 110.1; Lk 1.31-33; Jn 1.49). And, he has been reigning as the mediatorial king from heaven since his ascension (Mt 28.18-20; Acts 2.32-36; Eph 1.20-23). Nevertheless, his kingdom has not been fully realized in this sin-defiled temporal realm. This is why we continue to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Mt 6.10). It is only with the final overthrow of Satan (Rev 12.10) and the transfer of Satan's purported lordship over the world to Jesus that his reign will be fully realized and recognized throughout the renovated created order.

The heavenly voice rejoices over the realization of Christ's reign, and over the expulsion of Satan (Rev 12.9) and the silencing of his accusations against the saints. Satan is called the 'accuser' (Greek: 'one accusing') because he acts as a prosecuting attorney presenting a case before God for why believers in the Messiah/Christ should be considered guilty and not be received into heaven (Job 1.9-11; Zech 3.1). In the news today we often hear of accusations against leaders and celebrities for their purported sexual improprieties or their role in secret deals. These accusations are often followed by strong denials on the part of the accused. Sometimes the accusations have been fabricated by their enemies for political gain. However, Satan's accusations against Christians are true. He presents a condemning case before God and reminds God that the person who sins deserves to be punished with everlasting damnation (Ezk 18.4). Ironically, Satan and his hordes have spread the lie among humanity that actions which break God's commandments are pleasurable, not as bad as God says that they are, and below the notice of God. They delight in tempting mankind to break every commandment of God. Yet, at the same time, Satan dredges up all of our sins and parades them before God. He not only accuses believers of sinning, but charges God with injustice for forgiving their sins.

Before Christ's death and resurrection Satan's accusations against believers may have appeared to have some weight in the heavenly courtroom—after all, the penalty for sin for OT believers had not been exacted in time. At that point, the redemptive work of Jesus was a future promise and not a fulfilled payment. However, with the completed work of Christ on the cross—which paid the full debt of sin for all true believers—Satan's accusations have less weight than swamp vapour. The reason that Satan's accusations no longer have merit is not because we or our works have merit, but because of the merit applied to us through the atonement of Jesus—his perfect life and death have provided a covering of righteousness for us (Rev 1.5; Rev 5.9; Zech 3.2-5). Thus, Paul can ask with emphasis, "Who is to condemn?" (Rom 8.34). Now, when Satan attempts to accuse a believer before God the Father, the Father points to the Son, who in turn points to the wounds on his hands and side and says, "This is my brother, for whom I died. I have paid the debt for his sins in full." (Heb 7.25). Cling to this truth! It encourages you when you are despondent from facing challenges against your faith and discouraged by the remnants of indwelling sin. If the Son has set you free, you are free indeed! (Jn 8.36).

Christ's Kingdom Has Come – The Saints Conquer Satan (Rev 12.11)

Christ has conquered his enemies—Satan, sin, anti-God antagonists, and death—and has thrown down the accuser of the brothers (Rev 12.5, 10). Like him, we, his people are also conquerors. The 'and' beginning

verse 11, indicates that there is a logical connection between believers becoming conquerors and the preceding account of the victory of Michael and his army of angels (Rev 12.7-9) and the completion of the redemptive work of Jesus. The battle in the spiritual realm, and the work of Jesus on earth, are the foundation upon which all of the elect become conquerors of the dragon every day, throughout all of history.

Each of the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor promises blessings for those who conquer (Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 26; Rev 3.5, 12, 21). We are told here who the conquerors are, and how they have been able to conquer. The conquerors are referred to as ‘they’; with the logical antecedent being ‘the brothers’ of verse 10, who have been wrongfully accused by Satan. Thus, the conquerors are the entire multitude of the redeemed. No one who enters heaven has been a bystander in the war between Christ and Satan. Anyone who has not been engaged in that war will not be called into the presence of Christ the Victor. To participate in his victory, we must take part in his war against evil.

Next, we are informed of the means by which the victors have conquered. First, they have been successful because they have conquered “by the blood of the Lamb”. Ultimately their success is the result of having their sins covered by the blood of the Messiah—the Lamb of God (Rev 7.14; 1 Jn 1.7)—by his substitutionary atonement—his death on the cross. Every believer in Jesus Christ has an assured redemption and guaranteed salvation that has been purchased by the precious blood of Christ (1 Pt 1.18-19). The foundation of a believer’s being able to conquer sin in his life and resist the temptations of Satan is the certain knowledge that his salvation has been procured and secured by Christ’s death and resurrection. This certainty cannot exist where a person is relying on his own works of ‘righteousness’ (Is 64.6). Only those who understand and acknowledge that they have been justified by faith (Rom 5.1) in Jesus, and believe that he has accomplished their redemption, are able to stand before Satan’s accusations. The atonement is the foundation of our hope of everlasting glory, the origin of our ability to withstand the attacks of our spiritual enemy—the devil—and the source of our strength to persevere to the end of our earthly lives.

For believers to conquer Satan, sin, and death requires that the atonement of Jesus is applied to our lives by God’s grace. But it also requires a response on the part of believers. The believer’s faith response is to be three-fold:

- *Obey God’s commandments.* The voice from heaven does not mention, in this instance of praise, the requirement for believers in Christ to live obediently before God (Jn 14.15). Jesus himself has already mentioned this as a condition for conquering (Rev 3.8)—this is why faith apart from works is useless and dead (James 2.20, 26).
- *Bear witness through a word of testimony.* Likewise, those who claim to be Christians are expected to be ready and willing to make a public profession of their faith in Jesus Christ (Mt 10.32; Rom 1.16; 1 Pt 3.15). Some interpreters of this verse suggest that ‘the word of the testimony of them’ can be understood objectively, as God’s testimony to, or about, believers. However, it seems better, from the broader context of Scripture and Revelation (Rev 2.13; Rev 3.8), to interpret it subjectively, as our testimony to others about our faith in Jesus. If it were not for the atonement, we could not testify to saving grace. However, the inverse is also true. If it were not for the testimony of believers to their salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, the work of redemption would have been unknown, since God’s means for making it known is through his witnesses on earth (Mt 28.19-20; Rom 10.14-17; 2 Tim 4.2).
- *Love not life even unto death.* Jesus taught that anyone who loves his earthly life so much that he clings to it at all cost—e.g., denying his faith in Jesus—will not be considered worthy to receive eternal life (Mk 8.35; Lk 17.33; Jn 12.25). In contrast, those who display a devotion to Jesus, will display a willingness to give up their hold on this life, if God calls them to bear witness to Jesus and his true word through martyrdom. True believers in Christ know that our decaying mortal existence of 70-80 years is nothing compared with the promise of not being subjected to the second death (Rev 2.10-11; Rev 20.6) and receiving a new resurrected life. Thus, Paul states, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Phil 1.21)

These three requirements for demonstrating that we are participants in the faith are hard to meet. They compel us to ask what our commitment level is to Jesus Christ—for example, would we stand firm as many of John's 1st century readers did when they faced lions in the arena—and to recognize that we fail often in our obedience, witness bearing, and willingness to renounce this world. However, the message throughout Revelation is that in the battle between Christ and the forces of evil, Christ is already the victor—Satan has already been definitively defeated by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We must realize that Satan fights against our bodies (e.g., with persecution) only *after* he has lost the battle over our spirits, in an attempt to discourage us and, if possible, have us defect from Christ. But Jesus assures us that he holds us tightly (Heb 13.5). Thus, everyone who is in Christ is guaranteed victory.

Christ's Kingdom Has Come – Rejoicing and Woe

(Rev 12.12)

A voice commands the heavens to rejoice over the expulsion of the accuser—Satan—from heaven. Some conclude that these are the words of John rather than the voice from heaven. However, it would seem to be inappropriate for John, on earth, to be issuing a command to the residents of heaven. Rather, it is the voice of the large assembly of the glorified saints rhetorically directing the whole assembly dwelling in heaven to celebrate the victory of Christ over his enemies (Rev 12.7-11). After recording this command, John completes his account of the vision he has seen illustrating the conflict between the woman and the dragon (Rev 12.13-17), that he had begun earlier in this chapter (Rev 12.1-6).

The command is directed to the *heavens*. This is the only place in Revelation that the plural occurs. Where we might expect the plural (Rev 10.6; Rev 14.7), to allude to Genesis 1.1, John uses the singular. So, when he uses the plural here, he is clearly not speaking of the three ways 'heaven' is used—i.e., to refer to the sky; the celestial realm; and the abode of God, angels, and the saints. Rather, he uses 'heavens' to refer to all the classes of heaven-dwellers—all divisions of the holy angels and the vast multitude of the redeemed from mankind—who assemble for worship in God's throne room. His choice of the plural demonstrates that the OT Messianic prophecies (1 Chron 16.31; Ps 96.11; Is 44.23) have been fulfilled with the completion of God's redemptive work on the cross.

To refer to those who *dwell* in heaven, John uses the Greek word that could be translated as 'tabernacle', rather than the more commonly used word (in the NT), that is translated as 'dwell', 'live', and 'reside'. His choice of 'tabernacle' appears to be deliberate. It is not used in a transitory sense, as when the Israelites dwelt in the wilderness during their 40 years of wandering. Rather, he uses the word 'tabernacle' because of its theological importance and to provide assurance for his readers. The same root word is used in Revelation 7.15, where the ESV translates it as 'shelter'. The implication is that those who dwell in heaven are spiritually living in Christ, who 'tabernacled' among men (Jn 1.14) and are protected forever from all harm from Satan and his minions by God who 'tabernacles' with his people (Rev 21.3). A comparison of Revelation 13.6 with Revelation 13.8 illustrates how John uses the word 'tabernacle'. The ESV translates two different Greek words as 'dwell'. However, those dwelling in heaven 'tabernacle' there. Whereas pagan idolaters dwelling on the earth 'reside' there.

Thus, the cause for rejoicing among the heaven-dwellers is multifaceted: Satan and his hordes have been expelled from heaven, salvation for the elect has been purchased by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, Satan can no longer bring accusations against those for whom Jesus died, Jesus has prepared a permanent dwelling place for his people (Jn 14.2-3), and believers in heaven and on the earth can participate in Christ's victorious kingdom. This is astounding news that causes the heavens to rejoice and should cause rejoicing among all mankind on earth.

However, in contrast to the rejoicing in heaven, the voice proclaims a woeful curse upon the earth and sea—

the whole world, including mankind and the flora and fauna (Gen 3.17-19). The reason for this curse is the presence of the enraged devil in the world. Satan is enraged against God because he:

- Has been declared guilty for his sin of rebellion against his Creator
- Has been expelled from heaven and cast down to the earth
- Knows that God loves mankind, not fallen angels (Heb 2.5, 16), and has provided a means of rescuing a vast multitude from his clutches
- Knows that Jesus has defeated sin and death on the cross, and has bruised his head (Gen 3.15)
- Has been sentenced to everlasting torment in the abyss, and
- Knows that his time of ‘freedom’ to harass mankind is shortly to end.

Satan cannot wreak havoc in heaven, because he was expelled when he attempted to seize authority from God. Thus, in his anger against God and his hatred for God and mankind, he concentrates his efforts on causing chaos and bringing destruction to the earth, as quickly as he can. His means appear endless: encouraging mankind to deny the existence of God (Ps 14.1), suppress the truth, and pursue all forms of irrationality, superstition, and unnatural behaviours (Rom 1.18-32); stirring up prejudices, hatred, animosity, war, and slavery; and encouraging men to plunder and destroy God’s good creation rather than being faithful stewards of it.

The first readers of Revelation likely thought that the statement ‘his time is short’ meant that Jesus would return to the earth within their generation, or soon thereafter, and consign Satan to the abyss and renovate the heavens and earth. However, almost 2,000 years have passed since John authored this book. But what is the 2,000 years since these words were penned, or the 6,000 years since the creation of the universe, compared with everlasting joy in heaven or torment in hell? Nothing! We must not become discouraged by the apparent delay in Christ’s return or be among the scoffers who deny his return (2 Pt 3.3-4). Satan’s time is short! His wicked reign over this earth will end. Jesus will return and he will judge Satan and all mankind (Ps 96.10; Ps 98.9; Mt 24.45-51; 1 Thess 4.16-17; 2 Thess 1.5-10).

The Woman and the Dragon – The Dragon’s Vengeance (Rev 12.13, 15, 17)

A couplet in *The Mourning Bride*, a play by William Congreve (1670-1729), reads, “Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned / Nor Hell a fury, like a woman scorned.” Congreve was mistaken. Hell has far greater fury than a woman scorned, when the woman—the Church—and her children escape its grasp. The dragon from the pit of hell—Satan—is filled with seething anger because he has been expelled from heaven and the male child, birthed by the woman, has escaped his claws and fangs. Satan, a murderer from the beginning (Jn 8.44), lashes out in anger like Cain, the first human murder (Gen 4.3-8). Since he cannot kill God, he directs his vengeance against the woman and her children. But his efforts to destroy them are thwarted on every front (Mt 16.18), and his rage escalates like an exploding volcano.

Some suggest that Satan directs attacks against the Church (Rev 12.13, 15) and then, because that attack is unsuccessful (Rev 12.14, 16), he attempts a different tactic—attacking the offspring of the woman. However, we are not to think of these verses as presenting a temporal sequence. The Church is not a concrete entity, separate from the people who make it up, that can be attacked. The Church is the assembly of all true believers. To attack the Church is to attack believers, to attack believers is to attack the Church. Thus, this section presents different dimensions of Satan’s ongoing attack on the Church—in every generation—when he fails with one vile strategy, he uses another. Two of his primary attacks against the Church are mentioned in this section.

Water. As he pursues the woman, he pours out water like a river from his mouth attempting to drown her. Satan does not spew physical water that becomes a river. Rather, the flood that comes from his mouth

consists of *words*. The flood of words coming from his mouth includes:

- *Lies*. At the beginning, Satan, the father of lies (Jn 8.44), used words mouthed by a possessed serpent to beguile Eve into doubting God's veracity (Gen 3.2, 4-5), and brought the curse upon mankind. His deceptions today include the teaching of evolution, the idea that men and women can choose their own gender definitions, and the normalization of same-sex 'marriage', and other unnatural nonsense.
- *Temptations*. Satan uses the media and entertainment to tempt believers to compromise their profession of faith; for example, by giving over portions of the Lord's Day—the Christian Sabbath—to consumerism and watching sporting events, or by convincing them that fornication is an acceptable practice.
- *Accusations*. Satan attempts to destroy the assurance that believers have, that their sins are covered by the blood of Christ, through slander and aspersions (Rev 2.9; Rev 12.10; Job 1.9-11; Zech 3.1).
- *Heresies*. Heresies arose early in the Church (Rev 2.14-16, 20-22; Rev 3.9; Rom 16.17-18; 1 Tim 4.1). During its first few centuries, the Church had to confront major heresies such as: Gnosticism, Marcionism Apollinarism, Sabellianism Arianism, Docetism, Pelagianism and Nestorianism. The flood of Islam, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Liberalism, and neo-Antinomianism continues the evil, as Satan infiltrates the Church with false teachers and false teachings in every generation.

The metaphor of an overflowing river to describe the barrage of words emanating from the mouth of hell is appropriate, since it evokes the power of a turbulent river overflowing its banks and destroying homes and business and killing men and livestock.

War. Where words fail to destroy the Church, Satan uses bodily persecution to wipe out the Church. Mass executions of Christians occurred within the lifetime of the original recipients of Revelation. The history of the Church is filled with other examples, as attested by *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (1563). Not much has changed since the Covenanter persecutions during the killing time (1680-1688), carried out by the agents of Kings Charles II and James VII. Today, Satan's agents are Islamic terrorists such as ISIS, or communist dictators such as Kim Jong Un of North Korea.

Satan has already captured the hearts and minds of unbelievers, so the ones he targets with the intent of devouring (1 Pt 5.8), are the offspring of the woman. This included all believing Jews before the arrival of the Messiah and all true Christians today. They are those who:

- *Keep the commandments of God*. Obedience to the commandments of God—as summarized in the *Ten Commandments*—is not a popular teaching in the Church today. At best, many Christians accept nine, eight, or fewer commands that they think still apply. However, Jesus is God, so the *Ten Commandments* are his commands, and he declares the importance of keeping his commandments (Mt 28.20; Jn 14.21; Jn 15.10).
- *Hold to the testimony of Jesus*. Those who are truly Christ's people demonstrate their allegiance by bearing testimony to Jesus and his truth, as delivered in the Bible. They do not waiver in the commitment to their testimony, even when pressured, but are willing to die for Christ's sake.

By these two actions, God's people have always brought light into the darkness of evil and have been the means of the Church growing from a handful of scared disciples into the massive world-wide force for good that is today. It is therefore no wonder that Satan attempts to flood the Church with falsehood and wages war against it.

The Woman and the Dragon – Safety from Satanic Attacks (Rev 12.14, 16)

Jesus protects his Church from the attacks of Satan, which consist of evil words and physical persecution (Rev 12.13, 15, 17a). Jesus promised that even the gates of hell cannot rise up and conquer his Church (Mt 16.18). Some of the ways he protects his Church include: 1) limiting our temptations (1 Cor 10.13), 2) praying for us (Lk 22.31-32), 3) strengthening us with grace (2 Cor 12.9), 4) arming us with weapons of

spiritual warfare (Eph 6.11-18), and 5) providing angels to fight against Satan and his demons, and to guard us (Rev 12.7; Ps 91.11). Three additional means of protection are displayed in this vision:

- *Passage.* The woman is given wings of a large eagle so that she can escape from the serpent into the wilderness. By her escape she is not taken directly into heaven, where she could be protected forever from the attacks of Satan. Rather, her flight takes her into the wilderness. The imagery is drawn from the account of Israel's exodus from Egypt into the desert of Sinai (Ex 19.4). Even though Israel left a land of hardship (slavery), it entered another land where it had to face different kinds of hardship (e.g., thirst and wandering). Thus, the eagle's wings are not a symbol of absolute escape from hardship, but a means of leaving immediate danger as the Church passes through the wilderness on its pilgrim's journey (Heb 11.13) to the promised land.
- *Place.* Earlier, in our meditations on this chapter (Rev 12.6), we noted that God has prepared a *place* for the Church in the wilderness. The wilderness is the world, and it is a dangerous locale for the covenant community, but in it is a place of refuge. The wilderness itself is not *the* place of protection from the dragon's fangs and claws—it is a place of vicious animals (Satan and his demons) and of danger from attacks (temptation and persecution). But in it, God has provided a place of protection. Christ dwelling in the midst of his Church is the place of refuge. This indicates that the Church is made up of refugees heading to a new land, who make a temporary stop until they follow their Lord to the permanent place that he has prepared for them (Jn 14.2-3).
- *Prevention.* Satan spews out of his mouth a river of evil words—lies, temptations, accusations and heresies. However, the earth helps the Church by swallowing the river. It has been noted that John uses Greek word 'ge' (from which we derive the word 'gaia'). So, at least one commentator has suggested that the earth's helping the Church is a reference to 'mother earth' (Gaia, or Ge the Greek goddess) coming to the aid of the Church. John does not espouse such pagan nonsense. The word 'earth' when used in Revelation generally means the domain of wicked men (e.g., Rev 3.10; Rev 5.3, 6; Rev 6.4, 8; Rev 8.7). John tells us that, in spite of itself, the world of wicked men assists the Church. For example:
 - Shia, Sunni, and Sufi factions within Islam engage in internecine battles which disrupt their attacks against Christians. Likewise conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims (in Myanmar) and Hindus and Muslims (in India) is encouraging some people in battle torn lands to consider the message of Christ and to embrace the true peace that he offers.
 - The 'politically correct' notion that a person can choose to define his gender (from among many options) and that physical males (i.e., those with XY chromosomes and exposed genitalia) can enter women's change rooms or participate in women's sports will produce a backlash from feminists who fight for women's rights. This will assist the Church by supporting the Biblical truth that God created man, male and female.
 - Individuals within the Church experience martyrdom. But this will never result in the demise of Church. Ironically, the more that Christians suffer persecution, with perseverance and hope, the stronger the Church grows. Many people who see a gracious response from believers, step on the head of the serpent as they leave his dominion and follow Jesus.

The Church is preserved and "nourished for a time, and times, and half a time", or three and half years, while it passes through the wilderness. We have encountered previously mention of this period three times in our studies in Revelation; as forty-two months (Rev 11.2; see also 13.5) and as 1,260 days (Rev 11.3; Rev 12.6). How this expression, drawn from Daniel (Dan 7.25; Dan 12.7), is interpreted depends to a considerable extent on what a person believes is the primary purpose of Revelation. For example, if one believes that Revelation has been given to the Church to allow us to identify, or predict, future events, then he may conclude that the Church is to be protected during an intense brief period of future tribulation. If he believes that Revelation was written primarily for a 1st century generation, before the fall of Jerusalem, then he may conclude that the three and half years represents the duration of the period Christians stayed in Pella after fleeing from Jerusalem, as the Roman armies approached the city. However, if he believes that Revelation speaks about general times of persecution that the Church faces—during the entire existence of

the world or during the NT era—then he will understand the duration to be symbolic. We previously concluded (Rev 12.6), that it is probably best to apply it to the period from Christ’s ascension until his return, at the end of time, when he will judge the nations.

The true Church, while it passes through the wilderness of this world, always faces difficult circumstances, including persecution. However, it is also always under the special protection of the Lord of heaven and earth, who is saving a vast multitude.

The Beast Out of the Sea, Introduced

(Rev 13.1-2)

John saw the dragon¹ standing on the seashore and calling up two beasts from the abyss—out of the sea (Rev 13.1) and out of the earth (Rev 13.11). The spiritual battle between Christ and Satan has moved from the heavenly precincts to the earth, with Satan’s expulsion from heaven (Rev 12.7-9). These beasts are two of Satan’s instruments for continuing his attack against the Church and can be viewed as representing human government and false religion.

The first beast rises out of the sea. The sea in other places in Revelation may be a symbol for the nations that are in rebellion against God (Rev 17.1, 15), as it appears to be in some OT passages (Ps 65.7; Is 17.12; Is 23.11). Therefore, some interpreters conclude that this beast is a human being, the antichrist, with a Gentile background, who arose, or will arise, out of Europe or the Middle East (depending on the latest interpretive fad) and control an alliance of ten nations and their kings. However, if the sea is symbolic of the nations agitating against God, then the beast is also a symbol for all nations and governments that oppose God’s Messiah (Ps 2.1-2) and are manifestations of the spirit of the antichrist (1 Jn 2.18, 22; 1 Jn 4.3; 2 Jn 7). Thus, in the new heaven and earth there will no longer be a sea (Rev 21.1); which, as a symbol, indicates that no opposition to Christ’s reign can arise out of the nations.

The beast is described as a composite monster with seven heads and ten horns (Dan 7.7-8), on a body of a leopard, with feet of a bear. It also has a lion’s mouth (possibly in each of its seven heads or a mouth in its body). There is a family resemblance, in that the beast is like its father, the dragon (Satan) who is also described as having seven heads and ten horns (Rev 12.3), indicating that the beast derives its power and authority on the earth from the dragon. The description of the three animal parts appears to be an allusion to Daniel 7.3-6, where four kingdoms come out of the sea. The three animals that John mentions represented the successive kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece that preceded Rome. However, the beast that John saw is not specifically Rome. Even though Rome would have come immediately to mind for John’s original audience; particularly in the coastal cities of Asia Minor (Ephesus, Smyrna) that would have seen the envoy of Rome coming over the horizon of the sea. Rather, Rome was an historic instance of the first beast that combines the terrifying features of every arrogant human empire. Thus, this vision can be applied to every God-defying and Christ-denying kingdom and nation that has arisen in every generation.

The ten horns/diadems and seven heads do not represent specific successive kingdoms. We are not to attempt to associate, for example, the heads with the seven hills in the city of Rome or the horns with Roman emperors (e.g., from Augustus to Titus). This is a form of eisegesis—i.e., forcing a meaning onto the text. Suetonius (c. 69-122 AD), a near contemporary of John in his later life, indicates that there were twelve Caesars from Julius to Domitian, with Titus being the *eleventh*. Any attempt to associate the horns or heads with particular kingdoms will prove futile. Rather, the seven heads represent a fullness of scope (universal sovereignty), and the ten horns and ten diadems represent complete, or total, tyrannical power and a sweeping usurpation of Christ’s rule over the nations by the antichristian world powers. Thus, Satan’s

¹ The N/KJV has ‘I’, referring to John, rather than ‘he’, referring to Satan, based on the addition of a single letter at the end of the Greek word in a few late (9th century, or later) manuscripts.

emissary—human government—is to be identified with *all* wicked kingdoms that oppose the true “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19.16).

The beast had blasphemous names inscribed on its heads. John did not repeat the blasphemies. We do not know what each said, but we can infer that they were equivalent to the divine titles that Roman emperors would have ascribed to themselves in the imperial cult—such as, ‘august’, ‘divine’, ‘lord and god’, and ‘son of god’. Today, in Iran and North Korea, the head of state has been referred to as the ‘supreme leader’; and in North Korea the emperor is often portrayed as being adored by brainwashed adherents of the Kim-cult. Nations in the modern West have not yet been quite as bold. However, *Newsweek* displayed President Obama on its cover (2010-11-22) as the god Shiva with the caption, “God of All Things”, and later (2012-04-21) portrayed him with a rainbow halo over his head and proclaimed him the ‘first gay president’. Around the same time, actor Jamie Foxx introduced Barack Obama to his audience as “Our Lord and Saviour” and Louis Farrakhan called him “The Messiah”. Reverence for a man in this manner is what Satan desires to see, since it deflects and distracts from the worship of the true God.

Satan desires to be worshipped personally (Mt 4.9). However, he gladly cedes his claim to divine status and world-dominating authority and his wish to be publicly honoured, to his earthly representatives if they are worshiped as gods. So, he delegates his power, throne, and authority to them, and steps into the background, as they wrack havoc on his behalf. The nations today play God by their support for abortion and euthanasia; turning the Lord’s Day Sabbath, declared to be holy by God, into a day for indulging a consumer experience and for bowing to sports icons; endorsing laws that pervert natural male-female marriage and sexual relations; undermining personal responsibility within the populace; and ignoring the original divine mandate for the state to restrain and punish evil practices (Rom 13.1-7).

The Beast’s Mortal Wound is Healed

(Rev 13.3)

We have noted previously that there is much speculation about how to identify the elements in John’s visions. In this instance, opinions vary widely about who, or what, is the head of the beast that was mortally wounded. A popular view among commentators is that the head was Nero. They base their view on a rumour (that arose after his suicide in 68 AD) that he was still alive and hiding beyond the Euphrates and would return to Rome. However, this cannot be the correct interpretation of the mortally wounded head, since Nero was never restored to life—i.e., his mortal wound was *not* healed—and he did not return to Rome to the marvel of the citizens of the empire. In addition, Nero’s death was not a mortal wound to the Roman Empire since he died as a fugitive and in disgrace. Others, still applying the mortal wound to Nero, interpret the healing figuratively and suggest that it applies to the arrival of Vespasian, the founder of a new line of emperors, following the year-and-half interregnum in which there were three emperors. However, if the head that was wounded was an actual person (i.e., Nero), then the head that was restored (i.e., Vespasian) was not the same person. This makes a mockery of John’s vision that the mortally wounded head was the one that was restored to life. In either case, associating the mortally wounded head with Nero invalidates John’s vision. In addition, interpreting the head as Nero would position the composition of Revelation after 68 AD, which we concluded is a mistaken view (see, [*The Primary Fulfilment Generation*](#)).

Others have attempted to identify the wounded head of the beast with specific ancient (e.g., Gregory VII) or modern individuals (e.g., Hitler or Mussolini). But the lack of any evidence of a restoration from a mortal wound in these individuals invalidates the identification. It has also been suggested that the mortally wounded head symbolized the overthrow of paganism by Constantine and the healing as the re-introduction of pagan elements into the Medieval Church. Early Protestant commentators often suggested that the mortally wounded head of the beast was Roman Catholicism that revived after the Council of Trent. However, these latter views associate the beast with false religion rather than with hubristic human governments. A popular view today is that the seven heads represent important future rulers, and that one

of them, supposedly the seventh or last, will be revived from a near-death wound, or even resurrected from physical death, by the power of Satan. The belief that Satan has the power to perform healing miracles or to raise the dead is blasphemous. It was Jesus' ability to heal the sick and to raise the dead that demonstrated that he is God (Acts 2.22).

Most English translations imply that the head only appeared (e.g., 'seemed') to have been mortally wounded. However, it may be better to translate the text as, 'slaughtered to death'. The same Greek words are applied to the Lamb (Rev 5.6). In his case, he didn't just *appear* to have had a mortal wound. John was able to tell that he had been truly dead (Rev 5.9) but was now alive. Likewise, the head of the beast was slaughtered to death, and then restored to life. The parallel is too obvious to ignore. The beast is a manifestation of the antichrist, and the slaughter and resurrection of one of its heads is a Satanic parody of the slaughter and resurrection of Jesus. Since only one of the beast's seven heads was slaughtered, this indicates that only a portion of the beast's rule (Rev 13.2) over wicked mankind is affected at any time. Thus, we can interpret this verse as informing us that the beast, which figuratively represents all governments and nations among wicked men that are opposed to God and his Messiah, is afflicted by the destruction of one part of his dominion, but soon after that part or his realm is restored to 'life'.

It is the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6.17), that slays a wicked nation (a portion of the beast; Rev 13.14) and makes it alive in Christ. But its worldly demise is temporary. As soon as a nation begins to espouse Christ and live by his commandments, Satan attacks and restores it as part of his kingdom, and its latter state can be worse than its former state (Mt 12.43-45). For example, communist China was atheistic and virulently antichrist. Yet, out of this antagonism and persecution of Christians there has been a remarkable number of conversions to Christ. Nevertheless, China is not a Christian nation. Instead, Satan has resuscitated the head of the beast so that it has become a modern consumer-based and hedonistic society, which is essentially no different from North American society. Likewise, the Soviet Union was brought down, but Putin's Russia and the Islamic states (e.g., Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan) that have risen in its place, are just as evil as what they replaced. Thus, human governments are continually resuscitated by Satan so that they can extend their rebellion against Jesus Christ. This warns us not to place our hopes in any government that arises, or will arise, on the earth. The only government which we should hope for is the final realization of the kingdom of Jesus Christ that will be established at his return, when he restores the created order.

John informs us that the whole earth (the world of unbelievers) followed the beast as they marveled over the healing of its mortal wound. Men may be frustrated and even appalled at a manifestation of human government (e.g., a socialist dictatorship such as in Venezuela). But without the converting work of the Holy Spirit, they continue to elect or support oppressive and despotic governments and compound their despair.

The World Worships the Dragon and the Beast

(Rev 13.4, 8)

As God's written word is disseminated and the living Word is proclaimed, wicked nations—symbolized by the heads, horns, and diadems of the beast (Rev 13.1)—occasionally experience significant numbers of conversions and revivals, and the beast is mortally wounded (Rev 13.3). However, it doesn't take long for the dragon (Satan) to react and push back against the advancement of Christ's kingdom. He heals the wound of the beast so that it continues to exercise his delegated authority and power on the earth (Rev 13.2). He persecutes Christians (Rev 13.7) and deceives the wicked (Rev 13.5-6) so that they marvel over the healing 'miracle' (Rev 13.3). Through these actions, he directs their allegiance into worship of himself through his earthly emissary—every form of human government opposed to Christ (Rev 13.4, 8).

John says that 'they', unbelievers—those whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev

13.8)—of the “whole earth” (Rev 13.3), worship the dragon. If you suggest to a neighbour or co-worker that he is a Satan worshipper, he will laugh scornfully or vehemently disavow such a claim. For example, a typical person in our culture might respond, “I don’t worship Satan! I don’t even believe that he exists!” However, if people do not worship the true God correctly, then they *must* be engaged in Satan worship. This statement will be considered harsh and intolerant by many. But it is consistent with the teachings of the Bible. Any form of false worship is demonic idolatry (Dt 32.16-17; 1 Cor 10.20). Any person who does not worship the true God is an idolater—even a professed atheist is an idolater since he has made his own mind and opinions into his god and placed his own authority over God’s authority (Ex 20.3-6). Jesus is God, and worthy of worship (Rev 5.6-10; Rev 7.11-12). And, as Jesus teaches, anyone who is not aligned with him, is against him (Mt 12.30) and aligned with their father, the devil (Jn 8.44). So, the logic chain is clear—anyone who does not profess Jesus as God and Saviour (Rev 13.8), and worship him as such, worships Satan (Rev 13.12; Rev 14.9, 11; Rev 19.20).

The “whole earth” worships Satan in various ways, including:

- *Overt veneration of Satan.* Participation in witchcraft and Satanic or occult rituals fall within the domain of [Satanism](#).
- *False religions.* Every religion that does not profess Jesus Christ as the God-man, born of a virgin, who died on the cross and rose again on the third day, is a religion spawned from the abyss—the pit of hell.
- *False worship.* Within the Church, elements of Satanic worship creep in when professing Christians introduce unbiblical practices in worship.
- *Hedonism.* For many in our culture, viewing or engaging in sexual activities has become their god; for others it is gastronomic indulgences or the pursuit of other physical pleasures. This also is Satanic worship.

Satan’s objective is to receive the worship that God alone should receive (Mt 4.8-9), as is shown by the echoed boast of his earthly delegate, the king of Babylon (Is 14.12-14). However, Satan doesn’t care which form of false worship the world engages in, as long as worship is not directed to the true God in the form established by God himself.

Worship is also directed toward Satan through his delegate, the beast—which is a symbol for the nations that oppose God’s Messiah and are manifestations of the spirit of antichrist. Beast worship takes many forms, including:

- *Paternalistic Abdication.* The whole earth asks rhetorically, “Who is like the beast” (a parody of Ex 8.10; Ex 15.11). The people of this world consider human governments to be their ‘father’ and ‘mother’ and look to human governments to provide for their cradle-to-grave needs. They abdicate personal responsibility. Governments spend borrowed money to give the people what they *want*, so that they will not look to Christ, who provides what they *need*.
- *Power Addiction.* The crowds ask rhetorically “Who can fight against it” (a parody of Ps 35.10; Ps 89.6-8; Ps 113.4-5). The power of governments is seductive, and the crowds love their apparent invincibility.
- *Personality Adoration.* At the time John wrote, the [Imperial Cult](#) was well developed, with the emperor being worshiped as a demigod by the population of the Empire. For example, most of the cities addressed in the letter had erected Imperial Cult temples by the close of the 1st century. This form of dynastic cult persists in North Korea. But our ‘modern’ world, in the West, is not really any different. We have not dispensed with cultic adoration. Consider, for example, 1) The world’s response to the ascendancy of Barack Obama, who was honoured with a Nobel Peace Prize before he had done anything significant. 2) The fawning over Canada’s ‘[pretty boy](#)’ Justin Trudeau when he was elected as Prime Minister without people knowing much about his platform—other than the plan to legalize marijuana. Or, 3) The crowd’s gaga reactions when Prince William or Prince Harry announced their engagements.

Worship of the dragon through the beast is Satan’s ultimate counterfeit religion. Satan (the dragon) is the

substitute for God the Father and the beast (human governments and kingdoms) is the substitute—the antichrist—for Christ and his eschatological kingdom. Satan has been successful in deceiving and seducing the whole world into believing that a gruesome monster (Rev 13.2) is its saviour and its gracious provider which deserves thanks and praise. People’s eyes are blinded to the evil reality that is before their eyes, and they suppress the innate truth with which they have been endowed at their creation (Rom 1.18-23), unless the Holy Spirit opens their minds and hearts.

The Beast’s Blasphemies (Rev 13.5-6)

John reports that the beast was given a mouth to utter “haughty and blasphemous words”. The dragon (Satan) granted a group of his emissaries on the earth—the leaders of human governments—authority to speak on his behalf (Rev 13.2). Ultimately, the beast’s permission to speak against God, was granted by God himself—just as Pharaoh’s own will was the proximate cause of his hardening heart, while the ultimate cause was God’s providence (Ex 8.15, 19, 32; Ex 9.7, 12; Ex 10.1). Evidence that God is the ultimate ruler over Satan and the beast is provided by the statement that the beast was “allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months”. Satan is not the one who limits his agent’s authority to wrack havoc against the Church, it is God.

We are often perplexed by God’s providences and wonder why he permits governments to create legislation that contradicts his laws, endorse evil behaviour, persecute believers, and undertake actions that appear to be inimical to the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. We will address this perplexing question in our next meditation. Now, we will only observe that, regardless of how much power the beast may appear to have and regardless of its destructive acts against the Church, God is: 1) ultimately in control of the Satan (Job 1.12; Job 2.6) and the beast; 2) grants permission to the beast to act against Christ and his Church; 3) limits the perverse actions of the beast in time and extent; 4) reinforces the display of his grace, mercy, goodness, and justice; and 5) has an ultimate purpose behind the beast’s wicked actions that redounds to his glory. The Bible (and Revelation, in this section) rejects the false dualistic notion (two opposing gods or forces of good and evil) prevalent in many manmade religions (e.g., in animistic Shamanism, Taoist Yin and Yang, Hindu Dvaita Vedanta, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeistic Gnosticism, *Star Wars* light and dark sides of the ‘force’, etc.). Satan is not God’s equal. He is a created being who rebelled against his Creator.

The beast speaks haughty words. History is replete with examples of leaders who make boasts about their invincibility. The formerly Jewish readers of Revelation would have thought of the prophecy of Daniel, where it is said of a future national leader (Titus), in the fourth kingdom, that he would speak ‘great things’ (Dan 7.8, 20; the Greek translation of the OT uses the same word as is used in Revelation). Titus was awarded a triumph for his conquest of Jerusalem. The Arch of Titus, still standing in Rome today, commemorates this conquest. On the Arch there is a relief carving of a Roman procession of soldiers with laurel wreaths proudly carrying treasure taken from the Herodian temple (the golden lampstand and the table for the Bread of the Presence) and, it is thought, the trumpets of Jericho. Another relief carving shows Titus being carried into heaven on the wings of an eagle. At his death, Titus was declared to be a deity by the Roman senate.

World leaders who had spoken haughty or blasphemous words against God or his covenant people before Revelation was written, include Nimrod (likely, Sargon I) and the people of his first city (Gen 11.4), Ben-hadad (1 Ki 20.28), Sennacherib (2 Ki 18.13-27), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4.30), Herod the Great (prophesied to place himself above God; Dan 11.36), and Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12.20-23). Similarly, the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes claimed to be a god; as have many others, such as Ismail I, Taher Saifuddin, and Nirmala Srivastava. A modern example of an anti-God hubris are the words found in a North Korean newspaper (2017-10-08) that declared their country invincible, “No force on the earth can check the DPRK advancing with the might of self-reliance ...”

Blasphemy can include speaking against Divine attributes and institutions as well as against God himself or his name. John indicates this by including God's dwelling and those who dwell in heaven—faithful servants of God who have departed this earth and those elect whose names are recorded in the Lamb's book of life (Rev 21.27)—among the entities that the beast blasphemes. Some examples of this form of blasphemy and sacrilege include:

- The destruction, in 70 AD, of Jerusalem and the temple—where he made his presence known on earth—by the Roman armies—the abomination of desolation (Lk 21.20)—led by Titus.
- Nations that declare God's Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, abhorrent (as Islamic nations and most nations in the West have done) or remove Ten Commandments displays, commit sacrilege against God.
- Every country that has redefined marriage to include same-sex unions or has permitted commercial activities on the Lord's Day, has blasphemed God by denying the normative standard of his law.
- Nations that outlaw Christianity and Christian worship and destroy or desecrate Christian places of worship (such as has been done by North Korea and a number of nations that are predominantly Islamic) act haughtily against the only true God and his spiritual dwelling place.
- Legislation that requires the teaching of evolution is an example of the beast's blasphemy since belief in evolution is an implicit denial of God as the Creator.

Mercifully, God limits the blasphemy of the beast to forty-two months (1,260 days). We have seen (Rev 11.2; Rev 12.6) that this represents the period between Christ's incarnation and his return, when he will end the beast's blasphemies.

Why God Permits the Beast to Boast, Blaspheme, and Brutalize (Rev 13.5-7)

We are often perplexed by God's providences and wonder why he permits governments to create legislation that contradicts his laws, endorse evil behaviour, persecute believers, and undertake actions that appear to be inimical to the advancement of Christ's kingdom. In other words, why does God permit men to sin? The answer to this apparent challenge to the goodness and holiness of God does not lie in the speculations of false religions and philosophers. Some of the attempts to explain why people do bad things include the following:

- *The universe is unfolding randomly, there is no God and sin is a myth.* A person who holds to this position can never say that anything is right or wrong. Without God's moral standard, there can be no such thing as evil. All definitions of 'evil', 'bad', or 'wrong' are purely subjective. One man's evil can be another man's good.
- *God is evil; a deity with much to answer for.* God is good not evil, and he has provided a way of escape from sin and evil—salvation through Jesus Christ. To claim that God is not good because he permits evil is to slap him in the face. Men have no right to say that God isn't a good and loving God. And, man has sinned, not God. We cannot blame God for sin or the evil that comes from it. Bad things happen to sinful people, not sinless people.
- *God doesn't care about mankind.* God may seem remote and impassive at times, particularly when we hear of the brutal rape and murder of a twelve-year-old girl. However, no one who knows anything about Jesus, who is God, can honestly say that he does not care about what happens to us.
- *God didn't know that men would sin.* God not only knew that Adam would sin but decreed his sin in his eternal council of predestination. God appoints all that happens, including all sin. Yet, God is not the source or author of sin, is not pleased with sin, and can't be blamed for it.
- *God is too busy to deal with everything going on in the world.* The god that is referenced in this argument is nothing but a shadow of the real God. The God who created the entire universe in six days by a spoken word and has every hair on our heads numbered is fully and intimately engaged with every

event in the universe and every life on the earth.

- *Satan is the source of sin.* This only pushes the question back a level because we could then ask, why did God permit Satan to sin?
- *Satan is an independent evil agent equal to God who trapped man in sin.* This form of dualism is contrary to the Bible's teachings, which state that God created all things—including the fallen angels (Col 1.16).
- *Man could not have a free will if he was not permitted to sin.* It does not necessarily follow logically that a person who cannot sin cannot have free will. Jesus has an entirely free will and he cannot sin.

The philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, essentially quotes from the pagan philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BC): "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" Epicurus' aphorism has been restated by many professed atheists since Hume. Do Epicurus and Hume have unassailable logic? How can we reconcile the fact that God controls all events and planned, decreed, and permitted evil and yet is a good God who does no evil? We can lay out the following propositions:

- God is completely and only good (Ps 25.8; Ps 119.68).
- God is all-powerful and he can do anything (Lk 1.37) except that which is against his nature (e.g., God cannot deny truth or make himself cease to exist).
- Evil exists by definition (against God's Law) and actually (evil happens).
- God has morally good and sufficient reasons for permitting sin and its evil consequences that always result in fulfilling his good and glorious plans (Ps 145.17; Jn 9.1-3).

The final proposition is missed (or ignored) by Epicurus and Hume. There is no logical contradiction in the set. While there is much that God has left unexplained about the origin of evil, we know that his purpose for its existence is to bring glory to himself. His glory is displayed in his conquering evil and through his display of love for sinners, who return genuine thanks for their salvation.

Consider the example of the man born blind. Jesus says that the reason for his affliction (a consequence of Adam's sin) was not because of a particular sin on the part of the man or of his parents but so "that the works of God might be displayed in him" (Jn 9.3). Also, consider the premier example of how sin and God's goodness correlate for his glory—the crucifixion of Jesus was the greatest evil ever committed and those who sentenced Jesus to death and executed him were guilty of great evil (Acts 2.23). Yet, God's goodness was shown in his decreeing this event (Acts 4.27-28; Rom 5.8).

We see only a part of God's work. Things that appear to be evil when taken out of context can in fact result in good. When a child suffers through the extraction of an abscessed tooth, we do not say this is evil because we know the context. Yet, if someone saw only the screaming child, he might draw the wrong conclusion. We are like a man looking through a pinhole at a vast landscape. We do not know God's context for anything that happens around us. We must wait and see how God will work out his plans. We must trust God instead of trying to subordinate him to our standards of 'morality' and our intellectual 'authority' (Is 55.8-9; Rom 9.19-21). Those who reject God's goodness because he decreed and permits sin, perpetuate sin in their rebellion against him.

The Beast's War on the Saints (Rev 13.7-8)

Do you think that today's political instability and war-posturing among nation-states, world-wide Islamic jihad, and North Korean persecution of Christians, indicate that the rapture or return of Jesus must be imminent? You are in good company. The original recipients of Revelation in the 1st century probably believed the same thing, as they heard about Nero's blaming Christians, and slaughtering them, for the fire

that destroyed a large portion of Rome. Likewise, the people living in Europe at the end of the 11th century were feeling threatened by invading forces and pirates, then again in 1529 when Vienna was besieged by Muslim armies, and likely believed that the end was near. The Armenian people would likely have thought the same thing in 1915, during WW I, when Ottoman authorities slaughtered over a million of their people. Without any doubt, Jesus will return, despite what scoffers may say (2 Pt 3.3-4). But when we hear of wars, and particularly wars against the saints, Jesus warns us not to interpret this as a sign of the end of this world, but as the beginning of birth pains (Mt 24.6-8). For 2,000 years, since the resurrection of Jesus, the dragon (Satan) and the beast (human governments and kingdoms) have been at war with the saints, attempting to conquer Christ's bride—the Church.

Satan and his demons engage in war against the saints through non-physical means such as temptation, accusations, and inducements to discouragement and doubt. Thus, Paul informs us that our battle is not *primarily* against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil (Eph 6.12). Therefore, he tells us to take up the whole armour of God, which consists of spiritual armaments—truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer (Eph 6.13-18). However, Satan also uses humans and their institutions to carry out his war against the saints in the physical realm. The humans who are identified as carrying out this war are those:

- *Whose names have not been written in Lamb's book of life from the foundation of the world.* Revelation speaks of three metaphorical books: the record of the works of mankind (Rev 20.12; Ps 139.16), prophecies of plagues against unbelievers (Rev 5.1-9.21), and the book of life that records the names of the elect (see, [The Lamb's Book of Life](#)). Those who wage war against the saints do not have their names written in the Lamb's book of life because they are inveterate rebels and refuse to repent (Rev 9.20-21). They are not among the elect, who will be saved (Rom 8.29-30), but are those who were predestined before the foundation of the world to everlasting reprobation (Rom 9.11-13, 21-23).
- *From every tribe, people-group, language, and nation.* The enemies of the Church are not those associated exclusively with one ethnic group or nation. They have included Roman emperors and their Imperial Guards, Viking marauders, Muslim armies, Roman Catholic inquisitors, Stuart kings and Anglican prelates, and Russian and Chinese communists. Today, the enemies of the Church include Muslim jihadists, woke socialists, homosexual activists, and university faculties who despise the Bible's teachings about morality and God's work of creation.
- *Who worship the beast.* This is a specific reference to state religion, such as the Imperial Cult and modern equivalents that put the laws of men and the rulings of supreme courts above the exercise of a Christian belief and practice. However, since worship of the beast is also worship of Satan (Rev 13.4), it includes worshippers in every false religion. While Muslims are prominent antagonists of the Church, Islam did not come into existence until over 500 years *after* Revelation was written. Therefore, we must also include older false religions within the scope of this reference—e.g., Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism—which were, and continue to be, opponents of the Church. All religions are not the same. All religions do not worship the true God. All religions do not lead to salvation and heaven. Anyone whose name is not in the Lamb's book, worships the beast.
- *Who dwell on the earth.* John reinforces the universality of the beast's war against the saints by adding "all who dwell on earth". The beast's army is staffed with those who live beyond the boundaries of the ancient Roman Empire, and includes all unbelievers in ever generation, in every country on the earth (Rev 3.10; Rev 6.10; Rev 8.13; Rev 11.10; Rev 13.12, 14; Rev 17.8).
- *Granted authority to make war against the saints.* The beast is not an individual who, at a future date and at the behest of Satan, will establish a one-world government. The closest the world has ever come to this was with the Roman Empire (Dan 7.23). Since then, God, in his providence, has caused nations to become increasingly fragmented, as a means of protecting his Church from a unified and concerted beast. The beast is the leaders in all human governments, to whom Satan delegates his role as antichrist (Rev 13.2), who foolishly set out to exalt humankind above God (Gen 11.4) and who replace God with their own deities—superstitions, commerce, scientism, and hedonistic pleasures.

- *Who have imbibed a vision of conquering.* Satan has deceived the nations into the belief that they can conquer the saints. They massacre Christian worshippers, raze their church buildings, confiscate their personal property, deny them the right to carry out their businesses according to their consciences, legislate against Biblical morality, generate atheistic polemics and creation myths (e.g., Big-bang cosmology and evolution), and declare God to be dead. But their apparent victory is short-lived and ephemeral (as was Satan's chortling at Calvary). God controls history and is building and protecting his Church. The Saints are the true and final victors (Rev 12.11).

The Lamb Who was Slain from the Foundation of the World (Rev 13.8)

The ESV and NASB move the last clause of this verse (in the Greek)—"before/from the foundation/creation of the world"—and apply it to those whose names are not written eternally in the Lamb's book of life. The NIV and the N/KJV apply the clause to the Lamb himself—i.e., he was "slain from the creation of the world". There is much discussion in the commentaries about which is the correct position in English for this clause. In previous meditations we applied the clause to the names of those eternally written in the Lamb's book of life (i.e., the elect). We will now consider its application to the slain Lamb (Rev 5.6, 12).

Those who favour the placement of the clause so that it applies to the slain Lamb rather than to the elect, support their argument with references to other passages which use the same words (Jn 17.24; 1 Pt 1.19-20). However, these verses do not speak of Jesus being *slain* from the foundation of the world, but rather being *loved* and *foreknown* by the father. Also, these passages, use the Greek word 'before', whereas Revelation 13.8 has the Greek word 'from'. Also, another passage (Eph 1.4) applies the clause to the elect (chosen by God)—i.e., those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. In addition, John uses the identical words (in the Greek) later (Rev 17.8), and applies them to those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. However, the syntax of this verse (Rev 13.8) appears to support the application of the words to the slain Lamb, since it flows more naturally from 'slain'; and there is a twelve-word gap between 'written' and 'from', but no gap between 'slain' and 'from'. Nevertheless, is not essential that we solve this interpretive difficulty, since both interpretations are valid—the names of the elect have been written in the Lamb's book of life from the foundation of the world, and the Lamb *has* been slain from the foundation of the world.

Certainly, in the counsels of God, the Lamb was slain from (or 'before') the foundation of the world—'from' is a better translation than 'before' since time could not have existed before time began, at creation. God decreed his Son's death in his omniscient and infinitely wise plans for the created order. Since God's plans cannot be thwarted by any created being or force, his plans are absolutely guaranteed to be fulfilled in this spatial-temporal realm (Acts 2.23). In addition, we let our notions of time cloud our thinking when we consider God's plans. While God's plans are carried out in our time, he does not exist in time. He exists in a timeless eternity. He does not know or decree just what *has* been but what *will* be, in an ever-present reality. Thus, from God's eternal perspective Jesus is always the living one and the slain one.

In God's eternal plan, Jesus was set apart and devoted as the Lamb of God, as an offering to pay the debt of sin for his people. In the Mosaic economy, a lamb for the Passover meal was set apart for slaughter four days prior to its being slain (Ex 12.3, 6). Likewise, Jesus was set apart before he went to the cross. The amount of time between the selection and the slaughter of the lamb is immaterial. The fact is that Jesus was declared to be the sacrificial lamb long before he actually offered his life on the cross (Jn 1.29, 36). Though Jesus was not slain physically for over three years after he was declared to be the Lamb of God, yet he was offered as a sacrifice from the foundation of the world. The OT believers in the coming Messiah were saved on the promise of the crucifixion (Gen 3.15; Is 53.1-10; Ps 22.12-21), because in God's eyes it was an already accomplished reality.

That the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world indicates that the crucifixion was not an afterthought to God, as an expedient solution to the sin man had introduced into the world. God was not surprised by Adam's fall into sin and the resulting evils that have since been perpetrated on the earth; he had planned and decreed all events. However, in parallel, he had planned the remedy for the problem of evil, through the loving self-sacrifice of Christ (Rom 5.8; Heb 9.26; 1 Jn 3.16), and by saving a vast multitude to whom he would grant eternal life in a new paradise. God's redemptive love is a foundational principle of the created order.

We must never accuse God of being unloving or impotent because of the presence of great evil in the world. Instead, we must focus on what the Lamb has accomplished, and acknowledge that God:

- Had an essential purpose for decreeing and permitting evil. As finite, sinful, creatures we cannot discover or understand his purposes. So, we must trust that he knows what he is doing, for he does all things well (Gen 18.25; Is 45.7).
- Has provided a solution to the apparently overwhelming presence of evil in the world, through his self-sacrifice.
- Has provided a means of applying the sacrifice of Jesus to sinners through repentance and belief in his death and resurrection.
- Has declared that there is one, and only one, way to overcome evil. It is not through works of our own but through faith in Jesus (Eph 2.8), who is the only way to the Father (Jn 14.6).
- Guarantees the salvation of those who believe in Jesus, as surely as he guaranteed the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Will demonstrate his amazing grace and love when he unveils the magnificent glory of the new heaven and earth, in a restored paradise.
- Declares the Lamb to be worthy of worship (Rev 5.12) because he was slain from the foundation of the world.

A Call to Hear and Persevere (Rev 13.9-10)

John concludes his account of the vision in which he saw a beast rising from the sea—a representation of nations and governments that are manifestations of the spirit of the antichrist—by echoing the exhortation which Jesus gave as he concluded preaching to various crowds during his earthly ministry (Mt 11.15; Mt 13.9, 43), and which he gave in the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (chapters 2-3). This final charge in Revelation, to hear and listen, is given in the context of the persecution that the beast directs toward the Church of Christ. Some commentators note that this charge is not directed to a particular church (as in chapters 2-3) and conclude that the Church has been raptured from the earth when the beast arises from the sea. This suggestion is mistaken, since John addresses the members of the Church who are being persecuted by the beast, to assist them to understand the reason for the beast's rage against them and to help them trust that God is controlling the events of history for the advancement of his glory and the good of his people. John directs his message, not exclusively to churches in the 1st century or in the last generation of history, but to the Church universal, in all generations and in all locales. He uses this exhortation as a literary bridge between the vision of the beast rising from the sea and his word of application to our situation.

John precedes his call for endurance and faith with a statement given in the form of a proverb—which appears to be modelled on Jeremiah 15.2. If you compare commonly used English translations, you will notice a wide variation in how the first part of verse 10 is translated. For example, the ESV and NIV apply both statements to those being persecuted and to the certainty that what is decreed for them will occur. The N/KJV applies both statements to the persecutors of the Church and indicates that they will be visited with the same form of disaster (captivity or death) that they meted out. The NASB appears to apply the first part of the proverb (*'destined for captivity'*) to those being persecuted, and the second part to the persecutors;

although the entire proverb could be understood in the same way as the N/KJV translation. The difficulty with translating this passage can be partially attributed to the fact that some variation exists among the ancient manuscripts, from which the printed Greek texts of the NT have been prepared. In this meditation, we cannot address the question about which family of manuscripts, or particular manuscripts, are to be preferred over others. However, regardless of which way the proverb is translated, we can observe from the words ‘if anyone’ (‘he who’) that God is in control of the events of history. If the statements are directed to Christians, then they are intended to encourage them—since God has predestined all things, he has an infinitely wise purpose for handing his people over to persecution. If the statements are directed at persecutors (Jer 43.11), then they are warned that they are accountable for their actions and that they will be visited with a punishment that is equal to the persecutions they have inflicted on God’s people (Rom 12.19).

We will assume that the ESV’s translation is correct. Thus, we understand John to be informing us that it is inevitable that the beast will attack and persecute the saints throughout the universal Church. This suffering is unjust, but it is what we are to expect, because we are followers of Jesus—as he was persecuted, so must we be, for his sake (Mt 10.22; Mt 24.9; Jn 15.20-21). Thus, we are reminded that obedience to Christ and his word may result in imprisonment, property confiscation, and even martyrdom. John does not inform us of this reality to discourage us, but to encourage us. It is an encouragement because we do not believe that we are victims of fatalistic forces. Rather, since we believe that God predestines all events, including the persecution of his people, we can be assured that if we are persecuted for the sake of Christ, God’s ultimate glorious purposes are being worked out. Therefore, we can submit to his will, rejoice that we are considered worthy to suffer for his sake (Acts 5.41), and know that the testing of our faith produces a steadfastness that is perfecting us (James 1.2-4). Thus, John concludes with a call for us to endure with faith.

Endurance (perseverance) with faith is a challenge that is set before all Christians, whether or not they are called upon to face persecution. The ways in which we are to endure with faith includes the following:

- Suffering with equanimity, resting in the will of God, without retaliation (1 Pt 2.20; 1 Pt 3.9).
- Knowing that our afflictions are light compared with what our Lord and his apostles suffered and temporary, and “preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor 4.17).
- Entrusting our souls to a faithful Creator, by doing good (1 Pt 3.16-17; 1 Pt 4.19).
- Never wavering in our faith and trust in God and in the salvation which has been procured for us by Jesus Christ (James 1.6).
- Praying that God will protect us from physical and spiritual challenges to our faith (Mt 6.11, 13).
- Keeping the commandments of God (Rev 14.12) and doing good to silence the ignorance of foolish people (1 Pt 2.15).
- Being prepared to give a reason for the hope that is us (1 Pt 3.15).
- Being content in every circumstance and situation (Phil 4.11-13).
- Living joyfully (Rom 12.12; Phil 3.1; Phil 4.4).
- Living hopefully, looking for our reward in glory (2 Tim 4.8; 1 Pt 3.14).

The Beast Out of the Earth, Introduced (Rev 13.11-12)

Two beasts are mentioned in this chapter. The first comes out of the sea and the second out of the land. They symbolize Satan’s two primary forces for evil that encompass the whole earth. We determined previously that the first beast represents figuratively all leaders in all human governments, to whom Satan delegates his role as antichrist (Rev 13.2), who foolishly set out to exalt humankind above God. The second beast supports the first beast and makes the inhabitants of the earth worship the first beast, and indirectly the dragon.

The second beast does not appear as monstrous as the first beast (Rev 13.1-2). Rather, it appears like a lamb with two horns. However, like the first beast, the second exercises authority that is delegated to it by the dragon (Satan). Outwardly it resembles a lamb, but inwardly it is formed in the image of the dragon, and it speaks with the mouth of the dragon. Satan's objective with the second beast is to have it appear innocent and gentle so that he can control mankind through deceptive persuasion (Rev 13.14), following in his footsteps as the great deceiver (Rev 12.9; Gen 3.1-5), rather than by the fear and force used by the first beast. Its appearance as a lamb is its first line of deception, since Satan makes the world think that his rule over the hearts of mankind is benevolent (Mt 7.15; 2 Cor 11.14). The second beast also uses false signs to further its deception (Rev 13.13-15). So, the second beast is presented as an instance of antichrist—as a caricatured counterfeit of the Messianic Lamb (Rev 5.6) who, by contrast, demonstrated his divinity through his teaching (Mk 1.27; Jn 7.46) and by true miraculous signs (Acts 2.22; Heb 2.3-4).

