

THE GOLD MINE

What they didn't tell you about the end of the world



James Christie, Ph.D.

The Gold Mine

Second Edition

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(First edition)

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PREFACE

The finale of the book of *Revelation* is introduced with an invitation, “Come here, I shall show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” The convulsions of earth’s terminal centuries are over at last, and rescued humanity, in all its diversity, has been gathered together as an immortal companion for the Creator God.

However, as we follow the vision, what we see is not a Bride but a glorious and ornate city, descending from heaven to a place of rest upon a newly created earth. The various aspects of the city are described even to the point of exact physical dimensions; but especially striking is the material from which the city is constructed, “pure gold.”

Is this city to be understood as a literal place, or is it a picture of eternal cohabitation, of God and man finally dwelling together? The overall thrust of the Apocalypse tends towards a double meaning: “both” seems to be the right answer. God and man are destined to dwell together in a beautiful place, and rescued humanity somehow has become like pure gold, refined to perfection.

This is the outcome of a carefully planned but painful process. Humanity’s experiences in the terminal centuries, according to the visions of the prophet John recorded in *Revelation*, are not what anyone could wish. There is loss of life, hope, and habitat. But through it all, as if by the crushing of rock and the refining process of a fiery hot furnace, pure gold is melted out and carefully gathered; a diverse and precious remnant of humanity, drawn from every corner of inhabited earth, is rescued and built together into a city of pure gold.

Barrick Gold reports that in the first quarter of 2013, the Bald Mountain mine in Nevada produced 28,000 ounces of gold. That sounds like a fairly lucrative quarter for the mine, and so it was.

However, Barrick also reports that an average of just over 91 tons of rock was excavated per ounce of gold recovered. This means a total of over 16.7 million tons of rock was excavated in the same quarter for less than one ton of gold.¹

Was it worth it? Barrick certainly thinks so. The estimate of mineral reserves in the mine at the end of 2013 was still 2.5 million ounces, and there is no intention of abandoning the project. Even if the price of gold ever fell to \$1,000 an ounce, the mine would still have a gross mineral value of \$2.5 billion. Despite the cost of excavation, extraction, and refining; and despite the massive byproduct of contaminated waste rock; the mine continues to be worked because of the value of the gold.

What if it were to take a universe measurable only in billions of light years, and an earth populated by billions of people, for the Creator God to find for His purposes a reserve of gold, a collection of humanity responsive to His offer of rescue, a mixed and beautiful people suitable for His eternal companionship - would this be worth it? Apparently so, and He has provided a parable that we can understand: we ourselves expend all manner of effort, and spare no expense for the successful excavation of gold from a mine.

The book of *Revelation* is not a book about the end of the world. It is a book about the Creator God mining for gold.

One has only to read the first five words of the book of *Revelation* to suspect that its message will not be for everyone. It may be a book that reveals the gold for which the Creator God ultimately is seeking; it may reliably forecast a plan which is soon to unfold upon the earth; it may accurately describe waves of imminent, apocalyptic catastrophe from which everyone would more naturally prefer to escape; it may offer that exact escape to anyone willing to receive it. Nevertheless, the first five words may prove too strong a deterrent for some potential readers: *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*.

¹ See the quarterly report at www.barrick.com; a helpful summary can be found through Business Insider, <http://www.businessinsider.com/tons-of-rock-for-an-ounce-of-gold-2013-4>

It is inescapable, the book of *Revelation* revolves around the Creator of the world, Jesus Christ. For a moment He had visited His creation in human form to accomplish the impossible; He then returned and resided ever since in the parallel realm of eternity. *Revelation* intentionally draws these two parallels of “earth” and “heaven” together, and its storyline simply fails without reference to Jesus; earthly events can be traced, but their purpose is lost.

The book was written by a man named John. He started out as a fisherman, but as it happened, he was one of the few people who lived in the right place and at the right time to encounter Jesus during His brief visit to earth. John got to know Him about as well as any human being could and, by the time Jesus withdrew from the earth, was entirely convinced that he had encountered none other than the Creator of the cosmos.² He spent the rest of his life writing, teaching, and sharing with others what he had learned, until eventually he was exiled to the island of Patmos for these “illegal” activities. Even so, he made good of his misfortune and instead of ceasing and desisting, meticulously recorded *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, our book of *Revelation*, based on apocalyptic visions he received from an angel while there.

This composition in turn found its way into the collection of writings that came to be known as the “Bible,” Christianity thus claiming for itself the right of ownership. There is some justification for this since John specifically addressed his work to “the churches,” and certainly identified himself as a follower of Jesus. However, he must have anticipated a much wider, potentially universal audience because in the very second sentence of his work he asserts, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy.” [1:3] There are no qualifications added; we may therefore take this to mean that John was inviting everyone of every background to read, hear,

² John wrote a personal account of his experiences and observations with respect to Jesus, eventually included in the New Testament of the Bible as the gospel of *John*. In this account, John describes his conclusion about who Jesus was: “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him; and apart from Him, nothing came into being that has come into being.” [*John* 1:1-2] He clearly saw Jesus as the Creator of the cosmos and of everything in it.

and evaluate his work, even if it did become the possession of the church.

What is never surrendered to Christianity's right of ownership, or to the possession of the church, is Jesus Himself. Neither did Christianity nor the church create Him, nor do they influence who He is and what He is like, nor do they in any sense own Him. He is who He is, and it is He who is Owner of all - including Christianity and the church. The Jesus of *Revelation* is not a Jesus of images and paintings and speculations and crucifixes and creeds; He is a Jesus of the cosmos, Co-Creator of all things, a Jesus transcendent beyond planet earth and all that happens in it, beyond even the universe itself. He is the "ruler of the kings of the earth" [1:5], orchestrator of all that is about to happen in the unfolding of human destiny, rescuer of any who will embrace Him, judge of all who refuse. Exactly as with the rest of humanity, Christianity and the church bow to His sovereign rule, not as His owner, but as His possession. As we will see, John's prophecy has much to say about Christianity and the church, and it is often not what they might wish or expect to hear.

John was also a Jew, familiar with Jewish sacred writings.³ His work harmonizes with these, as well as with the other early Christian writings of the New Testament (including his own gospel.) We will find it helpful and sometimes necessary to cross reference these writings as we try to understand the message of *Revelation*, for its text is rich in quotes from and allusions to them.

For our purposes, one of the great advantages of John's work belonging to the Bible is the fact that it is available virtually to everyone. The Bible is the most published, most widely translated book in history. It is not hard to acquire a copy, go to the end of it, and find the book of *Revelation*. Thereupon, all are invited to read it for themselves.

What sounds like a simple task, however, soon turns out to be problematic; most anyone who accepts the invitation to read will not get very far before feeling quite at a loss. A book so full of

³ Most if not all the Jewish writings to which John refers are found in the Old Testament collection of the Bible.

visions, symbols, and obscure references almost defies comprehension. The strategy offered by the invitation suddenly warrants more careful attention: “Blessed is *he* who reads, and *those* who hear.” Implicit is the suggestion that the book requires a specialized “reader” whose efforts will in turn make it possible for others to “hear.”

Presumably in the time of its original composition, “reading” included at least the literal act of reading. Texts were hand written and would have been scarce. Not all people would have been literate. There would be benefit in the simple act of a good reader reading, and others listening attentively.

But the depths of this book can only be plummed by a much greater effort than by simple public reading. In the invitation to “read” is hidden an expectation of careful, systematic study, with the reading of the book resulting in an act of explanation. Unfortunately, one would also have to admit that such a process culminates, to some extent at least, in an “interpretive reading.” How true this is can easily be demonstrated by the vast array of differing approaches to *Revelation* that can be found in bookstores, in churches, in seminaries, on the internet, etc. Nevertheless, this reality does not eliminate the need for credible “readings” of the book.

The possibility of becoming one such “reader” did not occur to me until very recently. As a classicist with specialization in first century A.D. Western literature, I had the linguistic skills and the scholarly tools to dissect a Greek work of that period; and as a seminary instructor I had invested years in the study of other first century Christian writings; nevertheless, *Revelation* was a book I was quite content to leave to others. It is not that I ignored it, for it intrigued me, and I spent some 12 or more years studying its text out of purely personal interest. It just seemed too complex and maybe even too risky for my professional purposes. Dan Brown, author of [The Da Vinci Code](#), puts in the mouth of the fictitious Dean of the Washington National Cathedral what is perhaps his own conviction: “Oh, heavens, the Book of *Revelation*

is a mess! Nobody knows how to read that.”⁴ For a while at least, that was a tempting sentiment for me also.

Yet one persistent factor seemed to move in a contrary direction, namely that the book itself claims to be penetrable: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” [22:10] Whatever message it was that John felt commissioned to give to the world, he was not to hide it in obscurity. He was instead to make it open and available to anyone wanting to receive it. To my surprise, after the many years of personal study, a traceable, cohesive, systematic message and even storyline started to materialize. Likewise began to arise the possibility of sharing what I was discovering with others: perhaps it was appropriate to become a “reader” of the book after all.

Another reason for my decision to do so is the observation that the book of *Revelation* is regularly used for purposes other than “reading” and “hearing” its message. It is used as an impetus for sensational end times prophecy, because people are eager to hear what and who and when and where. It is used to build systematic schemes of how end time events are going to unfold (such schemes are technically called “eschatologies”); and the book sometimes just becomes a source of debate, which can almost become a sport for those so inclined. But a true “reading” of the book is an attempt to let the book speak for itself and tell us whatever it has to say.

As already acknowledged, it would be a very successful reader indeed who could claim to have the book “speak for itself.” We all come with our presuppositions and predispositions, and who would know for sure when our “reading” of any text is being shaped by what we have brought TO the text rather than what we are reading OUT of the text. While this applies to any text, how much more is the case with respect to the book of *Revelation*.

Still, we ought to try. We must attempt to “read” and to “hear” what the text itself is saying. Success in this exercise is the

⁴ Brown, Dan. *The Lost Symbol: A Novel*. New York: Doubleday, 2009, page 314.

basis for the blessing promised in *Revelation* 1:3, provided that “hearing” is followed by “doing.”

Many of us will already have at least some opinion about what the book of *Revelation* says, and that is not a bad thing. Our reading and hearing the book will not and should not result in all things original. Nevertheless, to the countless other studies currently available, I now offer this additional effort of my own, The Gold Mine, a new *reading* of the book focused upon what the text itself says. As you travel with me on this journey, I invite you to keep an eye on that text and evaluate whether what you are “hearing” is faithful to it.

The actual “reading” of *Revelation* is meant to begin in chapter two of this book. What follows in chapter one identifies the principles that I adopted and sought to follow as I developed the reading. However, even these are drawn from *Revelation* itself, and so in another sense, I suppose it would be possible to say that the reading begins now.

CHAPTER ONE

“THE TIME IS NEAR”

“The time is near” is a statement appearing at both the beginning and at the end of *Revelation*, and that clause alone is enough to start a healthy discussion about how one ought to approach the book. For some interpreters, it is proof that John was writing for his own generation, that they were to expect an imminent fulfilment of his prophecies, and the best subsequent readers can do is to look back and see what John’s work meant for his contemporaries. In this view, the book has little specific, prophetic information for future generations.

But if the work is what it claims to be, a revelation from the Creator God Himself, then an assertion that “the time is near” may be viewed from a completely different perspective. If this God is eternal, if even a universe 13 billion years old would only exist in a moment of time compared with infinity, then how long is one or two or three thousand years? Another early Christian prophet described time from this God’s point of view: “...one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day.”⁵ The Gold Mine intentionally adopts this perspective and anticipates the ultimate fulfilment of *Revelation’s* prophecies happening in a time still future. More will be said about this as we continue, including some seed ideas on how “near” to our day that future time might be.

Meanwhile, far more important than the question “When?” is the question “What?” Can we identify exactly what it is that John was telling us is near? The answer to this question is so important that most of our second chapter is dedicated to it. However, it may be summarized here in a sentence: *the Creator God is about to return to His creation and take personal charge of it.* John was living for this event, and he knew by personal experience exactly for whom and for what to look - a much earlier angelic visitation had already prepared him for it: “This Jesus, who has been taken

⁵ Recorded in another New Testament document, 2 *Peter* 3:8

up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”⁶ John was looking for a physical, visible return of Jesus, since that would be “the same way” that he saw Him go.

If it is true, as we said in the Preface, that “the book of *Revelation* revolves around the Creator of the world, Jesus Christ,” we may now be more specific: the central theme of the book is the *return* of the Creator, Jesus Christ, to His created world. This may sound simple enough until we continue in our reading and discover that the said return of Jesus happens in unexpected stages rather than as a single, one-time occurrence. Nevertheless, while *Revelation* is full of circumstances and events interwoven therewith, ultimately the thing that is “near” is the return of the Creator God to His earth.

The temptation at this point is to become sidetracked and to begin an eager hunt for clues as to when the events of *Revelation* are going to start happening. Instead, however, we will settle in to our stated purpose and prepare to let the book talk to us. Therefore, let us spend a little time laying down the principles of approach and interpretation that we are going to be using in our reading.

It seems helpful to start by identifying two things that the present book is not intended to accomplish. First and foremost, this book will not be an attempt to provide melodramatic or sensational prophecies with respect to specific circumstances or events that are happening in our world.

At the time of this writing, there happens to be widespread interest in a series of full lunar eclipses occurring in 2014-2015. One can learn much from Mark Biltz’s book, [Blood Moons: Decoding the Imminent Heavenly Signs](#), and from other books on the “Four Blood Moons” by authors who have followed Biltz’s lead. However, no one can identify specifically what these

⁶ A historian whose works were also included in the New Testament is only known to us by his first name, Luke. He wrote an account of the life of Jesus, known in the New Testament as the gospel of Luke; and also an account of the early history of the Jesus movement, known in the New Testament as The Acts of the Apostles. It is in this latter treatise, Acts 1:11, that the record of John’s earlier encounter with two angels is recorded.

eclipses portend, or how they relate directly to end time events, or in what way they connect with the prophecies of the book of *Revelation* - though *Revelation* does indeed describe the moon becoming blood red. What we are told to do is to watch for some major event happening with respect to Israel; if and when that occurs, maybe a connection will become possible with respect to specific prophecy, biblical or otherwise.

What I wish to point out is that whatever comes of these planetary phenomena, they are not a reading of prophecy, they are a reading of external circumstances. These kinds of observations are made from time to time, gain temporary attention, and then fade away when, afterward, the world simply seems to continue on as usual. Perhaps sometime someone will "hit the nail on the head," as the saying goes, and uncover a trigger type circumstance with respect to prophecy; but we will never be sure until we can look and see the actual correlation unfold, and likely only in hindsight. I wish to be clear from the outset that there will be little attempt in this book to make specific predictions or observations of this nature. Our goal will be to read and hear the prophetic message of the book of *Revelation*, not to point out circumstances that may or may not be relevant.

A second thing not attempted in this book is the interpretation of every detail or the resolution of every perplexity that exists in the book of *Revelation*. I hope that after reading this chapter, you would agree that it is somewhat foolish for anybody to think that he or she could do so. The book is full of symbols and mysteries; some yield to interpretation, some resist. (An obvious example of symbols that resist interpretation are the seven "peals of thunder" that are mentioned in *Revelation* 10:3-4) Some details must be left open to question. Therefore we admit at the outset that this book will have and is intended to have obvious limitations. It is not in the least a "sentence by sentence" examination of *Revelation*; rather it is an attempt to identify the major themes, and then to draw out and explore the important contributing factors. When we are done, it is hoped that those who have taken the journey will have a very real sense of everything important that the book of *Revelation* has to say.

With this in mind, we should now pause to identify the interpretive boundaries of The Gold Mine. Addressed below are three important questions that will help to make clear the guidelines that have been followed in preparing this “reading” of the book of *Revelation*.

**QUESTION ONE:
WHAT DOES REVELATION MEAN BY THE PHRASE
“THE TIME IS NEAR”?**

No one knows whether Aesop actually lived or not; but whether the fables preserved under his name are just a traditional collection or whether someone by that name created some or all of them, the collection exists and the stories are often insightful. It happens to be tale #210, one with which many of us will be familiar, that is relevant for us here.

A little boy - or maybe not so little - was entrusted with the town sheep and spent his days watching out for them in the pastures some distance from the village. Mischievous and bored, one day he decided he would cry for help to see what would happen. “Wolf, wolf!” he shouted. Sure enough the men of the village gathered their spears and pitch forks and rushed out to help the boy fight off the wolf; but of course, there was no wolf. They admonished him that his behaviour was unacceptable, that he must not do so again. “Okay, okay” said the boy; but he rather enjoyed the excitement and did it again anyway. The men of the city rushed to his aid; even a third time. One day, however, there really was a wolf. As the boy saw it, he was terrified for himself and the flock and with a whole new fervency cried “Wolf! Wolf! There’s a wolf! Come and help!” But the men had it figured out now. They knew better, they knew the game, and none of them was about to rush to the boy’s assistance again. The wolf attacked the flock without opposition and had his pick of the sheep. The moral of the story according to Aesop was this: nobody trusts a liar even when he tells the truth.

That precise moral is not what this discussion is about, although, incidentally, it would be one very fitting to the book of *Revelation*. We will see that right alongside misdeeds like murder

and sorcery, things that might be regarded as especially evil, is listed the sin of lying.

For our more immediate purpose, however, a different application is to be drawn. If, as we acknowledged above, the book of *Revelation* revolves around Jesus, the Creator God, returning to His created world, there have been no few attempts historically to predict when that was going to happen. We might even say that we have heard the cry, “Wolf! Wolf!” just too many times. Of course a difference is that those who made the predictions usually have not been deliberate liars but well-intentioned “forecasters” who genuinely believed what they were saying. Still, the effect of endless failed predictions has had the impact of the cry, “Wolf! Wolf!”

First century followers of Jesus were persecuted at Rome by the emperor Nero. According to the Roman historian, Tacitus, Nero inflicted unthinkable torture upon them in an attempt to deflect away from himself the growing hostilities of his own people.⁷ He eventually became widely regarded as a virtual madman and was driven to suicide. Not long after his death the book of *Revelation* began to circulate, and it described another malevolent world emperor to come, the “antichrist”; one thing that would identify him was that he “was killed with the sword and came back to life.” [13:3,14] What else could these early Jesus followers conclude than that the end times were upon them, Nero was going to rise from the dead, and Jesus would return? However, the expectation was gradually abandoned when none of it came to pass.

A well known church father by the name of Irenaeus (along with at least two other church fathers) made calculations and declared that Jesus was going to come January 1st, the year 500; so they preached and so people believed, but Jesus did not come.

In the Middle Ages many preachers declared that He was going to come in the year 1000, January 1. In Europe it caused riots. Christians pilgrimaged to Jerusalem so as to be present for it; but Jesus did not come.

⁷ See Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44ff

A man by the name of Henry Archer studied the Old Testament prophetic book of *Daniel* and realized that often when Daniel talked about days he meant years; so since Daniel said, "...blessed is he who keeps waiting and attains to the 1,335 days,"⁸ Archer concluded 1,335 years. He began counting from the time of the emperor known as Julian the Apostate, for Julian, like an "antichrist," had tried to turn the "Christianized" Roman Empire back to paganism. Archer calculated 1,335 years from his death and came up with the year 1700. He preached to everyone that Jesus was going to return to His creation in 1700. Jesus did not return.

John Wesley, a preacher of no little influence in the nineteenth century, founder of a whole Christian movement that became known as Wesleyan, wrote⁹ that he expected Jesus would return in the year 1836. His movement inspired great social reform, he is remembered and honoured to this day, but he was wrong about the return of Jesus.

Many readers of this book may remember the seemingly great threat that "Y2K" brought upon the civilized world in 1999. Would the New Year cause the electricity grid of whole cities or even nations to go off line? Our ears were filled with frightening predictions that technology was going to fail, the economy was going to collapse, and that life on earth was going to be turned on its head. Many preachers told us, "Be ready! This is the time when Jesus will return and the end times will begin to unfold." Well, the year 2000 came, but Jesus did not.

The preceding list provides only a few failed predictions, there have been countless others. "Wolf! Wolf!" What are we to do with this?

Popular cynicism may be forgiven. Perhaps the safe thing to do would be simply to ignore all the noise and just put off the whole idea. Even if one were to be open to the possibility of the return of the Creator to His universe some day, "some day" doesn't mean much to me today. I have a life to live and a society to which I must contribute. Distraction from this purpose leads to

⁸ *Daniel* 12:12

⁹ A chart detailing Wesley's rationale for this conclusion can be found in his [Explanatory Notes](#) on *Revelation* 12.

inefficiency or disillusionment. What sense would there be to respond positively to any future cry that the Creator God is coming soon? Let's carry on as if He were not coming, certainly not in our day. If we are surprised, let it be a happy surprise that we deal with when it happens.

This approach might well appeal to our sense of personal sophistication, or to our instincts of self-preservation - who wants to be found believing in something that does not happen? But it has a fatal flaw. The storyline of Aesop's fable is that *the wolf did come*, and it was an event that required preparation and action. Unfortunately everyone had been conditioned to ignore the possibility due to the boy's games, and they suffered loss as a result. So too will be the case if the Creator God returns and we are not prepared for it.

Despite all the failed attempts to predict the timing of such an "other world" event, the angelic announcement that John received has not changed or been rescinded. If we "hear" the book of *Revelation*, we will scarcely be able to miss its urgency about this. When I entitled this chapter, "The time is near," I was not using my words, but words found in *Revelation* itself; as noted above, they are used in the very first chapter at the beginning of the book, and they are used in the very last chapter near the end of the book. It is John himself who prophetically declared, "The time is near."

Five times in this book, John reports words of the Creator God Himself, "I am coming quickly"; two other times He declares, "I am coming like a thief." Throughout the entire book readers will encounter words urging readiness for His coming, that it is going to happen soon. The one thing we must admit about past "forecasters" who made failed predictions about timing is that at least they took the promise seriously. They genuinely believed the Creator God is coming back to earth.

We would do well to learn from their mistake. In the gospels it is reported that Jesus Himself claimed *not to know* the day or the hour of His return.¹⁰ If even He did not know, how wise would it

¹⁰ See *Matthew* 24:36 and *Mark* 13:32. Luke does not report this statement in his gospel, but he reports the words of Jesus to his followers in *Acts* 1:7, "It is not for you to know..."

be for any of us to think that we do know? Therefore, if in “hearing” the book of *Revelation* you are expecting to hear what Jim Christie thinks about the day or the hour, let us be perfectly clear. Jim does not know, does not think he knows, and is not foolish enough to go out on a limb and say “I think it’s going to happen at *such and such a time!*” I have thoughts about “when” in the more general sense, and such a possibility is suggested by Jesus when He says, “But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”¹¹ However, I do not plan to emphasize my thoughts about timing in this “reading” of the book of *Revelation*, for if we are true to our stated purposes, we are trying to hear what the book says, not what the reader of the book thinks.

What I will say here is that despite all the past (and present) specific predictions about the return of the Creator God to His creation, claims that have resulted only in skepticism arising in our minds, we must still hear the words of *Revelation* itself, “The time is near.” In the gospels Jesus said, “You too be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect.”¹² Perhaps like never before we do not expect His return. So many times so many people have predicted and they have always been wrong; we have heard the cry, “Wolf! Wolf!” But Jesus warned us to watch out. It could be the very moment when you give up that He will be right at the door!

Let me put this another way. *We do not need a specific prediction to move us to live as if the Creator God might appear at any moment. He Himself instructed us to live that way whether there is a specific prediction or not!* As another New Testament writer puts it, “...now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.”¹³ If this was said 1,950 years ago, how much closer are we now to the time that is near!

Furthermore, in “microcosmic” terms, there is a sense in which for each one of us as an individual the time is very near. Recently a close friend from university days lay down on his bed at 5pm for a nap before night shift. He kissed his wife, told his daughter he

¹¹ *Luke 21:28*

¹² *Luke 12:40*

¹³ *Romans 13:11*

loved her, and retired to the bedroom. At 10:30 when he should have been out of the door, his wife went in to awaken him. His body was already cooling. Instead of laying down for a short nap, he had lain down and suffered a massive heart attack. My good friend, a mere 53 years old, died instantly and without warning. For him, the time was very near even if no one had any idea. Apparently, the Creator came for him.

In this sense, the Creator God *is* coming in your and my lifetime even if it is at the moment when we breathe our last. According to the book of *Revelation*, our end is not to die and dissolve into oblivion, it is to enter a new dimension and come face to face with our Creator as He comes for us. It is going to be like going through a door; and whether we realize it or not, the time IS near.

One of the things I have observed about life is that when I was under the age of thirty, I tended to celebrate every year of my birthday. Every year seemed to set a significant, new milestone. When I passed thirty, however, time (without my being especially conscious of it) seemed to start moving more quickly, and while I noticed my birthdays, it became the decades that I really tended to mark. I was honoured with a great birthday party at 40, and another at 50. Suddenly now 60 has also rushed past, and 70 looms ahead. Life passes so quickly that one find's oneself thinking in terms of decades - and how many of those do we have at our disposal? Maybe seven, maybe eight, maybe even nine or ten, but that's not many. Note that *Revelation* does not say that the *end* is near, rather it is the *time* that is near. For each of us, the time is near to encounter the Creator God in person.

This reality brings the actual purpose of the book of *Revelation* more clearly into view. The prophecies were given more to teach us how to live than to inform us about what is coming in the future. If we knew that the Creator God was coming for us - individually, or collectively - and we knew that this was going to happen next week, we might adjust our lives drastically to be prepared for His appearance. At the very beginning of this chapter, we introduced two general approaches to *Revelation*: either that it was written for John's immediate audience; or that it was written for some future generation that would encounter

the ultimate fulfilment of his prophecies. The problem with both options is the possible conclusion that the book was written for only one generation of people. Not so. The book was written to lay upon every single generation the responsibility to be ready to receive their Creator God. He might come for them as individuals, one by one; or as a global community. In any case, for no one will the wait be longer than about 100 years.

Reflecting back for a moment, we must then commend the first century followers of Jesus for believing that the antichrist (Nero, raised from the dead) could arise in their day. Living in such faith inspired them to lay down their lives for their Creator God. They saw in the prophecies about an antichrist and in the warnings not to receive his mark on their bodies, a necessity never to swear ultimate allegiance to any earthly ruler. They and the succeeding generation of Jesus followers therefore refused to pour libations or offer sacrifices to the Roman emperors.¹⁴ For them it would be to receive “the mark of the beast.” They did not experience the ultimate fulfilment of John’s prophecies, but they thought they did, and they applied those prophecies to their own circumstances. They lived out the expectation that their Creator God was coming for them soon, and in doing so, lived exactly as any follower of Jesus should live in any generation.

In this same sense, we ought not to despise others who believed that it was going to happen in their day. Perhaps they were unwise to set exact dates, but they were not unwise to live in light of the return of Jesus to earth. While the prophecies of John in *Revelation* will have special relevance for those alive during their ultimate fulfilment, they have just as important relevance for every generation before then. Each generation and each human being needs to ask whether they are living in intentional allegiance to the Creator God. The blessing promised upon those who “hear and heed the things written in this book” was and is available to every generation since the book was written.

¹⁴ This exemplary loyalty is discussed in a bit more detail in the fourth chapter of this book.

As true as all this is, the book of *Revelation* does indeed disclose what is finally to come upon earth and its inhabitants. John believed the visions he had received, and he anticipated their imminent fulfilment. For our part, though we cannot set a day or an hour, if we are “hearing” John’s message we will be living in the very real possibility that the Creator God may well return to earth in our lifetime. Anything short of this would be to fail to “heed” the prophecies.

Before we leave the question about the statement, “the time is near,” something I noted above needs to be reiterated: *Revelation* does not say that the *end* is near, it says that the *time* is near. Many, if not most people who want to know what the book of *Revelation* has to say, are wondering particularly about what it says about the end of the world. Does it lead us to believe that the Creator God is returning to His created earth simply to bring it to an end? No! The book of *Revelation* is not a book about the end of the world or about the end of human existence. It is a description of the unfolding plan of the Creator God for His creation project, and He plans to take a very “hands on” approach. He is returning to complete the project that He has had in mind from the beginning. Much more will be said about this in our next chapter.

**QUESTION TWO:
DOES THE BOOK OF REVELATION PROVIDE
A CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE OF EVENTS?**

The first question was about time, this question is more about timeline. In the most general terms, the answer is that yes, one can discern in the book of *Revelation* a chronological sequence of events. However, that sequence of events is not without gaps of unknowable extent, and it must be excavated from a piece of literature that pauses for thematic development, that finds relevance quite apart from any chronology, that is replete with literary devices including both foreshadow and flashback, and that describes alternatively what occurs in the parallel realities of earth, where humanity dwells, and heaven, where the Creator God dwells.

The book provides for us three specific instructions about how to understand its structure with respect to timeline. The first of these is introduced in *Revelation* 1:19, where John, having just seen the vision of God and of heaven, is told, “Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things.” According to this, there are three categories of information that John is to pass on, and these three provide the overall structure of the book of *Revelation*:

Timeline, category 1: “The things which you have seen”

Timeline, category 2: “The things which are”

Timeline, category 3: “The things which shall take place after these things.”

If this is the general chronological structure that John proposes to follow in *Revelation*, it makes sense for us to deliberately follow this same pathway, and let it shape our “reading” of his book.

Perhaps many people who take it upon themselves to read The Gold Mine will be eager to rush ahead and discover what are the things that are going to come in the future, “the things which shall take place after these things.” But if we skip the first two categories, we will have failed to hear the book of *Revelation*! In fact, there is a very real danger that we will misread the third category if we do not digest what is provided for us in the first two. Therefore I encourage you not to quickly dispense with chapters two to four below. If you take the time to read and digest the material of the first two categories, you will be positioning yourself to handle responsibly what comes in the third.

The things which John “has seen” are in the foundational vision of *Revelation* chapter 1. It is here that we are introduced to the eternal God, and from this description of Him are established the guiding principles for the rest of the book. This is the material of the first category of timeline, “The things which you have seen,” and it will therefore be the starting point for our next two chapters: “The view from the throne;” and, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.”

Next, with some careful observation, we can discover what is meant by “the things which are,” the second category of timeline. Immediately after the foundational vision of chapter 1, the things which John “has seen,” is a set of letters to seven churches, found in chapters 2-3. It would be convenient if this set of letters turned out to be the content of this second category, “the things which are,” and happily there are sufficient indicators to confirm that this is the case. Following the seven letters of chapters 2-3, we read in chapter 4:1,

“After these things, I looked, and behold a door was standing open in heaven and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said ‘Come up here, and I will show you *what must take place after these things.*’”

The little phrase, “after these things,” is used seven or eight times by John throughout *Revelation* in an editorial sense, to help move the plot along, and we encounter the first example of that here as chapter four starts. However, in this verse (ie, 4:1) the phrase is used a second time, not by John but by the same voice which had spoken to him earlier. This voice recalls the wording of 1:19 where the timeline was originally announced. What we have in 4:1, therefore, is a declaration from the realm of heaven that what is to follow is the material of the third category of timeline, “the things which shall take place after these things.” Therefore the section between the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 4, namely chapters 2 and 3, the messages to the churches, must constitute the second category of timeline, “the things which are.”

Our entire fourth chapter will be dedicated to this second category of timeline, and it reveals a shocking preoccupation of the Creator of our universe. For if “the things which are” covers a period of time from John’s writing up to and beyond the present, then all the epochs intervening are included: the Middle and Late Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the medieval world, the Enlightenment, the age of Colonization, the Industrial Revolution, the Modern and Post-Modern ages, etc. You would think that at

least some of these developments would be so noteworthy as to capture the attention of a prophet who was describing the purpose and destiny of humanity, but not so. *Revelation* is not a book about the purposes or accomplishments of humanity for itself; it is a book about the purpose of the Creator for humanity, and apparently *that purpose finds its focus entirely in the church*.

What? No notice of the discovery of the new world, or in the rise of powerful nations? No mention of advances in medicine, in astronomy, in genetics, in human rights, in philosophy? No interest in the kind of technological advances that could send people into space, or destroy whole cities with one weapon, or provide computers in every household, or make possible instantaneous global communications? Just the church? The only thing of real interest to the Creator God throughout the period of time designated, “the things which are,” is the church? Shocking!

What, then, is the “church”? Today there are many ways this question could be answered, but from the point of view of *Revelation* 2-3, the church is simply this: the sum total of human beings who identify themselves as the people of the Creator God, Jesus Christ. The Creator is mining for gold, for people who will respond to His offer of love, forgiveness, and rescue; and in the present age, such people constitute the church. This helps to explain why the Creator God takes such a narrow interest in the activities of humanity upon the earth, for what He is really doing is gathering together for Himself an eternal companion, in fact, a Bride. For this reason, our fourth chapter is entitled, “Bridal Preparations.”

Unfortunately, as we shall see, the church often conducts itself in a manner far inferior to the gold for which the Creator is looking, and the letters to them in *Revelation* 2-3 deliver as much correction, warning, and judgment as they do commendation. However, for now it is enough to note that the second category of timeline, “the things which are,” is the present period of time in which the church exists, the “church age.”

The word “church” does not appear again in the book of *Revelation* after chapter 3, with the exception of 22:16 in the epilogue. This rather surprising absence of the word “church” concurs with our observation that as chapter 4 begins, the church

age is over and a new period of human history begins to unfold, “the things which shall take place after these things.” This, as we have already seen and will discuss further, does not mean that there will be no people fleeing to their Creator for rescue after chapter 3, but that for them it is going to be a different, much more intense time, requiring courageous individual choices.

Chapters five through nine of The Gold Mine deal with this third category of timeline, based on *Revelation* 4-22. It is here where we will encounter the stuff of “end time” prophecies: earthly judgments, massive waves of rescue, the antichrist, the collapse of religion and of the global economy, an interim reign of the Creator God over humanity, final judgment, and the new heaven and earth. In all this, never far from our view will be the activity and focus of Jesus the Creator, mining for gold.

Here then is the timeline structure which the book itself gives us:

1. “The things which John has seen” (the vision of chapter 1)
2. “The things which are” (the churches as addressed in seven letters, chapters 2-3)
3. “The things which shall take place after these things” (chapter 4:1 to the epilogue of chapter 22)

We go on now to the second specific instruction which *Revelation* provides for us about how to understand its structure with respect to timeline. The book affirms and greatly expands upon a prediction that there is yet to come upon humanity a seven year period of unprecedented tribulation. This prediction first appears in the ancient book of *Daniel* to which we referred above, and anticipation of it was renewed by Jesus Himself as He prepared His first followers for things to come.¹⁵ Daniel describes the tribulation as lasting for one week, and his use of this word “week” evidently represents not seven days, but seven years. He also predicts that something significant will change in the middle of the “week.”¹⁶

Accordingly, the book of *Revelation* describes a great tribulation to come that is going to be of seven years’ duration,

¹⁵ Each of the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke record these words of Jesus: *Matthew* 24:21, *Mark* 13:19-20.

¹⁶ *Daniel* 9:26-27

but divided into two distinct halves. Fortifying the conclusion that the tribulation will last for seven literal years, John variously identifies each half as 1,260 days, as 42 months, and “a time, times, and half a time” (that is, one year plus two years plus a half year). This last descriptor deliberately recalls the exact wording found in *Daniel* 12:7. Thus we find in the book of *Revelation* the seven year tribulation introduced in *Daniel*, but with much more - detailed description. Chapter 10 of *Revelation* becomes the very important transitional chapter that moves us from the first three and a half years to the second three and a half years of this great tribulation; it is important to notice this, because the second three and a half years take on a very different character from the first, and this change alerts us to some of the most important developments in the book as a whole.

This brings us to the third specific instruction that *Revelation* itself provides for us about how to understand its structure with respect to timeline. Even though we have found a general structure for the timeline of the book (namely, “the things which you have seen, the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things,”) it does not necessarily follow that the material covered by the designation, “the things which shall take place after these things,” is arranged in tight, chronological order. In fact, it is not.

To put it another way, chapters 4:1 through to the end of the book do not read as a strictly chronological order of events. As mentioned earlier, there are various literary devices that are used throughout, and while we see a general chronological trend, we also encounter flashbacks, interludes, and concurrent events. For example, chapter 10 is an interlude that introduces the second three and a half years of tribulation, but then chapters 11 and 12 are both flashbacks, clearly identifiable, that variously precede or retrace the time of the first three and a half years. We will watch carefully for such deviations from chronological order and try to see what we can about the temporal relationship of the different sections.

Another artistic, literary device used that interrupts chronological flow is similar to that which in art is called a “detail”

of a painting - a “close up,” or perhaps a “blow up” of a particular part of a larger picture. It provides for the viewer a much finer, more “detailed” perspective of the point being studied. It offers us a “window” for careful exploration, almost like a touch screen on our smartphones (or other “smart” devices) allows us to look at a picture or map in an overview, and then to expand it until we see the details we need.

An example of a literary “detail” from the book of *Revelation* arises out of chapter 17:16, where the role of the antichrist with respect to “Babylon the Great” is mentioned briefly. A graphic description of what this will look like becomes the focus of the whole of chapter 18, thus providing a “detail” of 17:16.

We must keep our eyes open for literary devices like these as we continue and they will help us make better sense of the book. Yes, there is a general sense of chronological sequence for which we will look; but the creativity of John’s prophecies call for alertness to flashback, interlude, concurrent events, and “details” if we are to understand how the overall sequence of the book evolves.

**QUESTION THREE:
HOW DO WE INTERPRET A BOOK THAT IS SO FULL
OF SYMBOLS, VISIONS, AND LITERARY DEVICES?**

So far, we have talked about time, what does “near” mean; and about timeline, what we should expect in the book of *Revelation* with respect to sequence and chronological order. Finally, we come to the more general question of interpretation, how are we to approach a book of this character? It talks about beasts and demons and dragons; the earth has a mouth, God has a wine press, the sea sends forth its dead. The whole book is full of symbols and pictures. How are we to deal with such a complex literary work?

From the very outset, the book shows awareness of this challenge, as already in chapter 1:1 we read, “...and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant, John.” The Greek word used for “communicated” here is a verb that literally means to give a sign or symbol. Older translations such as the

King James Version provide a more literal rendering and use the English word “signified.” The book is notifying us from the beginning that its literary approach is going to be symbolic, or at least that there are going to be signs and symbols used throughout; and this is indeed what we find to be the case.

At the same time, the book comes to our rescue and leads us to expect to be able to interpret its symbols and images. In many cases it actually tells us what a symbol represents, or failing that, provides enough indicators to keep us from mere guesswork.

For example, in chapter 1, John sees “seven golden lampstands,” a person like “a son of man,” and “seven stars” in His right hand. Then the chapter goes on to tell us that the lampstands represent seven churches, and the stars represent the angels of the seven churches. Admittedly, in the case of the “seven stars,” we still have to ask what are the “angels” of the seven churches - are they literal angels? are they messengers, leaders, pastors of the churches? Whoever they are, at least we are able to see that they are somehow responsible for the well-being of the respective churches. As for the one who is “like a son of man,” He speaks and describes Himself as “the first and the last,” the one who “was dead” and is “alive forevermore.” This can be no other than the Creator God Himself, Jesus. Even the description of Him as “one like a son of man” corroborates this interpretation, for Jesus in His time upon the earth often called Himself the “Son of Man.”¹⁷

What, then, is the purpose of the symbolism? If the book itself regularly interprets the symbols, why use them in the first place? In thinking through an answer to this question, we discover some of the richness of the book.

Back to our first example, we are told that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. We aren’t left to guess what the symbol represents, but we are left to ask ourselves why it was used. What does this symbolism tell us about how the Creator God sees the churches, and what role He expects of

¹⁷ The first four books of the New Testament, *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John*, are known as “gospels” and they describe the life and words of Jesus while He was on earth. Collectively, they report Jesus referring to Himself as the “Son of Man” more than eighty times.

them? A lamp provides light in darkness. The symbol recalls what Jesus said to His followers, "You are the light of the world."¹⁸ The churches are commissioned by the Creator God to reflect His existence, His values, and His care to the rest of the world. Throughout all the book of *Revelation*, the most important thing that the Jesus followers must do is to hold on courageously to the testimony of His name. During the present age, it is the church that is expected to do this. When we discover that the Creator God sees the churches as His lampstands, it helps us to understand why His criticism of them is at times harsh in chapters 2-3, for often they are not representing Him in the world, but are misrepresenting Him.

If the devil is pictured as a great dragon in *Revelation 12*, what does this symbol tell us about the character and purpose of the devil? If the Creator God Himself is pictured as a Lamb that has been slain, what does this tell us about the Creator God? If the whole purpose of the Creation plan, as disclosed through *Revelation*, is a gathering of rescued people from every corner of the earth, and this gathering of people is pictured as a Bride, what does this tell us about the attitude of the Creator God toward the people He has rescued?

The symbols turn out not to hinder our understanding of John's message, but to enhance it. They are not used to confuse us or to obscure meaning, they are given to convey fuller meaning! Thus, when we come upon the symbols of the book, most often we are going to be able to interpret with a good deal of certainty what they represent; this is exactly as the book intends it, we are expected to succeed. The challenge is that we will be tempted to stop there when, really, we should go on to ask ourselves why the respective symbols are used. Otherwise we miss the point of the symbolism and the richness of John's prophecies.

One final caveat is appropriate as we prepare to move ahead into the "reading" of the book: we should not look for symbolic interpretation when we don't have to. If the text says there was a great hail storm, or an earthquake, or a scorching sun, we can imagine a hail storm, an earthquake, or a scorching sun. There is

¹⁸ *Matthew 5:14*

much in the book that isn't necessarily cryptic, and we should hear the book with as much respect and common sense as possible.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VIEW FROM THE THRONE

In the Introduction, we acknowledged that the book of *Revelation* revolves around Jesus Christ, the Creator of the cosmos. We admitted that although those simple words might deter some from reading any further, they are central to the message of the book, and we are not hearing *Revelation* if we ignore them. I am thankful that you have stayed with me on the journey, and I hope that you will continue. There is now another related dimension which we must observe if we are to further our reading and hearing of *Revelation*.

John begins his work with a greeting, and included in this greeting is a wish that his audience would receive “grace” and “peace” from God. It is his ensuing description of God that calls for our attention. If Jesus Christ is the Creator of the cosmos, the “Creator God,” then logically it would seem that John is referring to Him as the source of grace and peace. This conclusion would be wholly true; but it is not the whole truth. Here is what John actually writes:

“John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” [1:4-5]

As you see, “grace” and “peace” are indeed conferred from Jesus Christ, but also from “Him who is and who was and who is to come,” and from “the seven Spirits who are before His throne.”

Here we observe that John orients his writing in a view of divinity that consists of three distinct “Persons.” We will encounter each of these divine Persons, under various designations, participating with united purpose throughout the

book. For example, Jesus Christ identifies Himself in *Revelation* 2:18 as “the Son of God,” and in the same context identifies God as His “Father” [2:28], and the “Spirit” as the one who is speaking to the churches. [2:29]¹⁹

This view of God as existent in a threefold form of being is equally discernible in first century Christian writings other than *Revelation*, and eventually it became recognized as a foundational tenet of orthodox Christian theology: God exists as a Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This view of God was not the invention of the church; it was a discovery by the church about what their earliest literature and Jesus Himself consistently taught. As we stated in chapter one, neither does the church nor Christianity own Jesus Christ or influence what He is like; now we must add that neither do they own God as a whole Being or influence what He is like. He is who He is, and the best we or the church or Christianity can do is to try to describe what He is like based on the information He has disclosed to us. None of us can fully understand what God is like, for example, how three can be one, or one can be three; or how God can have no beginning; or how He can be big enough to create a cosmos such as ours. We can believe these things because they are true; but we have to live with a degree of perplexity about them.

As we attempt to hear the book of *Revelation*, this discovery is critical. The book is highly sensitive to the threefold nature of God, and to the roles that each Person of the Trinity plays. Without an awareness of these distinctions, the book leaves us bewildered. For example, we have already identified Jesus Christ as the Creator of the cosmos; yet it is not He who is pictured throughout the book as the Sovereign God who sits on the heavenly throne. That place of ultimate authority over all things visible and invisible is reserved for “God the Father” [3:21], most often referred to simply as “God.” The other two Persons of the Trinity, the Son and the Spirit, perfectly share His divine nature but function in willful submission to His sovereignty.

¹⁹ It is perhaps confusing at this point to be told that there are “seven Spirits” before the throne. However, given the symbolic nature of John’s writing, and the general use of the number “seven” to indicate completeness, we should understand the “seven Spirits” to indicate the completeness and infiniteness of the Spirit of God. He is everywhere at once and can do all things at once.

The foregoing discussion allows us to be very specific about the theme of this chapter, “The View from the Throne.” All that the book affirms about the present, the past, and the future; all of its focus on Jesus Christ; all of its preoccupation with the mined “gold” of rescued humanity; it all derives from the will and decrees of Almighty God, He “who is and who was and who is to come.” It is as we look at the whole picture from His point of view, the view from His throne, that we discover purpose, destiny, certainty, and completion. Beginning in chapter 1 and then woven throughout the entire book of *Revelation* is the view from this throne. When we as readers and hearers come to the book of *Revelation*, we generally do so with great interest about what is ahead for planet earth and her inhabitants; but again and again our focus is snatched away from the events upon earth that are of such interest to us, and it is drawn back into the presence of Almighty God, who is sitting on His throne of dominion, working out all things after the counsel of His will. If we miss this, we have missed the whole message of the book.

In chapter one we discussed the interest that Christians have in end time events, but we would be incorrect to think that they are the only ones interested in such things. Many of the influential religious systems of the world including Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism also have comparable beliefs. Whether perceived as cyclical in nature as in Hinduism, or linear as in Islam, religion has tended to offer both hope and fear about things to come.

Furthermore, it is not just for reasons of religion that people have turned their thoughts towards what is yet to come on planet earth. Consider popular Western culture. According to Wikipedia, by 2015 there have been 213 feature length movies produced on topics related to the end of the world. As early as in the 1950's there were already seven such movies, including the almost legendary work of H. G. Wells, *War of the Worlds*. In the 60's the number doubled to 14. Skip ahead to the first decade of the new millennium and there were 59. And from 2010 to 2015 there were an average of ten per year. Such movies are seldom connected with any religion except incidentally. It just seems that one of the inevitable questions for man to face is, “Where is all

this headed?" If the increasing number of big screen pictures is any indication, at least as far as Western culture is concerned we are becoming quite transfixed with what is going to happen, and how and when it is going to happen. Perhaps the rise of terrorism and global insecurity is generating increasing interest, for while self-destruction remains well within man's capability, we now see it is also within his moral capacity.

Looking at current popular culture, I feel that we have become almost "schizophrenic" in our thinking. On the one hand, we have become increasingly convinced about evolutionary theory, that the universe, the earth, and all things in it exist as a result of sheer chance. When I grew up in the 1960's, a time when belief in God, in special creation, and in the uniqueness of earth still had a residual influence, the idea of alien life was the stuff only of science fiction (though astronauts returning to planet earth were always carefully quarantined just in case!) Now you are out of step if you don't assume alien life exists in the cosmos. The 1997 movie, *Contact*, did not strike us as being far-fetched, but as predictive. If evolution produced life on earth, surely, in such a vast universe, it must have produced it elsewhere as well. The cosmos and everything in it exists and continues quite without the need for "God."

On the other hand, the very same people are believing more and more in the metaphysical. We are no longer of the "modern" or scientific age, we are post-modern or, as some would have it, we have already moved on to metamodernism. In any case, we now believe in the spirit world, or that there exists at least some kind of "God." Ideas about this "God" are almost as varied as there are people, and even if contradictory, all ideas are regarded as equally valid. On the whole, we are becoming spiritual again in our thinking.

Here, then, is what I mean by schizophrenic, the disconnect between what we believe exists in the spirit world and what we believe about life on earth. "God," however conceived, exists somewhere, but "his" existence has nothing to do with what is happening or going to happen on earth. We are still at the mercy of all the man-made or chance or cause and effect events that can happen in a universe. The movie, *Armageddon*, provides a

good example of where our hope lies as it imagines mankind saving itself from a meteor on a collision course with earth. There is no “God factor” in the story.

The reality is that a massive meteor could strike the earth; war and weapons of mass destruction could bring life on earth to an end; or some incurable pandemic could snuff out human life. Apocalyptic books and movies offer insects, reptiles, extraterrestrial invaders, ice age, greenhouse effect, and any number of other possibilities for the “end of the world.” We are captivated with the possibility that the world may end; it is just that “God” is not a part of the picture, either in bringing it about or in rescuing us from it.

Accordingly, the book of *Revelation* could also be used to inspire apocalyptic entertainment; from it we could come up with a Hollywood movie like no other. There is thunder in the book of *Revelation* that would test the limits of any Dolby system. There are earthquakes so powerful that cities on both sides of the world fall at the same time. There is a storm producing hail stones weighing 100 pounds each, a storm so severe “that men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail.” Salt water and fresh turn to blood. Demonized insects sting like scorpions. Warfare with weapons of mass destruction kill millions of people at a time. If what we are looking for is literature that could inspire a movie thriller, look no further than the book of *Revelation*. However, if we used it for that purpose, we would be completely missing its point.

Revelation was not written to scare us or to entertain us or to satisfy our curiosity. It was written to affirm that we have a Sovereign God, and to reveal His intentions. It is an invitation, “Come and meet your God.” You are here for a reason. He has a plan and He is going to work it out.

Perspective changes everything, and this book starts and ends at the throne of God. Time and again we are reminded of Him who is sitting on the throne. We are not left for a moment to think that the future of the world and the life it sustains is subject to chance and random events, nor that it is ultimately in the hands of humankind. No, there is an Almighty God in control and He is decreeing what is happening and going to happen.

Part of the way in which *Revelation* discloses information to us about this God is through the unique, descriptive names that it ascribes to Him. The fact that these names are used deliberately and consistently throughout the book demonstrates their importance. They help us visualize who this God is, what He is like, and what He has planned. I propose now to discuss three of these that will help to create for us the book's perspective on "the view from the throne."

**"THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA," REVELATION 1:8
A GOD WITH AN ETERNAL PLAN**

Right at the very beginning of the book, John reports that God speaks and introduces Himself like this: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." [1:8] Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; the phrase, "Alpha and Omega," has a nice ring to it and our Bible translators have often transliterated rather than translated it. In English we would say, "God is the A and the Z." He is the beginning and the end. He is the start and the finish. He is the source and the destiny. If the alphabet provides the tools for the conception and communication of all thought and knowledge and meaning, in God Himself is the sum total of it all.

"Alpha and Omega" is a declaration about God's eternal existence and purposefulness. All things are from Him and through Him and to Him and for Him. Everything that exists, everything that has meaning, everything that could be conceived, everything that could be known or spoken or written, ultimately finds its source in God Himself. The story is His to tell, and when all is said and done, when the story is completed, God Himself will be, just as He is and always was.

When we hear this self-designation, Alpha and Omega, we are hearing God say, "I started a plan that includes all things, and I am going to finish it." It will not be man, whether presidents or philosophers or scholars or scientists or economists or strategists or gurus or terrorists who will write and finish the story. It will not be the unforeseeable projectiles of the solar system, nor the unstoppable forces of nature on earth, nor the ravages of time,

nor the interference of extra-terrestrials, nor the invisible powers of the spirit world, nor any other conceivable or inconceivable thing that will write and finish the human story. God declares that He is the start, and that He will bring about the finish, exactly as He has planned it.

This assures us that we need not live in fear of some dreadful, unforeseeable end of the world. God, the Alpha and the Omega, plans to finish what He has started, and the book of *Revelation* assures us that His plan is not for an imminent end of the world. In fact, we can search the book of *Revelation* for a detailed description of the end of the world, and we will not find it because it is not there. The book scarcely even refers to such an event. Yes, once at the great white throne in chapter 20:11 there is a passing comment: “And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence *earth and heaven fled away and no place was found for them.*” A mere comment in passing, but certainly not a focal point or climax of the book. Similarly, when the new heaven and earth are introduced in chapter 21:1, there is a single comment about the present heaven and earth: “for *the first heaven and the first earth have passed away, and there is no longer any sea.*” These two passing comments are all we will find in the whole book of *Revelation* about the end of the world. It never tells us *how* the world will end, only that when God is ready to make a new creation, the old will pass away.

The book of *Revelation* is occupied with a much greater purpose of God. We find Him overseeing and directing the human journey into His own, very intentional purposes. He appears, as it were, a craftsman working on the completion of a project, a God-sized project, encompassing the cosmos, the earth, and humanity. This project began with creation, experienced a catastrophic setback by the incursion of sin, but remains in the hands of its Almighty Designer, destined to fulfill its intended purpose.

We can all identify with this kind of activity, whether our idea of a project might be baking something delicious, or perfecting a computer program, or decorating a room, or building a garage. I couldn't call myself an artisan, but I am a fixer and I like projects.

If something is broken, or if something is needed, I like to fix it or make it. Such projects contribute to my mental health, for when I can work with my hands it gives me a much needed break from the more usual academic activities of my professional life.

There is a crowning moment with respect to such projects. In my case, if I can figure out how to restore to working order some device, especially if the problem requires careful examination and resourceful tinkering, or maybe the cobbling of some replacement part; if the whole process is very challenging yet ends up marvelously successful, the completion of that project is a delightful experience. It would almost be embarrassing for me if anyone were watching, because the likelihood is that I would keep going back to look at the restored item, just to watch it work and enjoy the success. (I take some comfort about this behaviour when I read in *Genesis* that when God created the world, even He enjoyed the moment and “looked and saw that it was good.”)

Well, maybe we are just “a chip off the old block,” as the saying goes. Maybe we are just like our Creator God - we were made in His image, after all. He too is working on a “project,” one that started out as beautiful, ran into trouble, desperately needed fixing, and remained as His focus until it should be finished just the way He wants it. God’s project embraces all creation and, especially, all humankind. He is carefully overseeing all that takes place in human history, from global trends to the details of individual life; He is strategically ordering all the things that have to happen to bring about His purposes. This is what the book of *Revelation* is about, a description of God at work in the completion of His humanity project.

There is yet to come the crowning moment when this monumental project is completed. We are introduced to it in chapters 19 and 20, where John looks and sees a Bride prepared and adorned for a wedding. A Bride! What God is doing is making an eternal companion for His Son. It is what this whole creation story has been about, God making for His Son a people who will be just like Him, who have chosen to be holy, true, and faithful; people who will love God their Maker beyond all else and at any cost.

The completion of this “project” is shown to be the priority of the book of *Revelation*, both by the amount of attention given to it, and by the pride of place assigned to it in the book’s layout. We pointed out in the first chapter that the book divides itself into 3 major divisions: the things which John has seen (the vision of chapter 1); “the things which are” (the seven messages of chapters 2 and 3); and then, “the things which must take place after these things” (chapters 4-22). The “Bride of Christ” whom we meet in chapter 19, includes the people of the seven churches in chapters 2 to 3. This is the whole second division of the book, “the things which are,” and thus we encounter the place of the church in God’s plan before we encounter end time prophecy. This is not an accident, but a signal of where *Revelation* is headed, and what will be the focal point of God’s “project.” Therefore in the fourth chapter of the present book, “Bridal Preparations: ‘the things which are,’” we must talk about the church and what God has revealed to His people about their place in His “project,” and the instructions He has for them throughout the process.

Of course in the broader sense, finishing the “project” involves more than just the perfecting of the Bride, for the Bride arises out of the bigger picture of humanity itself, indeed out of creation itself. In order for the “project” to be completely finished, God must deal with all aspects of humanity and creation. *Revelation* goes past chapters 2 and 3 to describe the various dimensions of this bigger picture.

For example, the book tells us that God is going to do away with world religions²⁰ and with all worship that is not directed towards Him through Jesus Christ. To be sure, throughout human history God has allowed religion to take every imaginable shape and be directed towards any given object of worship. But the book of *Revelation* reveals that it is not going to end that way.²¹ God is going to bring an end to all religion and allow only worship of Himself and of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Sin and evil must be eliminated, paradise must be restored. God’s creation was good, in fact, “very good.”²² It must return to

²⁰ This will be discussed in detail in chapter eight below.

²¹ This will be discussed in detail in chapter nine below.

²² *Genesis* 1:31

“good” or the “project” is not finished and God’s plan has failed. International conflicts, racist tensions, ethnic prejudices, and ingrained hatreds that have marred humanity must be eliminated. Israel must be restored to a place of favour with God. Earth must become a place of peace, the environment must be renewed, the killer instincts of the animal kingdom must cease. “Survival of the fittest” will no longer apply.

And what about Satan and his demons and the terrible role that they have played in creating earth's pain? Their influence must be neutralized, their deeds must be avenged.

It is this that the book of *Revelation* is all about, God’s “project”: what it is, what its completion will look like, and what the processes are that will take it there. There is nothing random about what takes place in the book of *Revelation*, and it is definitely not a book written merely to describe the end of the world. Rather, it describes the unfolding of the plan of a brilliant craftsman as He completes the “project” He began so long ago. He is the Alpha and the Omega, working intentionally and indefatigably towards the completion of His plan.

Will He succeed? A second name for God that also appears in *Revelation* 1:8, and that is used no less than six times throughout the book, answers this question.

“GOD THE ALMIGHTY,” REVELATION 1:8 A GOD OF INFINITE POWER

The Greek word that is used in the original text of *Revelation* for this name is translated into English with various synonymous terms: Almighty, Omnipotent, and Sovereign. Both the words “Almighty” and “Omnipotent” exactly parallel the Greek original, the latter of the two deriving from the Latin equivalent, *omnipotens*; in Greek, English, or Latin, the word means “all powerful.”

On the other hand, the English synonym, “sovereign,” creates a contrast that helps to illuminate the meaning further. In normal usage, the kind of power associated with the term “sovereign” is that of “supreme political control,” or of “one who holds a position of supreme authority.”

A political or religious leader may have “sovereign” power, but in reality that sovereignty is only as effective as the leader’s or the subject body’s ability to enforce and preserve it. A person holding a position of sovereignty may be overthrown, or the position itself may be weakened or displaced. An additional deficiency is that such “sovereign” power never has the ability to control all activity within its realm.

This usage is not at all what is in view when sovereignty is ascribed to God in the book of *Revelation*. There it is not a constitutional right or a position of defined authority that is in view, but actual power. *Revelation* pictures God in His sovereignty as having actual power over every single detail, large and small, animate and inanimate, of the entire universe; including over every single activity and decision of mankind.

Sovereignty described in this way could sound like mere fatalism, but it is far removed from fatalism; the book also affirms the free will of animate life, particularly of mankind, and warns of ultimate accountability to follow. This apparent contradiction turns out instead to provide a window into the transcendent nature of this God. The glory of His sovereignty is that He is able to rule a world permeated by random events and free will, while still exercising complete sovereignty over it. Reconciling such disparate factors might be impossible for us, but that proves nothing. God is not like us, He is not limited by our limitations, intellectual or otherwise. A God who could create a universe measurable only in billions of light years is so far beyond us that it would be complete arrogance on our part to think that we can or should comprehend Him; or to think that He can only operate within ways that we can understand.

The “sovereignty” factor provides a critical foundation to the book of *Revelation*. It is fine and good for God, the “Alpha and the Omega,” to have a comprehensive plan. Having a plan is the necessary place to start, but if you cannot complete the plan - for any reason - it has little or no value. Ask anyone who has set a New Year’s resolution; it is one thing to plan to do something, it is quite another to accomplish it. The point in observing God’s name as the “Almighty” is that it provides for us assurance that He has sovereign power and all attributes necessary to ensure a

successful outcome: His “project” WILL be completed perfectly and on schedule.

Revelation goes on from identifying God as the “Almighty” to showing Him at work in the unfolding of His plan. The book transitions time and again from what is happening on earth to what is happening in heaven. On earth is endured wave after wave of upheaval and catastrophe; but in heaven, there remains a sense of perfect stillness before the throne of the Almighty as He decrees the next steps of the plan. Powerful and perfectly loyal angels then execute those decrees upon the earth. Earthlings are not directly aware of what is happening in the invisible realms of God’s presence, but special agents of God (such as the two witnesses in chapter 11, and the 144,000 in chapter 14) prophetically and powerfully declare to men what He is doing. Thus in the sovereignty of God, earth and its inhabitants move ever closer to the completion of the “project.”

The sovereignty of God solves the problem of ensuring that His plan can be successfully completed, but in so doing it creates a completely different problem that almost cries out for attention. The God of *Revelation* is almighty, but He is also characterized by attributes such as love, mercy, kindness, and goodness. The problem is this: why is the creation over which He sovereignly rules so permeated by suffering, and why does the completing of His “project” involve so much pain? Whether looking at the human experience or at the animal kingdom, and whether looking at the earth as we now see it or as *Revelation* pictures it in days to come, suffering, pain, and death are everywhere. How can a God who is good and who has sovereign power over all be implicated in unspeakable suffering?

Atheism would provide a ready alternative. Disavow belief in the existence of God, or at least God as *Revelation* describes Him, and what is left is life as an accident, a product of chance; included in chance is the possibility of bad things happening as well as good things. Suffering is unfortunate but inevitable.

Our purposes do not admit of such a convenient solution. We are listening to the book of *Revelation*, and therefore atheism is not an option. *Revelation* unabashedly affirms the existence of a God, both benevolent and almighty, who exercises sovereignty

over our world, a world which is permeated by suffering. For us, the problem is that of a sovereign God WHO COULD CHANGE THINGS IF HE WANTED TO! Why doesn't He?

I recently had the unimaginable pleasure of raising an orphaned gray squirrel, "Stanley." For an animal lover who already had a special fondness for squirrels, this turned into one of the happiest experiences of my life. There was much to learn in the process, but ultimately the success of a wild animal rescue is measured by its safe return to nature. Despite how attached I felt to the little guy, I released him in the 18th week of his life as recommended, and his readjustment to the wild was almost immediate. I guess I had properly weaned and prepared him, for he returned to me once, momentarily, on the day of his release, once more early the next morning, and after that, never again. He became a squirrel just like every other squirrel.

Of course my fatherly love just wouldn't let go, and I tried to help him from a distance. That is when I began to find out just how difficult, even dangerous it is for a squirrel out there. I had mounted his wooden home into a tree to give him security, but by the second day an older squirrel drove him out and took it over. I spread food on the ground, but it only attracted raccoons and other squirrels who chased my little one away. Three times I saw a hawk dive into the backyard as if out of nowhere seeking a live meal. Twice I spotted a beautiful, brown weasel sniffing around the yard in search of fresh meat. A family of foxes lived across the road in a field, and one or another could be spotted from time to time with a squirrel between its teeth. Beyond all these threats, the biggest killer of squirrels in the city is the automobile; I watched intensely when, within the first week of his release, Stanley started to cross the street to explore the other side. When winter came, it was the coldest in 20 years. Day after day the high was minus 15-20 degrees Celsius. How was this little one, who just a few months earlier needed a heating pad to survive, supposed to endure that?

The little excursion I had taken into Narnia²³ ended up bringing me as much pain as it had pleasure. Suddenly the suffering of life

²³ Narnia is the name of C. S. Lewis' imaginary realm where man and animals share life together in harmony.

in the wild came right into my soul. How long did my little Stanley survive? I don't know, for after a couple of months outside, he faded in with all the other black coloured gray squirrels, and I could no longer identify him with certainty. I hated and still hate to see a dead squirrel on the road. With what sadness do I contemplate the potential suffering and death of my squirrel.

That is just one squirrel. What about the whole animal kingdom and how merciless life is in the wild? Far, far worse, what about human suffering? What about the pain of this whole world that Almighty God is watching in detail, feeling all the time? How can He bear to see sickness, congenital defects, tragedy, starvation, death, and all the pain that goes with those things? How can He stand the hatred that He sees between people and the harm they do to one another? Terrorists kidnapping and cutting off the heads of their victims, or blowing themselves up along with as many other people as possible; armed civilians going into schools with guns and shooting children and their teachers; little girls stolen from their parents and turned into prostitutes; drug cartel wars with prolific and gruesome violence; the horror of war and of genocide. If God is good and loving, how can he possibly endure the pain of His created world? If the completion of the "project" involves such deep and endless pain, would He not be more benevolent if He were simply to cancel the whole thing?

You will remember well Boxing Day, 2004. A 9.0 magnitude earthquake in the Indian ocean, blasting a tsunami towards South East Asia; 250,000 people were killed in one day. Where was the sovereign, benevolent God that day? One year later, hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and 1,800 people died in a single day and 700 more have never been found. Where was God that day? In 2010 an earthquake struck Haiti leaving 230,000 people dead, 300,000 wounded, 1,500,000 homeless; and all this in a country where there was precious little medical support, and nowhere near enough food and water to support the survivors. Wow! Where was God that day? A typhoon of unprecedented proportion swept into the Philippines in 2013; 6,000 people died within a matter of a day or two, and ultimately some 6,000,000

people lost their homes. These are only a few of the catastrophes of nature in recent years.

Human society itself produces unimaginable numbers of casualties. If we just look at very recent situations, the drug wars in South and Central America have produced well over 100,000 executions in the past decade. It is estimated that the war in Iraq left about 133,000 dead; in Afghanistan, 21,000 dead among civilians alone. In Syria's current civil war, by 2015 about 191,000 people had been killed, 2,000,000 had to run and leave their homes behind. At the hands of the Boko Haram, 2,000 people were killed in Nigeria on a single day in early 2015. If we add disease to this sampling of human suffering, AIDS has killed over 36,000,000 people globally; Ebola recently has taken 8,600; in 2020 the coronavirus and COVID-19 brought death internationally at astounding rates.

These statistics help paint a more global picture, but most readers will not need these reminders to be convinced that there is suffering in our world. Most of us have enough suffering right in our personal lives to prove the point. Divorce. Suicide. Depression. Bullying. Unemployment. Sickness. Disappointment. Violence. Sexual abuse. Betrayal. Tragedy. Bereavement. Failure. Life is not pretty.

If this were not enough, when we venture into the book of *Revelation*, we discover that there are much worse things to come. According to this book, if we are going to hear it, the truly hard days for man and animals on earth are before us, not behind us. Ugly, cancerous sores boiling up on billions of people at the same time. So much bloodshed that the image used is that of blood flowing five feet deep for 200 miles, a whole third of the earth's population being killed in a single outbreak of war. Terrible famine, but at the same time, ostentatious wealth, turning human society into a powder keg as the tension between the "haves" and the "have nots" increases dramatically. This followed by global economic collapse.

How do we reconcile such suffering with a God who is sovereign yet good? It would be simpler to reject the message of *Revelation* than to deal with this problem which it creates. However, should we do so we would be solving nothing, any more

than that a threat is eliminated by the proverbial ostrich burying its head in the sand. God DOES exist whether we believe or not; and He is who He is whether we like it or not. The plan He has revealed in the book of *Revelation* IS going to happen. Our views and beliefs and preferences do not change one thing.

I can conceive of no satisfying answer to this problem. I am forced into the humbling position of not being God, nor being like Him, nor understanding Him. It is especially in this area of suffering, the cost of God's "project," that I find Him to be so far, far different from me. Somehow, He can stand to bear the suffering of the whole world on His shoulders, and not flee from it or cancel His plans.

Should we therefore run from Him, or run to Him? John, in the gospel which he wrote, records a conversation that involved the well known apostle Peter. Jesus asked Peter if he was going to leave because things were getting too tough. Peter's answer was not particularly noble, but it was the only answer that could be given: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."²⁴ What option do we have? The book of *Revelation* leads us to the only hope for eternal rescue, and it comes from God Himself. He has the words of life, the plan for mankind's rescue. Whether or not we can understand Him and His ways, the only safe response is to run to Him for rescue. When we cannot see, we can still choose to trust.

I realize that I have not even attempted an answer to this question of suffering.²⁵ Instead I am trying to offer a strategy of how to live with it. In this vein, I would like to offer one more observation. The cost of God's "project" found its apex with the Son of God Himself, who entered into His own creation and died a horrible death on a cross, surrounded by people mocking and spitting at Him.²⁶ What would it have been like for the Creator God, unbounded, eternal, perfect, infinitely wise and knowing, powerful enough to create a universe - to be incarcerated in a

²⁴ *John* 6:68

²⁵ I can do no better than to recommend to the reader a little book published in 1940 by C.S. Lewis, [The Problem of Pain](#). Lewis does not directly attempt to answer the question either, but he at least deals honestly and profoundly with it.

²⁶ Our next chapter, *Worthy is the Lamb that was Slain*, will discuss His role in more detail.

human body, and then be crucified in that body? What unspeakable sacrifice is that! His entry into human form was permanent, it was not just a temporary situation for His 30 year life on earth. Jesus will never leave that human body, He was *given* to the human race, He became one of us. Jesus, the Creator God, was willing to become part of the “mining” process of God’s search for gold, willing for whatever suffering it would involve, including incarnation and crucifixion.

Someone asked me recently if I had watched *The Passion of the Christ*, and I had to admit that, no, I did not do so. Not because I don't believe the story but because I do believe it. I believe how much Jesus suffered, I just cannot bear to watch it. Nevertheless, I rejoice in it every day, because as I participate in the sufferings of humanity in my own life, and as I see suffering in the world around me, I am comforted in the fact that pain, however necessary from God’s point of view for the completion of His “project,” is not an experience of God up in heaven saying, “It is necessary for you to go through that down there.” No, it is the Creator God, Jesus, beside me saying, “I know what it feels like. I've gone through it; actually, I've had worse than you.” Somehow, if pain is included in what it takes for the “project” to be completed, at least the suffering of Jesus, the Creator Himself, gives us hope and courage to face it.

There remains now one more name that must be factored in if we are to form an adequate perspective of *Revelation’s* view from God’s throne.

**“THE LORD, HOLY AND TRUE,” REVELATION 6:10
A GOD OF ABSOLUTE PERFECTION**

This description of God, “holy and true,” means that He has absolutely no sin, either in thought, attitude or deed. He has never sinned and never will. He is absolutely perfect. Furthermore, He is true. Not only will He never lie, He CANNOT lie. He is true, He dwells in truth, and when He communicates, He communicates only truth. This is what we “hear” from the book of *Revelation*. The question we must now address is how these attributes, “holy and true,” influence what God does.

Something that we will quickly discover about the book of *Revelation* is that one of its major themes is judgment. Throughout the book, waves of judgment are decreed from the throne of God in the process of the completion of His creation project.

Prophetic writings in the same Judeo-Christian tradition in which *Revelation* is written consistently tell human beings that they have no right to exercise personal judgment upon others; they are never to seek their own vengeance for wrongs they have experienced. "Vengeance is mine," is God's constant declaration.²⁷ There are probably several reasons for this, but the most obvious one is that every human being is guilty of sin. We have not all committed the same sins, and we recognize some sins as more heinous than others; nevertheless, we are all guilty of sin. Who would we be to judge others? Therefore we are to forgive others just as we ask God to forgive us. The obligation upon human beings is to forgive, not to avenge.

This does not mean, however, that sin ought not to be avenged and judged; righteousness actually demands it! God, "the Lord, holy and true," is the only one who can do so righteously. Vengeance is not wrong, but it belongs to Him. He is the Judge of all the earth. He would be failing Himself and His creation if He did not right all wrongs.

Think of little boys or girls who are abused for the gratification of adult sexual appetites. Do not their little lives cry out to God for justice? When a spouse is betrayed, does that betrayal not cry out for justice? When seniors are defrauded and neglected, must not God require accountability from those who have so treated them? What about the atrocities that take place in our world, like the holocaust and genocide and drug related violence and war crimes and terrorism? Does not the blood of victims cry out from the ground to Almighty God, "You must make this right!"?

People have lived by lying and cheating and bullying and lusting and hoarding wealth while others starve - does not the Judge of all the world have to right these wrongs? Murderers and

²⁷ The first time this declaration appears is in the Torah of Moses, *Deuteronomy* 32:35.

thugs and criminals, must they not be duly punished? If Almighty God is holy and true, must He not enact just judgment?

Listen to *Revelation* 6:9-10.

“And when He broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’”

Here is a picture from *Revelation* that shows us victims of murder, who, though dead from the point of view of earth, nevertheless gather before the throne of God and cry out to Him for justice. “How long before you make this right, O God!?” And sure enough, the cry is founded on God’s character as they address Him, “O Lord, holy and true.” “You are the one we are counting on, O God! You have got to do this!”

Probably we agree with this, that when sins are serious or when they hurt others significantly, they should be judged and made right. Murder should be avenged. The perplexity is, as we will discover in *Revelation*, that *all* of humanity is going to face judgment; even people who are not murderers, people who pride themselves in living quite decent lives. Is it right for such people to be judged?

Why do we find God so intent on punishing even little sins? Why couldn't He just forgive and overlook most sins, and perhaps only punish the sins that are the most harmful? Why does He judge the world and add to its suffering in such dramatic ways as we see in *Revelation*? Couldn't there be a more gentle balance between God’s mercy and His judgment? Other characteristics of God that we find in *Revelation*, such as “good,” “kind,” and “merciful” seem to take a back seat, as it were. If God is good, then why is He so insistent on judgment?

Let us pause on that for a moment. Could God be good if He were not holy? We probably want a God who is good, but we may not be so comfortable knowing that He is holy; for because He is

holy, He cannot tolerate sin and therefore is going to enact judgment. But could God be good if He were not holy?

Let's say that God was not holy and true, and that the possibility existed that He would tell lies when that was convenient for Him. Would that be good? Actually, no, it would be terrible, for if you never knew whether or not He was communicating truth, you would lose the possibility of trusting Him; He just might mislead you! Lying is what Satan did in the original paradise that God created, and we have paid for it ever since. What help is it to you if God is good but in fact you can't trust Him?

What if God were self-centered, if everything were about Him? Supposing He didn't really care for us because He only cared for Himself; would that kind of a God be good? Would we be able to expect anything good from Him if everything He did were first and foremost for Himself?

And what if God were immoral? What if He made male and female so He could be either some kind of a lustful voyeur, or be like the Greek gods who would come down and rape beautiful women? Would God be good if He were immoral like we are?

The only way that you can have a good God is if He is a holy God. You can't have one without the other, there is no goodness without holiness. That is exactly why Jesus, when He was on earth, said, "No one is good except God alone."²⁸ What He meant was, you have to be holy to be good and there is no human being who is holy. Only God is holy, and only God is good. Of course I realize that this conclusion offends all our sensibilities, and we want to scream back, "That is not true! There are good people, and I may even be one of them!" However, we are not talking about our sensibilities. We are talking about what the book of *Revelation* says, and it makes it clear that God is not like us.

God cannot just wink at evil, pretend it didn't happen, or just let it go, for He is absolutely holy and true. As Sovereign Lord, He assumes full and ultimate responsibility for all that exists, and if He is going to bring human history to its proper end and finish His

²⁸ This statement of Jesus is found recorded in one of the New Testament gospels, *Mark* 10:18.

“project,” then He must also deal adequately with evil. In His holiness, He must enact perfect justice and He must eradicate sin.

God does not see sin as we see it. The problem He sees is not just little sins or big sins; the problem He sees is with the heart that produces those sins. A heart that can produce *any* sin, big or little, is a heart that has been “infected” with sin, and as such has the potential for all sins, big or little. The consistent testimony of *Revelation* is that humans will be judged for their actual sins, not their potential for sin; nevertheless, it is also clear that no one with the sin infection, no one who has the potential for sin, is a candidate for the new heaven and earth to come. Those who are rescued are not rescued just from their sins and ensuing judgment; they are rescued from themselves! When God’s project is finished, there will be no more sin or potential for sin.

Here are a couple of illustrations that might help. On July 26, 2013, in a routine examination of squirrels in Southern California, one at a certain campground was discovered with antibodies of the bubonic plague. It was not even the plague itself, just a few antibodies, and just in one squirrel; why would anybody worry about it? Yet immediately the campground was evacuated and closed. Word spread like wildfire. The BBC covered the story that very night - because a single squirrel in Southern California had a few antibodies! What? “Who cares!” Of course you know, don’t you. Where there are antibodies, there has been the plague! That means that squirrels in that area are carrying fleas that have picked up and are circulating the plague. The plague is back! (Really, it had never left, and it remains a constant threat. Thus the routine checking of squirrels.) The point is, a few tiny proteins are enough to notify the world that a terrible potential has resurfaced. Just as a few tiny sins, in God’s all seeing eyes, are a clear proof that the deadly sin disease is present.

Suppose that you have had cancer, but the medical interventions available have successfully eradicated it from your body; the oncology report year after year confirms that you are “clean.” One year, the oncologist calls you in and informs you that they have discovered in your blood “a few cancerous cells.” What will you want to hear next? “Don’t worry about it, it’s just a few cancerous cells. Come back next year and we’ll check again.”

Really? Don't worry about it? If there are a few cancerous cells appearing, does not that mean there is something very much to worry about? If there are a few cancerous cells, somewhere there is cancer giving birth to those cells. Again, just as a few tiny sins are proof that the sin disease is present. That is why *Revelation* makes clear that human beings cannot rescue themselves. The sin disease cannot be extricated out of our hearts, regardless of how "good" we are or how "little" are our particular failings.

This is why God's intolerance for sin, even "little" ones, is so unequivocal. If there is to be a new start, a new heaven and a new earth, there cannot be so much as one single sin "cell" present! One "little" sin in the primeval garden of Eden gave birth to the whole of humanity's evils. Has God taken mankind through this whole torturous journey only to repeat the same journey all over again? No! Sin must be dealt with. It must be eradicated. That is why the book of *Revelation* carries in balance these two aspects of the character of God: He is holy and must judge sin, but He is loving and will show goodness and mercy to anyone willing to receive it. Judgment, goodness, and mercy. These are not conflicting, but complementary values.

The matter is made all the more hazardous by the fact that the concept of sin and morality is a moving target in popular culture. Things that used to be regarded by society in general as immoral are now finding mainstream acceptance. This shift in turn makes "little" sins look all the smaller, all the less significant. Really, almost everything is OK today. Why would anyone fear judgment?

This is because we have convinced ourselves that there is no God "holy and true." Instead, God is now whomever we prefer Him to be. We have extricated ourselves from past inhibitions and are now accountable to no one. We create our own God, write our own rules, and we face no repercussions. The proof of this is all around us: building our world the way we want it has resulted in prosperity, pleasure, and freedom. God, if He exists, has transformed right along with us. We do not accept that there is judgment to come.

When I was in high school, some boys in our class were on the school rowing team. In one race something went drastically

wrong, and one of the young rowers apparently shouted out terrible blasphemy against God. The story was reported to our class by one of the other rowers who laughed and said, "I thought lightning was going to come down from heaven and strike him dead." The class joined in the laughter.

What they did not realize was that the lightning bolt actually was and remains very poised to strike, ready to go. God far prefers mercy over judgment, so He chose to exercise patience and to give the boy time to turn and ask for forgiveness; failing that, judgment is coming. The mistake my fellow grade twelve students made (the same mistake that popular culture continues to make) is that because judgment did not happen immediately, it is not going to happen at all.

This mistake is a terrible one. We change the moral rules and conclude that God has changed with us, that He doesn't mind, doesn't even seem to notice. We have convinced ourselves that as long as our failures do not include murder or bank robbery, all will be well for us. The book of *Revelation* stands firmly in opposition and foresees a time when every human being will stand before the judgment seat of the holy and true God and be judged, "every one of them, according to their deeds." [20:13] Humanity is hastening towards judgment. As difficult as it is to read it and hear it, "the Lord, holy and true" is preparing to do what He alone must do. He is the Judge of all the earth. He would be failing Himself and His creation if He did not do so.

A sobering note is struck in *Revelation* 15:8 as it introduces the time when God's judgment is about to begin:

"The temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power, and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished."

If we believe in God at all, we might think of Him as our friend, even our buddy; but no one is God's buddy on the day of His wrath. No one ventures into the heavenly temple that day, not even the holy angels who otherwise dwell in God's presence. And on earth, as *Revelation* 6:15-17 describes,

“...the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man, hid themselves in the caves and among rocks, and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of Their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’”

At the time of judgment by this holy and true God, no one is mocking Him anymore. His patience now done, instead of the time of mercy it is the time of wrath. Judgment is set into motion, and on this day, no one in heaven or on earth dares venture into His presence to share the moment with Him.

* * * * *

The book of *Revelation* provides a necessary and fitting conclusion to the human story. To appreciate it adequately, it must be viewed from the perspective of the throne of God. For it is His “project” that is about to be completed, and for that to happen He has to deal with all of the strands of human existence, good and evil. Ultimately, *Revelation* is not about end time events, nor about the end of the world itself. It is about a sovereign, holy God acting in complete character with Himself, righting all wrongs, mining for gold, finishing His “project,” preparing a fitting Bride for His Son.

When you hear or read the book of *Revelation*, don't read it to satisfy your curiosity; no, read it or hear it to meet your God. This is He, from whom, through whom, for whom, and to whom are all things. He invites everyone who is willing to become part of the gold for which He is seeking, a people who are forgiven and transformed into the holiness and goodness of His Son, Jesus, our Creator. For those who opt out there will be no escape. Judgment is soon to be released upon the earth, with eternal judgment to follow.

It is from this perspective, the “view from the throne,” that we will continue our journey of reading and hearing the book of *Revelation*.

CHAPTER 3

“WORTHY IS THE LAMB THAT WAS SLAIN”

One of the privileges that I had as a Pastor was to perform weddings. Up until the wedding, I spent time with the couple both in pre-marital counseling and in planning with them the details of the ceremony. While both contributed to the plans, often it was the bride who had the most to say about the details of the wedding, and much of the time we spent was focused on her and her wishes.

On the wedding day itself, however, I was not involved at all with the bride and the preparations and management of her day; in fact, I didn't even see her until she arrived for the ceremony. Instead - and this was one of the pleasures of the wedding day for me - I enjoyed time alone with the groom. Usually I arranged to meet him at the venue about an hour before the wedding. My role at that time was to try to keep him calm, and then help him review his responsibilities for the ceremony, be sure that everything was ready, that nothing had been forgotten, and that he was in a place of peace for the arrival of his bride.

Due to the convenience of cell phones, I usually had a pretty good idea where the bride was and her estimated time of arrival. When I knew that she was within about ten minutes of the venue, I took the groom, along with his best man, and seated them in a place where the bride could not be seen. When the bridal party had arrived and made final preparations, I led the groom to the altar and stood beside him as we received the wedding processional. As beautiful as that always was, the moment of all moments was when the bride herself stepped into view at the entrance. The assembly rose to their feet, all eyes upon her; but her eyes had already found the gaze of the groom as he finally beheld her, his bride. That was a very, very precious moment that I got to share with the groom.

In the preceding chapter we identified God's purpose for His creation "project" to be the perfecting of a Bride. In the next

chapter, we will explore the messages to the seven churches of *Revelation* 2-3 and discover that this is where the Bride first comes into focus; we will observe some of the preparations necessary for her to make herself ready. Before we get there, however, it is appropriate for us to spend a moment with the Groom, the one for whom God is preparing the Bride. If this one Person has secured such favour from Almighty God that all things have been done for Him, that the whole of the universe, earth, and journey of humanity has been to create a suitable, eternal companion for Him; if the book of *Revelation* is a description of the “project” of God, and the “project” once perfected is all for this One; then we will never be *hearing the book of Revelation* if we do not know who He is and why He is so special. How could anyone be “worthy” of a project of such cost, and of such grandeur?

Grandeur? Yes! In *Revelation* 19:6-7 an unprecedented celebration begins:

“I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His Bride has made herself ready.’”

All of heaven and earth have gathered as if the invited guests, and they cry out, “Hallelujah! Praise God! The wedding has finally come! The Bride is ready!” The trajectory of the book of *Revelation* has brought all things to culminate in this wedding, a wedding for which only the cosmos itself can provide an adequate venue. Who could be worthy of this?

And cost? Yes! The groaning and suffering of all creation, of the human experience in general, and of Jesus Himself, has all been for this. More particularly, the sufferings of the Bride herself have been for this. From the very first century on, faithful followers of Jesus have chosen to deny themselves and pay any price, including persecution and death, rather than be found unfaithful to their Groom. They have become pure gold. As the

book of *Revelation* unfolds, their number will increase dramatically, as will the intensity of the suffering, to such an extent that it is said, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” [14:13] When those who die are the “blessed” ones, circumstances on earth must be becoming unendurable.

Who is worthy of millions and millions of people saying, “I am ready to die for You. I don’t care what it costs me, take my life, take everything, I belong to You.” Who is worthy of such loyalty and sacrifice?

That is the exact question posed by the angel in John’s vision of *Revelation* 5:2-3:

“Who is worthy to open the book²⁹ and to break its seals?
And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth
was able to open the book or to look into it.”

Think of all the great kings and rulers of the earth, Pharaoh Ramesses II, Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Tang Taizong, Genghis Khan, Abraham Lincoln, etc.; no one of any time or from any nation is found worthy. What about the great religious leaders of the world and all the influence that they have wielded and all their millions of followers - Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed, Zoroaster, Confucius, Sai Baba, John the Baptist, the Virgin Mary, etc. - is any of them worthy of this great Bride which God is creating? Not one.

There have been musicians that have powerfully impacted human society like Johann Sebastian Bach, and the Beatles; actors who have become almost legendary like Marlon Brando and Katharine Hepburn; persons of such renown that their names are household words, people like Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Princess Diana, Martin Luther King, etc.; there have been the fabulously wealthy like Bill Gates or Warren Buffett. But neither power nor wealth nor influence nor giftedness nor popularity nor ingenuity has produced salvation for the human race. There is not one person anywhere from the past, the present, or the future

²⁹ We will discuss what is symbolized by “the book” and its seals as we continue in this chapter. Whoever opens the book releases the judgments of God upon the world and inherits the finished product of His creation plan.

who is worthy, or has done anything worthy of being the recipient of God's great "project."

No one? All this plan that God has had in mind, the universe and the earth and the human journey, is all for nothing because nobody can open this book and release it into its perfect completion? Is no one worthy of humanity's eternal love, worship, devotion, and self-sacrifice?

At this point in the vision there is such a sense of loss that John bursts into tears, crushed by disappointment; the journey has hit a wall. But someone intervenes and says, "Stop weeping. Behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book and its seven seals." [5:5]

John regains his composure and looks to see this Lion, king of the beasts, a symbol of royalty; but he doesn't see a lion, he sees a Lamb. Suddenly all eyes are on the Lamb. It might have been difficult to process the sight, a Lamb with seven horns (a picture of infinite strength,) and seven eyes (representing the omniscient and infinite Spirit of God); but as powerful and knowing as this Lamb is, He has been slain, and it is this aspect of the vision that triggers a song of heavenly worship: "You are worthy to take the book, and to break its seals; for You were slain and You purchased for God, with Your blood, people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." [5:9] Why was He alone worthy? What is it that set the Lamb of God apart from every other person or entity whoever lived or ever will? Why is He alone able to open the book and to look into it?

As we move towards answering these questions and go further along in our journey of hearing the book of *Revelation*, it is important to prepare ourselves for the character of what is coming. We have already described it above, but now must articulate it explicitly: the message of *Revelation* is a very narrow message.³⁰ While the book is global in its outlook, that is, its message is open to every single human being who has lived or who will live; nevertheless, its solution to mankind's dilemmas

³⁰ Jesus Himself, much earlier, warned His would-be followers that they would find this to be the case: "For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it." *Matthew* 7:14

and its promise of life and hope is provided in one and only one Person, the “Lamb that was slain.”

The message is not at all “politically correct,” it is “intolerant” as far as religion goes. One’s natural inclinations as an author would be to soften such a message and try to make it more palatable for a wider audience; but to do that would be to fail to “read” the book of *Revelation*. From the outset, the purpose of my work is that as many people as possible would *hear* the book of *Revelation* and thereby at least have a chance to evaluate and the opportunity to choose the one way of rescue that God Himself has provided.

We must go on to hear why *Revelation* holds such a narrow view, why the Lamb was the only one found worthy to receive God’s endorsement.

WORTHY BECAUSE OF WHO HE IS

We are introduced to this Lamb for the first time in *Revelation* 5, but it does not take us long to determine that this symbol of a Lamb represents God the Creator, Jesus Christ. The Lamb is identified as the “Lord of lords and King of kings” in *Revelation* 17:14, and this “King of kings and Lord of lords” is the one who returns from heaven on the white horse in *Revelation* 19:11-16: Jesus Christ.

We also observed earlier that in *Revelation* 2:18, the Creator God is identified as the “Son of God.” He is an equal member of the mysterious divine “Trinity.” Though He came to earth as a human, He was not just a great teacher or philosopher or religious leader, He was and is the Son of God. This alone sets Jesus, the Creator of the cosmos, apart from all others. No other name comes even close to being worthy to release the final plan of God for humanity and to inherit the finished product of all that God is doing. The rightful heir to the Father’s business is His Son.

Revelation does not just leave it there with a simple identification of who the Lamb is. It greatly enriches our appreciation of His special worthiness by disclosing intimate interactions between the Father and His Son. One such

interaction occurs already in the first sentence of the whole book, and deserves our careful attention.

The traditional title of the book, as found in the King James translation of the Bible, is *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine*. However, that is not the title that the book takes for itself. The first five words of the text give us the title, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. You wouldn't think that the little word "of" has much importance, but in this case, its importance is huge. When the text says that it is "the Revelation of Jesus Christ," there are a few possible interpretations with very different meanings.

It could mean that Jesus Christ is the author of the book. For example, we could be studying a play that is "a work of Shakespeare, the great 16th century English dramatist." By acknowledging that it is the work of Shakespeare, we are affirming that Shakespeare was the author. It is a play that he wrote, it is his work. When the text of our book says that it is "the Revelation of Jesus Christ," it could mean that Jesus wrote it. Some people take this view, but it is problematic.

As we continue in *Revelation* 1:1, we read that this is the revelation "which God gave Him." It is hard to see how Jesus could have been the author if God gave it to Him. This seems to be confirmed in chapter 5:1 where we find the scroll which contains the content of the revelation sealed up and in the right hand of God the Father. There is a search for someone worthy to receive it and open it; but it looks like God the Father is the author and the owner; it belongs to Him.

Another interpretative possibility is that the book is the revelation "of Jesus Christ" in the sense that it is a book *about* Him, meaning something like, "Prophecy about how Jesus Christ will be revealed." This interpretation is an attractive option because in the book of *Revelation* the "revealing" of Jesus is clearly described. Already in *Revelation* 1:7 it declares, "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and *every eye will see Him*, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him." That revealing of Him is described in more detail later. [19:11-16] The unfolding of the plot of *Revelation* leads to the revealing of Jesus, a critically important factor in the completion of God's "project." For by design, from the time of His birth even

to now, the identity of Jesus has not been obvious. He has not been openly revealed as divine and as the Son of God; He is easily viewed simply as an historical, or less than historic, figure.