The second beast arises from the earth and works to deceive people's minds. Thus, it represents every form of false human intellectual invention in religion, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology; which are earthly rather than heavenly, unspiritual rather than spiritual, foolish rather than wise, and demonic rather than divine (Rom 1.22; Phil 3.19; James 3.15). Its primary role, assigned by Satan, is defined in terms of false worship since it "makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast". This is why it is also called the false prophet, later in Revelation (Rev 16.13; Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10). However, we must not confine our understanding of the second beast to include only what we call 'religion'. Rather, the second beast represents every form of false teaching promulgated by the minds of men, including:

- *Self deception.* A person who is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, deceives himself with his belief that he is the master of his own destiny, sinless, and the standard for morality (Ps 36.1-4; Prov 16.18; Is 44.20; Jer 17.9-10; Ob 3; Rom 1.18; James 1.22; 1 Jn 1.8).
- *False prophets in the Church.* Jesus rebukes the churches in Asia Minor for permitting false prophets into their assemblies (Rev 2.2, 14-15, 20-24). He and the apostles warn that false prophets will arise in the Church and, if it were possible, to deceive the elect (Mt 24.24; 1 Tim 4.1-3; 2 Tim 3.13). We don't have space in this meditation to document the extent of false prophecy in the Church. However, it is a bigger problem than most people can imagine.
- *False religions.* Other than Christianity, there are about fifteen religions (including, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism) that claim the religious allegiance of approximately half the human population. In addition, about 10% of the population aligns itself with tribal paganism and another 15% claims to be agnostic, atheistic, or non-religious. However, people in this latter category *are* religious, since claiming that there is no God is a religious position. Their religion is secular humanism. So, false religions, the false prophet's deceptions, cloud the minds of about 75% of mankind.
- *Cultural mythologies.* This category includes foolish concepts such as evolution, socialism, proliferation of the number of genders, teaching that there are no moral absolutes, and a rights and entitlement mentality.

The second beast is not a single human being who will arise at a future date and deceive the whole world. Rather, it symbolizes all false prophets of all ages, and includes all ideas, concepts, beliefs, and teachings that confuse people so that they cannot understand reality, believe lies (2 Thess 2.7-12), and idolize human institutions. Whereas a true prophet leads people to worship God, the false prophet (the beast) leads them to worship the state.

The two beasts of Revelation—human government and false religion are the great antagonistic forces which have plagued the world and the Church since the days when Nimrod established the first post-flood empire and challenged God's authority as king (Gen 10.8-12; Gen 11.1-9). These two demonic forces, out of the abyss (Rev 9.1-3), continually cooperate to attack God, his Messiah, and his covenant people. The false prophet uses the power of the sword wielded by the first beast (e.g., Roman persecutions, the Spanish

Inquisition, Islamic *jihad*, legislation, human rights commissions, and high court rulings) to compel mankind to abandon the true worship of God. And the false prophet advances the worship of the beast of government through the promulgation of falsehoods. Thus, in Revelation 12.7-17 and Revelation 13.1-18, we are presented with Satan's unholy trinity. The dragon (Satan) positions himself as equivalent to the Father in the Godhead. He claims final authority as he attempts to usurp the power of God. He delegates his authority to the two beasts (Rev 13.2, 12), which together assume offices that mirror those of Jesus Christ—kingship by worldly rulers and the priest/prophets in false religions.

The Beast Out of the Earth Performs Great Signs (Rev 13.13-15)

Before we can interpret and apply this section we need to determine if Satan can perform miracles. Satan is powerful in the spiritual realm; however, we need to be careful how we view his power. Since he did not take on a bodily form when he tempted Eve, but possessed a serpent, this appears to indicate that his power is confined to possessing humans (Mt 4.24; Eph 2.2) and animals (Mt 8.31), and tempting and deceiving mankind with suggestions planted in their minds (1 Cor 7.5). Satan may have been granted power to control the physical elements when God tested Job. However, we notice that Satan challenges God with the words “stretch out *your* hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face” (Job 1.11), and when Job is afflicted by the first set of disasters (Job 1.12-19), he attributes them to the LORD's actions (Job 1.21). It may be that God granted Satan a temporary ability to afflict Job with sores (Job 2.7). However, Job understands that the sores were from God (Job 2.10). If Satan was able to act as God's agent of physical infirmity, as the angels were who struck the men of Sodom with blindness (Gen 19.11), it was only with the express permission of God. When Satan tempted Jesus (Mt 4.1-11), he did not perform miracles to impress Jesus, but challenged Jesus to perform them. Some claim that Pharaoh's magicians, agents of Satan, were able to perform miracles (Ex 7.11, 22). However, the account seems to suggest that their secret arts were mere artifices (sleights of hand) and not real miracles controlling nature, since it says that they “did the same [signs] by their secret arts”. It would appear, from the limited information that we have in Scripture, that Satan is not endowed with miraculous powers. We must not think of Satan as equivalent to God, but an evil counterpart. He is always under God's control and consigned to everlasting damnation (Rev 20.1-2; Rom 16.20). In contrast, Jesus, as the God-man, demonstrated his divinity through his teaching (Mk 1.27; Jn 7.46) and by performing truly miraculous signs (Acts 2.22; Heb 2.3-4).

Since Satan cannot, by nature, perform miracles, his demons cannot either; nor can his human delegates. Therefore, we must be cautious when interpreting this section. We must not assume that when John and Jesus (Mt 24.24; Mk 13.22) speak of signs, such as fire coming down from heaven, they are referring to truly miraculous events in the physical realm. John states that the beast deceives those who dwell on the earth with his signs. This indicates that the signs are not genuine, but tricks and frauds. They are pretend miracles—what Paul refers to as “false signs and wonders” (2 Thess 2.9)—which Satan concocts to induce superstitious unbelievers into thinking that they are seeing signs of true divinity wrought among them.

Contrary to the opinion of some commentators, we conclude that the ‘great signs’ that the beast performs are not genuine miracles; but rather counterfeit imitations, which fall into either of the following two categories:

- *Deluded deceptions.* The shamans of the nature worshipping pagans naively believe that their incantations and rituals influence the gods and work propitious outcomes for their people. They are like the prophets of Baal whom Elijah confronted on Mount Carmel (1 Ki 18.20-40)—they danced feverishly and sliced their bodies with knives in the mistaken belief that Baal would hear them. Likewise, some ‘faith healers’ in our day may honestly, but mistakenly, believe that their ‘commands’ to afflictions or demons to depart are effective.
- *Deliberate deceptions.* In the ancient world, the priests associated with the temples of pagan gods used tricks to produce fire, allegedly from the gods, and ventriloquism to make their dumb idols ‘speak’.

Similarly, some faith healers today are charlatans, intent on receiving glory from men and lining their pockets. They use carefully selected (sometimes pre-selected) candidates for ‘healing’ or use props such as chicken gizzards as fake tumors they claim to have removed from people with cancer, to deliberately deceive the unwary. They rationalize deception with claims that people enjoy the show or want to believe that God has helped them. Likewise, psychics, fortune tellers, practitioners of witchcraft, and new age gurus, like actress Shirley MacLaine, spout absurdities and are evil con artists who deliberately deceive the gullible. Whether demon possession occurs today, since Christ’s defeat of Satan at the cross, is debatable. However, the actions of these wicked deceivers are inspired by demons. By their fruit they shall be known.

Satan does not care if the counterfeit miracles are based on delusions or deliberate deceptions, as long as they distract people from the true worship of God. His objective is that men will make an image of the first beast and worship it—that is to worship man and his worldly wisdom and abilities, as extolled and fostered by the paternalistic state—rather than God.

Some sceptical moderns may not be deluded by the deceptions of spiritual charlatans. But *all* moderns, who have not been washed in the blood of the Lamb, are deceived into believing in false signs and worshipping the first beast. Belief in false signs inducing worship of the beast, takes many forms today; but they are just as foolish and superstitious as belief in the pagan cultic rituals in John’s day. False signs of the beast’s perceived greatness include a dependence on government funded health, welfare, and education programs, and endorsement of state-sponsored institutions that teach that man is the end result of an evolutionary process that began 13.8B years ago.

The Beast Out of the Earth – State-Religion Alliance (*Part 1 of 3*)

(Rev 13.14-15)

Thomas Jefferson wrote a famous letter to the Danbury Baptists on January 1st, 1802 in which he stated that, ‘Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a wall of separation between Church and State.’ His ‘wall of separation’ has become a rallying cry of the secular West, which has attempted to use it to expunge all vestiges of Christianity from the public forum and from all government legislative, judicial and administrative branches. However, as John indicates in this section, the beasts of human government and of false religion have formed an inviolable alliance. Thus, there is no wall of separation between false religion and the human governments, only between *Christianity* and the secular or pagan State.

In ancient times, before Rome became an empire, the state and false religion were aligned in most nations—the priestly cultus was supported by the king and the king was worshipped as a deity. This form of alliance between the state and religion can be observed explicitly in the Islamic concepts of the caliphate, which is to have the successor of Mohammad, and the *ummah*, in which the whole community of Muslims is bound together by ties of religion. Likewise, this alliance can be found in communist North Korea—where emperor worship has been decreed. However, it is no different today in the ‘democratic’ West, in spite of what modern secularists may claim. The modern state is aligned with false religion as surely as it was in the Roman Empire, in which the pagan cults furthered emperor worship and the common people were required to participate in their ceremonies or lose their places in the guilds, army, or government hierarchy. Psalm 2.2-3 recognizes the existence of the alliance between the two beasts, because the kings of the earth take a religious position by setting themselves against the LORD and his Messiah.

John indicates that false religions support the state by:

- *Encouraging worship of the State.* Those who dwell on the earth are deceived into making an idolatrous image of the beast of government. In Rome, this image would have been an idol of the emperor or an imperial altar, such as that found in Pergamum. Today the ‘image’ of government worshipped by the masses includes practices that are manifestations of the antichrist, such as banning the Ten Commandments from public buildings or prayer from public schools, making the teaching of the myth of biological evolution mandatory, or forcing a baker to decorate a cake for a wedding reception for two persons of the same sex.
- *Breathing life into the idol of the State.* John uses a metaphor to describe the persuasive power of governments that are anti-Christian. They compel subservience by funding (often with borrowed money) services such as community housing, doctors’ salaries, and income redistribution programs, which undermine personal and family responsibilities. Most people are fooled by the subversive danger of state control and accept exhibitions of the State’s largess as evidence that God is not required, thus denying the truth that all good gifts are from God (James 1.17).
- *Making the idol of the State speak.* In ancient Rome, idols were made to ‘speak’ by hidden priests using ventriloquism or hidden tubes to carry voices. The beast continues to speak through organs of communication, whether they are State-funded news media (e.g., BBC, CBC, China Central Television) or government-funded advertising intended to mollify the population into ambivalence (such as the Ontario Government’s partisan ads in 2017 about hydro rate ‘reductions’).
- *Slaying those who will not worship the State.* John is likely not speaking metaphorically when he says that those who do not worship the beast of the state and its image, will be slain. He may allude to the condemnation to death of the three friends of Daniel for their refusal to worship the image set up by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3.1-30) and to Daniel’s delivery into a lions’ den by Persian satraps because of his continued observance of true worship practices (Dan 6.10). However, persecutions of Christians by the Roman emperors had already begun when John wrote (Rev 2.13; Acts 18.2) and would intensify under Nero and later emperors (e.g., Domitian and Trajan). Persecution by evil governments never ends; as evidenced by the bloody conquest of Jerusalem in 636-637 by Islamic hordes, the invasion of Spain by Islamic Berbers in the early 8th century, the slaughter of over a million Armenians by the Ottoman Empire in 1915, the ongoing decimation of Christian communities in the Middle East and Pakistan by Islamic *jihadists*, and the purging of Christians by communist China and North Korea.

Christians in the West have been dulled into acquiescence by the dangerous beliefs in a benevolent state and the sustainability of religious pluralism. We must accept the reality that the two beasts—the pagan state and false religions—continue to operate and cooperate, with the intent of ravaging and destroying Christ’s Church. And, we must be prepared to make a stand, in this latter-day Babylon and Rome, for the crown rights of Jesus Christ, like Daniel’s three friends, and not pay homage to the image of the beast.

The Beast Out of the Earth – State-Religion Alliance (*Part 2 of 3*)

(Rev 13.14-15)

In the previous meditation we identified ways in which the beast of false religion supports the beast of the pagan State. We also noted that Christians in the West have been dulled into acquiescence by the dangerous beliefs in a benevolent state and the sustainability of religious pluralism. Despite popular opinion, it is impossible for a government to be neutral with respect to the place of religion within a nation. However, a ‘wall of separation’ between human government and religion does not actually exist and cannot exist. The state and religion always form an inviolable alliance; it is only a question of which religion the state aligns with—Christianity or a false religion.

Western societies are children of the ‘Enlightenment’ and are influenced by the anti-God political philosophy of the 18th century. Thus, the dominant view today attempts to create a thick wall of separation between a secular state and religious practices. The proponents of the idea of a secular state with an

alignment to no religion, but permitting religious pluralism, are unable to see the foolishness and dangers of their position. Such a position is a chimera because it is impossible to:

- *Create a secular state.* The so-called secular (non-religious or religiously neutral) state actually takes a religious position, since it is anti-Christian and endorses the religion of secular humanism.
- *Legislate anything without taking a moral position.* Sometimes you will hear people make the inane comment, “You can’t legislate morality.” By its very nature, all law making involves making moral decisions, and law legislates moral behaviour. What people really mean by such a comment is that they do not want to have God’s laws as the standard for society.
- *Define morally legitimate laws.* Without reference to God’s objective legal standard—summarized in the Ten Commandments—all law making is entirely subjective. No other basis for morality and law can be objective, since it can be derived only from sinful and wildly variant human opinion. For example, without God’s Law given in the Bible, rape, polygamy, same-sex ‘marriage’, abortion, euthanasia, kidnapping, and slavery can all be legitimated by one faction or another.
- *Make pluralism work.* No fair means of adjudicating between conflicting systems and priorities can be defined. For example, do lesbians’ ‘rights’ to rent a church building for their ‘wedding’ supersede a Christian congregation’s right to prevent them from using the building.
- *Avoid support for bullies.* Without God’s standards, the only means of allocating resources, rights, and privileges within a nation are to apply procedures such as: ‘might makes right’, ‘the loudest voice gets preferential treatment’, ‘majority rules’, or ‘he who pays the most, wins’.
- *Avoid moral chaos and physical danger.* As nations depart from the application of God’s Law, society degenerates and people live in fear.
- *Avoid the dangers associated with false religions.* Allowing the evil teachings and practices of false religions creates an environment in which permission mutates into demanded compliance. For instance, Muslims with children attending Christian schools demand that the schools remove Christian observances because they find it offensive.

All kings (rulers at any level of government) must acknowledge God as their supreme master (2 Chron 20.6; Ps 2.10-12; Dan 4.25; Dan 5.21; Rom 13.1-7). God’s Law, as given in the Bible, is not one of many possible ‘standards’, it is the only standard. All men know innately what God requires (i.e., there is a ‘natural law’), but they suppress this truth (Rom 1.18-31). God has also revealed his Law in written form (Dt 4.13; Dt 5.6-22). God’s Law is not just a standard for faith and personal holiness for Christians; it is the only definitive standard for all morality. God requires that his Law be the basis for all human laws, because his Law applies to all men through all time and in all nations, and provides practical guidelines for all areas of human relationships (Gen 9.4-7; Lev 24.22; Neh 13.20, 21; Ps 2.1-7, 10-12; Ps 33.8; Jonah 3.1-10; Mt 14.3-5; Mt 24.14 [compare with Mt 28.19-20]; Acts 17.24-31; 2 Tim 3.15-17).

Christianity is the only true religion. All other religions are false imitators of the true religion (Jn 14.6; Acts 4.12; Phil 2.9-11). Man does not have a right to proclaim atheism or any false religion, nor to endorse the existence of a plurality of religions (Ex 20.4-6; Dt 8.19; Ps 53.1; Mt 4.10; Acts 17.22-31). Thus, the Biblical requirement is for the civil magistrate to support Christianity and to prohibit the practice of false religions. This is a concept that is condemned today by most people, including professing evangelical Christians. They fear that a society founded on God’s Law would be an unbearable regime—like living under the Islamic Taliban. They clearly do not know their history and need to consider the reigns of kings such as Charlemagne (r. 768-814) and Alfred the Great (r. 871-899), Geneva in the 16th century, and Puritan New England from 1620-1740; which all made God’s Law their standard. Contrary to popular thought, a truly Christian society is the only society that can formulate any form of true tolerance. All other societies are intolerant. ancient Rome, Revolutionary France, Nazism, communism, Pol Pot and the Kemer Rouge, Islam, and transgender crusaders have all demonstrated that they are intolerant. However, the existence of a *sustainable* Christian civil government in this sinful world is not possible. The two beasts of the pagan state and false religions will always collude to suppress Christianity until Christ’s return.

The Beast Out of the Earth – State-Religion Alliance (*Part 3 of 3*)

(Rev 13.14-15)

The previous meditation concluded with the statement, “the existence of a *sustainable* Christian civil government in this sinful world is not possible. The two beasts of the pagan state and false religions will always collude to suppress Christianity until Christ’s return”. A study of Biblical and extra-Biblical history teaches us that Christian religious covenanting within a nation appears to retain its effectiveness only for the generation that makes the covenant, and by the second or third generation a government founded upon Christian principles has deteriorated into nominalism. Does this mean that we must abandon all hope of a peaceful existence while we live in this world under the authority of God-hating governments that conspire with pagan religions to destroy Christ’s Church? Absolutely not! Paul and Peter instruct us to be subject to non-Christian civil magistrates (Rom 13.1-7; Titus 3.1; 1 Pt 2.13-14) and to pray for rulers so “that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life” (1 Tim 2.2). This implies that the leaven of Christianity can have an influence on the practice of government, and we do not have to cower in fear as we await the advent of the new heaven and earth.

Revelation 12.7-17 and Revelation 13.1-18 inform us that the battle between Satan—who is accompanied by his two beasts—and the Church will be an ongoing reality until the end of time. Therefore, there will not be a time in this world when a majority from society is converted, and everyone will get along happily for a 1,000-year reign of a Christ-centred government on this earth. Thus, we should not expend energy in a Quixotic attempt to reform government while the hearts of the majority of the population remain unconverted and the Church is living a love-affair with materialism. We cannot expect unconverted people to accept and apply fundamental concepts of a Christian government (e.g., restitution for crimes, limited powers and activities of the state, Lord’s Day Sabbath keeping, and capital punishment) when many of our fellow believers do not hold to these Biblical positions.

Our engagement with human government should be guided by the following:

1. Never compromise Biblical principles for apparent political gains. The effect of such compromises is always short-term and non-enduring.
2. Always present Biblical principles in the public forum (e.g., that adultery is a sin, abortion is murder, commercial activity on the Lord’s Day Sabbath is abhorrent to God), in an irenic manner (1 Pt 3.15).
3. Never be afraid or embarrassed to declare God’s Law as the standard for the nations of the world. David, Jesus, John the Baptist, and Paul were not ashamed by it. Charlemagne, Alfred the Great, Calvin, and the Puritans were not embarrassed by it. Do we know more than these people did?
4. Always encourage and demand (“with gentleness and respect”) that the state follow and apply God’s laws, even if it appears to be a hopeless effort.
5. Continue to strive for Christian influence in government at every opportunity, using every legitimate means, at the same time as we present the Gospel.
6. Pray for the civil magistrates (1 Tim 2.1-2), and obey them as ministers of God (Rom 13.5; Titus 3.1; 1 Pt 2.13-14).
7. Call the civil magistrates to account for their sins by reminding them that they are ministers of God (Rom 13.4) who must do what God requires.
8. Use legitimate means (e.g., the courts) to challenge impositions of evil against Christianity, Christians, and God’s laws.
9. Where possible, vote for candidates who have stated that they will apply Biblical standards while in government office, even if that will result in a ‘throw away’ vote.
10. Work at all political levels (e.g., school boards) where Christians can have a direct influence. Follow the example of men like Joseph, Daniel and Nehemiah who served God faithfully under anti-God governments.
11. Trust God. Societies will revert to applying Christian moral principles because God, through general

grace, will not permit a complete collapse of all civil society throughout the entire world. Men will realize the failure of ‘post-modern’ subjective moral thinking, socialistic models, woke thinking, and tyrannical dictatorships, just as they generally understand the failure of communism. They will demand ‘law and order’, and Christians need to be prepared to present a rational basis and model for morality rather than the form of totalitarianism that could arise from fear and an un-Christian reaction to the consequences of evil. Between Christ’s advents, we can expect to see a general increase in Christian influence throughout the world. There will be times of marked increase in Christian influence over a period of a few generations and then swings in the opposite direction for a time. But the trend line is upward because Christ reigns over the nations (Ps 2.10-12).

12. Do not put your hope in temporal governments (Ps 118.8-9). John Calvin stated: “Even though all the princes of the earth were to unite for the maintenance of our Gospel, still we must not make that the foundation of our hope. So, likewise, whatever resistance we see today offered by almost all the world to the progress of the truth, we must not doubt that our Lord will come at last to break through all the undertakings of men and make a passage for his word. Let us hope boldly, then, more than we can understand; he will still surpass our opinion and our hope.” [Quoted by J. H. Merle D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the time of Calvin*, 1876, Vol 7, p. 49.]

The Beast Out of the Earth – Mark of the Beast (Rev 13.16-17)

Throughout the centuries since Revelation was written, many have speculated about the nature of the ‘mark of the beast’. In the 20th century some believed that it was the introduction of social insurance numbers, and others claimed that it would be some form of personal identifier such as that broadcast by an RFID chip embedded under a person’s skin. Many have based their belief that the mark would be visible (e.g., a brand, numbers, or letters) on what has been reported to have been the practice in the Roman world, in which brands were tattooed or burned onto the foreheads or wrists of slaves and soldiers. These speculations misinterpret the figurative nature of the mark.

When a person converts to Christianity and makes a profession of his faith, a spiritual seal is placed upon him (Rev 7.2-5, 8; Rev 9.4) and the name of the Father is written upon his forehead (Rev 3.12; Rev 14.1; Rev 22.4). When he is baptized, the sign of his profession is marked upon him through the application of water. No permanent outward evidence remains, yet he is viewed as forever belonging to Christ and his kingdom. Likewise, the mark of the beast is a figurative sign of a person’s commitment to Satan. Since the mark placed on a Christian is invisible, so also is the mark on the unbeliever. Both are spiritual in nature. When a person converts to Christ, he does not need to have laser treatment to remove the mark of the beast—it is instantly replaced with the mark of the Lamb. Thus, the two ‘marks’ are parallel, but opposites of one another. The mark of the beast is a parody and demonic counterpart of the mark (or seal) of the Lamb. Both classes of mankind (unbelievers and believers in Christ) are marked with the images of their respective masters—Satan or Christ.

The application of the mark to the foreheads and right hands of people is a symbol for the thoughts and actions of men. Thus, the marks indicate ownership of mankind by either of two masters, and to whom men have committed their allegiance. The two different marks are made visible through the outward practices of those bearing them. This outward manifestation is displayed primarily through worship of the beast (Rev 13.4, 8, 12, 15; Rev 14.9, 11) or of the Lamb (Rev 7.15; Rev 22.3). Those who are committed to the beast, worship it through their commitment to false religions—including Hinduism, Islam, philosophical naturalism, scientism, hedonism, and commercial materialism. The mark of the beast is not a physical inscription on a human body, it is idolatrous behavior.

John includes all of mankind with his use of three polar merismoses (‘small and great’, ‘rich and poor’, and ‘free and slave’). He uses this three-fold description to emphasize completeness, indicating that every

inhabitant of the earth who is part of Satan's kingdom is identified with the mark of the beast. Thus, we live in a binary world; not because of the prevalence of computers and 'smart' phones, but because of the reality that there are only two possible identification marks. No one is missing a mark, and no one can have both. A person belongs either to Satan, bears the mark of the beast, is under the curse of God, and is bound for hell; or he belongs to Christ, bears the mark of the Lamb, is blessed and protected by Jesus, and is bound for heaven. There cannot be a 'middle ground' (Mt 6.24; James 4.4). Every person is born with the mark of the beast, because of indwelling original sin. No one can expunge that mark by his own power. He can not wash it off, bleach it out, or cover it with makeup. It is indelible and can only be expunged through spiritual surgery that is applied by the Holy Spirit at conversion.

Proponents of the beast's worship actively work to exclude Christians from participation in economic activities unless they are willing to bow before the beast. John says "that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark" of the beast. When John wrote to the seven churches, they were experiencing a form of this exclusionary practice. The industrial guilds, professions, army, and civil service were controlled by adherents of the imperial cult and paganism. They would often demand a demonstration of allegiance to the emperor through a declaration of his deity or to the pagan gods through participation in temple rituals (including debauched ceremonies and cultic prostitution). Non-participation by Christians would have resulted in censure by their neighbours and civic authorities, and excommunication from a guild. It would have required a strong Christian commitment to withstand the pressure of friends and family to conform to societal expectations. When John wrote, Christians were often faced with a choice between apostasy or martyrdom.

In societies dominated by Islam, Christians are subjected to dhimmitude, which contrary to popular myth does not give Christians a protected status but subjects them to oppressive taxes and excludes them from legal procedures and commercial activities open to Muslims. In the 'enlightened' West, Christians are likewise being excluded from commercial activities. For example, homosexual activists use the courts to shut down Christian businesses where the proprietors will not recognize same-sex 'marriage'. And, in December 2017, the Canadian Liberal government indicated that any employer will be banned from receiving summer job grants for students if they do not sign an attestation that they agree with abortion and transgender 'rights'. The beast of false religion and the beast of anti-God governments work together to ostracize and slaughter (Rev 13.7) Christians.

The Beast out of the Earth – Number of the Beast (Rev 13.17-18)

The 'number of the beast' is a phrase from the Bible that is well known in popular culture; much like the phrase, 'the writing is on the wall'. However, few people could identify its origin from this section of Revelation, and fewer still could supply a correct interpretation of its meaning. Without doubt, it is one of the most debated statements in the Bible because of widespread confusion about the meaning of the number 666. Yet, despite the confusion, John indicates that a person with understanding can apply wisdom to calculate the number of the beast. This implies that the meaning of the number is to be known, was knowable in the 1st century, and is knowable today. It is not acceptable to claim ignorance about its meaning with the excuse that we should just attempt to understand the overall meaning of the chapter. Too many people have been led astray by false prophets over this number. So, we need to understand what John wants us to know.

John informs us that the number of the beast's name is 666, by the number of man. The most common suggestion for how to understand the beast's number is that it refers to a person. Some translations add an article ('a') or pronoun ('his') before man, which supports the idea that a single person is intended. This has led to considerable speculation about who the person might have been (or will be); with suggestions including emperors such as Caligula, Nero, Domitian, or Julian the Apostate; popes such as Innocent IV,

Benedict XI, or Vitalian; leaders of armies such as Genseric, Mohammad, Napoleon, or Hitler; Protestant reformers; and even modern US presidents. Most of these suggestions would have been meaningless to 1st century readers.

Most of those who hold to the idea that John refers to a single individual, conclude that when he says that those who are to understand are to calculate his number, this means that they are to associate the numbers to letters of an alphabet to derive the person's name—a practice which was applied in the ancient world before the adoption (during the Middle Ages in Europe) of the numerals we use. Proponents of this view, called [isopsephy](#), often point to graffiti found on the walls of Pompeii which use letters associated with numbers to refer to a person's name. Then they attempt to discover the name by mapping letters to numbers to obtain a total of 666. However, mapping 'Nero Caesar' to Greek letters does not sum to 666. So, it has been proposed that the Greek name 'Nero Caesar' should be transliterated into Hebrew, and the letters mapped to numerals sums to 666 and provides the necessary meaning (this view is defended by many, including Kenneth Gentry in his book, *The Beast of Revelation*). If the name is transliterated into Latin, the mapping gives the number 616, which is found in some early manuscripts of Revelation. However, there are objections against such a mapping, including:

- The '666' refers to the number of the *beast* not to a man.
- It makes little sense that John would have expected his readers, which would have spoken Greek as their primary or secondary language, to have known the Hebrew or Latin alphabets and how to use the letters of one of these alphabets to conduct the letter to number mapping.
- If John had intended his readers to use the Hebrew or Latin system of numeric mapping to letters, he would likely have guided his readers with words such as, "and his number in Hebrew is 666." (Rev 9.11; Rev 16.16).
- Nowhere else in Revelation is a letter-number scheme used.
- Choosing the name 'Nero Caesar' happens to sum to 666, when it is spelled a particular way in Hebrew. However, there can be latitude in including vowels and a final 'n' sound (e.g., 'nro' vs 'nron'). And, there is no valid reason to assume that the title 'caesar' must be included. For example, if someone wanted to associate 666 with President Trump, in English, he might include his first name, middle initial, or title until he had a combination that worked.
- If Nero was the obvious meaning to early Christians, then Irenaeus (130-200 AD) would not have said that many Greek names could be mapped to 666, and proposed 'Lateinos' (Rome) as the probable solution (*Against Heresies*, bk. 5, ch. 30)

Other schemes for identifying the meaning of 666 have included mapping the first letters of a series of Roman emperors; mapping an inscription found on 1st century coins, mapping the papal title *Vicarius Filii Dei*, associating the meaning with a heresy such as the Nicolaitans (Rev 2.6, 15), or interpreting the Hebrew letters for 666 as a word which could be read as, 'you should destroy'. The spectrum of possible 'solutions' that arise from associating letters with numbers indicates that this is not the correct way to find a solution, which John says that anyone who has understanding can calculate.

Therefore, it seems best to apply a symbolic interpretation, so that the number 666 refers to the beast by a human calculation or measurement (Rev 21.17). John likely uses the numeral 6 to mean incompleteness or falling short of seven, sometimes used in the Bible to represent perfection or completeness. Thus, the numeral 6 could be typical of what is earthly and is associated with the beast, in contrast to the heavenly and divine. The three-fold repetition of the numeral 6 in each decimal place (six hundred, sixty, and six) could represent the absolute falling short of divine perfection. When used as a number, 666 falls far short of the perfect 1,000 used in Revelation 20.2-7 to refer to a complete period. Thus, the number of the beast describes its nature as a deceitful sham (Rev 13.14), as a counterfeit Christ (an antichrist) that claims to provide prophetic truth to meet human religious aspirations but leads to nothing but decline, degeneracy, and debauchery.

Satan and His Subjects vs Christ and His Church

(Rev 12-13)

When studying Revelation, it is easy to become captivated by the details of a particular verse or topic (e.g., the ‘number of the beast’) and to lose sight of the ‘big picture’ messages of the book. The previous twenty-five meditations have dealt with detailed topics in Revelation chapters 12 and 13. We will now review a few of the major themes that can be identified in these chapters:

- *An unholy trinity vs the holy Trinity.* The dragon (Satan) positions himself as equivalent to the Father in the Godhead. He claims final authority as he attempts to usurp the power of God. He delegates his authority to the two beasts (Rev 13.2, 12), which together assume offices that mirror those of Jesus Christ—kingship by worldly rulers and the priest/prophets in the world’s false religions.
- *Deception vs truth.* Satan is a liar from the beginning (Gen 3.4), the father of lies (Jn 8.44), and the deceiver of the whole world (Rev 12.9). He uses overt falsehoods and subtle insinuations (Rev 13.14; Rev 19.20; 2 Jn 7) to tempt mankind into every form of perversity and evil, and to blind them against truth (2 Cor 4.4). In contrast, Jesus is the truth (Jn 14.6), bears witness to truth (Jn 18.37), is full of truth (Jn 1.17; Eph 4.21), and speaks only truth (Jn 8.46; Titus 1.2; Heb 6.18; 1 Pt 2.22). His truth is found only in the Bible—God’s revelation for all of mankind—not in the ‘sacred’ writings of other religions.
- *False vs true worship.* Satan uses the beast of false religion, the false prophet (Rev 16.13; Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10), to make the earth and its inhabitants worship the beast of anti-God governments (Rev 13.12) and Satan himself (Rev 13.4). Every form of false worship is demonic idolatry (Dt 32.16-17; 1 Cor 10.20). Today, about 75% of mankind has been beguiled by false religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Secular Humanism. Satan’s tentacles reach even into the Church, where there is found much human-centred worship that honours the accomplishments of men rather than honouring the Creator who alone is worthy of worship. Satan’s objective is to receive the worship that God alone should receive (Mt 4.8-9). However, Satan doesn’t care which form of false worship the world engages in, as long as worship is not directed to the true God. Therefore, the redeemed should be following the heavenly example, by worshipping the Lamb (Rev 5.12), in the form that he has established.
- *False vs true miracles.* The world sees the great signs performed by the beast of false religion (Rev 13.13-15) and cries out, “Who is like the beast?” (Rev 12.4). These signs are counterfeit miracles (2 Thess 2.9) that are based on delusions or deliberate deception (Rev 13.14), which Satan concocts to induce superstitious unbelievers into thinking that they are seeing signs of true divinity wrought among them. They include the falsehoods of shamans, who claim that their incantations and rituals influence the gods and work propitious outcomes; and of ‘faith healers’, who deceive the flock with props and trickery but are nothing more than charlatans, intent on receiving glory from men and lining their pockets. The second beast is presented as an instance of antichrist—as a caricatured counterfeit of the Messianic Lamb (Rev 5.6) who, by contrast, demonstrated his divinity through his teaching (Mk 1.27; Jn 7.46) and by true miraculous signs (Acts 2.22; Heb 2.3-4). Whereas the ‘resurrection’ of the first beast is merely symbolic (Rev 13.3), the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the greatest act in history—the act which vindicates Jesus as the Messiah and upon which our salvation rests. Thus, we declare, “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” (Ex 15.11).
- *Sealing with the name of the beast vs the name of Christ.* Satan has his sacramental equivalent of baptism. He seals all unbelievers with the mark of the beast on their heads and right hands (Rev 13.16-18). In contrast, those who are true believers in Jesus and his completed work on the cross, are baptized into his name (Rev 3.12; Rev 7.3; Rev 9.4; Rev 22.4; Acts 2.38).
- *Persecuted but protected.* Paul says that he was “persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4.9). Likewise, these chapters indicate that Satan persecutes the Church with the intention of destroying it (Rev 12.2-4, 13, 15, 17; Rev 13.7, 10). But he is unsuccessful because God

protects his people on earth (Rev 12.5-6, 14, 16), and ultimately when they are received into his glorious presence (Rev 21.4). Although some believers must face imprisonment (Rev 1.9; Rev 2.10), property confiscation, or even martyrdom (Rev 2.10; Rev 13.7, 10) for the cause of Christ and his Church, yet we believe that God predestines all events, including the persecution of his people, for his ultimate glorious purposes, and that all things work for the good of his people (Rom 8.28). Therefore, we can submit to his will, rejoice that we are considered worthy to suffer for his sake (Acts 5.41), and know that the testing of our faith produces a steadfastness that is perfecting us (James 1.2-4).

- *Condemnation vs Consummation.* John does not inform us of the great conflict between Satan and his subjects and Christ and his Church to discourage us, but to encourage us. It is an encouragement because we do not believe that we are victims of fatalistic forces or under the perpetual power of God's avowed enemies. Rather, Satan has been thrown down by Christ (Rev 12.10). Salvation and the power of Christ's kingdom have come (Rev 12.10). We with Christ have conquered by the blood of the Lamb (Rev 12.11). Therefore, we can rejoice (Rev 12.12) as Satan is defeated and Christ makes all things new (Rev 21.5).

The Lamb and the 144,000 Standing on Mount Zion (Rev 14.1)

John has finished describing a vision of the earthly struggle between Satan's unholy trinity (the dragon and his two beasts) and Christ and his Church (chapters 12 and 13). The vision now changes to a new scene, in a different venue. We see victory for the Lamb and his people (Rev 14.1-5) and the destruction of the dragon and his ungodly subjects (Rev 14.6-18.24). We should note again that we are not to read Revelation as if the visions prophesy how events will occur in chronological order. Rather, the visions provide a number of recapitulated views of the ongoing struggle between Christ and Satan (and their respective peoples) between the resurrection of Christ and his second coming, and the unveiling of Christ's eschatological kingdom.

When we last encountered the Lamb, he was standing (Rev 5.6) before the throne, worshiped by the heavenly multitude (Rev 7.9-17), and dispensing judgement on sinful inhabitants of the earth (Rev 8.1). Now we see him standing on Mount Zion with his Church. The juxtaposition of this portion of the vision with the previous portion provides a contrast between the true Lamb of God and the counterfeit lamb of false religion (Rev 13.11), sent forth by the dragon; and between the victorious Christ with his feet planted on a solid holy mountain rather than on the shifting waters (Rev 13.1) of the nations or on the abode of the pagan earth-dwellers (Rev 13.11).

This is the only place John uses the term 'Mount Zion', so determining what he means is not easy. Compounding the challenge is that the term is used only in one other place in the NT (Heb 12.22). Some understand the term to apply to the Church (the spiritual Zion; Rev 11.2; Ps 9.14; Ps 74.2; Ps 78.68; Rom 9.33) and others to heaven ("the city of the living God"). John does not refer to a place in the physical geography of Israel, nor to a literal appearance of Christ in the future in modern Jerusalem on the temple mount. We are probably to understand 'Mount Zion' as the spiritual abode of God and of his Church, which will be made manifest in a physical form in the new heaven and earth (Rev 21.2). As such Mount Zion stands for:

- The place from which God's anointed king victoriously reigns (Ps 2.6; Is 24.23)—in contrast to the wicked political and religious reigns of the dragon's beasts on the earth.
- The place of true spiritual worship; not to be realized in a restored physical Jerusalem on this earth (Jn 4.21-24) but with the Church, with the Lamb in its centre as its temple (Rev 21.22; Jn 2.21).
- The high, everlasting, fortress of God to which God's people may flee for refuge and protection (2 Sam 5.7; Is 35.10; Is 51.11; Jer 4.6).
- The everlasting new Jerusalem, the City of God—in contrast to the earthly and sensuous Babylon (Rev 14.8) destined for destruction (Rev 18.1-24).

This Mount Zion, is the fulfilment of the OT figures and types, represented by the physical hill upon which Abraham presented Isaac as a sacrifice and God provided a substitute, and on which the temple was constructed. It is also *spiritually* co-extensive with the true Church; since God dwells in the Church (Jn 14.17; Rom 8.9; Eph 2.22), true worship is offered in the Church (1 Pt 2.5), and the Church is the place in which Christ is found and to whom sinners can flee for refuge (Mt 16.18-19; 1 Cor 12.27).

John sees the 144,000 (Rev 7.4) standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion. We noted previously (see, [*Sealing the 144,000*](#)) that most commentators conclude that the 144,000 is a symbolic reference to the firstfruits (Rev 14.4) as a sample of the redeemed people or to the totality (a ‘perfect number’) of the redeemed. Based on this vision, it may be best to understand the number as the latter—i.e., the great throng of the triumphant Church assembled with Jesus (Rev 7.9). They are not firstfruits as a pledge of the elect since that was Christ himself (1 Cor 15.20). Nor are they firstfruits because they are a remnant of ethnic Jews, represent the first saved generation of NT saints, or are a cadre of the most holy saints from a larger multitude that will follow them. Rather, they are the firstfruits because they are the best (the select) from mankind. They are the best because they are the:

- *Elect*. They are the elect, not because of anything intrinsic to themselves, but because they have been graciously chosen by God. The number 144,000 indicates that God has elected an exact number from mankind.
- *Saved*. Because they are the elect, they are “redeemed from the earth” (Rev 14.3). There can be no break in the chain of God’s work of salvation from election to glorification (Rom 8.29-30).
- *Sealed*. They are the antithesis of the small and great, rich and poor, and free and slave from mankind who are marked on the right hand or forehead with the sign of the beast (Rev 13.16). They have the seal of the Father’s name written on their foreheads (Rev 7.3; Rev 14.1), indicating that they belong to God the Father and to his Son (Jn 17.9-10).
- *Protected*. They have endured the onslaughts of the dragon and his evil beasts (anti-Christian governments and false religions) because they are guaranteed divine protection (Rev 3.12; Rev 7.3).
- *Blessed*. They are companions of the Lamb—“God with us” (Is 7.14; Mt 1.23). Nothing can be more honourable or glorious than being with Jesus.
- *Victors*. They have not been overcome by the dragon and his monsters but march forth with Christ as a victorious army (Rev 19.14).

The purpose of this vision is to encourage our faith and diligence when it appears that the antichrist’s reign (chapters 12-13) is ascendant.

The New Song of the 144,000

(Rev 14.2-3)

John hears singing coming from the mouths of the 144,000 in heaven. They are before the throne, the four living creatures, and the twenty-four elders. In their midst is the Lamb (Rev 14.1). This indicates that the focus of the perfect Church’s worship is on Jesus Christ. Likewise, he should be at the centre of our adoration today because he is most worthy to receive worship (Rev 4.11; Rev 5.9).

The glorious visual display of this vision is augmented with a heavenly sound that was more spectacular than Dolby Atmos surround-sound in an UltraAVX auditorium. The singing is majestic, since it is likened to the thunderous roar of a large waterfall. In his day, the amphitheatres and stadiums would have been filled with roaring crowds. But the largest (e.g., the Colosseum in Rome, completed in 80 AD by emperor Titus) could hold only 50,000 people. The largest stadiums in the world today hold around 100,000 people. We can obtain an approximation of John’s experience in this vision, when we see a soccer game played in one of these stadiums and hear the crowd singing its patriotic songs. But this heavenly choir sings louder than any earthly crowd of spectators. It sings more gloriously because it is celebrating the greatest victory

of all—the defeat of Satan and the full manifestation of Christ’s kingdom (Rev 19.6-8). It is composed of people from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev 7.9), yet it sings more harmoniously than a human choir. Thus, John likens the sound to the beauty of musical instruments in a well conducted orchestra. [Note: Some commentators misread these verses. John does not state that the singers were *accompanied* by harpists. This passage, provides no support for the use of musical instruments in worship, nor can it be used to establish whether the temple in Jerusalem was still standing.]

John tells us that the multitude sang a new song. There is speculation about the nature of the ‘newness’ of the song—does it contain new content, or does it exhibit a spirit of newness, or both? In the OT, the expression ‘new song’ (used six times in the Psalms and once in Isaiah) is associated with victory over enemies (Ps 33.3, 10; Ps 144.9-10; Ps 149.1, 7), God’s lordship over the nations (Ps 96.1-13; Ps 98.9; Is 42.10), and deliverance from trials (Ps 40.1-3). Thus, the heavenly host’s new song would appear to be focused on two associated events—the defeat of Christ’s enemies, the dragon and his evil beasts (anti-Christian governments and false religions); and the victorious deliverance of Christ’s people from their earthly trials and temptations, and their redemption from the penalty of sin (Rev 5.9; Rev 14.3). So, the song sung in heaven isn’t actually new in terms of its contents. It is the same song that every redeemed person sings as his heart of stone is changed into a heart of living flesh (Ezk 36.26) by the Holy Spirit, and he places his faith and hope in Christ and in the resurrection to come. However, the song is also new because it has never been sung before with such vigour and enthusiasm. Song is often used to express joy—maybe not as much in our cynical age which is obsessed with darkness and evil. But in heaven, the saints will spontaneously and continuously burst into praise to express their joy over the ongoing renewal of the Spirit’s grace indwelling them, their awe at what God has accomplished, the blessedness of their place, the immediate presence of their Lord and Saviour, and the ever-new revelations from the infinite depths of God’s character and knowledge.

John also tells us that “No one could learn that song except the 144,000”. He does not indicate that there is a private song known only to a select group of saints, that the rest of the saved cannot know. The 144,000 is symbolic for all the redeemed; as indicated by the use of the word ‘redeemed’ twice in verses 3 and 4, and by the OT reference (Ps 74.2) to the redeemed congregation of Mount Zion (Rev 14.1). Thus, the song is one that *all* believers in Christ sing. Nor does John indicate that saved people will only learn the song once they reach heaven. Rather, John informs us that the song of the redeemed must be *learned*. It does not come naturally to sinners and wicked men. It cannot be acquired through the practice of rote religious rituals. It is not obtained through attempts at personal moral reformation. Nor is acquired through the accumulation of depths of theological insight. We must be taught the new song. This occurs only at conversion when we come to know Jesus personally and the Holy Spirit puts the new song in our mouths (Ps 40.3).

Finally, John tells us that the song could be learned only by those who have been redeemed from the earth—that is from earthly temptations and passions. Only believers can rejoice in what Jesus did in history through his sacrifice on the cross and by conquering death through his resurrection. Only believers can rejoice in the subjective realities of the conviction of sin and their pardon through the vicarious application of Christ’s righteousness. The world may know facts about Jesus (e.g., where he was born or that he taught the Golden Rule) but they do not and cannot rejoice over his person and work. No unbeliever on the earth or in hell can learn the new song of the redeemed or has a desire to learn it and to praise the Lamb. Rather he relishes wallowing in his hatred against God.

The new song of the 144,000 is voiced by the Church. We sing it when we lift our voices together in the Christian Sabbath assembly with the songs of Zion (Ps 137.3). When we sing the Psalms, we declare Christ’s victorious reign over the nations (Ps 2.4-6, 8-12; Ps 110.1-3), his resurrection (Ps 118.17-18), his coming as judge of all the earth (Ps 98.9), and our salvation (Ps 96.1-2). We sing a new song!

The Perfection of the 144,000

(Rev 14.4-5)

The 144,000 (Rev 14.1, 3) are the firstfruits from mankind; not a select group (e.g., 1st century martyrs or hyper-holy saints at the end of time) drawn from the entire body of the saved who have been granted a special honour. The firstfruits are all believers in Christ who have been selected (Num 18.12) to be a holy offering (a living sacrifice; Rom 12.1) to God from mankind (Rev 14.4, 40-20; Jer 2.2-3; James 1.18). They are all the elect, the vast multitude (Rev 7.9), who are saved and sealed (Rev 14.1) as belonging to Christ. They are the ones who are protected and blessed by Christ and declared to be victors with him, because they have not been adulterated with idolatry like the rest of mankind (Rev 9.20). John says that they display four attributes of perfection. They are:

- *Virgins*. John is not referring to people who have been celibate all their lives, as if sexual relations in a marriage relationship defiles a person—an impossibility, since God commanded them in the perfect paradise to multiply (Gen 1.28). Also, it is not possible for any person to be entirely sexually pure before God (Mt 5.27-28). Rather, John is using symbolism to describe those who have not succumbed to idolatrous worship. Sexually abhorrent practices were often a component of ancient paganism. So sexual immorality is used in the OT as a symbolic reference for idolatry (2 Chron 21.11; Jer 3.9). Likewise, Jesus associates sexual immorality with idolatry in his rebuke of the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira (Rev 2.14, 20, 22)—some members in those congregations may have participated in the religious rites, including ritual prostitution, of the temple guilds and their indulgence was being tolerated by the rest in their congregations. In addition, John associates worship of the beast with prostitution and sexual immorality (Rev 14.8; Rev 17.1-5; Rev 18.9). Spiritual virgins are those who are among God's covenant people (2 Ki 19.21; Is 37.22; Jer 18.13; Lam 2.13; Amos 5.2), who have not succumbed to the worship of human governments (the first beast) through false religions (the second beast). John refers to believers as 'virgins', using a word that is applied to women in all of the other thirteen instances it is used in the NT. He echoes the OT (Hos 1-3) and Paul (2 Cor 11.2; Eph 5.25-27) to indicate that the Church is the virgin bride of Christ (Rev 19.7-9; Rev 21.2, 9), free from spiritual unfaithfulness and wholeheartedly committed to him.
- *Followers of the Lamb*. Believing in Jesus is more than an intellectual exercise that accepts facts about him. It is a life-changing 180° turn. A truly redeemed person no longer identifies with Satan and his beasts and the world's idolatry. Being a follower of the Lamb is a commitment to be his disciple (Mt 4.19) that includes obeying his teachings and commands (Mt 28.20; Jn 14.15), trusting him wherever he leads or directs us to go (Mt 8.19-22; Jn 10.4), suffering in a like manner with him (1 Pt 2.21), and serving him (Mk 8.34).
- *Truthful*. An attribute of the sacrificed Messianic Lamb that stands out, in contrast to Satan, is his truthfulness (Is 53.7-9). Satan is a liar from the beginning (Gen 3.4; Jn 8.44) who is set on deceiving the whole world (Rev 12.9). He uses overt falsehoods to tempt mankind into every form of perversity and evil, and to blind them against truth. In contrast, Jesus is the truth (Jn 14.6), bears witness to truth (Jn 18.37), is full of truth (Jn 1.17; Eph 4.21), and speaks only truth (Jn 8.46; Titus 1.2; Heb 6.18; 1 Pt 2.22). Those who are truly redeemed imitate Jesus (1 Cor 11.1) and take on his attributes. Thus, no lie is found in their mouths because they: 1) will not exchange the truth of God for a lie (Rom 1.25); 2) will not declare falsely that "Caesar is Lord"; and 3) will not deny Jesus (1 Jn 2.22-23), but will declare him as Lord (Mt 10.32; Rom 10.9), even when under pressure from the beast and the false prophet to compromise their faith to save their temporal lives. Becoming a Christians profoundly changes a person's speech (Ps 15.1-2; Zeph 3.13; Eph 4.25; Col 3.9). Thus, truthfulness is a key visible evidence of moral purity and a distinguishing mark of the Lamb's followers.
- *Blameless*. Christ, the sacrificial Lamb of God, is presented in the NT as being without blemish (Heb 9.14; 1 Pt 1.19), as typified by the flawless lambs selected for the OT ritual sacrifice (Ex 12.5). John uses a Greek word that is used at times in the OT Greek translation to refer to the selected sacrificial animals (Lev 5.15). It is translated here as 'blameless'. However, it might be better to translate it as

‘without blemish’, as Paul indicates the Church is as the bride of Christ (Eph 5.27). The difference may appear to be subtle. However, John’s point is not that believers are experientially without any sin—an impossibility in this life (1 Jn 1.8). Rather, even while they were on earth, the 144,000 were selected as being without blemish, even as their Lord. This indicates that forensically they had been declared righteous and therefore were, and are, without blemishes before God. Of course, in heaven all believers will be both legally and experientially without blemish, for they will be sinless.

How is it possible for believers in Jesus Christ, the 144,000, to be viewed from heaven’s perspective as spiritual virgins, followers of the Lamb, fully truthful, and blameless? John identifies the means—it is because they have been redeemed (purchased) from mankind, by the sacrificial work of Christ. No person is innately perfect. No person through his own efforts can become perfect before God. A person becomes perfect when he is redeemed by Jesus, has Jesus’ righteousness credited to him, has the image of God in him restored, and is welcomed into a renewed intimate fellowship with his Creator.

The Eternal Gospel (Rev 14.6)

John indicates that another scene in the series of visions has been presented to him. He uses the phrase, “then I saw” thirteen times throughout Revelation as a means of demarcating the transition from one vision to the next. The scenery changes from the redeemed host standing on Mt Zion with the Lamb (Rev 14.1), to an angel declaring the eternal gospel to those who dwell on the earth—unsaved mankind. In this vision, he sees an angel flying directly overhead (this is the only instance in Revelation where an angel is described as flying) and proclaiming the message of the eternal gospel. Although the popular image of angels is that they appear in human-like form with wings, the only classes of angels in the Bible referred to as having wings are the cherubim (Ex 25.20) and seraphim (Is 6.2); neither of which appear to have a human-like form. Therefore, we may legitimately assume that this angel appeared in a non-human form—possibly with a composite body, including eagle-like wings.

John uses an intriguing phrase to describe the angel’s proclamation—“an eternal gospel”. First, it is the only place that he uses the word ‘gospel’ as a noun in any of his writings (he uses the verbal form in Revelation 10.7, ‘announced’; and here in Revelation 14.6, ‘to proclaim’). So, we have a challenge understanding what he means. Elsewhere in the NT, ‘gospel’ invariably means the good news for *sinners*, that Jesus has paid the penalty for sin and that those who believe in him, and his sacrificial work and resurrection will be saved and given eternal life (Acts 16.31; 2 Tim 2.8). However, in its context here, it appears that the word ‘gospel’ is applied to bad news—i.e., that “the hour of his judgement has come”. And there is no suggestion in the surrounding verses that there is the possibility of a respite from the pending judgement for those who repent of their sins. Thus, some commentators suggest that the gospel referred to by John is different from its traditional meaning and conclude that it is good news for *believers*, because the judgement of the world has arrived, and God will rescue his people from their persecutions. While that may be part of the good news, we can maintain the position that the ‘gospel’ mentioned here is the same gospel as preached by Jesus, that the kingdom of God has arrived (Mt 4.23; Mk 1.15) and that it is the “power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1.16). In order for there to be salvation from sin, sin must exist, and there must be guilt and associated pending punishment accompanying that sin. Thus, while Paul refers to salvation from sin for all who believe, he includes a second dimension in his praise of the gospel, the righteousness of God (Rom 1.17). There simply cannot be the good news of salvation from sin, unless there is the threat of destruction because of sin (Acts 17.31; 2 Cor 2.14-16). This consideration exposes a problem in much of the Church today. There is little effective preaching about salvation because there is practically no preaching about God’s Law, sin, guilt and judgement. Men cannot be saved from anything unless they are saved from something—i.e., sin, as defined by breaking God’s Law. Thus, a message that announces the destruction of the power of sin—that has cursed mankind and spread misery and despair—is truly good news!

Second, this is the only place in the Bible where the word ‘gospel’ is preceded by the adjective ‘eternal’ (or ‘everlasting’). Reasons that John uses this adjective may include the following:

- The gospel of salvation is not an afterthought with God as a response to man’s surprising and disappointing sin. God planned from the depths of eternity to demonstrate his love for mankind by sending Christ as the redeemer (Acts 2.23; Rom 5.8).
- The gospel is eternal because it is unique and unalterable (Gal 1.9). The gospel that was presented to Adam and the antediluvians (Gen 3.15), to the patriarchs (Gen 22.8; Rom 4.3), and OT believers (Is 53.1-10), is the same gospel that we have today and will have for the rest of time—there is salvation found in no one else (Acts 4.12). Nothing that men can do, or will do, will provide an advance over, or a substitute for, this gospel.
- The gospel is also everlasting because it presents the truth that a believer in Jesus will be sustained not only in this life but for ever and ever.
- In the propaganda of the divine-emperor cult in John’s day, the celebration of a Caesar Augustus’ birthday was hailed as ‘good news’ (the same Greek word was used in 1st century inscriptions). Thus, John chose the word ‘eternal’ to remind his readers that the true good news was associated with the resurrected King of kings—the Lord Jesus Christ—not with a frail, feeble, and fallible emperor whose remains were decaying to dust in the grave.

The angel is portrayed as flying directly overhead. This implies that the message which he proclaims is public and audible to all the inhabitants of the earth. This is reinforced by the reference to the audience for the proclamation—“those who dwell on earth” in “every nation and tribe and language and people”. This fourfold enumeration of mankind indicates that the gospel proclamation is intended for all people, regardless of their sex, age, or locale—i.e., the whole world (Mt 24.14)—who worship the beast (Rev 13.12). Thus, the eternal gospel is proclaimed in every age to people who are complacent scoffers and mistakenly think that judgement does not hang over their heads, not just to those living in the 1st century in the Roman Empire or to a last generation at the end of time.

The Proclamation of the Eternal Gospel

(Rev 14.6-7)

John sees an angel flying directly overhead, who proclaims with a loud voice the eternal gospel. Thus, the angel’s message is public and audible to every man, woman, and child on the earth. John includes people with different languages as one of the categories of hearers of the proclamation. Today, almost every person on earth can hear the Gospel and read at least portions of the Bible in a language that he can understand (if not in his native tongue). So, mankind is without excuse for not heeding the angel’s proclamation. We observe that his proclamation consists of three commands and that he provides two reasons why people must obey his three commands.

The angel’s first command is that mankind must *fear God*—that is to tremble before, revere, and obey the true God, rather than following the dragon and his beasts. We use the word ‘fear’ in two senses—to be afraid of something or someone and to reverence a person. Likewise, the word John uses in the Greek is applied in both senses (Mt 10.26, 28; 2 Cor 5.11). The author of Ecclesiastes tells us that the end of the matter, once all has been heard, is that we are to “fear God and keep his commandments”, this is the “whole duty of man” (Ecc 12.13). Mankind must fear God in terror because of God’s hatred against sin and the consequences of sin. However, once a person has received Christ as his saviour, he no longer needs to fear God in this way, since God comes to him as a friend and says, “fear not” (Mt 28.3; Rev 1.17). So, the more important form of fear that men must have is a reverence that honours God as God. One of the ways that we can demonstrate that we have a reverence and love for God is by obeying his law, summarized in the Ten Commandments. When people dismiss one or more of the Ten Commandments as not being relevant

in the NT age or rationalize their obedience to the commands, they demonstrate that they have no respect for the teachings of Jesus who declared their perpetuity (Mt 5.17-20) and no respect for God (Rom 3.10-18).

The angel's second command is that mankind must *give God glory*, instead of the dragon who imitates the true God. Many of us are familiar with first question in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: "What is the chief end [primary purpose] of man?" Man's chief primary purpose is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever (Josh 7.19; Ps 22.23; Is 24.15; Is 42.12; Jer 13.16; Acts 12.23; 1 Cor 6.20; 1 Cor 10.31; Rev 4.9). However, we may not be able to explain what it means to give glory to God. We cannot add to God's glory through our actions and make God more glorious than he is already (1 Pt 4.11). Rather, we glorify (ascribe glory to) God by recognizing and acknowledging the impressive splendour of his majesty and 'weight' of his being. We ascribe glory to God when we: keep his commandments to please him, not out of obligation; worship him through praise and prayer; repent of sin and confess faith in Jesus; confess our dependence on him, through prayer; and express thankfulness to him for all his goodness toward us. For any one of our actions (in any area of life) to be performed for the glory of God, it must be: 1) A *correct* act—it must not be sinful, breaking God's holy law. 2) A *conscientious* act—it must be done with diligence (Mt 22.37), not grudgingly or in a niggardly manner. 3) A *commendable* act—it must be a correct and conscientious act, done for the right reason, to please God rather than to satisfy our own pride (Eph 6.7; Col 3.23); and 4) A *consecrated* act—it must be sanctified by and through Christ in order to be acceptable to God (Jn 14.13; Col 3.17).

Third, the angel commands all mankind to *worship* God. As we noted in a previous meditation (see, [True Worship](#)), true worship consists of reverential acts authorized by God, that are directed to him and that are performed to honour him or his name (Ps 96.9). True worship does not include the futile rituals of false religions or the polluted offerings that many in the Church vainly offer to God with the false notion that their actions please him.

The angel provides two reasons for why mankind should fear God, give him the glory, and worship him, namely:

- *The hour of his judgement has come.* We do not need to debate whether the angel is announcing the final harvest of mankind and judgement (Mt 3.12; Mt 13.39) or the hour of a person's individual death and judgement (Ecc 12.14), since, as the writer of Hebrews states, "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement" (Heb 9.27). The gospel message is clear; if we do not honour God and live lives that are consistent with repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ, then we will face the terror of falling into the hands of the living God (Heb 10.31). Life is short, and the hour of our judgement approaches quickly.
- *He is the Creator.* The angel lists four categories of created objects to denote the universal nature of the proclamation that God is the Creator. Paul's indictment of mankind, applicable in every generation, is that they have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." (Rom 1.25). Paul also proclaimed the importance of believing that God is the Creator to the worldly-wise in Athens (Acts 17.24). To glorify God and to worship him, mankind (including many professing Christians) must give up the false beliefs that the universe and world are billions of years old, and that man evolved from an ape-like creature, and declare the truth that God created all things in six natural, consecutive days, about 6,000 years ago.

Announcing the Fall of Babylon (Rev 14.8)

In John's vision a second of three angels flies overhead and announces the fall of Babylon. In contrast to the eternal gospel (Rev 14.6) proclaimed by the first angel, the second angel announces the fall of the world's idolatrous system—Babylon. This is the first mention of Babylon in the book. The announcement

of its fall at this point is like a trailer for an upcoming movie. The full action-packed version of its demise will follow (Rev 18.1-24). In the Bible, Babylon (Babel) is introduced when Nimrod established the first post-flood empire and challenged God's authority as king (Gen 10.8-12; Gen 11.1-9), on a plain in the land of Shinar sometime between 2245 and 2215 BC. Later, Babylon became the epitome of all the enemies of God, as the destroyer of Jerusalem and the temple and the kidnapper of God's covenant people. In this verse, Babylon is called 'great'. Outside of Revelation (Rev 14.8; Rev 16.19; Rev 17.5; Rev 18.2, 10, 21) the only other place that this adjective is used in connection with the city is in Daniel 4.30, which connects the Babylon of Revelation with the Godless self-exaltation of Nebuchadnezzar.