The book of *Revelation* assures us that this will change. At the appropriate time, Jesus will come again and “every eye will see Him.” Everyone will know, even those who crucified Him will suddenly recognize that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The book of *Revelation* definitely includes the revealing of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, as critical as the unveiling of Jesus is to the plot of *Revelation*, it is not all that is contained in the book. There are many, many more topics treated in it. We already mentioned the several strands of the creation story that need to be brought to their destined conclusion before God’s “project” is complete. The book reveals what is to be the destiny of human beings as individuals, and the destiny of the human race as a whole. It describes what is going to happen to Satan, the great deceiver; what is going to happen to the church; what will be the special plight of people who go through the seven years of the tribulation, both with respect to the first and to the second half. The book reveals what is to be the final eternal state of creation, the new heaven and the new earth. *Revelation* provides the whole end of the story. It is not just about revealing Jesus, even if that is central to its outcome. So, I don’t think when it says, “the Revelation of Jesus Christ,” it means only the revealing of who Jesus is. It includes that, but it is much more than that.

We are left with one more option to consider, possession. The little preposition “of” can also indicate ownership. If I were to tell you that I spent many of the Sundays of my life at 1 McCowan Road in Toronto, at the property of Joy City Church, you would know exactly what I mean. That’s where our church family met to worship, and our legal corporation, Joy City Church, owned the property. This is quite a regular and normal use of the preposition “of.”

The interpretation in this case is that the title, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ,” means that this is the revelation that belongs to Jesus Christ. This is *His* book; the unfolding of this whole plan of God *belongs to Jesus*. I have become convinced this is the best way to interpret the book’s title.

The very wording of *Revelation* 1:1 suggests this interpretation, and shows us a very special, intimate interaction between the Father and the Son: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, *which God gave Him....*” This wording suggests that the revelation first belonged to God, and He then gave it to His Son. This is the natural way to take the words, and it is corroborated perfectly by the vision of chapter 5. There we see the scroll that contains the contents of *Revelation* from chapter 6 on, and it is in the right hand of God who is sitting on the throne. The scroll is His to do with it what He wishes, and He releases it into the hands of the only one worthy to receive it, His Son, Jesus. It is quite astounding to picture Someone walking up to Almighty God, reaching to take this book out of His hand, and Him gladly releasing it.

A little more reading and a little more grammatical examination serves to enhance this picture even more. *Revelation* 1:1 actually goes on to tell us *explicitly* what the revelation is about. It reads like this: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place.”

Bear with me, we need to follow some grammatical rules here. Slightly obscured in this sentence is the relationship of the last clause, “the things which must shortly take place,” with the title, “the Revelation of Jesus Christ.” To see the grammatical relationship more clearly, we can remove the intermediate clause, and then the sentence reads like this: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, ...the things which must shortly take place.”

In grammatical terms, we have just stumbled upon an “appositive.” An appositive is a noun (a person, place, or thing) that follows another noun, not to indicate an additional thing, but rather to provide a further description of the first thing. Let me illustrate.

When I mentioned Shakespeare above, I deliberately described him as “Shakespeare, the great 16th century English dramatist.” There are two nouns in this phrase; the first is “Shakespeare,” and the second is, “the great 16th century English dramatist.” Now while these are two different nouns, they are not describing two different people, they are both describing the same person. The first noun is simply his name; the second noun (actually, a

noun phrase) is further describing who this Shakespeare is. The second noun is an “appositive” of the first noun.

In the case of our sentence in *Revelation* 1:1, the first noun is the word “Revelation,” ie., “The Revelation of Jesus Christ...” The second noun is the noun phrase, “...the things which must shortly take place,” and it is an appositive of the first; it further describes the first. This means that the text itself is telling us exactly what the “Revelation” is. It is telling us that the “Revelation” IS “the things which must shortly take place” (just as “Shakespeare” IS “the great 16th century English dramatist.”) So by its very own admission, the “Revelation” is NOT just the revealing of Jesus. The “Revelation” is “the things that are going to take place.” It is a revealing of what is about to happen in heaven, on earth, and throughout the human race and human society. The transfer of the scroll in chapter 5 confirms that it was the revelation of the Father, handed over to the Son, and it now belongs to the Son. As the Son starts to break the seals, He releases and sets into motion the *denouement* of God’s creation “project.” What God has done is that He has taken this great project of creation and humanity, He has taken the title deed and the unfolding of the story, and put it in the hands of His Son, who as a Son is the rightful heir. Jesus now OWNS the unfolding of creation and human history, the Father has given it to Him.

Who else could be worthy of such a bequest! The Son of God is the rightful one, and the *only* one who is worthy to inherit all that the Father has made. He is the one whom the Father loves and trusts, and into His hands He commits the completion of the creation project. How fitting that our Creator God, Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is also entrusted with completing the Creation that He began.

Furthermore, God gave it to Him “to show to His bond-servants the things which must shortly take place.” God, in His love for those who love and follow His Son, has willed that they also should be aware of what is to come. Through the book we then see Jesus, in accordance with the Father’s will, passing on to His followers everything He hears. That is *exactly* what *Revelation* is. A message that Jesus received from His Father and now

communicates to His followers (and would-be followers) so they will know what is coming and can be prepared for it.

God's special love for His Son finds its perfect joy in the Son's complete submission to His plan. It was God's plan that the Son would step out of the tranquility of heaven and enter into the human experience. It was God's plan that the Son would become the Lamb slain for the rescue of humanity.

Jesus accepted this appointment in glad obedience, as demonstrated by one of His favorite descriptions of Himself, the "Son of Man." He was always the Son of God, but now He took upon Himself the further dimension of being a "Son of Man."

This act of obedience further qualified Him to be worthy of receiving the book of *Revelation* and all that it represents. In fact, being only the Son of God was not enough. He HAD to be the Son of Man also if He was going to provide rescue for the human race. At the beginning of creation, God assigned the first couple whom He had made to rule and care for earth and the life it sustained.³¹ Little did they realize that, as masters of creation, when they chose to obey the serpent, they were choosing surrender of themselves and of all under their rule to the authority of another. What power and control the devil thus gained over creation, so much so that *Revelation* pictures him as ruling the nations. In a very real sense, the devil became the illegitimate master of humanity and creation.

But at the very moment following that couple's monumental decision to yield to the serpent, God made a declaration to the serpent about the woman, that her "seed" would crush his head.³² To the woman it was a promise that her offspring would one day destroy the serpent and reverse the damage that he had done.

If, then, God's word revealed that the rescue of humanity must be accomplished by a human being, the offspring of the woman; and that this deliverer must also be able to crush the serpent with

³¹ This discussion is based on the early stories of creation found in the first book of the Bible, *Genesis*, chapters 1-3. If you are completely unfamiliar with the *Genesis* account, it would only take you a minute to read *Genesis* 3.1-15.

Chapter five of our book will focus on the serpent introduced in *Genesis* 3, who is also called the great dragon in *Revelation*.

³² *Genesis* 3:15

a fatal blow; the only one who could fulfill this role would be the one who was a Son of Man and the Son of God. He alone could reverse the damage done by Satan; He alone could save, preserve, and love humanity, and do so forever as a Groom for His Bride.

The scroll which the Lamb took from God's hand had another theme parallel to that of the rescue of humanity: the judgment of humanity. Who could be worthy to fulfill the role of a Judge upon the earth?

As the Lamb begins to open the seven seals in *Revelation 6*, the voice of one after another of four living creatures thunders, "Come!" Four mounted horsemen are successively released bringing about the first waves of judgment upon the world. We will look at the waves of judgment in more detail in chapter five, *Waves of Wrath*. For now it is enough to note that the outpouring of God's judgment as described throughout *Revelation* happens in increasingly severe measure until at one point an angelic being in heaven cries out "Woe! Woe! Woe! to those who dwell on the earth...." [8:13] When you hear of judgment that impacts life on earth, and then extends beyond that even to eternity, who is worthy to impose that kind of judgment? If by breaking the seven seals of the scroll [*Revelation 6*] one is releasing God's judgment upon the world and its inhabitants - who is worthy of that role? Who are you, who am I, to judge anybody else? Who on this earth would be good enough, right enough, trustworthy enough to judge anyone else? Who could be so free from his own sin that he could possibly judge another person for their sin?

Jesus Christ, the Lamb, is the one exception. We have already discussed the name ascribed to God in *Revelation 6:10*, "O Lord, holy and true."³³ The exact same description is found of Jesus in *Revelation 3:7*, "He who is holy, who is true." Jesus shares equal holiness with God His Father.

Furthermore, when Jesus became a human being, He stepped out of privileges of divinity and was exposed to every temptation on earth just as the rest of us, yet He never sinned. He could never be accused of passing judgment on others when He has not "walked in their shoes" Himself. On the contrary, He has indeed

³³ See chapter two, *The view from the throne*.

walked in their shoes, and yet maintained perfect holiness. No one can point a finger at Jesus and say, "You have no right to judge!" Actually, He is the only one that does have the right to judge.

If the scroll in the hand of Almighty God contained the outpouring of judgment upon humanity, of course no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was worthy to open it. Only the Lamb, the God / Man, Jesus Christ, holy and true, could do that.

WORTHY BECAUSE OF WHAT HE HAS DONE

The rescue that is going to take place during the great tribulation period to come is going to be massive, encompassing "a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation, and all tribes and peoples and tongues." [7:9] What we encounter in *Revelation* is hope and mercy, to the very end of the story. As we have said before, God would far rather forgive than judge. Who is it that is worthy to pour out this kind of salvation? Who is able to rescue such a kaleidoscope and multitude of people?

A surprising find in *Revelation* is that the symbol of Jesus as a Lamb is the primary way in which He is represented throughout the whole book after chapter 5. Thirty times in all He is referred to as the Lamb, and seven times reference is made to the fact that as a Lamb, He was slain. We have already noted the fact that the entire book of *Revelation* revolves around Jesus, the Creator God. Now we see that this centrality is intrinsically connected with the fact that He became the sacrificial Lamb who was slain for the rescue of humanity. There is no successful "gold mining," no redeemed people for God, without the unique, sacrificial role of the Lamb.

The word "purchased" is used in *Revelation* to describe that part of humanity which has been rescued by God. This word is rich in symbolism for the challenges God faced in rescuing humanity. It implies ownership, loss of ownership, and recovery of ownership, at a price. God had created humanity and it was His, but that ownership was usurped by another. There was a

purchase price that had to be paid for its return to its rightful Owner. So then, what was this price, and how was it paid?

Exactly in the context of *Revelation*, where the Lamb is identified as the one worthy to receive the scroll and break its seals, is the use of this word “purchased.”

“You are worthy to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood humanity from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” [5:9, author’s translation]

The Lamb is the Son of God, holy and true. He is no mere human being. He is unlike any other. He is perfect and He is God. When this One voluntarily surrendered Himself to be slain, His death, or in the words of *Revelation*, His “blood,” was enough to pay for all humanity and all their misdeeds. They had fallen into the hands of the great serpent, the devil; but the blood of the Lamb paid for their just release. The cost of sin is death, and the Lamb paid that cost on their behalf. Anyone who will accept this gift of redemption may now be rescued and returned to their rightful Owner. Jesus is worthy to be the rescuer of the world, and He is able to be its rescuer.

When we hear the book of *Revelation*, we discover that the story ends not with the end of the world, but with a new world and a new heaven, one without any sin or suffering. It is a place so beautiful and beyond description that gold and precious stones are just the building materials. Nobody, nobody needs to be left out. The book is written to tell us that this is what is ahead and that the road there is the Man named Jesus. No other name, no other person, no other plan will get anyone there. Only Jesus.

“Who is worthy...?” “...Worthy is the Lamb that was slain...!” It is true that our world doesn’t accept that Jesus Christ stands alone in this unique position. Instead, we have written our own religious “book” which teaches that every religious system ultimately heads in the same direction, and that ultimately, any road you take will lead you to a happy end.

As for God, He stands by His word as recorded in *Revelation*. There is only one in whom there is rescue for humanity; there is

only one worthy to inherit all things: Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain.

“Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen.” [1:8]

BRIDAL PREPARATIONS: “THE THINGS WHICH ARE”

If you are at all sentimental, you probably find a wedding to be a heart-warming event, especially if you know the bride and groom to be devoted to each other. For such a couple it will be one of the happiest days of their lives (in spite of the glitches.) The book of *Revelation* takes this exact highlight of life and uses it as a metaphor for what is to be the outcome of the human story. It is a metaphor, so we don't really know what the actual experience will be, but apparently the Creator gave to humanity the gift of marriage so that we could at least have a picture, a “feel,” for what is to come. A thundering voice from heaven will make the announcement: “The marriage of the Lamb has come and His Bride has made herself ready.” [19:7] There is every reason to expect an event of unspeakable joy. Somehow humanity and divinity will come together, join their hands and their lives, and walk as one into eternity, King and Queen, husband and wife.

Meanwhile, the wedding is still in the preparation stages, and although the book of *Revelation* says that “the time is near,” there is much to be done, the Bride has to make herself ready. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss these necessary preparations.

First, we need to make ourselves aware of a three stage development of the Bride. The first stage is that of the people of God who lived before the arrival of Jesus into the world. These folks did not much hear of the divine marriage to come, but they walked with God in faith. A man named Abraham became the founder of the faith known as Judaism, and according to the Bible, that faith that was ordained by God Himself, and formalized through Moses and the ten commandments. People of God before Abraham were non-Jewish, and after the time of Abraham, those of faith were primarily (but not exclusively) Jewish. All these make up the first stage of the Bride and have completed their

time of preparation. They provide an example of faith for all those to follow and in this way contribute to the further preparations of the Bride as they await her completion.³⁴

A second stage in the development of the Bride happens through the time of the church, the “church age,” when genuine followers of Jesus, the true New Testament saints,³⁵ do their part in preparing for the wedding to come. Jesus Himself laid the groundwork for the church during His earthly ministry, and then His apostles established it more formally after His death and resurrection. The result of their ministries has been the growth and survival of the church ever since.

This second stage of the development of the Bride lives on into the book of *Revelation*. The church is greeted in the first chapter, mentioned in the last chapter, and instructed directly in the second and third chapters. These second and third chapters we have already identified (see our chapter one above) as addressing “the things which are.” The church existed in John’s time, it continues to exist in our time, and will continue until sometime in the future. Suddenly a moment will come when, at least with respect to the book of *Revelation*, it is no longer there. After *Revelation 3*, the church is never again mentioned in the unfolding of the story. Somehow, it has disappeared from the scene, and the time of “*Bridal Preparations*,” at least for those of the church, is over.³⁶

After *Revelation 3* we still meet many saints, and it is there that we find the third stage in the development of the Bride,

³⁴ See *Hebrews 11* for a New Testament discussion about how the Old Testament saints provide an example of faith for New Testament saints.

³⁵ The term “saints” is used often in *Revelation* and has a unique meaning. It is a name granted to all true followers of Jesus, people who have come to Him and received from Him forgiveness and rescue. The forgiveness that comes from Jesus is complete, including all sins, past, present, and future. There is no sin and guilt left in a person’s life when they have been forgiven, therefore they are “saints” because they are sinless. Paradoxically, the “saints” still commit sins, but as true followers of Jesus, they confess their sins, and find themselves in a consistently renewed state of forgiveness. This is a different use of the word “saint” than has been used by the church when it canonizes certain deceased individuals as saints.

³⁶ To those who are familiar with the various systems of eschatology, it will now sound like this book adopts a traditional pre-millennial, pre-tribulation position. Just be aware that this is not exactly the case; the matter will be addressed very directly in chapter seven.

those who come to faith during the time of the great tribulation, who are not explicitly described as participating in “church” as we now know it, but who still live as “saints” and followers of Jesus, in dire circumstances. This last group of saints who lay down their lives in faithfulness to the Groom become the final stage in the development and preparation of the Bride.³⁷

We will discuss this third stage in the succeeding chapters of our book, but the present chapter addresses the second stage, the Bride during the church age. For this reason this chapter is entitled, *Bridal Preparations: “the things which are.”* It is based almost entirely on *Revelation 2-3*.

The church age is the age of grace. We live in the time of God’s patience and mercy. This is a privileged moment, the time when the church can get itself ready for the coming of Jesus and escape the judgment to come. Nor does Jesus leave it on its own, just to fend for itself as it were, through this time of preparation. Instead, He gives it a set of specific instructions which, if taken to heart, will ensure its readiness for His return. His desire is for the church to be completely successful in its preparations for Him.

The instructions in *Revelation 2-3* are set out as seven letters to seven churches, and there is no small debate among commentators about how to view and interpret these seven churches. Generally speaking, there are three categories of approach, corresponding roughly to the three overall interpretative approaches to the book of *Revelation*.

One approach could be described as “historical.” In this approach, *Revelation* is seen as an ancient letter written by the apostle John to seven local churches that existed in his time. These churches were experiencing the actual circumstances described in the seven letters, and were being given specific instructions to enable them to successfully follow Jesus in and through those circumstances. This approach does not see the book of *Revelation* as a book describing future events other than the return of Jesus. Therefore, the focus is exclusively one of

³⁷ Whether there may also be a fourth stage in the development of the Bride, something that arises in the context of the Millennium, is less clear. However we will address that possibility in chapter nine.

historical interest, providing us with an opportunity to observe what was happening in the first century in the province of Asia. Christians today may well benefit from the examples of the past, but the instructions of the letters are not directly applicable to any specific situation today.

Two problems with this approach are, first, that it would have been extremely relevant for the seven specific churches John was addressing in his time, but not very helpful to succeeding generations who know almost nothing of the details of these churches other than that of the first two, Ephesus, and to a lesser extent, Smyrna. A second problem is the very limited scope that is created for the book of *Revelation*, even in its own day, if it were addressed only to seven local churches in Asia.

A second approach could be described as symbolic. From this perspective, it is not necessary to find actual historical data behind the seven letters. The seven cities mentioned may well have existed; but that is not what matters. The letters are not intended as literal letters to specific, local churches in Asia in the first century. Rather, the church in every place and at every time could profitably read these letters and find principles of application for its various situations.

A third approach is futuristic or prophetic. This approach views the seven churches as prophetic pictures of the church age to come, so that Jesus was not just addressing specific churches at the historical moment of John's writing, but the church in its various circumstances during periods of time subsequent to that.

My personal journey of studying *Revelation* began some 40 years ago when I read a commentary by a man named H.A. Ironside, Pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. He proposed that a blending of the three approaches above was the wisest and most biblical way to interpret *Revelation 2-3*.³⁸ Now, after decades of reflection, reading, listening, teaching, and memorizing the text of *Revelation*, I am convinced that he was right, despite a lack of agreement among recent commentators about this.

³⁸ H.A. Ironside. Lectures on the Book of Revelation. New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1920

I think there can be no reason to doubt that the seven churches addressed by John were seven actual, historical churches in very real historical situations, that existed in John's time. The instructions given to them were appropriate and helpful. However, as I said above, other than the information found in the seven letters themselves, we know very little about these historical churches. Therefore we cannot find in this dimension alone much value from the letters.

As for a symbolic interpretation of the churches, we begin by asking, why *seven*? Why not one church? Or why not one hundred churches? Furthermore, John identifies them as churches in Asia (what would now be Turkey); why Asia? Are they the only churches that mattered? The church by the end of the first century had spread throughout the whole of the Mediterranean world and beyond; why limit this list to Asia, and to seven churches in Asia? We know there were others.

Well, the reason for seven churches is because seven is the number in the Bible that is symbolic for completeness. Jesus is basically saying that everything He has to say to His church He can say through these seven examples. Because the church is a global organism, it does not take on the exact same character in every location at every time; nor does the church face the same challenges in every location at every time. On the other hand, Jesus did not deal with His church as if every single local church in the world was unique and distinct from all others. No, there would be patterns in the way that local churches developed, and there would be similar types of challenges that various churches would face. He chose to organize what He sees in the church into seven distinct types, seven distinct circumstances. The fact that there are seven symbolizes a completeness of the instructions.

The point of this is that every local church in every place and at all times will find itself in one of these letters. Whether this happens because a local church is influenced by the predominate character in which the church at large exists in any given period of time; or whether it is experiencing a specific circumstance at a specific time; nevertheless every local church around the world at all times will find itself somewhere in these seven letters.

Churches will find necessary and invaluable instructions for them if they “have an ear to hear.”

With the passing of time, the futuristic / prophetic approach has turned out to provide another credible and impactful dimension of interpretation, one that helps us “hear” these letters more vividly. As we now look back on the various stages of the church, we see that the seven letters actually “fit” the situation of the church successively in each of those historical stages.³⁹

This approach is consistent with the observations we made in our first chapter about how biblical prophecy functions, namely, that it is fulfilled in complex rather than simple ways, and with an immediate, partial fulfilment followed by a more complete, ultimate fulfilment. If the letters were relevant to the seven churches of Asia in the first century, very possibly John, the author and the members of the churches would have thought those letters were simply for them and that was the end of it. But God’s prophetic word usually goes beyond the immediate; and so if it turns out that the messages had a much broader application as history unfolded, that would be consistent with how prophecy works. Even though the seven letters seem at first not to be prophetic - they are entitled, after all, “the things which are” - it turns out that in the providence of God “the things which are” actually existed for at least some 2,000 years. There is no problem with there being a dimension of immediate application as well as a fuller, more complete application as time goes on. This is how the book of *Revelation* functions.

If it has only been with the passing of time and by looking back over church history that this approach has come into view, one might ask, “What is the benefit of a prophetic word if no one knows that it applies until after it is over?” That is not really a problem. For if it is true that these seven letters also apply to the

³⁹ Admittedly, we are speaking of the historical stages of the church in the “Western” world. We cannot know why God ordained that the Christian church would exist down through history predominately in the West. And while even in this “Western” phenomenon of Christianity there was a division between the West and the East, resulting in an Eastern Orthodox as well as Roman Catholic church; nevertheless for some reason the major expansion of the church out of its Western locus occurred only in the last 300 years.

church at all times, in all locations, and in all circumstances, then whether one knows it is a special fulfillment or not is of little consequence. Rather, if what is found in God's word applies to my situation, I should obey it whether I know it was written specifically for me or not.

The approach I am going to take as we go through the seven letters will reflect these conclusions. I will not be trying to reconstruct the literal history of the seven churches when the truth is, we don't have adequate information to do so. Rather, I will be lining the letters up with the seven periods of church history with which they fit. As the meaning, relevance, and application of the letters are illuminated in this way, it will be all the easier to look and see where "my church," if I have one, belongs in the collection.

One final point calls for our attention before we start into the seven letters themselves. The seven letters all start and end in the same pattern: each letter is addressed to "the angel" of the respective church, and ends with the admonition, "He who has an ear, let him hear...."

Who is the angel of the church? Well, it could refer to the fact that spiritual forces, both good and bad, are involved with the church at all times. This would not be surprising, for *Revelation* talks about the war in heaven between, for example, Michael and his angels versus the dragon and his angels. [12:7-8] In this case it would mean that the letter is a disclosure of where the focus of the spiritual battle is for that church. However, invisible, spiritual battles in heaven do not seem to be the primary focus of the letters to the churches. They are, after all, letters to the churches, not to the heavenlies. Therefore another, and possibly better interpretation is that the "angel" of the church is its messenger, for "messenger" is the root meaning of the word "angel." In this case, it would be the pastor or leader of the church who is in view. Pastors and leaders of churches ought to be taking these letters to heart and determining where their church fits and what advice they should be heeding to be sure that their church "overcomes" the special challenges it faces.

Whatever "angel" means, the letters all make it clear that it is not just the angels or the pastors of the churches that are invited

to listen. It is anyone with “an ear to hear” that should be listening! While pastors and leaders are in the most strategic position to be able to guide their churches into God’s victory, no member of the church is limited by their pastor or leader as to what they are to hear and how they are to respond.

In fact, it seems to me that not only can every local church find itself somewhere in the seven letters, but I think every single church member can find himself or herself in these letters. In a given local church, especially today when denominations mean less and less and churches become eclectic gatherings of people from various backgrounds, there may be in any given local church individual church members who would fit several of the seven churches respectively. That invites all church congregants to ask themselves whether their situation before Jesus is that they have lost their first love (like the church of Ephesus), or that they are a sleeping Christian (like the church of Sardis), or that they are lukewarm and in love with money (like the church of Laodicea), or that they are being asked to suffer for Jesus (like the church of Smyrna), etc.

I invite every pastor and every church member to ask as we go through these letters, “Lord Jesus, what would You have to say to me? What do I / we need to do to be ready for the return of Jesus and be a prepared part of the Bride?” And as we go through the letters, I will be leaning heavily on the text of the letters themselves and allow them to lead us through “the things which are.”

I would also like to say a final word of introduction to any reader who is wrestling with the “narrowness” of the message of *Revelation* as they have found it so far, such as is discussed in chapter three; and who considers him or herself still to be an “outsider” at this point in time. You may be reading out of curiosity, or you may be evaluating what to think of it all. You will find this chapter also very narrow. There is really one and only one thread that passes through the seven letters: the church is called to an exclusive, devout allegiance to Jesus. Nothing short of that is acceptable, no cost is too great. That IS the message of the book of *Revelation*. It is a singular calling described elsewhere in the book of *Revelation* as “holding to the testimony of Jesus.”

Whether before or during the great tribulation, those whom God seeks are those who “hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

If you have turned away from the church because of inconsistencies or insincerities you have observed there, at least I hope that this chapter will help you realize that even Jesus himself recognizes problems in His church, and His effort through these letters is to help the church address them. On the other hand, I anticipate no little offense to be taken by church going people who will find in the discussions below what appears to be blunt, even unjust criticism. I invite you to study the text of *Revelation* and decide for yourself if I am being true to it in my reading. My purpose is not to give anyone a message from me, but to “read” the book of *Revelation* faithfully, so that churches and individual followers of Jesus might “hear” and “heed the things written in it,” and in so doing, prepare as a Bride for the coming of her Groom.

EPHESUS: THE MISTAKEN CHURCH [2:1-7]

We begin with chapter 2:1, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus....” I am calling the church at Ephesus the “mistaken church,” and as we read on we will discover what their mistake is. “The one who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this....” Now why would the Jesus introduce Himself like this? Well, He is saying that He is the Owner and Master of all the churches. All the pastors are in His hand; and He needs no invitation or permission to walk among the churches and observe what is happening. Whether anyone likes it or not, His word is the final word.

He starts by affirming His authority over this church, and then goes on to describe its mistake.

“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and

have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary." [2:2-3]

Wait a minute, what mistake? This is the church to whom He says that He knows how energetically it is working for Him. Not only that, it is persevering through hardship no matter what the cost, and watching out for imposters so as to protect the church from doctrinal error.

If there were ever a church that was determined to never be mistaken, to be sure that they were going to get things right, this is that church! This church takes pride in having accurate biblical knowledge and correct theology; it studies itinerate teachers and preachers (apostles), and calls it what it is when it discovers falsehood. It is going to serve God with all its heart, and be right about it!

A church like this can exist at any time in history, a church whose consuming passion is to work hard and be doctrinally sound. However, it is interesting to note that this is the only letter of the seven that refers to "apostles." This suggests that this letter was especially relevant during what is known as the "apostolic age." These were the New Testament churches that were started by or at least experienced the oversight of the 12 apostles, and which lasted into the succeeding generation that knew and remembered the apostles.⁴⁰ The book of *Revelation* may well have been written after most of the 12 apostles had already been martyred. If, at this time, the original apostles were largely unavailable, nevertheless, these churches would have known some of them personally.

Apparently there were also apostles other than the 12. The letter that we are looking at in *Revelation 2* does not fault people for being apostles, but for being *false* apostles. This was an age in which people recognized apostolic ministry, yet evaluated carefully what was genuine and what was not.

A church established by the 12 apostles, a church so intent on doing things right and being so correct, about what could they

⁴⁰ In the gospels, it is recorded that Jesus chose 12 of His followers to be His intimate, core group of disciples. These later became known as the 12 apostles, who were a specially recognized group of apostles within a larger number of apostles.

possibly be mistaken? "...I have this against you, that you have left your first love." [2:4] To paraphrase, "Remember what it was like at the beginning, how much you used to be in love with Me? I don't see that anymore." When the church started out, it was all about Jesus, but its heart imperceptively drifted away from Him, until now it is all about being right, and doing right things, and having right theology. It has forgotten who it was doing it all for!

Another New Testament book that seems to address the second generation of the apostolic church is *Hebrews*. This book was written to people who had a collective memory of the apostles, but who were now at a crossroads: would they really cling to Jesus, or would they drift away,⁴¹ or even fall away?⁴² We must realize that our hearts can slip away from a good or even great starting point. This is always the risk of second generation Christians: will they have the same passion as their parents had? In fact, it has been well said that there really are no "Christian grandchildren," there are only children, only first generation believers. If all we have is a heritage from our parents, but no reality of our own, then we have made a terrible mistake! The mistake may be cloaked by a wonderful structure of good works and good doctrine; but if the fire has gone out inside the structure, then it has lost its purpose.

Listen to what the Lord of the church says to this mistaken church, how serious an issue it is to Him. He, the one who holds the stars in His hand, who walks among the lampstands, the one who is Owner and Lord of the church and present to observe how the church is doing, says this:

"Remember therefore from where you are fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place - unless you repent." [2:5]

This is the church that has it all right except for one thing, it is no longer in love with Jesus; and what an assessment it receives from Him: "I'm going to stop it, I don't even want your church to

⁴¹ *Hebrews* 2:1

⁴² *Hebrews* 3:12

continue. I'm going to take your lampstand right out of its place because you have forgotten Me." Busy working. Busy knowing all that you should know. Busy proving the false doctrines of everyone else. Busy living a morally pure life: "Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."⁴³ It is doing all these good things, yet He is going to remove its lampstand!

Isn't that incredible? A church can be so right and yet be so badly wrong. Ephesus, the mistaken church. The church that has lost its love for Jesus. Whether it is the first century, apostolic church, or whether it is any church in any age, we should heed the wisdom of the ancient Proverb, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." We should be asking ourselves what is at the centre of our church life: being right, or being in love with Jesus?

"To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God." [2:7] Here is the promise to those who manage to move beyond the cloak of good church doctrine and structure, and find the far greater purpose of church membership. Such people are going to be given the food of true life that sustains their souls and connects them to life eternal. For this church, "*Bridal Preparations*" is all about falling back in love with the Groom.

I guess this is not surprising, for if we really are going to be right, we should start with the first and foremost commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength."⁴⁴

SMYRNA: THE SUFFERING CHURCH [2:8-11]

We move on now to the next church, the church of Smyrna. It is tempting to read meaning into the names of the churches, but in most cases we simply don't know certainly enough what the

⁴³ We don't really know who the Nicolaitans were but we do know that it is connected with some kind of immorality, and the Lord commends this church because they are determined to lead morally pure lives.

⁴⁴ Although this commandment was first pronounced in the Old Testament book of *Deuteronomy* [6:5], it was affirmed by Jesus, as recorded in the gospel of *Mark* [13:30].

name means or how that meaning might be related to its specific situation. However, in this case it is a different story, for the name Smyrna is in Greek the same word as for the perfume, “myrrh.” Myrrh is a costly fragrance that derives from a tree of the same name, used from early times in the Egyptian embalming of mummies, and by Hebrews in the entombment of their dead. The root meaning of the word is actually “bitter,” and this perfume is used (among other things) as an aid to dealing with the bitterness of death. Furthermore, it is by the constant wounding of the tree itself that the myrrh resin “bleeds” out of the sap wood and can be harvested. The harvested gum hardens and seals the myrrh within until it is crushed and the fragrance is released. Both the harvesting and the releasing process speak of fragrance arising out of wounding and bitterness.

Smyrna is the church that is facing just such bitterness: poverty, persecution, and martyrdom. It is a church being crushed by Satan; but that very crushing is creating a fragrance that is sweet and beautiful to their divine Groom who is intimately aware of such loyalty and self-sacrifice. He identifies Himself to them as “The first and the last.” [2:8] What encouragement for their critical hour! He reminds them that He is the sole reason that everything exists. He was there at the beginning and He will be there at the end. The persecutors on earth feel that they have had the final word, but the Lord Jesus wants his Bride to know that HE is the final word. Even for those from whom life is unjustly taken, He is right there to receive His own.

He receives them into life! He knows of what He speaks. He “was dead and has come to life.” [2:8] On the one hand, He knows what it is like to face death at an all too early age. On the other hand, He is a present, living testimony that death for His faithful ones is not the end but the door to life. “But you are rich!” [2:9] If they could just see things from His perspective, they would understand something of what a modern martyr had come to believe: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”⁴⁵ They were rich, and their riches were eternal.

⁴⁵ The famous quote of Jim Elliot who was killed along with four other missionaries by the Auca Indians in Ecuador, Jan. 8, 1956.

Be that as it may, this was a challenge almost beyond human capacity for this church of Smyrna, this suffering church. If I had a choice, this would not be the church that I would belong to, nor would this be the letter I would want to discover was written to me.

“I know your tribulation and your poverty.” [2:9] It is a church pressed on every side: beaten up and suffering, not able to find the refuge of a hiding place, nor the security of a livelihood; and all because it exists in a social environment where it is not wanted or welcomed inasmuch as it is devoted to Jesus. “And I know ...the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” [2:9] Often it is religious people, at times even so-called “Christian” people, who are the most determined to silence genuine followers of Jesus.

There appears to be no alternative or escape route for this church, for the letter goes on: “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.” [2:10] This is not a warning but a prediction. This IS going to happen. The only hope these believers have is this: “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” [2:10] That is a far cry from what it has been like to follow Jesus in my social environment in Canada, where a person can follow Jesus at any given level of commitment. For the saints of the church in Smyrna, there is no middle ground. The choice to follow Jesus will be a choice to be persecuted, imprisoned, and perhaps killed. The only alternative is, don’t follow Jesus.

According to the records of the early church fathers, a man named Polycarp presided as bishop over the church of Smyrna in the second century. Perhaps he was the “angel” to whom this letter was originally addressed? In any case, a writing entitled, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, included in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, describes how this man, who reportedly had known the apostle John personally, was martyred in 167 AD. He was one who died as a part of this suffering church, and as an example for them.

If the death of Polycarp was a beginning, it was only that. The second century evolved into a period of time characterized by

persecution and martyrdom, and by the work of “apologists” who vigorously defended the faith in face of this popular and official opposition. Despite persecution, the number of Christians was exploding throughout the Roman Empire, and as one of the apologists himself noted, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”⁴⁶ The persecution lasted until the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, when the newly converted Constantine⁴⁷ agreed with his co-emperor Licinius that Christians would from that time on be treated benevolently within the empire.

The stories of many such heroic followers of Jesus are recorded in the collections of the *Martyrologies of the Saints*; included are boys and girls, young and old women and men, people from every walk of life, who chose rather to die for Jesus than to deny His name or offer a sacrifice to an emperor. They took to heart the promises given in the letter to Smyrna and courageously laid down their lives; come what may, they were not going to be unfaithful to Jesus. As their Lord promised them, so they believed: “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Now I don’t know about you, but when I read the next five letters in *Revelation 2-3*, some of the rewards promised to “overcomers” seem more substantial or complete than the promise of life found here. The promise of life is included for the other churches, but with other things in addition. Not for this church; here it is just the promise of life. In fact, at the end of the letter, the promise is again repeated but in a negative framework: “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” [2:11]

I suppose it comes down to this. When you are facing the issue of life and death, the only thing that matters is life! If life is a given, then other things begin to matter; but if life is not a given, if you are facing the executor, what matters at that moment is this one thing: what is going to happen to me now if I die? The Groom, the Lord of the church does not complicate the matter

⁴⁶ This sentence is a popularized paraphrase of Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 50.13, “Semen est sanguis Christianorum.” Literal translation, “Blood is the seed of the Christians.”

⁴⁷ Though according to the church historian, Sozomen, Constantine did not receive baptism until the time of his death. *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.34.

but provides and confirms the one thing that is needed for that moment of decision: “Don’t worry! You are on the threshold of life!” After they pass through that door, then they will discover that they “are rich.” [2:9]

Furthermore, there was a truth in the ancient church that we have almost lost, but something we cannot continue to ignore if we are going to “hear” the book of *Revelation*. The early church believed that there was something called “hell,” and they were terrified about going there. We don’t believe it much anymore, and we are not terrified by it, because we have convinced ourselves that all roads lead to God; but our lack of belief or lack of fear does not mean that hell does not exist as a very real destiny. These people of Smyrna obviously took the words of Jesus literally, and seriously, and they did not want to be separated from God forever in a place like hell. It may not mean much to us in our culture, but when these dear saints of old heard the promise, “you will NOT be hurt by the second death (ie. the lake of fire),” that was enough! Better to lay down your earthly life in faithfulness than to suffer for eternity because of cowardliness. Thousands and thousands of Christians laid down their lives for Jesus. For them, in their circumstances, that was what becoming an “overcomer” meant. If necessary, die, in order to escape the judgment of hell, and to receive the crown of life. That was the second period of the church age.

However, the letter to Smyrna has relevance in other times as well, for in every age the church has had its martyrs. A study was conducted at Gordon Conwell Seminary to estimate as accurately as possible the number of Christian martyrs from the time of Jesus until the year 2000.⁴⁸ Their estimate is 69 million people; and that among pastors, an average of two out of every 100 have been martyred. The persecution of followers of Jesus continues into the present time. At the time of this writing, one of the images that haunts me is a picture from Syria of a long row of crosses with Christians affixed, at the hands of ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.) Christians have been martyred in

⁴⁸ World Christian Trends, AD 30-AD 2000. Interpreting the annual Christian megacensus. By David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, William Carey Library, 2001.

Central and South America, in the continent of Africa, in China, Iraq, Iran, India, Pakistan, etc. In different places at different times, pockets of the church of Jesus continue to face persecution and martyrdom. This letter is for them.

One very encouraging thing about the church of Smyrna is that Jesus has no word of rebuke or correction for it. I don't suppose that it was perfect any more than any other church is perfect. Apparently in the eyes of its Groom, it had enough to face, and what mattered was whether or not it would hold firmly to the testimony of His name. If it would do that, He would take care of the rest!

Perhaps there is someone reading these paragraphs and you too are being persecuted for your faithfulness to Jesus. Maybe nobody else really knows what you are going through; perhaps at home; at work; at school; in some social framework. Maybe you can't understand why for other Christians, everything seems to come easy; but for you, it is costing you everything to follow Jesus. You need to know that the Lord of the church is watching carefully, and He says to you, "Don't be afraid of how much you have to suffer for Me. God has a good plan for you, and you will not be hurt by judgment to come; you be faithful until the end and I will give you the crown of life."

The church of Smyrna: poor and crushed, yet so wonderfully rich because of their faithfulness to Jesus. For this church, "*Bridal Preparations*" is all about faithfulness to Jesus at any cost!

PERGAMUM: THE COMPROMISED CHURCH [2:12-17]

The third church is the church of Pergamum, and as you can see by the title, I am calling it the compromised church. It is remarkable how the description of this church creates such a perfect fit to the period of church history that followed that of the apologists and the persecuted church; though as in the case of all seven churches of *Revelation*, it can find relevance in any generation.

The address contains only a single attribute from the vision of the Lord of the church in *Revelation* 1: "The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this...." [2:12] A two-edged sword is

a symbol of the word of God, razor sharp and cutting in both directions. Why would Jesus introduce Himself to this church as the one who wields the sword of God's word? Well, if we are following the historical sequence, this church represents the period of time when the church was able to start developing its doctrines. Once persecution was displaced by peace, the church and its leaders were able to start focusing on matters other than physical survival, especially the development of orthodox theology. The Christian scriptures are not organized into a nice compendium of systematic theology, and it was left for the church to formulate and articulate its doctrine. The presence of heresy impelled this process at times with some urgency.

This created two issues with respect to the Christian scriptures. First, the development of theology can subtly turn the scriptures into a source of information rather than means of spiritual warfare. Not that the two cannot and should not go together, but the scripture is first and foremost "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword..."⁴⁹ If it becomes only a means to good theology, the result can be lifelessness. As Jesus begins this letter, He reminds His church that His word is a powerful weapon with which He does His work.

The second issue is with respect to how the church develops its theology. Will it be absolutely faithful to the scripture, or will it mix in ideas and thoughts from other sources? Jesus declares at the beginning of this letter that He is the source of the scripture and that He fully intends to use the scripture with its razor edged precision to deal with the development of His church.

Then the letter continues like this: "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is." [2:13] Now in Asia Minor where the seven churches originally existed, it is true that Pergamum functioned as the local centre of Roman government. When an emperor visited Asia, he would hold his residence at Pergamum. This status as the representative imperial city in Asia would have made the letter to Pergamum directly relevant at the time of

⁴⁹ This is a quote from what has become known in the Christian Bible as the book of *Hebrews*, chapter 4:12. No one knows who wrote this book, but early Christians recognized it as one of the writings that they should consider as "God's word."

John's writing. However, apart from the information that we read in the letter to the church in *Revelation 2*, we know almost nothing about the church in Pergamum.

On the other hand, the letter to the church in Pergamum has great relevance for the third major period in church history that was initiated by the Edict of Milan (mentioned above.) Until this time, the church could have been described, generally, as the "catholic church." "Catholic" means, "according to the whole," or perhaps, "all together as one." From this time on, it began its journey towards becoming the "Roman Catholic Church." That is to say, the whole church of Jesus attached to the authority of Rome.

While the conversion of Constantine the Great to Christianity did not position him as head of the church, he did presume to give direction to the leaders of the church. These leaders were now held in high imperial favour, and their power was both acknowledged and affirmed by the emperor.

The church had now grown so pervasively that Constantine realized its presence as a supporting organization would serve his purposes, much more effectively than as a movement to be suppressed. He claimed the cross of Christianity as the banner under which he would now go to war, and he embraced Christianity for himself and his people as their primary religion. In a matter of a few years, Christianity moved from the position of despised and persecuted to the place of power on the emperor's throne. "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is." [2:13]

Here is an example of that power. One of the most important questions of Christianity is that of the identity of Jesus: is He truly God or some form of being lower than God? The official, orthodox view was established by the church at the Council of Nicaea, 325AD. This was only 12 years after the whole empire was declared Christian, and it was Constantine himself who ordered the Council. The bishops of all the cities of the empire were required to attend, thus making it the first "ecumenical" council.

Why would Constantine care about this issue? Well, the church was now out of hiding and developing its theology; and this was a divisive question. Churches of the East preferred an interpretation of Jesus' identity as being "like" the Father. The

Western church believed that Jesus was “equal” in substance with the Father. The debate was intensifying and all but threatened to divide the empire, for Christianity was so influential that when the church was divided, the empire was divided. Constantine apparently did not prefer one outcome of debate over the other, he just wanted the empire to be at peace within itself, so he demanded the bishops get together and settle the issue once for all. Thus they did, and actually it was a great step forward in the overall development of Christian theology; but it came about because of a political motivation within the Roman Empire.

Here we see the church slipping imperceptively towards what Jesus was warning them against, admitting influence in its development other than the scriptures. This included the influence of the Roman emperor himself, something that was an almost irresistible temptation, and which caused the church much compromise down through its history to the point that the pope adopted the title “Pontifex Maximus,” an imperial title arising out of pagan times and denoting “chief priest of religion.”

Following the Council of Nicaea were other ecumenical councils, many of which made good strides forward in the development of orthodox theology; but also made decisions that were to evolve into much worse compromise. For example, the third council implicitly affirmed a growing devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, throughout the church by declaring her *theotokos*, the “mother of God.” On the one hand, this designation affirmed the deity of Jesus, but on the other hand, it was a nod to the growing veneration of Mary and the view of her perpetual virginity. As another example, the later councils (such as the second Council of Nicaea, 787) affirmed the use of icons, or images, in worship.

Throughout these and succeeding Roman Catholic councils, the church was developing its “magisterium.” This is a compendium of the teachings of the church, and comes to have as much authority as the scripture itself. In spite of, or perhaps because of this development, the Lord of the church addresses this church as the one who has the sharp two edged sword - and nothing else. Let the church develop whatever teaching it pleases,

but the judge of it all, from the point of view of *Revelation*, is the scripture itself.

We read on, "...you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of My witness, Antipas, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells." [2:13] Official persecution had ended, but a practice so firmly established was not easily eliminated. Historically, we know nothing of Antipas, but are reminded that persecution at all times remains a possibility. A difference here is that whereas in Smyrna the church as a whole was persecuted, here it is one specific individual who was martyred, all the more notable for that reason. The church of Pergamum is commended for holding fast to the name and doctrines of Jesus despite the continuing possibility of persecution.

"But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality. Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans." [2:14-15]

In this social / political environment, the church is starting to compromise, and no wonder. When in the chair of political influence and power, compromise is almost inevitable.

Why, for example, would a Christian even want to eat idol sacrifices? Well, we must not think for one minute that because the emperor has made a politically expedient decision to officially embrace Christianity, everyone in the empire abandons their pagan practices and preferences. For most people, sure, make some overtures to the new religion, but abandon your ancestral traditions? Not likely.

Take public events such as the Olympic games that were held every four years at Olympia, or similar athletic games held in Corinth and elsewhere. Public festivals were celebrated in honour of Olympic or local gods, and feasts were always included. Animals were sacrificed to the gods, and the meat was distributed to all attending. The church is now an acceptable part of the

culture and its members want to celebrate and dine with everyone else. Members who have risen to the role of being a public dignitary might even be expected to lead in opening ceremonies and participate in the sacrifices. What are such people to do, refuse to attend and participate? Or to fulfill their coveted role of leadership, and compromise in doing so?

In general, when Christianity becomes mainstream rather than a life or death decision, it is so much more likely that a “nominal” form of the faith will develop. It is now politically, socially, and perhaps even economically advantageous to be Christian. People therefore become Christian in name while maintaining many of their pagan traditions. What results is a compromised form of Christianity that reflects both Christian and pagan morals.

Thus the position of being welcomed to the top of the world led to compromise in morality and compromise in spiritual faithfulness; and Jesus responds to them, “Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.” [2:16] He is going to use scripture to judge and evaluate His church. He will sort out who it is that truly belongs to Him, and who is “Christian” simply for what they can gain from it.

“To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.” [2:17] Those who resist all the temptations that political power and social favour have to offer, and who stay faithful to Jesus, they are going to find the “hidden manna,” satisfaction for the soul that can only be experienced from God’s presence, not by anything this world has to offer; and a white stone, some kind of voting power, not of the authority of this earth, but that of the kingdom of God; and a new, personal name, a precious and personal relationship with Jesus Himself that leads to transformation and a new identity in Him.

If the church cannot be defeated by threat of persecution and martyrdom, perhaps it can be corrupted from within by the allurements of political and social power. Any time the church finds itself in favour with political power, it will face the temptation of compromise. For this church, “*Bridal Preparations*”

is about staying faithful to Jesus no matter what other attractive offers are made by the world.

THYATIRA: THE IMMORAL CHURCH [2:18-29]

Once again, we have very little direct knowledge of the early church of Thyatira. What we can infer from the *Revelation* letter gives us some general clues, but other than that we have nothing upon which to base a historical survey of the church there. The letter would have spoken to the immediate historical situation at Thyatira; it would also find relevance to given churches throughout history into the present. However, it continues to fit the pattern of the historical sequence, and moves us to the medieval, Roman Catholic Church. Though this church receives much censure, it is very much a church belonging to Jesus and accountable to Him.

He introduces Himself to this church as “The Son of God.” [2:18] We cannot let this self identification go unnoticed, for it is the only time in the whole book of *Revelation* that Jesus receives or states this title for Himself. It is a step away from symbolic language such as “the Lion” or “the Lamb” or the “Alpha and Omega,” into a very clear and direct identification; no one should miss this. He is boldly declaring His authority, His uniqueness, and His right to exist in oneness with Almighty God.

The medieval church inherited a growing fascination with and adoration of the “Virgin Mary,” the mother of Jesus, the *theotokos*, “mother of God.” Sometime around the beginning of the second millennium this veneration of Mary becomes more central and is brought into the structured liturgy of the church. Shrines and chapels, along with images, paintings, artifacts, etc., of the Virgin Mary, or devoted to the Virgin Mary, were proliferated throughout Europe in religious and public buildings, as well as in private homes. The church through this time affirmed by common belief, if not by official statements, several things about Mary: that she was a perpetual virgin; that she was of the same substance as the Son she bore; that she was sinless; that she was inferior only to the Father and the Son, but superior to all other created beings; the “queen of heaven”; etc. Her role

as the greatest of all the saints is that of mediatrix and intercessor; through her gracious cooperation, God brought the Saviour into the world, and through her He continues to distribute “all the graces.” As a mother, she better understands human weakness; she has much influence over her Son and, when entreated by needy humans, stirs His heart towards mercy.

Yet there turns out to be something very wrong with this church, and Jesus says to it right from the beginning, “I am ‘the Son of God.’” Look to Me, and to no other! Could it be that there was a connection between the church’s developing love for the Virgin Mary and its slide into immorality? Long before He was ever born through the young virgin, Mary, Jesus was and is and will be the eternal Son of God. He needs the church of Thyatira to hear this loud and clear. Think not of Him as the Son of Mary. Realize that His primary identity is that of Son of God. His “eyes are like a flame of fire, His feet are like burnished bronze.” [2:18] These are pictures of penetrating knowledge, of fiery judgment, and of purification and refinement. We have moved from the church of Pergamum, which was a church in compromise, to its offspring, a church fully engulfed in spiritual and moral corruption.

“I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.” [2:19] The letter continues with genuine commendation, for this is a church busy about the work of God. They were building schools and establishing hospitals and helping the poor and pouring their lives out in missionary work, serving God with all of their hearts. However, the letter then changes abruptly: “But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads my bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.” [2:20]

We have no idea if there was literally a female teacher in first century Thyatira by the name of Jezebel; it seems a bit unlikely, though there may well have been an influential female teacher among them that was leading the church astray. The name itself calls to mind the wife of the Old Testament king, Ahab, who

influenced him towards idolatry and wickedness.⁵⁰ Somehow an influence symbolized perfectly by this Jezebel had infiltrated the medieval church and was powerfully influencing it in the wrong direction.

Was this influence from Mary, the mother of Jesus? Of course not, not in the least! Mary the mother of Jesus, according to the gospels, was a simple and pure servant of God who was blessed with a very special role for His purposes. She herself recognized this and said, "All generations will count me blessed."⁵¹ Christian believers have fulfilled that prophecy. Mary is perpetually blessed by the church for being God's servant; for living a morally pure life so that she was a virgin when God called upon her for the special role of becoming the mother of Jesus; for going through all that it meant to raise this unique Child; and then for her suffering as she watched her son be crucified. Bless her heart! Thank God for such a woman!

But the Biblical record, in its characteristic honesty, also gives us little glimpses of the weaknesses of Mary's humanity; she herself acknowledged this when she said, "My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior."⁵² She recognized that as all human beings, she needed a Savior. At one point she was even complicit with her family in trying to detach Jesus from the ministry He was called to; she either agreed with her other children that Jesus "had lost his senses," or at least she did not prevent them from acting on that conclusion.⁵³ Indeed, her son, Jesus, was a perplexity to her, and she struggled to deal with that.

Happily it was a struggle she succeeded in, for her last recorded words in the gospels, found in *John* 2:5, are these: "Whatever He says to you, do it!" Her last words. "Don't follow me. Don't listen to me. Whatever *He* says, do it!" Here she declared her respect for and submission to the Son of God, and

⁵⁰ This can be found in the Old Testament book of *2 Kings*, for example in 19:1.

⁵¹ *Luke* 1:48

⁵² *Luke* 1:47

⁵³ See the story in *Mark* 3:21, followed by 3:31-35. Their motive in coming to "take custody of him" explains why Jesus did not run out of the house and welcome them. He was not showing disrespect to his mother, but he was keeping steadfastly to his agenda.

we never hear another word from her; she never takes back that word.

Given these realities of Mary the mother of Jesus, the all important question is this: the “Virgin Mary” that arose in the life of the medieval church, was she truly the mother of Jesus, or was she an invention taking over the identity of Jesus’ mother? How could the church of Jesus take such a sharp left turn that it would end up venerating the mother of Jesus almost as much as Jesus Himself? Whole orders of monks and priests and nuns have arisen which are explicitly devoted to the “Virgin Mary.” The medieval church fell in love with her, and began trusting her merits and intercession for their salvation. But was it with the real mother of Jesus, or an imposter?

Somehow the presence of this influential, female persona in the life of the church, in and of itself a sad departure from spiritual faithfulness to Jesus the Son of God, had a domino effect on the moral behaviour of the church. Concurrent with the belief that the “Virgin Mary” would somehow soften the attitude of God towards the sinful, arose the sad corruption of the “indulgence” grants of the church. An indulgence was a grant by the pope or by bishops to individuals for the forgiveness of their sins. It involved certain prescribed acts of penance such as prayers and pilgrimages; but it came to be not much more than a fundraiser. The prolific building projects of cathedrals, chapels, convents, hospitals, schools, etc., were funded in this period largely through the sale of indulgences. People would buy these in hope of their own sins being forgiven, or of the release of their loved ones from purgatory. The terrible fallout from this practice was a cheapening of the cost of forgiveness, and an unforeseen, unspoken, unsanctioned licence to sin. In their very worst forms, indulgences could even be purchased to cover sins in advance. One could buy with money the right to sin without penalty.

No wonder Jesus could not tolerate a church in this condition. It is His church, He is the Son of God, and He must do something about it.

“And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will cast her upon a bed

of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds.” [2:21-22]

If this were not enough, a terrible, further pronouncement of judgment follows:

“And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and the hearts, and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.” [2:23]

In the Old Testament, God’s people were warned that should they ever stray from Him and serve other gods, even they, God’s own people, would suffer judgment just as any other idolatrous nation. If the church of Jesus strays from Him and His ways, beware! What does God do with a church that has behaved treacherously towards Him and has permitted an imposter to be loved and adored in the place where He alone should be exalted? He judges that church; and He does so *before* He judges the world. Note that the church is dealt with in *Revelation* in chapters 2-3 before the judgment on the rest of the world is enacted (in chapters 4-20.) This follows God’s revealed pattern of priorities.

The unprecedented declaration of judgment found in this letter to Thyatira is quoted above and needs to be heard again.

“Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence; and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and the hearts, and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.” [2:22-23]

Towards the end of the medieval period of the church, the black plague carried by rats crossed Europe and elsewhere and killed millions of people. Jesus had warned His people - and Europe at that time would have called itself a Christian society - that their idolatry, spiritual infidelity, and moral corruption was going to be

judged severely. Sickness, pestilence and death had been decreed and so it came.

Included in the pronouncement of judgment is an implicit warning of even more judgment to come, if that were possible. The text says that Jesus plans to send those who “commit adultery with her into *great tribulation*, unless they repent of her deeds.” Here we come upon another example of the way that biblical prophecy unfolds, with both an immediate and an ultimate fulfilment. This is a statement that the people of this church will find themselves in great tribulation if they do not repent, if they do not turn away from their idolatry, spiritual corruption, and immorality.

At least in North America, we have in recent centuries developed an expectation that the church will be “raptured,” caught up into heaven, before the return of Jesus, and that it will not face the coming great tribulation. Well, here is a hint that our expectation may be flawed. Here is a warning to the church that if it is found in a state of idolatry, it may have judgment rather than rescue to look forward to. The medieval church certainly faced “great tribulation;” that was immediate. There may be yet a final fulfilment of that prophecy, that of going through the great tribulation to come.

“And all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.” [2:23] Let the whole church, whether Roman Catholic or Orthodox or Protestant or Anglican or any other branch of Christianity be warned by what happened to the idolatrous Christian church of the medieval world. The letters conclude, “If anyone has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” We should all be listening.

Opposite to all that is said about judgment in this letter are wonderful promises to those who hear, repent, and overcome the failures of this church. “But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them - I place no other burden on you.” [2:24] Is it not wonderful that Jesus, speaking with the people of this church, does not condemn them all with the same stroke of a brush! Instead He acknowledges that it was possible to

be part of this church and yet still maintain faithfulness to Him. Perhaps that is a good word for all believers, no matter what church they belong to, and when. Always there is freedom to avoid and reject beliefs or practices of a church that are clearly unbiblical and yet stay in the fellowship of that church if that is the best or only option. If in this church environment any can resist the pathway into idolatry and immorality, and thus steer themselves clear from complicity with Satan, that is plenty; nothing else is required, just keep true to Jesus.

The promises continue:

“And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from my Father....” [2:26-27]

Here we see a reason why judgment is rendered upon God’s people first, because they will participate with Him in the coming judgment upon the world. It would be completely inappropriate for idolatrous Christians to be judges over idolatrous non-Christians. Once God has purified His people, then they can and will share in the rule of Jesus to come.

There is one final word for those in this church who overcome, “...and I will give him the morning star.” [2:28] That promise sounds a little intangible at first, it is hard to know whether it offers anything meaningful. However, when we read on in the book of *Revelation*, we discover what (or who) the “morning star” is: “I, Jesus,... am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.” [22:16] Suddenly this final promise means everything: you overcome the temptations of idolatry and immorality, and Jesus will give Himself to you. He is the Morning Star! Isn’t that what Christianity is all about? Experiencing the presence of Jesus Himself, and all the blessing that comes with knowing Him? No, you don’t need the “Virgin Mary” to help you find Jesus. In fact, the opposite is true. If you will reject this misplaced importance on the “Virgin Mary,” you might just find Jesus Himself!

Thankfully what was the Medieval Roman Catholic church has given way to significant internal reform in more recent generations. It should not surprise us to find that Jesus is, as it were, “alive and well” in His church. One of the most pleasant “church” experiences I have had was when I encountered a certain devout Roman Catholic man of Italian decent. We hired his company to pave our church parking extension. While the work progressed, he and I chatted from time to time. Almost always, as we talked about very mundane things, he soon moved the conversation in the direction of the love of His life – Jesus, the Son of God. This was something like I had never really seen before, not in any church. He simply could not keep himself from talking about Jesus! “What is this, ‘Hail Mary, full of grace!’?” he would say. “We should be hailing Jesus, He’s the one full of grace; and we should all be full of grace! I went to the Priest and I told him that! It is Jesus who we should be adoring, I told him.” Here was a Roman Catholic man who was so full of love for Jesus that I found myself wanting to know how I could become as passionate as he was. He truly had been given the “Morning Star.”

For this church, “*Bridal Preparations*” is all about finding Jesus, and finding that He alone is all we need for life and salvation. Look to no other.

* * * * *

As we continue on this journey, we notice an important addition that has been added to the letter to Thyatira: “What you have, hold fast until I come!” [2:25] This is the first church of the seven that is told that they are going to be there when Jesus comes. Previous churches may have an experience of Him coming to them for judgment (ie. Ephesus and Pergamum); but here we have taken a step forward. The first three churches, with respect to their place in the prophetic historical sequence, are now in the past. The last four are going to be there when Jesus returns. Are we going to be ready for Him?

SARDIS: THE LIFELESS CHURCH [3:1-6]

As with the churches of Pergamum, Thyatira, and the final two churches of Philadelphia and Laodicea, we have almost no historical record of the first century church of Sardis. We are left with a letter written to them which must have had particular relevance for their immediate setting, but will be meaningful to us particularly as it addresses the church in its historical development.

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this:’” [3:1] In the previous letter, Jesus identified Himself as the Son of God. In this letter, He again affirms His connection with God the Father, but in a different way. The seven Spirits of God refer to the Holy Spirit, and since seven is the number of completeness, this symbolic representation, exactly as in *Revelation* 1:4, speaks of the completeness, the perfections, and the infiniteness of the Spirit. When Jesus declares that He has this Spirit, He is saying that He is co-equal with the Father, that they share one and the same Spirit, and that He is therefore the one who can give life. He is also Lord of the seven stars, the leaders of the churches, and holds them in His hand.

Look at how badly this church needs the Spirit of God. “I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, and you are dead.” [3:1] This is a church that needs not renovation, but resurrection. It needs the life-giving work of the “seven Spirits of God.”

If we are following the periods of historical progression, after the medieval church came a time of tremendous reformation which gave birth to a whole new branch of the church eventually called “Protestant.” This branch of the church was determined to right the wrongs it had witnessed and experienced in the existing church. It was led by spiritual “giants,” and gave rise to other spiritual giants, names that to this day are held as the founders of the denominations within the reformation movement, people like John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, John Knox, Charles and John Wesley, William and Catherine Booth, Albert Simpson, and others.

These were great men and women of faith who inspired renewed church movements, and counter-reformation within the

existing church. Sadly, however, as generation followed generation, just as we saw in the case of Ephesus, the great Protestant denominations began to slip. Yes, they had a name, they were the protestors, the correctors, the reformers; and they had giants in their past days of glory. Nevertheless, a name, a reputation - that is not enough: "you are dead." [3:1] How possible it is to take pride in a great beginning, to hold on to a received theological traditional, and yet have lost the fire of present spiritual passion!

"Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God." [3:2] Here is a church that in God's eyes is a sleeping giant. They rest in their glorious past, they have the heritage of a wonderful leader, they are part of what was a transformational movement; but are they alive for Jesus today? Is their church life based on a past reputation or on a present reality? This is Jesus' observation about the danger for Protestant churches, that they may not be truly alive in Him but may just be hanging on to what used to be as if it were their own today.

How can a dead or sleeping church "wake up"? Here is the instruction for them: "Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent." [3:3] There is nothing wrong with having a giant in your past; don't give up on what the giants accomplished. What they did was powerful, and what they started was beautiful in the eyes of God. Remember it and return to it! Jesus' introduction of Himself to this church now becomes critically important for another reason. The seven stars of the churches, the great leaders, are His! They are in His hand, they are not the possession of the churches. Church origins are now a thing of the past. What they need now is renewed life, modeled after that of their founders. The spiritual resources are available for them not in their founders, but in Jesus, who has the "seven Spirits of God," if only they will return to Him.

"If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you." [3:3] As with the letter to the church of Thyatira, here is a reference to the coming of Jesus for His people. This church will be present at that critical hour; though the danger for them is that the hour will

be like being burglarized. The thief comes, and in your failure to anticipate him you are unprepared and suffer loss at his hands. For this church, the coming of Jesus turns out not to be the great rescue we were expecting.

How do you know if you are part of this lifeless church? How can you tell if you are spiritually asleep? The next verse tells us: "But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy." [3:4] The letter basically says, "Check your lifestyle." Is your faith transforming you and making you holy? Are you a man or a woman of your word? Is your mouth clean or foul? Are you proud of how much you can drink without falling over? Is your life morally compromised? Are you one thing at church - you have great knowledge, an outstanding reputation, an appearance of godliness; but in your life outside of church, not at all different from the world that you live in? The litmus test is that of your behaviour. If you are living up to the name of that giant, your life will show it. It is how you can tell if you are spiritually dead or alive.

"He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels." [3:5] Does Jesus erase names out of the book of life? That is a sobering possibility. You could be Protestant, you could have a giant behind you who established your church and your theology; and yet by a lifestyle that denies all that the faith stands for, you prove yourself to be one who no longer belongs to the family of God. On the other hand, those who overcome by remembering and returning to the values upon which their church was established, by holding to and living by the legacy of their great founder, their names are kept secure in the book of life.

The church of Sardis: the sleeping Protestant denominations who were founded by giants, but are lifeless in their present state. For this church, "*Bridal Preparations*" is all about finishing the race with the same passion, values, and commitment as the great leaders who started it.

PHILADELPHIA: THE STRUGGLING CHURCH [3:7-13]

The next letter is to the church of Philadelphia, and while it is a church that is commended by Jesus, you will see why I am calling this “the struggling church.”

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut....” [3:7]

Here the Lord addresses the third church which is going to be in existence when He comes again; they are to live in that hope. Following the historical progression, this will be a time after the development of the large, Protestant denominations. It is a time when denomination will not be the most important issue, but rather what kind of local church a person belongs to, regardless of the denomination. It continues the time of great global missions, as the people of this church go boldly through the open door.

Jesus reminds them that He is holy and true. He will never, ever lie to them, He will never do anything that would be wrong. As King of kings and Lord of lords, He holds the key that opens and shuts any door that He chooses. For them, it is going to be a time of an open door. This church is going to exist in a time of great freedom. It will be a time when they can do anything they want for Him, serve Him with all their heart and attempt anything and everything they wish for His kingdom; He will not let the door shut. Admittedly, they have only “a little power,” [3:8] so there will be limitations to what they can do, but more due to lack of resources than lack of opportunity.

In such a time of freedom, followers of Jesus will have complete choice about how they spend their lives. There will be many, many options in life besides the option of following Jesus: for career, for recreation, for religious preference, for financial decisions, etc. The open door will also mean that the rest of society enjoys similar freedom. This, then, will be a people of God who are not in any way compelled to follow Jesus

wholeheartedly. No circumstance will force them to be serious about Him, as compared with, for example, the church of Smyrna for which a choice to follow Jesus meant being ready to die for Him. It is all about their personal choice. It is hard to avoid the likelihood that we are living in this exact day. We who live in Canada value almost nothing more than our “rights and freedoms.” It has been entrenched in our national constitution. We are a product of our time; for the whole Western world clings to these same values.

In such a social environment, Jesus finds that there is a church that has kept His word, and has not denied His name. [3:8] I think this is a time when the whole purpose of God’s creation “project” finds one of its zenith moments. For why did God not just from the beginning, create a perfect people for Himself and thereby avoid all the convulsions of sinful, human history? It would have been so easy. All He had to do was create the original paradise and humankind without a sin option! There was no need for the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” to be in the garden. However, if He had done that, He would have had a people who were His not out of personal choice, but out of His arbitrary act.

If there is to be a Bride for Jesus that will be precious to Him, then it apparently must be a Bride who wants Him, who has chosen Him. There is definitely something glorious about a people like those of Smyrna who would want Him so intensely that they would be willing to die for Him. But the other extreme is just as delightful to the Groom. If in a time of freedom and prosperity, a time when human beings can pursue any possible thing that would delight their heart; if in that time, there is a people who still prefer Him above all other things, who would live for Him and His kingdom rather than for all the pleasures and possibilities that the world can offer; such a people are the exact ones He seeks.

Unfortunately the world in which they live does not share this priority. So in a time when, according to the mathematics, this church could be overwhelmed with available resources, it remains a church with but “a little power.” Not a lot of people have made the choice to enlist in such a church. Not a lot of the world’s wealth is released into this church. Human and material resources are thin. In a time of freedom and bounty, it is still, for this

church, a time of struggle. Thankfully this does not matter to the Groom. He doesn't say He has provided the open door because they are a powerful, impressive, church. To the contrary, He is very aware that they are struggling and not well supported. In fact, worse than that, they are despised and criticized:

“Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie - behold, I will make them to come and bow at your feet, and to know that I have loved you.” [3:9]

Religious people, perhaps even people who are of the massive world religion known as Christianity, put them down, despise their fanaticism, think they are nothing. It is a church downtrodden and belittled, but *loved by the Groom!* Some day everyone will know “that I have loved you.” [3:9]

Then comes an astonishing promise. “Because you have kept the word of My perseverance,” - that is to say, you had all the freedom in the world to live anyway you wanted but you chose to be My disciple, to bear your cross and follow Me. You chose to pay any price necessary to do My will even though it impacted your marital happiness, your family, your career, your whole life. You did everything you could to follow Me! Behold, because of that kind of faithfulness - “I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour that is about to come on the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” [3:10]

This is not the only church that is told that they will be in place when Jesus returns; but it is the only church to whom Jesus says that He is going to save them from the terrible, global tribulation that is coming. This promise deserves careful attention, and we will address it in more detail in chapter seven, *Survivors*.

Meanwhile, Jesus continues His message to this church: “I am coming quickly, hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown.” [3:11] Watch out! In the climate of freedom in which you live, there are going to be so many opinions, pressures, options, and temptations that will try to deter or distract or stumble you from your resolve to follow Jesus with all your heart. The enemy of your soul is out to steal your crown and he will try

every trick available. Be careful! Let nothing and no one move you off the path. Remember that Jesus is the one who is holy and true. Trust His word and let all the competing opinions of the world around you fall harmlessly away.

“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it any more....” [3:12] These faithful followers of Jesus are going to receive what they long for, the permanent presence of God, an eternal dwelling place in His temple. They will be pillars that others can lean on: “Follow me as I follow Jesus!”

“...And I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.” [3:12] What is all this about a name? Is it so important? Well, read on! In the final tribulation it is all going to be about whose name you take. If you take the name and the mark of the beast, you don’t belong to the Groom. But those who take His name, such as the people we see in *Revelation* 14:1, even in the time of the tribulation it is going to mean salvation.

What Jesus is saying to this church is that for them the decision will have already been made before the time of any such tribulation! He is going to possess them as His own safely before the time of testing comes and forces the issue of choice upon all mankind.

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The church of Philadelphia may be small and despised, but it has a blessed hope. For this church, “*Bridal Preparations*” is all about persevering as faithful followers of Jesus in a time when so many other life options and outlooks are available.

LAODICEA: THE LUKEWARM CHURCH [3:14-22]

This last church is among the four that are going to exist when Jesus comes. It seems to be a church that also exists in a time of freedom and plenty, so perhaps concurrent with, but a later development during the time of the previous church, Philadelphia.

“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this....” [3:14] The word “Amen” means “true” or “truly,” and when it is said at the end of a speech or a prayer, it is confirmation of agreement. Someone who IS the “Amen” must be the one who has the final say about truth. Observe how emphatically Jesus affirms this here. As the “faithful and true Witness,” He is declaring that the testimony He is about to make is entirely reliable. As “the Beginning of the creation of God,” He is affirming that He knows perfectly of what He speaks. He was there when it all started and has known from the beginning what it is all for, and where it is all headed.

He is addressing a people that are not going to believe Him, for they are in a state of complete self-deception. Therefore, as He begins His letter, He is basically saying, “I need you to trust Me on this. I need you to believe that I am seeing things that you are not seeing, and that what I am seeing is the truth.” As with the church of Philadelphia, this is a church that exists at the end of the church age, and we cannot avoid the uncomfortable truth that we see it in our day.

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot.” [3:15] He tells this church that He sees them as fence sitters. If they were on fire for Him, or if they hated Him, Jesus would know what to do with them. When they are lukewarm about it all, they are hard to deal with. They go to church, they do the Christian things; but their lives and their values outside their attendance at church betray a heart set on things quite other than the kingdom of God. They would be offended if anyone accused them of not being “Christian”; yet there is nothing fervent or radical about their faith. They would never deny Jesus, but neither do they follow Him as their number one priority.

“So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.” [3:16] Now that does not sound like a very nice thing to say, in fact it is almost vulgar. The Greek word, literally, is the word for “vomit.” It is something with which we can all identify from the ordinary course of life; we enjoy hot drinks, and we enjoy cold drinks; but a lukewarm drink? It doesn’t

seem to be the right fit for any circumstance other than perhaps medicinal. We have probably all had the experience of expecting something hot or cold, and rejecting it energetically when we discover it to be lukewarm. What Jesus meant by “spitting them out of his mouth” will be addressed at length in chapter seven, *Survivors*, so I am not going to deal with that now. Suffice it to say for the present that if there is a suggestion to this church that they will be in existence when Jesus comes, this verse is the only place in the letter where we can find it.

Whatever the expression means, we read further and discover the root of the problem. “...You say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy and have need of nothing....’” [3:17] The church would hardly say this as a confession of failure. It says it as a statement of success, for “is not wealth and prosperity the proof of God’s blessing?” This last church is engulfed in a sea of plenty. It has actually developed a new version of the gospel, a “prosperity gospel,” that justifies the pursuit and acquisition of wealth, and sanctions it as the right of the believer and the evidence that God’s hand is upon their lives.

It is understandable how this development could come about. In an age of materialism, there is still an expectation upon the church to experience growth. Yet it is quite hard to attract people to the claims of Jesus in a culture that holds wealth and pleasure, rights and freedoms as its core values. “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”⁵⁴ It seems from the letter to the previous church, Philadelphia, that those who embrace a genuine pursuit of Jesus in this kind of social climate are few, and the church struggles.

The church of Laodicea has made a discovery. If you can somehow marry the pursuit of Jesus to cultural values, if you convince yourself that God’s purpose for your life is financial security, the good life, and your rights; and that those who follow Him find for themselves an ally in the pursuit of all the treasures that this world has to offer - well, then you have found a gospel that will “work” in this culture. Those who arrive at the place of bounty enjoy it as the evident blessing of God, and show due

⁵⁴ These are Jesus’ own words recorded in *Mark* 8:34.

gratitude by attending church regularly and fulfilling what is expected of them as “Christians.”

Is this church genuine? Absolutely. They are living by what they honestly believe. It is just that “the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God” sees the truth, that they are “wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” [3:17]; and worse, they “do not know” it! Will they believe Him? It is so counter-intuitive. A person who is so blessed, who enjoys such comfort and security - how can this not be irrefutable evidence of God’s favour? It is almost impossible to recognize this situation as a problem; Jesus had warned His followers about the “deceitfulness of riches.”⁵⁵

It is perhaps for this reason that, of all the letters, this one gives the most specific and the most detailed strategy of escape. [3:18] “I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire....” Gold that is refined speaks of character that has been purified and transformed into the image of Jesus. This purifying happens only when His teachings are taken seriously and obeyed. When a person starts to choose obedience to Jesus over the things of this world, no matter what it costs, that is buying gold from Him.

If you want to be sure you are putting Jesus ahead of prosperity in your life, whatever else you do, start by tithing! Start by opening your hand to God and giving Him the first ten percent of all your income. But don’t stop there, start sharing your wealth even further, both in support of kingdom ministry, and with the poor. “Give until it hurts. Then give until it stops hurting. Then give until you enjoy it!” If God can pry your hand open from clutching money, He will have taken you a long way towards the refined gold that He is talking about. But it goes further than your dealings with money.

Nobody is going to force you to take up your cross and follow Jesus, not in this age of freedom. In fact, if you decide to do so, others are going to tell you that you are going too far: “Jesus can’t have meant that literally.” When we read the gospels, we find that Jesus’ word applies to issues of easy divorce and remarriage; issues of morality in the spheres of attitude, behaviour, and entertainment; issues of forgiveness towards those who have

⁵⁵ *Mark 4:19*

betrayed or defrauded you; issues of stewardship other than money, such as time and talents; etc. Buy this kind of refined gold, the kind through which He purifies you because you have chosen His ways no matter what it costs you! This is the advice of Jesus, the one who sees things much more reliably than you do.

“And white garments, that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed.” Would it not be a terrible thing to stand before God, with all creation watching, and have to explain why it is that you, of all people, who were so blessed in this world with the resources of time and wealth, did not use them as an opportunity to serve? “White garments” in the book of *Revelation* may indeed be symbolic, but as we said in chapter one, they are not necessarily hard to understand. This is another case when the book itself tells us exactly what is meant, for example as when it describes the Bride ready for her husband: “And it was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.” [19:8] White garments represent good deeds, righteous acts. The advice of Jesus, here and elsewhere in scripture, is that the way to avoid being deceived by riches is to get busy serving God with them.

“...And eyesalve, to anoint your eyes that you may see.” The anointing of oil is symbolic of the empowering presence of God’s Holy Spirit being given to us. The kind of anointing prescribed here is not for an empowering for earthly blessing, but for spiritual awareness. Again and again in this letter Jesus tries to point out how deceptive life can be in the culture of freedom and plenty. How we need to be able to see clearly, so that we can know what really matters and what does not. Jesus promised us that God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

It is time to start asking! It is time to start taking time every day to read the scriptures, to reflect on them, and then to spend time with God in prayer. I mean not just the prayer of talking to Him, but also the prayer of listening to Him. One of the only ways to find God’s word to us and to receive His Spirit is through the practice of simple, attentive silence in His presence. What would He have to say to us? We need to know so we can obey and then receive the blessings that come from obedience. What is it that He knows that you need, or need to do? Buy this eyesalve! Take

the time daily to listen to Him, that you may see. Your eternal well being depends on it!

“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent.” [3:19] This may be a hard letter for this church to accept; but it is rooted in love, because this church needs a change! Being zealous is the exact opposite of being lukewarm. Jesus is calling for radical change, because the church is facing a serious problem.

It is almost at the point where Jesus is on the outside and needs to be invited in. Can that really be? Can we really attend church Sunday after Sunday, and lead a “Christian” life, and all the while the Jesus is on the outside of the door? He himself does not want it that way! “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one [so this means if any pastor, or if any parishoner] hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.” [3:20]

“He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” [3:21] Apparently it is not too late. One of the themes of *Revelation* is that the destiny of the saints, and the destiny of the Bride, is to “reign with Christ forever and ever.” This is one symbol that for me remains difficult to interpret, at least when it comes to a specific meaning. What will “reigning” look like in eternity? Has the new heaven and the new earth some dimensions that have not been revealed? I do not know, but what I do know is that the best thing that could ever happen to anyone would be to hear the Lord of Creation say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.” Whatever that joy is, it is offered to the church of Laodicea. The time is near, the time to respond to His letter is now. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

For this church, “*Bridal Preparations*” is all about exchanging the riches of this world for the riches of the world to come.

* * * * *

There is indeed a great wedding to come, and in the present time of “the things which are,” the church and her people have the opportunity to voluntarily prepare for it. These letters,

whether they call us to the radical sacrifice of dying for Jesus, or to drastic changes in our worship, our affections, our possessions, and our behaviour, they are giving us our chance for "*Bridal Preparations*." Even if the criticism hurts, even if it costs us to hear and heed what the Son of God has to say, it will be eternally worth our diligent compliance. God would much rather that we accept our discipline now than later.

This is not the end of the story, it is just the beginning of the end. The hope offered to the church at the beginning of the end, is the hope of preparation, leading to rescue. Judgment will soon be released on the world, and all of humanity that is here for it is going to be ushered quickly and painfully into the valley of decision. Church members will be among them if they have not had an ear to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

WAVES OF WRATH

In *Revelation* chapter 10 John is re-commissioned and given a second, smaller book. This time it is open rather than sealed, so apparently it is a subsection of the earlier book introduced in chapter 5. John is told to take it and eat it, and he describes what happened when he did so: "...I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey; and when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter." [10:10] He was then told, "You must prophesy again concerning many peoples and nations and tongues and kings."

By this time in the journey, John had already described two major cycles of God's judgment poured out upon the earth. He must have felt overwhelmed by it all, for it was no pleasant task to speak of such devastation upon the earth and her inhabitants. As he came to the end of the second cycle, he perhaps experienced a sense of relief - it's almost over! Chapter 10 comes as an interlude in which John discovers that no, it is not almost over. In fact, the worst is yet to come.

As he ate the book, it was a picture of receiving and accepting the word of God. God is holy and beautiful, and when He speaks to His followers, it comes to them as an experience of joy and peace: "in my mouth, it was as sweet as honey." The unfolding of God's plan in fulfilment of His word may not be so sweet and beautiful. It may be painful. God may speak a promise into our lives, and it may be a wonderful experience when He speaks, but the journey to the fulfilment of that promise may be difficult, perhaps extremely so. Even for Jesus, God's own Son, the route to glory involved crucifixion on the way. Of course God will always fulfill his word to those who obey Him, so if we endure through the painful process, the outcome will be every bit as wonderful as was His word to us in the first place; but the journey will call for perseverance.

If the little book of chapter 10 is now a subsection of the earlier book, and unfolds for John the rest of the pathway through *Revelation*, the outcome is one of joy and glory. We

encounter the fulfilment of God's promises in the last few chapters of the book; and for those who have obeyed God's word and persevered to do His will, it will be eternally and infinitely worth it. The road to that end is a road through judgment and anguish on earth. John has had a taste of this in the first half of *Revelation*, but now discovers that he must speak again about more judgment of God to come. Starting from chapter 11, as he ventures into the second half of the journey, he finds it to be a prophetic ministry that makes his stomach bitter - "gut wrenching," I suppose we would say - having to speak again about the wrath of God.

There is a special character about the waves of wrath in *Revelation* when it comes to their ultimate fulfilment. Throughout history there have always been times when individuals and even nations have experienced calamities that could be interpreted as the judgment of God. The final fulfilment of *Revelation's* prophecies become a matter of God's judgment on humanity as a whole. A parallel can be found in the ancient story of Noah and the flood, described in *Genesis* 6-9, when God destroyed all of mankind in a single outpouring of judgment. That was a time when humanity on earth was young enough and small enough to be of one culture and language, and God saw that, collectively, their ways were corrupted beyond remedy. Thus, when in His view they had engaged in wickedness to the point of no return, He destroyed them. A remnant of eight people survived because they took God's warnings seriously and entered the ark, God's one offer of rescue. No one else took Him or His warnings seriously. Sadly, humanity's lack of belief did not change what was coming, it only made them subject to it.

We never see that kind of destruction again until the end times. *Genesis* 11 tells us that after the flood of Noah, God imposed different languages on redeveloping human society which forced segregation. This in turn made inevitable the development of different nations and peoples, so that human society would never be a single, global community again, and God could deal with them one by one, according to their times and their deeds.

That is, until the end times. Who would have imagined that man would develop such technology and communications that billions of people, scattered around the whole earthly circle, would eventually evolve into one global community again? When this begins to happen, it is a sign that judgment upon humanity is near; though this statement itself calls for further explanation.

I often hear it said that the Old Testament of the Bible, the collection of ancient Jewish holy writings, is so full of violence that it is not consistent with the early Christian writings based on the life and teaching of Jesus, the New Testament; that the God of the Old Testament cannot be the same as the God of the New. Well, it is true that God deals with His people differently in the New Testament; and it is true that the Old Testament faithfully reports stories of violence. To be fair, it is often telling us not what should have happened, but what did happen.

However, there is an unwavering consistency with the God of the Bible, whether in the Old or New Testament. He is a God who rewards righteousness and judges wickedness. The judgment we are going to see described in *Revelation* is very much in step with judgment that is described in the Old Testament.

We need to look at an example from the book of *Genesis*, that of Abraham. He is told by God that he and his descendants are going to inherit the land of Canaan. God actually takes him there and shows it to him: "Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you."⁵⁶ The only problem was that "the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land":⁵⁷ the land happened to belong to someone else! However, Abraham was not instructed by God to fight and kill for the land, he was to wait upon God. In fact, his own descendants were going to suffer slavery in another land, Egypt, for four hundred years yet to come.⁵⁸ The reason for the delay, among other things, was because "the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."⁵⁹ God was watching the ways of the people of Canaan, and while their wickedness was increasing, He was still

⁵⁶ *Genesis* 13:17

⁵⁷ *Genesis* 13:7

⁵⁸ *Genesis* 15:13

⁵⁹ *Genesis* 15:16

going to give them time to see if they, or at least some of them, might repent. Should they descend into such a moral abyss that they arrive at the point of no return, God will at that time judge them. It is interesting that a God who dwells in eternity, to whom time means nothing, is so very attentive to the issue of time and timing when it comes to the affairs of humanity. He did not judge until the appropriate time.

When the time did come for judgment, it strikes us as offensive that God should command His people to go into the land of Canaan and slaughter every person there:

“...in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes. But you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite, the Canaanite and the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite, as the Lord your God commanded you.”⁶⁰

This was no random act of war, it was an act of God’s judgment on a people who had sinned to the point of no return. The clock had started ticking some 400 years earlier, and God was keeping track. It was time to execute judgment. If His own people refused to follow completely this command of God to be His instrument of judgment, they would pay for their disobedience.

Refuse they did, so that eventually, pay they did. When they fell into the same sins as the surviving remnants of the nations who preceded them, they were judged by God through other nations (Assyria and then Babylon), exactly as God had warned. God does not show favorites, not even to His own people. When people sin to the point of no return, He brings judgment. This is the case whether in Old Testament or in New Testament times.

The only difference that we are observing in *Revelation*, therefore, is one of scope. Since the time of Noah, humanity as a whole has never been in the same moral place at the same time. God watches nation by nation, people by people, and yes, He

⁶⁰ *Deuteronomy* 20:16-17 : The first five books of the Bible are known as the books of Moses, who was the first great leader of the Jewish nation. *Deuteronomy* is the fifth and last book in the collection that this Moses wrote.

judges. From a distance, it looks simply like a cycle of nations rising and nations falling; but from God's point of view, He brings a nation or culture to an end when He sees that their evil and immorality has come to the point of no return. Nations and cultures tend to have almost legendary beginnings, then something like a golden age, then silver, etc., but eventual decay until it is time for their end. This pattern can be traced in the empires of Babylon, Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, and others into modern times.

The introduction of different languages and the subsequent dividing of humanity into people groups allowed for the cycles of human society to occur in specific places at various times. However, the book of *Revelation* foresees a time in human society when there is once more a single, global human race to deal with. Not that diversity will cease to be, but there will become a commonly accepted set of values and morality. Jesus Himself prophesied that the world would return to a situation similar to the time of Noah when God will be in a position to justly judge all mankind at the same time.⁶¹ It is this very circumstance of a global community that prepares the way for God to bring to completion His great creation project.

We are already seeing international experiments that bode of a possible global community. The United Nations. G8 and then G7. Large block international trade agreements. Multi-national military alliances. Nations telling other nations how they must behave politically, economically, socially, and morally. The International Monetary Fund. The European Union. We are not yet a single, global community, and likely there will never be international peace and unity. However, we are seeing that globalization and political union are trends that lay a workable foundation for a final world empire as described in the book of *Revelation*. Meanwhile, the evolution of moral values is already happening as a global trend, and an enforced, unified religion will follow as part of the coming world empire. We should not miss what we are seeing: God is preparing humanity for final judgment. Mankind thinks that he is making progress, coming of

⁶¹ This prophecy is found in the first book of the New Testament, the gospel of *Matthew*, 24:37.

age, throwing off all the external restraints of the past, growing into the zenith of self-understanding and self-direction; but in fact he is following the plan of God and is in perfect step with that plan.

The book of *Revelation* reveals to us this plan of God and how it is going to unfold; for some reason He wanted us to know about it in advance. In the last chapter of *Revelation*, John reports the words of Jesus: "I have sent My angel to testify to you these things to the churches." [22:16] *Revelation* cannot have been given to us just to satisfy our curiosity, it must have been given so that we could know how high the stakes are and prepare ourselves accordingly. God must want us to be aware of how seriously we should take Him and His word, and how much we should treasure the rescue He has offered us through Jesus.

One of the things with which I have been surprised through an in-depth study of *Revelation*, especially in this section of the waves of wrath, is the mercy of God in the time of judgment. Chapter seven, *Survivors*, will be the place where we trace this mercy. We will observe the global influence of the "seven Spirits of God" (to use the symbolic language of *Revelation*) in rescuing people during the waves of wrath so that they will receive God's salvation instead of His judgment. The ultimate, eternal judgment of God is the "lake of fire," traditionally called "hell." We cannot fathom how terrible such an outcome would be for us. The punishment described there is that of "burning with fire and brimstone," but that may not even be the worst part. Hell by definition will be living away from the presence of God and therefore away from anything good, in company with the devil himself and all his demons, forever and ever. One of the worst things about it is that in hell there will be no hope. Hope is the thing that keeps us going; we talk about experiencing "hell on earth," and perhaps sometimes human suffering seems to justify the comparison. As terrible as suffering on earth may be, however, there is always hope that maybe things will be better tomorrow, maybe something good can yet come. Not so in hell. "The smoke of their torment rises up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night...." [14:11] The waves of wrath revealed in the book of *Revelation* are fierce and frightening but

they are nothing compared to what is coming in eternity. The judgment of God on the earth is by no means a mere “scare tactic,” it is a fulfilment of His role as a righteous judge. However, it is also a warning to mankind that something even worse is coming. Part of the purpose of the waves of wrath during the coming tribulation is to drive people to God for mercy. Flee His wrath while you still can! His calling is for people to turn away from evil and to come to Him for mercy and forgiveness so that He does not have to deal with them in eternal judgment. He prefers to forgive rather than to condemn.

Here we discover a particular divine purpose that God accomplishes through this period of judgment on earth. It is described in *Revelation 22:11*, and at first this verse shocks our sensibilities:

“Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and let the one who is filthy, still be filthy; and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness; and let the one who is holy, still keep himself holy.”

Why on earth would God speak like that? Does He not always urge the wicked to turn away from evil and be forgiven? Imagine the Bible telling those who practice “wrong” and who are living a morally “filthy” life to continue living that way!

Well, we have already had a taste of this in the way that Jesus addressed the church of the last days, Laodicea. You may recall from the previous chapter that this was a lukewarm church, neither cold nor hot, so He scarcely knew how to deal with them. He needed them to decide either to embrace Him or refuse Him, but not sit on the fence. After this pronouncement of judgment on the church, He then moves on to those outside the church. God wants them to be either hot or cold, either righteous or evil. Then He knows whether to deal with them in mercy or in judgment.

Accordingly, the waves of wrath, coming as they do with increasing intensity, move humanity in polar opposite directions, towards righteousness or towards further evil. There is a sense of trying to force people to “say ‘uncle’!” as it were, that they would

realize that evil leads only to worse and worse judgment; therefore turn from sin and run to God for mercy! Many people will choose this option through the experience of the waves of wrath. Sadly, many more - the vast majority, it seems - are described by a phrase repeated in *Revelation*, when fiercer and fiercer judgment is poured out, that still "they did not repent of their deeds." [9:20, 9:21, 16:9, 16:11] In this sense, the tribulation period is also called "the hour of testing" in *Revelation* 3:10. It is a time of determining what people are made of: who will repent and turn to God when they realize the truth of His existence and purposes; and who will continue in evil no matter what. The purpose of God in the time of judgment is to "squeeze" humankind as hard as possible to force them to make a decision for or against Him. Come to Him, receive mercy and eternal life. Refuse to listen, harden one's heart, determine to defy God and live in sin no matter what God thinks or says or does - well, then, the only option is judgment. The book of *Revelation* foresees circumstances in which God pushes humanity so hard that every single person will make a final, irreversible decision for or against Him. This is God's goal, to get humanity to the place that those "who do wrong" and "those who are filthy" hold steadfastly to their ways no matter what the punishments; and those who are "holy" and those who are "righteous" have made a permanent choice to live that way, no matter what the cost. When God has all of humanity in these two polar opposites, His creation project has pretty well been completed. It is then possible for final judgment and the removal of all those who have preferred evil over God's love and mercy; and for the gift of a glorious future, in a new heaven and a new earth where only righteousness dwells, for those who have permanently chosen righteousness.