Clearly the Babylon of Revelation is not the ancient city of bricks and mortar situated in the southern part of what is today called Iraq, where the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers converge toward the Persian Gulf. That city was a shell of its former glory by the time of Alexander's death and an abandoned ruin by the time John wrote Revelation. This was a fulfilment of the prophecies of God's judgement on historical Babylon, which foretold that the city would be desolate forever (Is 13.19-22; Jer 50.13, 23, 39-40; Jer 51.26, 62). Thus, the Babylon of Revelation is a symbol for the spiritual *City of Man*—the anti-God powers that arise in every age. Babylon is a type for any regime or city that espouses a false religion and persecutes the Church.

At the time John wrote, Rome (the city and the empire) was the preeminent exemplar of spiritual Babylon and is spoken of with a pseudonym (1 Pt 5.13), not to protect Christians from Roman censors who would accuse them of treason, but because the city and empire, like ancient Babylon, epitomized all that opposed the *City of God*—the spiritual Jerusalem. Rome was a contemporary incarnation of the idolatrous *City of Man*, but this does not exhaust the application of the cognomen. Therefore, we cannot confine our understanding of this verse to a single time or place—e.g., the sacking of the city of Rome in 410 AD. Rather, we must apply the angel's message to every antichristian world power or nation that seduces mankind into idolatry and ruthlessly persecutes Christ's Church.

Babylon is condemned for her sexual immorality. While this is to be understood primarily as spiritual adultery, we cannot exclude literal sexual immorality. Sex is a prevailing feature of the religions of man. In the pre-Roman world, pagan religions (e.g., in Canaan, Babylon, Greece) included prostitution in their fertility rituals. Rome's infatuation with sex was rampant. For example, to 'Corinthise' was a euphemism for sexual immorality and indicated that Corinth was the Las Vegas of its day. The walls in Pompeii and Herculaneum, which were destroyed by volcanic flows from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (79 AD) a few years after John wrote Revelation, display pornographic frescos. We do not need to list examples to prove that the Babylon of today is just as obsessed with the worship of sex. However, the angel's primary message is that the ungodly social, political, and economic systems of Babylon are man-centred, idolatrous, and anti-Christian. The word translated 'passion' could also be translated 'wrath' (ESV footnote) or 'fury'. Thus, Babylon is consumed with the fury of its fornication—both literally and spiritually.

Sometimes people are said to have drunk the 'corporate Kool aid' when they go along with a dangerous or doomed idea because of peer pressure. A similar idiom is used by the angel—the nations were "made to drink the wine". The nations of the world have been seduced into drinking the wine of Babylon's sexual immorality (Jer 51.7). The *City of Man* does not constrain its passion for pleasure, power, prestige, and prosperity. It drags all nations along its dangerous and doomed path. Most people are intoxicated by the false promises made by the *City of Man* (e.g., cradle to grave welfare) and go along naively and willingly (Rom 1.18) with its idolatrous demands. At other times they are forced to comply with Babylon's destructive demands or lose their income or possessions (e.g., Christians who speak out against evolution or same-sex 'marriage' are fired and become societal pariahs).

The ultimate false god of Babylon (Satan, expressed in the image of Baal) will tolerate no rivals. He demands wholehearted submission, and he blinds the world to Babylon's pending demise and to a wilful

dismissal of the only source of real hope and security for mankind—Jesus Christ. Therefore, the angel is constrained to announce that the beloved Babylon has fallen. The repeated Greek verbal form serves to indicate a ‘prophetic perfect’. Thus, at the time of the angel’s announcement the world’s pagan system had not been brought to its final judgement, but its demise is absolutely certain—just as certain as the prophetic word in the OT that foretold of the destruction of the physical city of Babylon, which now lies in a heap of ruins. We have here an instance of the ‘already and the not yet’. What God has foretold is expressed as a completed certainty. Babylon is fallen, fallen. Flee to the City of God!

Announcing Torment for Worshippers of the Beast

(Rev 14.9-11)

Two angels have passed with their messages (Rev 14.6, 8), a third is now heard. The messages have increased in severity. They ranged from a presentation of the eternal gospel and a warning of judgement, to the declaration of the destruction of the world’s pagan systems, to a loud announcement of the endless torment to be inflicted upon the worshippers of the beast and its image (Rev 13.4, 8). Those who will be punished show on their foreheads a mark of allegiance to Satan (Rev 13.16-17) through their sexual immorality—religious adultery (Rev 14.8).

Prostitution is a pernicious evil. But far more wicked is the prostitution of a human soul, created in the image of God, to Satan. God cannot ignore the travesty of men who should be soaring like eagles choosing to crawl with the Serpent on their bellies in the dust. So, at the appointed time, his wrath and anger will be poured out full strength against mankind who refuse to repent and persist in worshiping the beast (the Greek participle ‘worshippers’ indicates an ongoing activity). The angel adopts OT imagery (Ps 75.8; Is 63.6; Jer 25.15-18) of the wine of God’s anger being poured out against the wicked. He also says that the wine is ‘unmixed’, to indicate that its potency is undiluted. If mankind finds the wine of the passion of Babylon’s sexual immorality (Rev 14.8; Jer 51.7) intoxicating, they will find that the un-tempered wine of God’s wrath is overwhelming (Is 51.17). The wine of God’s wrath against sin is a pure and holy anger that men will rarely experience until they stand before God’s throne of judgement on the last day. This wine was poured out at the time of the flood, on Sodom and Gomorrah, on Jesus as he bore the sins of his people (Mk 14.36), and at the destruction of Jerusalem.

The wine of God’s wrath is retribution for men imbibing the wine of spiritual sexual immorality. It is manifested as the endless torment of fire and burning sulphur with no rest day or night. The image of fire and burning sulphur (that produces a gas that stings the eyes and lungs) is drawn from the OT. God rained these elements on Sodom and Gomorrah as punishment for their literal sexual immorality (Gen 19.24, 28). Likewise, he will punish all who persist in spiritual fornication and adultery. There is considerable debate about whether hell will include actual physical torment or will be only a place of spiritual and psychological suffering. Since every believer and unbeliever will be raised from the graves with new bodies (Dan 12.2; Jn 5.28-29; Acts 24.15), it seems logical to infer that the reprobate will suffer ongoing physical pain to the opposite extent that believers will experience perpetual physical joy. This is consistent with what Jesus teaches (Mt 13.42, 50; Lk 16.24).

The angel uses a compound expression (“into ages of ages”) rather than a single word to indicate the enduring nature of the torment of the worshippers of the beast and its image. Most commentators conclude that this expression means that the torment of the wicked will last forever and ever, as it translated in many Protestant translations. However, some attempt to find an alternate interpretation by suggesting that ‘ages of ages’ means a ‘long time’, and that there will eventually come a time when the torment of unbelievers will end because they have paid their debt of sin and can be admitted into the glories of heaven—this is contrary to the teaching of Jesus. The gulf between heaven and hell can never be crossed (Lk 16.26) and the fire that torments the unrepentant sinners is unquenchable (Mk 9.44, 48). In many parts of the professing Church there is hand wringing about the idea that the reprobate will be subjected to torment for an unlimited

duration, and they have introduced concepts such as purgatory or annihilation as attempts to soothe their queasy feelings. There is no second chance for salvation after this life (Mt 25.46; Mk 9.47-48; Jn 5.29; 2 Thess 1.6-9; Heb 9.27). Interpreters often make the mistake of thinking that those who are condemned to hell will look longingly toward those in heaven with regret and remorse and a desire to gain access to heaven. The reality is considerably different. Those in hell have no jealous desire to be in heaven with Christ and his people. They hate God and they obtain a perverse pleasure from wallowing in worship of the beast and soothing their wounded pride. There is no one in hell who doesn't want to be there.

Many people find this teaching about the endless torment of the wicked to be morally objectionable, reprehensible, and unworthy of the Gospel. They accuse God of being vindictive and unfair because he will judge and punish all unbelievers who have aligned themselves with the ungodly world systems. However, they misunderstand the nature of God's Law and man's sinfulness. They do not want to believe that the execution of penalties is required if law is to have any meaning and to be defended. Unrepented evil cannot remain unvindicated or God's threats against sin are a sham and Christ's death on the cross was a farce. Justice must be done, and it must be seen to be done. Thus, we read that the torment of the wicked occurs in the presence of the angels and the Lamb. The public judgement, sentencing, and punishment of the wicked is the final declaration of Christ's victory over Satan—the evidence that Satan's head has been forever crushed (Gen 3.15). Heaven acknowledges that God's judgements are right, and all mankind will likewise concur. Rather than trying to outthink God and explaining away his absolute right to judge and punish the wicked, we should accept the seriousness of this reality, fall down before him in worshipful awe, and declare the eternal gospel that all who flee to Christ will be rescued from the endless torment of hell.

A Call for Enduring Obedience and Faith

(Rev 14.12)

You may notice that most modern translations end the words of the third angel with verse 11 and attribute the words of verse 12 to John. Thus, the call for endurance of the saints comes from the apostle. He makes a similar call for endurance earlier (Rev 13.10; see also Rev 13.18 and Rev 17.9). Of course, ultimately the words of the angel and of John are the words of Christ, communicated through the Holy Spirit. John connects his call for endurance with what he has heard from the three angels with the word 'here'.

Many interpreters suggest that John calls for the endurance of the saints because of the consequences if they do not persevere through the suffering inflicted upon them. They claim that this suffering results from their public allegiance to Christ, demonstrated by their not worshipping the beast and his image (Rev 14.9). They suggest that the consequences of abandoning allegiance to Christ will be the torment that the third angel announces (Rev 14.9-11) and the forfeiture of blessed rewards (Rev 14.13). However, John calls those to whom he directs his message 'saints'. In Revelation, 'saints' is applied invariably to true believers. So, if John is warning of the dangers of falling away, he is speaking hypothetically since he would not suggest that true believers could ever lose their salvation (Jn 6.37, 39; Jn 10.28-29). Therefore, it is probably better to understand John as calling for endurance because of the vindication that awaits the saints. They will see God dispense punishment against the dragon and his beasts and worldly persecutors as evidence that the saints' commitment to Jesus is felicitous. Thus, John provides an answer to the saints' question, "how long, Lord, before you judge and avenge our blood" (Rev 6.10).

The word translated 'endurance' in this verse is translated in the ESV, outside of Revelation, as endurance (Lk 21.19), patience (Lk 8.15), and steadfastness (1 Thess 1.3); with each occurring about ten times. Elsewhere in Revelation, it is translated as 'endurance' in all but two instances, where it is translated as 'patient endurance' (Rev 2.19; Rev 3.10). The word 'endurance' is understood to mean standing firm in the face of a difficult situation. Thus, the saints are exhorted not to give up or to despair in the face of their "light momentary affliction" but to trust that their troubles are working a far greater "weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4.17). To demonstrate this trust, they are called upon by John to do two things:

- *Keep the commandments of God.* John refers to the commandments of God, rather than of Jesus. Of course, he is not suggesting that Jesus is not God or that the commandments Jesus declared to be his disciples (Jn 14.21; Jn 15.10) are not the commandments of God. Rather, John includes the entire revelation of God (OT and NT). Thus, he reiterates what Paul teaches—that *all* Scripture is the revelation of God and provides instruction for Christians living in a pagan world. (2 Tim 3.16-17). The idea that the OT is not relevant for the Church has been claimed since Marcion (c 85-160 AD) rejected the deity described in the OT Scriptures and denied the relevance of much of the OT for the Church. He was condemned as a heretic and excommunicated. Law keeping is not a popular subject in the Church today. As soon as anyone mentions adherence to God's Law, and in particular the Ten Commandments—the summary of the Law of God presented in the Bible—he is accused of being a legalist. There are many in the evangelical Church today who are Marcionites at heart and have rejected one or more of the Ten Commandments—especially the fourth. John does not say that law keeping is how a person can be saved, but how a person can demonstrate that he is a saint, by endurance in keeping the commandments. Jesus teaches, in the *Sermon on the Mount*, that our adherence to the Law of God must be from the heart (Mt 5.22, 28) and be more scrupulous than the observance of the Pharisees (Mt 5.17-20).
- *Keep the faith in/of Jesus.* There is debate about whether the reference to faith should be considered subjective—i.e., a believer's trust, or faith *in* Jesus—or objective—the system of doctrine or belief, the faith *of* Jesus, delivered to the saints (Jude 3). The Greek has 'the faith of Jesus', which is translated in the ESV as 'their faith'. John's earlier call for endurance in Revelation 13.10 speaks of the faith of the saints, so it is consistent to assume that in Revelation 14.12 he means the subjective faith of the saints. However, in Revelation 2.13 Jesus appears to speak of the objective faith that had not been denied by the church in Pergamum (although a subjective translation is given in the ESV's footnote). If John refers to a subjective faith, then the saints are encouraged to persevere through their trials and not to be deceived by the beast and succumb to the enticements of the world's systems. They are to place their trust in God, knowing that he is working all things for his glory and their good, and with an expectation of their pending glorious reward and vindication. If John refers to an objective faith, then the saints are not to deny what they have professed to believe, when they are faced with pressure to compromise the Gospel truth. The ambiguity is not a real problem and may be intentional. Faith in Jesus is not an abstract fuzzy feeling. It consists of belief in basic truths that are included in classic statements of faith such as the *Apostle's Creed* or the *Nicene Creed*. At minimum faith *in* Jesus includes belief that Jesus is God, the second person of the Trinity; the God-man, born of a virgin, who offered himself to die on the cross on behalf of sinners, rose from the dead on the third day, and ascended into heaven to assume his rightful rule; and who will return to earth to judge mankind.

The Blessing of Dying in the Lord

(Rev 14.13)

John hears a voice from heaven announcing a blessing for those who die in the Lord, and a second voice that confirms the blessing. Some believe that the first voice is that of an angel, like one of the voices of the three angels which John had just heard (Rev 14.7-11). Others believe that it is the voice of Jesus, noting the parallel command to write down what he saw (Rev 1.11). However, it is possible that the voice is that of the heavenly Father, who spoke a blessing from heaven over his Son (Mt 3.17; Mt 17.5) and now blesses those who are in Jesus. The Holy Spirit responds with an emphatic agreement. This is the first time we have explicitly heard the voice of the Holy Spirit in Revelation. However, he is credited as the channel through whom Jesus communicated to the seven churches (Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 29; Rev 3.6, 13, 22). We will hear his voice only once more in this book, when he invites us to the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 22.17). Thus, the Trinity is engaged in the delivery of the important blessing of salvation. The Father decrees and announces it, the Son is its instrumental source, and the Holy Spirit confirms its application. This verse is full of promise and hope for those who are in the Lord.

The blessings that accrue to a believer at death are the result of his being 'in the Lord'. This is an expression that speaks of a believer's organic union with Christ—we are in Christ (Eph 1.1; Phil 1.1; Col 1.2; 1 Thess 4.16). and he is in us (Rom 8.10-11; 2 Cor 13.3, 5; Gal 4.19; Col 1.27). His life flows through us and we live spiritually through him—as well as physically (Acts 17.28; Col 1.16-17). Before we can die in the Lord, we must be alive in the Lord. This means that we must have been saved by Christ's death and converted by the Holy Spirit; trusted Jesus with our temporal lives and with our everlasting existence; surrendered our lives to him and committed ourselves to obedience to his commandments (Rev 14.12); and communed with him through reading his word, prayer, praise, and sacrament.

All men are by nature dead spiritually and destined to die physically (Gen 2.17; Eph 2.1). Before Christ returns to this earth on the last day, it is the lot of every person to die physically (Heb 9.27). By nature, we are all the walking dead. Thus, John uses an oxymoron when he speaks of 'dead who die'. But he makes a distinction. Those who are spiritually dead and die physically are destined for damnation. But, those who are spiritually alive ('in the Lord'), who must die physically (whether by martyrdom or a 'natural' cause), are blessed. Our blessing in death is not in its mode, since some who die in the Lord are subjected to death at a young age or experience considerable pain at death.

Rather, the blessing of those who die in the Lord is what they obtain at death:

- *Release.* Dying means that we shed our mortal decaying bodies and leave behind this corrupt and decaying world. Death is an exit from sin's temptations, from the trials and persecutions sent our way by Satan, from frailties of mind and physical strength introduced by Adam's sin, and from illnesses and infirmities. It is no wonder then that Paul said that he was torn between staying to serve or departing (Phil 1.23-24).
- *Rest.* John has just encouraged the saints to persevere (Rev 14.12), and now he hears that dying in the Lord will result in rest from the weary labour that accompanies our perseverance. While heaven will be a place of rest from the labours of this world and the curse on work (Gen 3.17-19), it will not be a place of inactivity and listless lassitude. In heaven work will again be blessed and we will be energized to serve to the glory of God. In contrast, the followers of the beast will never experience rest (Rev 14.11).
- *Recognition.* The voice from heaven states that the saints' deeds follow them into heaven. While no one can be saved by his works (Eph 2.8-9), everyone is judged by his works—whether good or evil (Mt 16.27; 2 Cor 5.10). Any good work that we do—in faith, patience, intercession, or service—is entirely the result of our being in Christ and Christ working in us (Eph 2.10). Thus, our deeds that follow us into heaven have been empowered by the Spirit and sanctified by Christ, and are deemed to be righteous before the judgement seat of God.
- *Reward.* Those who die in the Lord are welcomed into everlasting glory at death (Mt 25.21, 23) and given great rewards (2 Tim 4.7-8; Heb 11.6).
- *Resurrection.* One of the great rewards we will receive is resurrected bodies (1 Cor 15.52-53). We do not need to digress into a debate about a supposed intermediate state and the final state after the day of judgement. Heaven and hell do not operate in our form of time or parallel to it. Each of us will be immediately at the final judgement at our deaths (Heb 9.27).

The voices from heaven provide great assurance for a believer at death:

- They indicate that death is not the terminus of our existence. Life continues—as a better form of life than we can imagine today.
- We do not need to fear death. It has been conquered by Christ, and for the believer it is the portal to a far greater world.
- The Father declares that blessings accrue to the believer at death and the Spirit confirms it. We can trust God, who cannot lie.
- Blessings will flow 'from now on'. The 'from now on' expression does not refer to the time following

the announcement from heaven or from an historical event such as the resurrection of Christ. The expression means that at the moment of a person's death in the Lord, the blessings will accrue and continue into the everlasting future.

John is told to write down the promise of this blessing to encourage us.

The Harvest of the Earth – The Righteous

(Rev 14.14-16)

We have noted that we must not read Revelation as if it presents a chronology of events which were to occur during the 1st century, or which will occur at some unspecified date in the future. Rather, Revelation covers a series of topics (e.g., persecution of the church, temporal judgement of the wicked, the final judgement, and rewards for the saints) multiple times, from different perspectives. Thus, in Revelation 14.14-20 we are presented with an image to illustrate the final harvest of all mankind. This was addressed, to an extent in chapter 7 and will appear again later. This section presents the harvest of two separate groups, at the Son of Man's coming at the end of time (1 Thess 4.16-17):

- *The righteous* (Rev 14.14-16). The righteous are reaped for redemption. In the Bible the image of eschatological reaping appears to refer primarily to the harvest of the elect (e.g., Mt 13.30²; Mk 4.29; Jn 4.35-38).
- *The wicked* (Rev 14.17-20). The wicked are harvested for punishment. The treading of the gathered grapes in a winepress of God's wrath (Rev 14.19-20) is an image of judgement against the wicked (Rev 14.10; Joel 3.12-13).

This section has nothing to do with a supposed rapture at the *beginning* of a millennium when Christians will be taken from the earth and leave behind unbelievers. The Bible teaches that there is only one harvest of mankind—of the righteous and wicked—on the last day, when Jesus will come again to wrap up history, open the graves, execute everlasting sentences, and renovate the created order (Mt 11.22; Jn 5.28, 29; 2 Thess 1.10). In Matthew 24.40-41 Jesus is not speaking of believers who will be taken, but of unbelievers who will be taken suddenly as those before the flood were swept away. Elsewhere (Mt 13.41-42, 49), he teaches that unbelievers will be removed, not believers.

After his encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus told the disciples that the fields were white for harvest (Jn 4.35). Now, the grain growing in the field of the world that represents the righteous, is fully ripe and dried ready to be gathered into the heavenly storehouse. This means that at the point the voice from heaven calls for the harvest, the full number of spiritual Israel—Jew and Gentile (Rom 11.25-26)—has been saved (Rev 6.11), and the gathering and separating of the righteous from the wicked can commence.

The one who is assigned the role of harvesting the righteous with a sharp sickle is described as having the appearance of the son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and sitting on a white cloud. Some suggest that this could be a reference to an angel; but it is more consistent with the rest of Scripture to view this person as Christ himself, since he uses the term 'son of man' from Daniel (Dan 7.13) as his own title more than 25 times in the Gospel of Matthew. And, the image of his arrival on a cloud, also from the same verse in Daniel, is how the angels indicated that he would return to the earth (Acts 1.9-11; see also, Mt 26.64). In addition, the golden crown is the symbol of Christ's victory and sovereignty (Rev 19.12), who is assigned the role of judge (Ps 2.1-12; Jn 5.22, 27; Acts 17.31).

John hears an angel calling to Jesus and telling him, in a loud voice, to commence the reaping, for the hour has arrived. We must not think that an angel *commands* Jesus to begin the reaping, as if the angel has any

² The ESV translates two different Greek words as 'gather'. The NIV distinguishes between them. At the time of harvest, the wicked are 'plucked up', but the righteous are 'gathered'.

authority over Jesus. Rather, the angel carries a message from the Father to the Son. The command does not originate with the angel, but he carries it out of the temple (or inner sanctuary)—that is, from God’s throne room. The message of the time for reaping is conveyed to the Jesus because as the God-man he had not been previously informed of the time when it was to commence (Mk 13.32). We do not need to address the question of how anything could be hidden from Jesus, who is God and knows all things. We accept his own words that in his human nature, and as the Mediator, the exact hour of the end of time is a decree that comes from the Father. Jesus accepts a subordinate role as the executioner of the command to begin the harvest of mankind. The message instructs Jesus to undertake the harvest with a sharp sickle, a metaphorical instrument of judgement. This indicates that the line of demarcation between the righteous and wicked is very thin. There is no muddled middle of folks who are not righteous enough to make it into heaven but not evil enough to be destined for everlasting torment (Rev 14.11). The dividing line is cleanly cut—all mankind is on one side of it or on the other.

We live in a dark day in which scoffers ask, “where is the promise of his coming?” (2 Pt 3.3-4), thinking that their scepticism somehow invalidates the word of God. These verses shine light into that darkness and assure us that:

- Jesus is coming again to this earth in a similar manner as he departed after his resurrection at the time of his ascension (Acts 1.11).
- He will return in God’s time, when *the* hour, the right hour, has come.
- He is coming as the righteous judge, exactly as was prophesied (Rev 19.11; Ps 96.13; Ps 98.9; Is 11.1-9).
- Without fail, he will gather his people (Jn 14.3), whom he knows individually (Jn 10.27), and take them into glory to be with him forever.

Rejoice that your resurrection and reception into glory draws near and encourage one another with these words (1 Thess 4.13-18).

The Harvest of the Earth – The Wicked

(Rev 14.17-20)

John has witnessed the first scene in the vision depicting the commencement of the harvest of mankind at the end of time—the harvest of the righteous (Rev 14.14-16). A new scene is now shown to him—the commencement of the harvest of the wicked, also at the end of time. These two dimensions of the harvest are described sequentially, not because they occur at different times—as some suggest because there is a lag of months between the grain and grape harvests—but because different actors are engaged in the execution of the harvest. Jesus himself harvests the righteous and welcomes them into heaven, but an angel is charged with the harvest of the wicked.

A second angel enters the scene. He is described as having authority over the fire. This is likely the fire of hell; it does not indicate, as some suggest, that angels are assigned responsibility over the four classical elements of earth, water, air, and fire. God has charged an angel with responsibility for guarding the opening of the shaft to the abyss (bottomless pit), as a countermeasure to Satan’s temporary ownership of the keys to the pit (Rev 9.1-2). The assignment of an angel to guard the opening to the pit is similar to the assignment of angels to guard the gate to the garden of Eden (Gen 3.24). The cherubim were to keep sinful mankind out of the garden—a symbol for heaven—whereas this angel is assigned responsibility to keep sinners assigned to hell from leaving it. The angel with authority over the fire instructs the angel with the sickle to begin the harvest by gathering the grape clusters since they are ripe—“It is time to fill hell with the number of the damned!” As with the harvest of the righteous, the angel that declares the hour of the harvest comes from God’s throne room in the inner sanctuary of heaven (Rev 14.15, 17).

The angel charged with carrying out this harvest, is described as holding a sharp sickle, as Jesus is shown

wielding one (Rev 14.14). The sickle is a metaphorical instrument of judgement and indicates that there is a thin line of demarcation between the righteous and wicked. There is no muddled middle of folks who are not righteous enough to make it into heaven but not evil enough to be destined for hell. The dividing line is cleanly cut—all mankind is on one side of it or on the other.

A vision of the grape harvest and the treading of the grapes in a winepress is used to communicate symbolically the nature of the harvest of the wicked because it is used in the OT as a type for God's anger that is poured out on an evil or rebellious nation (Is 63.2-6; Lam 1.15; Joel 3.13). The crushing of the grapes in a winepress is a symbol for divine severity against sin, which must be punished. It is the same severity that was directed at Jesus when he bore the sins of his people on the cross and was forsaken by the Father. When the harvest of the grain (the righteous) is called for, there is no mention of winnowing or purging the chaff (Rev 14.15). The saints are considered clean and pure because they are covered by the blood of the Lamb, and they can be gathered directly into the barn of heaven. But unrepentant sinners are destined for crushing.

The extent of the punishment of the wicked is reinforced by the imagery of the scene. John saw that the juice ('blood') of the grapes flowed from the winepress in a river that was as high as a horse's bridle and extended for 1,600 stadia (300 kms). Various suggestions have been offered for why the number 1,600 is used, including calculations of numbers representing the earth and completeness, and geographic distances in Palestine or Asia Minor. Regardless of the source of the number, it indicates that the harvest of the wicked will result in a tremendous bloodletting. No one in the ancient world could have imagined such a flow of juice from the spout of a winepress. Thus, the hyperbolic description is intended to represent a flow that is beyond measure. The gruesomeness of this scene is intended to invoke horror in the readers and to affirm that the punishment which will be inflicted on the wicked will be an everlasting torment (Rev 14.11), from which there will be no escape. The image of a river of blood flowing from wicked humanity is an appropriate symbol because it reminds us of the sin of murder that causes blood to cry out for vengeance (Gen 4.10), the evil of killing martyrs because of their witness to truth (Rev 6.9), and the wickedness of the abortion industry that has slaughtered millions of babies over the past sixty years.

The winepress in the vision is situated "outside the city". Some suggest that 'the city' is physical (ancient or future) Jerusalem; others that it is Babylon, mentioned a number of times in Revelation, which we determined is a symbol for the spiritual *City of Man*; and, others suggest that it is the city of Rome, an instantiation of Babylon. However, it is probably better to conclude that the city is the holy Jerusalem—the Church in the city's spiritual form and the heavenly residence of the saints in its physical form—since the logical antecedent of the city in this section is 'Mount Zion' (Rev 14.1). Thus, the vision indicates that the wicked are judged and sentenced outside the city. Jesus bore our sins on the cross, as a curse, outside the city (Heb 13.12), and no unclean thing can enter the city (Rev 21.27; Rev 22.15). The righteous are gathered into the city and wicked are judged and sentenced outside the city. This again indicates that there are only two categories of mankind. No one can stand at the gate of the city, with one foot inside and one foot outside. Either he belongs among the righteous in the city or is outside with the wicked.

Another Sign – Seven Angels with Seven Plagues (Rev 15.1)

John refers to another great sign that he saw in heaven. This commences a new vision and a new section in Revelation. The previous (and only other) reference to a great sign in heaven is found in chapter 12 (Rev 12.1, 3). Chapters 12-14 covered the history of the war between Satan and Christ and his Church, throughout the 'last days'—the period from Christ's resurrection and ascension until the final harvest of mankind on the day of judgement. Now, the vision John sees of the seven angels and the plagues that they are to distribute from seven bowls (chapters 15-16) returns to the theme of temporal judgement visited upon those among mankind who refuse to heed the message of the Gospel and the warnings of the final judgement.

The sign of the seven angels with the seven plagues originates in heaven. These angels may be the same ones we have already encountered as the angels with the seven trumpets (Rev 8.6). Their origin from heaven reminds us that all temporal judgements meted out upon mankind come from God. Contrary to the thinking of many, there is not a ‘god of the OT’ who is different from the ‘god of the NT’. There is one God—the God who sent the flood to wipe out the antediluvians whose thoughts were only evil continually (Gen 6.5), judged the hubris of those attempting to build a tower to make a name for themselves, rained down burning sulphur on cities that practiced unnatural sexual relations, wiped out nations which sacrificed their children to idols, sent his covenanted people into captivity because of their spiritual adultery, and poured out his wrath upon his Son as he bore the curse of sin for his people, is the same God who sends the plagues of judgement upon mankind which John records in Revelation. All the temporal judgements against mankind’s wickedness are a sign of the final judgement—everlasting torment (Rev 14.11)—which will be the lot of those who do not heed the warning to flee from the wrath of God (Mt 3.7) by turning to Jesus (1 Thess 1.10).

The vision of the seven plagues parallels the visions of the opening of the seven seals (Rev 5.1-8.5) and of the blowing of the seven trumpets (Rev 8.6-11.19). We are now introduced to a third, and final (“the last”), set of seven temporal judgements, before the scene changes to the total destruction of the world’s systems (chapters 17-19), the final judgement (chapter 20), and the unveiling of the new heaven and earth (chapters 21-22). Thus, Jesus provides John with three sets of warnings of the temporal judgements that are inflicted on mankind because they worship Satan and his beasts. There are likely three sets of warnings to reinforce the seriousness of disobedience to God’s revealed will, to indicate the certainty of judgement, and to meet the requirement that judgement and punishment should occur only when there are two or three witnesses (Dt 17.6; Dt 19.15).

These three sets of temporal judgements occur in parallel and continuously throughout the period between Christ’s advents, not sequentially when the end of time draws near. However, there appears to be an intensification in the sets of temporal judgements. For example, when the fourth seal was opened the rider had authority over a quarter of the earth. When the fourth trumpet was blown, a third of the light was darkened. However, when the plagues are poured out, the consequences seem to be more comprehensive (Rev 16.2-4, 8, 10). This intensification of temporal judgements is the result of an increased hardening of the hearts of rebellious sinners who refuse to repent (Rev 16.9, 11).

Thus, we should ask, how many warnings do people need before they will repent? And when will God’s patience expire? When will he no longer be willing to send warnings of the final judgement but will wrap up history and bring all mankind before his judgement seat? John indirectly answers these questions. He informs us that these are the last temporal judgements because the wrath of God is finished. John does not mean that the wrath of God has come to an end—his wrath against sin is yet to be expressed in the final judgement and in the condemnation of Satan, his demons, and the reprobate among mankind to their deserved punishment. Rather, God’s wrath has been filled up (Rev 15.7; Rev 21.9), exhausted, or reached its limit, and the bowls of wrath with the plagues are the last expression of his wrath in the temporal realm.

After the three sets of the partial manifestation of God’s anger against sin have finished, the final outpouring of his wrath will follow on the judgement day. This does not tell us *when* the judgement day will arrive, since the three sets of temporal judgements occur continuously, in every generation and in every nation that rejects God’s sovereign lordship and worships the dragon. Likewise, this applies to individuals. God sends each person warnings to repent of his personal sins. But after the three warnings, he withdraws his hand of patience and leaves individuals in the hardness of their rebellion. The ‘three’ is symbolic; the actual number of judgements of warning in any individual’s life or in a particular nation may vary—for example, it required ten plagues before Pharaoh finally capitulated and allowed the Hebrews to leave his land, but then he immediately regretted that he had allowed them to depart and chased them into the sea with hundreds of

chariots.

Before John reveals the contents of the bowls with the plagues, he makes a digression (Rev 15.2-4) to reflect on the status of the saints in glory, in order to comfort and encourage Christians in their war against Satan and his hordes.

The Heavenly Choir (Rev 15.2-3a)

Before John reveals the contents of the bowls with the plagues, he makes a digression to reflect on the status of the saints in glory, in order to comfort and encourage Christians in their war against Satan and his hordes. First, he speaks about the heavenly choir (Rev 15.2-3a) and then he relates the song they sang (Rev 15.3b-4). Their song is a solemn declaration of the propriety of God's sending plagues of judgement upon those who refuse to repent (Rev 16.9, 11).

John sees an assembly, the heavenly choir, which he describes as victors. He says that they have conquered the:

- *Beast.* They have resisted Satan's temptations and defeated him (James 4.7). This does not mean that they lived perfect lives, but that they did not make a practice of sinning (1 Jn 3.9) or delighted in sin as the pagans do (Rom 1.32).
- *Its image.* They have eschewed idolatry in its various forms. They have not fallen for the superstitious practices of the pagans, nor have they participated in false worship that continually encroaches on the Church.
- *Number of its name.* They have not compromised with the world for personal gain or in the pursuit of vain pleasures and power.

This assembly is not a select group of martyrs or of super-holy believers. It is the innumerable multitude (Rev 7.9) of the blessed who, through their union with Christ, have been declared righteous, sanctified, and welcomed into the everlasting glories of heaven. They are those who listened to his rebuke and instruction in his letters to the seven churches (also directed to us), to conquer (Rev 2.7, 11, 17, 26; Rev 3.5, 12, 21). Though the world may view believers in Jesus as inconsequential fools, they have won a great spiritual victory through the endurance of their faith and will receive the promised rewards, which are beyond anything this world can offer (1 Cor 2.9).

John sees the heavenly choir assembled before, what appears to be, "a sea of glass mingled with fire". We first encountered the "sea of glass, like crystal" in Revelation 4.6. At that time, we concluded that the calmed sea is likely a symbol for those who have been sovereignly and graciously brought out of the chaotic nations and purified, who are now at peace before the throne of God. It does not represent a "threatening presence of evil" or "ungodly masses of people in the world". God's throne room cannot be polluted with evil or its symbols. The sea is said to appear as being mixed with fire, meaning that it had a reddish glow, or that John saw flickering flames in the midst of the crystal. Fire is often associated with the presence of God (Ex 24.17; Ezk 1.27) and with his judgements (Rev 8.7-8; Rev 9.17-18; Rev 11.5; Rev 14.10; Rev 16.8; etc.). Thus, this image speaks of God's transparent righteousness and his judgement that is about to be revealed from heaven.

The image of the assembly standing on the edge of sea, rejoicing over God's pending judgement on their enemies, is an allusion to the rescued Israelite community standing on the shore of the Red Sea after the water-walls had collapsed onto the Egyptian army and drowned them all. Then, the assembly sang the song of Moses (Ex 15.1-18), the servant of God (Ex 14.31). Now, they sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb, also a servant of God (Is 42.1; Acts 3.26), indicating the increased breadth of the work of redemption accomplished by Jesus, and the unity of the two covenants and of the two covenant communities.

The assembly is seen holding the “harps of God”. Many commentators use this statement as a launch pad for a consideration of the role of music in the Church and to encourage us to apply musical instruments skilfully in our worship. However, as we noted previously (see, [Harps in Heaven \(Part 1 of 3\)](#)) we cannot infer that there is direct connection between the mention of harps and our congregational worship. We noted that the presence of harps in the visions is associated with other liturgical objects such as incense, an altar, the temple, and the sacrificed Lamb. John uses symbolic images derived from his experience with temple worship to portray events in his visions. Since Revelation was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, the use of the temple liturgy in symbolical form makes sense. However, later in the book, when the new order of the renovated heavens and earth is described, there is no reference to the temple or to musical instruments. In fact, we are told explicitly that there is no temple in the new order (Rev 21.22). With the completion of Christ’s work on the cross and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, we no longer observe any of the specific rituals that went along with the temple (animal sacrifices, incense, playing of musical instruments), except in their spiritual form. We cannot logically infer that because the assembly in this vision uses harps that there will be actual harps used in heaven (which there may be) or that their presence in the vision has any direct bearing on our use of musical instruments in worship today.

Ironically, some folk who would refer to this passage to defend the use of musical instruments in worship today, are appalled by the idea that the saints in heaven celebrate the demonstration of God’s judgement in the destruction of his enemies. As the Israelites rejoiced over the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, so the entire company of heaven acknowledges the supreme holiness of God, which requires the punishment of the wicked. In our next meditation, we will consider the contents of their exultation.

The Song of Moses and the Lamb

(Rev 15.3-4)

The Bible has many examples of the saints praising God in song. Early ones include two songs of Moses (Ex 15.1-18; Dt 32.1-43), and Deborah and Barak’s song (Judges 5.1-31). Commentators have pointed out that the covenant community at the time of the exodus sang Moses’ song on the shore of the Red Sea. Here, the entire assembled covenant community also sings the song of Moses and the Lamb on the shore of a sea. From the days of Moses (Ps 90.1-17), the covenant community added songs of praise to the developing canon of Scripture until the time of the Babylonian captivity (e.g., Ps 137.1) and possibly into the post exilic period (e.g., Ps 126.1; Ps 132.13-18). As the canon of Scripture was brought to its completion, with the composition of Revelation, we encounter the only NT examples of praise-song. There is some debate as to which of the examples of praise found in Revelation are sung *vs* offered as vocalized statements equivalent to prayer (Rev 4.8, 11; Rev 5.12-13; Rev 7.10, 12; Rev 11.15, 17-18; Rev 12.10-12; Rev 16.5-7). However, there are at least three instances of praise-song (Rev 5.9-10; Rev 14.3-4; Rev 15.3-4). In addition, Revelation 19.1-8 may be a *song*.

The praise-song in Revelation 15.3-4 provides a catalogue of the attributes of the Lord God Almighty—a tripartite title for God found only in the NT in Revelation (Rev 4.8; Rev 11.17; Rev 15.3; Rev 16.7; Rev 19.6; Rev 21.22). Attributes of God included in this song indicate that he is:

- *Active*. He performs deeds in the world. Therefore, he is engaged with his creation, through his acts of providence. This means that God is not an impersonal ‘force’ or the unengaged watcher of the deists.
- *All powerful*. His deeds are amazing (or marvelous) because he is *the* almighty one. There cannot be two, or more, who are almighty. To be almighty means that he is omnipotent, with complete power.
- *Just*. One of the many ways God reveals his incomparable majesty is by judging mankind justly. No one whom he condemns to hell, does not deserve everlasting torment. And no one whom he declares righteous is granted this status on his own merits, but on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Christ being applied to him. God’s righteous judgements vindicate his people while condemning their

enemies.

- *Truthful*. God is truth (Heb 6.18; Jn 16.13; Jn 18.36; 1 Jn 5.6); in contrast to Satan, the antichrist, who is the deceiver of the world (Rev 12.9; Rev 20.10) and the father of lies (Gen 3.4; Jn 8.44).
- *Sovereign*. God is the King of the nations and rules through his appointed Son (Ps 2.6), the King of kings and ruler of the world (Rev 1.5; Rev 11.15; Rev 17.14; Rev 19.16). Thus, Christ has the ultimate rule (as lawgiver and providential governor), even over those who resist his rule. All men will eventually acknowledge his kingship (Phil 2.9-11), even from the pit of hell.
- *Saviour*. It is the author of Revelation who records probably the most well-known verse of the Bible—John 3.16. God loves all nations of the world (all without distinction, not all without exception), and saves some out of every nation, tribe, people-group, and language of mankind (Rev 7.9). Thus, the heavenly choir acknowledges the fulfilment of God's promises (Gen 18.18; Ps 86.9; Is 2.2-4; Zech 8.22; Mal 1.11), that began to accelerate on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2.9-11), as it sees the nations streaming into the Kingdom to worship their Creator.
- *Holy*. God is innately holy (Is 6.3). Holiness is an essential attribute of his character (i.e., an attribute of what defines him as God), not just the absence of sinful actions on his part. Contrary to the claims of the neo-atheists of our day, God cannot do evil because he is not evil, but is love.
- *Righteous*. Every action of God is righteous and pure; including the act of damning the wicked for their refusal to repent of their rebellion.
- *Reverenced*. The worshippers ask a rhetorical question, “who will not fear ...?”, with the expectation that all mankind will reverence the only true God because of his glorious attributes.
- *Worshipped*. Elsewhere, the assembled multitude declares that the triune God, and specifically the Son, is worthy of worship (Rev 4.11; Rev 5.12). Thus, the nations will fall down in worship before him, rather than worshipping the beast and his image (Rev 13.12, 15; Rev 14.9, 11; Rev 16.2; Rev 19.20; Rev 20.4).
- *Revealed*. The choir concludes their song by declaring that God's actions have been revealed. God would be incomprehensible to us if it were not for his revelation of his attributes, character, and works. As Paul teaches (Rom 1.20), we have all been endowed with innate knowledge of God. However, many things cannot be known innately and had to be revealed to us. Two examples are how God created the universe (Gen 1-2) and how he has worked out salvation through Jesus Christ (1 Tim 3.16).

This song is referred to as being the “song of Moses, the servant of God”. However, there are no quotations of the words of Moses in this song. It is the Song of Moses, because of the Mosaic spirit of awe and faith that it exudes. It is also referred to as the “song of the Lamb”. Almost every word in this song can be traced to a precedent in one of the Psalms (Ps 86.9-10; Ps 111.2-4; Ps 98.2; Ps 139.14). The Psalms are the words of Jesus Christ (Col 3.16; 2 Tim 3.16) and they speak of him (Lk 24.44). Thus, if the words of the Psalms are considered sufficient and adequate for the praise offered in song to God by the heavenly choir, they should form the foundation of our praise-song. We can glorify God by recounting his attributes and works; and what better instrument for doing this is available to us than the God-breathed words of the Church's song book—the book of Psalms?

Seven Angels Carrying the Bowls of the Last Plagues

(Rev 15.5-8)

John informs us that he had seen seven angels with the last plagues (Rev 15.1), and then he makes a digression (Rev 15.2-4) to reflect on the status of the saints in glory, in order to comfort and encourage Christians in their war against Satan and his hordes. He now resumes the consideration of the angels with the plagues. In this section (Rev 15.5-8), he describes the scene just prior to when the plagues are poured out. In chapter 16, he describes each of the plagues.

The judgement of the last plagues begins in heaven, and specifically proceeds from the “sanctuary of the

tent of witness”. In these verses the Greek word that is used to refer to a place where a god is worshipped, is translated as ‘sanctuary’. However, in all other places in Revelation, when it is used to refer to this location in heaven, the ESV translates the word as ‘temple’ (Rev 7.15; Rev 11.1-2, 19; Rev 14.15, 17; Rev 16.1, 17). Therefore, it may be more consistent to use a translation such as, “the temple, that is, the tent of witness”. John is drawing on an OT type (Ex 38.21; Num 1.50; Num 10.11) that reflects the heavenly antitype (Heb 8.5). The ark of the covenant was placed inside the Mosaic tent (tabernacle); and inside of the ark the ‘witness’ or ‘testimony’ (Ex 25.16, 21) had been placed—that is, the two copies of the Ten Commandments written on stone by the finger of God (Ex 16.34; Ex 25.21; Ex 31.18; Ex 32.15). Therefore, the Law of God is his testimony to his holy requirements and the basis against which all mankind is judged (Rev 11.19). Thus, the judgements of the seven plagues are sent forth against those who reject his testimony—his Law and his Son who fulfilled all the righteous demands of the Law (contrast, Rev 12.17).

The messengers sent to carry the plagues against those who reject God’s Law are seven angels. They receive the bowls filled with their assigned plagues from one of the four living creatures (Rev 4.6), another class of angel (likely cherubim) who represent the presence of God in every direction on earth—north, east, south, and west. John observed that the seven angels were clothed in garments similar to those worn by the priests (Ex 28.8) who ministered in the tabernacle. This does not mean that the angels had *priestly* roles, but rather that they were clothed with the holiness required to enter the sanctuary.

Each of the seven angels is assigned to carry and dispense a separate one of the seven plagues. The seven plagues are contained in golden bowls, which is likely a symbol for the purity of the eternal God’s righteous wrath against the rampant sin of idolatry (Rev 14.11) practiced among mankind. As we have observed previously, the use of ‘seven’ in Revelation figuratively represents completeness. Thus, there are three waves of seven (Lev 26.18) progressively more severe temporal judgement against mankind’s wickedness—the previous two waves were associated with the opening of the seals (Rev 5.1-8.5) and with the blowing of the trumpets (Rev 8.6-11.19). Jesus provides John with these three sets of warnings of the temporal judgements to reinforce the seriousness of disobedience to God’s revealed will, to indicate the certainty of judgement, and to meet the requirement that judgement and punishment should occur only when there are two or three witnesses (Dt 17.6; Dt 19.15). Taken as a whole, the three waves of temporal judgement provide a dire warning for what is to come on the last day, the day of judgement.

John refers to God as the one “who lives forever and ever”. This appellation for God has appeared previously in the book (Rev 4.9-10; Rev 10.6) and refers to God’s uniqueness in his aseity (self existence), eternity, and as the source of life as the Creator. As the only God, he sends forth temporal judgement from his sanctuary in heaven, which John observed “was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power”. This imagery is an allusion to the cloud that manifested the presence of God and his glory during the exodus (Ex 16.10) and during the delivery of his Law on Sinai (Ex 24.16). Thus, the smoke in heaven indicates that God is present (Mt 17.5) and active in his judgements (Ps 18.8). We use the expression, ‘a smoke screen’ to indicate that something is veiled from sight. Thus, the presence of the smoke not only reveals the presence of God, but it also conceals his presence. The glorious perfection of his holiness must be veiled from our eyes because the outpouring of his wrath would be too bright for us to bear (Ex 33.20). The covenant community was forbidden to approach the mountain when God was delivering his Law (Ex 19.12-13). Likewise, as God is delivering temporal judgements against those who break his law, he shrouds himself in clouds (Ps 18.11) and no one is permitted to enter his sanctuary. In addition, the limitation on the access to the sanctuary indicates that once judgement has been initiated, there is no one who can approach God to request that it be abated or ameliorated. This imagery is intended to convey the sacredness of God’s Law and its accompanying penalties, and God’s sovereignty in carrying out his judgements on mankind.

These verses (Rev 15.5-8) serve as a solemn introduction to the fearful picture of the last wave (Rev 15.1) of pending temporal judgements. They are not the ‘last’ in a chronological sequence, but in terms of their

severity. The three waves of judgement occur repeatedly in the lives of individuals and nations until Christ returns. John will now describe the contents of this wave of judgements (chapter 16), before the scene changes to the total destruction of the world's systems (chapters 17-19), the final judgement (chapter 20), and the unveiling of the new heaven and earth (chapters 21-22).

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath

(Rev 16.1)

John again hears a 'loud voice'. Such a voice is heard more than twenty times in the visions of Revelation. In this vision of the seven bowls, the loud voice is heard commanding the angels to pour out the plagues. It is heard again as the seventh plague is poured out, as a conclusion to the plagues (Rev 16.17). The directive to administer the seven plagues, is:

- *Loud.* This indicates that the voice is public and audible to every man, woman, and child on the earth.
- *Directly from God.* This 'loud voice' is clearly the voice of God himself, since the voice came from the temple, into which every creature was prohibited from entering until the judgement of the last plagues was poured out (Rev 15.8³). This indicates that God is the righteous judge of all mankind (Gen 18.25).
- *From the temple.* This indicates that judgement comes from the throne room of God (Is 66.6), in which only righteousness, holiness, and justice can dwell.
- *A command.* God is the one who sends temporal punishments, which may come in the form of physical calamities and disasters (Amos 3.6).
- *Predestined.* The angels had been given the bowls containing the plagues (Rev 15.6-7), but they could not pour them out until the positive directive came from the throne room. This indicates that God has a perfect time for every action in his sovereign governance of the world.
- *Mediated.* God administers temporal judgement and punishment through intermediate agents. In this case, the responsibility is given to angels (Rev 15.6), who are to dispense the plagues. In other cases, it is given to human agents (Rom 13.4). In contrast, the administration of the final judgement is given into the hands of the Son (Acts 10.38-42; Acts 17.31).
- *Obedied.* As soon as the command 'Go' is given, the angels begin to pour out the plagues (Rev 16.2). We find in Scripture that often the best of men (e.g., Moses, Ex 3.11) are reluctant to obey God's commands. But the Son (Ps 40.8; Mk 14.36) and the holy angels do not object to God the Father's commands, and they do not delay in carrying out his decrees.
- *Discriminatory.* This chapter does not mention those who have been sealed by the Lamb. This is not, as some suggest, because they have already been harvested from the earth in a rapture. Rather, it is because, these plagues target the ungodly, and God's people are generally spared from them—as God made an explicit difference between the Egyptians and the Jews at the time of the exodus with some of the plagues (e.g., darkness, Ex 10.23; and firstborn, Ex 12.12-13). However, as there was collateral damage on God's covenant people from most of the plagues in Egypt, so Christians also often suffer from the plagues that God sends on wicked nations. However, Christians understand that God is working these events for their good, but pagans become hardened (Rev 16.9, 11, 21).
- *In response to sin.* God is neither capricious nor vindictive. However, his word is clear—"The soul who sins shall die." (Ezk 18.20) God's holiness and justice cannot overlook sin; he must deal with it. When he does, we come to realize how much he hates sin. Here, the plagues are displayed as an outpouring of his wrath.
- *Limited.* There are seven plagues, not hundreds or thousands. All temporal judgement comes to an end (Rev 16.17). But when it does, it will be followed by the final judgement.

There have been numerous interpretations of these seven plagues—figurative and literal. Some have applied them figuratively to a series of events leading to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD—understanding

³ The Greek word that is translated as 'temple' in Rev 16.1, is translated as 'sanctuary' in Rev 15.8.

‘Babylon’ (Rev 16.19) to be Jerusalem. Others have also interpreted them figuratively but applied them to various historic periods. For example, one commentator aligned the seven plagues with events during the 16th century Reformation, from Luther until the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre (1517-1572). Another suggested that the French Revolution was prefigured by the sixth trumpet. Since about the mid-19th century a common approach has been to understand the plagues as referring to actual physical events that will occur sometime in our future (for example, 40kg hailstones will fall from the sky). Although we accept as truth that God miraculously inflicted physical plagues on Egypt at the time of the exodus, and he could do the same on anti-Christian nations today, Peter’s application of the prophecy of Joel (Joel 2.30) on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2.19-20) appears to provide guidance on how we are to understand the imagery of these plagues. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Peter tells us that the prophesied events did not refer to physical phenomena, but to a spiritual revolution wrought by the Holy Spirit. Thus, the judgements of these plagues are likely speaking in metaphorical terms about spiritual, psychological, sociological, political, and economic, as well as physical, consequences.

The seven plagues do not occur chronologically after the seven trumpet blasts end. The temporal punishments associated with the seven seals, trumpets, and bowls occur repeatedly throughout history. However, there is clearly an intensified progression; for example, some of the trumpets affected a third of the environment, whereas these plagues are more comprehensive. This indicates that those who do not heed the warnings of the seals, and continue to ignore the blasts of the trumpets, will be inflicted with ‘great’ plagues 16.9, 14, 18, 21).

The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Affected Entities

(Rev 16.2-4, 8, 10, 12, 17)

The seven bowls carrying the seven plagues of the final (Rev 16.17) display of God’s temporal wrath are poured out by the angels on the following entities within the created order:

- *Earth.* The plague of painful sores is inflicted upon all classes of people who live on the earth, in every land and nation. With the judgement associated with the third trumpet (Rev 8.7), a third of the earth was burned up; but with this plague the intensity increases, with all the earth included.
- *Sea.* The sea is referred to in Revelation as a symbol for the nations at war with God and for their economic activities enabled through transport on ships. Thus, the plague poured out on the sea is designed to obliterate mankind’s aspirations to provide material goods without consideration for God’s providences and blessings.
- *Rivers and springs.* The plague polluting the rivers and springs of the world with blood is metaphorical. However, to apply the symbol to a specific false religion or false doctrine, as many in the past have done, is too subjective. Rather, as with the third trumpet (Rev 8.10-11), this plague is directed against the earth’s productivity and ability to sustain life through the spoiling of the waters. Again, we note the intensification—the trumpet blast was partial, the plague is comprehensive.
- *Sun.* Like water from rivers and springs, the light of the sun is essential for producing food. Thus, the sun’s beneficial light and heat are turned into antagonistic forces to destroy mankind’s ability to subsist.
- *Throne of the beast.* Satan’s emissary, the beast, was granted authority to rule over the wicked (Rev 13.2). Thus, the entity subjected to the fifth plague should be understood in a general sense to include all human governments that are antagonistic to Christ’s reign—metaphorically Babylon (Rev 16.19)—rather than to a specific geographic location or city such as Rome or Pergamum (Rev 2.13), which were manifestations of Satan’s government on earth. Satan’s throne was not directly threatened with an attack from one of the judgements of the seals or trumpets but is now directly afflicted with the final outpouring of God’s wrath.
- *Euphrates River.* With the third plague all the rivers and springs were polluted with blood. With the sixth plague the Euphrates River was dried up. The Euphrates was considered to be the boundary between the land of Palestine and God’s covenant people, and the northern and eastern pagan tribes

and their barbarous kings. Again, this is a metaphor (Is 11.15). It does not refer to the dams that have been built across the actual river that flows between Turkey and Syria and Iraq, to divert water to irrigation channels. Nor is this a code-name for the Tiber River in Rome.

- *Air*. The seventh plague darkens the air, which also occurred with the fifth trumpet blast (Rev 9.2). This is likely an allusion to the ninth plague on Egypt (Ex 10.21), and judgement on a temporary part of Satan's realm (Eph 2.2).

These seven plagues include every dimension of the physical infrastructure that supports mankind's spatial-temporal existence—the land (earth), sea, air (the sky or atmospheric heaven), fresh water, and sunlight. Thus, judgement has come upon mankind from the God who created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1.1), or who made “heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water”, and who alone is to be worshiped (Rev 14.7). In addition, Satan's realm, as appearing on earth as the throne of the beast, and the east from beyond the Euphrates, figuratively represent all false religions. This implies that man's spiritual nature as manifested in this spatial-temporal realm is also afflicted by some of the seven plagues. Thus, the seven plagues collectively represent judgement on everything that sustains mankind—body and spirit—in its rebellious state before the living God.

While the plagues are universal, affecting the entire earth and the inhabitants of every nation, we observe that they are specifically directed toward a subset from within mankind. This subset is defined as those “who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image” (Rev 16.2). Thus, a distinction is established between the only two ultimately important classes of mankind:

- *Unbelievers*. Those who worship the beast and its image (Rev 13.14; Rev 14.9, 11; Rev 19.20) and whose entire existence is predicated on the belief that all meaning and purpose in life is derived from this material realm and what they can grab from it. Some people in this class may claim that they are not religious and do not worship anything. However, God disagrees with their self-assessment. Anyone who places *anything* before him (Ex 20.3) is an idolater, bears the mark of the beast, and is singled out for temporal judgement by the seven plagues.
- *Believers*. Those who have rejected the worship of the beast and its image and are victorious conquerors (Rev 13.15; Rev 15.2; Rev 20.4). Christians may experience collateral damage from the judgements of the seven plagues. But they understand, by faith, that the afflictions that they encounter in this life are light and momentary (2 Cor 4.17) and part of God's amazing plan to work out *all* things for his glory and for the good of his people (Rom 8.28).

Thus, the purpose of these seven plagues is to reveal the folly of idolatry and of following Satan's lies—whether it is an overtly evil doctrine such as that taught by Hinduism, an explicitly materialistic belief such as biological evolution from microbes to man disseminated by university professors, or a heresy disguised by the *happiologist* purveyors of the prosperity gospel.

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath – The Plagues

(Rev 16.2-4, 8-9, 10, 12, 16, 17-21)

Some interpreters believe that the plagues of temporal judgement inflicted on the unrepentant, as identified in this chapter, will be manifested at a future date as actual physical instantiations; much like the people of Egypt were inflicted with the ten plagues before the exodus of the tribes of Israel from their Egyptian slavery. For example, they understand the sores to be a literal infection that will be visited upon all of mankind (except for any remaining believers), possibly brought about by a sexually transmitted disease or an experimental virus that escapes from a secret research facility. Or the rivers turning to blood is a prophecy about severe pollution that will fill the fresh water sources of the earth with a red-algae bloom. Others believe that many of these plagues have been fulfilled in the past and are references to historical events. For example, they suggest that the turning of the sea to blood was fulfilled figuratively by a judgement on countries with an allegiance to the papacy, such as the destruction of the Spanish Armada

(1588) or a series of naval battles (1793-1815) in which hundreds of military and merchant ships of Spain, France, and Portugal were destroyed.

We believe that the seven plagues parallel the judgements associated with the seven seals and the seven trumpets, and that all occur repeatedly throughout the era between Christ's incarnation and his return at the end of time. Therefore, we should not attempt to identify a specific historical event or supposed future event which is a single fulfilment of these plagues. In addition, we believe that these plagues are to be understood as figurative images of essentially spiritual judgements affecting all classes of the unregenerate, accompanied by physical consequences.

It is a challenge to understand the meaning of these plagues. Nevertheless, we will review the plagues and attempt to provide relevant applications for us living in the 21st century. The seven plagues are:

- *Painful sores.* This is reminiscent of the sixth plague on Egypt (Ex 9.8-12). It likely refers to individual spiritual and psychological torments such as excessive fear or worry, guilt, or depression. It also probably includes any form of illness, disease, or suffering (e.g., alcohol or drug addiction or an STD) that can be *directly* attributed to a licentious lifestyle.
- *Blood in the sea.* This plague is an allusion to the first Egyptian plague (Ex 7.14-25) and has parallels with the second trumpet blast (Rev 8.8-9). With the trumpet blast, a third of the sea became blood and a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. With this plague, the entire sea becomes like blood and every living creature in the sea dies. This plague appears to be a form of judgement that God uses to disrupt world-wide commercial and economic systems (e.g., market 'meltdowns'), and anticipates the dissolution of Babylon as the source of prosperous maritime commerce (Rev 18.11-13).
- *Blood in the fresh water.* This corresponds with the third trumpet blast (Rev 8.10-11), which poisoned the fresh waters, which are essential for drinking and food production; but the plague is more intense. God causes a 'bloodbath' in the world's ability to produce food, which exacerbates the curse on the ground and on man's labours (Gen 3.17-19) and causes severe deprivation and bitter suffering.
- *Scorching.* In this plague it appears that the heat of the sun is intensified so that it is no longer salubrious. Water and sunlight are necessary for the production of food. So, this plague is an extension of the previous one and indicates that God sends pestilence and famine; an interruption of the covenant blessings for faithfulness (Gen 8.21-22; Ps 67.6). However, the world has the capacity to produce more food than is required to feed everyone. So, starvation resulting from famine is almost always caused by human greed and political machinations.
- *Darkness on the beast's throne.* This beast sits on a throne and is representative of human governments that reject the lordship of Jesus. The darkening of its kingdom, an allusion to the ninth plague on Egypt (Ex 10.21-23), is symbolic of governments that endorse practices that are contrary to the Law of God and cause people to figuratively gnaw their tongues in anguish because of the confusion and chaos that they cause for their citizens, particularly through their support of false religions and the enactment of laws that are supposed to help the disadvantaged but instead cause inequity and hardship. This plague is designed to remind the ungodly that idolatry is vain—specifically that which is state-sponsored.
- *Kings from the east assemble at Armageddon.* Political authorities form an alliance to make war against Messiah's kingdom. However, we can identify a principle of disruption that God introduces into the world—an ongoing disunity and fragmentation in the political arena. Satan's desire for a one-world government under his rule will never be realized.
- *Lightning, hail, and an earthquake.* The *City of Man*—all the great Babylons and the cities of their hinterlands—are doomed. Every city that stands in autonomous and arrogant defiance against God and seeks the destruction of the *City of God* through oppression of Christianity and the Church, is the object of this plague. The metaphorical natural phenomena are signs of judgement and temporal punishment of the perpetrators of wickedness (Ex 9.23-25; Josh 10.11; Ezk 38.22). Their punishment includes psychological turmoil, political chaos, economic disruption, lawlessness, and sociological confusion.