A parallel to this divine strategy is found in the Old Testament section of scripture that has come to be known as "the Exodus."⁶² There, God concerns Himself with delivering His people from captivity in Egypt; He sends wave after wave of judgment on Pharaoh and the land of Egypt to force them to comply and release God's people, or to suffer the consequences of

⁶² This story is also found in the five book collection of Moses' writings; in this case, in the second book entitled *Exodus*.

disobedience. With every new episode of judgment, Pharaoh's heart gets harder and harder, he gets better and better at resisting God, until finally he goes so far as to pursue the escaping Israelites into a canyon miraculously carved through the waters of the Red Sea. Here, he and fighting men encounter the final earthly judgment of God upon them and drown in collapsing walls of water. The parallel we find there turns out not to be accidental; it illustrates for us what is described in the book of *Revelation*, even to the point of the plagues of *Revelation* roughly corresponding to those experienced in Egypt. The Old Testament story helps to confirm that what we are discovering in *Revelation* is consistent with the way that God works. The difference is that, in the case of Egypt, God was dealing with one particular culture and time; in *Revelation*, God is dealing with the whole human race at one time.

One last observation should be made before we begin to look at the actual waves of wrath of *Revelation*. As mentioned in chapter one, the concept of a seven year tribulation was introduced in the Old Testament book of *Daniel*. There it is stated that a change will take place in the middle of the tribulation, a new kind of ruler and rule will be established on earth. *Revelation* follows Daniel's prophecy and also divides the tribulation period into two halves. Its varied description of the halved periods as three and one half years, or 1,260 days, or 42 months, or "times, time and half a time," serves two purposes: it seems to be insisting on a literal interpretation; and it provides hope for anyone living at that time that this tribulation, while scarcely endurable, at least has a foreseeable end. In fact, one can count the days. Meanwhile, we will discover that this timeline of a seven year period of tribulation, divided into two even halves, provides the structural framework within which the waves of wrath are cast.

With this background, we now turn to the details of the large section of the book, *Revelation* 6-18, which will occupy our attention for this and the next three chapters. While God's ultimate judgment upon mankind will be eternal, as we will observe later from *Revelation* 19-22, earthly judgment is to be poured out first. When the book says that "the time is near,"

these “waves of wrath,” as I have called them, are part of what is being predicted. Included in them are three (or possibly four) sets of the judgment decrees of God.

The first set is symbolized by the seven “seals” introduced in *Revelation* 5. These seals begin the process of judgment as much by creating foreboding circumstances on earth as by actual acts of judgment. Following these is the set symbolized by the seven “trumpets.” These judgments will impact the world in catastrophic ways and will create much suffering, though they are restrained in scope. It is the third set of judgments symbolized by the seven “bowls” that will bring global judgment affecting all life on the planet. Each of these sets will be discussed below.

The reason that there may possibly be a fourth set is that there is a mysterious set of symbols in *Revelation* 10, the seven “peals of thunder.” John is forbidden to reveal what he heard these mighty crashes of thunder to say. Any attempt to interpret them is speculative, we are not even given clues. They appear to be seven decrees thundered from heaven, and may or may not indicate acts of judgment, but we simply do not know. We have no option but to leave them here with mere mention.

SEVEN SEALS: THE PRECURSORS TO GOD’S JUDGMENT

The seven seals ultimately include the entire content of the book (or scroll) which no one but the Lamb of God was found worthy to open. The first six seals have specific fulfillments of their own respectively, but the seventh seal turns out to be a door which opens to the rest of the book rather than having a specific fulfillment of its own.

When the Lamb begins to break the seals and open the book, the preparation stage for the judgment of God is set in motion, beginning with four horses and their riders. While this is not yet the seven year tribulation wrath of God, the thundering hooves can be heard pounding as if something threatening is afoot. These seals create the world stage, the kind of circumstances in which the judgment of God will be meted out in stages until it is

completed. I am calling these seals the “precursors” to God’s judgment.

In 1983, Dr. Billy Graham published a book entitled Approaching Hoofbeats, the revision of which was released in 1992 under the new title, Storm Warning, and updated again in 2010. As he traveled the world, he could not help but conclude that the circumstances described in *Revelation* 6 were starting to appear, at least in their infancy. That is a book I would recommend for anyone to read. His point was that the circumstances described through the first four seals are not going to be strange, unforeseen things. No, they are circumstances already germinating in our time, already visible and believable, but about to be magnified intensely when the judgment of God is imminent. We already hear the hoofbeats of the coming horses.

The first seal releases a white horse whose rider “had a bow; and a crown was given to him; and he went out conquering, and to conquer.” [6:2] Now anything white usually represents something that is good, true, and righteous. At first blush, then, one might think that this is a picture of Jesus being sent forth on a white horse to begin His rule over the world. However, there are problems with this. The rider of this horse does not bear any of the descriptions given to Jesus throughout *Revelation*. When He does appear on a white horse in *Revelation* 19:11-16, the description of Him and the names given Him leave absolutely no room for guess work; only Jesus could be in view there.

This horseman responds to the call of an angelic being, as if under his authority. He does not appear with a crown, though he is given a wreath-type crown for the assigned task. This is the type of crown that would have been given to a competitor in, say, the Olympic games, for winning a contest. This is not the type of crown we see on the head of Jesus, nor is Jesus a competitor in any contest. He is unquestionably the King of kings and Lord of lords who destroys His enemies with the mere breath of His mouth. Jesus in *Revelation* is armed with a sword, but this rider is armed with a bow. Furthermore, this horesman is followed by three similar horses and riders as if he is one of a group, and not someone holding the unique place as Son of God, heir of all

things, and recipient of the authority over all that happens in the book of *Revelation*.

If then this white horse and rider does not represent Jesus, the alternative is someone or something who wants to appear like Jesus, a counterfeit or deception of some kind. Another end-times verse in the New Testament describes just such a phenomenon:

“And for this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they might believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.”⁶³

This divinely appointed influence is the beginning of a polarizing of humanity towards Him or away from Him. A great contest for truth is set into motion. Are there really moral absolutes, or is sexual behaviour a matter of personal preference? Is the earth a special creation of God under His care, or is it a natural phenomenon with many replicas in our universe? Is life only found on earth, or is the universe filled with as yet unidentified aliens? Are sorcery and witchcraft by definition evil, or can they be good in the hands of good people? Should marriage be the commitment between a man and a woman, or should it be open to any options imaginable? Is one faith true and all others false, or are all faiths equally valid? Is human life sacred, or can it legitimately be terminated at will by those with the power to do so?

On and on goes the battle as the rider of the white horse engages in the high stakes competition of controlling the whole world's view about what is right and what is wrong. Let all things that at one time were considered dark now be considered white. Drive a sharp wedge between the revelation that God has given man about Himself and about truth, and that which man has come to prefer to believe about God and truth. Make it look white, like a very good thing, like a “coming to age” about truth;

⁶³ This verse is found in one of the letters which were written by the apostle Paul to the churches he established, in this case, Thessalonica in Macedonia. See 2 *Thessalonians* 2:11-12

and about what God is like. Let there be a new-found freedom from the antiquated and narrow views of the past.

Then another development. In chapter seven below, we are going to observe that a “rescue” of people loyal to Jesus, a “rapture,” occurs some time during the fulfilment of the first six seals.⁶⁴ Imagine that millions of people have disappeared in a split second, the reality of it being inescapable. People have suddenly vanished before one’s very eyes. There are associated commuter and industrial accidents. Friends and family cannot be found. The whole global community is shocked into suddenly rethinking all that they had heard from followers of Jesus about a coming “rapture.” At the same time, a powerful, convincing alternative is spread through social and mass media, an alternative as ingenious as the explaining away of the evident brilliance of God in creation by a theory of evolution. “Everything is okay, there is an explanation for this, don’t panic.” The white horse. Suddenly humanity is faced with a very specific question of what to believe as it travels the final road to eternal destiny. “Was that God, or wasn’t it?”

The second seal releases a red horse, to whose rider it was granted “to take peace from the earth, and that men should slay one another; and a great sword was given to him.” [6:3-4] Notice that this seal does not predict a percentage such as a third of humanity being killed, as will happen in the second set of judgments, the trumpets. Furthermore, this is not specifically a prophecy of wars taking place. It seems that it is more on the individual level, “people killing people.” This horse clearly adds another dimension of global circumstances preparing the way for what is yet to come: the world becomes a very unsafe, even terrifying, place to be. Wherever you are.

Who can deny that the sound of these hoofbeats is already reaching our ears? Commercial airline pilots crashing their jets deliberately, committing unprecedented mass murder and suicide; terrorists strapping bombs to their bodies and blowing up as many innocent people as possible in unavoidable, public

⁶⁴ The apparent suggestion that “the rapture” is to happen at this time will immediately cause some to assume that the author simply writes from an established eschatological position known as “pre-millennial” and “pre-tribulation.” A reading of chapters 7 and 9 below will give pause to this assumption.

places; religious fanatics hacking off the heads of their captives; armed citizens walking into malls or theatres or schools or factories and randomly killing as many people, even children, as possible. And what of the drug cartel violence in Mexico and Central and South America? People killing people.

These frightening, random acts of violence are apparently going to increase dramatically, both in frequency and in location, as this red horse fulfills its divinely appointed mission. No place on earth is going to be safe. The ordinary act of watching the daily news will become chilling. No parent will be at peace about their children, no husband about his wife; no one will travel anywhere without nervous glances over their shoulder. Any place that life takes you - school, work, shopping, public events, etc., will become a potential theatre for a sudden attack. You just never know when and where the next tragedy will unfold. Mother earth, long so hospitable, has become a frightening place to live. Danger is everywhere.

Once again the choice becomes necessary: am I going to turn to God for His help in this time, and look to Him for rescue and protection? Or am I going to shore up my own safeguards, count on the government to fix this, and press on in determination that, come what may, "God" is not an option?

The third seal is broken and a black horse gallops forth. [6:5-6] The rider carries a pair of scales in his hand and we quickly find out why: "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius." [6:6] At first blush this seems to be a prophecy about a coming scarcity of food, for a denarius was about the standard for a day's wage, a high price to pay for enough wheat to make a loaf of bread. But this is not exactly a prophecy about scarcity of food; it could mean that, but specifically, it is a prophecy about the price of food. In the mid 20th century, grains and other staples were converted from food for selling to commodities for investing. No longer was the priority for food a priority for feeding the hungry, it became a priority for accumulating wealth. Global markets set the price for food, and investors rejoice when the price doubles; at the same time, the poor find themselves in a world with adequate supply

but little or no access to that supply; especially in remote locations where shipping adds to the cost of food.

There is a second part to this prophecy, "...and do not harm the oil and the wine." Oil and wine are the luxuries of the privileged and the wealthy. The wealthy will continue to be able to buy even oil and wine; and while they might complain about the price of food at the grocery store, they can still afford whatever they want.

This is a picture of tremendous inequality in the world; the wealthy stay wealthy and build walls around themselves, while the poor live on the threshold of starvation. Whether this will be fulfilled by wealthy versus indigent nations, or by class distinction within nations, or both, the point seems to be that economic inequality is going to come to such a point that the world will be characterized by great tension between the rich and the poor. Famine will no doubt occur in various places, exacerbating this problem of the cost of food.

Humanity experiencing these kinds of extremes can only fall into further unrest, and this will help to set the stage for a world empire that can solve the problem of equitable food distribution.

The fourth horse is also the last, and John describes it as "ashen" in colour. Sickly looking. Grim. The rider of the horse

"had the name, 'Death'; and Hades⁶⁵ was following with him. And authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth." [6:7-8]

An important question for understanding this prophecy is the following: "What is meant by 'a fourth of the earth'?"

If it is a geographical use of the word "earth," then we should expect that about a quarter of the inhabited earth will be particularly subject to war, civil war and genocide (the sword), famine and disease, and despotic government (the "wild beasts of the earth" since a "beast" in Revelation often is a symbol of a king or ruler.) We could almost see this to be the case, as developing

⁶⁵ i.e. "the grave," or "the place of the dead."

countries, which might roughly make up a quarter of the earth, face such ravages in a way that the developed world does not. This would mean increasing levels of bloodshed and death ahead, not just people killing people as with the red horse, but a more organized and localized form of murders, execution, and genocide; while disease and famine become more lethal problems.

However, the current revision of this book is being completed in 2020 during the global pandemic, COVID-19. It is hard not to notice this disease and the numbers of death it is bringing, though we ought not rush to conclude that this pandemic is a veritable sign of the end. Perhaps it will come and go and life will return to a “normal” that the world previously enjoyed. On the other hand, this fourth horseman is a prophecy of death through disease (among other things), and death through disease is exactly what we are seeing. What we are not seeing is death through disease focused on the developing world. So far, it is focusing far more on the developed world, Europe and the United States. If the authority of the fourth horseman over a fourth of the earth is a geographical limitation, then COVID-19 does not at this point seem to be part of the prophecy. It is just a world problem that needs to be solved.

But what if it is the beginning of a trend? Already many are asking whether life on earth will return to what it was previously. And whether COVID-19 might last indefinitely and be a constant problem; and might be the first of more pandemics to come. Could this be part of the fulfilment of the ashen horse?

A careful study of the word “earth” in *Revelation* reveals that it is not always used with respect to geography, it can be used with respect to earth’s population. For example, in *Rev. 13:3*, “And the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast, and they worshipped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast.” Here it is clear that the “earth” refers to humanity.

What if we apply this alternative to the fourth seal of *Revelation 6*? Then the prophecy would be saying that “authority was given to [Death and Hades] over a quarter of humanity, to kill with the sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.” This would mean that the population of

a developed nation like the United States of America would be just as susceptible to the work of “Death” and “Hades” as the population of a developing nation like Bangladesh. Then as well we might also see a trend that is long underway: two world wars in which the “sword” killed about 91 million; the 1918 Spanish flu through which an estimated 50 million died; other wars and genocides and civil wars of the 20th century; etc. “Death” and “Hades” have been very busy. Perhaps the current COVID-19 pandemic is another wave of this prophecy, and the world as a whole is being impacted, perhaps like never before. If this is the case, as this fourth horseman continues his course, there is a lot more suffering and death ahead. A quarter of the world’s population is an unimaginable number of people to contemplate. The passing of time will give us opportunity to rethink this prophecy again.⁶⁶

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These first four seals contain the divine decrees that will shape the the world as the tribulation judgements of God close in upon it. The picture painted is indeed a sobering one. There are two more seals yet to be opened in *Revelaton 6*, each of which has its own special purpose. These fifth and sixth seals [6:9-17] provide additional windows into what is to come, so in a sense they are programmatic, helping us to know what to expect and look for as our journey through *Revelation* continues.

Through the fifth and sixth seals, various groups of people are introduced. We will discuss these groups in greater detail later, but for now we need at least to become aware of them. First, through the fifth seal we are introduced to those who, throughout history, have been martyred for their faithfulness to God. [6:9-11] This group is pictured as crying out to Him for justice; it is not their place to avenge themselves, but it is

⁶⁶ Of course it seems inadvisable to include in a book such a current event; the discussion will inevitably be outdated in short order. However, my commitment is to continue to observe and ponder, and update this discussion at an appropriate time. Since this book is intended to be always available online as a free download, anyone wishing for an update can check in. Perhaps notice will be made on the Patmos Project website when any new revision is completed.

certainly the place of God to do so. The answer they receive helps to prepare us for what is ahead for believers in the time leading to the seven year tribulation, namely that there are to be many more martyrs. The plan of God is not complete until this number is fulfilled. However, make no mistake about it; there will indeed also be the judgment of God upon those who have hated and murdered His saints, unless they themselves come to Him for mercy and forgiveness.

The second group that we meet is the surviving population of the world. While the faithful people of God lean into Him deeply for hope and refuge, the rest of the world trembles. The work of the four horsemen, the first four seals, has not convinced them to run to God for His mercy and salvation, but it has shaken them to the core. Now, in the sixth seal, heaven and earth undergo menacing convulsions, and earth's inhabitants realize that God is up to something far more dreadful than they have previously experienced. The time of judgment has come, and humanity runs in fear:

“[They] hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’” [6:15-17]

A third group of people is that of 144,000 Jewish people who are chosen, set apart, and “sealed” by God for His purposes. Their identity as being “from the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel” could be symbolic, representing all God’s true people whether Jewish or not; but the text goes to great length to emphasize their origin [7:1-8], and we will discover later that a Jewish origin is critical to the outcome. We do not meet this group again until the second half of the tribulation, and so this mention is rather like planting a seed. God is beginning the process of a restoration of the Jewish people, His “chosen people,” to Himself. This restoration can only happen through His Son, Jesus; and the

Jewish people as a whole will not be prepared to entertain this possibility until the time of fiercest tribulation.

A fourth group of people that we meet creates another dimension of hope that arises out of the time of tribulation. After seeing the 144,000, John sees

“a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’” [7:9-10]

Here is a massive cross section of rescued humanity, right at the cusp of a time of judgment! Someone asks John the question that we are probably all wanting to ask: “These who are clothed in white robes, who are they, and from where have they come?” John confesses that he has no idea, and so he is told,

“These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God....” [7:13-15]

We will meet this group in our seventh chapter, *Survivors*, and try to answer some of the other questions that their presence creates; but for now the text of *Revelation* is revealing to us one of the great outcomes of the tribulation period, something we addressed earlier in this chapter. If the waves of wrath are going to force humanity into polar opposites, and if a vast majority are going to choose to simply harden their hearts against God, this picture predicts that, conversely, a sizable percentage of humanity, creating a number too large to count, is also going to flee to God for mercy, forgiveness, and rescue. They are going to find it!

Last of all, a fifth group of people play an important part in the judgments that come through the seven seals and the seven trumpets. This group happens to be a group of only two, and we

have to move out of the textual sequence in *Revelation* to find them. They appear after the first six trumpet judgments, but in a section that, from a literary point of view, is a flashback (something to which we referred in chapter one.)

These two people are described in *Revelation* 11:3-13, and are called God's two witnesses, two prophets. John is told that "they will prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days." Now that is one of the careful time markers in *Revelation*, a number of days which amount to three and one half years, thus indicating one half of the tribulation period. The question is, which half? We find out in verse 7, because there we discover that the antichrist, who is just being introduced in *Revelation* 11, whose empire is just about to be established, is the one who manages to assassinate them. Their successful assassination catapults the antichrist onto the world stage, and opens the door to his three and one half year reign. This means that the two prophets are killed at the middle point of the seven year tribulation, so their prophetic ministry must be in the first, not the second half.

This helps us greatly, for consider a very real problem. Earth and her inhabitants even now experience many calamities; a few were mentioned in chapter two above. Are these judgments sent from God, or are they the mere accidents of nature or the evil deeds of people? Or both? Well, different people come to different conclusions about this, and who is to say what is the correct answer? Only God would really know.

When the judgments of the first six trumpets⁶⁷ are released, the same question prevails: are they judgments of God, or might they be just calamities of nature. If they are being sent by God, either to push people away from Him or to call them to repent and run to Him for rescue from further judgment; but no one even knows why they are happening, how will God's purposes be accomplished? Would not people simply believe that they are going through a time of terrible climate change, or natural disaster, or social ill?

Here is where these two prophets come into play. Their ministry is described like this:

⁶⁷ The decreed judgments of the series of seven trumpets in *Revelation* will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

“These have the power to shut up the sky, so that rain will not fall during the days of their prophesying; and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every plague, as often as they desire.”
[11:6]

The decrees of God through the seven trumpets basically deliver “tools” into the hands of these two prophets. It may not be that the trumpets describe circumstances or events in strict sequential order; but rather judgments that are made available to these two prophets as they call humanity to repent of their sin and turn to God. This would follow perfectly the parallel we found in the Old Testament story of the *Exodus*. There, plagues were sent upon Egypt, but Moses declared that they were coming as the judgment of God. It looks like the judgments that are poured out in the first half of the tribulation will not happen out of nowhere, as it were. They will be announced or even called down by these two prophets, so that no one will wonder why the events are happening. They are happening because God is judging the world!

Imagine, for example, that the prophets travel to North America and tell us that if we do not repent of our immoral entertainment and behaviour, Lake Michigan or Lake Ontario is going to be turned into blood. When the waters actually turn to blood, no one will have any possible alternative than to know that the judgment of God is afoot. Huge populations would be left scrambling for drinking water. It would be an act of God not easily ignored.

These two prophets are absolutely invulnerable during the time of their ministry; they speak and no one can stop them. [11:5] They will be God’s mouthpiece during the first half of the tribulation, the time for mankind to make a final decision with regard to Jesus. Apparently, God foresees that He can completely accomplish this first phase of His plan in that short period of three and one half years.⁶⁸ Following this, tribulation of a whole new character will come upon the earth, through the reign of the antichrist, and through direct, fierce judgments of God.

⁶⁸ This will be discussed in detail in chapter 7 below, “Survivors.”

Meanwhile, hear what *Revelation* says will happen when the antichrist finally manages to kill the two prophets.

“Those from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations will look at their dead bodies for three and a half days, and will not permit their dead bodies to be laid in a tomb. And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and celebrate; and they will send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth.” [11:9-10]

Humanity will then run into the arms of the antichrist who has become their hero and saviour; and they will be ready to side with him against the God of the two prophets, and against His Son, Jesus.

We go on now to observe some of the details of this next set of judgments, the seven trumpets, and we will see why earth dwellers will be so relieved when the apparent propagators of these judgments, the two prophets, are finally stopped.

SEVEN TRUMPETS: THE TERROR OF GOD’S WARNINGS

The breaking of the first six seals opened the book introduced in *Revelation* 5 and released into action, among other things, the plan of God’s judgment upon the world. The seventh seal has the unique role of introducing the rest of the book, beginning with an intense, yet restrained wave of judgment symbolized by the set of seven trumpets. [8:1-2] In the ancient world, the trumpet was the means of raising an alarm, a proclamation of warning. It might be that the city is being threatened by an advancing adversary. Or conversely, it might be an advancing army declaring war on their opponent. If this wave of judgments is symbolized by trumpets, it is God’s way of sounding an alarm that the time of accountability has come. While these trumpet judgments may be bad enough in and of themselves, they are still “restrained;” their main purpose is to shake the world with enough force to get everyone’s

attention and forewarn that time is running out. The outpouring of God's wrath in its fullness is at the door.

The trumpets are characterized by partial rather than global impact. For example, the first one decrees that a third of earth's vegetation (but including all grass) is burnt up. It is not hard to imagine heat and drought intensified in various places throughout the earth to such an extent that huge deserts and burned out forests result, for we already live in a time when warnings about a "greenhouse effect" are heard almost every day. Average global temperatures are rising. Ice in the Arctic regions is melting. The first trumpet is a prophecy that the heat of the sun is going to become intense, no small challenge to be reckoned with. Not only increased heat, but devastating weather and increased famine will result. [8:7]

The second trumpet judgment is referred to above when we observed that the two special prophets of God will have power over the sea⁶⁹ to turn its waters into blood, though limited to a third of the whole. [8.8-9] Aquatic life and the shipping industry will both be affected dramatically. The third trumpet decrees some kind of divinely appointed poisoning of a third of all rivers and springs, resulting in much death. Large populations of the earth already struggle to find safe drinking water, so this judgment will be devastating. But even in places like North America where fresh water has generally been abundant, the impact will be catastrophic.

The fourth trumpet then affects the heavens so that a third of the sun and moon and stars are darkened. There is no explanation given for how this will be effected. Nor is there any description about what impact the darkening of the sun has on the earlier intensification of burning heat. Humanity by this time will be aware that earth is not merely experiencing cause and effect interactions with nature, but is encountering acts of an Almighty God who rules and overrules nature. The two prophets will make this abundantly clear.

I am very aware as I write, that some of these judgment decrees can sound hardly credible, at least if we are trying to take

⁶⁹ The Greek text uses a generic term for "sea" here that would include the large bodies of both salt and fresh waters.

them literally. How, for example, does a third of all salt water turn into blood? However, please remember that my task in this book is to “read” the book of *Revelation*. The Apocalypse is all about sovereign intervention in the affairs of mankind. Nothing we have read is beyond the capacity of a God who is infinitely greater than anything we can conceive. If He was able to create a universe so vast that it can only be measured in billions of light years - well, who is this God? Can anything possibly be too hard for Him? If this is His word, will He have any problem fulfilling it? We may be skeptical or even scoff just as Noah’s society did as he built the ark; or we may explain it all away with some strategy of interpretation. However, if God has spoken, He intends to fulfill. Our belief or disbelief changes nothing.

Admittedly, as acknowledged in our first chapter, the message of *Revelation* is given with symbols, and there remains the legitimate task of deciding what is literal and what is symbolic. However, as also discussed in the first chapter, the book itself models how to deal with its symbolism. Symbols generally represent very discernible objects, and the symbols are not given to obscure meaning but to enhance it. If we are going to explain away as symbols things like water turning into blood, and aquatic life and ships being destroyed as a result, we should be able to identify exactly what is being symbolized. Furthermore, the Old Testament story of the Exodus describes an exact parallel of many of these judgments, including water turning to blood. The *Exodus* accounts are clearly presented to us as historical and literal. If God could do it then, could He not do it now?

I have written the two preceding paragraphs partly to prepare us for a decision we have to make about the fifth trumpet judgment. There is a miniature interlude between the fourth and fifth trumpets. John hears a skyborne proclamation, “Woe, woe, woe, to those who dwell on the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound.” [8:13] This is a declaration that what happens as a result of each of the final three trumpets will be terrible to experience. The last two are fairly clear: number six describes world conflict that kills a full third of surviving mankind through weapons that can scarcely be anything other than weapons of mass destruction.

[9:13-19] Though this trumpet is described in the language of vision, the fact that “the number of the armies of the horsemen was two hundred million” leads us to interpret it as a literal, human war. The seventh trumpet functions as did the seventh seal; rather than be a judgment of its own, it opens the door to the final waves of judgment, including those of the seven “bowls of wrath,” the world’s unthinkable encounter with the antichrist, and the rest of what happens in the second half of the tribulation.

If then the last two “woes” are of such massive import, we might also expect that the first “woe,” the fifth trumpet and its locusts from the “abyss,” would also be a terrible judgment to face. Is it to be taken merely as symbolic? Or is there a terrifying, unprecedented encounter with demonic power about to come upon humanity? I have wrestled for years with this passage, and I know that many commentators opt for some kind of symbolic interpretation. For me, I can find no symbolic interpretation that does justice to the text. Furthermore, since the judgments of *Revelation*, though much greater in intensity, nevertheless parallel those of the *Exodus*, and since there was a literal plague of locusts in the *Exodus* story, I am convinced that the first “woe,” released by the fifth trumpet, is going to play out just as John envisioned. The passage is worth quoting in its entirety, it speaks for itself. You do not want to be here when this happens.

“Then the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven which had fallen to the earth; and the key of the bottomless pit was given to him. And he opened the bottomless pit, and smoke went up out of the pit, like the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit. Then out of the smoke came forth locusts upon the earth, and power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power. And they were told that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, nor any green thing, nor any tree, but only the men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. And they were not permitted to kill anyone, but to torment for five months; and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings a man. And in those days men will seek death and

will not find it; and they will long to die, and death flees from them.

The appearance of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle; and on their heads, as it were, crowns like gold, and their faces were like the faces of men. And they had hair like the hair of women, and their teeth were like the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates like breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots, of many horses rushing to battle. And they have tails like scorpions, and stings; and in their tails is their power to hurt men for five months. They have as king over them, the angel of the abyss; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in the Greek he has the name Apollyon.

The first woe is past; behold, two woes are still coming after these things." [9:1-12]

Picture volcanic activity such as the 1991 eruption of Mount Pinatubo, out of which spewing ash created a cloud that spread from Southeast Asia to Central Africa. Suddenly, it becomes evident that it is not just ash, the cloud is filled with locusts. Vicious, psychopathic locusts that sting like scorpions. If you have ever bumped a wasp nest and encountered the militant insects that are on watch, you may have had a small taste of this plague. These demonized creatures have a task and a target, and they will not be deterred. The stings are unbearable, people agonize in fiery pain, wishing for death, anything. Those not yet stung fear the very act of going out of the house; or worse, the creatures find their way in! It buzzes determinedly towards you and, despite your swatting and brushing, homes in for the kill. As it grasps your flesh with its tiny but effective claws, you suddenly see its grim face close up, hauntingly human - there's intelligence there! The face is as frightening as the sting. This is no accidental encounter.

But there is another option. This is the first of the judgments that is selective; humanity as a whole is not being attacked, but only those people "who do not have the seal of God on their

foreheads.” This also happened in the plagues of Egypt; at a certain point, God declared that judgment would no longer be indiscriminate, for His own people would be excluded.

How do you receive the seal of God on your forehead? Well, God’s two prophets who warn the world of this plague and who call it up from the “abyss,” they tell you how. They cry out, “Flee to God and be saved! Turn away from your sorcery, your immorality, your violence, your dishonesty, your love of money. Turn away, call upon the name of Jesus and be saved!” When we turn from our sins and call upon the name of Jesus, immediately we are saved, the Spirit of God “seals” us and marks us as belonging to Him.

Many who have long been resisting, who have been defying the message of the two prophets, are now forced into taking an even tougher position: take the sting if I must, but I will never call out to Jesus! Others can take the judgment no more and are all but driven to their knees. As they flee from a pursuing, demonic locust they cry out for rescue, “Jesus! Save me!” In that split second, the locust slows its ambush, changes its course and begins the hunt for another.

Is this any way to choose Jesus, to be forced into it? Well, it’s not really being forced. Billions of people will hold out in spite of these stinging creatures and choose rather to be master of their own lives than to have someone else tell them how they should live. But those who are driven to Jesus through this plague of locusts will have saved themselves not just from an earthly sting, but from the far worse eternal fires of hell. The demonic locusts were sent to give everyone a foretaste of what is to come upon those who refuse the righteousness and salvation of Jesus.

It’s no wonder that the two prophets who call out the judgments of God are hated by earth dwellers. No wonder people gawk at their carcasses, celebrate their demise, party, and send gifts to one another when the antichrist finally assassinates them. But this victory does not turn out for their deliverance after all. The third woe is “coming quickly.” [11:14]

**SEVEN BOWLS:
THE END OF GOD’S PATIENCE**

When the seventh trumpet sounds, the third “woe” is set in motion. A time of judgment begins that is going to be doubly horrific, for humanity during the last three and one half years of the tribulation is going to experience both the wrath of God and the wrath of Satan. Divine judgment will be sent from heaven, and such decrees and their execution are enough on their own to make us cringe. At the same time, however, the devil will deal mercilessly with human civilization on earth: “Woe to the earth and the sea; because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time.” [12:12] The antichrist will ascend as a hero, he who delivers the world from the two prophets of God, but he will turn out to be no friend to mankind. His rise to power will be Satan’s finest hour; who, even so, cannot escape the fact that he is simply playing into the hand of God and fulfilling His purposes.

To begin, I think it is important for us to remind ourselves once again that the wrath of God and the acts of judgment that He sends upon the world are not arbitrary, random, or an explosion of divine anger. They are part of God’s purposes as He mines for gold, a necessary step in the completion of His “creation project.” Probably it is for this reason that before we are told about the final, dreadful set of God’s judgments, we are given another glimpse of the throne of God, where we see that what is coming fits His purposes entirely.

In *Revelation* 14:6-13 we are told three things that God is going to accomplish in the last half of the seven year tribulation period. These are: 1) a global proclamation of the gospel of Jesus; 2) the obliteration of all human religion; and 3) a final decision forced on every surviving human either to accept allegiance to the antichrist or to flee to Jesus for rescue. If the text does not give us the details at this point about how these things are going to be accomplished, it at least tells us what to be looking for as we continue to read. So while it may not be as important for us to describe in detail the judgments of the “seven bowls of the wrath of God,” though we will observe them below, it is very important that we pause and reflect on God’s revealed purposes.

John begins, “And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people.” [14:6] Somehow in the midst of the upheaval of this period of time, or maybe because of it, the world is going to hear one last call to repentance. God is going to find a way to have His rescue offered one more time. If the two prophets of *Revelation* 11 were successful in preaching globally during the first half of the tribulation, then imagine what the advent of another 144,000 evangelists could accomplish in the second half. They were introduced to us in *Revelation* 7, but they reappear in *Revelation* 14 as a loyal troop who “follow the Lamb wherever He goes.” It is just after they reappear [14:1-5] that the hope of a global proclamation of the gospel of Jesus is decreed. [14:6-7]

The “gospel” may not be the sum total of the prophetic message assigned to the 144,000 specially chosen followers of Jesus. The second and third heavenly decrees must also be sounded.

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality.” [14:8] Up until this time, mankind has been granted to live with genuine freedom of choice. Religion of every kind has been tolerated by God, whether religion of the individual or of a local variety, or whether the world religions that have spread across the globe; He has allowed religions to prevail. While the ten commandments of the Old Testament made it clear that idolatry of any kind is forbidden by God; and while worship of Him alone is commanded to mankind; and even though the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus revealed to the world God’s nature and His plan of salvation; nevertheless, God has allowed all other options of religious belief to exist. They will continue right into the second half of the tribulation period, but not for long. This second heavenly proclamation decrees their sudden, merciless, and permanent end. Their collapse will not be brought about by a voluntary abandonment of religion, but will be violently enacted by the antichrist and his forces, resulting in world-wide mourning. These things we will discuss more in chapter eight, *World Empire and the End of Religion*, but for now we simply note that this is

one of the purposes that God plans to bring about through the horrors of the second half of the tribulation.

The third proclamation is sounded in *Revelation* 14:9-11.

“And another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If any one worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or upon his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and He will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever and they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.’”

What looks like a stroke of genius by Satan in establishing a world empire under his command through the antichrist, turns out to be a decree of God that will accomplish His purposes. As the time of human freedom comes to a close, God is forcing a final decision with eternal consequences on all surviving mankind.

Here’s how the three heavenly decrees work together to that end. First, the rescue of Jesus is offered for one last time to the world by an effective, global proclamation of the gospel. Second, all other religious options are eliminated. Third, the antichrist forces allegiance to himself. The choice left to surviving humans will be to accept the gospel of Jesus and receive a last minute rescue; or accept allegiance to the antichrist by receiving on their bodies a permanent mark that somehow reflects his name. Thus through the last half of the tribulation, the great divide is finally complete. All humanity has now either chosen Jesus and eternal life, or the antichrist and eternal judgment.

Those who embrace Jesus for rescue at this last hour will find it to be a costly choice. We read in *Revelation* 14:12, “Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.” This is a word of preparation for such persons: what is called for now is perseverance. “Don’t expect deliverance from the horrific, earthly consequences of choosing

Jesus, because deliverance is not part of God's plan; He loves you, but in this last and final moment of decision, the stakes are high and the cost is unavoidable. Be warned, your choice to follow Jesus at this time is going to cost you everything, likely including your life." However, this may be a mercy. Verse 13 reports a comment from heaven, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!" "Yes," responds the Spirit of God, "that they may rest from their labors." When God himself says that death is your best option, life on earth has become dark indeed.

Can you feel the apostle John's stomach churning with bitterness as he prophesies such outcomes? It was great to be chosen to be a prophet, God's word was sweet to receive. Where it ends up taking him, the prophet cannot have wanted to go. The second half of the tribulation, what John was re-commissioned to declare according to *Revelation* 10, became a burdensome task. Even so, the visions of *Revelation* 14 were not yet finished.

"And I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, having a golden crown on His head." [14:14] The one sitting must be referring to Jesus. He is pictured as sitting, a posture of enthronement, and wearing a golden crown. John uses Jesus' own name for Himself, "Son of Man." But the implement He holds we have not seen in His hand before, "a sharp sickle." An angel comes out of the temple of heaven and announces that the time has come: "Put in Your sickle and reap, because the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe." The Son of Man, "who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth; and the earth was reaped." [14:15-16] This vision could be symbolizing a rapture, that is, followers of Jesus being snatched out of the earth and taken into the cloud, but the imagery and the timing are very wrong for a rapture. Instead, this looks like a great harvest of people who are forgiven and taken to be with Jesus, but their means of exit out of the earth is bloody. The sickle cuts deeply, though all in the providence of God. This vision harmonizes with the previous warning that turning to Christ during this part of the tribulation will be costly. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." Such saints, if latecomers, are nevertheless heroic. They are willing to

die for their new found Lord, Jesus, just as He had died for them. We will meet them again in our chapter entitled, *Survivors*.

Meanwhile, earthly outcomes look no easier for those who are not in the harvest of Jesus just described. "And another angel came out of the temple which is in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle." [14:17] This is not the "Son of Man," but it is a heavenly being assigned to a specific task.

"And another angel, the one who has power over fire, came out from the altar and called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, saying, 'Put in your sharp sickle, and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, because her grapes are ripe.' And the angel swung his sickle to the earth, and gathered the clusters from the vine of the earth, and threw them into the great wine press of the wrath of God." [14:18-19]

This sickle also represents people facing violent death, and in enormous numbers. "...the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood came out from the wine press, up to the horses' bridles, for a distance of 200 miles." [14:20] This is a vision symbolizing terrible catastrophes ahead for the human race, not the least of which will be an unprecedented loss of life through war.

As the prophecy continues into *Revelation 15*, the last set of God's judgment decrees is finally initiated. Seven angels are equipped with seven "bowls" full of the wrath of God. [15:7] Now, if a trumpet blast is a warning signal, what is a bowl? A bowl is a container that is used for holding or storing something, and in this case, it has been storing up the wrath of God. He has been waiting with patience and grace and mercy. He prefers not to judge and wants every single person who might come to Him for mercy and forgiveness to have the chance to do so. The events of the last half of the tribulation amount to God turning up the heat as high as possible.

Every sin that has ever been committed and not brought to God for forgiveness through the death of Jesus must be addressed. Every lie; every harsh word; every secret darkness

harboured in the heart; every murder; every adultery and other form of immorality, real and imagined; every theft, petty and grand; pride; slander; hatred; abuse; blasphemy, especially the abuse and mockery of the name of God's Son, Jesus; racism; violence; every evil thought and deed of mankind - the wrath of God has been collecting in these bowls, and at this time of reckoning, His judgment will be poured out without restraint. This is the end of God's patience. This is the last possible moment of opportunity for repentance. We anticipated this time in our second chapter, *The View from the Throne*, when the temple in heaven was "filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power, and no one was able to enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished." [15:8] Not even in heaven can anyone stand in God's presence when He pours out His wrath.

It is not necessary for us to dwell in detail here on the wrath of God that will be poured out from the seven bowls. They are found in *Revelation 16*, and it takes little imagination to visualize from that chapter what is destined for earth and her inhabitants. Cancerous sores affect everyone on earth "who had the mark of the beast and who worshipped his image." [16:2] All, rather than a third, of the remaining water is turned to blood; everyone is tormented by the scorching heat of the sun; an earthquake of unimaginable magnitude rocks the whole earth, cities everywhere collapse. If the storm in the *Exodus* story⁷⁰ seemed unbearable as both animals and humans were killed by hail, what would the hailstorm predicted in *Revelation 16:21* be like as "huge hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, came down from heaven upon men"? The description may sound hyperbolic, but no one can doubt the credibility of what we read would be the response to such an event, "men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail." [16:21]

Such will be the punishments of God upon the inhabitants of earth for their sin and their rejection of Himself and His salvation. However surreal these biblical predictions may seem, they are the decrees of the Almighty Creator and Ruler of the universe.

⁷⁰ See *Exodus 9:18-35*

Mankind's general unbelief in Him and lack of acceptance of Him changes nothing. He is, and He has spoken. "The time is near."

In writing this chapter on the waves of wrath, I have resolutely followed the two guiding principles of my work: first, that I would not speak my own ideas, but to the very best of my ability, that I would "read" what the text of *Revelation* is saying. Second, my purpose and hope is that I myself and whoever reads this book will never have to experience the waves of wrath personally.

I invite us to hear the word of Jesus as he talked about this great tribulation to come.

"Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."⁷¹

We are to be prayerful and vigilant so as to somehow have the strength to escape all these things. We are not to let our lives be so tangled up with the treasures and values and worries of this world that we cannot be untethered at the critical moment. Pray that when Jesus comes, we may be able to drop everything and go. We will talk much more about what this means in chapter seven, *Survivors*.

Meanwhile, we will go on to our sixth chapter and explore what *Revelation* has to say about the arch enemy of our souls, *The Great Dragon*, and his role throughout God's creation project, including the horrific, second half of the great tribulation period to come.

⁷¹ These words of Jesus were recorded by Luke in his gospel, *Luke* 21:34-36.

THE GREAT DRAGON

Some time ago during a holiday in Florida, I was walking along a boardwalk and noticed a little green lizard resting in the heat of the sun. Being a nature lover, I stopped to observe. It was probably four to five feet in front of me and I wondered how long it would stay and let me watch. After several seconds, it turned its little head towards me with apparent curiosity. Was I a tree it hadn't noticed before, or was I one of those dreaded human beings? I remained as still as I could, and with time it actually started to take careful steps towards me, watching, investigating, evaluating. Suddenly it stopped, turned and darted off the boardwalk: "It is one of those humans! Run for your life!" I was disappointed; how nice it would have been if it could have come and maybe crawled up on one of my sandaled feet; maybe we could have become friends. Of course, that would be a dangerous thing for a lizard. He is programmed to know better. You never know what a human being might do.

Similarly, from my point of view, Stanley, the orphaned squirrel that I raised in 2013, could have been a lifetime friend. What a joy he was during the 12 weeks that I was looking after him and preparing him for his juvenile release! When I entered his room, he couldn't wait to get out of the cage (I had built him a 64 cubic foot home) and leap on my head or shoulder and climb all over me. We would wrestle often for an hour at a time, Stanley versus my left hand - my right hand holding the camera. I was his mother and his siblings. The day of his release I started by moving his cage outside; he alone would know how to get in and out through the tiny escape hatch, so it would provide a place for him to flee for protection if necessary. I nailed his night box as high as I could get it into a tree. I put out food and water. Then with everything ready, I went back into his room in the house, called him up on my shoulder, and walked him outside to his newly located cage, and to the tree where I hoped he would begin his life in the great outdoors.

To my surprise, when we arrived at the cage and the tree, Stanley all but flew off my shoulder and took off running. At a safe distance, he stopped, turned around, and evaluated his options. Clearly in his little mind, he had just made a spectacular escape from captivity. I stayed by the cage, called him and coaxed him, and eventually he came closer and went up the tree. I continued talking. Once he came down and lay on the cage top about a foot away from where I was leaning, and stayed for about five seconds. Then he returned to the tree and started exploring. He found his night box and moved in; he would spend the first night there. Early the next morning I was out with fresh food and water for him; I sat and watched. He came down, sampled, and scurried away. After that moment, he never came near me again! Within 24 hours, Stanley was wild. When I saw him and called his name, he turned and ran away just like all the other squirrels. Imagine! All the love and care that I had showered upon him from the day of his rescue; all the playtime we spent together; how he had wanted me in his room so he could climb on me and have my company. Then suddenly, within one day, he turned completely wild.

Now I realize that this means I had raised him well, weaned him effectively, and prepared him successfully for the wild; his “rehabilitation” was my goal, anything else would have been only to hurt him. Still it was disappointing for me to see that this little creature who could have loved and trusted me for years to come almost instantly became frightened of me. It was built right into his little heart: humans are dangerous!

Think of what it must have been like for Noah. We envision it as a tremendous miracle that all of the animals would come into the ark with him; and yes, there must have been a “God factor,” even in the orderliness of it. When we carefully read the *Genesis* account, however, it appears that up until the time of Noah, earth was still experiencing the character of the paradise God had made; man and animals were friends, there was no instinctive fear of man in the animal’s heart. The big screen movie, *Noah*, may have strayed from the biblical account in some ways, such as who were the occupants of the ark; but in other respects, the movie showed some very real insight into the *Genesis* story. For

example, it was only “bad” people who ate animals; and the animals themselves were taken by surprise when a human turned against them. At the end of the flood, Noah let out a dove from the ark, and it flew around and came back to him; he put out his arm and brought it back into the ark. The dove flew right back to captivity, even landing on the arm of a human! A natural harmony between man and animal existed from the time of their creation. It must have been a wonderful way to experience nature.

After the flood, when God was preparing for a “re-genesis” of life on earth, He changed everything. He forewarned Noah, “And the fear of you and the terror of you shall be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky.”⁷² The natural harmony between man and nature was now over. Furthermore, God granted that “meat” should at this time be added to the human diet: “Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give it all to you as I gave the green plant.”⁷³ I personally suspect that this was a concession to the inevitable use that man would make of animals, and God simply anticipated it and granted it. For the animal kingdom, a healthy fear of man would help facilitate their survival.

That change must have been so surprising and disappointing for Noah and his family. Up to and including the time of the flood, they were able to enjoy the animal kingdom as their little (or big) friends; we get a hint of this through the domestic animals that we still enjoy. Now everything changed and life on earth became far more lonely as mankind was separated from nature by a wall of fear. Animals ran away instead of coming for affection. This was not life on earth as God intended it!

Given this background, it is not quite so shocking that a serpent had come up to Eve in the original Garden of Eden and started speaking with her like a friend.⁷⁴ It must have been a bit unusual that the animal was talking, though it is not the only such biblical story: Balaam’s donkey took exception to his master’s abuse and told him so.⁷⁵ Eve engaged in conversation as the

⁷² *Genesis* 9:2

⁷³ *Genesis* 9:3

⁷⁴ *Genesis* 3:1-6

⁷⁵ This story is recorded in the third book which Moses wrote, *Numbers* 22:27-30.

serpent gave a different spin to the warnings of God. “Can you really trust Him? Is that really what He said? Think about it, that tree won’t kill you! God knows that if you eat from it you’ll become like Him knowing good and evil.” That sounded good, so she took the fruit and ate it; and with that act humanity was ushered into a journey of tragedy.

The man and his wife could tell something dramatic had happened: why hadn’t they noticed their nakedness before? Such innocence, but now gone! This discovery instinctively called for cover, but before they could manage anything adequate, they heard their Creator calling. Looking at each other in panic, they whispered almost simultaneously, “Hide!” As the story unfolds,⁷⁶ the Creator pronounced something of what His warning of “death” would look like. Marriage, the home, and ultimately human society would become the pursuit of self-centredness and of fighting for one’s own way, instead of the mutual care that God had intended. Nature would resist human management by means of weeds and wildness. Added to this would be the hostility between man and animal that was introduced after the flood. The worst had not, at this point, been seen, but certainly the trajectory had been set. All this because of the serpent.

If the book of *Revelation* provides a description of the completion of God’s creation project, if it tells us how the story of humanity is going to be finished, and how all other “loose ends” are going to be tied together, then it must also address the matter of the serpent. *Revelation* more regularly calls him “the dragon,” but makes it clear that he is one and the same with “the serpent of old.” He is part of the story right from *Genesis* 3 to *Revelation* 20. He led God’s creation into sin and thereby turned a perfect world into ruin; much of the damage has been irreversible. God has to do something with this dragon, and the message of *Revelation* is not complete without this part of the story.

It is interesting that in the book of *Revelation*, the dragon scarcely even appears until chapter 12. He is present, but not openly so. There are two mentions of him in the section of chapters 2 and 3 regarding the church; and some reference to his

⁷⁶ *Genesis* 3:7-24

demonic forces throughout the waves of judgment up until chapter 10. His presence is cloaked, just as it has been through the whole human story. It was no accident that his first appearance was in disguise, for that is the way he works; Eve took him for one of her garden pets. From that time until now his presence and activity on planet earth continues to follow the pattern of deceit and disguise. The first half of *Revelation* and the first half of the tribulation period sees little change in this strategy.

However, things start to change in *Revelation* 12. Here the book turns its attention towards him in a more detailed way, presumably to equip us better for what is coming: the dragon is about to make a change in strategy. He will still work through disguise and deception, but he will have a much more direct presence through a dedicated human representative. In a sense, the devil will become present in an “incarnate” form. However, he will not want anyone to know that it is he himself, pure evil, behind this; he will want people to believe that he is some sort of benevolent spiritual power that has come to bring utopia to the world.

Revelation 12-20 thus has a very special purpose with respect to the devil and his role in the tribulation period to come. It uncovers his disguise and exposes his plans, making it possible for anyone who is willing to pay attention, to see through his deception. Humanity at large IS going to be deceived. The first seal, the white horse of deception, will already have done much to prepare the way; its hooves are even now kicking up the dust of deception and sending it forward. For anyone who “has an ear to hear,” the book of *Revelation* is offering protection. No one need be mistaken about who is behind the antichrist and his activities.

Our purpose here, then, is to draw from these chapters in *Revelation* a summary of what we need to know about the great dragon, he who has already wreaked havoc on our world, but who has much worse things in store. Happily, part of “what we need to know” is the sovereignty of the Almighty Creator over this almost almighty usurper.

The symbolism of *Revelation* 12 allows the epic conflict between God and Satan to be described in a matter of a few verses. The theatre of the war is humanity, and first introduced is the role of the chosen people of God:

“And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth.” [12:1-2]

Who, exactly, is this woman? Well, she in the most foundational sense must represent Eve, “the mother of all living,”⁷⁷ for concerning her the prophecy was made to the serpent, her offspring would crush his head.⁷⁸ This would explain why the serpent stood before the woman, so that when she had given birth, “he might devour her child.” [12:4] The dragon would be better off if he could destroy the woman’s offspring before He even got a start on life.

The woman in the vision had a crown of 12 stars, so there is a further sense of her representing the people of Israel, the birthing nation of the Messiah, comprised as they were of 12 tribes. Even more specifically, the actual event of the long anticipated birth came through Mary, the physical woman who gave birth to this Child. Thus “the woman” has done her part in bringing a redeemer for humanity into the world.

Then “...another sign appeared in heaven: and behold a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems.” [12:3] We are given more information about this anatomic curiosity later, and we will discuss it below. For the moment we continue, “And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven, and threw them to the earth.” [12:4] Throughout *Revelation*, stars are often used as a symbol of angelic beings, so this act of the dragon must picture the widespread influence his rebellion against God had among the rest of the angelic beings. A third of them at some point opted for

⁷⁷ *Genesis* 3:20

⁷⁸ *Genesis* 3:15

allegiance to him over allegiance to their Creator. Here is the reason why we are to understand that demons are actually “fallen angels.”

The good news is that according to this calculation, there remain two good angels for every fallen one! The advantage plays out for good, for we read a little further on,

“And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” [12:7-9]

This ejection of Satan and his demons from heaven was for him an ominous sign of impending doom. Nevertheless, he plans not to go down without a fight, and an all out “war of the worlds,” to use H.G. Wells words, has broken out. Declaration of war was actually made by God already in *Genesis* 3:15, as we have noted. Its final stages are yet to unfold.

I do not see any place in the book of *Revelation* where it is suggested that Satan thinks he can wage war with Almighty God and win; however, I see many times when he thinks he just might be able to take out His Son, Jesus. If he could do so, he would be neutralizing the woman’s “offspring” whom God had said was to crush his head. From the dragon’s perspective, the entrance of Jesus into the world as a human being created an opportunity too good to miss. Perhaps it would be here that he could find an Achilles’ heel in the plan of God. He has had good experience working with, deceiving, and destroying human beings; he has learned how to deal with them; the incarnation offers the perfect chance to strike a fatal blow to God’s plan of redemption for humanity.

For his first attempt, “the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child.” [12:4] Think of King Herod who ordered

all the baby boys in the Bethlehem surroundings to be killed.⁷⁹ That was Satan's first direct, physical attack. Then, later, are the temptations of Jesus as described in *Matthew 4:1-11*; if the devil can't destroy Him physically, maybe he can cause a moral downfall; this strategy had certainly worked with others! But, alas, this and many other attempts failed, and the dragon was undoubtedly tempted to think that his was a lost cause. That is, until an unexpected opportunity materialized before his very eyes. Such a surge of widespread hostility against Jesus was aroused as to have Him crucified, buried, and done away with once and for all. Victory at last! Imagine the shock when Jesus suddenly burst out of the tomb, alive and well. "And her child was caught up to God and to His throne." [12:5]

Meanwhile, the anatomic curiosity: what are the symbols of the seven heads and the ten horns meant to tell us about the dragon? We are never explicitly told, but if we are careful, we need not miss what is intended. We must first note a parallel vision between *Revelation 12* and *13*. In chapter 12, we are introduced to a "dragon" with seven heads and ten horns. In chapter 13, we are introduced to a "beast" with seven heads and ten horns. These are not one and the same, and yet are so similar as to seem to be. Their relationship will provide for us a critical key to understanding much of the succeeding chapters of *Revelation*.

There is no doubt what the dragon as a whole represents. The fact that he has seven heads is not critical to our question, for he is precisely identified as "the serpent of old, who is called the devil, and Satan, who deceives the whole world." [12:9] The dragon symbolizes the devil.

There is equal certainty available to us as to the identity of the seven headed beast of chapter 13, for it is explained in *Revelation 17*. There John is told that the seven heads represent seven "kings," [17:9-10] and since *Revelation* seems to follow the Old Testament book of *Daniel*, by "kings" is probably meant "kingdoms." The number seven is also the symbol for completeness. So the seven headed beast represents all the kings and kingdoms and human governments of the world down

⁷⁹ *Matthew 2:16*

through history. This is corroborated by its origins, for this beast comes up “out of the sea,” [13:1] representing the masses of humanity. Human government arises out of the masses of human society. It is the seven headed beast.

Regarding this beast, it is the seven heads that are of special importance for John. He is told specifically that of these seven kings, or seven kingdoms, “five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come.” [17:10] John’s world was that of Mediterranean civilization. From that perspective, the empires of ancient Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Macedonia (Alexander the Great) had come and gone, and Rome held imperial power in John’s time. One more was yet to come, and perhaps the Ottoman Empire of the late middle ages would be a reasonable candidate.

The ten horns of the beast are interpreted similarly in *Revelation* 17:12. They are also ten lesser kings, and they will exist only as contemporaries in the empire of the antichrist, who, more like the seven heads, “is himself also an eighth, and of the seven.” [17:11]

So let’s put chapter 12 and chapter 13 together. The dragon, Satan, has seven heads and ten horns. The beast has seven heads and ten horns. They match each other perfectly. They are a hand and a glove. One exists in the spiritual world, the other exists in the physical, human world. Suddenly we see a parallel emerging with what we discussed in chapter two, *The view from the throne*. There we saw that the things that happened on earth were actually rooted in the decrees and plans from the throne of God. Here we see things happening on earth that are also rooted in the spiritual realm, but not that of God but of Satan. The text is telling us that Satan accomplishes much of his overall purpose on earth by his influence and control of human government. When it comes to the end times and the empire of the antichrist, Satan is going to take a far more direct, “hands on,” approach than ever before.

In this regard, a detail that is easily overlooked actually helps us to be precise about what is happening in *Revelation* 12-13. When the dragon is depicted in *Revelation* 12, the “diadems” or crowns are on the seven heads. This indicates that chapter 12 is talking about the period of time when the seven heads are in

power on earth, thus, almost the whole of human history. However, in chapter 13, the diadems or crowns are on the ten horns. These ten kings only exist in the time of the antichrist, therefore the text is telling us that chapter 13 is speaking of the time of the antichrist, the last three and one half years of the tribulation. In chapter 12, we are invited to “meet our enemy.” In chapter 13, we are informed of his special tactics during the tribulation period.

Is all this true? Do Satan and his demons exercise their power over the human race by means of influencing if not controlling government? I suppose there is a question here of which is the cart, and which is the horse. Does the beast of chapter 13 follow the shape of the dragon in chapter 12, that is, does human government follow the plan and purpose of Satan? Or does the dragon conform himself to what he sees happening in human government and simply take advantage of it whenever he can? I am not sure if we know; but *Revelation* is telling us that there is an intrinsic relationship between the powers of darkness and the powers of human government.

As an aside, let us be careful not to extrapolate from this observation some kind of justification for rebellion against human government. Whatever Satan’s role or influence is in human affairs, *Revelation* affirms that God is greater, that His sovereignty overrules anything that Satan can do; when introduced to us in chapter one, Jesus is described as “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” [1:5] Therefore, “every person [is to] be in subjection to the governing authorities.”⁸⁰ Authority is something ordained by God even if Satan takes advantage of and influences it for his own purposes.

Let me give an example from what I have observed in Canada, my country of birth. At the time of the first writing of this book, we had a Prime Minister who led the Conservative Party, who saw himself personally as a follower of Jesus, and who held, along with his party, conservative moral values. Yet in the time of his role as Prime Minister, Canada saw its abortion law struck down, gay marriage legally affirmed, prostitution laws struck down, and more recently, laws forbidding doctor assisted suicide struck

⁸⁰ This is a quote from one of the apostle Paul’s letters, *Romans* 13:1.

down. I believe that he and his government saw more conservative legislation eliminated than any other government in Canadian history. Even though they had a majority government, they still didn't have the power to establish their personal, conservative convictions in our country. Despite any intentions they might have had to the contrary, there was something bigger than them and bigger than their constitutional authority that was dictating the direction of our country and its moral values. Something dark steers human society, and it is not a merely human power.

Some time ago I heard a Syrian pastor describe an interview that he had had with Saddam Hussein before he was hanged. He apparently said to Hussein, "I know that the West thinks that your rule was evil, but I want you to know that according to the Bible, every government on earth is wrestling with the devil and his power, one is no better than another." He told us that Saddam Hussein, just before his execution, said to his people, "Don't hate the Americans." I can't confirm that, but I live with just a little hope in my heart that even this man turned to Jesus, found forgiveness for himself, and forgave his enemies. We in the West don't understand what it is like to rule in a country where tribal warfare is endemic. We thought we would solve the Iraqi problem by moving in and establishing democracy. However, the rule of human society is not such an easy thing; behind the cloak of human government is the hand of the devil who is pushing hard for his own ends.

Before we go on to observe in more detail the activity of the dragon and the antichrist in *Revelation* 13, we would benefit by pausing for another moment in *Revelation* 12. Here, the focus is upon the dragon's activities throughout the more general period of the human experience, including the present. It will be helpful to note what *Revelation* reveals the dragon is up to now, and how we can win our battles with him. Chapter 12 identifies three spheres in which the dragon is active on earth, and what his strategies are in those spheres. With respect to the world at large, the primary goal of the dragon is deception. With respect to followers of Jesus, his goal is to prove them to be hypocrites.

With respect to the Jewish people, his goal is to inspire hatred against them.

In chapter 12:9 we read, “And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world...” It does not specify what is the focus of his deception for the world, but it is not hard to see, it moves in every direction. He deceives the world into believing that all religion is equally effective in reaching God, that Jesus is not unique, but simply one choice among many. He is equally happy to accomplish the opposite belief, that there is no God or Satan or eternity to come. If the world comes to believe in a non-traditional, spirit dimension, that is excellent provided that he can successfully cloud the distinction between good and evil; don’t think of the various activities of the occult and channeling and sorcery necessarily to be evil; believe that they can be innocent, interesting, and even helpful. As for morality, the devil would have the world believe it can redefine what is right and wrong, according to its own preferences and inclinations. As a whole, he would have the world believe that it can solve all its problems and finally achieve a utopian peace. These are some of the deceptions that he is busy accomplishing with respect to the world, and have been especially effective as the white horse of Revelation 6 has been released.⁸¹

As for followers of Jesus, *Revelation* 12:10 describes Satan’s primary strategy: “The Accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them before our God day and night.” I imagine that these are both legitimate and illegitimate accusations. Unfortunately, the choice to follow Jesus does not result in immediate saintliness. Sainthood, yes; saintliness, no. For although God grants complete forgiveness to anyone coming to Him through Jesus, the propensity to sin remains a continuing reality. The “saints” continue to sin, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes consciously, sometimes carelessly, etc. There are always grounds for Satan himself to point these failures out to God, or to prompt people to do so in the human arena. God does not need help in recognizing the sins of His saints, He Himself chooses to expose them. If His people think that they can act one

⁸¹ This is discussed in more detail in chapter 5 above.

way at church, but live another way outside of church, they need to think again. God hates hypocrisy more than people do and He will do something about it.

But *Revelation* 12:10 seems to have “illegitimate” accusations more in view. True followers of Jesus hate it when they sin. When they do so, they immediately fall on their faces before God, confess their failure, receive forgiveness, get up and make things right with those they have sinned against, and then try again to live rightly. They find life to be a struggle between a genuine passion to live and love as Jesus did, and a constant falling short of that hope. Progress is slow and painful - but it does happen. Satan and a watching world are quite ready to pounce when they observe the sinful failures of this process. They are not so willing to see the improvements. With time and practice and help from the very presence of God, things change, and it comes to a point where ground for accusation against a progressing saint can scarcely be found. Such was the case with the prophet *Daniel* of old, about whom his accusers admitted, “We will not find any ground of accusation against this *Daniel* unless we find it against him with regard to the law of his God.”⁸² It was also the case with Jesus Himself when His accusers were trying to find grounds for putting Him to death, but “they were finding none.”⁸³ The lack of legitimate grounds for accusation changes nothing, except that accusation turns to slander, and the “saints” continue to be harassed anyway, now for sins already forgiven, or for sins not even committed. Satan does not care, legitimacy means nothing to him. All he wants to do is undermine the “saints” and make their lives as miserable as possible.

This continues until the “saints” learn what is actually happening and who is behind their misery; then they find out that they do not have to entertain the accusations. “They overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb, and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even to death.” [12:11] The blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony: “Yes, Jesus, I know who I am, I know I am a failure, and I know I sin and have sinned. Nevertheless, You died for me, your blood

⁸² *Daniel* 6:5

⁸³ *Mark* 14:55

covers me, and I AM FORGIVEN! Hallelujah! So let me be accused by Satan and by people and by my own heart, I am guilty as charged! But the blood of the Lamb, Jesus, was shed for me, and my sins are paid for. I am free, and I will grow.” And they did not love their life even to death: “I belong to Jesus now. I live for Him, and I serve Him. He is helping me become the saint He has called me to be. I don’t care what it costs me, I don’t care how I am treated, or what people think of me. I would die before I would ever turn my back on Jesus, my Saviour. I will follow Him to the end, come what may.” Such saints “overcome” the serpent, for there is not much more he can do when they become this fanatical about their new found love for Jesus!

The last mentioned target of the devil’s hatred is the Jewish people, symbolized by the woman of the vision: “And when the dragon saw that he was thrown down to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male child.” [12:13] The otherwise inexplicable hostility towards one people above all others is finally explained: anti-semitism comes from the devil himself; it is he who ultimately hates the Jewish people. Thus the holocaust of World War II was inspired by the great dragon, and inasmuch as he found such a willing, human champion for his cause, one who could mobilize so many in his wake, his venomous strike was all the more lethal.

There is both bad news and good news for the Jewish people as we continue to read the prophecies of *Revelation*. The bad news is that the devil is going to continue to hate and persecute the Jews right until the completion of God’s plan for mankind on earth in its current form. That persecution is going to intensify drastically during the tribulation period, especially during the final three and one half years when the antichrist prevails. The good news is that God still loves His specially chosen people; not at the cost of loving humanity as a whole, for God’s capacity to love is not limited as is ours; nevertheless, He loves His people, the Jews. They have rejected His Son, Jesus, and so they have been estranged from Him for millennia. That is going to change, as we will see in our next chapters.

In the meantime, God's love for his estranged people moves Him to provide protection for them from the hatred and persecution of the dragon.

“And the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, in order that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.” [12:14]

During the first half of the tribulation, Satan would love to inspire focused hatred towards the Jewish people, but he will not be able to do so. Somehow she is going to find a way to hide. It may be that another short time of exile is in store for Israel when, as in times past, she becomes dispersed and hidden among all the peoples of the earth. It looks like, despite the dragon's attempts to kindle renewed anti-semitic persecution, the billowing populations of the earth will simply swallow up the Jews and make them invisible.

“The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, so that he might cause her to be swept away with the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and drank up the river which the dragon poured out of his mouth.” [12:15-16]

During the second half of the tribulation period, God actually ends Israel's estrangement from Him. This is a wonderful development that we will explore in chapter seven. However, for now we turn our attention to the second half of the tribulation, not so much to see what it will mean for Israel, but rather, to see what Satan plans to accomplish during his reign over the earth.

THE COMING EMPIRE

As we said, it is in the tribulation period that the great dragon will take a more direct, “hands on” approach in his war against God in the theatre of humanity. The description of this strategy provides a clear warning for anyone willing to pay attention. No

one needs to be deceived by Satan's final attempt to hide his true intentions in the guise of a new world empire. For those who have no time for or interest in what the book of *Revelation* has to say, the trap is being set. Satan is a brilliant strategist, and he is going to take the world in by deceit.

One of the wisest - or should we say, most crafty - things that the dragon has ever done has been to watch God and learn from Him. How better to strategize for war than to learn from the greatest strategist of all? Throughout God's dealings with man on earth, He has very often followed the pattern of appointing a team of two complementary leaders in order to accomplish something. "One shall chase a thousand, two shall put ten thousand to flight."⁸⁴ Often one will be a leader, and one will be a spokesman. The first example is Moses, the great leader of Israel, who was granted an assistant, his brother, Aaron, to be his mouthpiece: "...he shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be as God to him."⁸⁵ Then throughout the whole Old Testament, when Israel was established as a nation, there was a succession of leaders along with a succession of prophets. Even in the New Testament the pattern continued in various ways. The most influential pair was the prophet, John the Baptist, and Jesus Himself, whose mission John introduced. But also in *Revelation* we saw that God appointed a team of two prophets to be His spokesmen during the first half of the tribulation.

The devil must have realized that this is an effective strategy. In *Revelation* 13 we are introduced to his team of two protagonists, the antichrist and the "false prophet." These two become a formidable pair.

It is possible to become confused at this point, so we should stop for a moment and try to clarify. The same word "beast" is used in *Revelation* to indicate different things. The "beast" that has the seven heads and ten horns, that comes out of the sea [13:1], represents human government throughout history. The "beast" starting in *Revelation* 13:3 is the antichrist. In a sense, he is still the beast of 13:1, because he represents the last expression of human government, the empire of the antichrist.

⁸⁴ *Deuteronomy* 32:30

⁸⁵ *Exodus* 4:16

He is the final manifestation of the seven headed beast. However, this final “head” functions quite on his own from this point on, and takes over the title of “the beast.” Therefore, to help us remain clear about what we are talking about in our reading of *Revelation*, I will refer to this final “beast” from now on as the antichrist.⁸⁶

There is more helpful information given to us about the antichrist. We are told that he is “of” the seven heads, but is himself also “an eighth.” [17:11] What does this mean? Well, apparently this last “head” of the beast arises out of one of the previous empires, and may even have functioned previously somewhere on the stage of world empire. He “was, and is not, and will come.” [17:8] He suffered a violent death, but is going to rise again from the dead; his fatal wound will be healed. [13:12] Does this sound familiar? He “was and is not and is to come;” this sounds a lot like Jesus, who “was and is and is to come”! The devil has been watching and learning. He is going to pull off a masterful alternative to God’s Messiah. The description of the antichrist’s origin is entirely consistent with this, for he comes “up out of the abyss.” [17:8] He does not arrive on the scene in the usual way, someone who has been born and raised and observed. He arrives miraculously, a king resurrected from the past, brought back from the dead, called up from the abyss. The early church took this literally and believed that Nero would rise again and rule once more. Of course, they were wrong - or were they? Maybe it is we who are wrong as we keep looking around the present world stage and speculate that this or that person might ultimately become the antichrist. Satan is about to pull off a spectacular feat in his final challenge against God.

“And those who dwell on the earth will wonder, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast [antichrist], that he was and is not and will come.” [17:8]

⁸⁶ The actual word or name, antichrist, appears in the Bible only in the small epistles of *1* and *2 John*. But the concept of a final world ruler appears elsewhere in the Bible.

This special origin of the antichrist is tacitly emphasized by its contrast to the origin of the seven headed beast, who came up out of the sea. [13:1] The sea represents the masses of humanity that give rise to various forms of world government; the seven headed beast arises without any miraculous intervention. Likewise, his origin is contrasted with that of the false prophet, another “beast” who comes “up out of the earth.” [13:11] This man has arisen normally through the process of human procreation. Not so the antichrist. He is a work of the supernatural, and somehow the world will recognize this and stand in awe. The devil has someone from the past in mind, someone who in John’s time “was and is not.”

The Old Testament, prophetic book of *Daniel* agrees with *Revelation* that this last world ruler will arise from the seven headed beast, but it goes a step further and identifies him as arising from the people who will “destroy the city and the sanctuary.”⁸⁷ This prophecy of destruction was fulfilled by the Romans in the first century AD. Therefore taking all these prophecies at face value, the antichrist could be some great Roman ruler who lived before the writing of *Revelation*, and who was killed violently. Such a man as Julius Caesar comes to mind, but only as a qualifying example. In any case, it is a misguided practice for anyone to scan the world for potential candidates for the antichrist. Satan has a much more sensational plan up his sleeve.

With this kind of backdrop, it is easier to appreciate the motives of the dragon in this production. Chapter 13:3-4 describes them: “And the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast [antichrist]; and they worshiped the dragon, because he gave his authority to the beast [antichrist]....” From day one, the dragon envied Almighty God and sought to be worshipped just as He was. Surely it was the dragon whom the world should obey and to whom it should bow down! Finally his moment comes; he creates a powerful, superhuman champion to represent him, someone who alone of all men could cut down the two prophets who had called out judgment for the previous three and one half years, someone who alone could give hope for the

⁸⁷ *Daniel* 9:26

kind of peace and freedom that the world hungered for. Yes, Satan has to come up with a plan that is big enough and impressive enough to offer a believable and more desirable alternative to what God had done through his Son, Jesus. The devil - liar, murderer, inventor of all filth, destroyer of creation - wants to be worshipped! That is exactly what he accomplishes; how he deceives the world!

Much of his success occurs through the work of the false prophet. Just as the two prophets of God had earlier confirmed the authenticity of their message by the judgments they called down upon the earth, so this false prophet produces great signs and wonders in support of the antichrist. "He had two horns like a lamb and spoke as a dragon." [13:11] He looks as innocent and gentle as a lamb, but his message is as beguiling as the dragon himself. "And he performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men. And he deceives those who dwell in the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform...." [13:13-14] Earth dwellers had just had their fill of the judgments of God; now they are being offered a new kingdom, under a new ruler, with an alternative supernatural power behind him. The false prophet fills the world with propaganda declaring this new world order to be all that they long for; and signs and miracles are offered to confirm his message.

The only thing is, perfect allegiance is demanded. You must take a mark on your body to demonstrate a lifetime, irreversible subservience to this new power. You must worship the antichrist; if not directly in his presence, at least the spectacular image of him that is erected, an image which itself comes to life with the power to speak and watch and record behaviour. "And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast might even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed." [13:15] Aldous Huxley, in his worst nightmare, did not dream of this: an image and, one would expect, its replicas or its eyes, distributed globally (perhaps in virtual format?) and watching every person, every move.

“And he causes all the small and the great and the rich and the poor and the free men and the slaves to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, and he provides that no one should be able to buy or sell except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast [antichrist] or the number of his name.” [13:16-17]

The technology to implement this kind of tracking and control is already part of the mainstream of our culture. The idea of it offends our current sense of privacy rights, but the plausibility of it, we live with every day.

Two other items are high on the agenda of the antichrist, and though we will address them in chapters seven and eight below, we should at least make note of them here. First, mentioned earlier, the hatred of the dragon towards the Jewish people will find a whole new opportunity of expression. Once in such complete power, there will be little to stop the antichrist from fulfilling the dragon’s horrific intentions towards them. He will antagonize them by usurping the place of God in their temple, and then he will force them to bow down to him or face beheading. This will unexpectedly turn out to be Israel’s finest hour.⁸⁸

The second item is somewhat related, for not just will the Jews’ worship of their God be prohibited, but all human religion will be forbidden, and worse, obliterated. We will study this in detail in chapter eight; however, here I want to make an observation about the dragon that arises from this particular plan.

In *Revelation* 17 and 18, world religion is pictured as a woman sitting on the beast which has the seven heads and ten horns. This vision exposes the perennial, mutual dependence of political power and religion. If the dragon has thus maintained significant political influence throughout world history by some kind of unspoken alliance with religion, he has no hesitation to throw her off his back and crush her when that is convenient for him.

⁸⁸ This will be discussed in chapter seven below.

That is the kind of enemy that we are dealing with, and he will treat you or me no differently. He would love to get your allegiance so as to use you for his purposes. He will make you some great offers; and though you won't recognize that it is he, you will be very aware that though the offers are enticing, they involve compromise. What you are not seeing is that he wants you for his purposes, and then when he is done with you, he will quite happily turn on you, destroy you, and throw you away. He is the great betrayer. The world is heading towards the worship of such a one.

THE DRAGON'S DESTINY

It may be difficult for us to comprehend why Almighty God would allow the dragon to play a role in His creation project, let alone so prominent a role. We can be sure of this: God may have permitted him and his activities, but He is also well able to stop him when it suits His purposes. John sees another angel coming down from heaven, who

“laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer.” [20:2-3]

When God is ready to have Satan removed from the picture, He has no problem doing so. In fact, He sends one angel to bring it about. One single angel. The dragon has not been an unstoppable force from God's point of view; he has been used by God for His purposes, and when these are fulfilled, the dragon is bound and imprisoned.

While this thousand years in the abyss is not a final destiny for him, it is certainly a foretaste of what is to come. Following his short release after the thousand years, he is “thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast [antichrist] and the false prophet also are; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” [20:10] The recompense of the antichrist and the false prophet for their service to the dragon was being

“thrown alive” into the lake of fire. In the end, the dragon himself is thrown into the same eternal, fiery prison with them. Here is the ultimate destiny for Satan, the lake of fire.

At the same time, there is an additional dimension to the devil’s destiny, one that we would not have expected. This other dimension is that he is destined to do his part to fulfill the will of God! We have just touched upon one of the great mysteries of the book of *Revelation*, namely that the dragon is bound and thrown into the abyss, but just for one 1,000 years. After this he is released and returns to earth once more and “deceives the nations.” [20:8] Why is he allowed to do this? This is an important question, but the answer is connected with the purpose of the 1,000 year period just mentioned; therefore we will devote the first half of chapter nine to exploring the answer. For now, it is enough to observe that God is in complete control, He works all things after the counsel of His will, and even Satan is always doing exactly what God wants accomplished. His destiny is to do the will of God.

Think about that! It may not look like it to us, we may not understand it, but that is why the dragon is present and active in the world, because he is accomplishing the will of God. Admittedly, if there is one thing he does NOT want to do, it is the will of God. In every single thing he does, he means to do the exact opposite of the will of God. However, nothing and no one can outmaneuver Almighty God.

People too, just like the dragon, can rebel and hate God and defy Him, but all the while He will be using them for His own ultimate purposes. When all is said and done, it will become evident that they have simply played into the hand of God.

God’s use of the devil for His own purposes is already happening. God is mining for gold. He wants people who want Him, who really want Him. We are the gold for which He is searching if we want Him more than anything else in the world. Satan is working the world system like a salesman, offering all kinds of other options, good and evil, to see if he can get us to choose anything but Jesus. He thinks he is fighting God, but he is not. God put him there to help prove whether we prefer the world and its options over Jesus.

The problem in North American and Western culture in the 21st century is that we are not even aware that an eternal choice is happening. Bit by bit, by the nice things around us, and by the options for evil, the devil is the salesman trying to lure us away from the real prize. God put him there because He wants to know what we are made of. Are we pure gold? Do we really want Him, or are we mere opportunists looking for the best road to what the world has to offer? We prove ourselves by whether or not we are willing, in the here and now, to meet the costly demands of following Jesus as described in the *Revelation* and in the other New Testament writings.

As end time circumstances unfold, and as we shall see in our next chapter, *Survivors*, the choice we are facing is going to become increasingly clear. The stakes rise higher and higher in the book of *Revelation* until everyone will have to make an outright choice for the antichrist or for Jesus. We will see that it is not the devil who has attracted God's special focus, he is merely a tool in His hands. God's special focus is upon humanity.

CHAPTER 7

SURVIVORS

In the last three and a half years of the tribulation period, the time when the antichrist will rule, only those who accept his mark on their body will be given the right to function and continue through the period of his reign; his policy will be that all who refuse his mark are to be executed. We begin this chapter by asking the question, who are the survivors, those who take his mark and in doing so manage to live through the final half of the tribulation, or those who are executed for refusing?

The answer depends on our perspective. If survival is all about the preservation of physical life on earth for as long as possible, then those who cooperate with the antichrist are the survivors. If survival is measured from an eternal perspective, by a safe entrance into the new heaven and the new earth, then those who are executed turn out to be the survivors. Jesus prepared us for how the kingdom of God operates, and it is counter-intuitive: “For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it.”⁸⁹ Those who lay down their lives for Jesus, whether by living for Him or by dying for Him, those are the ones who we are identifying as the survivors, this is where the book of *Revelation* takes us. We are about to discover God’s offer of mercy and rescue to anyone who will give their ultimate allegiance to Jesus.

If the whole story of the human experience is ultimately one of Almighty God mining for gold, then it is in this chapter that we find dead centre. Here it is that we find a vein of pure gold, the kind for which He has been seeking. In chapter four above, we observed challenges that people in the church age face if they are to prove themselves pure gold in His eyes. For some of them too, such as those of the church of Smyrna, choosing to love and follow Jesus has meant martyrdom. Others in different circumstances face choices that are similarly costly and difficult. All such people are added to the divine treasury as the sought

⁸⁹ *Mark* 8:35

after product, the gold, of His purposes. However, when we come to the days of the tribulation, both the first and the second half, a new, rich vein of gold is uncovered and the “recovery rate” of the mine becomes the highest at the finish. As the stakes are raised and the choice for humanity becomes more clearly defined - embrace or refuse Jesus, there really are no other options - through those days, unprecedented numbers of additional people are going to make a last minute, costly decision to join the billowing multitudes of the rescued.

Rescued? Didn't we just say that many of these will be executed? What kind of rescue is that? Well, when the time comes that execution is the only option available for anyone choosing allegiance to Jesus, then it is a rescue by death. It is an escape by martyrdom. This is an eternal rescue, not a temporary one. Such courageous souls are rescued from an ultimately wasted existence, from the deceitfulness and addictiveness of sin, from total, irreversible personal loss, from the eternal judgment of hell. These are rescued, even if through death, and whisked into the arms and presence of the Lamb who died on their behalf. Almighty God is “mining” to find those who truly love His Son, the Creator of the cosmos; and such people prove their love by being faithful and true to Him at any cost.

The rescue is not always through death, however. Journey with me through this chapter on *survivors* and discover the various waves of rescue that God accomplishes as He brings human history to the fulfilment of its intended purpose, and gathers to Himself all the gold that He can find remaining in the end time masses of humanity.

In preparation for this part of our passage through the book of *Revelation*, I want to identify a few important terms that will be used in the following discussions. For people who have some kind of church or Christian background, these terms may already be familiar. For others, a bit of an introduction might be helpful.

First, from time to time we will be using the word “eschatology.” Just as “theology” is the study of God, “eschatology” is the name for the study of end times. Most churches or denominations have an official “eschatology,” that is, they have a view of how end time events are going to unfold.

Actually, the term is not limited to Christianity, for all world religions have an eschatology, a system of belief about how things are going to end or at least come to the end of a cycle.

In Christianity, eschatology generally revolves around the most important end time event with respect to Jesus Himself, His return to earth. The various views of eschatology that have developed are distinguished by how they see other end time events happening relative to His return.

It could hardly be surprising that Christian eschatology would have the return of Jesus at its centre; but it is somewhat surprising that another end time event, one given only ten verses in the whole book of *Revelation* [20:1-10], has become the second most important factor. The ten verses in question describe a special, 1,000 year reign of Jesus over the earth; because of its thousand year duration, it has come to be known as “the millennium.”

Christian eschatologies are divided by how they view this millennium. “Post-millennial” eschatology is the view that Jesus will return to earth after the millennium. Whether or not it is a literal thousand years is regarded as unimportant, but the basic view is that Christianity will prevail until the world has achieved a spiritual and moral state suitable for the return of Jesus. The optimism of this view has been hard to maintain in a time when Christianity is becoming less rather than more influential upon human society.

Those who hold the next view, “amillennial,” believe that the millennium should not be taken literally, that there will not be a millennium as such. At some point Jesus will return and establish His reign, and that is what matters. Today, the post-millennial and amillennial views have become so similar as to be almost indistinguishable.

A third view is called “pre-millennial.” This view holds the millennium as a literal, 1,000 year period yet to come. It begins immediately following the seven year tribulation period, at which time Jesus will return and establish His reign upon the earth. This view is in turn divided into three sub-groups, and this subdivision revolves around the concept of a “rapture,” and when this rapture is to happen relative to the tribulation period. The word

“rapture” is used to describe the hope that at some point before the actual return of Jesus to set up His reign on earth, He will return momentarily to collect His people and take them up into heaven with Him. The 2014 movie, *Left Behind*, starring Nicolas Cage, is based on the idea of such a rapture, when from earth’s point of view, a large number of people have just suddenly and inexplicably disappeared.

The three subgroups of the pre-millennial view are thus known as 1) “pre-tribulational,” that is to say, the rapture will happen before the seven year tribulation period; 2) “mid-tribulational,” that the rapture will happen in the middle of the tribulation, and 3) “post-tribulational,” that the rapture will happen at the end of the tribulation period, virtually synchronous with the return of Jesus to set up His kingdom on earth.

Now that I have introduced these various views of eschatology, I need to say that I have not adopted or followed any of them as a predetermined, guiding principle for my work. I did not come to the book of *Revelation* with a previously established view. My goal was, if possible, to let the book shape its own eschatology, admittedly, based on the principles of interpretation that I have adopted and articulated (see chapter one.) Because of the “as literal as possible” approach I have taken towards *Revelation*, I started by viewing the millennium as a literal event to come. As I did, I found no compelling reason to abandon that interpretation; to the contrary, I found it a great benefit. I discovered that only with a literal millennium does the book of *Revelation* function consistently within itself.

Not only that, for those willing to venture even further with me and explore how the book of *Revelation* interacts with the content of the other books that make up the Bible, I have concluded that without a literal millennium period to come there are huge problems with the consistency of the Bible as a whole. I will present much of this discussion concerning the millennium and its purposes in chapter nine. For now, I affirm that the conclusion I have come to in my reading of *Revelation* is that a “pre-millennial” view of the return of Jesus is the view to which the book calls us.

Even so, I rather expect that my conclusions about *Revelation* will please no one. I have not “landed” in any traditional, “pre-millennial” camp, as it were. There will not be many readers who will say, “Yes, this is exactly what we believe.” So let me offer this to anyone reading: please evaluate my conclusions based on the text of *Revelation* itself. If you see that I am not being true to what the text says, then disagree and even let me know. On the other hand, if you see that what I conclude arises out of the text of *Revelation*, then it is reasonable for you to at least give this book a hearing. I am not trying to please or displease; I am not trying to start a new eschatological view. I am simply trying to “read” the book of *Revelation*, and let it prepare us for things to come.

We said earlier that the time of the tribulation will offer second chances for God’s mercy. There are at least three, and possibly four, specific offers of rescue discernible in *Revelation*. I am identifying the three more obvious ones as the successive means of escape which God will make available from His coming judgment, and I am glad it is finally time to talk about them!

ESCAPE BY READINESS

There is a group of survivors who escape the judgment of God simply by being ready. This group will not even enter into the tribulation period. We have already met them in our fourth chapter, *Bridal Preparations*. The sixth church, that of Philadelphia, was given a wonderful promise:

“Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth.” [3:10]

Here is a promise that Jesus makes to people who are voluntarily faithful to Him before the tribulation even starts: You follow me with all your heart; you hold on to my word and keep it no matter how much that costs you; you be ready for me when I come - and I will spare you from that terrible hour on the horizon. You are

going to escape because you are ready and waiting for Me. Jesus did not say that they had never suffered for following Him, nor that they were rich and happy and blessed in every single thing that they did; no, they were apparently people who struggled, people who had to “hang on for dear life,” as it were, in their determination to follow Him. “Because you have kept the word of My perseverance....” Yes, perseverance. Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart! For those who do, and who take it seriously, they are promised a great escape. In terms of the views of eschatology as we talked about earlier, this sounds a lot like a “pre-tribulation” rapture.

My purpose in writing is not to defend the view of a pre-tribulation rapture. This has been done elsewhere and often. To be very honest, I have been reluctant to accept the possibility that this is what *Revelation* teaches. Nevertheless, I cannot escape the fact that the church of Philadelphia was promised a special rescue before the onset of the tribulation period.

This raises another question: what about the other churches of *Revelation* 2-3, where are they in this picture? I have already noted that the word “church” is not used again in the book of *Revelation* after chapter 3.⁹⁰ It seems that church as we know it, whether it continues or not, is no longer the focus of God’s activity during the tribulation, and those who were ready for the return of Jesus have simply disappeared. Quite cleverly, *Revelation* creates a literary “rapture” similar to the physical rapture; the book is left and the world is left with the mysterious disappearance of a significant number of people. Everyone who has not been part of this first great rescue is now subject to the global waves of judgment that are about to come, whether or not they previously attended or continue to attend church.

There is an unsettling admonition given by Jesus Himself, recorded in *Luke* 17:32: “Remember Lot’s wife.” In the context of that statement, Jesus was talking about His return and gave some descriptions that seem to fit with the idea of a rapture. For example, He said that His coming would not be something people could point out to one another, but it would happen like a bolt of

⁹⁰ The one exception is in the final comments at the book, *Revelation* 22:16, which does not pertain to any of the events within the book.

lightning flashing instantaneously across the sky. He also gave the illustrations of two people in one bed, one disappearing, the other remaining; of two people working together, one disappearing, the other remaining.⁹¹ Some will stay, some will go. Even among people who share life together, some will stay, some will go. In this context, he gives the warning about Lot's wife. What are we to make of this?

Well, Jesus is referring to the Old Testament account of God's judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah, recorded in *Genesis* 19. This was a society that had become so morally corrupt that God decreed its destruction. The family of Lot was singled out by God for mercy, for they were not complicit in the depths of evil to which Sodom had fallen. In the instructions they were given to run for their lives and thus escape from the coming doom, they were also told, "Do not look back!" Don't long for what you had there! Don't hold on so tightly to the world you are leaving behind that you cannot let go! The family fled but, sadly, Lot's wife could not resist one longing glance back at what she was leaving behind. We read that she "looked back, and she became a pillar of salt."⁹² She missed the escape that had been offered, and fell under judgment. From God's point of view, she was as guilty as the society He was judging because she held it so dearly in her heart.

What is Jesus telling us here? He seems to be saying, Be ready to go! Don't let there be anything in your life so precious that it will keep you from going: no relationship, no possession, no ambition, no affection; let there be nothing that has your heart chained to this world. If the call comes to go, go! It appears that there is going to be a sudden moment when Jesus is going to come and snatch up His followers. In preparation for that sudden moment, "Remember Lot's wife!" Anyone who is called to go but at that moment cries out in their heart, "No! I can't leave this!" "I can't leave her!" "I can't leave him!" may find that in that moment of hesitation they have just forfeited their opportunity to "escape by readiness." They are found not loving Jesus over all else.

⁹¹ *Luke* 17:34-35

⁹² *Genesis* 19:26

The church of Laodicea was given a similar warning that may help to illustrate this. They were told that because they were lukewarm and so captivated by earthly wealth and pleasures, Jesus would “spit them out of his mouth.” [3:16] We can visualize this metaphor, spitting out lukewarm water, but what does it represent? What would that action look like in terms of actual people being rejected somehow by Jesus? Well, it might fit perfectly with what we have been saying here. Jesus comes to rescue His faithful followers, those who, in His eyes, are members of the church of Philadelphia; but He plans to reject those of the church of Laodicea. Spit them out - not in disdain, but in discomfort; leave them behind because they are not ready to go!

The choice is made by church members themselves. Picture this: Jesus comes to call them, and they are so in love with their surroundings, so comfortable in their possessions and affections, so distant in their hearts from a true love of Jesus, that they hesitate. Leave all this? Now? And while they process the options, the moment has passed and they have been left behind. They have been “spit out” of the mouth of Jesus in their lukewarmness.

Of course the decision to “escape by readiness” will not really be made at the moment when Jesus comes; the decision will be made in advance. Right now, today, we are already living out whether we will choose to go or not. Jesus was not uttering platitudes when He said that if we love anything or anyone more than Him, we are not worthy of Him.⁹³ The call to follow Jesus is a call to love Him supremely above anything and anyone in the whole world.

More, even than our own children? There is every reason to believe that very little ones will be rescued along with those who are “ready,” simply by the mercy of God. When our children are old enough to make their own choices, we will even have to choose Jesus over them. If they have not chosen Jesus themselves, they too will be left behind, though in the hands of a God who still has a plan of mercy and rescue - second chances. Our lives and our sudden disappearance in such a rapture will speak mightily. The best thing we can do for anyone we love is to be living a life that clearly reflects devotion to Jesus and readiness

⁹³ *Matthew 10:37; Luke 14:26-33*

for His coming. Do everything we can to help our children be prepared just as we are, but the choice is still theirs.

How difficult it is to live in a way that would enable us to “escape by readiness,” to be ready to drop everything and go! No wonder Jesus advised, “But keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”⁹⁴ Do we take this advice seriously, or do we think that we can live any way we want, love anything and anyone we want, and then suddenly be snatched away by Jesus and be turned into what He wants? Not so! He is going to decide based on what we want! We are deciding right now by our choices and the way we live. If we are in love with this world and the things and people in it more than in love with Jesus, we will not be able to make an instantaneous decision to depart with Him.

I find a third possibility within this “escape by readiness.” We have seen that there are those who will live in readiness and will escape thereby. There are those who are church members yet unready, and will therefore not escape the coming tribulation. We discover another potential group of people in a very unexpected place in *Revelation*, chapter 16. Right in the middle of a very intense description of the final wave of God’s judgment, the “bowls of wrath,” the text suddenly breaks and says, “Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments, lest he walk about naked and men see his shame.” [16:15] The placement of this reminder is so startling as to remind us about the shocking unexpectedness of Jesus’ coming. He is coming like a thief, and even those who are rescued could experience loss instead of blessing - caught “naked.” The possibility seems to be that we could be ready to go, we are not tethered to the world, we do love Jesus; but nevertheless, we are not really living for Him. “Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his garments.” Clothing represents the righteous acts of the saints. The possibility exists that we could be ever so interested in eschatology, interested in what *Revelation* says, good at theology, but forgetful about the real calling upon us to live for Jesus. The calling is to live our life in the service of God and the service of

⁹⁴ Luke 21:36

others. Here is one final warning even for those who may “escape by readiness,” the possibility that we can be ready for His return but end up being ashamed that we have not lived for Him while we had the chance.

Now we come to a problem that I had to resolve if I was to stand by the conclusion that a pre-tribulation rapture is taught in the book of *Revelation*. Where, exactly, is it in the book? How could there be an event of such importance in a book about end times, and that event not be readily found? There is no explicit description of Jesus coming to rescue people who are ready and watching for Him.