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath – Praising God for His Justice

(Rev 16.5-7)

The Bible identifies a number of roles for angels. Most of them appear to be represented in Revelation (see, [*The Angels' Roles in Revelation*](#)). In Revelation 16.5 we see two of these roles associated with the angel who is assigned responsibility for pouring out the third plague on the fresh water sources of the earth (Rev 16.4): 1) acting as God's agent for the issuance of temporal judgement, and 2) worshiping God through praise. In this interlude between the third and fourth plagues, the angel's praise reflects on the justice of the plague he has just dispensed, and likely on the preceding two plagues poured out by his peers. Another voice, emanating from the altar (Rev 9.13) in the heavenly throne room, responds with an emphatic endorsement of the angel's praise—the 'yes' in Revelation 16.7 can be translated as 'indeed' or 'certainly'. This second voice may be that of another angel. However, it is more likely that it is the voice of Jesus himself, since the altar figuratively represents his body upon which his sacrifice was offered to the Father.

A cry that is often heard is, "It isn't fair!" It is voiced by children when their siblings get a perceived larger share of a birthday cake, or they believe that their parents are reneging on a promise. It is also voiced by many in our society who have an entitlement mentality. And it is voiced by people who are suffering physically or from financial hardships and feel that they are being abused by God. Even many Christians, when they think that they are being illtreated by God, make the same declaration. In contrast, the angel of the third plague and the voice from the altar declare the opposite, "It is fair!" They are referring to the plagues that are being poured out as fair, because God's judgements are:

- *Just*. Justice is a moral attribute that we desire to see administered in a civil society. If the rich or powerful can flout the law and avoid penalties or the lawbreaking of the indigent is excused because of their circumstances, most people believe that justice has not been served. This is not the case with God. He is not a respecter of persons but is absolutely fair in the execution of his judgements against sin.
- *Holy*. God is entirely without sin and has an innate hatred against every breach of his holy law. Every judgement and punishment of sin is a direct reflection of his holy character and a required response to uphold his personal dignity and the goodness of his law. In this declaration of praise, the angel uses a tripartite title that is similar to one used previously (Rev 1.4, 8; Rev 4.8), but he substitutes "O Holy One" for the phrase "who is to come". Some conclude that this substitution is made because the end has arrived. However, that is an incorrect interpretation, because at this point there are more temporal plagues to be unleashed, Christ has yet to return, and the final judgement, at the end of time, has not yet occurred. Rather this substitution is made to emphasize the fact God was holy in his previous judgements (e.g., with the flood, at Sodom and Gomorrah, or in Egypt at the time of the exodus) and continues to be holy in his execution of the temporal plagues.
- *True*. When Jesus was being examined by Pilate, he indicated that he had come into the world to bear witness to the truth, and Pilate asked in response, "What is Truth?" (Jn 18.37-38). Ironically, 'truth' was in front of Pilate's face, in the person and character of the God-man. Truthfulness is a key aspect of judging fairly because it exposes falsehood and adheres to what accords with God's objective standards (Rev 19.2).

God is the Almighty, and his sovereign acts of judgement are an expression of his infinite, eternal, all-powerful, and omniscient character. Therefore, no one can legitimately claim that God is capricious. He is declared to be just because he has judged in a holy and true manner; and his judgements are just because they are his and cannot be other than holy and true judgements. He is just because he is holy and true; he is holy because he is just and true; and he is true because he is just and holy. These three attributes are part of a unified whole in God and cannot be separated.

The angel identifies the reason that the wicked are judged. They have shed the blood—physically using

genocide and figuratively with various other forms of persecution—of the saints and prophets. The saints and prophets are all classes of believers, throughout history, beginning with righteous Abel (Mt 23.35). Therefore, the persecutors in turn are made to drink blood (Is 49.26), which indicates that they are repaid in kind for their brutality toward Christians. One of the means God may use to accomplish this is by causing the persecutors of Christians to fight among themselves—for example, Islamic factions killing one another. The idea that punishment must be proportionate to a crime is Biblical. It was first introduced explicitly during the delivery of the Law to Moses (Ex 21.24), reiterated elsewhere in the OT (Hos 8.7), endorsed and extended by Jesus (Mt 5.38-39; Mt 7.2), and confirmed by the apostles (Gal 6.7; Heb 2.2). The punishment of unrepentant rebels by temporal plagues, and the everlasting torment that they typify, is not unjust but is “what they deserve!”

While the account of the plagues is a solemn warning against ongoing sin, it is also a helpful reminder to Christians facing persecution that God takes personal notice of their sufferings at the hands of persecutors; will set all things right through his just, holy and true judgements; will punish the wicked, if not immediately, certainly on the last day; will vindicate the cause of his people; and will declare his sons and daughters to be victors with Christ.

The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Kings from the East (Rev 16.12)

In the past, the primary enemies of the Jews came from the ‘east’, beyond the Euphrates River—during the kingdom period it was the Assyrians (to the northeast) and later the Babylonians (to the east). Also, a major enemy of the Roman Empire at the time John wrote was the Parthian kingdom (the remnants of the Persian Empire) located to the east; although, the northern Goths were also significant enemies. Thus, John’s vision uses a feared contemporary circumstance for his readers—armies from the east—to illustrate the assembly of wicked forces for battle (Rev 16.14).

The drying up of the Euphrates is not intended to inflict damage on the river *per se*, but is symbolic for opening the way for the kings of the east and their armies to move into the ‘west’ without facing any natural obstruction. It has been suggested that this could be an allusion to the drying up of the Jordan River (Josh 3.14-17) as the Jews travelled from Egypt to Palestine at the time of the exodus, and they were able to enter the land of Palestine from the east to defeat the Canaanite cities. However, the miracle at the Jordan was for the benefit of God’s covenant people; but the sixth plague symbolically refers to *pagan* armies pouring out God’s wrath upon his enemies. If there is an allusion to an historical event in the vision, it is probably better to understand it as the diversion of the Euphrates by Cyrus’s army so that they were able to enter the city of Babylon and defeat it without any hindrances, which may have been a temporal fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy (Is 44.26-28). As Babylon is universalized in Revelation, so references to the Euphrates (Rev 9.14; Rev 16.12) should also be understood as universal and not as speaking of a literal geographical feature in the Middle East. In the OT, the drying up of the Red Sea (Ex 14.21-22) and the Jordan River, and prophecies of waters being dried up (Is 11.15-16; Is 44.27; Is 50.2; Is 51.10; Jer 50.38; Jer 51.36; Zech 10.11) are identified as the work of God as he directs his wrath against the Jews’ enemies. Thus, we should understand the drying up of the waters of the Euphrates River in this vision as fulfilling God’s direct command (Rev 16.1) to pour out temporal judgement upon his enemies in every age.

The ‘kings from the east’ represent God’s judgement upon the worshippers of the beast and his image. There has been considerable speculation about who these kings are. One writer observed that he had identified over fifty different proposals for their identity in a hundred commentaries on Revelation that he had consulted. Suggestions that have been offered include: 1) an amalgamated force of Parthian petty kings targeting historic Rome; 2) a ‘resurrected’ Nero who was expected to return with an allied army from the east; 3) one of the Islamic Turks’ attacks on Constantinople (674-678, 717-718, or 1453 AD) or their siege of Vienna (1529 AD); 4) an alliance of earthly kings against the LORD’s anointed and his Church (Ps 2.2);

5) the ascendancy of Luther and Protestantism in Germany against the papacy and its aligned kingdoms to the west (e.g., France and Spain); or 6) an army from the Orient engaging in a future, final, world war, just prior to the second coming of Christ.

Since there are so many divergent ideas about the identity of the kings, and most (all) of the proposed alignments with historical events are now dismissed by modern commentators, it seems unwise to associate the assembly of the kings from the east with any specific event or nation. This caution should also apply to suggestions that place the assembly of these kings at a particular future time (e.g., prior to the advent of a millennial age) or location. Thus, this vision does not refer to Russian or Chinese armies converging on Western Europe. Also, it may be tempting to think that John provides a prophecy about the rise of Islamic terrorism against the West, this is not what John speaks about—particularly since Islam did not arrive until about 500 years after John wrote Revelation and such a prophetic outlook would have had no relevance for the seven churches in Asia Minor to whom the epistle is addressed.

It appears that ‘the kings from the east’ is synonymous with ‘the kings of the whole world’, also mentioned in this account of the sixth plague (Rev 16.14). Thus, we understand the ‘kings from the east’ to be a representation of all human political authorities that constantly form alliances to make war against the Messiah (Ps 2.2). This ongoing battle will be described later in Revelation (Rev 19.11-21). However, we need to notice that the plague is poured out on all pagan nations that attempt to overthrow God’s Law and Christ’s kingdom—it is not directed against God’s covenant people. Thus, we identify a principle of disruption that God introduces into the world with the sixth plague—a constant, ongoing disunity in the political arena. Since the days of Nimrod, who established the first post-flood empire, centered in Babel (Babylon), to challenge the authority of God’s Messiah to rule as King (Rev 17.14; Rev 19.16), men have attempted to assemble ‘kings’ into world-dominating empires. After the chaos introduced by the division of languages at Babel, the next attempt at assembling a worldwide government was by Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylon empire. Thus, in Revelation, Babylon (Rev 14.8; Rev 16.19) becomes the code name for human empire aspirations and represents a world dominating system of evil. However, this plague introduces discord so that Satan’s desire for an *orbis unum* (one world) government under his rule will never be realized. The plague includes the kings of the earth turning against one another. As evidence, history and current events show that the norm since Christ’s day has been constant fragmentation through civil war and separatist movements, so that today there are almost 200 independent nations.

The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Three Unclean Spirit-Frogs (Rev 16.13-14)

Verse 13 contains the only reference to frogs in the NT. Other than references in the second exodus plague in Exodus (Ex 8.1-14) and the Psalms (Ps 78.45; Ps 105.30) frogs are not mentioned in the Bible. Thus, the original readers of Revelation were likely to connect the plague of John’s vision with the plague on Egypt. Frogs were designated as unclean by the ceremonial law and are generally considered by most people to be slimy, loathsome creatures—no one wants to kiss a frog! Also, the association of frogs with the Egyptian fertility goddess, Heqet, who was portrayed as a frog, made frogs even more detestable to those who believed in the one true God. Thus, using frogs as a visual symbol for unclean, demonic spirits is an appropriate image.

Three frogs are seen proceeding from the mouths of the dragon (Satan) and his two beasts—here, the second of Satan’s beasts (Rev 13.11) is identified as the false prophet (Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10). These three entities are visual representations of the unholy, hellish trinity that Satan has established to challenge the holy, heavenly Trinity. Satan sets himself up as the usurper of God the Father and his two beasts of human governments that oppose God’s Anointed (Ps 2.2) as a substitute for the reign of Christ, and false religions (the false prophet) that purvey pagan rituals to appease the gods, as an alternative to true worship and the converting work of the Holy Spirit.

The three unclean, demonic spirits spew out of the mouths of the dragon and his beasts. Satan charges them to perform signs before the kings of the whole world. Their signs are not real miracles since Satan and his demons do not have the power to perform miracles. Rather, their signs are intended to deceive those who dwell on earth (Rev 13.14). This indicates that their signs are not genuine, but tricks and frauds. They are pretend miracles—what Paul refers to as “false signs and wonders” (2 Thess 2.9)—which Satan concocts to induce superstitious unbelievers into thinking that they are seeing signs of true divinity wrought among them. These ‘signs’ fall into two classes:

- *Deluded drivel.* The incantations and rituals of shamans and nature worshipping pagans who naively believe that they can influence the gods and work propitious outcomes.
- *Deliberate deceptions.* Tricks of charlatans (psychics, fortune tellers, practitioners of witchcraft, new age gurus, and faith healers) used to derive glory from men or line their pockets. They rationalize deception with claims that people enjoy the show or want to believe that God has helped them.

Satan does not care that these counterfeit miracles are based on delusions or deceptions, as long as they distract people from the true worship of God. His objective is to beguile men into worshipping him directly or through his beasts—worship of worldly wisdom and abilities, as extolled and fostered by the paternalistic state, or worship of the idols of false religions.

These unclean spirits not only perform deceptive signs, but they also teach deceptive falsehoods (1 Tim 4.1). This is implied by their coming out of the mouths of the dragon and his beasts and by the incessant and meaningless croaking of frogs. Satan is a liar from the beginning (Gen 3.4) and the father of lies (Jn 8.44). He uses overt falsehoods and subtle insinuations (Rev 13.14; Rev 19.20; 2 Jn 7) to tempt mankind into every form of perversity and evil, and to blind them against truth (2 Cor 4.4). Through his beasts, he is the deceiver of the whole world (Rev 12.9). The dividing line between truth and error is often subtle—for example, the quest for equality can easily morph from the legitimate concept of equal opportunity and fair treatment before the law, into the concept of equal outcomes pursued by those who are obsessed with their supposed rights rather than their responsibilities. Satan uses this subtlety to confuse mankind. The corrective is simple—finding truth in *every* area of life must begin with a deep understanding of divine revelation. In contrast to Satan, Jesus is the truth (Jn 14.6), bears witness to truth (Jn 18.37), is full of truth (Jn 1.17; Eph 4.21), and speaks only truth (Jn 8.46; Titus 1.2; Heb 6.18; 1 Pt 2.22). His truth is found only in the Bible—God’s revelation for all of mankind—not in the ‘sacred’ writings of other religions by which people are beguiled and bound to Satan and hell.

Satan’s explicit purpose for sending the unclean spirit-frogs is to entice the kings of the whole world to assemble “for the battle of the great day of God the Almighty”. This is not, as many suggest, to orchestrate military maneuvers of physical armies from various nations from the east in modern-day Israel, in preparation for a final world war. The battle that Satan is engaged in, against God and his Church, is an ongoing spiritual battle (Eph 6.12), which became more desperate, from Satan’s perspective, following Christ’s victory over sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection. Satan knows that his time is short (Rev 12.12), the time for Christ to return is drawing near, and that his reign over the hearts and passions of wicked men in the temporal realm will be forever terminated. However, as we will see when we consider verse Revelation 16.15 in our next meditation, Satan does not know the day or the hour when Christ will return (Mt 24.36). Thus, his objective is constantly to assemble his earthly agents so that they can intensify their persecution of Christians and lead astray as many as possible from mankind. His goal is to prevent God from filling heaven with a vast multitude of saved humanity on the final day of judgement.

The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – Jesus’ Coming will be Sudden (Rev 16.15)

Jesus abruptly interjects into the flow of John’s vision of the sixth plague a message of promise and warning.

His purpose is primarily to teach and encourage the Church that is facing the assembled hosts of the kings of the whole world (Rev 16.14), who are stirred up by the unclean spirit-frogs (Rev 16.13). His words are similar to the exhortations that he already gave to the churches in Sardis (Rev 3.2) and Laodicea (Rev 3.17-18). There are a number of lessons that we can derive from this parenthetical interjection.

Jesus says that he is coming. His return (second coming) to this world is certain and has been confirmed by multiple witnesses:

- *Jesus, himself*, when he stated that he would come in glory with his angels to judge mankind (Mt 16.27) and assures the readers of Revelation that he is coming soon (Rev 3.11; Rev 22.7, 12, 20).
- *Angels*, who said that Jesus would come again in the same way as he went into heaven (Acts 1.11).
- *Paul*, who declares that the Lord will descend from heaven (1 Thess 4.16).
- *Peter*, who assures us that Lord's return is certain, despite what scoffers may say (2 Pt 3.4-10).

John ends this book with an appeal to the Lord to come (Rev 22.20), because a fundamental purpose of the book is to assure the Church that he is coming to establish the final form of his Kingdom and to vindicate his people before those who worship the image of the beast.

Jesus indicates that his return to earth is to be sudden and unexpected, like the coming of a thief in the middle of the night. This reiterates the essence of his teaching during his earthly ministry (Mt 24.37-44). Paul and Peter also state that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night (1 Thess 5.2; 2 Pt 3.10). This means that no rational creature (human, angelic, or demonic) knows when Jesus will return to this earth or can predict it. In fact, Jesus says that even he does not know when his return is scheduled—this information is known only to the Father (Mt 24.36). We cannot explain how Jesus, who is God, cannot know this information. Some attempt to explain the conundrum by suggesting that Jesus was speaking of his human nature which appears to have veiled some aspects of his divine nature during his earthly life. If mankind was privy to information about the precise moment of his return, society would either succumb to extreme wantonness, knowing that the final judgement was postponed, or be paralyzed with panic as the moment approached.

His return is certain in fact, but uncertain in time. Yet, people want to believe that events described in Revelation herald the approach of the end; and many have been led astray because of this belief. None of the visions given in Revelation are intended to provide any precise (or even general) information about when events will transpire. Those who attempt to pigeon-hole events recorded in this book into an historical or a future timeline and associate them with specific events, are confused. Anyone who attempts to calculate a date for the return of Jesus, is deluded and should stop 'reading tealeaves' and succumbing to superstitious notions (Acts 1.7).

Our Lord intends that the temporal conclusion of all things will be sudden and instantaneous. Rather than attempting to prognosticate the future, we should do what he warns us to do. In the immediate context of the sixth plague, his warning can be understood as being directed to those who have joined the alliance against God's Anointed. They are warned to repent of their rebellion quickly because they do not know if they will have another minute in this world, let alone a day or year. It is also directed to those among mankind who may have some understanding of the Gospel but have not repented.

However, this warning is directed most specifically to those who have made a profession of faith in Jesus. Jesus speaks to those who are *awake* and indicates that they are blessed if they stay awake. Clearly, he is speaking of spiritual, not physical, wakefulness—meaning that they have been converted by the Holy Spirit and made alive in Christ. Thus, this warning is similar to the charges he gave to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, encouraging them to remain faithful and persevere to the end. This is a message for all professing believers in Christ as they face daily challenges (temptations and persecutions) from Satan's agents in the world. This context provides additional information that helps us interpret the meaning of the

vision of the sixth plague. We concluded that the sixth plague describes the ongoing assembling of Satan's earthly forces to persecute Christians and lead astray as many as possible from mankind. The warning of this verse would make no sense if the sixth plague was referring to a one-time event that was to occur just prior to the return of Christ.

Jesus also states that his hearers are to keep their garments on and not go about naked. He is clearly not speaking about physical clothes that someone might shed at night. The garments that he refers to are the righteousness with which believers are clothed when they are converted—the white garments of the saints that are mentioned elsewhere (Rev 6.11; Rev 7.9, 13, 14). This is the only possible preparation for access to heaven (Mt 22.11-14)—which once given cannot be stripped from our backs. Thus, Jesus is encouraging perseverance and faithfulness in the Christian life, to the end.

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath – Assembling at Armageddon (Rev 16.16)

After recording the parenthetical words of Jesus (Rev 16.15), about his pending return—which is to be sudden and unexpected—John returns to the account of the sixth plague. He indicates that the kings of the whole world (Rev 16.14) were assembled—by the three demonic frog-spirits; the dragon, beast, and false prophet (Rev 16.13)—in a place called Armageddon. 'Armageddon' is one of the terms from Revelation that is widely known in popular culture; like the 'four horsemen' and the 'mark of the beast'. It has been used in the titles of dystopian and disaster movies, and is used to refer to a nuclear holocaust, as in the title from a 2017 book, "Sleepwalking to Armageddon: The Threat of Nuclear Annihilation", that claims that Donald Trump was the source of a then current nuclear danger. The word 'armageddon' appears only here in Revelation. It does not appear in the OT, elsewhere in the NT, or in writings outside the Bible from the same era as the OT or NT. Thus, the meaning of the word is difficult to determine—other than that it refers to a place.

Many commentators, regardless of how they interpret the visions which John records in Revelation, appear to assume that the place that is being referred to can be identified on a map of the Middle East. John indicates that the place is called 'Armageddon' in Hebrew. However, no such place can be identified in the OT (or in other Jewish or Greek writings) by that name. Therefore, most interpreters of this verse, dissect the word 'armageddon' into two parts: 'har' and 'mageddon', and state that the Hebrew prefix 'har' means mountain and that 'mageddon' refers to a town in ancient Israel called Megiddo, which was about 100km north-west of Jerusalem. It was abandoned in 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar's army destroyed Jerusalem and took captive many of the people of Judah. They claim that Megiddo is an important place because a decisive OT battle between Deborah and Sisera (Judges 5.19) was fought in the vicinity of the town. Also, they claim that it is an important place because Josiah (2 Ki 23.29-20) and Ahaziah (2 Ki 9.27) died there from battle wounds. However, this appears to be a form of eisegesis—imposing an interpretation onto a text—since there is no clear correlation between what John sees in his vision and the battles of the OT. In addition, Megiddo isn't a mountain, and not even a hill. The mound on which the town is located rises at most 20m above the plain. Thus, some interpreters state, with no evidence, that John is actually referring to Mount Carmel, the nearest hill—which is 35kms from Megiddo—where a decisive contest took place between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Again, this appears to be a form of eisegesis.

Those who claim that John's visions are to be understood literally, conclude that two vast antichristian armies will assemble on the plain of Megiddo, centered around the ancient city's ruins, to engage in a single, great, and final battle—that may expand into a world war. After the battle, Jesus will supposedly return and establish an earthly kingdom, centred in Jerusalem, from which the saints will rule with him for 1,000 years. However, Armageddon isn't a real place with geographic coordinates. It is a symbolic place—like the Mount Zion (Rev 14.1), Babylon (Rev 14.8), Sodom (Rev 11.8), Egypt (Rev 11.8), and Euphrates (Rev

9.14), referred to in Revelation. Therefore, it may be best to understand the word ‘armageddon’, as some have suggested, as the ‘mountain of decision/sentence’ or the ‘mountain of troops’.

The kings of the earth assemble for a battle at Armageddon (Rev 16.14, 16). However, this battle is not a physical battle in a geographic locale, since John is reporting about a great spiritual battle that has been raging since Satan beguiled Eve in the garden. The battle is spiritual (Eph 6.12), and the conflict between good and evil continues to rage in “the battle *of the* great day of God the Almighty” (Rev 16.14). Although, Satan is likely now intensifying his persecution of Christians and his attempts to lead astray many from mankind, since he knows that his time is short (Rev 12.12), the battle of Armageddon is not a single battle that will occur only once.

Armageddon is a symbol for every battle in which the leaders of nations, under Satan’s thrall and slave mastery, reject God’s Law (e.g., endorse commercial activities on the Lord’s Day), enact laws that are subversive to justice (e.g., permitting Muslims to practice *sharia*) and destructive to human life (e.g., permitting abortion and euthanasia), suppress true worship (e.g., outlawing prayer in the name of Jesus in public forums), introduce false religious practices (e.g., permitting public school students to hold Satanic clubs, but not conduct a Bible study), and persecute Christians (e.g., claiming that teaching children about man created as male and female is child abuse). Armageddon might also be a symbol for personal battles in which believers are engaged as they resist Satan’s temptations (1 Pt 5.8; James 4.7). However, this suggestion could be pushing toward allegory.

Armageddon is also a symbol for victory—for Christ’s victory (Rev 19.15). The enemies of God continually assemble in antagonistic outbursts of the battle of Armageddon, until they blunder into the path of the rider in heaven on the white horse (Rev 19.11) on the day of judgement. On that final day of the ongoing battle, the Lord will once again reveal his power; decisively conquer his and our enemies; righteously judge the rebellious; rescue forever his distressed people; and condemn sin, death, and Satan to the everlasting abyss. For all of its bluster and false bravado (e.g., declaring, “God is dead!” or claiming that the Church is archaic and obsolete), evil is rapidly spiraling to its own defeat.

The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath – The *City of Man* Destroyed

(Rev 16.17-21)

The plague on the sky delivered from the seventh bowl was poured out on the air so that catastrophic phenomena were unleashed—lightning, thunder, and hailstones—which were accompanied by an earthquake. The choice of the imagery in this final plague may be designed to communicate the following:

- *Presence.* God made his presence known in the OT economy through selected physical manifestations, such as those found in this plague; for example, on Mt. Sinai (Ex 19.16-18). He reminds sinful mankind that he is the God who is ever present in his creation.
- *Power.* Satan assembles his forces at Armageddon using his power over the minds of the reprobate. But God demonstrates his absolute sovereign power over nature in his works of creation and providence.
- *Purging.* Satan, who is temporarily “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2.2), is purged from his dominion as Christ manifests his control over all the created order (Col 1.15-17).
- *Punishment.* These phenomena were identified as signs of judgement and temporal punishment of the perpetrators of wickedness (Ex 9.23-25; Josh 10.11; Ezk 38.22). At the time of the exodus, a plague of hail struck one nation but in this plague all nations in opposition to God are afflicted. This is intended to remind mankind that the final judgement is pending at any moment, when people least expect it (Rev 16.15).

The earth, and all nations on it, are described as being hit from above and from below. The earthquake that accompanies the aerial phenomena splits the great city into three parts, causes the cities of the nations to

fall, destroys land masses, and levels mountains. The frightening imagery would have been familiar to the original readers of Revelation; some of whom had had the experience of living through an earthquake (Sardis and Philadelphia had an earthquake in 17 AD, and Laodicea had one in about 60 AD). This scene is intended to illustrate the total destruction of the earth's surface so that mankind's rebellious activities are decisively disrupted. Many interpreters conclude that this plague is a description of the final judgement, through a global earthquake that destroys the earth. However, this plague is not dispatched only on the last day of planet earth at the final judgement. Time will not end with hail and an earthquake but with the complete dissolution of this sin-cursed created order and the introduction of an entirely new one (2 Pt 3.10-13). Rather, this plague is a symbolic description of grievous temporal judgements that God sends against the wicked between Christ's ascension and his return (Ps 97.5; Nah 1.5; Hag 2.6-7; Heb 12.26-27). It describes a largely spiritual and psychological plague, with destructive ramifications for human relationships, commercial activities, and political aspirations. This plague continues to be a precursor to the last day but is not poured out on it.

Babylon, the great city, and the other cities of the nations are destroyed in this plague. Here, we are given a summary of their destruction. Fuller details of Babylon's specific downfall are given in the following chapters. This plague is not directed at a specific city in the past or future. Rather, it is directed at the *City of Man*—all the great Babylons (Rev 11.8; Rev 17.18), and the cities of their hinterlands are doomed. At the time of John, Rome was the exemplar. Today it includes cities that are:

- Steeped in sexual sins (Rev 14.8); e.g., Amsterdam and San Francisco.
- Infatuated with commerce; e.g., London, NY, and Hong Kong.
- Driven by a lust for world dominance; e.g., Washington and Beijing.
- Fanatical about entertainment; e.g., Los Angeles and Las Vegas.
- Deceived by secular humanism and false religions; e.g., Boston, Riyadh, and Mumbai.

Every city that stands in autonomous and arrogant defiance against God (Dan 4.30) and seeks the destruction of the *City of God* through oppression of Christianity and the Church, is the object of this plague. Throughout history, from the time of John until today, we have seen cities rise in prominence and lose their influence and human importance because they have drunk the intoxicating wine of Babylon (Rev 17.2; Rev 18.3). Examples include: Athens, Rome, Constantinople, Baghdad, and Venice; and a number of cities in Asia that were comparatively large in the Middle Ages and early Modern era, but are shells of their past human 'glory' today.

John tells us that "God remembered Babylon"; meaning that he observed its wickedness (Rev 18.5; Gen 6.5), in contrast to his remembering his righteous people in the midst of his dispensing punishment—e.g., Noah (Gen 8.1) and Abraham (Gen 19.29). Since, the imagery of this vision is symbolic, we are not to expect physical hailstones, each weighing a talent (about 40kg), to fall from the sky or that the mountains will be levelled by earthquakes. Therefore, we are to understand the draining of "the cup of the wine of the fury" of God's wrath, that the *City of Man* is made to drink, as his working to bring down haughty oppressors. He uses various means, including: psychological turmoil (e.g., guilt, phobias, and psychoses), political chaos (e.g., 'backroom' deals, power grabs, broken treaties, and civil war), economic disruption (e.g., stock market crashes, Ponzi schemes, and depressions), lawlessness (e.g., increased crime, violent protests, and vigilantism), and sociological confusion (e.g., demographic decline and migration of adherents of false religions who refuse to integrate into their host nations). These are the lightning bolts, hailstones, and earthquakes of God's ongoing judgement on the *City of Man*.

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath – The Wicked's Response (Rev 16.9, 11, 21)

It would appear that there are only a few possible reactions a person can have when he receives punishment, whether from a parent, a lawful civil authority, or God; these are unresponsive ambivalence, a desire to

reform behaviour, or an angered resentment. However, there really are only two possible reactions. People who have hearts which have been converted by the Holy Spirit are given the grace to respond to temporal chastisement with humility and repentance and to ask for his assistance in living a more sanctified life. On the other hand, every person who has not been touched by the Spirit resents any form of punishment. The unconverted human heart is desperately wicked (Gen 6.5; Jer 17.9) and filled with false beliefs about its own self-righteousness. Thus, John informs us about how those who worship the beast and its image (Rev 14.9) react to the seven plagues. They:

- *Do not repent of their actions.* The purpose of God's temporal display of wrath against sin is twofold: punitive (Rom 1.18) and redemptive (Rev 14.6-7). The punitive nature of the execution of physical plagues was exhibited in the case of Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Ex 10.1). Those judgements did not awaken the Egyptians to repentance but hardened them into a recalcitrant obstinacy (Ex 9.35). But, as long as temporal life remains, God offers any sinner an opportunity for true repentance (Ezk 18.21; Lk 23.42-43). However, by nature a sinner cannot turn from his wicked ways. Instead, he becomes progressively hardened in rebellion. Although he understands that his temporal judgements are from the hand of God (Rev 16.11), he recoils at bowing humbly before his Creator, refuses to repent and binds himself more tightly to Satan and hell, angrily shakes his fist at God, and stubbornly pursues perverse and unnatural passions and idolatrous worship practices (Rom 1.19-32).
- *Do not give glory to God.* The second Commandment prohibits worship of the beast and its image and requires that God alone be worshiped. But men who are bound to Satan refuse to praise God for the beauty of his person (Ps 27.4), the perfection of his character (Mt 5.48; 1 Jn 4.8), and the glory of his works (Ps 92.4). They deny that God has power over the plagues (Rev 16.9) because he has ultimate authority over all of the created realm. They hate the transcendent God because their god is earth-bound and a creation of their own fantasies, and they choose to serve the creature, rather than the Creator (Rom 1.25).
- *Curse God and his name.* The third Commandment prohibits taking God's name in vain—this includes blaspheming God or cursing him. Yet, people who have not repented of their sins and do not give glory to God constantly curse God in various ways, including:
 - *Swearing.* They use names of God as expletives and swearwords.
 - *Calling God evil.* They claim to be on a moral high ground and declare God's acts of judgement against wickedness to be evil.
 - *Lie about God.* Satan in the garden, called God a liar when he tempted Eve. Since then, men twist God's revelation to suit their evil desires and declare, "Did God actually say ...?"
 - *Slander God's character.* They question the truth that God is love by asking how a good God could permit evil when he has the power to prevent it.
 - *Attribute his works to the gods.* For example, they claim that fate controls our *karma* or that chance-based evolutionary processes produced the variety of life around us. The expression, 'God of heaven' (Rev 16.11) reinforces the extent of their blasphemy, as they demean the only true God by denying his sovereign power (Rev 16.9) over the plagues.

There is an evident irony in the response of the wicked to the judgements that God sends in their direction. The irony is illustrated by Richard Dawkins, who claims to be an atheist and yet he rails against the God he claims not to believe in. His response toward God is silly. People do not try to disprove the existence of the non-existent—for example, no would write a serious essay trying to prove that unicorns do not exist. By cursing God for his judgements, unbelievers like Dawkins demonstrate that they know that God exists and that his requirements are righteous, and their punishment is deserved, as Paul indicates in Romans 1.20, 31.

The response of the wicked indicates that their hearts are rock-hard. They are like the Jewish leaders, who stuffed wool in their ears so they couldn't hear the preaching of Stephen (Acts 7.57), and do not want to listen to anyone (God through the Bible or through his messengers proclaiming the Gospel) who would counsel them to repent and give glory to God. They are not reformed by God's temporal judgements but become bitter and continually more depraved. They spiral down into the abyss. Once they reach hell, they

persist in nourishing their hatred toward God.

The response of the wicked to temporal judgements provides instruction for all mankind. First, it teaches unbelievers that God is patient with the wicked and gives them multiple warnings (three waves of warning—the seals, trumpets, and bowls) and abundant opportunities to flee from the wrath to come (Mt 3.7). Second, it reminds us, who are believers in Jesus Christ, that we need to persevere in living out our faith, by repenting daily of our sins (Mt 6.12; Jn 1.9), living for the glory of God (1 Cor 10.31), and assiduously avoiding any form of blaspheming or cursing our Creator.

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath – “It is Done!”

(Rev 16.17)

The plague on the sky that is poured from the seventh bowl is accompanied by a loud voice that says, “It is done!” This is likely the same voice that John heard announcing the plagues (Rev 16.1), and thus it is the voice of God himself. Therefore, we need to consider what God means by this declaration. The ‘done’ could be applied to the accomplishment of the command—i.e., the angels have poured out the contents of all the bowls. However, the ‘done’ probably has a broader meaning. It appears that with the destruction of Babylon (Rev 16.19) God’s patience for giving warnings and dispensing temporal judgements has come to an end—the plagues are the last wave (Rev 15.1)—and the world is primed for the return of Christ, the consummation of this age, the final judgement of all mankind, and the renovation of the heavens and earth.

The blast of the seventh trumpet (Rev 11.15) is different from the other six since no temporal punishment is associated with it. Rather, with the blast of that trumpet, the end of this created order has been announced. It represents the trumpet blast of which Paul speaks (1 Thess 4.16), which will announce the end of time and the resurrection of all the dead. However, the plague of the seventh bowl is not the final judgement or the end of time since it describes a temporal judgement on Babylon and the cities of the nations. In addition, the seven plagues are not the ‘last’ wave of a chronological sequence of temporal judgements, but in terms of their severity. The three waves of judgement (seals, trumpets, and bowls) occur repeatedly in the lives of individuals and nations until the end of time. Thus, with the plague of the last bowl, God declares that the temporal judgements are done. From this point in the account, John considers in more detail the destruction of the world’s systems (chapters 17-19), that is addressed in summary form in the last plague (Rev 16.17-21). Then he turns to the final judgement (chapter 20), and the unveiling of the new heaven and earth (chapters 21-22).

The last plague is not the physical annihilation of the world. Rather, with its completion, the return of Christ is set in motion. However, do not suppose that this provides information about when Christ will return. As we have observed previously, we cannot place the events of Revelation into a single, specific earthly timeline. The seven plagues occur repeatedly throughout our history, between Christ’s resurrection and his return, and are applied to each wicked generation. At death, every person who has ignored the warnings of the seals, trumpets, and plagues and has not repented of his sin, will leave our time and appear immediately before the judgement seat of Christ (Heb 9.27).

God declares the seventh plague to be the ‘done’—that is, the completion—of his warnings of judgement because he has reached the end of his patience. He does not provide mankind today with just one warning, as he did with Adam (Gen 2.17), but three waves of warnings (seals, trumpets, and plagues), so that mankind is without excuse (Rom 1.20).

The Lord sees that the wickedness of mankind is great in the earth and that the intentions of his heart are evil continually (Gen 6.5). So, at some point, in the lives of individuals and nations, his patience ends and he delivers a decisive and final temporal blow against their sin, as he did with the flood that destroyed all

of mankind, except for those in the ark. For individuals, this may appear as a serious illness directly resulting from sinful behaviour, a financial disaster, a relationship breakup, or death. For nations, when God's patience has reached its limit, his wrath against their sin may be displayed as famine, war, political turmoil, or economic collapse; with the eventual demise of the nation as it is overwhelmed by its enemies. The same applies to congregations and denominations—God's patience with their false doctrines; toleration, and even endorsement, of sinful behaviours; and false worship eventually reaches its end, and he declares, "It is done!" The well of human sin is bottomless! When we reflect on the extent of what God has witnessed for 6,000 years, we are tempted to cry out, "Why is God silent? Why is he taking so long to right wrongs?" (Ps 94.3) We must, as Revelation teaches, take solace: God is not silent. No unrepentant sin goes unforgotten. No cry of the saints goes unheard. God has great and glorious purposes for permitting evil to go unpunished for a time. At the appointed time, all evil will be set right, and the saints vindicated, because Christ is victorious!

Unbelievers curse God because of the severity of his justice (Rev 16.9, 11, 21), and claim that judgement is undeserved. Sadly, many professing Christians also attempt to take a moral high road by declaring that God is unfair by being so severe in his judgement against 'innocent' people. They object to teaching that speaks of the wrath of God against sin (Rev 16.19). Instead, of objecting to what is clearly explainable, because it is just and right, mankind should observe and marvel over what is unexplainable—the patience, grace, and mercy of God! The amazing thing that is taught by Revelation chapters 6 to 16 is *not* that God punishes sin—we have known this from the first days after creation (Gen 3.14-19). Rather, the amazing thing that is taught by these chapters is that God does not obliterate sinners the instant that they sin, but gives them warning upon warning of the final judgement that is to come, and that he has provided an open door of hope for all who hear and heed the warnings (Rev 2.7)—through repentance of sin and faith in the Lamb who was slain (Rev 5.12) as the sacrificial substitute for our sins.

The Great Prostitute – The *City of Man* (Rev 17.1-18)

One of the angels who delivered the seven plagues speaks with John and invites him to witness the judgement of the great prostitute. John is then carried in the Spirit into a wilderness where he sees a vision of the prostitute and the beast. John describes this vision (chapter 17) before he deals with the actual judgement of the prostitute (chapter 18). The wilderness into which he is transported is likely the same one that he saw the Church fleeing into (Rev 12.6, 14)—which we determined to be the spiritual wilderness of this world and, although a dangerous locale for the covenant community, is also a place of refuge. It is an environment of persecution and of yet of provision for the Church.

As we turn to a consideration of the description of the prostitute and what she represents, we notice that John uses descriptive language that in modern terms would be 'R' rated. His purpose is to shock his readers with symbolic imagery that illustrates how evil the great prostitute is.

The identity of the prostitute has been the subject of much debate for almost 2,000 years. Suggestions that have been offered, include the following:

- A symbol for Jerusalem since OT prophecies speaking of apostate Jerusalem (Is 1.21; Jer 2.20; Ezk 16.31; Hos 2.5; Mic 1.7) appear to be alluded to in John's description of the prostitute.
- The city of Rome (1 Pt 5.13), that includes seven hills (Rev 17.9) within its walls. This was the standard view of patristic exegetes and is the consensus view of many academic scholars today.
- The Roman Empire, centred around the city of Rome (Rev 17.18), up to the fall of the western empire (493 AD); with its demise being described in chapter 18.
- After the Reformation, many Protestant writers concluded that the prostitute is the Roman Catholic Church. This anti-papal interpretation was viewed as the natural meaning by generations of Protestants.

- Apostate or heretical portions within the true Church of Christ (Rev 2.20); all the faithless or nominally Christian in the professing Church, at all times.
- A literal future, rebuilt, city of Babylon (Rev 17.5) in modern Iraq or a future instantiation of the geographical city of Rome located in Italy.
- A final product of civilization, a great wicked city that will be the capital of the antichrist, who will persecute and murder the followers of the Lamb at the end of time.

Notwithstanding strong arguments that support some of these suggestions, the best interpretation seems to be that the prostitute represents an epitomized image of an abstract *City of Man*. To equate the prostitute with a specific instantiation of the *City of Man*, e.g., 1st century Jerusalem or Rome, Imperial Rome, or a future megacity that will hold supremacy over the nations on the earth at that time, does not do justice to the richness of the imagery in Revelation and the message that is directed to the Church in every generation. The transtemporal nature of the *City of Man* is demonstrated by the image of the prostitute riding the beast (Rev 13.3; Rev 17.8, 11), which exists in every age. The Babylon of Revelation is not Rome; but without doubt 1st century Rome was an instantiation of the *City of Man*; as was Paris in the 16th century, and as are London, Beijing, and Washington (and many other cities) in the early 21st century. All of these cities bear the image and display the features of the *City of Man* that was founded by Cain (Gen 4.17). The inhabitants of Cain's city strove for lives of affluence and pleasure, with no regard for God. In contrast, Seth and his descendants, traced to Noah (Gen 5.4-32), are portrayed as righteous and stand out as being dedicated to living within the knowledge and fear of God's presence. They sought the establishment of the *City of God*. The focus of the Cainites was on human accomplishments and man's glory. The focus of the Sethites was on extolling God's glory (Gen 4.26). The *City of Man* is the product of human achievement without God. The *City of God* is founded on divine grace, with Jesus as its cornerstone (Eph 2.20; 1 Pt 2.6-7) and is designed and built by God (Heb 11.10).

After the flood, the *City of Man* was quickly reconstituted in Babel, the first city of Babylon, by Nimrod (Gen 10.8-12; Gen 11.1-9). Later, Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar, became the destroyer of Jerusalem and the temple and the kidnapper of God's covenant people. Thus, Babylon is symbolic for all the enemies of God. In Babel and Babylon, politics and religion were intricately intertwined. Nimrod (Gen 11.4) and Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3.1-30) established false state-sponsored religions. Babylon is the embodiment of an amalgam of Satan's beasts (Rev 13.1, 11)—anti-God government and false religion (the false prophet; Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10)—that is openly hostile to the *City of God* and attacks its inhabitants with spiritual and physical armaments. Today, the *City of Man* continues to exhibit the amalgam with state-sponsored doctrines of evolution, libertinism, political correctness, tax-funded paternalism, and evil practices.

The choice of a prostitute to symbolize the *City of Man* is appropriate and deliberate. People in every culture are aware of the deceptive nature of prostitutes (Prov 7.10) and of the evil that they support. Thus, Revelation now presents us with an explicit contrast between the two rival cities as represented by two women—the wicked prostitute of Satan (the *City of Man*) and the pure bride (Rev 12.1-6; Rev 19.6-10; Rev 21.2; Eph 5.25-27, 32) of the Lamb (the *City of God*, the Church)—both of which he observed existing in the spiritual wilderness of this spatial-temporal realm (Rev 12.6, 14; Rev 17.3).

The Great Prostitute – Attributes of the *City of Man* (Rev 17.1-5, 15)

John provides a detailed description of the prostitute—the *City of Man*. We can consider the possible meaning of the symbolic components of the image that he sees in this vision. She is:

- *Seated on many waters*. The 'many waters' indicates that the *City of Man* is globe-straddling and made up of the "peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Rev 17.15) of the earth; as appears to be the meaning of 'seas' (i.e., 'many waters') in some places in the OT (Ps 65.7; Is 17.12; Is 23.11). It

has been noted that Jeremiah refers to the historic Babylon as living by many waters (Jer 51.3). John may allude to this, since he refers to the prostitute as ‘Babylon’ (Rev 17.5).

- *Seated on a scarlet beast.* There is no contradiction between verses 1 and 3. The prostitute rides on the scarlet beast which is standing on the many waters (the nations) and simultaneously on the spiritual wilderness of this world. We have already met with this beast (Rev 13.1-2)—the beast out of the sea. We must not carry our interpretation of the symbols too far, but the fact that she rides on the beast—Satan’s emissary manifested by human governments that stand in opposition to God’s Anointed (Ps 2.2)—may indicate that she places her trust in the beast rather than in the true “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19.16). The *City of Man* moves forward in its attempt to destroy the Church, with the support of the political and military force (possibly symbolized by the scarlet of ‘royalty’) of the beast.
- *Identified with a blasphemous name.* The beast on which she rides is covered with blasphemous names—including tattoos stating such things as: “God is dead.”, “Abortion is a woman’s right.”, “Man is the product of evolution.”, “Worship the nanny state.”, and “No prayer in Jesus’ name is allowed.” The prostitute has a blasphemous compound name written on her forehead that is identified as a mystery, because it requires revelation from God for men to know and understand it. In other places in Revelation names (marks, or seals) on the forehead imply ownership (Rev 7.3; Rev 9.4; Rev 13.16; Rev 14.1, 9; Rev 20.4; Rev 22.4). Although her name aligns her with the beast and the dragon (Satan), in this instance the name placed on her forehead also declares her profession and character. Therefore, the suggestion may be accurate that is made by a number of commentators, based on the writings of Seneca the Elder (*Controversies*, 1.2.7) and Juvenal (*Satires*, 6.122-123), that she follows the practice of Roman prostitutes who blatantly displayed their profession with their names written on bands on their foreheads. Her name identifies her as:
 - *Babylon the great.* This associates her with all the cities of men that have rebelled against God and his laws since Babel and the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar.
 - *The mother of prostitutes.* She is the source of all forms of actual sexual immorality including fornication, adultery, and homosexual practices; and the source of spiritual adultery manifested as idolatry.
- *The mother of earth’s abominations.* Everything else that is overtly sinful is cultivated and promulgated by her (Rom 1.32).
- *Dressed luxuriously.* She is portrayed as being arrayed in clothes and jewelry that indicate royalty, wealth, and worldly magnificence—as Ezekiel (Ezk 28.13) described the jewels adorning Tyre, an instance of the *City of Man*, when he prophesied its downfall. She is positioned as a contrast to the bride of Christ who is portrayed as being arrayed in simple white garments (Rev 19.7-8). Her apparel is intended to seduce mankind with a false ‘prosperity gospel’—if you succumb to her temptations, you will be adorned as she is and experience her earthly delights. We see instances of this seductive come-hither appeal in governments in every age, which promise bread and circuses for their docile slaves.
- *Holding a cup of abominations and impurities.* The golden cup may appear outwardly beautiful—like dead people’s tombs (Mt 23.27)—but is filled with everything unclean, vulgar, and repulsive. The cup holds forth the elixir of a forbidden fruit (Gen 3.6). Once tasted, its intoxicating draught blinds (Rom 1.22) and maddens (Jer 51.7) those who drink it, and binds them to Satan, sin, death, and an everlasting hell. It is only when the Holy Spirit drags us into his detox clinic of conversion, faith, and repentance that we can experience a withdrawal from our addiction to her cup.

This description of the prostitute and her alluring appearance teaches us to beware of the brazen seductiveness of the *City of Man*—whether it is her offer of ‘cradle to grave’ health and welfare, her claim of ‘free love’ without consequences, the intimation that ‘he who has the most toys wins’, and her appeal that we should ‘grab for the gusto’ or ‘party ‘til we drop’. However, her ice-cold embrace offers only the despair of a full-strength intoxicating drug of despair and hopelessness (Eph 2.12). As long as we are in this world, we cannot escape from the *City of Man*. She fills the whole earth, riding on her beast that straddles the nations and the spiritual wastelands of this world. The extreme escapism of the strict ‘Old

Order' Amish is not a solution, since the heart of man is deceitful and desperately sick (Jer 17.9), regardless of the community he is born into. Cars, television, the internet, shopping malls, and alcohol are not evil in themselves, but they all contribute to the appeal of the *City of Man*, and we must be realistic about 'civilization' and flee from the allurements of the great prostitute, Babylon (Prov 6.25-27; Prov 7.10; Prov 29.3).

The Great Prostitute – Her Cup of Iniquity

(Rev 17.2, 4, 6)

The great prostitute, the *City of Man*, holds an alluring golden cup in her hand, which is full of abominations and sexual immorality. Drinking from it, she and the dwellers on the earth have become drunk. There are three related, aspects of their drunkenness: immorality, idolatry, and intolerance.

A few years ago, news out of the entertainment industry expressed surprise that, during its opening weekend, a Christian-themed movie called "I Can Only Imagine" earned more than twice its production costs and financially outperformed, by a large margin, a purported 'romantic comedy' from Disney about a teen with homosexual feelings called "Love Simon". The modern movie industry, a product of the *City of Man*, has drunk from the cup of the great prostitute and continues to crank out movies that endorse and encourage fornication, adultery, homosexual practices, sadomasochism, pedophilia, and bestiality. Likewise, novels, comic books, and advertising are saturated with sexual themes, defended in the name of 'art'.

An infatuation with sexual immorality is not new. It began in the antediluvian world. For example, Lamech appears to have introduced polygamy (Gen 4.23). Sexual immorality was an underlying reason that God sent the flood to wipe clean the earth. Although the Bible does not mention sexual sins associated with the founding of Babel, we know, both from the Bible (Gen 19.1-12; Num 25.1; Dt 23.17-18) and from extra-biblical history, that sexual immorality became prevalent throughout the Middle East shortly after the flood. Often aberrant sexual rituals were associated with pagan religious practices (e.g., fertility cults and cult prostitution). At the time John wrote Revelation, matters were not any different. Corinth was infamous for its licentiousness; 'to Corinthianise' was a euphemism for sexual immorality, and Paul refers to the practices that were a regular part of meals associated with the pagan temples (1 Cor 10.1-22). Likewise, the walls in Pompeii and Herculaneum, destroyed by volcanic flows from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, display pornographic frescos. And Jesus warned the churches of Asia Minor of the dangers of sexual immorality encroaching on the Church (Rev 2.14, 21).

While the reference to the sexual immorality of the *City of Man* is certainly to be understood in a literal sense, its additional application is metaphorical. Sexual immorality (fornication and adultery) is used repeatedly in the OT to describe faithlessness towards God, as evidenced by idolatry (Ex 8.14; Ex 34.15; Ezk 6.9; Hos 3.3). The seductiveness of idolatry is not confined to any portion of society but is universal. The academy with its infatuation with evolution and the political sphere with its reverence of power are as guilty of idolatry as the masses that worship wealth and luxury and idolize celebrities. The whole world is inebriated and desensitized by the great prostitute's wine of idolatry.

Because the prostitute has plunged herself into immorality and idolatry she must carry her rebellion against God to a further level of degradation—to intolerance. She cannot tolerate anyone who speaks against her licentious practices and false religious beliefs. Thus, she has a passionate drive to destroy the Church because it is God's chosen instrument to preach about the demands of his law, the need for repentance from sin, and of the pending final judgement. Although men know innately about these things (Rom 1.18-20), since they do not want to hear the truth, they attempt to suppress it. One of their means is to persecute, even to death, the saints who bear witness to Jesus Christ (Rev 1.2, 9; Rev 6.9; Rev 12.17; Rev 19.10; Rev 20.4).

John uses graphic language to describe the persecution of the saints. He refers to it as ‘drinking their blood’. In Rome, at the time of John, this phrase was used as an idiom for war and oppression. It likely has its roots in the barbarous custom of warrior-peoples, such as the nomadic Scythians (from a territory that included parts of today’s Ukraine, southern Russia, and Kazakhstan) who, according to Herodotus (a Greek historian in the 5th c BC), drank from skulls the blood of their enemies whom they had slaughtered. They terrorized Europe from about 900 BC to 200 BC.

Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon figuratively drank the blood of the saints (God’s OT covenant community) when it destroyed Jerusalem (586 BC). Rome (a NT instance of Babylon) drank the blood of the saints (NT believers living in the Empire) with its persecution of Christians by Nero, Domitian, and other emperors. During the late Middle Ages and into the early Modern period, instances of Babylon’s persecution of the saints included the inquisition in France, northern Italy, and Spain; and persecution of Protestants in London (under Mary in 1556-1558) and Paris (the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre in 1572). Today, jihadist Muslims, sponsored from cities such as Tehran and Karachi, are a violent instance of the prostitute’s persecution of the Church. In North America, homosexual activists and supporters of abortion are not yet slaughtering Christians *en masse*. However, the harassment of churches, pastors, and individual Christians occurs in Canada and the US. For example, Trudeau’s government excluded Christian organizations from applying for summer jobs grants; and there are numerous examples where photographers, cake bakers, and wedding venue hosts have been targeted because they, in good conscience, could not serve customers holding same-sex weddings.

The Mystery of the Prostitute and the Beast

(Rev 17.7-8)

The mystery of the prostitute and the beast has perplexed people, over the centuries since when the angel spoke with John. We need to remember, that ‘mystery’, as it is used here, is not speaking of something that is mystical or associated with a ‘mystery cult’, but rather that its explanation or meaning can only be understood when it is revealed by the Holy Spirit. The angel’s rhetorical question to John, “Why do you marvel?” and his statement that he will provide an explanation, informs us that we are expected now to be able to understand the vision’s meaning. Thus, the Holy Spirit, through the angel, provides the revelation that we need to understand what the vision represents.

The prostitute and the beast are presented as separate entities in the vision, with the woman sitting on the beast. Later in the chapter they are shown as being at enmity with one another (Rev 17.16-17). This makes it seem as if there is a substantive difference between the two. However, they actually represent the same fundamental thing. As we have seen, the beast from the sea (Rev 13.1-10) is described as a composite monster, likened to all four of the major kingdoms prophesied by Daniel (Dan 7.3-6)—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. In addition, the seven heads represent a fullness of scope (universal sovereignty), and the ten horns represent complete, or total, tyrannical power and a sweeping usurpation of Christ’s rule over the nations by antichristian world powers. Thus, Satan’s emissary—human government—is identified with *all* wicked kingdoms that oppose the true “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19.16). Likewise, as we saw in the preceding three meditations, the prostitute represents an epitomized image of the *City of Man*, with 1st century Rome as a representative instantiation. The image of the prostitute riding the beast (Rev 13.3; Rev 17.8, 11), which exists in every age, indicates the transtemporal nature of the prostitute. Thus, the prostitute and the beast are both images of the governments of mankind united in rebellion against God.

The angel reinforces the fundamental unity between the prostitute and the beast when he indicates that he will show John the mystery of the woman and of the beast. There is one mystery and ultimately one evil entity that raises its head against God the Father and his Messiah (Ps 2.2). We can think of the prostitute as an overriding principle of godless evil, ambition, tyranny, and persecution of the saints, which is manifested as the beast spawns instances of the principle through every God-defying and Christ-denying kingdom and

nation that arises in every generation, wherever it places its poisoned feet.

The angel reminds John of what he had been informed earlier (Rev 11.7), that the beast rises from the abyss (bottomless pit)—a Greek word used to identify the abode of demons. This indicates that the source of the beast's tyrannical power is Satan, the temporary ruler of this world (Jn 12.31), who delegates his authority to the beast (Rev 13.4)—manifested by every human government that idolizes man and refuses to give glory to the Creator—to execute his temporal battles in his ongoing spiritual war against God and everything that is holy, good, righteous, just, gracious, loving, and beautiful. All that is evil, bad, unrighteous, unjust, selfish, hateful, and ugly comes from the pit of hell.

The angel illustrates the universal and perpetual (as long as time continues) nature of the beast's attack on Christ and his Church by giving twice the formula, "was and is not and is". This formula is not referring to a miraculous return or 'resurrection' of an earthly tyrant in the past (e.g., a purported myth about Nero), nor of a future ruler, yet to appear. Nor does it refer to chronological stages in history, as some suggest. Rather, the formula indicates that the beast's existence continues from the beginning of time to its end. As long as this world exists, we cannot get away from the tyranny of the beast—even as one form of human government or one nation passes ('is not'), another rises to take its place ('and is'), and another will follow ('is to come').

The beast, displaying the spirit of antichrist in every age (1 Jn 2.18, 22; 1 Jn 4.3), claims to be eternal. And the "dwellers on earth" who are not among the saints—those whose names are "written in the book of life from the foundation of the world"—are in awe and amazement (they marvel) of the beast and its apparently enduring nature (Rev 13.3). Thus, they worship the beast (Rev 13.12). We see this in our generation as people place their hopes in the paternalistic promises and programs of one elected government after another. However, the nations are deceived. Thus, God ridicules (Ps 2.4) the mimicry and foolishness of Satan and human rulers, who have attempted to usurp the place of the true ruler, the Christ, "who is, and who was, and who is to come" (Rev 1.4, 8; Rev 4.8). There is really no 'is to come' for the beast. Rather, it rises from the bottomless pit to "go to destruction". The enduring nature of the beast is only apparent and intended to deceive (Rev 12.9; Rev 20.3) the dwellers on the earth. The beast's demise is certain (Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10).

As with all of Revelation, the image of the vile prostitute and the beast was not revealed through John to scare or worry the Church, but to encourage it. Rather, than fearing the supposed arrival of a particular human antichrist at some time in the future, we are to understand that the antichrist (Satan) is already at work through his earthly forces, but they are already defeated and destined for the bottomless pit of destruction. For those whose names are written in the book of life there is true hope, in the everlasting reign of Christ.

Identification of the Kings Symbolized by the Beast's Seven Heads

(Rev 17.9-12)

The angel provides an interpretation of the vision of the beast the prostitute is sitting on. However, he also indicates that to understand its meaning requires wisdom. This is not surprising, since his interpretation seems to be as difficult to understand as the symbols of the vision itself. After almost 2,000 years the Church has not been able to arrive at a definitive conclusion about the meaning of these verses. For example, one element of the vision—the seven heads—is said to have two different meanings—mountains and kings. Determining the meaning is also made more difficult by the fact that most interpreters are inconsistent in the way in which they approach Revelation. They interpret some aspects symbolically, some figuratively, and some literally. Most commentators appear to agree that the prostitute and the beast are figurative, and are not to be understood literally—i.e., there was not (or will not be) an actual human woman who rides upon a composite, massive and monstrous, creature. Therefore, when we consider the statement that the

seven heads are seven mountains, we should not conclude that this is a reference to a geographic location, where seven mountains tower above the earth. Likewise, the identification of the eighteen kings is not to be found by examining a list of Roman emperors or European monarchs. The variety of interpretations of these verses is astounding. We will continue to apply our understanding that Revelation is best interpreted figuratively, with a universal application beyond the generation to which it was addressed.

The mountains of this vision are not physical mountains. Verse 9 is not, as many have suggested, from the second century onward, identifying the seven hills in Rome (either the capital of the Roman Empire or of the Roman Catholic Church's papacy) or in the capital of a future world government. Nor, as some have suggested, are the hills located in Jerusalem. Mountains are symbols of power in the Bible (Ps 48.2; Ps 95.4; Ps 125.2; Is 2.2; Jer 51.25; Ezk 35.3; Dan 2.35), and in contemporary myths (e.g., Mount Olympus) and literature. The Greek reads, "the seven heads seven mountains they are ... and kings seven they are." This indicates that the mountains are figurative for kingly reigns or kingdoms, which implies that they are not physical mountains, and cannot be the hills of the city of Rome. The presence of *seven* mountains symbolizes the universality of human authority and power.

Those who attempt to provide a specific identification of the kings must make assumptions not supported by the nature of the literary genre (i.e., figurative) of Revelation. *Every* proposal to associate the kings with named individuals is disputed by other commentators. For example, some commentators begin with Augustus and claim that the fifth king was Nero, who had fallen by the time John wrote this book. Thus, many argue on this basis for a 'late date' for Revelation. However, the exclusion of Julius Caesar is arbitrary, since Suetonius (c 69-122 AD), a contemporary of John in his later life, indicates that there were twelve Caesars from Julius to Domitian, and he includes Galba, Otho, and Vitellius who reigned briefly in 68-69 AD. Commentators who exclude these three emperors, so that they can align the sixth ruler with Vespasian and the seventh with Titus, do not provide convincing arguments for their exclusion. Others claim that the list of seven kings should start with Nero, making Vespasian (the fifth of those who have fallen), Titus (the one supposedly ruling at the time John wrote), and Domitian (the one to come). However, the angel says that the seventh would "remain only a little while". This does not fit historically, since Domitian had a longer rule than any emperor before him, except for Julius and Augustus. Thus, there is no valid reason for making the claim that the seven kings were Roman emperors from Nero onward. Associating the seven kings with specific Roman emperors is a form of eisegesis—i.e., forcing a meaning onto the text.

An ingenious, but equally flawed, approach is to identify the seven kings as seven different kinds of government that were practiced in Rome (e.g., consuls, tribunes, etc.), with five being extinct, the rule by pagan emperors as the sixth, the rule of Christian emperors as the seventh, and the papacy as the eighth. Others have attempted to align the kings with empires, with the extinct ones being selected from Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Macedon, and the Seleucids. However, identifying which would be the correct five that preceded the Roman Empire is arbitrary. And, identifying which are the seventh and eighth kingdoms that followed the Roman Empire is an impossible task.