As I said previously, the book has deliberately and cleverly kept this event in obscurity. It is there, but through a symbolic description, and the symbolism has profound impact. In *Revelation* 4:1, John begins, “After these things....” As discussed in chapter one above, this phrase is a literary tool that is used to help move the plot forward. John uses it quite often throughout *Revelation*. It is a signal from John that we are moving on to a next section of his book, whether the new section represents a chronological or thematic change, or both.

However, to our surprise, John almost immediately uses the same phrase over again. This second time, however, it is not an editorial comment, a “literary tool,” it is used in a direct quote that John hears and reports. Read this carefully to observe the two uses of the phrase:

“After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.’ Immediately I was in the Spirit....” [4:1-2]

The voice that John hears and quotes for us here repeats exactly what John heard and quoted in *Revelation* 1:19, “Write therefore the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things.” With these two uses of the phrase, “after these things,” we gather two pieces of information. First, editorially, John is simply saying that we are

now moving on his book. But the second use informs us that we are also moving on chronologically, from “the things which are,” to “the things which shall take place after these things.”

This then affirms that the days of the church, are now over. The church is not mentioned again until the wrap up in *Revelation* 22, and in 4:1, we are at a pivotal moment. And what, exactly, is it that happens at this pivotal moment? The wording reflects everything that a pre-tribulation rapture has us expecting.

First, “a door standing open in heaven.” The concept of a rapture of faithful followers of Jesus being snatched up and brought into His eternal presence, what better symbol of this could be used than “a” door standing open in heaven? And not “the” door, but “a” door. This is not the only way or time that access to heaven will be granted, but this is certainly one such moment. The Greek verb tense for “standing open” implies permanence; those entering are doing so permanently.

Second, the voice that John hears is “like the sound of a trumpet.” In another early Christian end-times prophecy, we are told that the return of Jesus to gather His people to Himself would happen at a God ordained moment, and would be accompanied by “the last trumpet.”⁹⁵ In *Revelation*, it is further revealed that “the last trumpet” is actually a series of trumpet blasts, and the event of *Revelation* 4:1 has a special place in that series.

Next, the call, “Come up here....” Here is the invitation to depart and go with Jesus. Admittedly, John is the only one who hears it and goes from a literary point of view, but he is the prophet of the book, and moves with the book; John’s moment is not the final moment of the church age, he is just going through the door prophetically, “in the Spirit.” When the prophecy has its fulfilment in real time, and there is a mighty call from heaven, like the sound of a trumpet, “Come up here”; and a door to heaven is flung open for permanent access - who is it that will be part of the actual, ultimate fulfilment of this prophecy? It will be those who are escaping by readiness. John himself goes as their prophetic representative. If this seems a bit of a stretch, I invite

⁹⁵ This prophecy is found in a letter of the apostle Paul to the Corinthian church, *1 Corinthians* 15:51-52.

you to hold your judgment; for a parallel moment repeats later in the book that helps to confirm this interpretation.

Finally, one more detail of the wording is quite noteworthy here. In *Revelation 4:2*, John begins, "Immediately...." His transfer to heaven was immediate. Now if we were reading in the gospel of *Mark* and we came upon the word "immediately," we would not think it noteworthy. Mark seems to be writing for an audience with a short attention span - something like today's audience of movie trailers. He has to keep the story moving quickly, so he transitions between his pericopes quickly by the words, "And immediately...." He uses the word 41 times in his gospel. Matthew uses it 18 times, Luke uses it 33 times in Luke/Acts. But John? He is not at all fond of the word "immediately." He uses it only 6 times in his gospel, none at all in his three epistles, and - you guessed it - exactly ONE time in the whole book of *Revelation*. Only here. Why? Well, if this passage is a symbolic description of a biblical rapture to come, one that is to effect the transformation of people from earth to eternity in "the twinkling of an eye," then, yes, John did well to save the word for this occasion alone. The faithful people of God are simply gone. They had a split second to make their choice to go and they did so. Their absence is almost eerie. We did not see them go, they just disappeared.

Those remaining will be left to deal with that mystery. The tribulation period is ushered in, whether that very day, or whether shortly thereafter. Times will start to become tough for the residents of planet earth. Happily, the end of the church age is not the end of God's mercy. Those facing the tribulation will now be given a second opportunity for escape, though not an easy one.

ESCAPE BY FIRE

We begin again in *Revelation 7* where we earlier observed 144,000 people "from every tribe of the sons of Israel," specially set apart by God. [7:4] I said at that point that I was inclined to believe that this group of people were to be taken literally as Jewish, rather than the Jewish description being symbolic of

people from whatever background belonging to God. Today as we go further into chapter 7, we are introduced to a second group of people juxtaposed to the first group of 144,000. The second group is described so differently as to confirm that the first group should be taken as literally Jewish.

“After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’” [7:9-10]

This vision happens between the sixth and seventh seal of *Revelation 6*, and it is preparing us for what will happen in the next period of time, the first half of the tribulation period.

We should notice several things about this new group of people. They are so great a number as to be beyond counting. An army of 200,000,000 was countable according to *Revelation 9:16*. Does this mean that we are encountering a multitude far bigger than that? Should we be thinking of billions and not millions? We find them “before the throne,” thus they are in the presence of God and of the Lamb. They are clothed “in white robes,” so they are pictured as people who have been cleansed from all sin and who have fulfilled righteous acts before God. Their hearts are bursting with worship and thanks to God, specifically for their “salvation,” so they are a massive group of people that have been “rescued.” Is this, then, a picture of those who were “raptured” before the tribulation, those who “escaped by readiness”? Or just who are these people? The text anticipates our need to know.

“And one of the elders answered, saying to me, ‘These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and from where have they come?’ And I said to him, ‘My lord, you know.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their

robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”
[7:13-14]

Ah! These are not those who have escaped the tribulation by readiness, these are the ones who have experienced the tribulation and who have come out of it, who are now “before the throne of God,” and serving Him day and night in His temple. [7:15] The plan of God through the tribulation period has been highly effective! The prophetic work of the two special prophets of the first half of the tribulation has reached the very ends of the earth so that people from every single language and people group have heard and responded to the offer of God’s mercy and salvation. The number of those who have responded is - what, in the billions?

The introduction of this group is immediately followed by an outburst of praise and worship by “all the angels.” [7:11] Jesus one time said that there is joy in heaven over “one sinner who repents.”⁹⁶ Witnessing countless millions or even a billion people fleeing to God for rescue in the short space of three and a half years was almost more than the angels could take in! If it is true that there are guardian angels assigned to people, imagine the joy of each angel as the object of their care suddenly finds the mercy of God.

How did this group of people get to be in the presence of God, worshipping Him before His throne? Have they been martyred during the tribulation? Furthermore, why are we concluding that they have come out of the first half of the tribulation, and not from the whole of it?

There is no evidence from the text that this group has been martyred. Soon we are going to see another rescued group that is composed largely of martyrs, but not this group. We are actually told what it is that this group in *Revelation 7* have escaped from: “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat.” [7:16] These people have suffered terribly, but they have suffered in ways corresponding to the judgments of God that have been called down by the two prophets in the first half of the tribulation.

⁹⁶ Luke 15:10

There is no suggestion that they have had to face the demands of the antichrist in the second half of the tribulation. They have hungered and endured scorching heat, and it was the first trumpet judgment that decreed massive loss of vegetation through burning heat; and the second trumpet that destroyed 1/3 of marine life; in addition to the heat, they have lived in a world where the global sources for food had been drastically decreased. They have thirsted: the third trumpet judgment turned poisonous at least a third of earth's fresh water making short supply of potable water.

Interestingly, this group of people do not seem to have suffered from the fierce stings of the demonic locusts of the fifth trumpet [*Revelation* 9:1-11]. Why might this be? We already saw the answer to this in our fifth chapter, *Waves of Wrath*. The locusts were specifically told that they did not have authority to sting anyone who had the seal of God upon them. This group of people consists of those who obeyed the call of the two prophets; they fled to Jesus for forgiveness and rescue, and in doing so received God's seal; for them, exemption from the stinging fury of the locusts is their first experience of His salvation.

If this group has "come out of the great tribulation," they have come out of the first half of it. This will be confirmed further in the last section of the present chapter. We are left with the other, all important question: how did these people come to be in heaven, enjoying the presence and protection of God? They were not martyred, but they did "come out" of the great tribulation. How did this happen?

Furthermore, this group does not appear again in the second half of the tribulation. There we meet a completely different group of rescued people, but not these. These are just gone! Their absence from earth is just as eerie and unnerving as was the absence of the first group who "escaped by readiness." Could there have been another rapture?

You may recall that early in this chapter I noted three different views of when the rapture would happen: pre-tribulation (before the tribulation); mid-tribulation (in the middle of the tribulation); and post-tribulation (at the end of the tribulation.) The reason that there are three views is that as people study *Revelation* and

the rest of the Bible, the matter is not exactly clear. There can be verses and statements found in support of all three views, which has led to the development of different “camps” of eschatology.

But what if, instead, they are all correct? What if there is indeed a pre-tribulation rapture, and those who are “ready” for the return of Jesus are snatched up and “kept from” [3:10] the great tribulation? Now we discover there is also a mid-tribulation rapture, in which those who flee to Jesus during the judgments of the first half of the tribulation are snatched up and come “out of” [7:14] the great tribulation.

This possibility does not fit any of our nicely defined eschatologies, but that doesn’t really matter. What matters is whether or not this hope is actually offered to us in the book of *Revelation*. And that REALLY DOES MATTER! For consider who might be found in the midst of such a group of refugees.

Perhaps the very children and loved ones that some had to leave behind when they escaped by readiness! Children who had not taken mom or dad’s faith to heart, they didn’t see its value; or those who had grown up following Jesus, but had been gradually lured away by the many options life had offered them. Spouses who had been prayed for over the years, now moved to take a second look at what their husband or wife had been trying to tell them. No end of relatives and friends of sincere followers of Jesus, who had lived and rubbed shoulders with them in time past, but finally in the tribulation period humbling themselves and coming to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness. Weeping, frightened, and hurting - but at last finding salvation, guided by the instructions of the two great tribulation prophets. There may be a glorious reunion yet to come for parents who had grieved over the stubborn unbelief of their children, or wives over their husbands, brothers over their sisters, etc.

Perhaps a large number of this second group of rescued people are “church” people. Some, those who thought the church was going to save them; after all, they were baptized and had participated in the sacraments and had given their money. But they missed the rapture, Jesus did not come for them! Others, those who had fallen asleep, spiritually speaking, who had become careless about their relationship with Jesus and were not

ready when He came for His people. Church people, shaken to the core, suddenly realizing that they are on the verge of losing everything; they turn around, take Jesus seriously like never before, and hold to Him faithfully through the toughness of tribulation days.

This is only the beginning. Included also are millions of unchurched people, agnostics, atheists, and eclectics, who had been completely deceived by the lie that all roads lead to God, or that whatever you believe is as valid and reliable as what anyone else believes. People who had despised the name of Jesus because they thought it was all just a fairy tale for the weak minded; they hear the warnings of the two prophets, they see the proofs, they realize their error, and fall to their knees crying out for another chance: "God forgive me for the attitude I've had towards Your Son!" Immediately they are forgiven and added to the number of this second wave of humanity to be rescued.

Perhaps the greatest surprise of all, something thought scarcely possible heretofore, now becomes the new reality: people from "every nation and tribe and tongue and people" - yes, even people from nations devoted to the great world religions, whether Hindu or Buddhist or Muslim or Sikh, people from folk religions and local religions, animists, etc., they hear the global message from the two prophets, they experience the reality of God's judgments, and in healthy fear flee for their lives in large number to Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

Today this sounds like mere Christian triumphalism, like Christians dreaming of their religion becoming first among world religions and winning some kind of contest. Not so. Christianity as a world religion already boasts the largest number of adherents globally, but is nevertheless going to suffer the same fate as all religions, something we will discuss in our next chapter. Belonging to the world religion called "Christianity" has little to do with one's success in escaping the judgment of God. We do not discover in the book of *Revelation* a religious contest which "Christianity" wins. We discover that there is only ONE way to escape the coming wrath of God, and it is Jesus. He is God's offer to mankind, not earth's or humanity's or Christianity's invention. Jesus came to save Jews, Muslims, atheists, Hindus, Christians,

Buddhists, animists, and all others. Anyone of any background or religion who flees to Jesus for salvation and forgiveness will be rescued and taken into eternity to live forever with the only God who exists. What the book of *Revelation* tells us is that the number of people who are going to do exactly this during the horrors of the tribulation period is beyond counting.

“And God shall wipe every tear from their eyes.” [7:17] Tears, yes. At what a cost, through what tribulation, this mass of humanity will come to Jesus. It is “an escape by fire.” However, if this is what it takes, anything is better than facing the eternal judgment of God. Those who live through this period will suffer, but they will find in the long run that it has all been worth it; their every tear will be wiped away by God Himself. As the ancient Hebrew poet once said, “Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.”⁹⁷

We have one last question to answer before we move on. This massive group of people are not martyred, they are suddenly and simply gone. They are nowhere to be found in the rest of the tribulation period. It appears to be a second stage of rescue that leaves the world in a state of perplexity as did the first. If the book of *Revelation* is leading us to expect a second rapture in the middle of the tribulation period, where do we find it in the book? Just as such an event so significant as the rapture that precedes the tribulation should be discernible somewhere in the book, so should this second rapture, don't you think? Can we find it?

The answer is yes, though once again the book of *Revelation* shapes the literary description of this rapture to match the physical event. It is all but invisible, and it happens in a flash. “And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here.’ And they went up into heaven in the cloud....” [11:12]

This verse is describing the ascension into heaven of the two prophets of God who are killed by the antichrist at the end of the first half of the tribulation. They are killed, but they come back to life after three and one half days; they are not left on the earth at that point, but are caught up to heaven. This event perfectly mirrors the event that described the first rapture in *Revelation* 4:1. The call is exactly the same, “Come up here!” The prophets

⁹⁷ *Psalm* 30:5

are immediately caught up to heaven just as John was in 4:2. In this case, they are caught up “in the cloud.” What cloud are we talking about? Why even mention a cloud? Well, if the number of those who “escape by fire” is more than can be counted, and if they suddenly disappear from earth and reappear in heaven at the end of this half of the tribulation, what description could be more appropriate than a cloud surrounding the two prophets as they are whisked heavenward?⁹⁸ The two prophets, exactly as had happened with John in *Revelation* 4:2, are described as “going up” themselves, but they go up as representatives for all those who respond to their ministry; just as John represents those who respond to his ministry and make themselves “ready” for the coming of Jesus. Given that *Revelation* has notified us that it is going to speak to us in symbols, it is completely consistent to conclude that the “cloud” of *Revelation* 11:12 in which the two prophets went to heaven represents the cloud of people who went with them. This is unbeknownst, of course, to the spectators of the event, but nevertheless, a mid-tribulation rapture, for those who have now “escaped by fire.”

ESCAPE BY MARTYRDOM

When the seventh trumpet sounds in *Revelation* 11:14, it signals that the second half of the tribulation is about to begin. The two prophets of the first half have just been killed, resurrected, and taken up to heaven. The antichrist has entered the world scene as a hero who has rid humanity of the two prophets. Whole new dimensions of God’s judgment are about to be released. However, instead of a time of total darkness, we are quickly brought back to the greater purposes of God which are rooted in His mercy and the rescue of His people. We are coming to the third stage of “escape,” and as we have mentioned previously, we will discover here a special focus of God on rescuing His chosen people, the Jews.

⁹⁸ This symbolism is not unique to John’s usage in *Revelation*. When the rapture is described in another New Testament prophecy given by the apostle Paul, *1 Thessalonians* 4:17, it also includes “clouds” as part of the description. The host of saints from the Old Testament is also described in as a “cloud” of witnesses in the New Testament book of *Hebrews*, 12:1.

“And I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him 144,000.” [14:1] This group was set apart by the decree of God during the first half of the tribulation, and if there was a rapture at the end of that period, they were not included in it. However, their being “left behind” is apparently not due to any unworthiness; rather, they are found to be entirely righteous and devoted to the Lamb, Jesus. The fact that they have His name, and the name of God His Father written on their foreheads is a pre-emptive strike against the antichrist. They are a force for the purposes of God in the second half of the tribulation, and they are already out of the antichrist’s reach before he even gets started.

The moral code of this group is described like this: “These are the ones who have not been defiled with women, for they are celibates.” [14:4] Given that the entire Bible upholds marriage, sexual fulfillment, and procreation as a “blessing” of God that was granted at creation before sin was even in the world, this particular character of the 144,000 cannot imply that marriage would have been defiling for them. Rather, the time of the tribulation is not a time for marriage and the raising of a family. It is a brief, intense time of great distress. What it is about this group that distinguishes them from the rest of the world, is that they resolutely abstain from sexual immorality. They are God’s chosen servants, set apart for the special task of preparing people for a final rescue.

We are also told that “they have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.” [14:4] This is an unexpected suggestion of hope. “First fruits” are a selection of the initial harvest of a garden, field, orchard, etc. They are only a sampling, from the beginning of the crop. If there are first fruits, then there is a harvest to follow. Here we are in the last half of the tribulation, when God’s unrestrained judgment is about to be poured out, when the antichrist is about to establish a completely totalitarian governance over humanity; and before it begins, we are told to expect a great harvest of people who are of the same character as these 144,000. There is yet to be another massive turning to Jesus in this period of the tribulation. We saw earlier from *Revelation 7* that the 144,000 are chosen from the “sons of

Israel.” They are Jewish. And if the first fruits are Jewish people who have declared allegiance to Jesus, then the great harvest to come should be Jewish people who choose Jesus. Is this confirmed in the text?

Just as hope was given of a great multitude being rescued during the first half of the tribulation [7:9-10], so now hope is given of another great multitude being rescued; obviously it is a different group from the former group which is no longer in view; but it is a wonderful and similar outcome from the second half of the tribulation.

“And I saw, as it were, a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had come off victorious from the beast and from his image and from the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God.” [15:2]

This group of people refused to take the mark of the beast and chose rather to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom. The group who turned to Jesus for rescue during the first half of the tribulation were people from every nation, people, tribe and language. They were ethnically diverse. Who are the people of this latter group?

“And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God and the song of the Lamb.” [15:3] A cherished, biblical value is introduced here that we have not seen previously in *Revelation*: the ministry of Moses, the Old Testament prophet and leader of Israel. Who would burst into worshipful singing that connects Moses and the Lamb? Jewish people who have also embraced Jesus! After their song of praise, we read that “the temple of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven was opened....” [15:5] Once again the description is rich in Old Testament, Jewish language. The “tabernacle” was the moveable tent of worship that Moses and the people of Israel had taken with them on their wilderness journeys; the “testimony” represented God’s direct presence and His word to His people, including the tablets of stone which contained the ten commandments, preserved in the “ark of the covenant,” which also appears in the heavenly temple in anticipation of the second half of the tribulation. [11:19] All signs

point to this group being Jewish, a people about to flee to Jesus for rescue, and thus escape from the judgment of God, even if an “escape by martyrdom.”

How on earth will this happen? The Jews on the whole have been decidedly unwilling to embrace Jesus throughout history. What will change their minds now?⁹⁹

Those things which look to us like terrible developments on earth - and indeed, they are terrible - will in fact be the very circumstances that enable the Jews to discover who their messiah really is. It is not that other people could not turn to Jesus during the second half of the tribulation. The door remains open. However, it appears that most Gentiles (ie. non-Jews) will have made their final decision by this time. The judgments of the first half of the tribulation have caused as many as would be willing to flee to Jesus for mercy and rescue, to do so. We saw them: a multitude no one could count. The rest had grown more and more determined that they would never bow the knee to Jesus. In general terms, God’s final harvest of the Gentiles is over, the “times of the Gentiles” have been fulfilled,¹⁰⁰ and He is now bringing the Jewish people back to Himself.

They, along with much of the rest of humanity, had resisted the call to come to Jesus through the first half of the tribulation, but their reasons were different. When Gentiles refused to bow the knee to Jesus in the time of tribulation, it was because of their stubborn pride, their refusal to submit to the lordship of Jesus, and their unwillingness to abandon wickedness and immorality. Their response is described here:

“The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders nor

⁹⁹ In Romans 11, the apostle Paul also describes a day yet to come in which God will rescue the Jewish people as a whole through His Son, Jesus. How that could happen is almost unimaginable until we see the extreme measures that God will use to do so in the second half of the tribulation, according to

Revelation.

¹⁰⁰ Luke 21:24

of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts.” [9:20-21]

However, the Jews refused to bow because they did not believe Jesus is the messiah of God. They longed for God, they longed to please Him; but they did not believe that Jesus is the pathway to Him. They were prepared to be loyal to their coming messiah at any cost; and that messiah was not Jesus. They heard the messages of the two prophets of God, but they did not believe, in spite of the judgments.

However, the last three and a half years of the tribulation brought about an unexpected discovery for the Jews. The first step towards it was the antichrist’s demand that the world worship him. The Jewish people would never agree to do that, and all the more so because of his flagrant trespass of occupying the place reserved for God in their temple.¹⁰¹ This act by itself will so offend the Jews that they will abhor the antichrist and refuse his reign. To whom, then, should they flee? All other religion, including Judaism, will be forbidden and destroyed, as we will discuss in chapter eight below. There will be no place to run; except that 144,000 of their own people spread shocking news among them: Jesus really is the Messiah of God, and they have personally experienced His love and presence. Add to this the work of God’s Spirit to suddenly open their eyes and let them see the truth and what they have done. Alas! They have rejected and hated their very own Messiah for generations! What a tragic mistake! How could they have done this? How could they have so hated and hurt the very one whom God had appointed to be their king and to re-establish the throne of their father, King David?

This discovery of their Messiah, Jesus, happens at the most intense time of suffering humanity has ever seen. This does not matter; the Jews are thrilled that they have found Him; it is the fulfilment of a hope that they have cherished for millennia. The antichrist was bringing the world into terrible darkness, with a special hatred for the Jews. It looked far too much to face,

¹⁰¹ This is prophesied by the apostle Paul in 2 *Thessalonians* 2:4. It is for this reason that many commentators anticipate a rebuilding of the Jewish temple at some time before the tribulation period.

another holocaust was arising. Now, instead, they realize that Jesus is the One they have waited for, that He died for them, and that He loved them in spite of their rejection of Him. His arms are open, He is offering them mercy, forgiveness, acceptance and rescue. All the promises of their prophets are still going to take place.

The doorway to this rescue has a formidable deterrent. The antichrist has decreed that all who refuse him will be killed, and beheadings become the mark of his ruthless tyranny. [20:4] Is any other way possible? None at all!

“If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.” [14:9-11]

Who can face such a choice? Bow to the antichrist and perish forever, or accept the offer of Jesus and face the guillotine. “Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.” [14:12] This is the one last offer of mercy from God: you can be rescued now, but your escape is going to be by martyrdom.

Who can face such a choice? Perhaps only Jewish people who have just discovered Jesus to be their Messiah! This is their chance to pay Him back for what He has done for them! This is their chance to prove the genuineness of their love towards Him! If this is the pathway that leads to the kingdom of God that they have always longed for, then they accept. For the Jewish people, this is their finest hour. This is their canonization as “the saints of God.” True survivors, those who escape by a glorious martyrdom.

A final question must be asked in light of the chapter we are bringing to a close. Is there a third rapture, a post-tribulation rapture? Certainly there is about to be a great resurrection; those

who lay down their life for Jesus in this last half of the tribulation will be raised back to life in very short order; we will look at this in chapter nine below. But are there people who refuse the demands of the antichrist, who refuse to worship his image, who choose the mercy offered them in Jesus at this last hour - and who somehow live through the tribulation to the end? It looks like most of them have been martyred; but one verse that is in the context of the second half of the tribulation suggests that some will have won the crown of victory by persevering for Jesus through long days of suffering and captivity rather than by dying for Him. "If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes." [13:10] Actually, as harsh as it may sound, those who are martyred seem to have had the easier option. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on! 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors.'" [14:13]

However, for those who somehow outlive this terrible ordeal, the visible return of Jesus to earth will be their salvation. Once again there is a declaration of "heaven opened" [19:11] and a great resurrection, the "first resurrection," will take place. [20:4-6] Here must occur the final fulfilment of the enduring Christian hope, that "the dead in Jesus will rise first", and that those "who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds...."¹⁰² Here we find a third stage of the rapture, what could be called a post-tribulation rapture.

Through this last half of the tribulation period God has brought to a finish the redemptive dimension of His creation project. The mine is exhausted, the gold has all been safely recovered. He now has for Himself a people who have chosen Him above all else, who have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" [7:14], who have embraced righteousness and demonstrated an unshakable allegiance to Jesus, His Son. "The marriage of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready." [19:7] The Bride would never have been complete without a massive return to Jesus from among the Jewish people. Their Messiah must at last find His chosen people in His embrace. The text does not explicitly state that only Jews turn to Jesus during the second half of the tribulation; it just points in the

¹⁰² *1 Thessalonians 4:16-17*

direction that it is predominately Jews who do so. Neither does the text state that only Gentiles turn to Jesus in the first half; the door to mercy has been left open until the end of the tribulation for everyone who will enter.

If God has dealt with different segments of humanity in different ways at different times, His goal is that an undivided eternal kingdom will result, with no distinction between Jews and Gentiles (or on any other ground.) By the time the “saints” get through the challenges of the earthly journey and have been humbled and purified by the fires of testing; and though that journey has been different for different people; the result will be a people who are one in Jesus and for Jesus. The Bride will be composed of people from every corner of the world, Jew and Gentile. Survivors, united and unified by this one thing: Jesus created them all, loved them all, died for them all, and rescued them all from the wrath of God. They are His people, His Bride, His eternal companion. They are pure gold.

Our last chapter, *Peace at Last*, will explore the final stages of God’s creation project, leading to paradise, the new heaven and the new earth. However, because the book of *Revelation* pauses to treat one more important aspect of the human story, we too will now spend a chapter there: *World empire and the end of religion*.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WORLD EMPIRE AND THE END OF RELIGION

Throughout the history of human society, it is hard if not impossible to find an example of a culture devoid of religion. From the ancient to the modern world, one of the special characteristics that can be studied of any given people is its religion. Although voices of religious skepticism and cynicism can also be found, wherever there is human society there is religion. Even modern attempts to suppress it, such as in the USSR, China, and North Korea, which succeeded at the level of public policy, did not eradicate religion, perhaps scarcely even diminished it, among the general populace. If the Western world managed a period of widespread secularization as an inevitable outcome of the Enlightenment, even that did not last. Religion returned in the post-modern world with an adaptability never before imagined but quite in step with religion's time-tested resilience. Where there is man, there is religion. Should the story or a "meta-narrative" of the human journey be told, it would have to include the phenomenon of religion.

In the broadest possible terms, the book of *Revelation* provides for us just such a meta-narrative. It roots the story in God who set it into motion and superintended it towards its purposeful end. We have identified the major participants, we have observed the tensions between God's wrath and mercy, and we are almost at the end of the story, *Peace at Last*. Before celebrating the completion of God's creation project, however, the book of *Revelation* looks back on the powerful role that religion has played in the journey. The facts are assessed, a verdict is given, and the sentence is pronounced. Of all the acts of God's judgment described in *Revelation*, none is given more attention, especially with respect to its impact on humanity, than His judgment upon religion. It must be that we are to take notice.

Anyone familiar with the text of *Revelation* may be aware that there is no explicit mention of the end of religion; what it talks

about is the fall of “Babylon, the great city.” This city is also pictured as a woman [17:3], and the woman in turn is called “the great harlot.” [17:1] So the first question we must ask is whether we are correct in concluding that “Babylon,” the great harlot, is a symbol representing religion.

There is a statement in the text that addresses this question, but even the statement itself is open to debate. “Why do you wonder?” asks the angel, “I shall tell you the mystery of the woman...; ...the woman you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.” [17:7,18] As John heard these words, it is likely that he would have thought, “Rome.” It was the city of imperial power in his day, many kings and nations were under its dominion. However, upon further reflection, such an interpretation is too narrow to satisfy the requirements of this symbol. For one thing, if the “great city” reigns over the kings of the earth, then Rome is ruling over Rome, for it too has a king. More importantly, the woman is pictured as sitting on the beast with the seven heads and ten horns. [17:3] Following our conclusion that this beast represents all human government, past, present, and future, this “great city” of Babylon has and will always have some kind of regal influence over human government, whereas Rome did not reign but for a small percentage of the total time. We have to look for something more vast and more enduring than Rome.

We have noted often that *Revelation* draws upon other books included in the Bible, and in this case it is especially true. Babylon is a name that John brings forward from the earliest of biblical traditions. We are first introduced to Babylon in *Genesis* 11, where the name is often translated, Babel. It is the same Hebrew word that through the rest of the Old Testament is translated, Babylon. It is in the *Genesis* account that Babylon the Great reveals the origin of its symbolism.

In the process of repopulation after the flood, there must have been a great sense of insecurity in the collective memory: could it happen again? A small but growing society decided to take the steps necessary to provide security for themselves. They would build a city, and included in it, a tower of great height, one that would reach “to heaven.” This would be for them a source of

pride, permanence and protection. Of course, another option for permanence and protection would have simply been to fear and obey the God who had brought judgment upon the earth; Noah's sons were still alive at this time and people were their descendants, so there was plenty of reliable information about this God. Man, however, prefers to build his own way to permanence and security, and his own way "to heaven." The city and the tower were the preferred option.

The story goes on to say that God Himself intervened. He created new languages and distributed them to family groups. It must have been startling for people to have suddenly become complete strangers to one another, no more able to communicate. The strategy was effective, and they moved away from one another and formed new communities according to their respective languages. The building did not completely stop, and today the remains of primitive, city / towers called "ziggurats," amounting to temple monuments of ancient religion, can be found in both Iraq and Iran. Babel (or Babylon) was the first experiment in organized religion following the flood of Noah. God's intervention was successful in stopping mankind from building a singular massive temple structure, but it did not stop man's desire to have his own religion, and to build his own towers to heaven. We have been building religious systems ever since.

Should there be any doubt remaining as to the identification of Babylon with human religion, the fact that it is also described as "the great harlot" is equally or even more compelling; for what is a harlot? She is an illegitimate lover. Her activities by definition create unfaithfulness. She takes what is not rightfully hers and profits by it. Since we are thinking in terms of the big picture, the "meta-narrative" of the human story, the symbolism is not hard to apply.

Why did God make mankind in the first place? We get an immediate idea by simply looking at the creation story and what was happening in the Garden of Eden. On a daily basis the Creator God went to meet with Adam and Eve, to walk and talk with them; He made them so that He could enjoy a personal relationship with them. He didn't mind that they had each other in addition to Him, in fact He intended it that way. He didn't mind

that they were going to have a family, for He blessed them and told them to be fruitful and multiply. He didn't mind that they would be occupied with looking after the garden for He assigned the care of His creation to them. He expected them to live a fully human life. It was all good, and woven throughout was to be an ongoing, unbroken relationship with Him. Despite the separation which sin subsequently introduced between God and man, the continuing story of the Bible is one of repairing the relationship, both on individual and corporate levels.

As we get towards the end of *Revelation* we see a glorious celebration of the Son of God finally receiving His Bride. We discover that the whole plot of the Bible has been romance; humanity finds its ultimate purpose, God finds the eternal companion He was seeking for His Son. Inkings of this romance were evident in the creation story, humanity by its very nature anticipated it. God, in His kindness, granted to mankind a parallel experience of romance, marriage, and intimacy. It turns out that WE are the metaphor! God longs for humanity to be in love with Him, to be one with Him, and to have our world revolve around Him.

By living out this metaphor, we also feel the pain when our special relationship is transgressed, when our spouse is unfaithful, when we suffer betrayal from the one we love. Our hearts are broken and our spirits are crushed because the one who promised us unending love, the one we trusted and counted on and built our life around - has turned to another! God has built right into our souls an exact mirror of His own heart with respect to the humanity He created for Himself. We know the treachery of the adulteress, the harm and hurt that a harlot brings about.

God made us to know Him, love Him, live for Him and live with Him, but our hearts have turned to another, or better, to others. Mankind builds religions out of his own imagination, creates his own gods, finds his own way. The reason why God commanded that there should be no images made of Him [*Exodus* 20:3-5] is that He is a real Person, existing in a spiritual dimension invisible to humans. He wants an inner, personal relationship with every human being. No image man could make would ever do Him justice, it would only distract, mislead, and become a false

substitute for Him.¹⁰³ The reason He commanded that we should worship no other god than Him is because *there is no other god than Him!* Sure, we can create our own gods, and Satan and his demons can give them a spiritual reality so that they seem like bonafide gods; for Satan is only too happy to usurp the worship that is due to God alone; but they are not God.

To a world that had lost sight of Him, God sent His Son, Jesus, to communicate and demonstrate who He truly is and what He is like. The Bridegroom came to introduce Himself to His Bride. The miracles that He performed and the spirit in which He did those miracles were evidence enough of God's power and love; but His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection three days later were the ultimate proof. This is no myth created by a few Christian writers of the first century. Lest anyone think it a simple thing to deny the credibility of the Jesus story, note that even the great Roman historian, Tacitus, one who wanted to do anything but support the cause of the Jesus movement, provided us with a pagan (and hostile) account.¹⁰⁴ We have no excuse for disbelieving the historicity of the Jesus stories and the salvation He brought from Almighty God into our world.

Sadly, the world of humanity, generally speaking, has no ears to hear and no appetite for the true and living God. Its heart has been lured away by countless alternative ideas of religion. It has now convinced itself that all religious beliefs, albeit mutually exclusive and intellectually incompatible, are nevertheless equally valid, and that all religious roads ultimately lead to the same place. The true and living God, who seeks a personal, individual relationship with human beings, is shut out. Devotion and affection is poured out instead on gods and treasures of every other variety. The great harlot, through all of history to this day, has stolen the hearts of men; she indulges endlessly in her illegitimate affairs; she has succeeded in separating humanity

¹⁰³ A shocking exception to God's law that mankind should have no image of Him is stated in another New Testament book. Colossians 1:15 states that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God." No one could have guessed that God Himself would one day provide for us a legitimate image of Him, Jesus His Son. Jesus, the living, authentic, perfect reflection of and even shared identity with the eternal God. Do we want to see and worship the living God? Look to Jesus!

¹⁰⁴ See Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44

from its rightful love, the God who created it for Himself. She must be held accountable and be judged for her sin against God and man.

The vision of her seated on the beast which has the seven heads and the ten horns [17:3] adds another dimension to the place in the world which she has usurped. So pervasive and powerful is the influence of religion upon humanity that "...with [her] the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality." [17:2] Rulers and kings and tyrants realize that influence over their people is greatly increased if they model, promote, or even represent the religious beliefs of their subjects. Whereas rulers, as all other human beings, are called to worship the true and living God, to walk with Him and trust Him for the security of their lives, and in their case, of their positions of power, there is no way that they will do this. To do so would seem "political suicide." No indeed. "The waters which you saw where the harlot sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues." [17:15] Religion navigates upon the sea of people who make up the world's populations, she pervades humanity. Embrace and promote the religion of your people and you will have a much greater chance of survival as ruler.

Akhenaten of Egypt,¹⁰⁵ who enjoyed relative longevity as Pharaoh, and is regarded even today as a scientific thinker, spent much of his energy on unifying his people under worship of the sun god, Aten. Alexander the Great's¹⁰⁶ religious views are not transparent; did he really think he was of divine descent, or did he simply use that belief to enhance his power? Either way, his influence especially in the east was improved by the perception. Early Roman emperors assumed the role and title of "Pontifex Maximus"¹⁰⁷ so that they would be seen as the human intermediary with the pagan gods; Constantine the Great¹⁰⁸ adapted himself to Christianity when it appeared politically expedient. (Even so, he never gave up the title, "Pontifex Maximus.") Napoleon,¹⁰⁹ regarded by many as the greatest

¹⁰⁵ 14th century, BC.

¹⁰⁶ 4th century, BC.

¹⁰⁷ Head priest of all Roman religion.

¹⁰⁸ 4th century, AD.

¹⁰⁹ 18th-19th century, AD.

military strategist of all time, nevertheless did not overlook the importance of religion: he established Roman Catholicism as the state religion of France. Perhaps the most obvious recent example is the Ayatollah Khomeini, who led the 1979 revolution in Iran that removed the last Shah and established Iran as a Muslim state under himself as political and religious leader. Examples are so abundant that, apart from the last 150 years, it is the exception that is hard to find. Political power is fortified by religious adherence. The great harlot sits “as a queen” [18:7] on the back of the seven headed beast of political power.

However, God’s plan is for her overthrow, which *Revelation* tells us will happen in the last half of the tribulation period. It is an almost unimaginable development; how could the world’s billions be separated from their traditional religions? Nevertheless, the prophecy is that it will happen, and world leaders who relied upon her are going to be shaken to the core:

“And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her, will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke of her burning, standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! For in one hour your judgment has come.’” [18:10]

That may be the time when they finally distance themselves from religion, but they do so only when there is no other option.

Another dimension of the great harlot’s evil influence also calls for our reflection. Religion is not just called the great harlot, she is also described as “the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.” [17:5] The same passage also says that “...those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality.” [17:2] Religion has had a profound impact on humanity that has resulted in behaviour both immoral and irrational. Values are turned upside down, reason is distorted.

This is unexpected, for religion is supposed to be characterized by piety and reverence, is it not? Nevertheless, the book of *Revelation* returns a “guilty” verdict upon religion, both on its direct and its indirect influence. Religion has given direct rise to

everything from temple prostitution to self-mutilation; it has accepted human sacrifice, including the sacrifice of children; it has led to the worship of animals and nature instead of the one who made them. Religion has provided license to sin; it has resulted in racism, prejudice, hatred and vengeance, sectarian violence, even murder and warfare. "In her was found the blood of prophets and saints *and of all who have been slain on the earth.*" [18:24]

Perhaps the indirect influence of religion that has caused the most detriment to humanity is the distortion of moral values. When the great harlot succeeds in separating us from our Creator God, she removes us from the absolute moral truth that He affirms for us; and we are suddenly free to follow our own instincts and make our own moral rules. Unless humanity has absolute standards, it cannot adhere to right living, it does not even know what right living is. For those of us who have lived in North America for the past 50-80 years, we have seen a gradual but unmistakable change. On the spiritual side, we have distanced ourselves further and further from any sense of there being an unchanging, self-existent Creator God, and we have substituted our religious preferences for Him. On the behaviour side, we have abandoned almost any sense of moral rightness, especially with regard to sexuality: everything is now acceptable as long as it is "between consenting adults." Because our God no longer exists, and there is no one to whom we are accountable, we may simply live by our own preferences, follow popular opinion, and let the entertainment industry show us the way. We justify our behaviour because "in my view of god," such behaviour is okay. Ultimately the relationship between ourselves and religion has not taken us to God at all. It has taken us to ourselves. We have jilted the God who loves us, and we prefer it that way, because we prefer the moral freedoms we have won. All the while we shape our religion, if we have one, to appease our conscience.

It does not stop there.

"After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined

with his glory. And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!'" [18:2]

That statement sounds like religion has come to an end, that it has collapsed. That is not at all what the text has in mind:

““And she has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird.”” [18:2]

Birds in the parables of Jesus often represent Satan. *Revelation* says that human religion, for all its ostensible good intentions to build a tower to heaven to connect us with God, ends up becoming a dwelling place for demons. It ends up focused on idols and places and treasures where demons move in and actually interact with people and lead them to some kind of a spiritual experience, just not a spiritual experience with God. This is not to say that demons are controlling or possessing everyone involved in human religion, though they will do that when they can; they are just as content to simply deceive us into thinking we are on the right track towards God when in fact we are moving away from Him. However, they enter in through the doors that human religion creates for them. Little do we realize that the redefinition of morality that accompanied our drifting away from the Creator God was actually strategized by spiritual powers.

Of course, it could seem that in the West our moral standards have changed but that the change cannot be attributed to religion. For to a large degree, we have been rather extricated from religion, have we not? Is it not the *freedom from* religion that has allowed us to “come of age” and establish the brave new world of moral redefinition? And if there has been a relationship between religion and government down through the ages, the same can hardly be said for current Western government, can it? Today we value the separation of religion and government. We admitted earlier that exceptions to the relationship between government and religion may be found in the past 150 years. Might not our freedom from religion, both in public policy and in

private opinion, be disproving the theory of the influence of religion, at least in the West?

Revelation has anticipated this possibility and addressed it forcefully, for there is a third sphere of influence that is identified with respect to Babylon the Great. Not only does religion have impact first with respect to humanity as a whole, and second, with respect to human government; it also has a massive impact with respect to money, wealth, and the economy. This will be highly accentuated by the time the book of *Revelation* sees its ultimate fulfillment.

In the first place, the harlot is described as having gained considerable wealth from her importance. When we see her, she is resplendent “in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls.” [17:4] Religion has always tended to attract money, even in the poorest places of the world; despite all the poverty that may be in evidence, the temples, at least the primary ones, are adorned with images, decorations, equipment, architecture, priestly regalia, etc. made of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls. Historically, many of the most lavish and impressive architectural feats have been accomplished in the temples, basilicas, and cathedrals of religion.

Far more gripping, however, is the amount of wealth that has been accumulated by means of her: “...the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality.” [18:3] The height to which she has climbed in the arena of human society has engendered such commercial activity and economic prosperity that when she falls to the ground, the world economy collapses. The section of *Revelation* describing this is worth quoting:

“The merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her, because no one buys their cargoes any more; cargoes of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and every kind of citron wood and every article of ivory and every article made from very costly wood and bronze and iron and marble, and cinnamon and spice and incense and perfume and frankincense and wine and olive oil and fine flour and

wheat and cattle and sheep, and cargoes of horses and chariots and slaves and human lives.” [18:11-13]

When the great harlot is thrown down, the global economy also suddenly stops. The great stock exchanges of the world such as in New York, Frankfurt, Tokyo, Shanghai, London, etc., fall off the charts. Trillions and trillions of dollars are wiped out. Just as the world rulers whom we described earlier withdrew from the great harlot, so the money makers of the world

“who became rich from her, will stand at a distance because of the fear of her torment, weeping and mourning, saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen and purple, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls; for in one hour such great wealth has been laid waste.’” [18:15-17]

But how could the collapse of religion have this much impact on the global economy?

An idol is anything that mankind chooses to worship. Take a whole society - the Western world, for example - and free it from all the obligations of traditional religion, and set it loose to pursue wealth, economic prosperity, and the good life; and what do you have? A brand new “morph” of religion, the religion of money, wealth, and prosperity. The new god is money! Religion has found yet another way to rule the earth. Government leaders no longer court traditional religions; instead, they serve the new religion called “the economy.” Declare allegiance to this new love of mankind, succeed in this sphere, sacrifice all to this one purpose, and there is a good chance of popularity and longevity in power.

Other connections become all the more clear. If the last manifestation of the great harlot who steals the hearts of men, the last great religion, is a love of money, then no wonder the last church, Laodicea [3:17], which exists in this social environment, faces as its primary struggle the draw of earthly wealth. Jesus Himself warned of money as one of the great religious

competitors when He made the statement, “You cannot serve God and riches.”¹¹⁰

If the god of money is the religion that rules the world or a large part of it in the end times, no wonder *Revelation* sees religion as the instigator of immorality and of the abominations of the earth; no wonder that “in her was found the blood of prophets and saints and *of all who have been slain on the earth.*” [18:24] No one has to be told how much immorality, evil, violence, and murder is introduced into our world for the sake of money. And if most people are not involved in the pursuit of money to the extent of the worst, violent crimes, still financial prosperity has succeeded in taking the place of God in our hearts.

Thus, when we discover that one of the major themes of *Revelation* is the fall of the great city, Babylon, and that this symbolizes the end of religion, we should not be surprised to find that included in its downfall is also the end of the religion of prosperity.

“And every shipmaster and every passenger and sailor, and as many as make their living by the sea, stood at a distance, and were crying out as they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, ‘What city is like the great city?’ And they threw dust on their heads and were crying out, weeping and mourning, saying, ‘Woe, woe, the great city, in which all who had ships at sea became rich by her wealth, for in one hour she has been laid waste!’” [18:17-19]

This last quote highlights the speed at which religion and the global economy are going to collapse. Could it happen “in one hour” or “in one day”? Well, the fact that *Revelation* uses two different descriptions of time - one “hour” and one “day” - suggests figurative usage. However long the actual time, the point is that the collapse of religion and of the economy will happen so unexpectedly and so quickly and so completely as to render humanity into a state of utter shock.

¹¹⁰ This is the reading in the margin of the New American Standard Translation of *Matthew* 6:24. The translation in the actual text says, “You cannot serve God and mammon.”

To understand how this could happen, we must turn now to the theme of the other half of our chapter title, *World Empire*. We gave a fair amount of attention in chapter six above to the final world empire that will occur under the rule of the antichrist. This empire will last for a mere three and one half years, or “forty two months,” or “twelve hundred and sixty days.” It will be a time so unbearable that God has made the unusual concession of revealing its exact duration; the more usual way of wisdom is to face suffering one day at a time, not knowing what tomorrow will bring, and not knowing how long suffering will last. God will help us through today, and that is all we need to know. Not so during the final years of the tribulation. Anyone surviving it physically will at least be able to count down the days.

It is during this three and one half years that global religion and economy will collapse. The most influential factor in their demise will be the determination of the antichrist, supported as he is by his false prophet and his confederate kings, to obliterate religion. He rises to power through his success in destroying the two prophets of God who have tormented earth’s population during the first half of the tribulation. He deceives the world into believing that he is their hope of peace and of emancipation from the interference of Jesus. He sets himself up in the temple at Jerusalem, and declares himself to be the one true God, having come to rescue the world. As such, he sets out to annihilate all other religion.