Rather, the use of 'seven' (a symbol for fullness or completeness) followed by 'an eighth' is probably an example of a Hebrew idiom which uses two consecutive numbers to indicate a representative illustration rather than providing an exhaustive list (Prov 6.16; Prov 30.15, 18, 21, 29; Ecc 11.2; Mic 5.5). The seven heads (kings), and the eighth king (the beast) that is like the seven, represent a fullness of scope, indicating universal sovereignty, tyrannical power, and a sweeping usurpation of Christ's rule over the nations by the antichristian world powers—some which had passed when John wrote, some which were current, and some which were soon to appear. Therefore, Satan's emissary—the beast of human government—can be identified with *all* wicked kingdoms that oppose the true "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19.16). Thus, John's enumeration of kings or kingdoms is not identifying an actual number of kings, or specific kings, but is symbolically representing the continuing resurgence of the beast's earthly representatives who

are intent on executing war with God's Messiah by persecuting his people.

The Kings of the Beast Receive Authority for a Short Time

(Rev 17.10-12)

In the previous meditation, we concluded that the seven kings, symbolized by the heads of the beast, do not represent actual kings that ruled in the ancient Roman Empire (or will rule in a revived Roman Empire). Rather, the use of 'seven' is a symbol for fullness or completeness that represents a universal sovereignty, tyrannical power, and a sweeping usurpation of Christ's rule over the people of the nations by the antichristian world powers.

Like the mountains (Rev 17.9) that are a symbol for power in the Bible, horns also symbolize power (1 Sam 2.10). Thus, the angel indicates that ten kings (symbolized by the ten horns) would arise who, when the vision was revealed had not yet received royal power and authority. Some interpreters suggest that all ten of these kings were to reign simultaneously for one hour (i.e., a short time). Thus, they claim that this indicates that the Roman Empire (which was under the authority of a single emperor) would be fragmented into warring nation states that would exist for only a short duration. However, to associate, convincingly, the ten horns with historical kings or kingdoms any time after the original twelve Caesars is an impossible task. Others suggest that the ten kings will be a confederacy of future European (or other) nations, similar to what the UN or NATO represent, that will be allied into a future world-wide government or will cooperate in opposition to a central government that has established a single human world-wide government. Others claim that the confederacy will oppose the reign of Christ in a supposed earthly, temporal kingdom. All of this is faulty exegesis.

We must not attempt to associate these ten kings with a specific historic (or future) period. They are not ten kings who reigned after Domitian was the emperor, nor were they kings during the Middle Ages or in the Modern era. They are also not a confederacy of kings that will arise prior to some key eschatological event in the future. Rather, since the number 'ten' is also a symbol for completeness, these kings or kingdoms represent the oppressive power of human government throughout the ages. Human government presumes for itself divine authority and persecutes God's people when they do not submit to the state's claim to lordship over their lives. The use of 'seven' and 'ten' reinforces the fullness of the scope of human rebellion through their kings who set themselves against the LORD and his Anointed (Ps 2.2).

The angel indicates that some of the eighteen kings identified in these verses had already fallen, one was then ruling, some were to arise shortly, and others would receive their power and authority in the future from the beast. Thus, we can conclude that the vision is speaking of the enduring nature of the rebellion of human governments (past, present, and future) throughout the entire period between Christ's two advents.

There are two references to time in this section—"a little while" and "one hour". The kingdoms of this world may appear to be strong and durable, like mountains. However, as history demonstrates, and the word of God teaches, the nations of the earth are passing. Before God they are less than a drop from a bucket or dust on scales (Is 40.15). Where today is mankind's first post-flood (Akkadian) empire, established by Nimrod? It lies in rubble in the Levant. Likewise, the Assyrian, Babylon, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Achaemenid empires are nothing more than museum artifacts. The Roman Empire has left little but scrolls and architectural edifices. Wikipedia lists over 180 empires that are now extinct, and hundreds of nations that no longer exist. All nations and empires are temporary, and the flow of power is constantly shifting. Many have come and passed away, and many more may arise and will disappear before Christ returns. Today, the US and China may appear to be world powers, but they are just as transient as the nations of the past. This is a lesson of history. The Scriptures also teach that God judges and destroys the nations of men (Ps 110.6; Is 34.2 Jer 25.31; Joel 3.2). This is a key message that the angel communicates to John and the

Church. Satan's dominion over this world, exercised through human kingdoms, to which he assigns authority, has been judged and will be brought to a final destruction with him (Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10; Jn 12.31; Jn 16.11). While this passage speaks of kings (kingdoms or nations), it has a broader applicability to all manifestations of the *City of Man* (Rev 17.15, 18). All the works of Satan and his earthly emissaries are temporary and will be destroyed—whether political systems (e.g., socialism, communism, democracy), the 'arts' that spew out moral filth, or the 'mountains' of philosophy and scientism, such as evolution, which appear to be unassailable. They are all human edifices built on shifting sand that will crumble when the gale winds of God's judgement is visited upon them.

We have observed many times that Revelation alludes to Daniel's prophecies. In his dream (Dan 2.17-30), Nebuchadnezzar saw a great image that represented his kingdom (as the head of gold) and the ones which would follow until the time for the arrival of the Messiah. In that dream he saw another kingdom represented, not as one of seven mountains (Rev 17.9), but as a great mountain that filled the whole earth. This kingdom, not formed by human hands, would break in pieces the clay, iron, bronze, silver, and gold of the image. It would be set up by the God of heaven as a kingdom that shall never be destroyed. Revelation teaches that this mountain—Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12.22)—has been established forever.

The Beast's War with the King of Kings (Rev 17.13-14)

Because sin causes people to be envious and hate one another, factions form constantly among unbelievers. They argue with each other and often resort to physical violence—for example, Sunnis against Shiites, communists against Nazis, and 'green' protestors against the managers of pipeline construction companies. However, the enemies of Christ can temporarily put aside their differences and cooperate to harass and persecute Christians, because they "are of one mind" in their hatred against the message of the Gospel and the Church. For example, North American and European feminists who despise the oppression of women under Islamic *sharia* are not willing to challenge any mistreatment beyond their borders because they (secretly) delight in seeing Christians persecuted and slaughtered by Islamic terrorists. Likewise, university professors and directors of research facilities, who argue for free inquiry and free speech to support their pursuits will align with organizations such as the ACLU in the US and Human Rights Commissions in Canada to silence Christians who ask legitimate questions about the supposed evidence for evolution or the genetic causes of homosexual inclinations.

Unbelievers exist in a constant state of mental confusion because they have handed over their power and authority (including their mental faculties) to the beast—the God hating, and Christ despising, systems manifested in all forms of human government. They have a darkened understanding (Eph 4.18), are foolish (Rom 1.31), and suppress truth (Rom 1.18), due to their hardness of heart and slavery to sin (Rom 6.16). Thus, they cannot think rationally about spiritual realities and often about temporal matters and they sell their souls, like a Dorian Gray, to the beast and become progressively more dependent upon it for their material sustenance. The Greek word, translated "hand over", is an active present tense verb. This indicates that the enemies of Christ continually submit to the beast's authority, in every generation.

Mankind's "war on the Lamb", is not a one-time event. This section is not speaking about a supposed alliance of ten nations that will emerge and make a covenant with the nation of Israel seven years before the second coming of Christ, as some commentators suggest. The war between Satan, his beast, and all unbelievers against the Church has been ongoing since the day Satan tempted Eve to eat the fruit in the garden. This war takes many forms:

- Execution of God's covenant people such as the slaughter of infant males by the Egyptians at the time of Moses, the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes (c 168 BC), the infant males in Bethlehem by Herod, Christians in the arenas by Nero, Protestants by the Inquisition, and Christians in Syria or Iraq by ISIS.

- Expulsion of Christians from university faculty positions because they are unwilling to advocate for the latest ‘politically correct’ falsehoods about transgenderism, abortion, or euthanasia.
- Disruption of the livelihoods of Christians by suing them for refusing to undertake activities (e.g., taking photographs or renting a facility for a same-sex ‘marriage’ ceremony) which would demonstrate endorsement of evil.
- Ridicule of belief in the Bible as the word of God. Anyone who believes that the world is only about 6,000 years old and was created in six actual days or that Jesus rose from the dead is considered to be a simpleton.

However, the aligned forces of evil will never be successful, because “the Lamb will conquer them”. At times, it may appear that the beast and his aligned kings are winning in their battle against the Church, but their demise is always imminent. Every attempt to defeat the kingdom of Jesus Christ fails and will fail. God declares it (Ps 2.8-9; Mt 16.18), and history demonstrates it: Babylon and the Persian Empire are museum artifacts, communism’s atheistic bastions such as the Soviet Union and China have succumbed to capitalism and the Church is growing in their lands. Likewise, as oppressive as Islam may appear, it also will be defeated by the Lamb. We are already hearing of hints of Christ’s ultimate victory even over Islam through the growth of the secret Church in places such as Iran.

The angel provides John with the reason that the Lamb conquers all his enemies—he is the “Lord of lords and King of kings”. Ultimately Jesus is the supreme master and monarch over the nations because he is God (Dt 10.17; Ps 2.2; 1 Tim 6.15). Satan, his beasts, and all kings of the earth aligned with him are his subjects, and have no power or authority but that which has been temporarily granted to them for the greater display of God’s glory (Jn 19.11). Jesus is also the conqueror of his enemies because of his victory over sin and death on the cross (Col 2.14-15) and through his resurrection (Rom 1.4).

Many modern interpreters of Revelation are mistaken when they say that verse 14 focuses on a final battle associated with the second coming of Christ. If that were the case, then all those who are called and chosen and have been faithful, even unto death, are not included among those who have conquered with the Lamb. Jesus encouraged the generation who first received Revelation (chapters 2-3) to conquer with him to receive the promised rewards. Every generation of Christians, and all individual believers, are victors in and with Jesus. They participate in the victorious war against Satan and sin, and in the celebrations as evil is defeated—incrementally, and finally as it is cast into the abyss of hell.

The Called, Chosen, and Faithful (Rev 17.14)

With the words “called and chosen and faithful” John presents key truths about salvation. However, he is not writing a theological treatise and laying out the detailed (logical or chronological) steps involved in person’s regeneration and glorification, as Paul does in Romans 8.29-30. However, he indicates that salvation originates with God, is the work of God, and is successfully brought to completion by God.

He begins with a call. There are two dimensions to the call of God to unbelievers to come to Christ and receive salvation. First, there is the general call that goes out through the dissemination and reading of the Scriptures and through evangelism and the preaching of the Gospel (Rom 10.14). Second, there is the particular call that the Holy Spirit makes as he speaks to an individual and draws him to Christ (1 Cor 1.9).

John does not specifically include predestination (Rom 8.29-30; Eph 1.5, 11) or election (Rom 9.11) in his simplified list. However, we can infer that both predestination and election are necessary for a person to be drawn to Christ as his saviour. The Holy Spirit does not call people at random to salvation, but only those whom the Father has identified as being chosen from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1.4). The fact

that John (and Peter; 2 Pt 1.10) place ‘chosen’ after ‘called’ does not mean that they disagree with Paul, who says that election precedes calling (Rom 8.30). Paul gives a logical and ordered chain of events in the process of salvation whereas John and Peter are identifying a few of the key components of the conditions for salvation. Also, the idea that predestination and election (‘chosen’) are conditional and are the result of a person’s responding to the call of the Holy Spirit is not what the apostles teach. It does not make sense to say that a person is chosen by God after he (the person) chooses to receive Christ. That makes God’s choice meaningless and a person’s salvation dependent on his own will—which is impossible because his will is dead in sin and cannot choose to love and obey God. It also invalidates God’s free choice in predestination and election, for example, when he says that he loved Jacob but hated Esau (Mal 1.2-3; Rom 9.13). God doesn’t love a sinner to save him because of anything in the sinner, but because of his free grace (Eph 2.8-9).

John follows his reference to ‘called’ and ‘chosen’ with ‘faithful’. Thus, he skips over a number of the key steps in salvation that Paul refers to: regeneration (Titus 3.5) or conversion (Acts 15.3), the exercise of faith or belief (Acts 16.31), repentance (2 Cor 7.10), justification (Rom 4.25; Rom 5.18), and adoption (Rom 8.15). However, this does not mean that John did not consider them important components of salvation, since he writes elsewhere about each of them: regeneration or conversion, as the new birth (Jn 3.3); exercise of faith or belief (Jn 3.16; Jn 11.45; Jn 12.11); repentance, as confession (1 Jn 1.9); justification (1 Jn 1.7); and adoption (Jn 20.17).

A person who has been chosen by God the Father, called and converted by the God the Holy Spirit, and saved by the vicarious atoning work of God the Son on the cross is declared to be a member of God’s household and a sibling to the King of kings. At this point in the process of salvation God the Holy Spirit undertakes two activities in the life of a believer:

- *Sanctification.* Although a believer is declared holy (sanctified) at the moment of conversion (Rom 6.6-11; 1 Cor 6.11; 1 Jn 3.9), he continues to struggle with the remnants of sin during the remainder of his temporal life (Rom 7.7-25; 1 Jn 1.8). However, during this time, the Holy Spirit is at work in the heart of a believer, purifying him and making him more Christlike (Rom 8.13; Col 3.10).
- *Perseverance.* The Holy Spirit also works in the life of a believer to ensure that his salvation is forever secure. It is impossible for a person who has been saved by the work of the Triune God to lose his salvation (Jn 5.24; Jn 6.37; Jn 10.26-29; Rom 8.28-39).

John summarizes these two aspects of the process of salvation with the word ‘faithful’. True believers are faithful, in that they strive, with the support of the Holy Spirit, to live out their lives in a manner that is consistent with the commands of God and the example of their saviour. They are also faithful because, in the end, they cannot fall away and are with the Lamb as he conquers Satan, sin, and death. Those who have been predestined to salvation and called by the Holy Spirit are faithful to the end of their lives on this earth and into eternal life in the new heaven and earth.

John also implies that the believer in Christ is glorified—the last step in the process of salvation that Paul identifies (Rom 8.30). John states that the Lamb will conquer all those who make war on him. John includes believers with the words, “and those with him”. All true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are co-conquerors with him. They are united with him in his death (Rom 6.5), resurrection (Col 2.12), and glorious reign (Eph 2.6). Thus, the three epithets that John uses—called, chosen, and faithful—encompass the entire process of salvation from God’s eternal predestinating decree to the welcome reception of the saints into everlasting glory. Regardless of what trials or tribulations we may face in this life, the promises of God cannot be revoked. He has declared that all those whom he has saved will be with him forever (Jn 14.3, 8). This is the glorious message of Revelation.

War Between the Beast and the Prostitute (Rev 17.15-18)

The angel informs John that the waters upon which the beast is standing, with the prostitute seated on its back, represents the nations of the earth. The use of ‘peoples’, ‘multitudes’, ‘nations’, and ‘languages’ indicates that the waters represent the entire human race in every geography and in every generation that is under Satan’s slave mastery. His temporary reign over the earth is administered through one of his earthly representatives, the beast. The nations of the earth are represented by ten kings, with the ‘ten’ being a symbol of completeness or totality. Thus, the vision John sees does not relate particularly to a single alliance of kings and their peoples in the past or at the end of time at the return of Christ.

We have seen previously that the prostitute, also called Babylon the Great (Rev 14.8; Rev 17.5), represents the *City of Man*, which is the product of human achievement without God that works in constant opposition to the *City of God*—the Church. The *City of Man* has had many specific instantiations throughout the ages since the flood, beginning with Babel and continuing with Babylon and Rome. Current instances include cities such as Beijing and Washington, with their world-dominating aspirations. The beast is an image for a more generic manifestation of human, anti-God government. It represents the leaders in all human governments, to whom Satan delegates his role as the antichrist (Rev 13.2), who foolishly set out to exalt humankind above God (Gen 11.4), oppose God’s Messiah (Ps 2.1-2), and replace God with their own deities—commerce, scientism, and hedonistic pleasures. Thus, the beast is described in Revelation as a composite monster (Rev 13.2) with the attributes of many kingdoms. The beast carries the prostitute, which indicates that she is a specific instance of the generic beast with world-domination aspirations, as Rome was in John’s day.

The beast and the kings of the nations hate the prostitute and attack her. This is not limited to a specific historical event or to a supposed future event but represents an ongoing struggle between two conflicting directions that evil men pursue—the aggressive desire to concentrate power and to dominate others (people or nations) and the contrasting compulsion to rebel against authority and to be independent and autonomous. Thus, on the one hand, attempts are made to create larger aggregations of civic entities—e.g., cities are amalgamated or consume the counties in which they reside and nations or territories form alliances and unions (e.g., the United States or the European Union). On the other hand, secessionist movements (e.g., in Quebec, Scotland, or Catalonia) or jurisdictions fragmenting (e.g., Brexit) indicate that despite aspirations for centralization, people are not able to cooperate in their execution of their war with the Lamb (Rev 17.13-14).

The ‘civil war’ between the prostitute—centralization of human power and control—and the beast—dispersion and fragmentation of peoples and nations—is reflected in *every* human endeavour not founded upon Biblical standards. For example:

- Empires break up as subject countries petition for independence, at times through revolutions (e.g., the American Revolution).
- Nations founded on humanistic beliefs (e.g., communism and socialism) eventually implode, as witnessed by the breakup of the Soviet Union and the troubles in Cuba and Venezuela.
- Companies (Facebook, Amazon, Google, telcos, oil, etc.) attempt to dominate their business segments and governments feel threatened and regulate them or use antitrust legislation to force them to break up.
- Organizations based on skin colour (e.g., Black Lives Matter) or ‘lifestyle’-based groups (e.g., Pride) cannot cooperate with the police.
- Feminists challenge males claiming to be females who dominate in the women’s category of a sporting event, such as at the Boston Marathon.

Observation of history provides ample evidence that evil often turns on itself, resulting in its own defeat. As one [writer](#) said, “Culture has odd ways of supplying spontaneous correctives, even when the vanguard of a cultural wave or ideology recognizes no bounds of taste or decency.” The correctives are often violent.

We may have to witness this violence if the West finally wakes up to the dangers associated with open immigration of devout adherents of false religions, or to the intolerance of the ‘politically correct’ woke universities which refuse to permit legitimate questions about topics such as transgenderism and evolution.

The angel provides an explanation for why the forces of evil and injustice engage in an internecine conflict and cause their self destruction: “God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose.” It may appear that the nations and kings of this earth are carrying out Satan’s will. In reality, Satan and his demonic minions, and the beasts of the false prophet and anti-God government, are continually under God’s control and executing his will. This truth is demonstrated by the example of Satan having to be granted the right to afflict Job (Job 2.6) and the teaching of the Bible that states that God providentially controls *all* things for his glory, including the wicked actions of men (Ex 9.16; Prov 16.4; Jn 9.3; Jn 11.4; Acts 2.23; Rom 8.28). The infighting among the factions of evil is a strategy that God uses to confound their wickedness (Ezk 32.21; Hag 2.22; Zech 14.13), demonstrate the foolishness of every human endeavour that is not based on his truth, and control Satan’s destructive tactics (Mk 3.26). God has constituted his creation with a law of sowing and reaping that cannot be contravened (Gal 6.7-8).

Obituary for Babylon

(Rev 18.1-3)

John uses the expression “after this” to introduce a new vision, for the fifth of six times (Rev 4.1; Rev 7.1, 9; Rev 15.5; Rev 18.1; Rev 19.1). The visions are presented sequentially from John’s perspective as the receiver, but do not provide a chronological set of events in the world’s history or in our future—the events symbolized in these visions recur continually between Christ’s two advents.

As in most of the preceding visions, an angel from heaven is the instrument God uses to deliver the message to John and a principal actor in the events shown to him (Rev 18.21). In this instance the angel is described as having great authority and being bright with glory. The authority delegated to the angel is to announce the judgement of Babylon, which is described in the following verses of this chapter. His authorization as a messenger of God is confirmed by his glory, manifested to John through the brightness of his appearance. The only other time the expression ‘great authority’ is used in Revelation is when the dragon (Satan) gives power and ‘great authority’ to the beast (Rev 13.2) which represents leaders in all human governments who foolishly set out to exalt humankind above God (Gen 11.4), oppose God’s Messiah (Ps 2.1-2), and replace God with their own deities. Thus, the appellation ‘great authority’ assigned to this angel indicates that he is more glorious than the beast and has real, though delegated, authority.

The angel announces the demise of Babylon, an instantiation of the *City of Man*—worldly systems of commerce, scientism, and hedonistic pleasures—with a mighty (loud) voice (Rev 5.2; Rev 14.7) so that all mankind can hear. He wants us to pay attention to the dangers of falling under the intoxicating spell of Babylon’s wine and to know that she has been weighed in the balance, found wanting, and is facing her everlasting doom. The message the angel delivers is authoritative because it comes from the presence of God. Therefore, we must hear it.

The angel’s message is that Babylon the great has fallen. It is a brief notice of death, an obituary, with the only mention of her biography being her alleged greatness, from a human perspective, from which she has fallen. The use of the word ‘fallen’ twice does not refer to two aspects of her demise, as some suggest, for example, her idolatry and her immorality. Rather, it is an instance of a Semitic idiomatic form used to emphasize certainty, and can be read as ‘surely fallen’. The use of the aorist verbs ‘fallen’ and ‘has become’, translated in the English in the past tense, further indicates that the fall of Babylon is certain. The use of the past tense is a prophetic form of announcing absolute certainty of a future event (e.g., Is 45.1; Is 53.2-9) and echoes the prophetic words of Isaiah about the then distant but certain doom of the geographic city of Babylon (Is 21.9). The fall of Babylon has been predetermined in the eternal council of heaven, ensuring

that the moral law's requirements for justice and retribution are fulfilled to the glory of God.

Babylon's final state is described as an empty shell, in contrast to her former world-dominating 'glory'. At the time John wrote Revelation, the physical city of Babylon was essentially a pile of ruins (it was fully abandoned at the end of the 1st century AD). Many of its stones and bricks had been plundered to build the nearby city of Seleucia during the early Hellenistic period and then later it was supplanted in the region by Ctesiphon and then Baghdad. The ruins of the city became a desolate inhabitation for desert jackals and hyenas, birds of prey, and lizards and snakes. This was a fulfilment of prophecies made by Isaiah (Is 13.21-22; Is 34.11-15) and Jeremiah (Jer 50.39; Jer 51.37) hundreds of years before the destruction of the city. Thus, the imagery of the prophecies about the physical city of Babylon is appropriately applied to the transtemporal Babylon. However, instead of animal species, she is possessed metaphorically by demons and evil spirits.

The transtemporal Babylon does not fade into obscurity as physical cities decay, as trade routes change, harbours silt up, their environs are polluted, or they are levelled by besieging armies or blitzkriegs. Rather, she is destroyed because of deserved punishment for two sins, which the angel identifies:

- *Idolatry*. Babylon's demise is not the result of her political dominance. A centralized rule is not the primary issue, although generally this type of rule is abused by human leaders. Rather, the problem is that Babylon entices her citizens into idolatry—spiritual adultery (Ex 8.14; Ex 34.15; Ezk 6.9; Hos 3.3), here figuratively labelled as 'sexual immorality'; however, many forms of idolatrous practices include literal fornication. Once a person imbibes the intoxicating wine of idolatry, the chains with which Satan binds his mind and will are tightened to complete his slavery.
- *Sensuality*. Likewise, Babylon's demise is not the result of her enabling her citizens to be prosperous. God generally provides temporal peace and prosperity for his faithful people (Dt 28.2; Ps 72.16; Ps 132.15; Mt 6.30). Rather, the problem is that Babylon facilitates an ostentatious and self-centred materialism, in which its inhabitants focus on the quest for luxuries, pleasure, and physical security without reference to God and with no concern for the state of their souls.

All instantiations of Babylon ('nations'), past, present, and future, are judged and punished by God because of their moral foulness and appalling wickedness. Their doom is justly deserved, because all "sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (James 1.15).

Come out of Babylon!

(Rev 18.4)

John hears another voice from heaven. Since, this voice refers to "my people", it is the voice of Jesus himself and not the voice of an angel. His voice is 'bookended' by the voices of two powerful angels as he speaks into the midst of their pronouncement of the judicial sentence against Babylon and he commands his people to come out of Babylon.

The command to come out of Babylon is an allusion to prophetic injunctions (Is 48.20; Jer 51.45) relating to ancient Babylon. It also reminds us of the directives given by God to Abraham to leave Ur (Gen 12.1) and Lot to leave Sodom (Gen 19.12-15), and to the warning given by Jesus to Christians living in Judea to flee when they saw the Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem (Mk 13.14). The command is not a call to unbelievers, who are among the reprobate, since they can never have an interest in leaving the intoxicating allure of Babylon (Rev 18.3). Nor is it a converting call issued to unbelievers who are among the elect. It is a sanctifying exhortation issued to Christ's people living in the midst of Babylon—those whom he already calls, "my people". Thus, the call is a universal call. If the destruction of this Babylon was completed in the past, and the command applied only to believers living in Jerusalem or the City of Rome in the 1st century, the command has no immediate relevance for us. Likewise, if Babylon is only a future entity, then we can comfortably ignore the command since the supposed future Babylon has not yet been revealed. However,

the command to come out applied to Christians living in the 1st century, in the seven cities of Asia Minor to whom Revelation was initially addressed, and it applies to us in the 21st century.

Two reasons are appended to the command for why Christians should come out of Babylon:

- *Lest you take part in her sins.* To avoid being sucked into the morass of Babylon's sin we must flee from temptation to participate in her idolatrous rituals and to indulge in her sensual pursuits.
- *Lest you share in her plagues.* To avoid suffering from the temporal plagues, associated with the seven trumpet blasts or with the bowls, with which the inhabitants of Babylon are afflicted we must exit the city like rats fleeing from a sinking ship or renters rapidly descending from a burning tenement building on the exterior fire escapes.

To come out of Babylon does not mean that Christians are to live as hermits in backwoods cabins or to establish contemplative monasteries or hippy-like communes that are off the grid. Nor does it mean that we are to live like the Amish, avoiding the use of technical innovations that have been developed since the 16th century. It also does not mean that we are to build spaceships and flee the dreadful and decaying planet earth, like the characters in the 2018 remake of *Lost in Space*. None of these initiatives provides a means of fulfilling Jesus' command to come out of Babylon. In a different context (1 Cor 5.9-10), Paul reinforces the truth that we cannot escape from Babylon by discontinuing our interactions with unbelievers, since:

- The world's economic and government systems are highly integrated and total isolation within a purely Christian community is impossible. Thus, Christians are not to disavow any involvement with human government. Daniel, one of the most righteous and wise men who ever lived (Ezk 14.14, 20; Ezk 29.3) provides an example, as he served in the government of ancient Babylon through the entire period that it controlled Judea.
- The latent nature of sin means that every separatist Christian community has to deal with the presence of overt sins within its midst—the world still resides within human hearts (Gen 6.5; Rom 3.10), since man carries with him his inborn natural tendency to sin wherever he goes.
- Christians would be abandoning their mission to the world (Mt 28.18-20), into which the Church is to be a light—which it cannot be if it is hidden from the world (Mt 5.14).
- Christians would not be applying the example (Mt 9.10-13), teaching (Lk 15.1-32), and prayer (Jn 17.15) of Jesus; and would not be following the example and teaching of the apostles (Acts 17.16-34; Acts 18.3; 1 Cor 10.27).

To come out of Babylon is spiritual, not physical. Christians are to remain in Babylon but not be of Babylon. It means that we are to separate ourselves from sin. In our modern context we do not “take part in her sins” when we:

- Proclaim God to be the Creator; who created all things over an actual six-day period of natural days, about 6,000 years ago.
- Keep the Lord's Day (the Christian Sabbath) holy by refusing to succumb to the pressures to participate in commercial activities and use various forms of entertainment on his day.
- Strive to exclude all forms of idolatry and human innovation from our lives and from our corporate worship.
- Defend the Bible's definition of marriage as a life-long covenant between one man and one woman (not between two members of the same sex), encourage sexual chastity and the avoidance of pornography, and prohibit the marriage of Christians with unbelievers (2 Cor 6.14-18).
- Stop worrying and trust God when he promises to take care of our material and temporal needs (Mt 6.33), because he loves us and works out all things out for our good (Rom 8.28).
- Look forward to that day when we will be totally separated from all sin and its consequences (Rev 21.4).

Babylon's Just Sentence

Babylon reflects the beliefs and attitudes of its sinful inhabitants, who, in turn, reflect Satan's mind and sins. So, with human hubris, echoing the claims of historic Babylon (Is 47.7-9) she displays the egregious sins of:

- *Pride*. She claims to live as a queen—endowed with the rights of royalty to rule and with entitlement to live on wealth plundered from others.
- *Idolatry*. She glorifies herself by worshiping ephemeral projections of herself and emanating from her rebellious self-will.
- *Autonomy*. With profound self-assurance, she claims to be mistress of her own fate and will always be loved by her supporters and never mourn for them. Ancient Babylon and Rome at the time of John claimed, and many nations and cities since have claimed, to be unassailable and eternal.
- *Sensuality*. She lives for pleasure, that she believes she deserves. Her attitude is reflected today in many commercials that declare what you deserve today such as early retirement, a good meal, or a luxury cruise.

Men have no idea how sinful their beliefs, attitudes, and actions are before God. They think that they are 'fine fellows' and pretty good most of the time, even if they make 'mistakes' once in awhile. But God declares otherwise. The accumulation of Babylon's (mankind's) sins is "heaped as high as heaven" because the wickedness of man is great on the earth and his intentions and the thoughts of his heart are only evil continually (Gen 6.5).

Because God is omniscient, he knows everything that can be known, and certainly everything about mankind and their sinful actions. Nevertheless, he uses an anthropomorphism as he describes himself as 'remembering' Babylon's sins (Rev 16.19; Rev 18.5). When God 'remembers' mankind's sins, it means that he is fully aware of what they are up to and has not forgotten that just punishment must be exacted for their sins. At times, it may appear that God has forgotten his people and is not aware of the persecutions they endure for the sake of the Kingdom. But he always has their best interests in mind (Gen 8.1; Gen 19.29; Gen 30.22; Ex 2.24; Ps 98.3) and is storing up his wrath, to be unleashed upon his enemies at the proper time. Judgement may be delayed or postponed, but it is never cancelled or annulled in God's courtroom.

It is interesting to note how many commentators attempt to soften the degree of Babylon's sentence. Some appeal to the principle of 'an eye for an eye' (Ex 21.23-25; Lev 24.17-22; Dt 19.21) and claim that she is not punished double for her sins since "that would lose the sense of balance between the injustice and its judgement". Another said, "The 'double' must not be taken to mean 'double her sins.' Her sins are themselves called double, and her judgement is according to her sins." [In fact, her sins are not 'called double'.] One writer has gone to great lengths to 'demonstrate' that the word 'double' found in most translations is inaccurate. He claims that it can be translated as 'equivalent to'. However, even if we substitute 'equivalent' for 'double' this does not obviate the fact that she is paid double for her sins. Nor is a double payment for her sins inconsistent with the principles of justice. In the OT restitution was generally to be two-fold (Ex 22.4, 7, 9) which provided for restoration to normalcy and punishment but could be up to five-fold (Ex 22.1; 2 Sam 12.6; Lk 19.8), depending on the circumstances and degree of aggravation of the injury to the victim. We find this principle expressed in many legal systems today. For example, it is not sufficient for a thief to just repay what he stole, the Law requires him to also pay an additional amount as a fine and to recompense the victim. Since Babylon's sins are heaped as high as heaven, her double punishment is entirely just—first it makes restitution and secondly it punishes—and she is paid back to the full the measure of what she deserves. God must double her punishment in order to maintain his justice.

Jesus (the one speaking) declares, "Pay her back as she herself has paid back others." There is no support

in the Greek manuscripts for the inclusion of ‘you’ in verse 6. Jesus does not direct a command to his saved people (Rev 18.4) but implores the Father to vindicate his people by exacting the vengeance that belongs to him (Dt 32.35; Rom 12.19). The Father has passed judgement (Rev 18.8, 20), and he delegates to his angels the responsibility for dispensing the seven plagues of his wrath (chapter 16). This should encourage us. Jesus, our advocate in heaven (1 Jn 2.1), asks the Father to carry out the judgement he has decreed on the persecutors of his people. God’s vengeance is still alive!

The plagues of judgement come upon Babylon ‘in a single day’. This does not mean that all the plagues occur in the space of twenty-four hours. This is an idiom meaning suddenly or quickly—just as ‘in a single hour’ (Rev 18.10, 17, 19) denotes the speed with which the plagues will fall upon Babylon. When we see the apparently unassailable forces of wickedness—e.g., activists who persecute Christian business which refuse to endorse same-sex ‘marriage’ or university administrations which dismiss professors who raise doubts about the idea that man is the product of a long chain of mutations from a primordial microbe—it is hard for us to imagine that God can bring down the edifices of humanistic materialism so suddenly that it will make men’s heads spin. Let us have confidence that he continues to judge all forms of Babylon and will visit upon them the plagues of “death and mourning and famine” and all of her instantiations “will be burned up with fire” because “mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.”

Lament Over the Fall of Babylon

(Rev 18.9-19)

The one speaking with John identifies the primary classes of humanity that lament the fall of Babylon:

- *Monarchs*. All human rulers—whether hereditary kings, dictators who have seized power, or elected officials—are tempted by power. As Lord Acton said in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” Corrupt power is often displayed through indulgence in luxuries—a prime example is the ruler of North Korea who maintains a harem and overeats while many of his subjects suffer malnourishment.
- *Merchants*. The world without the true God runs on commerce. If people don’t spend their disposable income (note the implications of the word ‘disposable’) and borrow to excess to purchase the latest ‘smart’ phone, the merchants (bankers, company executives, and stock traders) begin to panic over their pending lost income.
- *Mariners*. In John’s world, the logistic specialists, who provided the merchants with their goods, were the thousands of mariners (shipmasters to sailors) who criss-crossed the Mediterranean every year. Today, is no different; ships from Shanghai, Singapore, and Shenzhen embark daily to fulfill the demands of the world for consumer items.

With the fall of Babylon, the world’s commercial systems are disrupted. The extent of the disruption is described with an extensive list of luxury goods (delicacies and splendors) that become no longer available to consumers and to those who make vast fortunes from supporting the insatiable addiction of the world for more consumables. The Canton Fair, which began in 1953, and is held twice a year in Guangzhou, a port city near Hong Kong, now requires the floorspace of over 70 Walmart Supercentres for exhibitors to display over 150,000 products to buyers. The deals, worth billions of dollars, made at the fair cover most of the classes of products identified in Revelation 18.12-13. Even John Bunyan would have been surprised by the size of this Vanity Fair.

One class of goods that we hope is not available at the Canton Fair is slaves. In John’s days human souls (persons) were a commodity, consumed as domestic servants and prostitutes, and to provide for ‘entertainment’ in the arenas. Matters are really not much different today, just partially hidden. The shipment of young women for the sex industry continues. The sports and entertainment industries also engage in the abuse of human souls, created in the image of God, who suffer concussions, are subjected to

extreme pressure to enhance their performance, or expected to provide sexual ‘favours’. Bodies are considered to be merely ‘beautiful’ or ‘talented’, but soulless.

The wealth that the souls of the purveyors of luxury long for is suddenly laid waste, “in a single hour”—repeated three times, to emphasize certainty—as God executes judgement on Babylon. The suddenness of the destruction of Babylon’s economic and commercial systems can be astounding at times. When men think that life as they are experiencing it can continue forever, they are caught short—as evidenced by the 1929 stock market crash and the following economic depression that lasted a decade; and the 2008 Lehman Brothers bankruptcy (a \$619 billion debt) and the housing market crash in the US that followed a few months later. Throughout history men have been reminded that the material security and pleasures they lust after are temporary and passing, whether at the national or individual levels. At any moment God will destroy earthly possessions and make them nothing. Do not misread this passage and assume that it applies only to a final product of civilization in the future. It applies now! When divine gifts are abused, Babylon is judged.

The lovers and followers of Babylon see the smoke of her burning. This imagery is drawn from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19.24, 28), but is applied metaphorically here, and previously (Rev 14.10-11). In the face of this ‘fire from heaven’, Babylon is utterly helpless and a source of bitter disappointment to her worldly paramours. They raise a great lamentation, “Alas! Alas!” (also repeated three times to emphasize certainty) as they reflect on the passing of the worldly might, adornment, and greatness of the *City of Man*. Their lamentation is accompanied by weeping and mourning, and, figuratively, by throwing dust on their heads. Some people express their despondency over the downfall of Babylon by committing suicide.

However, most of the lovers of Babylon stand far off (also repeated three times) and watch her destruction. Some disassociate themselves because they fear to experience her torment. But most stand aloof because they are not really loyal to her but to the material goods and sensual pleasures she provides. Men do not mourn over failing commercial systems or over their own wickedness, but because of their loss of wealth and income. Their lament over the demise of the *City of Man* is utterly selfish. Notice that the monarchs, merchants, and mariners are not destroyed with the downfall of Babylon. This indicates that her fall is continuous, and not a single event at the end of time. Instead, they immediately turn to their next opportunity to pursue their material aspirations, since they are slaves sold to godless gain and pleasure and refuse to heed the warning that passages such as this provide—the day of judgement is coming when the *City of Man* will be finally and forever consumed with all of this material universe.

A Command to Rejoice Over the Fall of Babylon

(Rev 18.20)

In contrast to the monarchs, merchants, and mariners that lament over the fall of Babylon (Rev 18.9-19), the angels and saved righteous ones are commanded to rejoice over her fall—an allusion to the command of the LORD to rejoice over the destruction of the historic Babylon (Jer 51.48). Although the voice speaking with John specifically identifies the residents of heaven, we may legitimately conclude that he also includes believers on earth within his use of the collective term ‘saints’, since elsewhere in Revelation they are included (Rev 13.7, 10; Rev 14.12; Rev 18.24). Likewise, the words ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’ need not be limited to the twelve NT office holders or to OT or NT officers appointed to receive God’s direct revelation. In a broader sense, apostles and prophets are all accredited leaders in the Church entrusted with dissemination of God’s word through preaching and teaching.

How do we react when we hear that we are to rejoice over the destruction of Babylon? When we consider her demise abstractly, we agree that the wicked idolatrous and sensuous system must be judged and sentenced to punishment. However, when we consider that this includes the punishment to death (Rev 9.18;

Rev 19.21) of many of the willing inhabitants of Babylon, some of us might have doubts about the propriety of rejoicing over someone's death. All men know in their hearts that wickedness must be dealt with through retributive justice. They retain an element of indignation against evil, particularly when it has a direct impact on their lives (e.g., a family member is hurt, or their possessions are destroyed). And, when we hear about an openly perverse person (e.g., a serial rapist or killer) being arrested we are often relieved and inwardly pleased that he has been caught and will be judged. Our response is similar to that which was displayed across the West when it was announced that Osama Bin Laden had been killed by a US Navy Seal. Many people who otherwise would have spoken out against capital punishment, were nevertheless pleased to hear of his demise. Likewise, we should rejoice over God's judgement of all the wicked. It is a false piety which claims that God should not judge and punish them or should give them a second chance. We come to a faulty conclusion about the nature of men because we judge by outward appearances, and say things like, "He isn't that bad, is he?" or "He doesn't deserve to be sent to hell, after all no one went and told him about Jesus." However, we cannot see how desperately wicked the heart of men really is (Gen 6.5). All men know God's righteous decrees and requirements and choose to suppress the truth and rebel against the only God (Rom 1.18-23).

Our rejoicing over God's judgement of Babylon must not be the result of a selfish spirit of revenge. Nor should we take pleasure in the temporal miseries assigned to the reprobate or over their everlasting punishment in the fires of hell, which will be accompanied by ceaseless weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 13.42). Nevertheless, rejoicing over God's justice being carried out against every form of Babylon (the *City of Man*) gives glory to God because:

- God has decreed that his acts of justice and judgement are to be celebrated (Ps 48.11; Ps 97.8). If for no other reason than he commanded it, we should rejoice over the punishment of the wicked world-girdling system epitomized by Babylon.
- Justice must not only be executed, but be seen to be executed. Some mistakenly theorize that God could have saved mankind without sending his son to the cross. However, God cannot forgive our debt of sin, without it being paid by our substitute. Those who do not embrace Jesus as their saviour must be punished.
- Evil has no right to exist; it is an abomination before the holy God. God must deal with the aberration of wickedness that has spoiled and polluted the entire created order.
- It demonstrates that God is sovereign over all the nations of men. Every manifestation of Babylon is directly accountable to God, and he judges, and will judge the nations (Ps 82.8; Ps 96.10; Ps 98.9; Is 34.1-17).
- It provides a temporary halt to her deception of the nations through her intoxicating "wine of the passion of her sexual immorality" (Rev 18.3).
- It provides temporary respite for the saints living on the earth from a constant barrage of persecutions (Rev 18.24; Jn 15.20; 2 Tim 3.12).
- Punishment of the wicked displays justice, which is an essential attribute of God. God cannot be love (1 Jn 4.8, 16) if he is not also just. Mercy (an expression of love) has no meaning if there is no corresponding justice (Is 30.18; Hos 2.19; Mt 23.23). The ultimate display of justice and mercy working together is the sacrifice of Jesus, who was punished for our sins so that God could love us (Rom 4.8; 2 Cor 5.21; 1 Jn 3.16; 1 Jn 4.10).
- Punishment of the wicked is just and justly deserved, since all men deserve death for their sins (Rom 1.32).
- Temporal destruction of evil is beneficial for the advancement of peace and prosperity for all mankind.
- Temporal judgement provides a warning of the final judgement which is coming and may encourage some to turn to Christ for salvation.
- It vindicates Christians who do not take vengeance into their own hands (Dt 32.35; Rom 12.19), but have placed their faith in God, committed their cause to him, and have trusted that he will righteously right all wrongs—whether in this life or in the next.

- It encourages believers, since they can know with certainty that God has heard their pleas for vindication and has acted on their behalf (Rev 6.10).

The Destruction and Desolation of Babylon

(Rev 18.21-23)

John sees in his vision another mighty angel; one who takes up a large upper millstone, probably of the size that required multiple donkeys to turn, and throws it into the sea. Then the voice (of Jesus; Rev 18.4) that has been speaking with him indicates that this action symbolizes the violent destruction of the spiritual Babylon—the *City of Man*—where Satan manifests his evil temporal rule over mankind. This imagery appears to be based on the symbolic action of Jeremiah when he prophesied about the utter destruction of the historic Babylon (Jer 51.61-64). It has been observed that there are three references in Revelation to mighty (strong) angels (Rev 5.2; Rev 10.1; Rev 18.21). The first two are associated with scrolls of prophecy—one sealed with seven seals and the other that John was instructed to eat—which speak about the trials that the Church in every age must face while it is in the world, and of God’s promises to vindicate his people. This third reference to a mighty angel is related to the fulfilment of this vindication, as judgement is delivered against all instances of Babylon that have persecuted the Church (Rev 18.24).

The words “no more” occur six times in these verses. They are applied to the city herself and to activities that occur within her, including entertainment (music), commerce, and domestic life. A six-fold restatement of the fact that these activities will be no more, is intended to attract our attention, like a bell tolling at a funeral. Thus, these words reflect the certainty of the total destruction and desolation of Babylon. Some interpreters claim that nothing like what is described in these verses has occurred in history and thus conclude that the Babylon of Revelation must refer to the antichrist’s final world-dominating city. They claim that this chapter speaks prophetically about the destruction of only that city. However, we must understand these words to be hyperbolic and that they apply for as long as this spatial-temporal realm exists. Babylon will continue to raise her alluring temptations (Rev 17.2; Rev 18.3) in every generation. And each manifestation, such as the original historic city on the Euphrates, ancient Rome, or a modern instance (e.g., Beijing, Dubai, London, or Washington) will eventually be brought to its end and be ‘no more’. Of course, the entire system of false religion, humanistic hegemony, and the quest for sensual gratification that Satan has propagated—instantiated in many ‘Babylons’—will be irrevocably destroyed when Jesus returns to bring about the consummation of this age and to repay all those who have shed the blood of his prophets and saints (Rev 18.24).

An addition to her lust for the sensual is appended in this vision. Babylon is the purveyor of deceptive sorcery (Rev 18.23). The Greek word translated ‘sorcery’, the basis of our word ‘pharmacy’, refers to those who mix drugs to cast spells. Every generation has had challenges with intoxicants. The ancient Persians used alcohol to lubricate decision making. The Macedonians viewed intemperance as a sign of masculinity and were known for their drunkenness. Alexander was reputed to have been a heavy drinker, drowning his anxieties in alcohol—some believe that he died of alcohol poisoning. In John’s day, opium use was common (Marcus Aurelius is believed to have been addicted), and the gin scourge of the first half on the 18th century in England is another example. We see the deception of drugs manifested in our day as governments licence and even sell marijuana and many people’s lives are being destroyed by the use of cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl.

As a result of Babylon’s decadence, the voice speaking with John identifies three classes of human activity that will cease with her destruction:

- *Entertainment.* The inhabitants of Babylon live to gratify their sensual desires. Music is one of the means they use and is representative of all types of sensuality. While music is not inherently evil, some *forms* of music are—in their lyrics or rhythms, or in the forums in which they are performed. Music is also associated with idolatrous practices, such as that which accompanies Sufi whirling dervishes and

the sitar sounds used to help induce Hindu yoga trances. God will destroy the music of Babylon with the trumpet blast of the angels, like Jericho was destroyed by the blast of Israel's trumpets.

- *Commerce.* The inhabitants of Babylon do not live to work and to glorify God through their work; but work to 'live', to gratify their materialistic aspirations. Yet they object to Christians who are open about their beliefs and endeavour to conduct honest and diligent commercial activities. In John's day, Christians often could not execute their trades because they would not participate in the guilds' idolatrous and often immoral sexual practices. Today, the litany of Christians who have been driven out of business or their jobs is almost endless, as they are charged with intolerance when they won't supply services for a same-sex 'marriage', refuse to endorse 'politically correct' practices such as abortion or euthanasia, suggest that there might be scientific evidence against evolution from microbes to man, or close their store on Sundays. As Babylon destroyed the livelihood of Christians, so her ability to provide for her inhabitants will collapse in economic recessions and depressions.
- *Domestic life.* Even lawful domestic activities (e.g., food preparation, household chores, and life events like weddings) will cease because there is no longer an economic infrastructure to support the city.

Thus, all that makes Babylon the mecca for human depravity is repeatedly being destroyed by God's avenging angels, and she is left as a desolate shell.

Babylon is Punished for Persecuting God's Covenant People

(Rev 18.24)

We have considered a number of the reasons why Babylon has been judged and sentenced to destruction, including: pride, idolatry, autonomy, and sensuality (Rev 18.5-8), and deceptive sorcery (Rev 18.23). An additional reason is identified in the final words spoken in this vision—persecution of the prophets and saints (Rev 16.6; Rev 17.6; Rev 18.24; Rev 19.2)—an allusion to the reason given for the fall of the historic Babylon (Jer 51.49). Notice that Babylon's destruction is not because she is prosperous or wealthy, but because of the abuse of her wealth to glorify herself and to destroy God's covenant people.

The explicitly stated reason for Babylon's punishment in this verse is that she has *slain* the prophets and saints. However, it is generally agreed that 'blood' and 'slain' are used as figures of speech which include the entire spectrum of persecution (Rev 2.10; Rom 8.35-36). Persecution of believers is a first step that leads to their murder wherever the perpetrators believe that they can get away with their crime without suffering any consequences. Notice that the speaker includes in the category of the 'blood', *all* those "who have been slain on the earth"—a reference to everyone from the entire redeemed community who has suffered at the hands of the enemies of Christ and his Church. This provides additional evidence that the Babylon of Revelation is transtemporal and not a specific Satanic nation, an historical city (Jerusalem or Rome), or a single future megacity that will dominate mankind near the end of time. Babylon is the epicentre of all the slaughter of believers and blood-guiltiness from the time of righteous Abel until our own day (Gen 4.10; Mt 23.35). It is Satan's depraved worldwide system that is under judgement throughout the earth and throughout the ages, which will be definitively destroyed when Christ returns to restore the created order.

There are four primary classes of persecutors of God's covenant people:

- *Anti-God governments.* Biblical history provides numerous examples of anti-God governments that have persecuted the Church, including Nineveh, Tyre, Edom, and Babylon. The first recorded murder also falls within this category. While it might appear that Cain's murder of Abel was merely a personal vendetta, it has more subtle ramifications. Cain hated the right worship of God and being rebuked for his idolatry. He took out his anger against God on his brother. Then he went to the land of Nod and built a city (Gen 4.17) that represented the first anti-God government. At the time of John, Rome was the epitome of Babylon with its overt persecution of Christians. Today, there are numerous examples of governments that are explicitly anti-Christian, particularly in nations that endorse Islam or communism. However, governments in the West are increasingly antagonistic toward Christians and

the Church. We only have space to consider one example. In 2018, California was considering a ruling that would utilize the state's existing consumer fraud statute to classify "gay conversion therapy" as a fraudulent practice. This would outlaw the sale of books and participation in conferences where individuals describe how their conversion to Christ has enabled them to abandon sinful practices. It will not be long before the Bible is outlawed.

- *False religions.* Practitioners of false religions, often with state support, persecute Christians. Paul encountered this form of persecution in Ephesus (Acts 19.21-41). Since the 7th century, adherents of Islam have systematically annihilated Christians in parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Adherents of other false religions, including Hinduism (e.g., in Uttar Pradesh in India) and Buddhism (e.g., in Sri Lanka), have violently attacked and killed Christians.
- *By the apostate within the covenant community.* Jeremiah (Jer 2.34) accused Judah of shedding the blood of the guiltless poor, and Jesus charged the Pharisees with killing the prophets (Mt 23.35); and in the 1st century, Jews persecuted Christians. During the Middle Ages and into the Modern era, the church hierarchy persecuted true believers who attempted to reform its theological errors and immoral practices.
- *Non-government organizations.* Attacks on Christianity and its adherents by the administrations and faculties of state-funded universities is often attested. In Canada, some law societies would not accept students from Trinity Western university, and Human Rights Commissions' decisions endorse 'politically correct' silliness and rule against Biblical teaching. In the US, many teachers' unions and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) are openly antagonistic to Christianity. The ACLU includes in its stated purpose defense of abortion, homosexual practices, and child pornography, and elimination of the death penalty. The organization should rightly be called the Anti-Christian Litigation Union.

In our day, Babylon appears to be in the ascendancy and continues to be a dangerous threat for Christians. Thus, we must:

- Separate ourselves spiritually by resisting her alluring temptations, so as not to take part in her sins or share in her plagues (Rev 18.4).
- Trust that God has not abandoned his people; cares for them dearly, hears their prayers, and will avenge their cause against their persecutors (Rev 6.10).
- Believe that God judges and destroys all temporal manifestations of Babylon and will overthrow her for a final time when Christ returns.
- Live in hope of a new city that Jesus is building for the Church, which will come down from heaven (Rev 21.2).

Rejoicing of the Redeemed, Over the Fall of Babylon

(Rev 19.1-5)

John hears the sound of the great multitude in heaven worshiping God, as a response to what they have seen as he has judged and destroyed Babylon, the *City of Man* (Rev 18.1-24). The lament of the three groups of mankind who gained their power and wealth from an allegiance to Babylon—monarchs, merchants, and mariners (Rev 18.9-19)—is rebutted by the praise of the LORD ('hallelujah') by three groups of creatures aligned with the *City of God*—angels, representative leaders of the Church, and the saints—all assembled around the throne in heaven. Their worship consists of an acknowledgement of God's perfect attributes and a declaration of his amazing judicial works. In their praise, they refer to his:

- *Salvation.* The mention of salvation includes God's ultimate work of saving rebellious and lost sinners from their spiritual deadness and moral depravity and, proximately, to his saving his Church (all the saints) out of the clutches of Satanic persecuting forces.
- *Glory.* God is totally and absolutely glorious; glory cannot be *added* to him; not even by holy angels and saved sinners. So, when the assembly in heaven ascribes glory to God (Rev 4.9, 11; Rev 5.12, 13;

Rev 7.12), and when we on earth ascribe glory to him (Rev 1.6; Rev 11.13; Rev 14.7), they and we are recognizing him for what he is—the only one worthy of worship (Rev 4.11; Rev 5.12).

- *Power.* Likewise, power cannot be added to the omnipotent God. Thus, when creatures declare that power belongs to him, they concede their pride and self-declared autonomy and bow before the only one who is to be worshipped (Ex 20.3).
- *Just and true judgements.* No one is punished by God for what he does not deserve. Every person deserves everlasting damnation because he is born a sinner and has broken God's Law from the moment of his first conscious thought. There is no provision in God's judicial procedure for an appeal to a lack of knowledge, since all men know God's righteous decrees and have chosen to disobey them (Rom 1.18-23). And everyone is punished precisely as he deserves (Heb 2.2). Even those who have been saved through grace are punished as they deserve. However, their punishment has been delivered upon a substitute—the Lord Jesus Christ—who vicariously received their punishment through his death on the cross.
- *Vindication of believers.* When he destroys Babylon, God avenges the “blood of his servants” (an allusion to 2 Ki 9.7). We noted previously that similar words, “blood of prophets and of saints” (Rev 18.24), are a figure of speech that includes the entire spectrum of persecution that Babylon inflicts on the Church. The destruction of Babylon demonstrates the integrity of the faith of the saints and answers their appeal for justice and vindication (Rev 6.10; Ps 79.10).

The worshippers ratify their statements about God with a solemn ‘amen’, to confess their trust in him and to add emphasis to their praise-worship.

The reason for their worshipping God is their observation of and reflection upon God's just work in judging Babylon. Those who believe that the fall of Babylon is a pending one-time event, understand the words in the past tense, “for he has judged”, to be merely a prophetic form of announcing absolute certainty of a future event. However, while the *final* demise of the entire system that Babylon represents will occur when Christ returns, all temporal instantiations of Babylon have been and are being judged and destroyed.

God judges and destroys *every* temporal manifestation of Babylon because of her: pride, idolatry, autonomy, and sensuality (Rev 18.5-8); deceptive sorcery (Rev 18.23); and persecution of the prophets and saints (Rev 16.6; Rev 17.6; Rev 19.2). The worshippers briefly summarize these reasons by identifying her immorality (e.g., sexual perversions associated with the cults in John's day and the pursuit of all forms of sexual perversion in our own day) and her persecution of God's servants (e.g., by pagan Rome at the time of John, papal Rome during the Reformation, and by Islamic terrorists today).

The worshippers state that the smoke of Babylon's destruction “goes up forever and ever”. God may use literal fire to destroy instances of Babylon (as when Rome burned in 64 AD). However, this is a symbolic description (Rev 18.9, 18) of destruction, applied to the temporal instances of Babylon (e.g., pagan Rome and modern equivalents such as Beijing and Washington), that indicates that her shame before God continues for as long as time endures. However, it is also a prophetic description of the final destruction of spiritual Babylon as she is destroyed in the actual fire that will consume the entire cursed created order (2 Pt 3.10) and of the everlasting punishment that she will experience when she is cast into the lake of fire (Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10, 14-15) along with Satan, his demons, and all men who have lusted after her power and pleasures (Mt 3.12; Mt 25.41).

Previously Jesus commanded all believers to rejoice over the fall of Babylon (Rev 18.20). Now, he commands us (God's servants small and great), to fear God. This ‘fear’ is intended primarily to be a reverence or awe for God, because of the works that he has accomplished. This ‘fear’ is displayed through praise-worship. Thus, Jesus exhorts us to join with the assembly in heaven and to praise our God (Ps 115.13; Ps 134.1). The reason for our praise-worship is because the Judge of all the earth shall do what is just (Gen 18.25; Dt 32.4). Thus, when we sing the Psalms we worship God by rejoicing over his holy and just judgements (Ps 94.1-2; Ps 96.13; Ps 98.9; Ps 106.42-48). Amen, hallelujah!

Hallelujah!

(Rev 19.1, 3-4, 6)

The only place in which the word ‘hallelujah’ appears in the NT is in this chapter. It is also the only place the word occurs in most of the commonly used English translations. In the OT, the phrase appears only in the Psalms, where it is usually translated into English as ‘praise the LORD’. ‘Hallelujah’ is a transliterated phrase, made up of the Hebrew words ‘hallel’, which means ‘praise’, and ‘jah’, which is an abbreviation of the covenant name of God, Yahweh or Jehovah.

The phrase ‘praise yah’ is used about twenty-five times in the Psalms (Ps 104.35; Ps 105.45; Ps 106.48; Ps 111.1; Ps 112.1; Ps 113.1, 9; Ps 115.18; Ps 116.19; Ps 117.2; Ps 135.1, 3, 21; Ps 146.1, 10; Ps 147.1, 20; Ps 148.1, 14; Ps 149.1, 9; Ps 150.1, 6). It is used as an opening or closing imperative, and as an exclamation in the midst of a few of the Psalms. In four of the Psalms (Ps 135.1, 21; Ps 147.1, 20; Ps 149.1, 9; Ps 150.1, 6), it is used as both an opening and closing statement. It is the very last words of the Psalter.

In the last recorded words of the assembled heavenly multitude, near the end of God’s entire written revelation for mankind, they praise God with ‘hallelujah’, using a word that is derived from the Psalms. This teaches that:

- All of the rational creation of angels and saints in heaven join in the worship of God, using an expression that occurs *only* in the Psalms, thus indicating that Psalms are not only suitable for the praise of God, but are required to be used in his praise.
- The selection of this word from the Psalms indicates that the Psalms were well known to John and to the NT churches in Asia Minor.
- The word ‘hallelujah’ appears in the Greek translation of the Psalms, which the early NT churches, outside of exclusively Hebrew-speaking congregations, would have used as their book of praise. Through singing of the Psalms, the word passed into more general usage in the Church.
- The Psalms provide material for the praise of God, that the church on earth needs to use for worshipping its Creator and redeemer.

It has been suggested that the introduction of the word ‘hallelujah’ at the end of the sequence of John’s visions, anticipates a time when the Jews will be converted *en masse*. However, this is looking in the wrong direction. Rather, the use of the word indicates that the glories of believing Israel (the covenant, the promised Messiah, justification by faith, the oracles, and the Psalms) have become the treasured possession of the universal Church.

The word ‘hallelujah’ is one of the few words that has become universally recognized across all Christian communities, regardless of the languages they speak. It is one of a few words that connects Christians from every culture. For example, if you encountered a person from a distant land (e.g., Tibet), who noticed that you had a Bible in your knapsack and approached you and uttered a question such as, “Christ?” or “Jesus?”, and you responded with a nod of the head, he would in turn declare “Hallelujah!”. You would have an instant bond with that person that would continue into the ages of the ages.

Many English translations of the Psalms use the expression ‘praise the LORD’ instead of ‘hallelujah’. As we noted previously (see, [*The Living One Died and Yet Lives*](#)), the word ‘LORD’ is a translation of the Hebrew consonants YHWH (‘jahweh’), or for its abbreviation YH (‘jah’), which is one of God’s self-appellations and refers to his self-existence as the “I AM” (Ex 3.14). Jesus used this self-appellation (Jn 6.35; Jn 8.12, etc.) to declare that he is God. The use of ‘hallelujah’ in Revelation provides us with an Apostolic example of how we should refer to and worship our Sovereign:

- The repeated use of ‘hallelujah’ by the heavenly multitude, following the destruction of Babylon and

the lament of her earthly lovers (Rev 18.9-19), forms a marked contrast between the citizens of the *City of God* and the *City of Man*. The first use of ‘hallelujah’ in the Psalms occurs in the context of God’s final judgement and punishment of wicked sinners (Ps 104.35). Psalm 149.6-9 also voices this theme. Thus, the heavenly host praises God for his just judgement and for vindicating the cause of the redeemed against their persecuting enemies. The OT saints were encouraged to sing the Psalms to praise the “God who judges on earth” (Ps 58.10-11). The NT saints join with them as we also use the Church’s enduring hymnbook—the Psalter.

- ‘Hallelujah’ (in Hebrew) is used in the Psalms to acknowledge the worthiness of God to be worshiped (Ps 148.1; Ps 150.1, 6) and to reflect on his works (Ps 111.1) of rescuing his people from Egypt (Ps 106.48; Ps 135.1, 21), caring for the downcast (Ps 113.1, 9), sustaining and blessing his people (Ps 112.1; Ps 115.18; Ps 146.1, 10), hearing their pleas (Ps 116.19), and loving them with a steadfast love (Ps 117.2).
- The use of the word ‘hallelujah’ here in Revelation may be an allusion to its use in the Hallel Psalms 113-118, which were sung by the pilgrims as they made their way to the festivals in Jerusalem. Immediately following the outburst of hallelujah-praise in this chapter, the pilgrims arrive at the everlasting festival in the new Jerusalem and are invited to attend the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19.7-9).

In dark times, the entire Church can be encouraged and sustained in its faith and dependence on God, by singing the Biblical ‘hallelujah choruses’ of the Psalter.

The Marriage of the Lamb

(Rev 19.6-7, 9)

The great assembled heavenly multitude praises God with a loud voice, that is as thunderous as a massive waterfall, because he has destroyed Babylon (Rev 19.1-5). They also praise him for establishing the kingdom of Jesus Christ. The use of ‘Lord’ in the phrase, “the Lord our God the Almighty reigns”, is a reference to the second person of the Trinity (Rev 1.8; Rev 11.17; Rev 15.3) who is the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 17.14; Rev 19.16). Jesus reigns now, since at his resurrection the Father established him as the ruler over all the nations of the earth, and over the entire universe (Ps 110.1; Phil 2.8-11), in fulfilment of OT prophecy (Is 9.1-7), including in many of the Psalms that we sing in worship (Ps 47.3, 6-8; Ps 93.1; Ps 96.10; Ps 97.1). Thus, the Church in heaven and on the earth, in every generation since the ascension of Jesus into heavenly glory, rejoices and exalts (Ps 64.10) that he has conquered death and Satan, and gives him glory—that is, they honour and praise him for his works of salvation, preserving of his people, and his acts of governing providence.

The praising multitude rejoices over specific attainments—the marriage of the Lamb to his betrothed Bride and the accompanying marriage supper. The marriage of the Lamb has *come*. It is not in the future; not anticipatory. Christ is united in a complete and inseparable union with his Bride *now*, likened to the intimacy of a marriage relationship (Is 54.1-8; Hos 2.14-20; Mt 25.1-11; Jn 3.29; Eph 5.25). His Bride is the true and faithful Church—all those who have believed in him, have placed their trust in his work on the cross, and have repented of their sins—a marked contrast to the adulterous prostitute Babylon. Some writers on this section attempt to apply the Jewish approach to betrothal and marriage and suggest that Christians who are now alive are living in the betrothal period and that the marriage will be consummated when Christ returns or when individual believers are taken into heaven. However, this idea misses the intent of God’s election of his people. All believers have been betrothed to Jesus from before the foundation of the world. The marriage of Christ with his Church was formally enacted when he conquered Babylon through his death and resurrection. Individuals are united to him in marriage upon their conversion. Of course, there is a temporal aspect to the marriage union. As long as time continues, it is an ongoing process because some individuals who are betrothed to him are not yet born and will make a declaration of their faith in him at a future time. And there is also a future aspect in which the remainder of the Church on the earth will shed

their mortal bodies, will be purified (Eph 5.26-27), and will be taken into heaven, never to be separated from the glory of the Lamb.

In every culture, eating meals together is a symbol of intimate fellowship among members of a family and their friends. And, as long as history has recorded accounts of marriages, there have been meals, as feasts, associated with the wedding ceremonies. Jesus attended one of these feasts at a wedding in Cana of Galilee (Jn 2.1-2). The marriage between Christ and his Church is also celebrated with a feast that indicates that his assembled people have intimate fellowship with him (Rev 3.20). In the early Church, the observance of the Lord's Supper appears to have been associated with a communal fellowship ('agape') meal (1 Cor 11.17-34). For members of the Church who are still on the earth, this feast is largely spiritual, although the heavenly feast is prefigured by the physical elements of the Lord's Supper. However, in heaven the feast will be both spiritual and physical. Jesus said, during the institution of the Lord's Supper, that he would not drink again of the fruit of the vine until he drank it with the disciples in his Father's kingdom (Mt 26.29). In our resurrected bodies with Jesus, also in his resurrected body, we will enjoy an actual fellowship meal together.

Some interpreters make a false distinction between the Bride who is married to Christ (Rev 19.7) and the invited guests (Rev 19.9)—suggesting that the Bride is composed of ethnic Jews and the invited guests are Gentiles. However, these verses do not speak of different groups of believers. All believers in Christ are his brides (Mt 25.1-13)—collectively, his Bride—who are wearing the proper wedding garments (Rev 19.7-8; Mt 22.11-14) and are united with him in marriage. The invited guests to the marriage *supper*, are the same individuals who are married to Christ. Both metaphors portray the intimacy of the union that all believers have with him and also the fellowship they have with him. The first focuses on the corporate nature of the Church, and the second on the individuals who make up the Church. A similar two-sided image is found in chapter 12, where the Church is portrayed both as the woman and as her seed. The metaphors of the marriage and the marriage supper also indicate that the Church, as a community of believers, not only has fellowship with Jesus, but with one another. At the time of John, wedding feasts could last an entire week. However, the marriage supper of the Lamb is everlasting.

God's sovereign initiative in saving the elect is implied by the word 'invited' (Rev 19.9). The Greek word translated as 'invited' is from the same root as the word that is translated as 'called' elsewhere, where it applies to the elect (Rev 17.4; Rom 1.6-7). Thus, those who are married to Christ and are invited to his marriage supper, are those for whom he died. They are the ones who have been blessed as the recipients of God's grace (Eph 2.5; 2 Tim 1.9). Thus, the angel instructs John to record the words that he has heard from the multitude about the marriage of the Lamb, since they are words of encouragement for the persecuted Church, which are affirmed as "the true words of God".

The Bride's Preparation for Marriage with the Lamb

(Rev 19.7-8)

People often comment that brides look particularly beautiful on their wedding day. The source of their exceptional beauty can be attributed to their wedding gowns, the extra care taken to prepare their hair and makeup, and the inner joy that radiates from their faces. It is no different for the Bride of Christ—the Church. She is beautiful on her wedding day, because of her pure white gown of righteousness, her preparation through obedience and the continued maintenance of her testimony in the face of persecution, and her inner spiritual joy from a renewed heart.

Some commentators conclude that these verses refer to meritorious human works, because of the words 'made herself ready', 'clothe herself' and 'righteous deeds'. In response, many commentators take care to defend the doctrine of justification by faith alone, through grace alone. However, the book of Revelations is not a systematic theology textbook. It is a series of revelatory visions given to Christ's Bride to encourage

her to be faithful while facing persecuting forces sent by Satan through his beasts and the prostitute Babylon. These verses are not the place to attempt to establish doctrinal definitions or standards relating to the process of salvation. For the doctrine of justification, we should turn to other passages, such as Romans 3.21-31; Romans 5.12-21; Ephesians 2.1-10; and Philippians 3.1-11.

What we observe in these verses is a delicate balance between two causes of the saints' marriage union with Christ, one ultimate, and the other proximate:

- The grace and work of God that draws sinners to Christ (Jn 6.44, 65) and to marriage (union) with him (Rev 19.9), and grants and supplies (Rev 3.18) to the Church the garments of salvation (Rev 19.8).
- A human responsibility to exhibit a necessary faith response (Mk 1.15; Acts 20.21) to the Holy Spirit's converting call. This action is a voluntary act since God the Holy Spirit does not force conversion on anyone but makes a person willing to offer himself to Christ (Ps 110.3).

Paul identifies this balance when he indicates that we are saved by God through grace and are empowered by him to perform righteous works (Eph 2.8-10; Phil 2.12-13).

John observes that the Bride is clothed in "fine linen, bright, and pure". The Greek in this passage uses a special word for 'linen' that indicates that it was not the ordinary course-grained linen (canvas) used for day-to-day activities, but a more costly fabric made with finer threads (Rev 18.12, 16; Lk 16.19). Common, untreated, linen had a light beige hue, but the expensive, fine linen was bleached and appeared as a pure white. The whiteness of the Bride's garments indicates that she has washed them in the blood of the lamb (Rev 7.14) and is holy and that she does not wear the gaudy and obscene apparel of the prostitute—Babylon (Rev 17.1, 4).

The Bride has made herself ready for her marriage with the Lamb by clothing herself with the fine white linen, which is "the righteous deeds of the saints". Wearing the white linen garments of holiness is a requirement for entering into marriage with the Lamb (Rev 16.15) and also a reward for being married to him and being received into his presence (Rev 3.4-5; Rev 6.11). To be prepared for marriage with the Lamb, the Bride must first appear clothed in a pure white robe—the required wedding garment (Mt 22.11-14). This means that all the saints must:

- Produce righteous deeds as evidence of being justified and definitively sanctified; not performed as an attempt to gain a right standing before God but performed because they have a right standing in Christ.
- Provide evidence that they are walking with Christ. This evidence is the righteous deeds (good works) that God has prepared, so that they can walk in them (Eph 2.10). A good tree produces good fruit (Mt 7.16-20).
- Obey the commandments of God. Jesus indicated that anyone who loves him will keep his commandments (Jn 14.15)—which are summarized in the *Ten Commandments*, exemplified by his life, and illustrated through his teaching (e.g., in the *Sermon on the Mount*). Right standing at the marriage altar with the Lamb is achieved through right living throughout the Christian life.
- Acknowledge that they will never be perfect in this life, but nevertheless have a true desire for perfection. Thus, they must face the ongoing struggle in this life of desiring to do righteous deeds, while finding that the remnants of sin hinder them from faithful obedience (Rom 7.7-25).
- Be counter-cultural, resisting the intoxicating wine of Babylon (Rev 17.2; Rev 18.3). Christlike living is being not conformed to the world, but is living a transformed life, the result of having a transformed mind (Rom 12.2).
- Persevere in their faith throughout a life of trials. Receiving white robes, elsewhere in Revelation, is associated with a holiness that is the result of a test of faith—enduring through persecution, even to death (Rev 6.9-11) and holding to their testimony (witness) to Jesus Christ (Rev 12.11, 17; Rev 19.10).

Since the Bride of Christ is the Church, which is made up of an innumerable multitude of individuals (Rev 7.9), the Bride's wedding gown is composed of all of the righteous deeds of all the saints throughout history.

Every righteous deed performed for Christ, or his people (Mt 25.40) has been woven into the Bride's pure white, fine linen robe.

God, the Only True Object of Worship

(Rev 19.10; Rev 22.8-9)

John was overwhelmed by the revelatory vision he had received about the destruction of Babylon and the reception of the Bride to Christ's marriage supper. In his state of euphoria, he fell at the feet of the angel who had been interpreting the vision for him, as a sign of humble respect. He had previously fallen at the feet of the glorified Jesus (Rev 1.17) and probably made a mistake and thought that the angel was Jesus. That he made the same mistake twice, indicates that it is difficult to distinguish the glorious angels (those appearing with a human-like form) from the resurrected Christ in his bodily form, rather than that he was influenced by the angel-worshipping cults among the Jews and pagans of his day.

In John's cultural context, people were required to fall down (kneeling and placing their foreheads on the ground) before important personages—a practice derived from the claim and widely-held belief that royals were divine or descendants of the gods. For example, in ancient Persia, Haman expected Mordecai to bow before him (Est 2.2-3). However, the angel rebuked John for falling at his feet informing him that he also was a fellow creature, thereby indicating that the nature of his respect, even for an angel, was inappropriate. This teaches us that we must be careful to distinguish between the message and the messenger, and between showing respect for a person, or a person's office, and of falling into improper forms of honouring creatures.

The angel indicates his own creaturehood by informing John that he is a fellow 'servant' with John, his brother believers, and his fellow prophets (i.e., those who had been entrusted by Jesus with communicating the NT to the Church; Rom 1.1; 1 Pt 1.1). Because of the negative connotations we have with the word 'slave', from the wicked enslavement of Africans in American history, our English translations generally tone down the word 'slave', used in the Greek, by translating it with the word 'servant'. Without doubt, the Greek word 'slave' has a range of semantic meanings, but the angel is not informing John that he and John were hired workers who had an option to serve Jesus or to hire out to someone else. He is stating that he, along with all the holy angels, are bound to Jesus as 'bondservants' just as John and his fellow apostles were, and all the saints are, who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

Angels are not to be worshipped because they are creatures, and God has explicitly stated that no created thing is to be worshiped (Ex 20.4-6). If holy angels are not to be worshiped, then certainly other objects, such as unholy persons, animals, and inanimate objects are not to be worshiped. This can be extended to any form of idolatry, which was a problem in John's day (Rev 2.14-15, 20-21; Rev 9.20), and continues to be a problem in our day—as evidenced by the prevalence of false religions, interest in astrology and the spirit realm, infatuation with celebrities, anti-God materialism that espouses chance as the creator, the veneration of saints, and the encroachment of false forms of worship into the Church's liturgy. This teaches us how easy it is for mankind (including us!) to embrace false worship.

The angel provides an additional specific reason for refusing worship. He says that, with John, he is a fellow bondservant of Jesus, who holds to the "testimony of Jesus" (Rev 19.10) and keeps the "words of this book" (Rev 22.9). He declares that his purpose as a messenger of Jesus (the Greek word transliterated into English as 'angel', means 'messenger') is to communicate revelation and explain the visions that John has been seeing and hearing so that it can be recorded for the Church. Along with John, the angel believed in the truth of the revelation from God. He did not fall from heaven with Satan and the other rebellious angels but remained faithful to God. Likewise, he expects John and the saints to maintain their commitment to the revelation, even as they face persecution from the followers of Babylon, the prostitute.

A reason that John is not to worship the angel is appended to Revelation 19.10—because of "the testimony

of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy”. Some suggest that these concluding words are an explanation added by John. The ESV follows this suggestion by excluding the statement from the quotation of the angel’s words. However, it is probably better to understand the statement as a reinforcement added by the angel. All true prophecy (whether predictive or explanatory) originates with, and is breathed out by, the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3.16; 2 Pt 1.21), with a primary purpose to reveal Jesus—i.e., all of Scripture testifies or witnesses to Jesus (Lk 24.27, 44). Thus, John is told that he must not worship the angel because all worship is to be directed only to God, as a witness to the truth about Jesus as the God-man, as it has been revealed by the Holy Spirit (Jn 14.26; Jn 16.12-14).

In contrast to the angel speaking with John, Satan, a fallen angel, desires to be worshiped (Mt 4.9) to challenge God’s right as the Creator to be the only object of worship (Ex 20.3). Thus, the angel commands John, and us, to worship God; and by an obvious logical conclusion he means worship God *only* (Mt 4.10). The angel’s words are not only a prohibition against idolatry, but a command to worship God, and to worship him correctly. When we worship God correctly, we bear witness to Jesus as God, as the Messiah/Christ, and as the saviour of mankind.

The Rider on a White Horse – His Description

(Rev 19.11-16)

John is given another vision, in which heaven is opened and he sees a rider on a white horse followed by the armies of heaven also riding on white horses. Although John does not state that the leading rider is Jesus, it is universally accepted that these verses describe Jesus—because: 1) this vision follows the revelation of the marriage of the Lamb in the preceding paragraph, 2) of the description of his attributes and role, and 3) of the titles and names he bears.

John describes Jesus with attributes that uniquely qualify him to be the absolute sovereign—the King of kings—who he sees:

- *Riding on white horse.* In a previous vision, John saw a rider on a white horse (Rev 6.2). We considered various options for who that rider might be and concluded that it is Jesus riding out to establish his Messianic kingdom (i.e., his rule on earth between his first and second advents). In almost every instance in Revelation, white is a symbol for holiness and heavenly things. Thus, a rider on a white horse symbolizes a royal dignity that is all powerful and entirely pure.
- *With Eyes like flames of fire.* When the resurrected Lord Jesus was first seen in the visions in Revelation, he was described as standing among the lampstands, which represent his Church. There, John also saw him with eyes like flames of fire (Rev 1.14). These are the all-seeing eyes (Ps 139.3) of the omniscient one; which penetrate to the depths of a human heart (Mt 9.4; Lk 9.47), which no sin can escape, and which determine the appropriate form of judgement for mankind (Dt 4.24; Is 66.15).
- *Crowned with many diadems.* The plurality of his diadems indicates that he is the King of kings (Rev 17.14; Rev 19.16). This is probably an allusion to an ancient custom in which a conqueror would wear the crowns of the kings he had defeated. Since Jesus wears *many* diadems, this indicates that he is the victor over all of his enemies and has immense power and authority over them. The head that once wore the crown of thorns as he was mocked as king of the Jews (Mt 27.29), was officially crowned King of heaven and earth at his resurrection (Phil 2.9-11), as a fulfilment of OT prophecy (Ps 110.1-2; Is 9.6-7). The many diadems with which Jesus is crowned represent Jesus’ sovereignty over:
 - *Space, time, energy, and matter.* Jesus is the Creator of the universe, who holds it together moment by moment (Ps 24.1; Col 1.16-17).
 - *Life and death.* Jesus is the author of all forms of life (Gen 1.20, 24; Gen 2.7), and the sustainer of all life (Rev 1.18; Acts 3.15; Acts 17.28).
 - *Humans, angels, and demons.* Jesus not only created animals and mankind but is also the creator of angels (some of whom rebelled and are now demons) since they are also creatures (Rev 19.10;

Rev 22.8-9).

- *Heaven, earth, and hell.* Jesus is Lord over every domain that is inhabited by rational creatures (Rev 1.18; Mt 28.18; Acts 7.49)
- *Nations.* Jesus rules over all nations of this world (Ps 2.10-12; Ps 22.28; Ps 110.1; Acts 17.26; Rom 13.1-7), even though kings and governors may deny that it is their responsibility to serve him.

Thus, Jesus as the one universal King is sovereign over everything—a marked contrast to the dragon and the beast who have a finite number of crowns (Rev 12.3; Rev 13.1), indicating their limited and temporary rule over the hearts of mankind.

- *Wrapped in a robe dipped in blood.* There is debate about the source of the blood on his robe. Some suggest that the blood is his own shed on the cross (Rev 7.14; Rev 12.11), or the blood of martyred saints (Rev 16.6; Rev 17.6; Rev 18.24). They claim that this vision of Jesus shows that he conquers, not by killing his enemies but by allowing himself to be killed and by inviting his followers to do the same. However, the symbolic robe dipped in blood appears to be derived from Isaiah (Is 63.1-6), where it is clear that the blood on the conquering hero's garment is that of his enemies whom the LORD has trampled under his feet. Thus, John sees Jesus as a divine warrior-king who conquers his enemies, judges them, and sentences them to everlasting death.
- *Followed by the armies of heaven.* These armies, all arrayed in the white garments of holiness and riding on white horses, consist of the holy angels (Rev 15.6; Dt 33.2; Lk 2.13) and the glorified saints (Rev 3.4-5; Rev 7.13-14). They are not marching out to war, but are participating in the victors' triumph parade in heaven, behind their conquering hero who has meted out justice in righteousness. They have fought their battles—the angels in the spiritual realm (Rev 12.7; Dan 10.20-21; Jude 9) and the saints in the temporal realm (Rev 17.14; Rev 19.8)—and are now receiving their honours before the Father.
- *A sharp sword coming from his mouth.* In previous instances where John saw a sword proceeding from the mouth of Jesus (Rev 1.16; Rev 2.12, 16) we concluded that it represented the word of God that discriminates between good and evil and cuts to the heart of man and exposes his inner nature. This imagery continues to apply in this vision, since it is the sword of just discernment. However, John adds a dimension—it is also the sword of just judgement and punishment by which Jesus strikes down the nations that are his enemies. We can combine the two ideas. Jesus judges mankind by the word of God and sentences them according to that word.

By these attributes Jesus is qualified to carry out his role as sovereign over all of creation. We will next consider the means and methods by which Jesus executes his office as king, as John sees them in this vision.

The Rider on a White Horse – His Names and Titles

(Rev 19.11-16)

A series of names or titles of Jesus are identified in this vision, each of which has been mentioned previously in Revelation or by John in his Gospel. These names are given for our instruction and help.

Faithful and True. Jesus is assigned two attributive titles, to be understood as a single name. Previously, when these words were applied to Jesus (Rev 3.14) they indicated that as a witness his words are true (what he reports can be relied upon) and that what he speaks is the truth (Rev 21.5; Rev 22.6). By calling him “Faithful and True”, John extends the application of these attributes beyond Jesus' spoken words to his essential character. Jesus is *the* faithful one and he is *the* true one. His fidelity is part of his essence. He cannot be unfaithful because he is God, and God cannot abandon his steadfast love that he has directed toward his elect. Likewise, he is truth personified (Jn 1.14; Jn 14.6; 1 Jn 5.20) because he is God, and God cannot lie (Num 23.19; Titus 1.2; Heb 6.18). Jesus' faithfulness has been demonstrated throughout the ages, for example, as he saved his people from Egypt or brought them back from the Babylonian captivity. Many Christians since then have given their testimonies and declared the faithfulness of their Lord as they depended upon him in faith. Likewise, the many explicit Biblical prophecies that have been fulfilled

indicate the truthfulness of God's word. Thus, the readers of Revelation, in every generation, can be encouraged—Jesus is faithful to his covenant promises and will bring them through persecution and death, vindicate their reliance upon him, and honour them with great rewards as they follow him in his victory parade.

An unknown name. Jesus has a name written on his forehead—inferred from the mention of the diadems being placed on his head and from other passages in Revelation (e.g., Rev 7.3; Rev 14.1; Rev 22.4)—that no one knows but himself. John may have seen a script that he did not recognize, or text that he was unable to decipher. This name for Jesus is not unknown because it is confidential—John sees it emblazoned on the rider. Rather, it is unknown because:

- It alludes to the nature of Jesus, as the God-man, which is unfathomable by mankind since it is infinite. Thus, Jesus declares that no one can know him except the Father (Lk 10.22).
- In a cultural context where knowing the name of someone or some thing (e.g., a pagan deity) was viewed as giving the possessor of the name control over the object, it indicates that Jesus cannot be controlled by a created being and is the absolute sovereign over heaven and earth.

The Word of God. John introduces Jesus as the Word in the opening of his Gospel. He is the only Biblical author who uses this name for Jesus. In this instance, the name 'The Word of God' could be understood as both the word *from* God and the word *about* God—Jesus is both the message from God and the revealer of God's character. The choice of the word 'word' to identify Jesus reveals that God:

- *Uses words.* God expresses his thoughts through words within himself. For example, the members of the Trinity communicate with each other through words (Gen 1.26; Ps 110.1).
- *Creates through words.* Materialists, who believe that there is no supernatural realm, claim that matter created minds purely by random events, without any form of communicated information. Yet, the Bible teaches that the intelligent mind of God—i.e., mind over matter—created the material universe through spoken words (Gen 1.3 6, 9).
- *Communicates through words.* God communicates to rational beings outside of himself, through words. For example, he delivered the Ten Commandments as words (in the OT they are called the 'ten words'; Ex 34.28; Dt 4.13; Dt 10.4) and he revealed his will for mankind in the Bible, which consists of words, not drawings, diagrams, charts, or pictures.
- *Enacts verbal covenants.* God makes covenants (Gen 9.9) and seals them with promissory words (e.g., Gen 3.15; Gen 17.2).
- *Reveals himself through the Living Word.* Jesus came to teach the truth about God's will for mankind, and to preach the Gospel. He ratified his spoken proclamations through his actions—a perfect life and the payment of the penal requirements for sin through his death. Jesus declares the mind and heart of God through words as well as actions.
- *Judges through words.* God executes judgement and delivers justice through the spoken words of the Son (Mt 7.23; Mt 25.41).

King of kings, Lord of lords. This compound title (also mentioned in Rev 17.14) is emblazoned on the thigh of Jesus, where a warrior would wear his sword (Ps 45.3), indicating that he has obtained his right to rule by conquering every enemy that dares to oppose him (Rev 6.2; Ps 2.1-6). His rule is not *of* this world (Jn 18.36) but is *over* this world. It is a spiritual and everlasting rule that transcends all earthly kingdoms (Dan 2.44; Ps 72.16). The rulers of secular states and the prophets of false religions proclaim their autonomy from this rider on a white horse, but they are all subject to Jesus and shall all fall before him, acknowledging his ultimate sovereignty (Phil 2.9-11).

There is no one like Jesus, who bears these names and titles. He is the Lord whom we worship; who conquers Satan, sin, and our enemies; and awaits the time when he can welcome us into his glorious presence forever.

The Rider on a White Horse – His Roles

(Rev 19.11-16)

We have previously encountered the rider on the white horse (Rev 6.2), who is Jesus. When we saw him then, he was crowned with a single crown and was heading out to war—conquering and to conquer. While he continues to engage in war against his enemies, we now see him as the victor, wearing many crowns—the crowns he has taken from his enemies whom he has defeated thus far—marching in a triumphal procession through the avenues of heaven.

The warfare he continues to wage—until the end of time—is a spiritual war (Eph 6.12) that takes place between Christ with his people on earth and Satan and his demonic hordes and the followers of the beast and false prophet. The objective of the war is to advance good in the world and to defeat open or secret evil in its many forms, including false religions, sexual immorality, human pride, and all other manifestations of wickedness—thus we pray, “Your kingdom come”. One of the primary means he uses in this war is the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6.17), by which he dispels spiritual darkness with the light of the Gospel of redemption (Mt 4.16; Jn 1.5). Jesus could end this war at any time, if he so pleased. At some points in history, when evil appears to be in the ascendancy, his saints beg him to end the war with a definitive stroke, and they cry out, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22.20). However, his glorious purposes are still being prosecuted in this spatial-temporal realm as he shows the world the foolishness of their unbelief and false philosophies and the amazing faith and fortitude of the saints as he continues to save a vast multitude that no one can number (Rev 7.9).

While he continues to execute war in this world, he fulfills other roles besides being a warrior prince. His other roles include:

- *Judging mankind.* Mankind has an unavoidable appointment with death (2 Sam 14.14; Ecc 3.2) and judgement (Acts 17.31; Heb 9.27). Upon death, each of us must appear before the judge of all the earth. For the unbeliever, this should be the most solemn of truths, since he will have no answer to give to the almost endless list of charges he will face for breaking God’s holy law. For the believer in Jesus, this will not be a terrible experience, since Jesus himself will not only act as his judge, but will arise as his advocate, and stand in his place. Amazingly, Jesus will say to the Father, “This one has been sanctified, because he has washed his robes in my blood.” (Rev 7.14) As a judge, Jesus judges in righteousness. John alludes to the description of the Messiah as the coming righteous judge as portrayed in the Psalms (Ps 9.8; Ps 72.2; Ps 96.13; Ps 98.9) and by Isaiah (Is 11.4). His judgement is not tainted by human proclivities to play favourites or to pervert justice but is described as being righteous. This means that it is marked by an excellence in justice, integrity, and perfection. Jesus makes no mistakes when he judges against God’s holy and righteous standards.
- *Ruling over the nations.* Kings, presidents, and prime ministers (whether they have been elected or have seized power) believe that they rule by the will of the people or by their own authority. They are mistaken. They have been appointed by the providential governance of God (Ps 75.7; Dan 2.21; Dan 4.17; Rom 13.1), who is executing his plans for establishing a kingdom that can never be destroyed (Dan 2.44). This kingdom is ruled by the Messianic king, Jesus (Ps 110.1-2). In fulfilment of OT prophecy (Ps 2.8-9), Jesus rules over all the nations of mankind with a rod of iron (Rev 2.27). In accordance with Psalm 2.8-9, Jesus breaks (overthrows) the nations which do not serve him, as if they are pieces of pottery. Depending on the vowels supplied by an interpreter, the Hebrew word in Psalm 2.9 can mean ‘break’ or ‘rule’. John supplies a vocalization (also found in the Greek translation of the OT, used at the time of John) of the Hebrew consonants found in Psalm 2.9, and states that the rider on the white horse will ‘rule’ over the nations with his rod of iron. Thus, the Holy Spirit, through John, informs us that Jesus is the ultimate ruler over the nations, as the King of kings. All earthly kingdoms are temporary, and they will be conquered by his kingdom and ruled by him. Ultimately, only Christ and his kingdom can prevail. Satan has only temporary sovereignty over men (Jn 12.31; 2 Cor 4.4) and

must cede it to Christ.

- *Dispensing punishment on the wicked.* The imagery described by the words, “the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” (Rev 14.10, 19), refers to God’s pure and holy anger that is poured out as punishment on rebellious and unrepentant sinners. This punishment is:
 - *Deserved.* The punishment of the wicked is what they deserve (Heb 2.2); no more, no less. Some people claim that God is unfair in the way he dispenses punishment (for example, on pagans who have never heard the Gospel). However, Paul makes it clear, all people know God’s righteous decrees and are punished for disobeying them (Rom 1.18-22).
 - *Terrible.* The punishment of the wicked is terrible beyond anything that we can experience or imagine (Mt 8.12; Mt 13.42; Mt 24.51; Mt 25.30).
 - *Capital.* The punishment of the wicked is ultimately everlasting death, from which there can be no escape (Dan 12.2; Mt 25.46).
 - *Avenging.* The punishment of the wicked avenges the saints who placed their trust in Christ, against all the pernicious persecution meted out upon them for their testimony (Rev 12.11, 17; Rev 19.10; Rev 20.4) while they lived in this world.

Righteousness

(Rev 19.11)

In the previous meditation, we observed that Jesus judges in righteousness. He also makes war in righteousness. This means in total that he punishes his enemies exactly as they deserve. This is the only occurrence in Revelation of the word ‘righteousness’. The word ‘righteous’ also occurs (Rev 15.4; Rev 19.8; Rev 21.11), as does a related word from the same Greek root—‘just’ (Rev 15.3; Rev 16.5, 7; Rev 19.2). The concept of righteousness is an important Biblical concept, so we will now consider it.

The word ‘righteous’, comes from Old English, and is made up of the word ‘right’, with a ‘ous’ ending that was appended later, which gives the idea of abundance (like the ending of ‘bounteous’). So, the word ‘righteous’ means simply, ‘very or abundantly right’. The appending of an additional suffix, ‘ness’, modifies the adjective to refer to a state or condition of being very right-ness.

The first time the word ‘righteous’ appears in the OT is when it is applied to Noah (Gen 6.9; Gen 7.1), who is said to have been “a righteous man, blameless in his generation”. The Hebrew word appears to have its origin from a straight edge (e.g., of a reed), which was used during construction to ensure that a course of stones on a wall was aligned properly. From this, we can infer that the meaning of ‘righteous’, when applied to a person in the OT, includes the idea of being straight, or compliant, against a standard (Dt 6.25; Ps 119.7; Ezk 18.9). Thus, in the OT a human being is ‘righteous’ if he is straight (i.e., he obeys) the commandments (the standard) of God. Similarly, in Greek, the word translated as ‘righteous’ is applied to someone who is conformed to the expectations of a standard (Mt 5.20; Rom 2.13), such as that imposed by an authority or expected by society. Thus, a person who is ‘righteous’ is one who is morally upright (Dt 4.8; Ps 32.11; Ps 33.1; Ps 64.10), good (Prov 2.20), truthful (Ps 19.9; Ps 119.142), and just (Dt 16.18-19) in every situation.

The word ‘righteous’ appears to have been first applied to God by Job, in the oldest of the OT books. Job ascribes righteousness to his Maker and refers to the Almighty as abundant in righteousness (Job 36.3; Job 37.23). Elsewhere in the Bible we find numerous references to God as being righteous or to his righteousness. For example:

- He is called righteous or one who exhibits righteousness (2 Chron 12.6; Ps 7.9, 17; Ps 11.7; Ps 22.30-31; Ps 35.28; Ps 116.5; Is 45.21)
- He is identified as a righteous judge (Ps 7.11; Ps 35.24; Is 58.2; 2 Tim 4.8)
- All of his works are declared to be righteous (1 Sam 12.7; Ps 11.7; Ps 145.17; Dan 9.14)

- His laws are to be cherished as righteous (Ps 19.9; Ps 119.75, 137)
- He is also called the Righteous One (Prov 21.12; Is 24.16). Since Jesus is also called the Righteous One (Is 53.11; Acts 3.14; Acts 7.52; Acts 22.14), this identifies him as the LORD.

God chose the term ‘righteous’ to describe his nature, since his character, laws, and actions provide the straight standard against which all things are to be compared and by which he judges the actions of men.

John informs us that Jesus judges in righteousness (Acts 17.31). This means that he is innately righteous and that his judgements are consistent with the holy standard of God’s Law and without any favouritism (Rev 16.5). Jesus is also the King of kings (Rev 19.16). Thus, Jesus is the ultimate Melchizedek (“king of righteousness”) of OT prophecy (Ps 110.4; Heb 5.6). In contrast, mankind since Adam’s sin, is innately unrighteous (Rom 3.10) and it is impossible for a person born as a sinner to perform righteous acts (Gen 6.5). This presents a dilemma: how can God declare any sinner, including Noah, to be righteous?

The answer to this dilemma lies in *imputed* righteousness. God has provided a means of applying righteousness to those who do not deserve it and cannot produce it by themselves. He accomplishes this by:

- Accepting the righteousness of Christ as a substitute for the unrighteous (Rom 5.6-8)—the righteous for the unrighteous (2 Cor 5.21; 1 Pt 3.18).
- Applying the righteousness of Christ to sinners through conversion, which includes faith (Rom 3.22; Rom 4.3, 5, 13, 22) and repentance (Mk 1.15). Righteousness cannot be earned through obeying the Law (since no mere human can obey God’s Law; Rom 3.23; James 2.10). Righteousness can only be obtained through faith in the one—Jesus—who kept God’s Law perfectly (Gal 3.11).
- Producing acts of righteousness (1 Jn 3.7; 2 Tim 3.16; 1 Pt 2.24), and a desire to be righteous (Mt 5.6, 20; 1 Tim 6.11; 2 Tim 2.22), in converted sinners through the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit applied in the new birth (1 Jn 2.29) and through the advocacy of Jesus (1 Jn 2.1).
- Making the saints entirely righteous as they enter the glory of heaven. Thus, Paul can declare that all believers who love the appearing of the righteous judge will be awarded a crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4.8).
- Displaying his righteousness by being both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Rom 3.26).
- Displaying the righteousness of his acts of judgement on his enemies by vindicating his people (2 Chron 6.23; 2 Thess 1.5-6).

Righteousness is an essential attribute of God, which he displays in the administration of his plan and program for redeeming a people for himself.

The Rider on a White Horse – His Heavenly Triumph

(Rev 19.11-16)

Most commentators believe that this section (and the remainder of chapter 19) refers to the second coming of Jesus as the glorious King—compared with his first coming as a humble servant. For example, one commentator says, “As John saw heaven open, he saw prophetically Christ’s second coming and the events which will follow it.” It is also suggested by many that his return will coincide with a great world war; with the centre of the conflict in Israel, including house-to-house battles in Jerusalem. Among those who believe that Jesus will be engaged in this temporal and physical battle, opinions differ as to when he will return—at the beginning of the war, which will rage for seven years, or on the last day of the war to bring it to a conclusion. It is claimed that since he declares that his return will be accompanied by angels (Mt 25.31), the armies of heaven (Rev 19.14) include at least angels. Opinions differ about whether there will be Christians present during this supposed world war. Some claim that believers, with resurrected bodies, will return from heaven with Jesus, also riding upon white horses, and join the in war. To say the least, the idea that Jesus will return to earth to engage in a physical world war is fanciful. At its worst, this idea is dangerous because it leads many in the Church into speculative digressions and panic as they hear the

evening news, and it engenders a faulty understanding of the message of Revelation.

This passage (Rev 19.11-16) does not provide a prophetic vision about the return of Jesus to earth in bodily form, either before the judgement day, or on the judgement day—the last day this universe will exist. We need to observe carefully what John says—i.e., we need to read what is on the page, and not read ideas into it. John does not say that he saw heaven opened and the rider on the white horse *coming down* to the earth. He says that he saw heaven opened, and there he saw a rider in heaven being followed by the armies of heaven. This distinction may appear to be subtle, but John has been careful to indicate where what he sees in his visions is portrayed as taking place. For example, when a vision displays something coming from heaven, John tells us that he sees something “coming down” from heaven (Rev 10.1; Rev 18.1; Rev 20.1; Rev 21.2, 10). When he describes something happening in heaven (Rev 4.1-2; Rev 8.1; Rev 11.15, 19; Rev 12.1, 3, 7, 10; Rev 14.17; Rev 15.1, 5; Rev 19.1) he does not use the words ‘coming down’. When heaven is opened in a vision (as in Rev 19.11) without the accompanying phrase ‘coming down’, then the events of the vision take place in heaven, unless we are told that the actions extend to the earth (e.g., when angels pour out plagues on the earth).

This section does not describe the descent of Jesus to the earth to engage in a physical and temporal world war at the end of the age. Rather it describes the victory (or, triumph) parade of Jesus who has conquered his enemies and is leading his rejoicing armies as they participate with him in the parade. His armies have fought their battles—the angels in the spiritual realm (Rev 12.7; Dan 10.20-21; Jude 9) and the saints in the temporal realm (Rev 17.14; Rev 19.8)—and are now receiving their honours before the Father.

Also, this section does not refer to Jesus coming to earth for a battle, because:

- The battle Jesus (and the saints with him) is engaged in is spiritual, not temporal and physical (Eph 6.12). He does not take up physical weapons to defend his kingdom, nor are his armies to do so.
- The battle (Armageddon) Jesus (and the saints with him) is engaged in is not a single worldwide war at the end of time. It is every battle in which the leaders of nations, under Satan’s thrall and slave mastery, reject God’s Law, enact laws that are subversive to justice and destructive to human life, suppress true worship, introduce false religious practices, and persecute Christians.
- The military imagery of this scene does not correlate with other passages which describe the return of Jesus (Acts 1.11; 1 Thess 4.15-18).
- The angels (the armies of heaven) are not sent to the earth to engage in a physical war but to gather the elect (Mt 13.36-43).
- Jesus will not return to wage a final battle on earth, but to raise the dead (1 Cor 15.51-58; 1 Thess 4.15-18).
- When Jesus returns with his angels, he will not come to engage in a physical battle, or to lead angelic troops into a physical battle, but to execute judgement on his enemies on the day of judgement and to vindicate the saints (Mt 13.41-42, 49; Mt 16.27; Mt 25.31-32; Mk 8.28; 2 Thess 1.6-10; Jude 14-15).
- When Jesus returns in bodily form to this earth, all mankind will be immediately called before his judgement seat to receive their everlasting rewards or punishment, according to their works (Rev 2.23; Rev 20.12). At his return, God does not allocate time for a final battle of even a day’s duration, let alone the supposed seven years, because time (as we know it) will have ended and the entire universe will have been consumed with fire (2 Pt 3.10) and replaced with a new heaven and earth (2 Pt 3.13).

In this vision, Jesus is not shown as a king leading an army, riding out to war; but as a king who has conquered his enemies and is receiving the honour and accolades of heaven. This vision is a reminder that it is not a Caesar who has the power and is victorious and is riding through Babylon in his triumph; it is the King of kings riding through heaven, who is victorious!

The Rider on a White Horse – He Punishes His Enemies

This section is not providing a visionary glimpse into a new event that will occur at a single point in our future (whether temporally near or distant). Nor is it speaking of an event that follows chronologically after the marriage of the Lamb with his Bride, the Church (Rev 19.6-9), and the triumphal march of Jesus, accompanied by the heavenly host (Rev 19.11-16). Rather, this section reveals metaphorically events that are occurring in parallel with events in heaven and provides a brief recapitulation of the spiritual war that Jesus continues to wage—until the end of time—with Satan and his demonic hordes and the followers of the beast and false prophet. This war, and Christ’s victory over his enemies, has been revealed from different perspectives in the visions of the seven seals (Rev 6.1-17; Rev 8.1-5), seven trumpets (Rev 8.6-9.20; Rev 11.15-19), and seven bowls filled with plagues (Rev 15.1-16.21). The primary difference is that this section describes the gruesome end that is reserved for all of Christ’s earthly enemies—the beast and false prophet, manifested by leaders of anti-God governments and false religions, and their followers.

This vision opens with an angel standing in (or on) the sun. Of course, this is symbolic—John does not see an angel who is millions of kilometers tall. From an earthly observer’s perspective, a regular-sized angel is seen hovering in the earth’s sky (Rev 8.13; Rev 14.6) above the sun. He is calling to the carrion birds, which are symbolically circling above the battle scene waiting to see if there will be any people that have died, upon which they can gorge. The angel calls the birds to eat the flesh of the corpses, an image based on the OT prophecy against Gog and Magog (Ezk 39.4, 17-20). The invitation to the “supper of God” is an antithetical parody of the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19.9)—which is indicated by the use of the same wording in both invitations in the Greek (“into the dinner”; Rev 19.9, 17)—implying that the punishment meted out on Christ’s enemies is the flipside of the rewards given to the saints (Mt 25.31-46). Since the angel says, “come, gather”, it indicates that the feast is occurring now, as Christ defeats his enemies, generation by generation, and that their defeat is absolutely certain.

John sees the kings of the earth with their armies assembling to make war against Christ seated on the white horse (Rev 19.11). However, this is not, as many commentators suppose, a one-time call to ‘the last battle’ at the end of time when Satan and his beasts and their followers will attempt to kill all remaining Christians at one time. Rather the war between Satan and Christ and his Church is a spiritual war (Eph 6.12) that has been ongoing since the day Satan tempted Eve to eat the fruit in the garden. We have encountered references to this ongoing war previously in Revelation (Rev 11.7-10; Rev 16.14, 16; Rev 17.13-14). We should observe that in the passage we are now considering, there is no description of a battle, let alone a prolonged war, but only a reference to the enemies of Christ *assembling* for war. This indicates that they are not ultimately successful in their attempt to destroy Christ’s Church. In fact, as this section indicates, Christ defeats and captures them, and consigns them to everlasting punishment. This is a message of hope. Though we may experience times of persecution, the Church will never be overcome by the gates of hell (Mt 16.18).

We see that Christ captures two identified groups of antagonists whom he consigns to punishment:

- *Beast and false prophet.* These are not specific individuals who, some claim, will appear sometime in the future. We have previously identified the first beast as every God-defying and Christ-denying nation that has arisen in every generation (Rev 13.1-2), which has the hubris to claim that it is a god and stands in the place of God. The second beast (also called the false prophet) represents every form of false teaching promulgated by the minds of men (Rev 13.11-12). These systems of anti-God government and pagan religion deceive all mankind who have the mark of the beast on their foreheads and hands (Rev 14.9, 11; Rev 16.2). However, Christ consigns these systems, along with Satan (Rev 20.10), and all who espouse their deceptive ideas, to destruction in the lake of fire that burns with sulphur (Rev 20.10; Dan 7.11)—the lake of fire is a metaphorical picture for hell. They are thrown in ‘alive’, which implies that even while they are still being used actively by Satan to deceive mankind, Jesus deals definitively with them.
- *Rebellious mankind.* John refers to ‘the rest’, by which he means all of mankind who are the followers

of the beast and false prophet (the armies; Rev 19.19) who have worshipped the beast (Rev 13.4). They are slain by the sword that comes from Christ's mouth. We concluded previously that the sword represents the word of God and the just judgement and punishment by which Jesus strikes down the nations that are his enemies. Thus, Jesus defeats his enemies with truth and punishes them with declarations of damnation. Then, their corpses are left for the birds to gorge upon. In the ancient Middle East, burial was normally completed shortly after a person had died (Dt 21.23; Acts 5.7, 9). Leaving corpses exposed to ravenous animals was a symbol of great indignity (1 Ki 13.22; 1 Ki 21.23; 2 Sam 21.10; Jer 16.6). However, this is not the final punishment for those who persist in their rebellion against Christ. They are also consigned to the lake of fire that burns with sulphur (Rev 20.15; Rev 21.8; Mt 13.42, 50). Their final punishment will consist of perpetual spiritual, mental, and physical agony (Mt 8.12; 2 Thess 1.9).

The Thousand Years – A Figurative Temporal Concept (Rev 20.1-7)

Before we consider the meaning and application of the sections of this chapter that deal with the binding of Satan, the saints' reign with Christ, and the first resurrection, we should attempt to determine what John means by the phrase, the 'thousand years', which is mentioned six times in this chapter.

Among theologians and the common people in the early Church, there were a number who believed that the 'thousand years' was to be understood as a literal period that would end around 1000 AD. There was an outbreak of 'millennial fever' among some in Christendom as the calendar approached the end of the 1,000 years from the birth of Christ and again at the end of the 1,000 years after his resurrection. There were also outbreaks of 'millennial fever' in the latter part of the 20th and early 21st century. In particular, many believed that 70 years after the creation of the modern state of Israel (May 14, 1948), Jesus would collect believers through a rapture, in May 2018, and introduce a millennial reign on this earth. However, other theologians, such as Augustine (writing in the early 5th century), have understood the 'thousand years' to be figurative or symbolic. Therefore, are we to understand the 'thousand years' as a literal measure of time or as figurative?

So far, as we have considered the use of the numbers in Revelation, we have interpreted them to be symbolic—e.g., *four* is associated with the earthly created order; *seven* generally implies completeness or perfection; *ten* and *twelve* are also used to represent completeness; *three-and-a-half* represents incompleteness or imperfection; and *144,000* represents a large number (12 X 12, a completeness times a completeness). The number 1,000 is the third power of ten (10 X 10 X 10) and can likely be understood as symbolizing an absolute form of perfection—much like the three-times holy God is absolutely holy (Rev 4.8; Is 6.3). Also, other uses of a *thousand* in Revelation are symbolic (Rev 5.11; Rev 9.16). Thus, we should begin with the premise that the 'thousand years' in Revelation is also to be understood as symbolic.

There are additional reasons for considering the 'thousand years' used here as figurative and not as a literal chronological number of years, including:

- The immediate context in which the 'thousand years' occurs includes numerous figurative references, including, 'key', 'bottomless pit', 'great chain', 'dragon', 'ancient serpent', 'beast', and a mark on the foreheads and on the hands.
- The larger context of Revelation, which is a book of revelatory visions described in a figurative form, implies that the 'thousand years' is also to be understood figuratively.
- All the other occurrences of the specific phrase 'thousand years' in the Bible are figurative (Ps 90.4; Ecc 6.5-6; 2 Pt 3.8), do not have a literal sense, and are a hyperbolic means of referring to a 'long time'.
- Elsewhere in the Bible, the word 'thousand' is often used figuratively (Dt 7.9; Ps 50.10; Ps 68.17; Ps 84.10; Ps 105.8).

- The phrase ‘thousand years’ can be understood to denote an era or age, rather than a specific number of years. Peter appears to use the ‘thousand years’ in this way (2 Pt 3.8)—i.e., to denote a long period of time in contrast to a short period of time.
- The tribulation the saints experience for ‘ten days’ (Rev 2.10) is a short time compared with their glorious reign with Christ for 1,000 years. Since the ‘ten days’ should be understood as figurative and not as a literal period of time, so should the ‘thousand years’.

Some interpreters suggest that we should ignore entirely the temporal aspect of the ‘thousand years’ and understand it to be a concrete phrase used to illustrate a concept—the ultimate victory of Christ and his suffering people over Satan, his demonic hordes, and his earthly worshippers. They suggest that the binding of Satan for a ‘thousand years’ means that he is completely bound and that his subsequent loosing is not to be understood in a chronological sense but in a subordinate sense—i.e., his loosing is subordinate to his binding—and that both occur in parallel. Thus, they say, the activities that Satan conducts while he is ‘loose’ are limited by his having been completely ‘bound’. However, this seems to push the figurative aspect of the ‘thousand years’ too far. It is likely best to understand the ‘thousand years’ and the ‘little while’ as contrasting but indefinite figurative references to some form of temporal realities—one of long duration and the other of short duration. Even if we conclude that the ‘thousand years’ refers to a temporal reality with a beginning and an end, and not only as a metaphorical means of illustrating the reward that the saints will receive, it does not logically follow, as many claim, that it must be a literal thousand-year period.

If we accept the conclusion that the ‘thousand years’ is a figurative reference to a temporal reality, then we should not attempt to limit the ‘thousand years’ to a literal thousand years in history or to some time-period in our future. For example, it would be a mistake to state, as many commentators have, such things as: “This chapter presents the fact that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years.” We will consider the nature of Christ’s reign with the saints, as it is described in this chapter, in a subsequent meditation. However, whatever it means, it does not mean that it must be limited to a literal thousand years.

The Thousand Years – When it Began and Ends (Rev 20.2-7)

In the previous meditation, we determined that the ‘thousand years’ is a figurative reference to a temporal reality. We concluded that we should not limit the period to a literal historical thousand years or to some future, literal time-period. Thus, we next need to ask, when did the figurative temporal ‘thousand years’ begin and when will it end? You may notice that the first part of the question, about the beginning of the ‘thousand years’, is framed in the past tense and the second part is in the future tense. This indicates that the position which will now be presented is that the ‘thousand years’ has already commenced and that it has not yet ended.

The majority of commentators writing on Revelation today, and many who wrote in the recent past, express the view that the ‘thousand years’ has not yet begun. There are varying beliefs about what will initiate this supposedly future ‘thousand years’. Some believe that Christ will return to earth to inaugurate an earthly reign, to be centred in physical Jerusalem, which will last for one thousand years. Some who hold to this view believe that a rapture of living believers, with an accompanying resurrection of dead ‘church-age’ believers, will coincide with a special return of Christ ‘in the air’. This will supposedly commence Christ’s ‘thousand years’ reign, after which there is to be a second return of Christ to conduct the final judgement of all mankind. Others believe that the ‘thousand years’ of his earthly reign will commence at the time of his second (and only) return. There are many variations on the sequence of events that are supposed to occur leading to the commencement of the ‘thousand years’ and near the end of the period. Every detail of the supposed sequence of events and the nature of each of the events is open to dispute. For example, will the ‘first resurrection’ (Rev 20.6) result in dead saints being raised to reign with Christ in this sin-stained world or will they be taken into heaven to await the subjects of a second resurrection to join them? And,

how can a physical ‘first resurrection’ be correlated with Jesus’ teaching that all believers will be raised on the last day (Jn 6.40)?

There are also some who claim that Christ will return one thousand literal years after the fall of the antichrist and a mass conversion of the Jews living at that time, or after a long era (metaphorically, a thousand years). However, a serious issue confronts those who hold to this position. They cannot consistently believe that Christ could return at any moment (Mt 24.36-44; Mt 25.1-13; 1 Thess 5.1-3; 2 Pt 3.10) and also believe that there remains a thousand years of glorious peace and prosperity for the Church, resulting from the binding of Satan. This view undermines the expectation of the imminent universal return of Christ and can only be applied to the sudden death of particular individuals. With this view, they could say, “We know Christ isn’t going to return for at least one thousand years because the triggering events of the ‘thousand years’ have not yet occurred.”

There have also been attempts to place the commencement of a literal ‘thousand years’ in the past. At one time, some claimed that it began with the reign of Constantine, or the rise of the papacy. However, these suggestions are not supportable. The start-points selected are arbitrary and about two thousand years have passed since Christ’s resurrection. No thousand-year period during the past two thousand years can be singled out as being significantly different from any other thousand-year period. Such things as the number of wars, presence of perverse evil practices, rise of false religions, declension in the Church, or times of revival and church growth have remained relatively consistent; although they have waxed and waned.

The only references to the ‘thousand years’ reign of Christ in the Bible are in these verses. If they were not in the Bible, no one could have ever conceived of the idea that the reign of Christ would result in a golden age on earth that would span a literal one-thousand-year period. Therefore, we must interpret these verses in the context of the rest of Revelation and of the entire Bible.

Since the ‘thousand years’ is a figurative reference to a temporal reality, but not to a literal thousand years, it must have a beginning and an end. The only reasonable point to associate with the initiation of the ‘thousand years’ is the most significant event that has ever occurred in the history of the world—the death and resurrection of Jesus, the crushing of Satan (Rev 12.7-9; Gen 3.15), and the ascension of the God-man. It was at that time that God exalted Jesus to the position of King of kings and Lord of lords (Phil 2.9-11). Nothing else can compare with the exaltation of Jesus—not the crowning of a human monarch, the creation of a nation-state, the commencement of a world-wide war, or the signing of a major peace treaty.

The most reasonable point to identify as the end of the ‘thousand years’ is the promised return of Jesus to this world (Acts 1.11) to call all the dead from the graves (1 Cor 15.20-23; 1 Thess 4.15-17), execute the final judgement (Mt 13.49-50; Mt 16.27; Mt 25.14-46), and replace this cursed creation with the new heaven and earth (Rom 8.19-22; 2 Pt 3.10-12). Thus, the figurative ‘thousand years’ represents the entire period between Christ’s departure from this world in 33 AD and his sudden pending return—during which time there will be on-going persecution of the saints and continual judgement of the wicked, but also a general increase in the size and influence of the Church in the world.

The Binding of Satan (Rev 20.1-3)

John saw an angel coming out of heaven with a key and a chain. It is possibly the same angel who gave the fifth trumpet blast, since he also had the key to the gate that covers the shaft into the bottomless pit. We observed previously that the bottomless pit (abyss) describes hell metaphorically (Rev 9.1-2). It is the abode of Satan and his fallen angels (Lk 8.31), from which they direct their attacks against Christ’s Bride, the Church. That the angel holds the key, indicates that he has been delegated authority by Jesus, who ultimately holds the keys to the abode of the dead (Rev 1.18). Jesus is the one who judges and sentences Satan.

However, much like a sheriff is assigned authority by a judge, Jesus sent the angel to arrest Satan (also called in these verses, the dragon, the ancient serpent, and the devil; see, [Satan, in Revelation](#)). It is possible that this angel was Michael since he appears to have had sufficient power to contend with the king of the demons (Dan 10.21; Dan 12.1; Jude 9). In this instance, John also saw the angel carrying a great chain. The chain likely symbolizes the power to bind and restrain Satan.

The angel *seized* Satan—which has the sense of suddenly taking him by force—and bound him with the chain, consigned him to the pit, and shut and sealed the gate to the pit. There is much debate among commentators about what is meant by the binding of Satan. We should first observe that Satan is not a physical being—he is a spiritual being, without a material dimension. So, the imagery of binding him with a chain and confining him in a pit is metaphorical. Also, we should observe that the binding of Satan does not refer to the total extinction of evil from the world during the ‘thousand years’—which we have determined is the period between Christ’s first and second advents. Satan is not destroyed, nor has he yet been consigned forever to hell and shut out from any contact with mankind on the earth, otherwise Peter would not have to warn us to be watchful of his prowling as he seeks someone to devour (1 Pt 5.8). The curse on creation, temptation, sin, and death will continue to infect the earth and mankind until Jesus purges evil and all of its consequences at the end of time. Then he will consume this universe with fire and establish a new heaven and earth in which only righteousness will dwell (2 Pt 3.13).

Some suggest that Satan’s binding is with respect to believers, and that he is constrained from possessing them (i.e., demon possession) or tempting them to such an extent that they could fall away. While it is true that Satan cannot possess Christians, it is not the meaning of the passage we are considering. Others suggest that his being bound means that his authority over the realm of the dead has been curtailed. However, this suggestion is not consistent with what John tells us. Satan’s binding is with respect to the *nations*—that is, kings and kingdoms that are steeped in idolatry and are in sustained rebellion against Christ. Until Christ’s death and resurrection, there was only one nation on the entire earth that had professed the LORD as God. During the OT period, there had been a few instances of idolaters from the nations that had turned to the living God, such as Ruth and Rahab. But Satan held all the nations, except Israel, in his thrall and the Jews had had limited success in being the light to the nations that they were supposed to be (Gen 22.18; Is 49.6; Mt 23.15). Once Jesus had cried out, “It is finished.” and had been raised from the grave, Satan was conquered (Gen 3.15; Jn 12.31-33; Col 2.15; Heb 2.14). He can now no longer deceive all the nations or deceive all the people in any nation.

Satan, in his character of the deceiver of the whole world (Rev 12.9), has been bound and limited in his ability to deceive the nations. Thus, Jesus declares that the Gospel is intended for all the nations (Mt 28.19; Jn 12.32; Acts 1.8; Acts 17.30; Acts 26.17-18). Satan can no longer stop the extension of Christ’s Kingdom into every corner of the earth. The prophetic voice of the Psalter is being gloriously fulfilled (Ps 47.1-9; Ps 72.1-20; Ps 96.1-13; Ps 98.1-9; Ps 102.18-22). We are the recipients of this blessing, since most of us are descended from peoples who lived in the unbelieving nations that the Gospel reached during the past 2,000 years. Wherever the Gospel is preached today, Christ demonstrates that Satan has been bound and can no longer deceive the nations and keep them blinded to God’s truth. This is why John tells us that he witnessed a great multitude in heaven from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev 7.9) and why we see the Church growing every day in number and extent—even into spiritually dark corners of the earth, like in North Korea and Iran.

Jesus declared that only after the Gospel has been preached to the whole world as a witness to the nations, will the end come (Mt 24.14). Thus, the binding of Satan spans the entire period between Christ’s two advents—the period of the ‘thousand years’. However, Satan will be released for a little while from his chain at the end of time. We will consider what this means when we address the defeat of Satan in a future meditation (Rev 20.7-10). In the meantime, we should meditate on the message John conveys to the Church. Satan has been bound, the Gospel is being proclaimed, heaven is being filled with an innumerable multitude,

and the gates of hell cannot overcome the Church. This message is intended to encourage every believer in Jesus who is facing persecution at the hands of the enemies of Christ and his Church.

The First Resurrection and the Second Death

(Rev 20.4-6)

The phrase ‘the first resurrection’ occurs only in these verses. So, we must ensure that as we determine its meaning, we take into account the broader teaching about the resurrection given in the rest of the Bible. A number of suggestions have been offered for how to understand this phrase:

- *Entering glory in a disembodied state.* Some claim that since these verses do not refer to the resurrection of *bodies*, and since verse 4 uses the word ‘souls’ to refer to believers, the resurrection spoken of in these verses refers to the passing of a believer into the glory of heaven, in a disembodied state, where he rules with Christ between Christ’s first and second comings. However, nowhere in the Bible is the idea of entering heaven in a *disembodied state* referred to as a resurrection.
- *Baptism.* Some claim that since Paul says that Christians have been raised with Christ in baptism (Rom 6.4; Col 2.12), the first resurrection refers to baptism. However, Paul does not equate resurrection with baptism, but with faith—we are raised with Jesus through faith.
- *A physical bodily resurrection.* The most widely accepted belief today, in the broader Evangelical Church, is that the first resurrection is an actual physical resurrection of a select group of believers at the beginning of Christ’s temporal thousand-year reign on the earth. Some who hold to this position, believe that those who are resurrected will reign with Christ from heaven, but most claim that this co-reign will be in an earthly kingdom centered in Jerusalem. Those who are raised will have immortal bodies and will serve as Christ’s attendants and participate in the administration of his government until a second resurrection occurs at the end of his thousand-year reign. Those who hold to this position state that since the text refers to those who have been beheaded and are dead, it must refer to those who have experienced physical resurrection. There are a number of reasons why this interpretation appears to be faulty:
 - It is unlikely that believers, who will have apparently been living with Christ in a disembodied state for thousands of years, in the glories of a sinless heaven, will be resurrected to live again in this decaying and sin-filled world for a thousand years. This makes a mockery of the hope of the resurrection and of paradise as the reward for perseverance and faithfully conquering.
 - Nowhere else in the Bible is there a suggestion that the resurrection of the righteous (or a subset of the righteous) will occur a thousand years before the resurrection of the wicked. To the contrary, every reference to the resurrection elsewhere in the Bible speaks of only one general resurrection of all the dead; on the last day, at the end of time (Rev 11.11-12; Rev 20.12-15; Dan 12.2; Jn 5.28-29; Jn 6.39-40, 44, 54; Acts 24.15; Rom 8.19, 23; 1 Thess 4.15-17).
 - It is unlikely that God would reveal a complex concept like a bipartite resurrection in this figurative book, when it is not revealed in the other passages of the Bible which are not shrouded in figurative language.
 - If the first resurrection meant that rising from the grave would give people immortal and glorified bodies, then they would not need the assurance that the second death has no power over them (Rev 20.6) since they could not be subject to death.
- *A spiritual resurrection.* Since at least the days of Augustine (*City of God* book 20, chapters 67), it has been widely believed that John’s statements about the first resurrection refer to an awakening from spiritual death to spiritual life—i.e., being born again (Jn 3.3-8). In his Gospel, John quotes Jesus and indicates that the new birth is a form of resurrection (Jn 5.24-25). In his first Epistle (1 Jn 3.14) he implies the same thing. Some who disagree with this interpretation claim that John wouldn’t use the word ‘resurrection’ in two different senses in one place or this would cause language to have no meaning. However, there are examples in the Bible where two senses are given to a word in one context (Prov 26.4-5; Rom 9.6).

The first resurrection is salvation from everlasting death—the ‘second death’. Those who experience the first resurrection are blessed because they are immune to the second death, because the first death (physical death) has lost its sting (1 Cor 15.55-56). It is granted to all those who have believed in Jesus as their saviour and have repented of their sins. They are called holy in this section because they are the saints (sanctified ones). This is not limited to a small cadre of especially devout believers but includes all those martyred for their testimony to Jesus and all those who have not worshipped the beast and his image or received his mark—i.e., all professing Christians who have remained faithful to Christ as Lord. Thus, every physically dead and living believer in Jesus is reigning with him now, during the thousand-year period between his incarnation and his second coming as judge of all the earth.

The rest of the dead—that is, all those who are spiritually unregenerate—whether still alive with their current bodies or physically dead—will come to life when Christ returns, along with all believers. This means that all persons who are physically dead when Jesus returns will be raised from their graves, and all mankind (believers and unbelievers) will be endowed with new bodies that they will take with them into heaven or hell (Jn 5.28-29; Acts 24.15). Unbelievers raised from the dead on the last day will experience the second death as they are cast into outer darkness with their physical bodies, to face everlasting punishment (Mt 8.12; Mt 13.42, 49-50; Mt 22.13; Mt 25.29-30).

The Saints’ Reign with Christ

(Rev 20.4, 6)

In a previous meditation (see, [*The Fifth Seal – Those Who Had Been Slain*](#)), we considered the use of the word ‘soul’ in Revelation 6.9 and Revelation 20.4, as found in most English translations. We concluded that we could translate ‘soul’ as ‘person’ so that readers do not equate ‘souls’ with ‘spirits’. Thus, Revelation 20.4 probably should read, “the *persons* who had been beheaded”, since John could not have seen disembodied spirits (spirits are non-material and invisible) and he must have seen persons with an identifiable physical form. If we translate this verse using ‘persons’, it may help us understand how we are to interpret and apply the saints’ reign with Christ.

John indicates that he saw an unidentified number of thrones with persons seated on them. When Jesus encouraged his core group of disciples about their pending status in the new world, he told them that they would sit on twelve thrones (Mt 19.28). Earlier in Revelation, John sees twenty-four elders sitting on thrones (Rev 4.4; Rev 11.16)—who, we concluded, represent the two Messianic economies brought together as one Church. In this instance, it appears that John sees more than twenty-four persons seated on thrones. He identifies two groups “to whom authority to judge was committed”. The first group is martyrs who were beheaded for the testimony of Jesus. He probably does not refer exclusively to individuals who were *beheaded* but uses this as a synecdoche to include all Christians who were persecuted for their testimony while they lived in this world (Rev 12.11, 17; Rev 19.10; Rev 20.4). The second group is “those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands”—i.e., all professing Christians who have remained faithful to Christ as Lord and have been made spiritually alive through the first resurrection. Thus, John’s vision appears to indicate that every physically dead and currently living believer in Jesus is reigning with Jesus today, during the metaphorical thousand-year period between his incarnation and his second coming as judge of all the earth.

John also does not identify where the thrones that he sees are located. The supposition of many today is that these thrones will be located on the earth during a literal thousand-year reign of Christ, who will be physically present on the earth. However, the account does not say that. Rather, a plain reading of the text indicates that the believers who sit on the thrones and are reigning with Christ are all those who have shared in the first resurrection. Jesus’ throne is consistently portrayed as being in heaven in Revelation (Rev 1.4; Rev 3.21; Rev 4.2-6, 9-10; Rev 5.1; Rev 7.9-11, 15, 17; Rev 21.5; Rev 22.1, 3), never on the earth. Thus,

we can infer that John saw the throne of Jesus in heaven in this vision (Rev 20.1, 4, 6). There is nothing in this section (Rev 20.1-8) that describes a descent of Jesus or his throne to the earth. Rather, the saints are either directly with him in heaven (Rev 7.9) or indirectly with him through their spiritual union with him, while living out their lives on this earth.

How the saints reign with Jesus has not been fully revealed in Scripture, and thus has been the source of much discussion. However, we can infer some ways the saints' reign is made visible in the spatial-temporal realm, as they:

- *Concur with Christ's judgements.* Christians praise Christ for the just judgements that he administers to the wicked every day (Rev 18.20; Rev 19.1-5; Ps 94.1-2; Ps 96.13; Ps 98.9; Ps 106.42-48)—as they are displayed in the plagues of the blasts of the trumpets and bowls which John saw in earlier visions.
- *Judge and condemn the world.* Christians living in obedience to God's commands witness to Christ's ultimate reign over the nations (Ps 2.2, 10-12). Paganistic hedonists and adherents of false religions know that they are under God's judgement (Rom 1.32) and despise Christians for reminding them of this truth through their commitment to the testimony of Jesus. Thus, these wicked men attempt to eradicate the Christians' witness to God's truth through persecution of believers. Also, at the final judgement, Christians will participate directly in the judgement of the wicked (Dan 7.22; 1 Cor 6.2; 2 Thess 1.6-10).
- *Take possession of the world.* Jesus taught that the meek are blessed because they shall inherit the earth (Mt 5.5). We can legitimately include in this inheritance the new heaven and earth. However, The Church is also taking possession of this current world as it grows in absolute and relative numbers and in its increasing penetration into the nations that are no longer held in the thrall of Satan's deceptions (Rev 20.3).
- *Conquer sin and death.* Jesus came into the world to conquer sin and death through his perfect life and substitutionary death (Jn 12.27). Christians who are victors with Christ, demonstrate this as they also conquer sin and ultimately death as they are raised from the grave victoriously (Rev 2.10-11; Rev 3.21; Rom 8.37-39; 1 Cor 15.54-57).

The reign of the saints in heaven and on earth is portrayed as currently in progress, during the thousand years. However, it will continue forever (Rev 22.5), after this realm is consumed with fire (2 Pt 3.10, 12-13) and replaced with the new heaven and earth. We can only surmise how that reign will be manifested. However, in the meantime, we are to be encouraged by the fact that we are princes, priest-kings (Rev 5.10), and fellow heirs (Rom 8.17) with Jesus, the King of kings. This is a glorious truth, a wonderful spiritual blessing (Eph 1.3), and an amazing hope (Eph 1.18) for those who are united with Jesus. There is no room for despondency in the Christian life—we are already reigning with Christ!

Is there an Intermediate State? (Part 1 of 3)

(Rev 6.9; Rev 20.4)

Among Protestant Christians, it is generally believed that when a person dies his spirit departs his body and enters an alternate disembodied spiritual state, in heaven or hell, usually referred to as the 'intermediate state'. However, the immediate translation of a person's spirit into heaven or hell at death seems to raise a perplexing issue. At death, a person would have to be judged and declared innocent to enter heaven (Mt 25.21, 23) or declared guilty to be consigned to hell (Mt 25.26-30). Thus, a person is judged before the day of judgement. This appears to present a conundrum—how to reconcile immediate individual judgement at death with the final judgement at the return of Christ. Some early Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho*) and Tertullian (*A Treatise on the Soul*) proposed a 'solution' with temporary intermediate *places* of residence between death and the resurrection that supposedly existed apart from heaven or hell. These ideas later developed into the concepts of purgatory and *limbus partum*. Some modern scholars have argued that usages of *sheol* (OT) and *hades* (NT) refer to an intermediate place rather than to

physical death and the grave as most scholars conclude.

The reformers rejected the concept of intermediate *places* and argued that the spirits of the dead go immediately into heaven or hell at death, to await the resurrection of their bodies. This concept of an intermediate disembodied *state* is incorporated into prominent Reformed catechisms and statements of faith (e.g., *Heidelberg Catechism*, 1563, 57; *Second Helvetic Confession*, 1566, 26:3; and *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1647, 32:1). Thus, it is concluded that even though the dead are in a non-material form, they exist somewhere, much like non-material angels exist in heaven.

This is certainly a possibility. However, there may be an alternate approach for dealing with this perplexing matter, facilitated by a revised understanding of the nature of time. Time was created along with the space, energy, and matter of the universe (Gen 1.1). In addition, heaven and hell are not eternal. Heaven may have been created during the creation week, when the first components of our universe were being created, since Genesis 1.1 refers to ‘heavens’—i.e., atmosphere, the celestial heaven, and possibly the abode of angels and God. Paul refers to the third-heaven, meaning the abode of God (2 Cor 12.2). Hell may have been created when Satan and his followers rebelled. Regardless of when they were created, heaven and hell exist as alternate physical realities. Jesus has a real body in heaven (Acts 1.9-11) and the saints will exist in embodied states after their resurrection, and unbelievers will have bodies in an everlasting hell. As physical places, physics of some form operates. For example, light is propagated in heaven (Rev 21.23; Rev 22.5; 1 Tim 6.16). Thus, matter and energy exist in heaven. Presumably some form of what we call ‘space’ also exists, because objects in heaven are described as having dimensions and spatial relationships with one another. This leaves only a question about the existence of time in heaven. Some form of process or sequence of events occurs in heaven because conversations and praise take place—the utterance of a sentence requires that one word follows another, and that ‘before’ and ‘after’ concepts exist.

The concept of time is much more difficult to grasp than it first appears. It is difficult to give a precise and consistent definition which applies across multiple disciplines including theology, philosophy, and physics. In the past, time was assumed to be a constant. Many people assumed that it was a transcendent universal. For example, Immanuel Kant arguing against the existence of God said, “Now this cause must itself begin to act, and its causality would therefore be in time, and so would belong to the sum of appearances, that is, to the world. It follows that it itself, the cause, would not be outside the world—which contradicts our hypothesis. Therefore, neither in the world, nor outside the world ... does there exist any absolutely necessary being.” (*The Antinomy of Pure Reason*, Fourth Conflict of the Transcendental Ideas). Because Kant assumed that time is a non-created, transcendental entity, he argued that a first cause—God—must exist in time.

Einstein revolutionized our idea of time. He theorized, in his Relativity models, that time is variable, rather than a constant. Some of his ideas about time have been demonstrated empirically. For example, clocks in a stronger gravitational field will ‘tick’ at a slower rate. The clocks in GPS satellites run faster than identical clocks on Earth and must be re-calibrated regularly or airplanes and ships will steer off course. Today the concept of time as a constant has been rejected by much of scientific and philosophical thinking.

Consider the example used to illustrate the Special Theory of Relativity—an astronaut travels from earth at near the speed of light and then returns at the same speed. When he returns, he finds his peers have aged considerably more than he has, or even centuries have passed on earth, and they are all dead. We can extrapolate this illustration of relativistic time and apply it to the end of a person’s life. It is possible that at the moment of his death—in this spatial-temporal realm—a person is translated immediately into a different physical realm, with a different construct of time, and is immediately at the day of judgement and the general resurrection. He leaves this spatial-temporal realm and enters a different physical reality with a different form of time.

Is there an Intermediate State? (*Part 2 of 3*)

(Rev 6.9; Rev 20.4)

In the previous meditation, we noted that Einstein's theories revolutionized our understanding of time. He theorized, in his Relativity models, that time is variable, rather than a constant. Since then, empirical evidence has validated his models. Thus, it is possible that heaven and hell exist in a different physical reality, with a different form of time. Then, at the moment of his death—in this spatial-temporal realm—a person is translated immediately into this alternate physical realm, with a different construct of time, and is immediately at the day of judgement and the general resurrection.

An illustration may help us grasp this concept. It is possible that we can think of the history of the world as an arc, like a portion of the outer rim of a wagon wheel. The arc has a beginning and an end and represents the entire span of history and time for this physical universe. From the hub of the wheel, a different form of time (in an alternate physical reality) extends perpendicular to the wheel, i.e., along the axle of the wheel. At death, a person instantly traverses a spoke of the wheel and reaches the *end* of our time, at the hub, and arrives at the beginning of a new timeline—which begins with the day of judgement and the resurrection. Each person travelling along the arc of history is equidistant from the end and arrives at the end at the same time as everyone else, since the spokes of the 'wheel' are all the same length.

If this illustration provides a reasonable approximation of the interconnection between the two different forms of physical reality, then there is no such thing as a disembodied or intermediate state (i.e., people existing in heaven or in hell in a spiritual form, waiting for the resurrection of their bodies). Rather, at death a person moves instantly from possessing one body to possessing another (like those on earth who will have not yet died at the time of Christ's return; 1 Cor 15.51-52). Thus, there may not be an alternate form of reality in which events occur in parallel with events on earth. Rather, there is only the non-physical, eternal, and timeless God; this current spatial-temporal universe; and an alternate physical reality that temporally coincides only at one point with our universe—the temporal end of our universe and the temporal beginning of the next.

A model such as this may provide a solution to the conundrum presented in the previous meditation—how to reconcile immediate individual judgement at death with the final judgement at the return of Christ—since it:

- Supports the concept of immediate judgement following a person's physical death (Heb 9.27).
- Removes the separation of judgement at death from judgement on the day of judgement. Thus, it makes unnecessary the concept of a person being received into heaven, or sent to hell, up to thousands of years before the day of judgement.
- Disassociates our form of time in our universe from a different form of time in the alternate physical reality of heaven and the new heavens and earth.
- Eliminates the idea that a disembodied intermediate state must exist. A human being will always remain fully a human being—body and spirit (Gen 2.7). Paul appears to provide support for the idea that our current mortal bodies will be immediately replaced by immortal bodies as we leave this realm and enter heaven (or hell). He says, "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal ['everlasting'] in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life." (2 Cor 5.1-4). Also, the account of the rich man and Lazarus may indicate that a person remains in an embodied state after death (Lk 16.24). Thus, on both sides of the grave we are embodied, and will never be found 'naked' (i.e., without a body).
- Explains how Jesus and some believers (e.g., Enoch, Elijah, and probably Moses [Mt 17.3] and the

resurrected saints [Mt 27.52-53⁴]) can have bodies in heaven while others apparently do not—since, instead, all believers are provided with their resurrected bodies instantly in the alternate reality of heaven or the new heavens and earth.

- Eliminates the false concepts of purgatory and *limbus patrum*, which have introduced an additional problem with the idea of a second chance for salvation after physical death.

In the next meditation we will address classes of counter arguments to the idea presented here that an intermediate *state* may not exist, that are based on the interpretation of a number of verses that appear to speak of the existence of a temporary disembodied state between death and the general resurrection.

Is there an Intermediate State? (Part 3 of 3)

(Rev 6.9; Rev 20.4)

In the previous two meditations we saw that Einstein's empirically validated theories of Relativity have revolutionized our understanding of time. Time is no longer considered to be a constant but variable contingent on our form of space. Thus, it is possible that heaven and hell exist in a different physical reality, with a different form of time. At the moment of his death a person is translated into an alternate physical realm, with a different construct of time, and is immediately at the day of judgement and the general resurrection. If this is the case, then humans never exist in a disembodied form and there is no intermediate state. However, there are several passages which could be used to provide counter arguments to this idea, which we will now address.

Separation of body and spirit

- Ecclesiastes 12.7 refers to the body returning to the dust at death, and the spirit returning to God.
- 2 Corinthians 5.6, 8 contrasts being at home in the body and away from the Lord and vice versa.

These verses do not deal with the intermediate state or with the resurrection, but with the separation of the spirit from the earth-bound (natural, mortal) body at death. They are formulated from our time-based perspective. In addition, Paul does not say that a person who is with the Lord is in a disembodied form, he contrasts being in this present state with being in a different state. In fact, the preceding verses (2 Cor 5.1-4) seem to imply that one body is replaced by another (i.e., 'our heavenly dwelling' and 'further clothed'), immediately as we leave this realm.

Waiting for the resurrection of the dead

- 1 Thessalonians 4.16-17 refers to believers waiting for the resurrection.

This verse refers to a forward view along the timeline in this present realm and does not speak to what is happening in the heavenly realm.

Spirits or souls in heaven or hell

- Hebrews 12.23 refers to the spirits of the righteous made perfect in heaven.
- 1 Peter 3.19-20 speaks of the spirits in prison.
- 2 Peter 2.4 and Jude 6 refer to the fallen angels being chained in gloomy darkness (i.e., sentenced to hell) until the day of judgement.
- Revelation 6.9 speaks of the souls of slain ones, who are in heaven (similarly, in Rev 20.4).

These verses appear to present strong support for the idea that there is a spiritual (disembodied) intermediate state in heaven and hell. The 2 Peter 2.4 and Jude 6 passages indicate that fallen angels are chained in 'eternal' (ESV) or 'everlasting' (NIV) chains, while they wait for "the judgement on the great day".

⁴ Matthew reports that after the resurrection of Jesus, many believers who had died and been buried were raised and came out of the tombs and were seen in Jerusalem. It seems unlikely that they were raised from the dead and then required to live again in this world and to die again. It is more likely that these believers in the Messiah were raised into glorified bodies and, after they were seen, followed Jesus into heaven.

Interestingly, they are already in their final and everlasting state—“gloomy darkness”, that is, hell—and they will not leave that place when humans are judged. So, these passages do not provide support for the concept of an *intermediate* state for these fallen angels. To say the least, these verses are difficult to interpret, without adding the eschatological complexity.

It is possible that the reference to ‘spirits’ in Hebrews 12.23 could be understood as a reference to ‘spiritual persons’ (compare, 1 Cor 2.15), rather than to disembodied spirits. Thus, the verse could be speaking of ‘righteous spiritual persons’ made perfect. It does not require that we understand it to be speaking of disembodied spirits in an intermediate state. Likewise, ‘souls’ in Revelation 6.9 and 20.4 could be equivalent to ‘persons’ (see, Acts 7.14; Acts 27.37), and the passages could be read as, “the persons slain ...” (see, [*The Fifth Seal – Those Who Had Been Slain*](#), for a fuller analysis).

1 Peter 3.19-20 presents interpretive challenges. This passage has been used to support the concepts of both purgatory and *limbus patrum*. However, if we understand it to be speaking of those who were metaphorically in prison because of unbelief at the time of Noah, then it is possible that we can understand Peter to be speaking of ‘persons’ when he uses ‘spirits’. He uses ‘souls’ in verse 20, which is translated as ‘persons’. It is possible that he uses ‘spirits’ and ‘souls’ as synonyms.

Time passing in heaven and hell

- 2 Peter 2.4 and Jude 6 refer to the fallen angels being chained in gloomy darkness (i.e., sentenced to hell) until the day of judgement.
- 2 Peter 2.9 speaks of the unrighteous being kept under punishment until the day of judgement. However, it does not indicate that they are in a disembodied form.
- Revelation 6.10 has the saints in heaven asking how long it will be before God avenges their blood on those who dwell on the earth.

These verses appear to indicate that time passes in heaven and hell. As we noted previously, a form of time may exist in these places of an alternate physical reality. But their time does not necessarily run in parallel with ours. Applying the model, which places heaven (and hell) at the ‘end’ of our time, it could be that the saints in heaven are reflecting on God’s permitting wickedness to continue on the earth along the path of our current form of time and are speaking from an earth-focused perspective (as we do when we say ‘the sun rises in the east’).

The Defeat and Doom of Satan

(Rev 20.3, 7-10)

The proverbial statement, “timing is everything”, applies to many activities, such as playing a musical instrument, delivering a punchline, and selling stocks or buying a house. Likewise, God times events with precision (Mk 1.5; Rom 5.6; Gal 4.4; Eph 1.10). Thus, just prior to the end of time—at the conclusion of the metaphorical thousand years between Christ’s incarnation and his return to earth in a resurrected bodily form—Satan must be released for a little while from his bondage in prison. He is currently constrained there from deceiving the nations (Rev 20.3). The reason that his release is necessary is not explicitly stated. However, it is not, as many commentators surmise, so that he, along with a vast human army, can wage a final battle against Jesus and his saints and stop the preaching of the Gospel and once again delude the nations into practicing wholesale idolatry. There is no ‘last battle’ spoken of in these verses. Rather, we may infer from these verses that Satan is released so that he may face public judgement, humiliation, and everlasting punishment, and so that Jesus may demonstrate his sovereignty over all things (Rev 11.15; Mt 28.18), including Satan.

On being released from his prison, Satan will emerge with the intent to deceive all the nations and to gather them quickly for an assault against Christ and his Church. John uses the names Gog and Magog as a

derogatory collective term for the pagans among the nations of the world. In OT times Gog was the king of Magog (Ezk 38.2; Ezk 39.1) with a threatening army that would invade Palestine from the north (Ezk 38.15-16). John applies these historic entities as a collective label for every force that is intent on hindering the dissemination of the Gospel message and on destroying God's people. Any attempt to associate these names with current or future persons or national entities is doomed to failure because the names are purely symbolic.

In his vision, John sees this multitude, as numerous as the sand of the sea, marching and assembling together to surround the camp of the saints and the beloved city. We can think of the 'camp of the saints' as individual believers or small assemblies of believers in their scattered congregations; whereas Jerusalem is the collective Church across the ages (Rev 3.12; Rev 21.2, 10; Heb 12.22). This vision of a final campaign of Satan's earthly minions does not take place in the spatial realm. The armies do not come from the physical four corners of the earth and then march toward Jerusalem from Russia, through Turkey and Syria; and they do not assemble on the coastal plain to the west of Jerusalem or in the Jordan valley. The marching and assembling of the nations is for a final spiritual skirmish (Eph 6.12) in the on-going battle of Armageddon (Rev 11.7-10; Rev 16.12-16; Rev 17.13-14) that all the enemies of Christ engage in. When we considered Revelation 19.17-21, we observed that these verses do not describe a battle, let alone a prolonged war, but only speak of the enemies of Christ *assembling* for war. We concluded that this indicates that they are not ultimately successful in their attempt to destroy Christ's Church. Christ defeats and captures them and consigns them to everlasting punishment. Likewise, in the passage we are now considering there is not a description of a battle, because there is no battle! The objective of Satan and his human adherents is suicidal because before they can engage in the first volley of a final attack against Christians they are destroyed by Christ, the rider on the white horse (Rev 19.11-16).

The mass of wicked humanity thinks that God is a chimera who ignores their depravity, and that Christians are simpletons and weaklings. However, like Sennacherib king of Assyria who threatened the physical Jerusalem, and 185,000 men of his army were destroyed in a single night (2 Ki 19.35), so Jesus will send fire and sulphur from heaven and instantaneously consumes his enemies (Gen 19.24; Ps 11.4-6; Ezk 38.22) who threaten his spiritual Jerusalem. However, this time, the judgement against the idolatrous will not be partial, as it was with the plagues of the seven trumpet blasts and bowls. This final time, judgement will be cataclysmic. None will survive the 'shock and awe' of this final judgement that will consume the wicked. And, what might appear to be a most dire crisis for the spiritual Israel as it faces overwhelming odds (Rev 20.8; Josh 11.4-5; Judges 7.12; 1 Sam 13.5) will be turned into a glorious victory, because Jesus has promised that even the gates of hell would never be able to overcome his Church (Mt 16.18).

Sennacherib was not killed on the night his army was destroyed. He returned to Nineveh and was assassinated by two of his sons (2 Ki 19.36-37). But the situation with Satan is different. He is seized and thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur to be tormented forever, at the same time as his human army is consumed by fire and sulphur. Thus, this passage reports the defeat and doom of Satan—he is never mentioned again in Revelation. John says that he will be thrown into the lake of fire where the beast and the false prophet will have also been consigned. We observe a pattern in Revelation where the leaders of the rebellion against God are introduced in order: 1) Satan, 2) the beast, 3) the false prophet, and 4) Babylon. However, their demise is recounted in the reverse order: 1) Babylon (chapter 18), 2) beast and false prophet (Rev 19.20), and Satan (Rev 20.10). In the visions of Revelation, we have reached the end of this age. All that remains to be told is the final judgement of all mankind, documented in the following section (Rev 20.11-15) and the unveiling of the new heaven and earth (chapters 21-22).

The Judgement Day (Rev 20.11-15)

These verses cover the final vision that John received about events which are to be realized in our realm. It

relates to the judgement day; also called the *last* or *final* judgement, because God has sent temporal judgements on wicked men throughout history, as illustrated by the plagues of the seven trumpet blasts and bowls. This is one of the few sections in Revelation about which there is practically universal agreement among commentators as to its primary focus. They all understand that John receives a glimpse into the climax of mankind's history. From mankind's perspective, there are a few events in history which are more important than all others—we can summarize them as: creation, cataclysm, cross, and consummation. Beyond this last event, believers will enter a new universe in which they will dwell forever. This new state is the subject of the final two chapters of Revelation.

This vision opens with a person seated on a great white throne (a symbol of holy justice). All agree that this is God's throne (Rev 5.1, 7, 13; Rev 7.15; Rev 19.4; Dan 7.9; Rom 14.10). There is only minor disagreement about whether Christ is with the Father (Rev 6.16; Rev 7.10) or representing the Trinity on the throne. The rest of the NT is clear that it is Jesus—the God-man—who administers the final judgement (Rev 21.5; Mt 25.31; Jn 5.22, 27; Jn 9.39; Acts 10.42; Acts 17.31; 2 Cor 5.10; 2 Tim 4.1). Final judgement has been given into his hands because he is God, is the author of life, represents mankind with his perfections, has paid the debt of sin for his people, knows who are his own and who have rejected him, dispenses rewards and punishments for all mankind, and vindicates his persecuted people.

John next sees an image of the earth and sky being dissolved. The visions John sees are generally to be understood as reflections of spiritual realities. However, in this instance John sees a fulfilment of the NT prophecy which declares that this current spatial-temporal realm—the universe that we live in—will be destroyed at the end of time and be replaced by a new physical reality (Mt 24.35; 2 Pt 3.10-13; Rev 21.5), likely with a significantly different physics than we currently experience, in which decay associated with the curse on creation will be lifted and space, time, energy, matter, and entropy behave differently (Rev 21.1, 23).

When Jesus returns, there will be a resurrection of all the dead—believers and unbelievers (Dan 12.2; Jn 5.28-29; Acts 24.15). Those who have died and were buried on land or lost at sea will be given new, immortal bodies so that they can stand assembled before the judgement throne of Christ (Mt 25.32). Believers will be given new bodies fit for heaven (1 Cor 15.43-44; Phil 3.20-21), but the new bodies of the unrepentant will be suited for their everlasting punishment in the lake of fire.

As mankind assembles before the throne to be judged, books will be opened (Dan 7.10) that contain the entire record of the actions of every person on earth. These are a figurative representation of God's omniscience. A separate book will also be opened, which is the 'book of life' (Dan 12.1), which figuratively contains the names of the elect (Lk 10.20; Phil 4.3; Heb 12.23; Rev 13.8; Rev 17.8; Rev 21.27), those for whom Christ died on the cross. Judgement will then proceed based on the record of what men and women have done (Ps 62.12; Jer 17.10; Rom 2.6; 2 Cor 5.10; 1 Pt 1.17). This does not show that a person can be saved by his or her works—salvation is by grace through faith (Eph 2.8-9). Rather, it shows that our faith and character are made evident through our righteous works and words (Eph 2.10; Titus 2.11-14; James 2.14-26). The works of those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life are deemed righteous because of their union with Christ. In addition, the degree of punishment of the reprobate and the nature of the rewards for the righteous will be established by the righteous judge, according to what every person has done (Mt 16.27; Mt 25.31-46; Lk 19.11-27).

At the conclusion of the process of judging mankind, Jesus will throw death and the grave into the lake of fire. These are symbolic, but the intent is clear, the last enemy to be abolished by Christ's redemptive work is death (1 Cor 15.26). So, at the end of time when all men are raised from their graves and given new immortal bodies, and the universe is re-created, there will no longer be any physical death because it will have served its purpose as temporal punishment (Gen 2.17). However, unbelievers raised from the dead on the last day will experience the second death as they are cast into outer darkness with the 'lake of fire' (Rev

21.8) with their physical bodies, to face everlasting punishment (Mt 8.12; Mt 13.42, 49-50; Mt 22.13; Mt 25.29-30). John is the only one who uses the term ‘second death’, and it is found only in Revelation (Rev 2.11; Rev 20.6, 14; Rev 21.8). Although theologians usually speak of three stages of death—spiritual (Eph 2.1, 5; Col 2.13), physical (Gen 5.5), and everlasting (Mt 10.28)—John uses ‘second death’ to refer to consignment to hell to experience everlasting conscious, physical, and psychological torment (Rev 21.8). In our next meditation we will examine in more detail the second death. However, we should now address a question that often comes up, “What if my name isn’t written in the book of life?” The contents of that book are known only to God in his secret councils, but the answer to the question is very simple: if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ you will be saved (Acts 16.31), because your name is written in his book!

The Second Death

(Rev 2.11; Rev 20.6, 14; Rev 21.8)

In a previous meditation we noted that unbelievers raised from the dead on the last day will experience the second death as they are cast into outer darkness with their physical bodies, to face everlasting punishment (Rev 20.10, 15; Mt 8.12; Mt 13.42, 49-50; Mt 22.13; Mt 25.29-30). The idea that God will punish a portion of mankind with everlasting punishment is distasteful to many who profess to be Christians and to unbelievers who think that God would not punish them. Two common objections that are raised against Jesus’ teaching that there will be endless torment for those who have rejected him as Lord and Saviour are that:

- *God would be unfair.* It is claimed that God could not send people to hell who had never been given an opportunity to hear the Gospel message, or he would be unfair. The class of the unreached includes people who lived before the first coming of Jesus and those who lived since then in parts of the world where missionaries had not yet visited. It is also claimed that people who live ‘pretty good’ lives or who are seeking after God through other means than through Christ—e.g., Greek philosophers or people living in countries where Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism are the dominant religions—should not be sentenced to everlasting torment. The Biblical responses to this objection are:
 - Anyone who has not repented of his sins, placed his faith in Jesus, and been converted by the Holy Spirit is not ‘pretty good’ and is not seeking after the true God, but is wicked (Gen 6.5; Ps 14.1-3; Jer 17.9; Mt 15.19; Rom 1.28-32).
 - The wicked, who have no knowledge of the Bible, will not be sentenced to everlasting punishment because they rejected Christ but because they have broken God’s Law, which they know innately (Rom 1.18-23).
 - Any other attempt to please God and to reach heaven, except through faith in Jesus Christ, is a manmade way and is idolatry (Jn 14.6; Acts 4.11-12).
- *God is love.* It is also claimed that since God is love, he would not send people to hell to be tormented forever, since this would be inconsistent with his being forgiving and merciful. However, God must punish sin, or he would be unjust. And his love is displayed in that he has provided the perfect solution for balancing his love and justice in the sacrificial death of Jesus (Rom 5.8).

Men who have a distaste for the Biblical teaching that God (specifically Jesus) sentences the wicked to everlasting torment, attempt to avoid the truth by fabricating alternatives, including:

- *Purgation.* During the Middle Ages a belief developed in the Church that most people, who had not lived saintly lives, would be consigned to a supposed disembodied existence in a place, called ‘purgatory’. In this place of transient torment they would eventually pay off their debt of sin against God through their suffering and be granted access to heaven. However, this view is not taught in the Bible and is contrary to what the Bible teaches (Mt 25.46; Lk 16.26).
- *Universal salvation.* A widely accepted view, even within the professing Church, is that adherents of other religions (e.g., Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism) will be reconciled to God and make it into heaven because of their striving to know God and because of a professed desire to do good. This view is

extended to include the most outwardly wicked; even they will eventually make it to heaven through second chances—e.g., reincarnation or purgation. Others argue that based on Christ's sacrificial death, God will simply forgive all mankind of their sins.

- *Annihilation.* A view held by many, particularly those who deny the existence of a supernatural realm, is that there is no afterlife, at least for the wicked. At death, the wicked simply cease to exist. However, the Bible is clear. There is another life after this life (Jn 5.28-29; Acts 24.15), and the works that we perform in this life (whether done for Christ or against Christ) are decisive for determining where we will exist forever after we die (Rev 20.12-13; Mt 25.31-46; Gal 6.7; Heb 9.27).

The idea of everlasting physical torment is considered gross and distasteful to many people today. They cannot accept the idea that God would actually raise the wicked dead, endow them with new indestructible bodies, and then subject them to endless physical torture. If they believe in a hell at all, they claim that the torments of hell will be non-physical—exclusively spiritual or psychological, like the closing words of Sartre's 1943 play, *No Exit*, 'So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the "burning marl." Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot pokers. HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE!'" While it is true that hell will include a non-material aspect for wholly spiritual beings such as Satan and his demons; it will include spiritual, psychological, and physical components for humans who are body-spirit beings. For the unrepentant wicked, hell will include endless physical torment (Mt 8.12; Mt 13.42, 50; Mt 22.13; Mt 25.30; Lk 16.24). Thus, the 'second death' is not a second physical death but an endless dying that consists of separation from God's presence, extreme hatred against God, a perpetual self-justification, an ongoing denial of having done anything wrong against God or other people, and an endless corporeal suffering that will be more painful than passing a kidney stone, appendicitis, or a migraine. But there won't be any alcohol or drugs in hell to suppress anxiety or oxycodone to relieve the physical pain.

The Hope of the Resurrection

(Rev 20.13)

When Christ returns, all the dead will be raised from their graves (Jn 5.28-29; Acts 24.15). In our previous meditation we considered the destiny of those who die in an unrepentant state, and determined that at the time of the resurrection they will experience the second death as they are cast into outer darkness with their physical bodies, to face everlasting torment (Mt 8.12; Mt 13.42, 49-50; Mt 22.13; Mt 25.29-30). In contrast, this will not be the experience of believers. Those who died, having placed their faith in Jesus as their redeemer, will be given new bodies fit for heaven (1 Cor 15.43-44; Phil 3.20-21) and will be taken into heaven by Jesus (1 Thess 4.15-17).

Belief in the resurrection and renovation of the body is a great hope for Christians (Jn 6.44, 54; Acts 23.6; Acts 24.15; Rom 8.23). But it has always been a scorned and attacked belief among those who have rejected Biblical truth (Acts 17.32; 1 Cor 15.12). We believe in the resurrection because:

- The translation of Enoch (Gen 5.24) and Elijah (2 Ki 2.11), and the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1.9), indicate that physical bodies can exist somewhere, other than in this space-time realm.
- There are instances of 'resurrections' (resuscitations) from the dead⁵ prior to and after Christ's resurrection, which point to the general resurrection at the end of time.
- Christ led the way by being raised from the dead in a glorious form, as the firstfruits of the resurrection (1 Cor 15.20, 23).
- Jesus (Jn 5.28-29; Jn 11.23) and the apostle Paul (1 Cor 15.12-49; 1 Thess 4.16) declared that a general resurrection is pending.
- Jesus has promised that he will complete the task of salvation that he took upon himself, including

⁵ 1 Ki 17.22-23; 2 Ki 4.32-35; 2 Ki 13.21; Mt 9.25; Lk 7.14-15; Lk 8.54-55; Mt 27.52-53; Jn 11.43-44.

raising dead believers in him (Jn 6.39-40).

- The resurrection is required to complete Jesus' work of saving his people (Jn 17.24; 1 Cor 15.52-58; Jude 24).

Belief in the resurrection is important. Paul indicates this when he uses a rhetorical technique with a series of 'ifs' and explores the consequences of each 'if' with a hypothetical 'then' condition (1 Cor 15.12-19): Paul says, if there is no resurrection, then:

- Preaching is a vain pursuit, and we waste time preaching the Gospel. There can be no message of salvation since death still holds sinners in its clutches. We may as well shut the church doors and join a Rotary Club.
- Faith is vain and futile. It is directed toward a dead saviour who can do nothing. We may as well contract with a cryonic containment centre to preserve our bodies until 'science' can restore them to health.
- The apostles and all preachers misrepresent God; Christianity is a myth that does not proclaim historic facts and absolute truth. We may as well believe in unicorns; they can do us as much good.
- We are all still lost in our sin; a dead saviour cannot save anyone. We may as well sin to excess. It makes no difference what we do since there can be no escape from everlasting judgement.
- Those who have already died are without hope of a resurrection, and we should conclude that they have ceased to exist.
- Hope only in this life, with declining bodies in a decaying world, is most depressing. We may as well eat and drink as if there is no tomorrow.
- Christians are to be pitied for wasting their time on a futile belief with less hope than the fulfilment of finding extra-terrestrial intelligent life.

Thus, if there is no resurrection into a physical afterlife, no benefits can be obtained from a sincere faith, proper worship, moral living, forfeiting the temporary 'pleasures of sin', and enduring hardships (privation, persecution, prison) for Christ and his Gospel. But the reality is that we can hold to no more important a belief than to the truth that Jesus was raised from the grave on third day, and to its logical consequence—the resurrection of believers to be with him forever.

The pending resurrection of believers is our great hope because it will:

- Preserve us as we were originally created—as whole body-spirit entities (Gen 1.27; Gen 2.7)—and give us a new physical realm to experience forever.
- Provide perfect, immortal bodies that will not be subject to decay or any damage (Rev 21.4; 1 Cor 15.42-45).
- Make us fit for dwelling in the restored paradise in which there will be no more sin or consequences of sin (Rev 21.8; Rev 22.15; 1 Cor 6.9).
- Maintain our personality and individuality so that we will know others as they were known to us, and they will know us (Mt 17.3; Mt 27.52-53).
- Restore our fellowship with family members and friends who left this realm before our time of departure (2 Sam 12.23; Mt 22.32).
- Make us like Jesus with his glorified body (1 Cor 15.49; 1 Jn 3.2).
- Fulfill the promises of God (Col 3.3-4) and demonstrate his power over death (Mt 22.29; Jn 5.28-29; Rom 8.11; Phil 3.21); thus, vindicating the faith of his people and silencing forever the scoffing of their enemies.

Paul tells us that we should encourage one another by speaking about the resurrection (1 Thess 4.18). A firm and confident belief in the resurrection helps us put everything else into a proper perspective—how we live, what we live for, how we endure persecution for Christ's sake, and how we die.

Eschatological Timeline

(Rev 1-22)

Throughout our studies, we have identified events mentioned in Revelation that occurred in the past (e.g., the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus), occur continually during the period between Christ's ascension and his second coming (e.g., the plagues associated with the seven trumpets and the bowls), and will occur in the future, at the end of time (e.g., the judgement day, and the unveiling of the new heaven and earth). At times, it is difficult to distinguish between these timeframes—past, present, and future—in the visions of this book. Therefore, it may be helpful to provide a summary of key eschatological events mentioned in the Bible, which have provided a context for our interpretation of John's visions recorded in Revelation:

- Satan was bound when Christ paid the penalty for sin and rose from the dead, so that he could no longer deceive the nations and so that the Gospel could go out freely to the whole world (Rev 20.1-3; Mt 28.19; Acts 1.8).
- The period of 1,000 years referred to in Revelation 20.2-7 is a symbol for the complete period of the *last days* (Acts 2.17; Heb 1.2; 1 Jn 2.18)—the period between Christ's first coming and his second coming. This is not a present period of a literal 1,000 years, nor is it a period of a literal 1,000 years yet to come, when Christ will rule in a special way—either before his physical return or after his physical return.
- Christ reigns now as King of kings (Rev 17.14; Rev 19.16; Is 9.6-7; Acts 2.29-36; Acts 4.25-28). His mediatorial reign formally commenced at his ascension to the right hand of the Father (Phil 2.9-11).
- The Church will grow and increase in number and fill the whole earth, by being present in every nation, throughout the period of the *last days*. From a small seed like that of a mustard plant, the Church will grow into a great tree (Mt 13.31-32). From a small lump of yeast, the Church will grow to fill the entire dough of the earth (Mt 13.33). People out of all nations will come to Christ (Rev 7.9; Mt 28.19). In absolute numbers and in relative numbers, the Church will grow into a vast multitude that no one can number (Rev 7.9), throughout this period of the last days.
- Although the general trend for the Church will be one of growth, there will be periods of great decline in society and in the Church (1 Tim 4.1; 2 Tim 3.1-5; 2 Pt 3.3-4; 1 Jn 2.18; 1 Jn 4.3; Jude 18).
- There will be a final time of falling away before Christ returns (Lk 18.8; 2 Thess 2.3, 6-8). But we will not be able to determine if any specific period of falling away is the final one before the return of Christ, since this will be one of many; and we are constantly to pray and hope for revival in society and reformation in the Church.
- Christ will return to this earth (1 Thess 4.15-16) in the same way as he was taken from the earth (Acts 1.11).
- Christ's return could happen at any time. Every generation should expect his return (Rom 13.11-12; Heb 10.37; 2 Pt 3.8-10), since it will come suddenly, without warning, and will be universally unexpected—there will be no special signs or evidences to indicate when he will return (Mt 24.36-44; Mt 25.1-13; 1 Thess 5.1-3; 2 Pt 3.10).
- At Christ's return, every person alive on the earth will see him (Rev 1.7).
- The Church will be complete (all the elect saved) at his return (1 Cor 15.23; 1 Thess 3.13; 2 Thess 1.10) and the time of probation for mankind will have closed and Christ's intercessory work through the Holy Spirit will cease (Rev 5.6; Jn 14.16-17, 26; Jn 15.26; Jn 16.7; Titus 3.5-6).
- The NT sealing ordinances of baptism (Mt 28.19-20) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11.26) will no longer be observed after Christ's return, because they are anticipatory and not consummating ordinances.
- When Christ returns, all the dead will be raised from their graves (Dan 12.2; Jn 5.28-29; Acts 24.15; 1 Cor 15.20-23; 1 Thess 4.15-17). Believers will be given new bodies fit for heaven (1 Cor 15.43-44; Phil 3.20-21). The new bodies of the unrepentant wicked will be suited for their everlasting punishment in the lake of fire (Rev 20.15; Lk 16.24).
- Judgement will follow the resurrection of mankind (Rev 20.11-15; Mt 13.49, 50; Mt 16.27; Mt 25.14-46; Lk 19.15-27; Jn 5.28, 29; 1 Cor 4.5; 2 Thess 1.6-10; Jude 14-15). This judgement will be administered by Jesus (Rev 21.5; Mt 25.31; Jn 5.22, 27; Jn 9.39; Acts 10.42; Acts 17.31; 2 Cor 5.10; 2 Tim 4.1) and mankind will be judged according to the works they performed during their lives (Rev 20.12-13; Mt 10.32-33; Mt 16.27; Mt 25.31-46; Lk 19.11-27).

- Everlasting rewards and punishment will be dispensed by Jesus (Mt 25.31-46). For the righteous, there will be everlasting joy and honour (Mt 13.43; 2 Tim 4.8; 1 Pt 1.4). For the unrepentant wicked, there will be everlasting and unescapable physical torment and woe (Rev 21.8; Mt 13.41-42, 49-50; Mt 25.30, 46).
- At the time of the general judgement the heavens and the earth will be consumed with fire (Rev 20.11; Rev 21.1; 2 Pt 3.7, 10-12), all creation will be replaced (Rom 8.19-22), the new heavens and new earth will be established (Rev 21.1; Is 65.17-25; 2 Pt 3.13), and heaven will be extended to the new earth (Rev 21.2-4), in which there will be no more sin (Rev 21.4; Rev 22.15).
- The saints will be forever relieved of their earthly efforts for advancing the Kingdom (Lk 19.13) and persecutions (Mk 10.30; 2 Cor 4.17) and will experience an everlasting sabbath (Heb 4.9-10).
- The saints will participate with Christ in his victory over Satan, sin, and death, and march and celebrate with him in his triumph parade (Rev 19.11-16).
- Then the saints will sit down with Jesus at the perpetual marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19.9).

A New Heaven and Earth

(Rev 21.1, 5)

These verses reveal that God (Jesus) will create a new physical heaven and earth, at the end of time. They (the new heaven and earth) are not to be understood in a purely spiritual or moral sense—i.e., of a total righteousness that will be introduced into the hearts of God’s people so that they become new creatures and live without sin. Nor are they to be understood as purely a representation of the NT Church, or church-age, made up of the regenerate (2 Cor 5.17; Gal 6.15). That there will be an actual, physical new heaven and earth is supported by the following facts:

- Man is a body-spirit being who was designed by God to live in a physical world, with dominion over the rest of the creation. God’s intention for mankind has not changed, despite the despoiling of the original creation by Adam’s sin. Rather God’s plan from the beginning, as indicated by OT prophecies (Is 65.17; Is 66.22), was to re-create the universe so that his saved people have a permanent place to live (Jn 14.2-3).
- Mankind will be given resurrected physical bodies on the last day (Rev 20.13; Jn 5.28-29; Jn 6.39-40, 44, 54; Acts 24.15; Rom 8.19, 23; 1 Thess 4.15-17). The bodies of the saints will need to exist in a physical environment with some form of space, time, energy, and matter.
- Paul declares that the entire creation has been subjected to corruption and decay because of Adam’s sin (Rom 8.19-23) and is waiting for its redemption. The curse that was placed on the physical creation (Gen 3.16-19) cannot be undone if the new heaven and earth are only spiritual.
- The God-man, in bodily form, will dwell (Rev 21.3) with the saints in a restored paradise (Lk 23.43).
- Mankind was locked out of the original paradise (the garden of Eden) after eating the forbidden fruit (Gen 3.24), and the garden was destroyed by the flood. Satan’s temporary dominion over God’s created order (Jn 12.31) would be left unaddressed if a physical paradise is not restored.
- Mankind was prohibited from eating of an actual tree of life after Adam sinned (Gen 3.22-23). In the new paradise, the tree of life will be made available to every saved person, who will receive everlasting sustenance and refreshment from it (Rev 2.7; Rev 22.2, 14).
- Peter states that this physical universe is to be consumed by fire and replaced (2 Pt 3.10-13). His statement cannot be understood as metaphorical, therefore we should use his statement to guide our interpretation of what John sees in his vision.
- Jesus also indicates that this current realm will pass away (Mt 5.18; Mk 13.31) and be replaced by a new world (Mt 19.28).
- God will wipe away tears and pain from his people. This will only be possible if the pain-causing curse (Gen 3.16, 18-19) has been removed from the physical creation.
- This universe is decaying, and entropy is increasing. Therefore, in its current form, this universe cannot be everlasting. So, it must either be transformed to work with a different form of physics, or be

completely replaced—which these, and other, verses indicate will be the case. It has been suggested that this current world (but in a revived form) will be the permanent dwelling of the righteous, based on Jesus' statement that the meek shall inherit the earth (Mt 5.5). However, our inheritance of the earth does not mean that it will consist of precisely the same physical constituents. Consider an analogy: believers will have resurrected bodies that will be made up of entirely different molecules than the molecules in their bodies when they died; but these new bodies will still be part of the same person and be fully recognizable. Likewise, the new earth, that the meek will inherit, will be different in form, but identifiably the earth.

John identifies a difference between the old and new earths—the absence of a sea in the new earth. This statement has engendered much speculation, even disbelief that a new physical earth could not have a sea, which is believed by some to be an unattractive expectation. Many interpret John's statement purely as figurative, since elsewhere in Revelation and Scripture the sea can represent the restless and wicked nations of the earth (Rev 17.1, 15; Ps 65.7; Is 17.12; Is 23.11). However, it is not inconsistent to understand the vision to be a figurative representation of a physical reality—as the Lamb represents Jesus. The absence of a sea in the physical new earth may be a symbol for the fact that the pagan nations (Is 57.20) of the earth will be excluded from heaven (Rev 22.15) and that God has removed an agent of judgement from the new creation which he used on this earth, for example, to wipe out mankind at the time of the flood and to check Jonah's rebellious flight. God has always used physical elements as symbols of his dealings with mankind (e.g., a tree's fruit to represent a moral obedience-test in the garden, the sacrifice of animals to represent Christ's sacrifice, the cutting of the foreskin in circumcision to represent the purification of the heart, a pile of stones to represent the people's crossing into the promised land, and bread and wine to represent the Lord's sacrifice and spiritual fellowship with him). Thus, the absence of a sea in the new earth will be forever understood by its inhabitants as a symbol of the removal of sinful rebellion and of judgement against that rebellion.

The new heaven and earth will be qualitatively different from the current universe because the curse on the natural realm will have been lifted. However, it will also be *better* than the original perfect creation (Gen 1.31) because the possibility of its corruption will be removed forever.

The New Jerusalem

(Rev 21.2-4, 9)

The imagery used in the visions throughout Revelation is fluid and should not be forced into a single interpretive paradigm (e.g., only literal, figurative, or symbolic; or only past, present, or future). At times the imagery refers figuratively to spiritual beings (e.g., God, angels, Satan and demons) or conceptual entities (e.g., white robes for holiness, incense for prayer, or a beast for pagan government). At other times it provides symbols for physical entities (e.g., the Lamb, representing Jesus). In Revelation the meaning of the images for the new Jerusalem appear to fluctuate between a representation of the collective people of God who are its constituents (Rev 2.1) and the abode of the people of God in the new heaven and earth (Rev 3.12). Elsewhere in the NT the Church (the spiritual Jerusalem) is also represented as an assembly of professing believers (1 Cor 1.2; Phil 4.15; Col 4.15), the transtemporal and universal collection of all true believers (Eph 5.27; Heb 12.22-23), and the home or abode of those are the people of God (Acts 20.28; Gal 4.26; Heb 11.10, 16; 3 Jn 10). In Revelation the new Jerusalem is presented as the bride of Christ (Rev 21.2, 9)—the collection of all the saints through all time. However, another description of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21.10-22.5) appears to identify it as the final home for believers, that Jesus has gone ahead to prepare for them (Jn 14.2). Thus, the city, the new Jerusalem, is a spiritual entity, composed of the saints (the Church) and it is also a physical entity where the saints dwell with their resurrected bodies in everlasting bliss in heaven.

Whatever the new Jerusalem is understood to be, it is the work of God. It is a bride prepared for her husband

by God. And it is part of the new creation which he prepares as he makes all things new (Rev 21.5). It is a city whose designer and builder is God (Heb 11.10). The Greek word that is translated as ‘prepared’ (Rev 21.2) is used elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 8.6; Rev 9.7, 15; Rev 12.6; Rev 16.12; Rev 19.7), and in each instance the preparation is ultimately the result of God’s decree and gracious actions, and not mere human effort. Thus, when John tells us that the city, as the bride of Christ (2 Cor 11.2), is holy (an allusion to Is 52.1) and adorned to meet her husband, he is speaking of the holiness that is given to the saints when they are clothed in the garments of Christ’s righteousness (Rev 7.9, 13-14; Rev 19.7-8) that he has given to them (Eph 5.25-27). The holiness (symbolized by whiteness) of the new Jerusalem’s garments indicates that she has washed them in the blood of the lamb (Rev 7.14) and that she does not wear the gaudy and obscene apparel of the prostitute—Babylon (Rev 17.1, 4). In addition, since the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, it is not the work of men, like those who attempted to build their own city—the first Babylon—to reach to heaven (Gen 11.4). Never in history, since Adam’s sin, has it been possible to describe the state of the Church as ‘holy’. She has always been plagued by heresies and idolatry. Only after the resurrection of believers and their being endowed with perfect new bodies, will it be possible to declare, as John does, that the new Jerusalem is a holy city.

In the garden of Eden, God made his presence know to man (Gen 2.19; Gen 3.8-9). Prior to his eating the forbidden fruit, Adam had fellowship with God, who likely appeared to him in a physical form. During the delivery of the Law, God indicated that one of the blessings of covenant obedience would be his presence with his people (Lev 26.11-12). In the OT kingdom era, God declared Jerusalem in Palestine to be his dwelling place (Ps 48.1-3; Is 2.3; Zech 1.16; Zech 2.10; Zech 8.3), where he manifested himself in a physical form of fire from the inner sanctuary (2 Chron 7.1-3). OT prophecies indicated that God would dwell among his people in the Messianic or eschatological kingdom of Christ, as Immanuel—i.e., ‘God with us’ (Is 7.14, 8.8, 10; Ezk 37.23, 27). These prophecies were fulfilled with the incarnation of Jesus (Mt 1.23; Jn 1.14). Since Jesus’ ascension, the Church has been the spiritual dwelling place of God (1 Cor 3.9; 2 Cor 6.16; Eph 2.19-22). However, the voice from the throne (likely from the Father) declares that God, as Jesus, will make his everlasting dwelling place in the new Jerusalem, which will come down from heaven to the new earth. Here, he will make his presence known in a physical form (1 Jn 3.2). Thus, in the new Jerusalem, the God-man will walk with the saints and fellowship with them forever, in a restored paradise. This will fulfill one of man’s primary purposes—to have communion with his Creator.

Because the former things will have passed away, with the restoration of paradise and the full manifestation of God’s presence in the form of the glorified Lord Jesus, God will lift the consequences of the curse that he inflicted on the present creation (Gen 3.16-19) and replace it with the full blessing of total goodness (Gen 1.31; Is 25.8; Is 65.19). In the physical new Jerusalem, there will be nothing evil that is now associated with the *City of Man*—Babylon. There will be no weeping or mourning (Rev 18.8-9, 11, 19), no pain resulting with the plagues of temporal judgement (Rev 16.10-11), and no death (Rev 9.18). These evils have been defeated by Christ, who cried out, “It is finished.” as he paid the debt of our sin (Mt 8.17; Heb 4.15), and through his resurrection as he defeated death (Rev 20.13-14; 1 Cor 15.26). They will be replaced by holiness, unadulterated love, everlasting joy, endless blessings, holy pleasure (Ps 16.11), and eternal life. Paul informs us that what we suffer in this world, when it is not the direct result of our own sins, is a momentary affliction that is preparing for us an everlasting weight of glory beyond all comparison, because the things seen (now) are transient and passing (2 Cor 4.17-18). Let us rejoice in the promise of the new Jerusalem.

A New Physics in the New Heaven and Earth (Rev 21.1-5)

In previous meditations we concluded that the new heaven and earth will be a physical place and that the new Jerusalem, which will come down from heaven to the new earth, besides representing a spiritual entity (the Church), will also be the everlasting physical dwelling place of the resurrected saints (a city paradise

on earth). We also noted that the curse on creation will be lifted in the new heaven and earth, which means that there will no longer be any consequences of sin, such as pain, decay, or death. John summarizes this change when he says that the “former things have passed away”.

Since there will not be pain, decay, or death in the new physical creation some things about it will likely have to be significantly different than how we understand physics operates today and how we currently experience it. As a simple example, when we are walking up a staircase in the new Jerusalem we won’t trip and stub a toe. It is of course possible that angels will constantly be on guard and keep us from tripping (Ps 91.11-12). Or it is possible that God will intervene directly with a preventative action, what we might call a miracle, to keep us from tripping. However, it is more likely that God will administer the new creation through secondary causes as he appears to have done in the first creation that he declared to be very good, and as he does now—e.g., through the four known primary forces (e.g., gravity and electromagnetism) and the 1st and 2nd ‘laws’ of thermodynamics.

We do not want to address this matter in an over technical way, but can consider a few examples of how things may be administered differently in the new creation:

- Since Adam’s sin, God operates the current physical universe as a closed system—the total amount of energy in the universe does not change (the first law of thermodynamics) and total entropy increases as matter and energy decay through time (the second law of thermodynamics). However, God will likely operate the new creation as an open system and maintain an energy stasis through a constant injection of high-order energy (similar to how he created light on the first day of the creation week) and a removal of low-order energy (heat). John states that in the new creation he did not see a sun because God himself will directly provide the necessary light (Rev 21.23; Rev 22.5).
- Entropy will likely operate differently, since an increase in entropy is not intrinsically evil and the result of sin. Some form of entropy would have been necessary in the original paradise or Adam and Eve could not have undertaken any actions. For example, friction that is necessary for walking requires the dissipation of some heat and therefore an increase in entropy. Likewise, the ability to grasp a fruit requires an expenditure of energy. Thus, when we take action in our resurrected physical bodies, we will likely generate friction to walk or to pickup objects and generate heat as we move. The new physics will have to handle entropy differently than it operates today or the new creation would eventually end with a heat death in which thermodynamic free energy would no longer exist and processes that add entropy could no longer operate.
- Today we consume and digest food and breathe in order to perform work. Digestion and respiration result in increased ‘decay’ and entropy, but they are not sinful actions. Jesus ate food and breathed while he lived on the earth and also in his resurrected body (Lk 24.42-43; Jn 21.12). This form of ‘decay’ is therefore not the result of sin and is in a class with clouds giving up their water vapour and not the destructive decay that infects the universe as the result of sin. After Adam’s sin, God removed some of his sustaining support (Col 1.15-17)—he handed over the universe to ever-increasing decay. However, in the new creation God’s sustaining support will prevent harmful decay.
- Currently, pain is part of the curse (Gen 3.16-17), but also a needed factor for preventing bodily damage—e.g., we pull our hand quickly off a hot stove or we remove a stone from our shoe. In the new creation, no one will suffer pain or need it as an early warning indicator.
- Our current understanding of physics, since Einstein’s theory of relativity has received empirical support, indicates that space, time, energy, and matter are intricately intertwined. For example, time slows down in a higher gravitational field. Many of the accidents that occur in this world are caused by people falling (e.g., from a ladder) or by objects falling on them. It is conceivable that gravity in the new creation will behave quite differently than it does today; and if so, then all aspects of the physical realm may behave differently than we can even imagine today.

Ironically, many scientists today postulate the existence of alternate universes in which the physical laws

and constants are different than in our universe. They do this to avoid the reality that this universe is a unique creation and not the result of one set of random events that happened purely by chance to generate a habitable universe. Yet, our consideration of John's vision of a new heaven and earth indicates that there will be an alternate universe where physical processes, 'laws', and constants will be quite different than we know them and yet they will support human physical life in an ideal form. Let us not be sceptical about what God can do. Rather let us rejoice in the promise that in the new heaven and earth there will no longer be a need for ambulances and hospital wards.

The Certainty of Everlasting Rewards and Punishment

(Rev 21.5-8)

John is reminded by God that the visions he has seen are revelation—either the immediately preceding one about the new heaven and earth or all that are in this book. Thus, he is told to write down what he has just heard (“Behold, I am making all things new.”) and seen so that it can be preserved for dissemination to the Church, for her encouragement. These words, and what he has seen in the visions, are given a divine seal of authenticity with three statements that serve as witnesses to their truthfulness:

- *True and faithful.* The words (and the visions) are true and faithful and can be trusted by the saints because they come from God, who cannot lie (Titus 1.2). The theme of the trustworthiness of what John has been seeing and hearing is repeated throughout this book (Rev 1.5; Rev 3.7, 14; Rev 19.9, 11; Rev 22.6). This repetition assures us that what Revelation documents is a factual statement of certainty—God will reward the righteous, make all things new, and punish the wicked.
- *It is done.* Time, history, Babylon, and this universe will come to an end. The persecution of God's people by the followers of Satan and his beasts will also end, and the enemies of Christ and the Church will be punished for their antagonism. In contrast, believers will be delivered into God's glorious presence to receive their rewards for persevering and conquering. Because Christ declared that the work of redemption was finished (Jn 19.30), we can rest assured that his work of saving all of his people will also be fully accomplished.
- *Alpha and Omega.* Revelation opened with the declaration that God is the beginning and the end of all that was, is, or ever will be (Rev 1.8). And it closes with the same declaration (Rev 22.13). This solemn title reminds us, as we concluded previously (see, [The Alpha](#) and the Omega) that the Triune God is eternal, immutable, and the Creator, and sovereign over everything that transpires in this world or in the next.

In this instance, the one speaking from the throne may be Jesus specifically, since he identifies the rewards which will be given to his faithful people—those who conquer (see, [Conquering in Christ](#))—using words and imagery that he used during his time on the earth or earlier in this book. He identifies the rewards as:

- *Living water.* Speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus informed her (Jn 4.10) that he is the source of the living water that was promised in the OT (Is 44.3-4; Is 49.10; Jer 2.13; Jer 17.13), of which the thirsty are invited to drink freely at no cost (Rev 22.17; Is 55.1).
- *An inheritance.* The reference here to a heritage may be to the blessings of kingship (Rev 20.4, 6) and a royal inheritance with Jesus since Isaiah 55.1-3 ties the privilege of drinking freely of the waters with an everlasting Davidic covenant. Alternatively, it could refer to Abraham's offspring by faith, who are heirs according to promise (Gal 3.28-29). In either case, it indicates that believers in Christ have an inheritance in heaven (Mt 5.5; Rom 8.17; Eph 1.14; 1 Pt 1.4).
- *God's presence.* In his first epistle, John makes a promise to the Church. He says that when Jesus appears, at the end of time, we will see him as he is (1 Jn 3.2) in his resurrected body. Jesus, the God-man, will welcome us into heaven (Mt 25.21, 23), dine with us (Rev 19.9; Mt 26.29), and walk (Gen 5.22, 24; Gen 6.9) and talk with us. Thus, the covenant promise that God will be our God and we his children (Lev 26.12; Jer 7.23; Ezk 11.20; 2 Cor 6.16, 18) will be fulfilled in a way that we cannot imagine today.

There are many reasons why God will provide these rewards for his people, which we can not consider now in detail, including: he is loving and gracious, keeps his covenant promises, vindicates his suffering people, plans to restore paradise with a manifestation better than the first one, and will bring to a full realization the human potential that was spoiled by Adam's sin.

No one deserves any of the rewards that God will grant to his people, and no one can earn them. Instead, we deserve only everlasting exclusion from the new Jerusalem and to be consigned to endless punishment for breaking God's laws. Anyone who refuses to repent of his sins and to cling to Christ in faith will suffer precisely what he deserves (Rev 9.20-21; Rev 16.9, 11). John does not leave us in doubt about who the excluded are; he identifies them as, those who are:

- *Cowardly*. They give in to the beast's threats rather than face persecution. They are afraid to bear the cost of aligning with Christ and his Church.
- *Faithless*. They refuse to trust God's word and to believe what he says.
- *Detestable*. They love all the abominations of the world (Rev 17.4).
- *Murderers*. They are primarily those who kill the saints during the beast's reign of terror (Rev 13.15; Rev 17.6; Rev 18.24) and includes those who administer abortions and rip the unborn from the safety of their mothers' wombs.
- *Sexually immoral*. They are those who give themselves over to the great prostitute (Rev 2.14, 20-21; Rev 14.4; Rev 17.1-2; Rev 18.3), including all who participate in sexual acts outside of a male-female marriage or purvey or peruse pornography.
- *Sorcerers*. They are superstitious and embrace astrology (Rev 9.21; Rev 18.23).
- *Idolaters*. They worship false gods, particularly the beast's image (Rev 13.14-15; Rev 14.9, 11; Rev 16.2). This includes adherents of all false religions.
- *Liars*. They make false claims (Rev 2.2; Rev 3.9) and deceive the naive with their foolishness, such as claims about evolution and transgenderism.

There is only one possible outcome for these people—it is to be consigned to everlasting physical torment in hell, which is the second death.

New Jerusalem's Attributes (*Part 1 of 4*)

(Rev 21.9-14)

John is invited by an angel—one of those who had been assigned the duty of pouring out one of the bowls of God's wrath—to take a virtual tour of the new Jerusalem. He is taken to a high mountain (Ezk 40.2) so that he can have a clear view of the city, like Moses looking into the promised land from the top of Mount Pisgah (Dt 34.1-4). This is great honour for both the tour guide and the sightseer—the angel who had to perform an execution is now given the happy duty of showing off God's magnificent creation; and John is given a glimpse of the spectacular future (1 Cor 2.9). The description of the new Jerusalem provided in this chapter and the first part of the next is figurative of a spiritual reality (the entire glorified Church; Gal 4.26; Heb 12.22), in which believers will be living stones (1 Pt 2.5) and pillars (Rev 3.12). The new Jerusalem will likely not be a literal cube 12,000 stadia (2,200 kms) on a side (Rev 21.16). However, it would be a mistake to think that the description relates *only* to spiritual realities. The saints will have resurrected physical bodies and will live in a new physical heaven and earth (Rev 21.1, 5). And on that new earth there will be a place for them to live that will be a city-paradise (Jn 14.2-3; Heb 11.10; Heb 13.14). In the new Jerusalem there will be no more physical death or pain (Rev 21.4), so it must be more than just a spiritual entity. To illustrate the dual nature of the imagery of the new Jerusalem shown here, consider our use of the word 'church'. We speak of a church as a conceptual entity—an assembly of believers—but also as a physical entity—a building located at the corner of First and Main.

These verses describe the new Jerusalem as having the following attributes:

- *Holiness*. The saints who make up the city and who dwell in it are pure. They have been cleansed by

the blood of the Lamb and have shed any remnant of their old natures that warred against their new natures while they lived on this earth (Rom 7.13-25). Also, the city is holy because it is sanctified and set apart by God who makes it his place of habitation in the form of Jesus in his resurrected body.

- *Glory.* The new Jerusalem is bathed in the glory (light) of God (Rev 21.23; Ex 40.34) and reflects that glory like Moses' face shone after he had met with God on Mount Sinai (Ex 34.29-35). John likens the radiance of that glory to the light reflected from an expensive, sparkling jewel or a clear quartz crystal (a better translation than 'jasper', which is opaque, coloured quartz).
- *Security.* The city has a great wall (Is 26.1), that is massive. Its height is 12,000 stadia and its thickness is 144 cubits [65 m; Rev 21.17]. This indicates that it would be impossible for Satan and his armies to breach its walls, if they were permitted to attack the city. However, John has already seen that they have been consigned to the lake of fire forever (Rev 20.10, 15) and excluded from the new heaven and earth (Rev 21.8). Therefore, the wall is not large to protect the saints from a possible or actual attack, since one could never occur, but to assure the saints that their safety is forever secure. Never again will they have to fear Satan, who now "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pt 5.8).
- *Accessibility.* The city is protected so that it is unassailable, yet it is also accessible. It has twelve permanently open gates (Rev 21.25), made of huge pearls (Rev 21.21), with three on each side of its square ground plan. That the gates face each of the four points of the compass indicates that peoples from all nations are invited to enter the *one* city—there is not a separate city for Jews or Gentiles or any other class of distinction (Rev 7.9; Gal 3.28).
- *Guarded.* Even though the gates are open, each is guarded by an angel, just as the gate to the first paradise was guarded by cherubim after Adam's sin (Gen 3.24). They are placed there not to protect the city from attack, but to indicate that only those who have the correct credentials may pass through the gates. No one can enter who is not wearing the white robes of righteousness and no one can counterfeit an access badge.
- *Permanence.* The city is placed on twelve foundations, indicating that it could never be moved or toppled by a cataclysmic event. That the city is founded on the apostles and not on the tribes of Israel, may indicate that the new Jerusalem could not be permanently established until the incarnation and the completion of the NT revelation (Eph 2.20-22).
- *Completeness.* The twelve gates and twelve foundations are inscribed with the names of the tribes of Israel (Rev 7.4-8; Ex 39.14) and the apostles, signifying the completeness of the spiritual Israel of God (Rev 4.4; Gal 6.16). The twenty-four names represent the courses (1 Chron 24.3-19) of the priest-kings (all the saints; Rev 20.4, 6) who will serve forever, day and night, in God's throne room (Rev 7.15). The integration of the tribes and apostles in the new Jerusalem indicates further that there is only one city and Church—"all Israel" (Rom 11.26)—that is saved in Christ.

The contrast between Babylon (the *City of Man*) and the new Jerusalem (the *City of God*) is evident—Babylon is a prostitute (Rev 17.1), Jerusalem is a virgin bride (Rev 14.4); Babylon is given the epithet 'great' (Rev 14.8), Jerusalem is called 'holy'; Babylon comes up from the abyss, Jerusalem comes down from heaven; Babylon carries the names of blasphemy (Rev 17.3), Jerusalem is inscribed with the names of the tribes of Israel and the apostles; Babylon is where demons and sinners dwell, Jerusalem is where only the saints dwell; Babylon is a slave of Satan, Jerusalem is a joint heir with Christ; Babylon is destroyed (Rev 18.1-24), Jerusalem is indestructible and everlasting.

New Jerusalem's Attributes (Part 2 of 4) (Rev 21.15-21)

The angel who has been speaking with John and giving him the tour of the new Jerusalem, uses a rod (like a meterstick) to measure the dimensions of the city—an action similar to that which was undertaken by an angel in Ezekiel's vision as he measured the figurative eschatological temple and its courts (Ezk 40.3-5;

Ezk 42.15); by an angel in Zechariah's vision as he measured Jerusalem (Zech 2.1-5); and by John himself as he measured the temple, altar, and assembly of worshippers (Rev 11.1). John tells us that the measuring rod was made of gold and that it was of the standard length used among men and angels. This measuring action figuratively represents a heavenly inspection and testing (like an audit, in our terms) of the city against God's standard (as represented by the gold rod). Thus, as the dimensions of the new Jerusalem are reported, we are to understand that they represent perfection.

The new Jerusalem is described as being a perfect cube that is 12,000 stadia (2,200 kms) on a side. Besides being a cube, one of the perfect geometric solids, this cube has a peculiar attribute—the sum of its edges (12 X 12,000) equals 144,000, which figuratively represents the number of the elect (Rev 7.4; Rev 14.1, 3). In addition, it reflects the cubic shape of the inner sanctuary of the original temple in Jerusalem (1 Ki 6.20). This indicates, as we have observed previously, that the imagery of the new Jerusalem represents the entire Church of believing Jews and Gentiles. However, it also figuratively represents the permanent home of the glorified Church—the city in which the saints will dwell. If this city were a physical cube placed on the current earth, its base would extend from Toronto to Saskatoon. However, since we understand this passage to be figurative, the sizes of the dimensions are not to be interpreted literally, but to indicate that God is creating a new Jerusalem that is both perfect and immense—beyond anything that we can imagine today. One writer, defending a non-literal interpretation of this section, has said, “There never was or could be a literal city so vast.” Why not? God created a universe with an estimated 100 sextillion stars, in a single day; creating a massive new Jerusalem would be trivial for the almighty God! Nevertheless, we interpret the description figuratively.

The city's wall is 144 cubits [65 m] thick. Some suggest that the 144 cubits represents the height of the wall. However, they clearly have not considered the relative proportions of the two measurements. If we used the height of an adult male compared to the thickness of piece of paper, in relative terms, the thickness of the sheet of paper would be at least ten times larger than the thickness of the wall—and the wall would be flat with no apparent height. It is likely that John's vision is a reminder that the new Jerusalem is more magnificent than ancient Babylon. Herodotus, the Greek historian, referred to Babylon as “the most powerful and renowned” of all cities which “surpasses in splendour any city of the known world” (*Histories*, bk. I, para. 178) and said that the city's wall was 50 royal cubits (about, 25 m) wide. Thus, the new Jerusalem's wall is more than double the thickness, and truly surpasses Babylon, the *City of Man*. The objection that a wall 2,200 kms high could not stand on a base only 65 m thick is spurious, since John is not providing engineering specifications, but a figurative image of the greatness of the city.

John describes the splendour of the composition of the city in terms that would have had meaning for his first readers. He selects the most precious, brilliant, and beautiful material objects of the ancient world—pure gold, clear crystal, transparent glass, gems, and pearls. We underestimate the impressive nature of the imagery because we are familiar with objects made of 24-carat gold, transparent glass, large, radiant gemstones, and strings of pearls (even if we don't possess them). But even something we think of as easy to obtain, such as clear glass, was a very expensive luxury in John's day, since most glass was smoky and filled with flaws. Many of the names of the gems that John mentions are difficult to translate and equate with modern equivalents; but it is not necessary to identify them precisely, because John wants us to see the ‘big picture’. While Babylon had pieces of gold, a few small gemstones, and pearls adorning her headdress (Rev 17.4; Rev 18.16), the new Jerusalem is *made* of pure gold and has gigantic gems and pearls as its foundation stones and gates. The ESV's translation ‘adorned’ (Rev 21.19) assumes that jewels were placed on the foundation of the walls and makes us think of small stones attached to the crystal quartz (rather than, ‘jasper’) walls. However, a better translation is probably, “the foundations of the wall of the city were *made beautiful* with every kind of jewel”. John wants us to see what he saw, gigantic gemstones and pearls—not tiny, insignificant ones dotted on the walls. One writer has said, “it is ludicrous to conceive of literal pearls so big that each one suffices for a gate”. While we agree that John's description is figurative, and that the new Jerusalem will not have gates made of actual gigantic pearls, it is not ‘ludicrous’ to

conceive of a giant pearl. Pearls are made of calcium carbonate (chalk!); so are the Cliffs of Dover. We shouldn't underestimate the power of God; he could make a pearl as big as a city gate. But we digress; John's point is to show us that the new Jerusalem is flawless and beautiful beyond anything in this temporal realm. Thus, he is describing the Church—the gathered elect, founded on the apostles who represent the twelve spiritual tribes carried on the high priest's breast-piece (Ex 28.17-21)—in its complete and glorified state; but he is also describing the everlasting dwelling place of the saints—an immense, heavenly city that will be more wondrous than the vast possessions of the wealthiest persons who have ever lived.

New Jerusalem's Attributes (*Part 3 of 4*)

(Rev 21.22-27)

John continues his virtual tour of the new Jerusalem. We can picture the movement of the vision as it begins with a panoramic shot taken from a high mountain (Rev 21.10), so that John can be shown a perspective of the entire city. Then it zooms in to focus on details of the wall and gates. It has now entered the city, and John begins to describe things that he notices as missing, as well as what he sees.

He mentions that he does not see a temple in the city. Commentators suggest reasons why there is no visible temple structure in this vision. Some say that the whole city is a temple, laid out with a similar structure to the earthly temple. Others say that the city is modeled on the holy of holies so there is no need for a temple. And others, say that the Church, figuratively represented by the new Jerusalem, is a spiritual temple composed of the saints (1 Cor 6.19; Eph 5.23), who are priests (Rev 20.6) and 'pillars' (Rev 3.12) in it. However, John does not say that the whole city is a temple or even part of a temple. He says that there is no temple building in the new Jerusalem because the Lord God Almighty (the Father) and the Lamb (the Son) are its temple. A physical temple is missing because it has been replaced by God himself (see, [*The Temple in Revelation*](#) for a consideration of how the word 'temple' is used in this book). John is telling us that Jesus as the God-man represents the temple to which the OT temple pointed (Jn 2.19-22), and that the Jewish ceremonial system with its bloody sacrifices has been completed and abrogated by the sacrifice of Jesus, and that there is no need for a temple for offering sacrifices in the new heaven and earth. This also indicates that the expectation of many today, that a new physical temple will be constructed on the temple mount in Jerusalem, is mistaken since physical sacrifices will never again be required or acceptable in the worship of God.

There is also no sun or moon in the new heaven and earth to shine above the new Jerusalem. Before God created the celestial objects on the 4th day of the creation week (Gen 1.16), he had already illuminated the first earth with a stream of light emanating from his presence (Gen 1.3). Scientists can describe properties of light and how hot objects (e.g., the sun or a burning candle) or excited electrons falling into 'holes' (as in LEDs) can produce light, but they really are not able to tell us what light *is*. Light is highest-order energy, that ultimately comes from God (Rev 21.23; Rev 22.5; 1 Jn 1.5). In the new heaven and earth there will be no need for secondary sources of light because God will continually energize the new creation. Physical light also serves as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment and righteousness (Is 60.19-20; Jn 1.5, 9; Jn 8.12; Jn 11.9-10; Jn 12.46; 2 Cor 4.4-6; 1 Jn 1.7). Thus, John's vision extends the light emanating from God to the knowledge and wisdom about God given to the nations and their rulers who have received the invitation of the Lamb and have placed their faith in his glorious light (Is 60.3). With the destruction of Babylon, darkness (physical and spiritual) will fall on the wicked and their realm forever (Rev 16.10; Rev 18.23; Mt 8.12; Mt 22.13; Mt 25.30). In contrast, the new Jerusalem will be full of light forever.

With no darkness present, it may appear that it is superfluous for John to say that there is no night in the new Jerusalem. However, he wishes to emphasize that there is neither physical nor spiritual darkness. With the removal of the curse placed on the created order because of Adam's sin, it will no longer be necessary for people to sleep since they will not grow weary or tired—thus there will be no night. And, with darkness used as a metaphor for evil (Mt 6.23; Jn 1.5; Jn 3.19-20; 1 Jn 2.9-11), there will be no spiritual 'night' in

the new heaven and earth.

Because all forms of evil will be absent from the new heaven and earth, and there will be no danger for the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem, the gates to the city will never have to be shut. John expands on the absence of evil by identifying those from among mankind who will be excluded from the new Jerusalem and not invited or permitted to pass through its gates—anyone who is unclean (Is 52.1) or does what is detestable or false. Thus, all those who practice sexually abhorrent acts (Rom 1.26-27), participate in idolatrous rituals (Rom 1.23), or turn the truth of God into a lie (Rom 1.25) receive their everlasting reward in the lake of fire (Rev 20.10, 15).

While John sees that all the wicked are excluded from the new Jerusalem, he understands that not one of those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev 3.5; Rev 13.8; Rev 17.8; Rev 20.12, 15) is missing. This is a foundational message and promise of Scripture, which John heard from the mouth of Jesus (Jn 17.12; Rev 18.9). None of the elect, those for whom Christ died who are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit, will miss out on heaven. They cannot lose their salvation, they cannot be cast into outer darkness, and they cannot be denied entrance into heaven (Rom 8.29-30). John sees that the assembly of the saints includes all the spiritual seed of Abraham—people from all the nations (Rev 7.9) along with many of their rulers. Thus, the promise to David is fulfilled—nations and their kings will serve David's greater son, the Lord Jesus (Ps 72.10-11; Phil 2.9-11). They will walk forever in the light of God's glorious truth, and they will bring their own glory (pride and earthly magnificence) into the new Jerusalem and cast it before Christ's throne (Rev 4.10) by humbling themselves and worshipping their Creator and Lord.

New Jerusalem's Attributes (*Part 4 of 4*) (Rev 22.1-5)

The angel continues to lead John on a virtual tour of the new Jerusalem. Now he sees a *paradise* within the city. Our word 'paradise' has its origin from a Middle Eastern word that was applied to walled gardens in the ancient world. This paradise includes a river originating at God's throne, with tree-lined boulevards on either side of it. There is a similarity between what John saw in this vision and how Herodotus, the Greek historian, described ancient Babylon ([*Histories*](#), bk. 1, chapters 178-179)—again establishing a contrast between Babylon, the *City of Man*, that will perish, and the everlasting new Jerusalem, the *City of God*. This is the final scene of the vision of the new Jerusalem and of all the visions in Revelation. Following this section, the book closes with a series of exhortations to God's people, encouraging them to persevere in faithfulness until they are welcomed into the glory of heaven.

John sees a river of fresh, pure water ("bright as crystal") flowing from the throne of God. The word 'throne' is singular, but both God (the Father) and the Lamb (the Son) are seen sitting on it—similar to their standing together in the place of the physical temple (Rev 21.22). This indicates that the Son is divine and has full equality with the Father (Phil 2.6), and jointly shares the sovereign rule over heaven and earth with him. Since this is a vision of the final perfect state of mankind, the river flowing from the throne does not symbolize purification from sin; the inhabitants of this paradise are already perfect in holiness. Nor does it symbolize refreshment for the people of God (Is 41.17-20; Is 43.18-21), since there can be no weariness in heaven. Nor does it represent the Gospel going to the nations, as does the river flowing from the typical temple in Ezekiel's vision (Ezk 47.1-12). Rather, as the river of the "water of life"—a concept appearing in the NT only in John's writings (Jn 4.10, 14; Jn 7.38; Rev 7.17; Rev 21.6; Rev 22.1, 17)—it indicates that God is the source of all physical, spiritual, and eternal life. In the physical new heaven and earth, even with resurrected bodies, we will still need the ongoing energizing and empowering of God, since we will forever continue to live, move, and have our being in him (Acts 17.28). Thus, the "water of life" comes from the primal source and force of all life and is given to the inhabitants of heaven to sustain their everlasting lives. The vision of the river in paradise is an allusion to the river that flowed from the land of Eden to water the original paradise garden and, divided into four rivers, the entire single continent of the antediluvian world

(Gen 2.10-14). So, in the new paradise, the waters sustain the tree of life, which provides fruit for the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem.

The new paradise exceeds the original in grandeur and perfection, since it not only has a life-sustaining river and the tree of life, like the first one, but has the throne of God and the Lamb in its midst and nothing accursed can ever enter it. This latter difference is encouraging for today's beleaguered saints, since in the first paradise, Satan possessing a serpent, was permitted to enter the garden and tempt the woman (Gen 3.1-5, 14-15). However, in the new paradise he is forever excluded (Rev 12.7-9; Rev 20.10), and nothing can ever again interfere with the ongoing felicity of those for whom Christ died.

Since the curse on the created order has been banished, everlasting benefits overflow to the inhabitants of the new Jerusalem; these include:

- *Seeing God.* Adam walked with God—who was in a theophanic form—in the garden. But after Adam's sin, seeing God face-to-face became a circumscribed reality; even Moses was not permitted to see God's face (Ex 33.20, 23). With the incarnation, people looking into the face of Jesus, saw God's face. What a privilege it must have been to look into those eyes full of love! In the new Jerusalem the promises of seeing God's face (Job 19.25-27; Ps 11.7; Ps 17.15; Mt 5.8; 1 Cor 13.12; 1 Jn 3.2) will be realized, and all the pure in heart will see him in the form of the risen and glorified Lord Jesus. The original divine-human intimacy in the garden of Eden will be fully restored and made even better.
- *Perfect worship.* Heaven is filled with worship. The saints respond to the presence of Jesus with exuberant joy, thanksgiving, praise, and service as priests (Rev 1.6; Rev 5.10; Rev 7.15; Rev 20.6) for who he is and what he has done.
- *Adoption by God.* When God places his name on the foreheads of the elect saints (Rev 7.3; Rev 9.4; Rev 14.1), he declares that they belong to his family and have taken on his character as their heavenly Father. They no longer belong to Satan's realm (Rev 20.4).
- *Absence of night.* The absence of night and the presence of God as the light source of heaven refers to the absence of spiritual darkness caused by sin (Rev 21.23-24; 2 Cor 4.4, 6) and to the absence of physical darkness that those in paradise don't need, because no one becomes weary or tired and needs sleep.
- *Reigning with Christ.* The saints are exalted and honoured to reign with the King of kings (Rev 20.4, 6). We saw previously (see, [The Saints' Reign](#) with Christ) that our co-reign with Christ includes: concurring with his judgements, judging and condemning the world, taking possession of the world, and conquering sin and death. Given that this section speaks about the new paradise, it is probably right to conclude that this reign includes the restoration of the Edenic mandate (Gen 1.26) to have dominion over the rest of the created order. This may provide a hint that animals will be present in the new heaven and earth and the restored paradise.

With the lifting of the curse, God makes the end like the beginning—a glorious reality of a new paradise to be looked for and longed for!

The Tree of Life

(Rev 2.7; Rev 22.2, 14, 19)

The tree of life was among the various kinds of trees God planted in the first paradise (Gen 1.12; Gen 2.9). It, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil appear to have had a covenantal significance. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented covenant obligations—God gave a command about the fruit of that tree as a test of obedience (Gen 2.17). The tree of life served as the sacramental sign and seal of the Covenant of Creation and provided the ratifying meal for that covenant administration. After Adam's sin, mankind was excommunicated (expelled from the garden) and prohibited from partaking of the sign of the first covenant administration. Although, in mercy, God would later establish a covenant administration, based around sacrifices, that would point to the coming Messiah and provide hope for restoration.

After this, Scripture remains silent about the tree of life, except for references in Proverbs which equate the tree with wisdom and righteousness, until it reappears in John's visions, as God closes his written revelation to mankind. In Revelation, the only mention of any form of vegetation in the new heaven and earth is about the tree of life. The trees lining the boulevards on both sides of the river flowing from God's throne in the new Jerusalem are of one kind—the tree of life. The contrast between the two paradises is evident. The single instance of the tree of life in the first paradise has been replaced with multiple instances in the new paradise, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is absent from the new paradise. This indicates that the covenant obligations have been fully met and there is no longer a test for obedience and that there remains only an everlasting observance of the covenantal meal with the benefits that flow from it.

The tree of life in the new Jerusalem is atypical, relative to our experience. It doesn't bear a single annual crop of fruit, but twelve crops. John says that they are for each month. Obviously, he is using an earth-focused reckoning of time, since there will be no months in heaven—there is no moon by which to measure months (Rev 21.23; Gen 1.14), and an entirely different form of time in the new heaven and earth. His point is that the trees continually bear a super-abundance of fruit that will be available to all of the saints.

In addition, John tells us that the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations—likely an allusion to Ezekiel 47.12. Since there will be no unsaved persons (needing spiritual healing), or diseases or injuries (needing physical healing) in the new heaven and earth, it seems perplexing that the leaves of the tree are given for *healing*. However, it is possible that a different translation of the Greek word used here might be preferable. We obtain our English words 'therapy' and 'therapeutic' from the Greek word. In the Greek, it appears that the word can also be applied to the idea of maintenance of health or proper order (Lk 12.42). Thus, the leaves of the tree of life appear to contribute to the ongoing wellbeing of those in heaven.

Many interpreters avoid concluding that the fruit and the leaves of the tree of life in the new Jerusalem are physical entities. They give a purely spiritual or even an allegorical interpretation. For example, some claim that the leaves of the tree of life are missionaries who are sent out to heal the nations through the preaching of the Gospel. There can be no doubt that the fruit and leaves have symbolic significance, just as the meat of a sacrificed lamb in the OT economy had symbolic significance, and as do the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. However, the meat, bread, and wine are still physical realities. Thus, it will be the same in the new heaven and earth; the tree of life will be a real tree with salubrious physical properties, from which all the saints will eat, and it will symbolize God's covenant provisions and divine blessings. It is ironic that today many in the medical field promote the supposed life-prolonging benefits of certain fruits (e.g., blueberries) because of their anti-oxidant or cancer fighting properties, yet Christians are unwilling to take God at his word when he says that eating from the tree of life contributes to man's immortal life.

Evidence that the tree of life has intrinsic physical properties can be observed from the fact that God cut short his council of deliberation about what could have happened if Adam had eaten the fruit from the tree of life (Gen 3.22-24). He did not finish his sentence, implying that the consequences of Adam's eating the fruit from the tree of life in the state of sin were too significant to consider, and too grim to voice. If Adam had eaten the fruit, he would have lived forever in a perpetual state of sin. It would have been the worst of all possible worlds if man could have lived forever in his fallen state with no hope of redemption. Their hope would not have been the same as ours—for a restored paradise in which will be found an accessible tree of life.

Adam and Eve lost the privilege of eating from the tree of life in the garden of Eden. Also, no mere human since then has had an opportunity to eat from it because of their indwelling original sin and inability to obey God's Law. However, because of the life and sacrifice of the Last Adam, who obeyed the Law perfectly, a way has been opened for all the redeemed to obtain nourishment from the tree of life and to maintain robust health forever. This is a dramatic reversal of curse given in Eden, a contrast to Babylon's slaughter of the

saints (Rev 17.6; Rev 18.24), and a fulfilment of one of the promises made to those who conquer (Rev 2.7).

God Redeems the City

(Rev 21.9-22.5)

Cain built the first city recorded in history (Gen 4.17). The report of this city appears in the context of his banishment. Thus, his construction project was:

1. *A challenge against God.* His action appears to be in direct defiance of God's command that he was to be a wanderer (Gen 4.12).
2. *An attempt at permanence.* He wanted to establish a sense of permanence and unity with a centrally located 'headquarters' settlement.
3. *A monument to man.* His pride and ambition compelled him to erect an edifice that he dedicated to his son; thus, challenging God whom he should have been honouring.
4. *A response to fear.* He attempts to defend himself from any who might be set on vengeance, not trusting that his life would be spared and protected by God (Gen 4.14-15).
5. *A declaration of separation.* He declared his independence from God and from those who called on the name of God (Gen 4.26).
6. *A rallying point for apostasy.* His city would have been the focal point for his man-centered religion and an alternative to the place where God made his presence known at the gate to the garden of Eden.
7. *A declaration of his hope.* He used an earthly settlement and associated outward prosperity to fill the hole in his soul, rather than placing his hope in an everlasting rest from God.

After the flood, the residents of the city of Babel also challenged God by concentrating in a city and refusing to abide by his mandate to fill the earth (Gen 9.1) and by practicing false worship by building a temple-tower to make a name for themselves (Gen 11.4). They had the same goals as Cain and were determined to establish their own destiny and declare God redundant. Babel was not merely any city. It was *the* city of man. It was the centre of Nimrod's empire and would later become the capital of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian empire—declared by God to be the greatest human empire, all that man would want in a world-controlling empire. It had a complete religious system that replaced Biblical truth, an absolute monarch who placed himself above all creation and sought to be worshiped as a god, a humanistic system that viewed man's technology as preeminent, a comprehensiveness that brought together all people groups descended from the three sons of Noah, and a total domination of society through the concentration of statist power. Babylon's authority and control over men was unequalled and unrivaled in history. Babylon has forever become a symbol for man's total religious and political rebellion against God and is the prototype for Revelation's Babylon.

The actions of Cain and the residents of Babel raises questions about the propriety of building cities. Often the ideal of a peaceful life is presented as an Edwardian pastoralism. Adam was assigned the occupation of a gardener in the original perfect state, and the first occupations mentioned after the expulsion from the garden are those of shepherd and farmer (Gen 4.2). On the other hand, many argue that the greatest social and technical progress has been achieved by men living in cities—e.g., democracy from Athens; a legal code from Rome; commercial instruments from Amsterdam and London; music from Vienna; computer technologies from Pal Alto. Nevertheless, cities built by men, without reference to God (Ps 127.1), are intrinsically evil and quickly become concentrations of wicked men and their institutions of money, political might, religious influence (priest cults), 'culture', schools (e.g., universities), and military power. They engender a collectivist and centrist spirit and concentrate corruption. In the Bible, they are often represented as symbols of wickedness and apostasy (Rev 2.13; Gen 18.24-32; Josh 6.1-27) which will be judged by God (Rev 18.2; Is 25.2; Is 26.5; Is 27.10; Jer 6.6; Jer 21.8).

However, there is a tension in the Bible with respect to cities. Cities can be either bad or good; much like most other things that man touches. Regardless, God uses human instruments and inventions in his

providential administrations. So, we often find positive references in the Bible to cities: as places of refuge (Num 35.6), a gift from God (Josh 24.13), a blessing of permanence instead of wandering (Ps 107.4), a place where God chooses to make his name known (1 Ki 11.32, 36; Dan 9.18), and the dwelling place of God's chosen dynasty (2 Sam 5.9). Believers are exhorted to seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which they live (Jer 29.7). Thus, we find in Scripture a tension between the *City of Man* and the *City of God*.

Cities in the Bible, cast in a positive light, point to the work of Christ and to his Church. All mankind that believes in Jesus is destined for city life. Man was designed by God as a communal creature, not a loner, and is intended to be in fellowship with God and other rational creatures. This is fostered by city life. Therefore, God is going to redeem the institution of the city for his purposes. Ultimately, he will show that every institution and cultural artefact used among men is polluted, by destroying them. However, he will redeem some (e.g., government, religion/worship, work, and the city) for his ultimate glory. As Abraham looked for a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God (Heb 11.10), so we should focus on the heavenly city and not on the cities built by the Cains or Babelites of this world. The first city was built by a wicked man. The last and ultimate city, the new Jerusalem, is being prepared by Christ as an inheritance for his people. In this city there will never be any evil (Rev 22.14; Ps 101.8; Is 52.1). Also, the tree of life will not be found any longer in a garden but in the midst of the everlasting city (Rev 22.19).

Jesus is Coming Soon

(Rev 22.6-7, 12, 20)

The revelatory visions have ended, and the voices speaking with John change their message to one of exhortation. There are three themes of exhortation in the epilogue of Revelation: 1) Jesus is coming soon, 2) there are multiple witnesses to the authenticity of the information communicated in this book, and 3) it is necessary for believers to persevere in holiness. We will now consider the first.

When Jesus began to communicate with John, he indicated to him that what would be revealed “must soon take place” (Rev 1.1) and that the “time is near” (Rev 1.3). We concluded that most of Revelation deals with events that were to be fulfilled in the near-term, during or soon after the lifetime of the recipients of this book (see, [The Time Is Near](#)); not at some far-distant future, thousands of years after the book was written. As we have seen, as we have worked our way through the book, many of the visions relate to events that occurred during the lifetime of the first readers; *and* to events which have occurred repeatedly in each generation since then—the period of the figurative 1,000 years (Rev 20.1-6). Of course, the visions about the defeat and doom of Satan (Rev 20.7-10), the final judgement (Rev 20.11-15), the advent of the new heaven and earth (Rev 21.1-8), and the descent of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21.9-22.5) illustrate events that will occur only once, at the end of time.

Jesus now uses the word ‘soon’ to refer to his return to this earth to initiate the final judgement (Rev 22.12), the re-creation of the universe, and the unveiling of the new heaven and earth and the everlasting new Jerusalem—not, as some have supposed, to establish an earthly temporal kingdom. Jesus will soon conclude the history of this sin-cursed world. He states four times that his return will be *soon* (Rev 3.11; Rev 22.7, 12, 20). The fact that Jesus states that his return is soon, and yet 2,000 years have passed since the statements were recorded by John, has perplexed many believers and has engendered much scepticism among unbelievers. Various attempts have been made to explain the apparent discrepancy. For example:

- The Greek word translated ‘soon’ could also be translated ‘quickly’, and Jesus could be saying that his return will occur rapidly, rather than speaking of a point following a short delay in time. However, this does not seem to fit the context of how ‘soon’ is used elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 2.16; Rev 3.11).
- The Church changed its understanding about Christ's return. At first the apostles and leaders believed that Jesus was going to return within their lifetimes and then, as time passed, they realized that his return was not imminent. However, the words of Scripture are from the Holy Spirit and do not reflect

changing interpretations as the Church supposedly matured.

- Jesus is speaking of his coming to individuals who have an expectation of living 70-80 years and must be watchful for the sudden command for them to appear before his judgement bench. However, the verses in Revelation chapter 22 that use ‘soon’ are evidently speaking of the one, and only, physical return of Jesus to this earth at the end of time (1 Thess 4.15-16).
- The return of Jesus has been delayed because the Church is not fulfilling its mandate to evangelize the world (Mt 24.14)—in other words, the 2,000-year delay is our and our forefather’s fault. Similarly, others suggest that the delay is due to other events which have not yet occurred, such as a great apostasy (1 Tim 4.1; 2 Tim 3.1-9), the revelation of a supposed individual antichrist, or the supposed mass conversion of the last generation of Jews. However, this implies that the risen Lord Jesus (and the Holy Spirit as the ultimate author of Scripture) did not know how history would be directed by God when he informed John that he would return soon.

The best way to explain the apparent discrepancy seems to be to accept the reality that God’s time is not our time (Ecc 3.1; Acts 1.7; 2 Pt 3.8). We view 2,000 years as an interminably long duration. However, from God’s eternal perspective it is less than a blink of an eye. At the *right* time (Rom 5.6; Gal 4.4; Eph 1.10), Jesus will return. Nothing is hindering his return except the Father’s will to work out his redemptive plans to the fullest (2 Pt 3.9).

The belief that Jesus will return to this earth in his resurrected physical bodily form is greeted with scepticism by the world and even by some who claim to be Christians. This scepticism is the same as that which Paul encountered when he spoke before the ‘elite’ leaders of Athens about the fact that the resurrected Jesus will judge the world (Acts 17.31-32). Peter also refers to this scepticism when he says that in the last days—we live in the last days—scoffers will arise who will question his coming, claiming that things will continue as they always have, and nothing can intervene (2 Pt 3.3-4).

The great hope of the Christian life is not that we believe that Christ will return in our lifetime, but that we believe that Christ *will* return (Titus 2.13). We know that when he returns, he will set all things right, vindicate and reward his people, punish the reprobate, and create a new paradise that will be perfect and better than the first one. Jesus says emphatically, “Surely I am coming soon”. We must believe this! And, with John respond with an ‘amen’ (“so let it be”; an utterance of trust). John then utters a brief prayer, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22.20). Likewise, Paul, closes his second letter to the Corinthians with a similar prayer “Our Lord, come!” (1 Cor 16.22). So, our prayer should often be that God the Father will expedite the return of the Lord Jesus—“Come, Lord Jesus!”

Witnesses to the Authenticity and Importance of Revelation

(Rev 22.6, 8, 10, 13, 16, 18-19)

It is difficult to determine who the individual speakers are in each of the statements in the epilogue to Revelation (Rev 22.6-21). However, we do not need to be perplexed by this, since Revelation is ultimately the word of Jesus (Rev 1.1), and he commissioned angels and John (through the Holy Spirit) to relay his revelation to the Church (Rev 1.1-3; Rev 22.10, 16). Thus, the words that describe the visions that John saw and what he heard from Jesus himself and from the angels—“these things”—are declared to be trustworthy and true. The book of Revelation is not a cleverly crafted mystical tome. It is the word of the living Christ, which is validated by witnesses, identified as testifying (Rev 22.16, 20; 1 Jn 1.1-2), as if before a judge and jury with severe consequences for perjuring themselves (Rev 22.18-19), to the veracity of the account. These witnesses are:

- Jesus (Rev 22.13, 20), who as the God-man cannot be untruthful (Titus 1.2).
- The Holy Spirit, the one who revealed truth to the prophets and apostles, including John (Rev 22.6; 2 Tim 3.16; 2 Pt 1.20-21).

- Angels (Rev 22.1, 8-9, 16; and in numerous other places in the book)
- John, the human author of the account (Rev 1.1, 4, 9; Rev 22.8, 10).

Thus, the book of Revelation is authenticated by more than the two or three witnesses that are required to authenticate a declaration (Dt 17.6; Dt 19.15).

Two of the titles that have been applied to Jesus previously in this book—“Alpha and Omega” and “Root of David” (Rev 1.8; Rev 21.6 with Rev 22.13; Rev 5.5 with Rev 22.16)—are repeated and combined in the epilogue to highlight his deity, veracity, authority over the created order, and ultimate right to conclude history when he returns to this earth. Jesus expands his declaration that he is of the root of David (Rev 5.5) by adding that he is a ‘descendant’ of David. This might appear to be redundant. However, he is declaring himself to be the fulfilment of the Davidic Messianic hope prophesied in the OT (2 Sam 7.12-16; Is 11.1, 10) and affirmed elsewhere in the NT (Mt 1.1; Mt 9.27; Mt 15.22; Mt 21.9; Lk 2.4; Lk 3.31; Rom 1.3; 2 Tim 2.8). He adds another title, “the bright morning star”, that he had not used previously; however, he did say to the church in Thyatira that he would give the morning star to the one who conquered (Rev 2.28; 2 Pt 1.19), implying that he himself had the light of the morning star to give. This title appears to be an allusion to Balaam’s oracle (Num 24.17; Mt 2.2) about a star coming out of Jacob. As a fulfilment of this prophecy, Jesus displays the brightness of the glory of God (Rev 1.16; Mt 17.2; Jn 1.14) and heralds a brighter, perfect, and everlasting new day in the new heaven and earth. Jesus may also assume this title to displace the false worldly, pomp of Satan (Is 14.12) whom he has deposed.

Jesus states that the reason he has sent witnesses to testify about these things to the churches and to show his servants what “must soon take place”, is because the “time is near”. Jesus wants everyone in the Church to know and to understand what is to happen during the last days (the period from his ascension until his second advent). The purpose of Revelation is not to confuse but to enlighten and encourage believers who are perplexed by the unfolding of God’s providences in their lives and the apparent ascendancy of those who hate Christ and persecute Christians.

The angel speaking with Daniel told him to preserve the scroll he was writing for the distant future, in a safe manner as a valued treasure (Dan 8.26; Dan 12.4, 9), which could not be tampered with or changed. This did not mean that it was to be kept hidden as a secret until the arrival of the Messiah about 500 years later, since the book was translated into Greek sometime in the 2nd century before Christ and a copy of it was shown to Alexander the Great when he came to Jerusalem. In contrast, Jesus tells John not to seal up Revelation, because the time for the fulfilment of the events described herein has arrived (Rev 1.19; Rev 6.1) and because the Church needs to know these things. Sadly, many ‘scholars’ have turned Revelation into a mystical book for *future*-telling (rather than for *present*-telling) and suggest that they alone have the key to the imponderable mysteries that it supposedly contains. They shut up the book from the Church and make many Christians afraid to apply their minds to understanding it. When we approach Revelation with the right mindset—interpreting it as a ‘picture-book’ for those with a child-like faith, that illustrates with vivid figurative images the victory of Christ over Satan and all forms of evil—we can revel in the majesty of Christ’s work and the beauty of his revelation to us. So, John did as he was told and sent copies to the seven churches so that they could read it in their public worship assemblies (Rev 1.4, 11; Rev 22.18). It is therefore our duty to read Revelation (publicly and privately) and to be blessed by reading and applying it (Rev 1.3; Rev 22.7), because Christ reigns!

Jesus (through John) adds a solemn warning about how we are to read and apply Revelation—we are not to add to it or remove anything from it, because it is complete and precisely what Jesus wants the Church in every generation to know. His injunction certainly means that the text is not to be tampered with (e.g., some question Revelation’s inclusion in the NT canon). However, since this statement is a reiteration of the sense of Moses’ warnings about keeping covenant commitments (Dt 4.1-2; Dt 12.32), we must understand this warning to those in the Church who introduce heretical teachings, question the accuracy of the Bible, pervert the Gospel (Gal 1.7-8; 2 Tim 2.16-18), undermine God’s Law, or introduce idolatrous practices. To

do any of these things is a capital crime that will be punished with all the plagues declared in this book and exclusion from heaven and the tree of life.

Holiness Necessary for Heaven

(Rev 22.7, 11-12, 14-15)

Revelation repeatedly announces blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience; as did the book of the covenant, before the Israelites entered the temporal, typical promised land (Dt 11.29). Thus, status, character and behaviour differentiate those who are qualified to dwell in the new promised land from those who are not.

In the epilogue to Revelation (Rev 22.6-21), differentiators are identified for those who are blessed with an invitation to enter the new Jerusalem; they:

- *Wash their robes.* As we have seen previously (Rev 7.14), those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb are those who have been saved by placing their faith in Jesus Christ, as the one who shed his blood and bore their sins on the cross. They have been identified with his death, which paid the debt of their sin (Rev 5.9-10). Their filthy garments of sin have been stripped off and they have been clothed in Christ's righteousness and have been declared holy (2 Cor 5.21). They are now adorned as beautiful brides to meet their husband at his marriage supper (Rev 19.7-9). Thus, it is Christ's worthiness that has qualified them to enter the city by the gates.
- *Keep the words.* Because they have been given new hearts (Ezk 36.25-26) and renewed minds (Eph 4.23)—they have been born again—they hear and heed the prophecies of this book. They persevere in their desire to live holy lives that are pleasing to their Saviour, even when facing severe persecution from the enemies of Christ and his Church; and their deeds, though not perfect while they remain on this earth, demonstrate their new status and character—they are saints (Eph 2.6-10).

These are the only ones who are permitted to enter the gates of the heavenly city and to receive the blessings associated with access to the river of the water of life (Rev 22.1), to eat from the tree of life (Rev 22.2, 14, 19), and to see the face of God, in Jesus (Rev 22.4).

This epilogue also identifies those who are excluded from the new Jerusalem, by listing six behaviours that indicate the true nature of their hearts; they are:

- *Dogs.* This is a euphemism for homosexual acts (Dt 23.17-18) that are base, degraded (Lev 18.22), and unnatural (Rom 1.26-27).
- *Sorcerers.* This includes the use of astrology, witchcraft, spells, and drugs to exert influence over others and to obtain physical pleasure.
- *Sexually immoral.* This includes fornication and adultery (and unjustified divorce; Mt 19.9), which violate the sacredness of marriage.
- *Murderers.* Adam's sin of eating the fruit resulted in genocide as he brought death on the human race. Since then, hate and murder (including abortion) have filled man's covetous and selfish thoughts and actions.
- *Idolaters.* Idolatry is spiritual adultery that is manifested by giving improper honour and worship to anything that is not God.
- *Liars.* These are the ones who love and practice falsehood by teaching anything that is contrary to God's Law and his word revealed in the Bible.

This is not an exhaustive list of the behaviours that disqualify a person for admission to the new Jerusalem; but indicative. Nor are any of these sins individually sufficiently heinous to prohibit entry into heaven—each of them could be committed by a Christian (1 Cor 6.9-11) and each of them can be forgiven where a true spirit of repentance is present. The NT vice-lists (Rev 9.20–21; Rev 21.8, 27; Rev 22.15; Rom 1.29-31; 1 Cor 5.9-11; Gal 5.19-21) refer to those who *continue* to pursue these practices and whose lives are characterized by such sins, and who refuse to repent.

Jesus states that those who are prohibited entry into the new Jerusalem will receive the recompense and repayment for what they have done. When he returns to this earth and judges all mankind (Acts 17.31) he will establish absolute justice and punish those who deserve to be punished for rejecting his Law and teachings recorded in Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit stirring their consciences and urging them to repent and believe in Jesus. In this last section of Revelation, Jesus reiterates why he has an absolute right to judge. As the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, he is mankind's creator, sovereign, lawgiver, and judge.

Some believe that there is a second chance for people to repay the debt of sin accumulated in this life. They think that those refused entry into the new Jerusalem will dwell outside the city walls in a hinterland and longingly look through the gates at the blessings of the celestial city—like Adam's children could have looked from Eden into the garden. However, 'outside' (Rev 22.15) refers to everlasting banishment to the lake of fire in which the reprobate are condemned to receive their punishment (Rev 20.15; Mt 25.41; Lk 16.24). Unlike man's first banishment from paradise (Gen 3.23-24), for which God provided a means of escape through faith in the promised Messiah, there is no escape from hell. But those consigned there will not wish for an escape. They will cherish their grudges against God and accuse him of being unfair. Thus, at the end of time, at the final judgement, those who are evildoers and filthy will continue to do evil and be filthy, but those who are righteous and holy will continue to do right and be holy (Rev 22.11). Those who delight in sinning in this life will continue to delight in their darkened minds and rebellious hearts in hell. They will never wish for the circumstances to be different; and they will be left forever to go the way they wish. But those in the new paradise will go on in holiness, because without holiness it is impossible to see God (Heb 12.14).

The Beatitudes of Revelation

(Rev 1.3; Rev 14.13; Rev 16.15; Rev 19.9; Rev 20.6; Rev 22.7, 14)

The word 'blessed' occurs multiple times in Revelation, in seven different sections, from the prologue through to the epilogue. We have noted in our studies that a number of things occur seven times in Revelation—e.g., seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls of plagues. The use of 'seven' indicates completeness; following the pattern established during creation week, with the seventh day being blessed as holy. In addition, the word 'seven' occurs over fifty times in the book, indicating its significance for the figures and symbols that the visions represent. Thus, it is unlikely that it is a mere coincidence that there are seven blessings recorded in Revelation. They are likely a deliberate part of how John structured Revelation, under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1.21).

Let us consider the seven beatitudes of Revelation and see how they fit into the progress of the book as the visions unfold:

- In his prologue, John states that anyone who reads aloud the prophecies of this book, and those who hear it read to them, will be blessed (Rev 1.3). He thus indicates that pastors should read this book during an assembly of public worship. Of course, it should also be read privately. But John was thinking of his early recipients, many of whom may not have been able to read and would not have had easy access to hand-scribed manuscripts, like we have to printed Bibles. Thus, we learn that the book of Revelation is an important part of Scripture that is provided to the Church as a corporate entity and to individual believers for their edification, because the time is near for the fulfilment of what it communicates.
- John records a number of visions before the next beatitude is pronounced. These visions portray temporal judgements being dispensed upon the wicked, with the seven seals and seven trumpets. He has also written about the woman (the Church) being pursued by the dragon (Satan) and by the pending destruction of Babylon (the *City of Man*). His readers could have started to become discouraged by the compounding effect of these messages of judgement and destruction. So, a voice from heaven issues

the second benediction (Rev 14.13). This one reminds all believers that regardless of what happens in this world, if we die believing in Jesus (“in the Lord”), we are truly blessed and will receive rest from our labours as we enter a new life in the glorious new heaven and earth.

- The next beatitude occurs in the midst of the account of the seven plagues. When the world of wicked men assembles in vile hatred to plot an attack against Christ and his Church, Jesus interjects an encouraging word, saying that he will come unexpectedly, like a thief, to put an end to the antagonistic forces of evil. He then says that everyone who “stays awake, keeping his garments on” so that he will not be seen naked—i.e., living out a holy life by persevering in faith and obedience—will be blessed (Rev 16.15).
- At the point that the next beatitude occurs, Babylon has been destroyed in a vision and heaven has been filled with rejoicing. Then one of the angels who has been speaking with John declares that anyone who is invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb is blessed (Rev 19.9). Thus, those who are no longer citizens of Babylon are invited into the everlasting presence of Jesus. They are privileged to be able to join him in his triumphal march of victory (Rev 19.11-16). With this beatitude, the angel adds an assurance that this blessing is true because it is the word of God.
- In the fifth beatitude, John assures true believers that they will be blessed because they are holy and share in the first resurrection (Rev 20.6)—that is, they have been converted by the Holy Spirit and have been saved by the Lord Jesus. Thus, they are blessed because they are immune to the second death (everlasting damnation), because the first death (physical death) has lost its sting (1 Cor 15.55-56). And they are blessed because they are made priests of God and co-heirs with Jesus and will share in his reign in the everlasting kingdom of the new heaven and earth.
- The sixth and seventh beatitudes occur in the epilogue. Jesus alerts his readers to his imminent (sudden, at any time) return, which will occur when he has saved the very last person for whom he died. He then says that those who remain faithful by obeying the words of this book (e.g., the exhortations given to the seven churches in chapter 2 and 3) will be blessed (Rev 22.7). The implication is that we are never to waiver in our diligent observance of obedience, because we should expect his return, at any moment, to this earth to wrap up history.
- The last beatitude closes the circle, by restoring the tree of life that was in the garden of Eden and making it available in a new paradise that is reserved for those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7.14; Rev 22.14). This new paradise will be different than the first. It will be a garden within a city—the new Jerusalem—populated not by one man and one woman but by an innumerable multitude (Rev 7.9).

Seven times, Jesus encourages those who are weary and burdened by the pressures of this life, their personal struggles with sin, and from facing the antagonistic forces of their enemies, to come to him for blessings. Some of these blessings are made available in this temporal realm and some will be available only in the new heaven and earth. But they are only available to those who have heeded the words of this book and have fled from the final manifestation of God’s wrath against sin, that is drawing quickly near.

Jesus’ Invitation to Come to Him

(Rev 22.17)

John concludes this book by issuing a warning to its recipients telling them not to tamper with its message (Rev 22.18-19), testifying that his account of the visions is true (Rev 22.20), and placing a benediction on them (Rev 22.21). However, before that, he invites his readers to hear and heed the Gospel call which he has been charged to declare. Thus, he indicates that a key reason why Jesus gave the book of Revelation to mankind is to declare the urgency of turning to him, believing that he is the promised Messiah, to avoid the plagues documented in the book, which will come upon anyone who rejects him as Lord. In this verse (Rev 22.17), John is not addressing Jesus with the word ‘come’, asking him to return soon as he does later (Rev 22.20), but is addressing all who read the book, compelling them to come immediately to Jesus—the word

‘come’ is an imperative command. Even though it appears to be an invitation, it is an urgent royal command from the Lord of the universe that must be obeyed.

There are multiple sources for the invitation in this verse, they are:

- *Jesus*. Since Revelation is a communication from Jesus (Rev 1.1), the ultimate invitation comes from Jesus himself.
- *The Spirit*. Jesus communicates the Gospel through the Holy Spirit (Jn 15.26), who gives the inner call to those for whom he died on the cross.
- *The Bride*. Jesus commissions his Church to make the outer call to come to him (Mt 28.19-20). This is its corporate duty, which it executes in a formal way through its officers, stated worship services, and preaching and teaching. The Church is to compel men to accept the invitation, but not to force them. The Church does not grow by the sword of man but by the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6.17).
- *Hearers*. Those who hear and believe, young or old, mature believer or new convert, in their individual, personal capacities are also to call the world to come to Jesus. They are to be like the Samaritan woman who went into the city and told the people to come to Jesus, who had given her living water (Jn 4.29).
- *The Bible*. John documents this invitation in Revelation, the last book of the Bible. From beginning (Gen 3.15) to end, the Bible invites mankind to hear the promise of redemption and to come to Jesus.

Those who are invited to come to Jesus are characterized as follows:

- *They are thirsty*. They sense their spiritual need and know that this world cannot satisfy it or fill the longing in their souls (Is 55.1; Jn 7.37-38). They seek to know the living God (Ps 42.1). Initially they may not be convinced and convicted of their sins, and are thus not thirsting for mercy, but they know that something is wrong in their lives.
- *They desire life*. They desire to drink from the water of life. They want eternal life; not immortality *per se*, but the purposeful and joyful life, that only Jesus can provide.
- *They have a destination*. To ‘come’ means they are going somewhere and arriving there. They come first to a person—Jesus himself as their saviour—and then they come to a place—the new Jerusalem—as their everlasting reward for coming to Jesus.
- *Anyone*. John says, twice, “let the one”. He does not specify or limit the invitation. It is open to anyone and everyone—regardless of his age, ethnic background, former religious affiliation, sins he have committed, or the era in which he lives. There is no limit to how many people can be accommodated in the new Jerusalem; it is big enough to admit everyone who will come and be saved (Rev 21.16). No one is uninvited unless he ignores and refuses to accept Jesus’ invitation.
- *Those who will come*. No one arrives in heaven by chance or by doing nothing in response to the Gospel call. Reception of the Gospel requires action on the part of the ones who hear; they must heed the invitation and come in faith and repentance.
- *Those who conquer*. As Revelation has consistently demonstrated, those who are invited to enter through the gates of the new Jerusalem are those who have persevered to the end of their lives and have conquered through the indwelling support given by the Holy Spirit (Rev 7.13-17; Rev 21.6-7; Rev 22.14).

The invitation to come to Jesus is initiated by Jesus himself. He is the one who graciously invites and saves his chosen (elect) ones (Mt 11.28). He has always gone in search of lost mankind—as he went into the garden to find Adam and Eve who were hiding, as he teaches in a number of his parables (Lk 15.1-10), and as he states (Lk 19.10). He also states that the water of life (i.e., salvation and eternal life), and therefore admittance to the new Jerusalem, is without price. The river of the water of life flows from the throne in the new Jerusalem (Rev 22.1). It does not originate on earth. Eternal life is not obtained by following religious practices and rituals, by performing good works, or by being part of a particular faith community. It is obtained only from God, and it is given freely without price (Is 55.1), because Jesus has paid for our

eternal life through his work on the cross. There is nothing we can do (other than to believe in Jesus and his work and repent of our sins) in order to drink from this river of life. The invitation to come is clear, since it is repeated three times: come, come, come! If you have read this meditation, and have not come to Jesus, you cannot offer any legitimate excuses. You know the way to the gates of the new Jerusalem, and you know that they are open to you if you will but come in.

The Grace of the Lord Jesus be with All. Amen!

(Rev 22.21)

John opened this letter to the seven churches with a greeting that indicated his desire that they would be blessed with grace and peace from the eternal Jesus (Rev 1.4). He now closes with a benediction expressing a similar desire; with only the second usage of ‘grace’ in the entire book. This bestowal of a blessing is not to be viewed as a perfunctory gesture, like the ‘Good morning,’ which might be voiced between passing walkers out for a morning stroll, who don’t know one another. To the Jewish mind, the offering of a blessing was a serious and solemn matter that the offeror sincerely wished to be realized in the life of the recipient (Gen 27.33-38). John uses an expression that, in various similar forms, appears to have become common early in the NT Church, since Paul uses it frequently (1 Cor 16.23; Gal 6.18; Phil 4.23; 1 Thess 5.28; Heb 13.25). This expression replaced the old Jewish greeting of ‘shalom’. It indicates that a new Christian community had developed that expressed a mutual concern for the wellbeing of its members. It also displays a brotherly love that is absent from other religious communities.

Grace in the Bible includes two aspects: 1) God’s favour toward unworthy sinners, as manifested in salvation (Rom 3.24; Rom 5.15; Eph 2.5, 8), and 2) unconditional kindness shown to anyone (believer or not) who doesn’t deserve it (2 Cor 8.6-7, 19; 2 Cor 9.8; Eph 4.7, 29; James 4.6). Since John assumes that his readers are saved (Rev 1.5; Rev 2.13, 19; Rev 13.10; Rev 14.12), and never calls them to *believe*, as in his gospel (Jn 1.7; Jn 3.18), he uses ‘grace’ in Revelation in the second sense.

John identifies the source of the grace that he desires to be bestowed on his readers—it originates with the Lord Jesus—and thereby implies that:

- Grace exists; mercy and favour are available to undeserving mankind, in a world that is filled with rebels and saturated with sin’s consequences.
- Jesus is God, who supplies divine mercy and favour, as the representative of the Trinity (Col 2.9), as he demonstrated by forgiving sins (Mt 9.5).
- Jesus is alive in heaven, otherwise he could not dispense grace.
- Blessings flow from Jesus to those who live in him through faith.
- Grace is a necessity for salvation and then for living out the Christian life.
- Only by the grace of Jesus are Christians enabled to conquer and receive the blessings of the new heaven and earth described in this book.
- The grace of Jesus is sufficient for us to live out the Christian life, as Paul was informed by Jesus when facing a challenge in his life (2 Cor 12.9).
- The dispositions of grace are according to the will and wisdom of Jesus.
- Jesus is willing to grant grace to his people, because he loves them.

John’s desire is that all of his readers will be blessed with the grace of Jesus. He desires that they will be blessed with help from the Lord Jesus so that they can conquer sin, persevere in the face of persecution, and receive their reward in heaven. Specifically, he desires that those who have lost their means of livelihood, because they refused to compromise with Babylon and the beast, will be provided relief (Rev 2.9); that those facing persecution will be empowered with a holy boldness (Rev 2.10); that all of his readers will be given wisdom to understand the meaning of what has been communicated through the account of his visions (Rev 1.3); and that they will keep the words of this book (Rev 22.9).

John desires that each person will continually receive the grace that will meet his needs, regardless of what those needs may be and the current state of the mind of each individual receiving grace—the flow of grace from Jesus does not change because we have doubts or lack assurance. John does not view the blessing of grace to be conditional (since grace is unconditional) and does not contemplate that a believer will sometimes be graciously blessed and at other times overlooked, or that some believers will be blessed with a greater measure of grace than others. He envisions that the grace believers receive will continuously flow from the all-knowing and loving Lord Jesus, who will supply all the saints with the grace they need, in every era of this age, and into the age to come.

He concludes his benediction with an ‘amen’. We have already considered the importance of this word and how it is used in Revelations (see, [Amen!](#)), so will only note now that he emphasizes how sincerely he wishes the blessings of grace to flow to all the saints and displays a fervent concern for the well being of his fellow believers in this life and in the life to come.

Many pastors close their services with a benediction. Likewise, the writers of the NT epistles generally close their communications with a benediction. So, it is proper that John follows this practice and closes his epistle to the Church and bids us farewell with a benediction. However, this benediction has an added dimension. It contains the last words of the entire Bible. From the beginning of creation, after Adam’s sin, God has been working out his plan of redemption to save a vast multitude (Rev 7.9) and to fill heaven with the trophies of his grace. It is therefore altogether fitting that the Bible close with a blessing of grace.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus fill your minds with the truth of this book to encourage your hearts with strong confidence as you face the challenges of a culture that is increasingly hostile to Christ, the Gospel, and Christians. May the grace of Jesus help you persevere and conquer Satan and sin, until you are called to meet Jesus either at your death or on his triumphant return to this earth. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen!

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