“And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire. For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled.” [17:16-17]

A more violent and bloodthirsty regime the world has never before seen.

They will “hate” the harlot. Religion is their worst enemy, for it holds the hearts of mankind, something the antichrist demands

for himself alone. They will have no regard for temples or priests or worshipers or institutions or traditions; the confederate kings will mobilize their armies and storm the world's religious sites, burning buildings, shredding books, smashing idols, pillaging treasures, slaughtering adherents, defiling "holy" places, desecrating tombs, and obliterating all aids to religious life. "They will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire." Public obeisance to the image of the antichrist will be carefully monitored, and those resisting will be eliminated. Martyrs will be made of people from all religions if they are not willing to abandon their god(s) and bow instead to the antichrist. The choice will affect perhaps billions of people.

At the same time, the world's economic frenzy, the endless marketing and shopping, the pursuit of wealth - these too will be stopped in their tracks. What the world has treasured and trusted and lived for must be traded in for singular devotion to the antichrist. His mark on their foreheads or their right hands will be required of anyone participating in a now tightly controlled market system. The goal is not to facilitate economic prosperity, but rather to keep the supply of goods and food carefully guarded. Because of the concurrent judgments of God on the world during this period of time, food and water will be in scarce supply to begin with. Thus as distasteful as allegiance to the antichrist may become for anyone, it will remain the only option for survival.

In all this, we must not lose sight of what is really happening. While the antichrist and the dragon who empowers him believe they are accomplishing their own goals, they are actually fulfilling God's divine purposes. For it is God who has put it in their heart to do His will, and they are allowed to function only until His purposes have been completed. [17:17] In this case, it is the purpose of judgment. We have seen again and again that God would prefer to show mercy rather than enact judgment on humanity, but mercy is only available through His Son, Jesus. Those who refuse Him, those who opt for any other god and religion and lifestyle, must finally be judged. Here that time has come. God sends His own final wave of judgment (the seven bowls of wrath), and then uses the antichrist to bring to an end,

and ruthlessly so, all world religions, all local and personal religions, and the consuming love of money.

Following his success against all earthly religion and his mastery over surviving humanity, the antichrist will then turn his focus against the only remaining roadblock to his permanent reign on earth: Jesus Himself. He gathers his armies and his confederate kings to the place called Armageddon, not realizing that he is leading them into a trap as effective as the Red Sea had been against Pharaoh and his army. "These will wage war against the Lamb" [17:14] in hope of overthrowing Him.

This war will occur at the time of the visible return of Jesus [19:11-16], just previous to the inauguration of the millennium [20:4]. There is a reason for this, which we will explore in our last chapter. For now, we just note that the world is about to lose its entire human stratum of rule, order, and enforcement in a single battle.

"And I saw the beast [antichrist] and the kings of the earth and their armies, assembled to make war against Him who sat upon the horse, and against His army." [19:19]

Actually, it turns out to be not much of a battle.

"And the beast [antichrist] was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast [antichrist] and those who worshipped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat upon the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh." [19:20-21]

The antichrist is a very real emperor; the kings and the armies with him are very real kings and armies. The return of Christ is also a very literal event. Are the heavenly horses and army which are with Him literal? On that one, I am not sure, though there is

scriptural precedent for the possibility.¹¹¹ I guess there can be horses and armies when there need to be, for there is no shortage of angelic beings available to serve the purposes of God. To get sidetracked on this question would be to miss the main point of the prophecy. What matters is that the stage is set with the most powerful emperor who has ever lived, mobilized by the devil himself, leading a confederacy of kings and armies in unprecedented number. How hard is it for Jesus to defeat them? Apparently, the word that comes out of His mouth is all that is required! He who simply spoke into being the universe and all things in it, now speaks once more and in an instant defeats all the powers of darkness. A prophecy of much earlier times created the same expectation: “And then that lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will slay *with the breath of His mouth*, and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming.”¹¹² A mere puff of breath from His mouth, a mere word, is all it takes.

In our chapter on the great dragon, we asked why God would even allow forces of evil such as the devil and his angels into creation. Whether or not our answer to that question was adequate, the outcome of this episode in the human journey reinforces it: the devil has only been there because God allowed him to be, and when God wants him removed, it will be done without delay. For all the power and wisdom and influence of Satan, he is no match for Jesus. His best, most concentrated effort amounts to nothing. All the participants in the war are turned into carrion for greedy birds, while the antichrist and his false prophet are “thrown alive into the lake of fire.” [19:20] At this point the devil himself is chained and locked in the “abyss.” [20:3]

The last human empire comes to a grinding halt, and humanity becomes just like “sheep without a shepherd.” Consider what has been accomplished. Those who have turned to Jesus have been rescued from the scene; the rest of mankind has been punished severely for its sin and for its rejection of Jesus. All religion including the pursuit of wealth has been removed from the face

¹¹¹ See, for example, the invisible, spiritual military force that Elisha’s servant is suddenly granted to see, *2 Kings* 6:17.

¹¹² *2 Thessalonians* 2:8

of the earth, and the forces which accomplished this have now been dispatched to the netherworld. There is nothing left for man but to start over. The world is ready for a new era and a new ruler. *Peace at last*. To this we turn in our final chapter.

As we conclude our discussion on the end of religion, it would be wise for us to hear one final admonishment from the book. As *Revelation* 18 introduces its description of the fall of Babylon, John reports a voice from heaven saying,

“Come out of her, my people, that you may not participate in her sins, and that you may not receive of her plagues; for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.” [18:4-5]

Religion was man’s attempt to build a tower reaching to heaven; the verdict we hear from God in this text is that a tower has been built, alright, but not a tower of piety that connects man with God; it is a tower of sin that is calling down the judgment of God. Those found in her by the end of the tribulation are subject to that judgment, without mercy.

Much of the judgment of God that is predicted in *Revelation* is ultimately due to the harlotry and sins of Babylon the Great. Two full chapters (17-18) are given to the description of God’s special judgment upon her. This is more coverage than what is given to the new heaven and the new earth. Religion is the main thing that has kept humanity away from the true God and involved it in sin. Perhaps at this point we should point out that Christianity as a human institution and as a world religion is just as culpable as any other religion. Hearing the book of *Revelation* is not the same thing as hearing the story of Christianity. As a world religion, Christianity has developed rituals, set up images, blended with the beliefs and practices of other religions, engaged in crusades, slaughtered its enemies, defended immorality, looked to the sacraments and to the priesthood for salvation, etc. In general, it has lost sight of the one thing that ultimately matters for every human being, a personal relationship with Jesus. Perhaps the worst problem is the false sense of security that Christianity as a religion has given to billions of people, that their salvation is

secure because of the religion they espouse. Religion does not save anyone from the judgment to come; not even the Christian religion. Only Jesus Himself can rescue us.

Revelation is not a book for or about the Christian religion. It is a book about the Son of God being sent into the world to save every single person who will flee to Him. It is about the judgments coming upon those who miss Him. So when the voice from heaven calls out, "Come out from her, my people," every single one of us should stop and take stock. To what religion do I belong? To what am I trusting my rescue from the coming judgment of God? Name any religion you wish; the real question is, have I connected with Jesus to receive mercy, forgiveness, and rescue from Him? If the religion to which I belong, whatever the name, is not leading me to Jesus, what am I doing there? The voice addresses "my people." What are any of God's people doing in religious systems that are not under His blessing, but are leading people away from Jesus? *Come out*, he says. *Keep away from her sins, escape from her judgment.*

To be sure, the choice to "come out" may in many cases call for no small amount of courage and may involve suffering. Religion and culture are often so closely entwined as to be indistinguishable, and family relationships are bound up in traditional religion. A choice to separate oneself from any religion may result in isolation, misunderstanding, hurt, anger, and even persecution. Consolation will be found in Jesus to whom we flee, and it will be worth it no matter what the cost. When and where possible, the social losses might be replaced by a new circle of like-minded followers of Jesus. Nevertheless, we should not be naive about how difficult it is, and how great can be the cost, to flee to Jesus for mercy and rescue.

Another type of challenge also looms. If the last great religion in which many of us may find ourselves is the religion of money, the pursuit of wealth and prosperity, how do we come out of that one? How can we be sure that the love of our life is not money? We still have to live, work, and manage our finances; we still have to live in a society that is preoccupied with prosperity and financial security. Likely the answer has not that much to do with our personal, financial circumstances. It is more a question of the

heart, of where our affections lie. “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”¹¹³

Of course, the very first thing to do is to flee to Jesus! There is no sense trying to live in a vacuum, or trying to be good enough to go to heaven. We must come to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness, and determine that He will be in the centre of our heart’s affections. If we are pro-active about living for Him by reading the Bible and doing what it says, and by finding others of like mind and heart with whom we can share the journey, we will be in a much stronger position to succeed.

Then the Bible gives us several different activities that are intended to help us steer our hearts in the right direction, towards Jesus and away from the love of money. I will just mention them here; we can use them as “tools” to be sure that our religion is not the love of money. The first two I have already mentioned in chapter four when speaking about the challenges of the church of Laodicea.

First, we should tithe. Tithing is giving ten percent of your income to Jesus. If you find a church of people who are of like mind, serious about following Jesus, that is a good place to give your tithe. Tithing is “from the first” of whatever is your income or produce. It is not giving from what is left over, or from what we feel we can afford; it is from the first. We give to Jesus first, and we work with what is left over. This approach honours Him as God in our lives. It puts Him in the first place, which is exactly where we want Him! There is nothing like the discipline of tithing to be sure that our hearts, our hands, and our bank accounts are open to Him. If Jesus is in the first place, then money isn’t holding that position!

Second, we should share, even “scatter.” It might help just to hear a couple of affirmations about this that come from the Bible but are outside the book of *Revelation*.

“Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be

¹¹³ *Proverbs 4:23*

generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.”¹¹⁴

This verse does not say that it is wrong to be rich; it simply tells us what to do with what we have in order to be sure that we have a treasure stored up for eternity, and that we are focused upon “life indeed.” It is good also to be mindful that this advice is not just for the wealthy. People of every economic status can and should share what they have, and it will have the same wonderful effect of steering us away from the love of money and helping us to live for what matters.

Here is one more, almost cryptic, verse that helps: “As it is written, ‘He scattered abroad, he gave to the poor, his righteousness abides forever.’”¹¹⁵ Whoever this is referring to discovered that “scattering” his wealth, sharing it lavishly without careful record keeping, kept him in the place of righteousness.

A third thing that will help us avoid the love of money is to refuse to play lotteries, to gamble, or to participate in any “get rich quick” scheme. The point is not whether these means could be successful or not in gaining us wealth, the point is that it is simply unwise for us to want to get rich. How much better to trust Jesus to “give us this day our daily bread” and to be fully dependent upon Him for our survival. The best way to love Jesus with all our heart is to be in the place of complete trust in Him. Those who plot to “get rich quick” are simply making a mistake right out of the gate. They are focusing on the wrong thing.

A fourth thing scarcely needs to be mentioned; it goes without saying if Jesus is in the centre of our lives. All financial dealings must be handled with complete integrity, everything from paying taxes to operating a business. As soon as we compromise for financial advantage, we are showing that money is the highest value of our heart. Integrity and honesty at any cost protects us from the love of money.

The matter of spending is a fifth thing for us to watch. Just how luxuriously should we be living as true followers of Jesus?

¹¹⁴ 1 *Timothy* 6:17-19

¹¹⁵ 2 *Corinthians* 9:9

Should we always have the best car on the market, the biggest house on the street, or every gadget and toy available - just because we can afford them? How much more important to bring Jesus with us when we do our spending. If He is truly our God, if He is in the centre of our heart, then we would want to please Him even in our spending. Maybe it would be better for us to be modest in our possessions, allowing us to use our wealth for other far more important things. If we take this approach to everything we own and acquire, if we make this a part of our spiritual journey, we will discover far, far more joy in the things that we do have, because we will know that they have been granted to us by the God who loves, cares, and provides for us. Again, this does not only apply to the wealthy, this applies to every one of us.

A last suggestion is that we hold our earthly treasures lightly. We should remind ourselves every day that wealth is temporal at best, that we cannot take it with us, and that life is short. Today could be the last day granted to us; or maybe today will be the day of Jesus' return to rescue us from the coming judgment! This approach to life is not just biblical, it is the only sensible one, for it is true. Life is not guaranteed, not for anyone; it is a daily gift from God. The problem with wealth and prosperity is that it blinds us from this truth, and deceives us into thinking that we have all that matters, and that it will last.

By following such practices as these, we who live in the religious environment of the love of money will be answering the call to "come out of her, my people." We will be avoiding the sins that are piling up as high as heaven, and we will be escaping the judgment to come.

CHAPTER NINE

PEACE AT LAST

PART ONE: ENFORCED PEACE

In chapter seven, *Survivors*, we briefly surveyed the various views of eschatology that exist with respect to the millennium (the 1,000 year reign of Jesus that is described in *Revelation 20*.) While the post-millennial and amillennial views interpret the millennium symbolically and do not envision a literal thousand year reign of Jesus, there are many who think the opposite, that the millennium should be taken as a literal period of time in the future - the pre-millennial view. As I stated in chapter seven, it is this view that I have come to embrace after many years of reflection on the book of *Revelation*. My conclusion is that the book of *Revelation* and the Bible as a whole do not function consistently without an earthly reign of Jesus yet to come on planet earth. I want to share some of my reasons for this conclusion before we go on to look at the millennium and its purpose.

The most fundamental reason has to do with the nature of the book of *Revelation*. It shares with the rest of the books collected together in the Bible the claim that it is not merely the word of man, it is the word of God. We encounter this claim most directly at the end of the book where it gives strong warnings against taking its text lightly:

“I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.” [22:18-19]

Historically, when the list of books that were to be included in Christian literature as “scripture” was developed, the church

fathers were looking for books that were of ancient origin, that had authentic, recognized authorship, that claimed to be “God’s word,” and that demonstrated these things through content that was consistent with the collection as a whole. The claim for these books is articulated in one of the apostle Paul’s letters to his helper Timothy where he says, “All scripture is inspired by God...”¹¹⁶ Followers of Jesus then and ever since have staked their lives on the belief that the scriptures are God’s word, and therefore can be trusted entirely and are to be obeyed faithfully.

The book of *Revelation* met the criteria for being included in the Bible, and as such comes down to us as the word of God. When I have contemplated the text of *Revelation* over the years, including what it affirms about the millennium, it has forced upon me a decision about whether or not the word of God is to be trusted in everything it affirms.

Some time ago this question struck home with renewed force for a completely different reason. I was standing beside my mother’s casket and watched it being lowered into the grave. She had become especially precious to me in her later years, for I had invited my parents to spend their retirement in my home and I had learned to love them all over again. Her death was unexpected and sudden, she was snatched away without the opportunity even for a goodbye. And now I was watching her burial. Was this “Jesus” that I had believed and preached over the years for real? My mother, who had been a devout follower of Jesus - was she really “with the Lord”? Was she going to rise again from the dead one day? Or were these all just nice platitudes that we repeat at appropriate moments? I stayed at the graveside until the burial was completed to be sure that they would treat her body with respect. First they used shovels, and then came the tractor to finish the task. She really was dead, the mountain of dirt seemed to be the final proof. And as I stood there, I had to decide once for all, do I really believe that the Bible is the word of God and can be trusted?

That is a question every single one of us must ask. Of course, if the Bible is not the word of God, then it is not a book that

¹¹⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16

matters all that much anyway, and neither does this book that I am writing. If *Revelation* is just an interesting example of ancient apocalyptic writing and its message is just the product of someone's literary creativity, then it has little or nothing to do with things actually coming upon the earth. Pay no attention! Likewise, if the Bible is in some respects the word of God, but in other respects is not; and if some parts are divinely "inspired," and others are not; then we are also left adrift. What is it that we can count on, and what should be abandoned? And who could we trust to make that call?

Our reasons for believing that the Bible is the word of God are probably varied. As a student of ancient Western literature and history, I myself begin with the historical credibility of the biblical records. Add to this the personal experiences of Jesus that have come to me as I have believed and obeyed the Bible, including one miracle of physical healing, three or four angelic encounters, a string of both day time and night time visions that have either come to pass or are yet awaiting fulfilment; forgiveness displacing guilt, peace displacing fear, contentment displacing longings, and joy displacing depression - well, now it would be a very difficult thing indeed for me to not believe that the Bible is what it says it is. Because of this realization I have done the only sensible thing, I have chosen to dedicate my life to the Bible's call to follow Jesus, even if it means to "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow [Him]." ¹¹⁷ The Bible itself admits that if it is not true in its affirmations about life and eternity, then those who follow Jesus are foolishly throwing their short lives away. "If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied." ¹¹⁸ Better to "eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." ¹¹⁹ But if the Bible is the word of God, the premise upon which this book is written, then the whole of it matters. Every word. Those parts which seem relevant and important and compelling matter because they are God's word, and those that seem distant and insignificant and perplexing matter for the same reason. We have

¹¹⁷ *Mark* 8:34

¹¹⁸ *1 Corinthians* 15:19

¹¹⁹ *1 Corinthians* 15:32

no authority to pick and choose which words of the Bible are “God’s word.”

Of all places in the New Testament, this is especially emphasized in the book of *Revelation* in the passage I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. If I am taking up the invitation to “read” the book of *Revelation* [1:3], I had better take it seriously. I had better not remove a word, I had better not add a word.

So now let me introduce a verse, or better, a prophecy, that has forced me to give careful consideration to the possibility of a literal, millennial reign of Jesus upon the earth: *He shall rule all the nations with a rod of iron*. It appears originally in the Bible as a messianic prophecy in *Psalms* 2:9, and then is picked up and repeated three times in *Revelation*, 2:27, 12:5, and 19:15. If this Old Testament prophecy were mentioned once in *Revelation*, we should still give it suitable attention; but three times? We are almost forced to stop and take notice.

Take notice of what, exactly? What can it possibly mean? It seems to be saying that there is coming a time in human history when this world and all the nations in it are going to be forced into complete submission to the rule of Jesus; they are going to function precisely as they were intended by their Creator God. This will be a time when humanity will not have its own way; it will not be deceived by the devil; it will not be permitted to change the moral rules; it will not be permitted to embrace religions and idols. The world will be ruled by Jesus, and that with the inflexibility of “a rod of iron.” The standards of the ten commandments will be strictly enforced.

When will this be? Various interpretations of this prophecy are offered. Some suggest that it is being fulfilled in the church of Jesus at the present time, that He rules over His own people, and it is in the spiritual realm of His invisible kingdom that this rule is being realized. But that is not what the prophecy says. It does not say that Jesus will rule His church with a rod of iron; it says that He will rule the nations with a rod of iron - *all* the nations. Furthermore, the promise is given the third time in the context of Jesus’ second coming, in *Revelation* 19. So if the rule of Jesus “with a rod of iron” is still future at the time of the second

coming, it can hardly be finding its ultimate fulfilment in the church at present.

A second possibility is suggested, that Jesus is ruling all the nations presently with a rod of iron. His will is ultimately being accomplished among the nations, because God “works all things after the counsel of His will.” Well, this is the biblical hope, that no matter what happens on earth, it will eventually play into the hand of God for His divine purposes. But really, do we see Jesus ruling “with a rod of iron” in the present? Does our world look like Jesus is in control, like things are exactly as they should be due to His enforced reign? Terrorism. Anarchy. Global tension. Immorality. Idolatry. Sorcery. Violence. Greed. Pollution. Climate change. Natural disasters. Do these things sound compatible with Jesus “ruling with a rod of iron”? I think not.

A third possibility is that the prophecy will be fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth, when all those who have fled to Jesus for mercy and rescue are resurrected and granted life in an eternal paradise. There they shall be ruled “with a rod of iron.” Now it is true that the Bible describes eternity as the place of the eternal reign of Jesus, and that there will be only righteousness and perfection in it. However, it also says that the resurrected people who have chosen Jesus will *reign with Him forever and ever*. [22:5] Eternity is not a place of the permanent subjugation of God’s people, it is a place of eternal freedom and joy in His presence. There will be no need at that time for Jesus to rule “with a rod of iron,” because the people there will have already voluntarily chosen His reign. They embraced righteousness while on earth and will rejoice that it has finally come in perfection. They will be the Bride of Jesus, His companion and partner. What kind of marriage is it when the husband rules “with a rod of iron”? Not any kind of marriage that God has intended, and certainly not one He would set up as a model.

None of these suggestions work in any satisfactory way. We can believe the prophecy, but we cannot find any time in the human story for it to occur. That is, unless there is an almost hidden period of human history yet to unfold. The only possibility that I can come up with is that we have to take the millennium seriously; it cannot simply be dismissed as a symbolic prophecy

about the church, or a symbol of the invisible kingdom of God in the present age. There is a time coming, BEFORE the new heaven and the new earth [*Revelation 21*], but AFTER the return of Jesus [*Revelation 19:11-21*], when there is going to be a reign of Jesus upon the earth, a period when His righteousness and peace are going to be FORCED upon all the nations. [*Revelation 20:1-10*] A time when Jesus is going to rule with a rod of iron. If I take the word of God seriously, I am crowded to this conclusion. The millennium is going to be a very real 1,000 year period of time in human history when something never before experienced by mankind is going to occur. Humanity is going to experience what it is like to be in a global empire ruled by Jesus.

During the process of my reflections on the book of *Revelation*, as this conclusion became more and more inescapable, I also gradually encountered an experience akin to sunlight breaking into a dark room. Some other parts of scripture that had baffled me my whole life, things which I had eventually given up on as just the product of poetic licence, started to awaken and come to life like joyful music.

Listen, for example, to a passage in *Isaiah* that prophetically celebrates God's redemption of creation sometime in the future:

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem for rejoicing and her people for gladness. I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in My people; and there will no longer be heard in her the voice of weeping and the sound of crying. No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his days; for the youth will die at the age of one hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred shall be thought accursed.” [*Isaiah 65:17-20*]

The passage begins with a clear signal that it is the completion of God's creation project that is in view, a “new heavens and a new earth.” However, there are some perplexing inconsistencies. To be specific, Jesus taught that in the resurrection, in the new

heaven and earth, there would no longer be marriage and procreation; those there would “be as angels in heaven.”¹²⁰ And *Revelation* makes clear that in the new heaven and earth, there will no longer be any death. [21:4] Yet in this prophecy of Isaiah, there will be infants and youth and elderly, all of whom are subject to death! Procreation and death. They do not belong in the new heaven and the new earth, but here they are in this prophecy! Yes, death has lost much of its power; youth will live to one hundred even in the worst case scenario, and the elderly will live out the fullness of their days. For all this, death is still present. How do we deal with such biblical inconsistency? Do we explain it away as some kind of symbolic language? Do we ignore it, as I have done until recently, with the inadequate excuse of “poetic licence”? If so, where is the credibility and reliability of God’s word?

When a period of time intermediate between the second coming of Jesus and the new heaven and earth is granted, a time when the world will still be under the curse of sin but yet be overruled by the insistent rule of Jesus, when humanity will experience the closest thing possible to “heaven on earth,” then suddenly the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah and the other prophets, which *don’t quite fit*, have a window of opportunity for fulfilment! One can find scores of such prophecies, often entwined as this one with hope of a completely new heaven and earth. The complex pattern we have seen throughout our study of biblical prophecy being fulfilled by early, partial fulfilments, followed by final, complete fulfilments, is occurring again here.

Another partial fulfilment that I personally look forward to, especially after the experience of raising and releasing my adopted squirrel, “Stanley,” is also prophesied by Isaiah:

“And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the

¹²⁰ Mark 12:25

weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." [Isaiah 11:6-9]

Narnia! These prophecies never quite made sense before because there was no place in the human journey in which to fit them. They don't fit earth as we know it, but they have factors inconsistent with the biblical descriptions of the new heaven and earth. However, if there is an intermediate period, a literal millennium, suddenly the problem is solved, and a wonderful time on earth may now be anticipated.

Once the decision is made to take the millennium seriously and literally, then other details surrounding it become extremely important. What were previously the "loose ends" of a symbolic interpretation, things that, to be honest, were unresolved and needed to be quietly bypassed, suddenly turn out to be the very building blocks we need to help us understand the millennium and its purpose. As we start to put some of these together, the picture that forms will astound us; though be prepared, we will not like everything that we find. All our sensibilities are about to be offended, and we will find ourselves questioning the Creator God. Our instinct will be to look for any other possible interpretation than the one to which the text leads us. Nevertheless, our preferences notwithstanding, the millennium becomes a shocking yet all important segment of the human "meta-narrative," one that we had not or could not have anticipated, but one which is critical to a satisfactory completion of God's creation project.

To start with, consider the bewildering difference in the treatment of Satan before and after the millennium. Beforehand, he is rendered powerless by double security measures: first he is bound with "a great chain," [20:1-2] and second, he is imprisoned in the abyss which itself is shut up and locked. [20:3] The imprisonment will last for the 1,000 years of the millennium, and the purpose of it is "so that he should not deceive the nations any longer." [20:3] But after the millennium, of all things, the devil is

deliberately released from his prison! Listen to this astounding declaration from *Revelation*:

“And when the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog....” [20:7-8]

What? After all the gains made through the reign of Jesus in the millennium, after the nations have tasted “heaven on earth,” Satan is deliberately allowed to return and lead humanity back into a state of revolution - and he succeeds? He gathers “them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore.” [20:8]

What perplexing questions this raises! If Jesus is about to establish His reign on earth for 1,000 years, and if after this reign there will be the new heaven and earth, why is Satan only bound and imprisoned for the 1,000 years? Why is he not locked up forever at this point so that his interference in humanity would be done with? Why even bother with a millennial period if the new heaven and the new earth are to follow closely behind? Why the intermediate reign of Jesus on the present earth?

The very fact that Satan *could* potentially deceive the nations during the millennium confirms that it is a different period of time than the new heaven and earth, but the fact that he *cannot* deceive the nations, because he is bound and removed, demonstrates that the millennium period will be different from what we experience in the world at present. Why not just get on with the new creation? It can't be just for the arbitrary fulfilment of ancient biblical prophecies; for prophecy does not establish the future, it predicts the future. The future is established purposefully by God, and He reveals it in advance through prophecy. The millennium is clearly founded in the intentional purposes of God.

The two great wars between the devil and Jesus that in end times' folklore have perhaps blended into one, the battle of Armageddon, and the battle of God and Magog, now separate from each other by a distance of 1,000 years. They are very different wars with very different participants, very different

purposes, and very different outcomes. The first war is the antichrist, his kings, and their armies against Jesus. The second is all the nations of the world, in numbers comparable to the sand on the seashores, gathered against Jesus. The first war prepares the way for the millennium, the second prepares the way for the new heaven and the new earth. The first war leaves the nations still in place on the earth, the second obliterates the nations from upon the earth. Why all this!? If God plans to destroy the nations anyway, why the millennium? This is a question that must and can be answered as we tune our ears to “hear the book of *Revelation*.”

Let us start to put the pieces together and follow the plan and purpose of God for the millennium. This is when our sensibilities will begin to be offended, for the millennium is a time of **enforced peace** on earth, and human beings do not enjoy *anything* being forced upon them. Not even heaven on earth!

The background to the millennium is set by the removal of the antichrist, his confederate kings, and their armies from the world. They have been destroyed in the battle of Armageddon. This brings to a sudden end the world empire of the antichrist, and the end of the second half of the tribulation period. Humanity now lacks government, and as the 20th and 21st century have so clearly demonstrated, when a ruling power is removed from a nation, anarchy and violence naturally fill the vacuum. However, after the battle of Armageddon, instead of the world falling into global civil war, a new reign is established immediately, that of Jesus who has just returned to earth.

Who at this point are the inhabitants of earth? Of what segment of humanity are the nations now comprised? There have been three waves of rescue from judgment; those people who turned from their sins and fled to Jesus for mercy, forgiveness and rescue, were gathered in successive stages into “heaven.” All persons who had chosen Jesus are thus gone, and the people who are left on earth are those who have made the opposite choice. They are the ones who, in spite of all the warnings of God, did not want Jesus or His rescue, and

“did not repent of the works of their hands, so as not to worship demons, and the idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk; and they did not repent of their murders nor of their sorceries nor of their immorality nor of their thefts.” [9:20-21]

They are people who stubbornly chose sin over right living. They are the ones who received the mark of the beast and worshipped his image. The antichrist ruthlessly executed anyone else who resisted him, including all who valued their religion above him.

What a picture! Here comes Jesus to reign over the world, and the people over whom He is to reign are the ones who rejected Him, refused to accept His standards of righteousness and morality, stubbornly endured His judgments, and declared allegiance to Satan when they received the mark of the antichrist. Does that sound like the ingredients of a happy kingdom? No wonder that we have been told repeatedly, “He shall rule the nations *with a rod of iron*”! If Jesus is to reign over this kind of world, it could only be by force.

Not that the earth would be a bad place to live. Yes, it was devastated by the plagues of judgment - water ruined, vegetation burned, cities fallen, industry destroyed, the economy collapsed, etc. However, if Jesus sets up His kingdom on earth as reflected in the prophecies of the Old Testament, apparently there is going to be a supernatural renewal of both environmental and animal life, as well as human society. In a sense it is “a new heaven and a new earth,” just not the final fulfilment of that prophecy. The very fact that Jesus has returned from the spiritual dimension back to the physical indicates that we are in a period of time that connects heaven with earth. The miracles necessary to restore earth to the character of “paradise” are easily accomplished by the one who created the earth in the first place. We can imagine the startling changes of experiencing “heaven on earth” as compared with life under the antichrist and the judgments of God so recently endured.

There will be another dimension of human life on earth at this time which will be introduced to enjoy this renewal, a vast

population of resurrected people. This contributes to the “hybrid” nature of the millennium where there is present both a natural and a supernatural dimension. Those who are resurrected are no longer subject to death and the vulnerabilities of human existence.

“And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.” [20:4-6]

The hope promised to all people who flee to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness is the hope of resurrection, and of life with Him forever. The first resurrected experience of that eternal life will happen in the millennium. To one degree or another, these resurrected “saints” will be participating with Jesus in the administration of His earthly empire: “And I saw thrones set up, and they sat upon them.” [20:4]

Included among them are the people who “broke rank” with humanity during the time of the tribulation and fled to Jesus for rescue. These very same people now return to the earth, just that they are no longer the downtrodden or the despised, they have been transformed into an immortal, invulnerable state of humanness: “Over these, the second death has no power.” [20:6]

You may recall from chapter seven, *Survivors*, that most of the ones who “had come off victorious from the beast and from his image, and from the number of his name” [15:2] are of Jewish background. In the last half of the tribulation a great restoration of Israel to God occurs as Jews suddenly recognize that this Jesus, the rescuer of all who flee to Him, is also *their* Messiah. These Jewish people are the ones that are specifically identified as

reigning with Jesus for a thousand years, who in their new found loyalty to Him

“had been beheaded because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and ...had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand.” [20:4]

It may seem strange that a period of human history so significant as the millennium receives such brief mention in *Revelation*. We have to weigh every word and carefully construct its character and purpose from minimal information. When we realize, however, that the millennium is largely a fulfilment of the Old Testament promises to Israel about the earthly reign of their Messiah, suddenly a whole library of information, the Old Testament prophetic books, are available to help fill in the gaps. The Jews have been expecting this for centuries! You may remember the question the apostles put to Jesus just before His ascension, “Lord, is it now that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?”¹²¹ The answer at that time was “no.” The answer at the time of the millennium is, “Yes!”

God has some “unfinished business” with His people, the Jews. He had promised them a time like this was coming, a day when they would “be the head and not the tail.”¹²² Their Messiah will come and establish an earthly kingdom for their benefit. It was not easily foreseen that others, too, would be included in the blessings; in fact, in the long delay of its fulfilment, it has actually reversed and seemed that the Jews themselves would never see it. Nevertheless, God keeps His word, the messianic kingdom comes as the new world empire during the years of the millennium, and the terrible convulsions of anti-semitism are ended forever. Forever.

As we intimated above, however, the millennium is going to be a time of mixed experience for those who have survived the tribulation period physically and who are now the subject peoples of the reign of Jesus. On the one hand, they will enjoy a life on

¹²¹ Acts 1:6

¹²² Deuteronomy 28:13

earth that has not been experienced since the early days of creation. Man and animal are in perfect harmony. The environment is renewed to almost perfection, and nature no longer seems to be an adversary. Life will be peaceful because conflict will not be permitted. Sickness and aging will be deterred. Death will no longer be such a cheater of life. This return to health and peace will be a welcome change.

Not quite so welcome will be the fact that life is no longer an expression of human liberties. We are not given details about how Jesus and those who reign with Him will implement their rule “with a rod of iron.” Does it mean that there will be such policing that wrongs will never be permitted to even happen? Or does it mean that wrongs which are committed will be exposed quickly and without fail, and that swift judgment will be executed? Either way, picture a world where no evil is tolerated: no theft; no violence; no murder; no filthy talk or behaviour. Racism, prejudice, abusive language, greed, blasphemy, religion, idolatry, sorcery, dishonesty, etc., will be forbidden or at least swiftly punished. There will be no more exploitation of human sexuality for the purpose of entertainment; no more pornography; no more prostitution. Marriage will be honoured and encouraged, but no immorality will be permitted. Human rights and freedom of speech will no longer be the foundations of society, but all will be limited by the righteous standards of Jesus imposed on humanity. The worship of Jesus and God, His Father, will cover the earth, and only pursuits in harmony with His purposes will be allowed.

How will those who have deliberately rejected Jesus and His moral standards feel about their renewed world? Earth itself may have become very pleasant and hospitable, but the behavioural expectations and requirements of the ruling empire will seem intolerable. They will hate every minute of it! They might have to bow their knee physically to this Jesus, but in their hearts they hate Him for His rigidity and intolerance. For them, heaven on earth has turned into hell on earth.

“And when the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to deceive the

nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore." [20:7-8]

Earth's inhabitants are ready for a way out, this reign of Jesus is too much! Somehow - we are not told by what mechanism, whether through human leadership or some other way - Satan deceives the nations of the world. *They don't have to live like this! Earth is beautiful, and it belongs to them! If they would only band together, every man, woman, and child, and stand up to this Jesus and His administration, they could in all likelihood take Him out. They could win the world back for themselves, and return life to its preferred state of human rights and freedoms. Why let someone else dictate how they must live?*

"And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city...." [20:9] The devil's strategy works; he convinces the world's population that they can overthrow Jesus and His ruling empire. They congregate for one last "all or nothing" war. *Death is better than life if life must be lived under such a regime.*

"...And fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." [20:9-10]

Just like the battle of Armageddon, it is no contest. There is not even a battle. Fire from God licks up the rebelling population of the earth like a wind driven fire consuming a tinder dry forest. The millennium is over and so are the nations who lived through it.

Consider what is accomplished here. Through the millennium God answers the great human objection: *Jesus cannot be the only way to God because that would be unacceptably narrow, arbitrary, and intolerant. All religious pathways are equally valid. Everyone should expect a bright eternity in a good place, no matter which way they get there.* God gives humanity an

opportunity to try that out! With respect to the millennium, *all roads do lead to God!* He is going to give people who have rejected the Jesus option, who have chosen any and every other way, the chance to live under the reign of Jesus. Let them see if they fit in a kingdom such as His. What happens? First chance they get, they rally to overthrow and be rid of Him. *They cannot stand His reign.* As I said before, for them, heaven on earth has proved to be hell on earth.

The new heaven and new earth which God will actually create and where God will actually dwell, will be a place of holiness and perfection. “Nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it.” [21:27] Jesus will be the one reigning in the new heaven and the new earth just as He will be the one reigning during the millennium. The standards of behaviour and the requirements of right living will be a part of the new heaven and new earth just as they were part of the millennium. The only difference is the fact that those who are granted access to the new heaven and the new earth *want it that way!* They have already chosen Jesus and His ways! They long to be righteous! They can’t wait to get to an environment where the options of sin don’t even exist anymore. For them, it is not an experience of being ruled with a rod of iron, it is an experience of glorious freedom! Finally they are free from the pull and pitfalls of temptation. Finally they can have rest and peace and righteousness and freedom in the presence of God and of His Son, Jesus, whose holiness is so perfect that sin could not find a tiny, secret place to exist.

If you do not want the reign of Jesus in your life today, if you do not want to live by His moral standards and by His righteousness today, what makes you think you will want to do so for eternity? The new heaven and the new earth is no place for those who want nothing to with the lordship of Jesus. The millennium is going to demonstrate that people who choose to reject Jesus in this life will not want Him in His eternal kingdom either.

There simply is no other good option. The one God who created the earth sent His Son, Jesus, to rescue it from sin and judgment; this one God is going to create a new heaven and a

new earth for those rescued, a righteous world for those who long for righteousness. As for the rest?

“Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” [20:11-15]

All human beings who have ever lived, including those who lived in the millennium, suddenly come back to life, both those lost at sea and those who have been buried on earth (ie. Hades.) Death had seemed like the end but behold, it was not. All stand before the throne of Almighty God and answer for their deeds. No one's deeds are found good enough to gain entrance into the new heaven and earth. Only those who had received the offer of mercy and forgiveness from Jesus, whose names were recorded for life, only those are spared. The rest are thrown into the lake of fire.

How can anyone contemplate such a destiny, not only for oneself, but also for others we love? People who have chosen to follow Jesus have sons and daughters, parents and spouses, friends and neighbours who have no interest in Him. Believing the Bible means believing that those who reject Jesus are going to face the lake of fire. How can we bear this possibility for those we love? How could heaven be heaven if those there know that their loved ones are experiencing eternal grief? I don't really have an answer, I have to trust the scripture when it says, “And God shall

wipe away every tear from their eyes.” [21:4] I trust that God has an answer.

However, I do find this one consolation. The millennium proves that those who don't want Jesus *don't want Jesus!* If those whom I love simply do not want Jesus, then heaven would not be heaven for them. For all my efforts, I could not change their minds. Ultimately heaven is not a place, it is the presence of Jesus. There is no heaven without Him. If those I love did not want Jesus, there simply was no heaven option for them.

The millennium is no mere afterthought of the Bible that appears as a creative idea in the book of *Revelation*. It is a critical part of the overall journey of humanity. It is a time when a taste of peace is finally granted, but it is a peace that is enforced. Thankfully, this is not the finish line of the journey. An infinitely better conclusion is just ahead.

PART TWO: EMBRACED PEACE

The climax of the book of *Revelation*, the conclusion of God's special creation project, is introduced in chapter 19 before the millennium where it reads, "...the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." [19:7] The details and the setting of the "marriage" are described in *Revelation* 21:1 to 22:5. It is somewhat surprising that this section is so brief, considering that the Bible as a whole is such a large compilation of writings. My particular edition of the Bible has about 1,700 pages in total; only two full pages are devoted to a description of the new heaven and the new earth, at least in the book of *Revelation*. The Bible is obviously much more preoccupied with the journey than the destination, not that the destination is unimportant. It is almost like the scripture leads us to the door of the wedding, opens it, ushers us in, and then slips quietly away.

As for the information that we are given, it is such a blend of symbolism and realism that it is hard to know how we are to take it. When it says that the "street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass" [21:21], or that the city gates are each "a single pearl" [21:21], are we to anticipate a literal city, gloriously ornate? Or are we to see the city as a symbol of the people who

inhabit the new heaven and earth, the “gold” of humanity that has been mined from the earth by Almighty God, now gathered together in His presence forever?

I suppose there is no problem with both being true. There will be a spectacular city, but for all the precious metals and stones and pearls used as building materials, the real value, the real gold, is to be found in the people who make up the city, the Bride of Jesus.

The one thing we don't want to do is to be left with a sense that there will be something less real or less material about the new earth compared to the earth we now call home. It is just the opposite. The present earth is temporal and will disappear; the new heaven and earth will be permanent. The inhabitants will all be in a state of resurrection that is physical, though different from our current state.¹²³ Death seems so final in our experience, but *Revelation* says that it is only an intermediate state. Man's destiny is that of permanent existence, whether with God or away from Him.

Furthermore, we should keep in mind that the earth which will disappear at the end of the millennium is not an earth that is in desolation and ruin, it is an earth that has been renewed and replenished by the reign of Jesus. It is a beautiful earth, but still it flees from God's presence. [20:11] Earth in its present mode of physical existence was never the place where God could make an eternal home for His Son and the new Bride. For all the glory of the present creation, it is still perishable. Therefore a new heaven and a new earth is needed, but in a form that is imperishable and eternal. The descriptions of the new are at least akin to what we know from the present; somehow the universe as we know it foreshadows what is to come. If the present heaven and earth are God's temporary provision for His creation project, what must be the permanent world to come!?

Some of the best news is that “there shall no longer be any death” [21:4] “and there shall no longer be any curse.” [22:3] Death sounds like an event, but after Adam and Eve sinned it became apparent that it was a process. God had warned that sin would result in death, and it did; it just was not an instantaneous

¹²³ See a more detailed description of this in *1 Corinthians* 15:35-58.

event. From the moment of sin, every living creature on earth, plant and animal, entered into the process of death. At conception, it is not just the process of life that begins, it is also the process of death. Whether through genetic or accidental or self-inflicted or external or viral / bacterial or any other cause, the inevitable outcome of the death event moves ever closer. As we age, we discover that physical ailments and conditions can less frequently be “cured.” Instead, we have to learn to manage them. The use of medications becomes part of our lifestyle instead of remedies with permanent results. We live in the process of dying. Not so in the new world to come. No need for hospitals and health care there! Death as a process and as an event is eliminated.

Likewise the “curse” that was placed upon creation itself is removed. *Thorns and thistles the ground will grow for you*, Adam had been told after his sin. Nature would cease to cooperate willingly with mankind’s efforts, and the law of decay was introduced.

I live in a city, but decided to “go green” some years ago, and grow a lot of my own vegetables. The first year or two were exciting; the garden yielded so plentifully that I ended up taking bushel baskets full of carrots, beats, peppers, etc., to a city foodbank. The garden work, however, was unbelievable. It was almost impossible to keep ahead of the weeds and the pests, and at times my yard looked more like jungle undergrowth than a garden. I simply did not have enough time for all the work. After a few years I gave up and sodded the yard again. Nature was too determined in its resistance, at least for me. I realize how trivial is this example, but we all experience the curse in various ways. The new earth and whatever form nature takes will have this additional great advantage, *no more curse!*

And there is “no longer any sea.” [21:1] If we thought about it, we might well wonder where all the water came from to flood the earth in Noah’s day. *Genesis* says that “the foundations of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of the sky were opened;”¹²⁴ apparently there were stores of water that had not been released into the world before that time. Wherever it came

¹²⁴ *Genesis* 7:11

from, there was enough water to fill the earth to a height of 20-25 feet over “all the high mountains.”¹²⁵ That is a lot of water! There must also have been massive geological upheaval during and after the flood to create ocean basins for the waters to go and in order for dry land to reappear. From that time on, while contributing support to earth’s ecosystem, oceans were always a testimony to the judgment of God in time past. There will be no need for such a thing in the new earth, no reason for the earth’s surface to be rendered uninhabitable because of water, and no need for rescued humanity to be reminded of judgment past. “The first things have passed away.” [21:4]

Another significant physical difference about the new earth is that “there shall be no longer be any night.” [22:5] Resurrected human beings apparently will not tire nor have need of sleep. What is more, darkness in the present provides a cloak to cover evil and even symbolizes evil. There will be no hint of evil in the new creation and darkness will be a thing of the past. Whether there will be a sun, moon, and stars in a universe as we think of it, the text is not clear. There will definitely be a new heaven as well as a new earth [21:1], but what the new heaven will contain or how far it will reach is not described. Even if there are sun and moon and stars, earth and humanity will not be dependent on them, for “...they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them.” [22:5]

This absence of evil and the presence of God are the two foundational distinctives about the new heaven and new earth. They are described both directly and symbolically. Perhaps a symbol that captures them both at the same time is found in the dimensions of the new megacity that is envisioned.

“And the city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles, its length and width and height are equal.” [21:16]

¹²⁵ *Genesis* 7:19

Lest we should take this whole section of *Revelation* as only symbolic, we are given actual measurements and even told that human measurements are the same as angelic measurements. [21:17] If it is literal, the city is beyond our comprehension; even if we could visualize a city 1,500 miles across, we would be hard pressed to even imagine a city 1,500 miles high. The main point is that the city is a perfect cube, there is perfect symmetry. It speaks of the perfections of God and the uprightness of life in the city. It may also be preparing us for completely different physics than we are accustomed to in our world. After His resurrection, Jesus was able to appear and disappear at will. Could it be that movement will be different in this new universe, and that natural laws like gravity will not function as we now experience them?

Three times in the last section of *Revelation* it is reaffirmed that no one who practices evil of any kind will be granted access to this new creation: 21:8, 21:27, and 22:15. If we were to examine these three verses carefully, we would discover that there is one particular kind of perpetrator fingered by all three: the liar. One might think that there are many other “worse” sins than lying, but dishonesty is at the core of the world’s evil. The devil himself managed to introduce sin into the world by means of just two “small” lies: “You surely shall not die! ...You will be like God.”¹²⁶ All other sin and evil that has ever occurred in the world has its root in these two lies. Those whose names are in the book of life, who have fled to Jesus for mercy and forgiveness, have as their number one priority the cultivation of perfect honesty. Integrity is the foundational virtue established in the new heaven and earth.

God Himself, and His Son, Jesus, are the ultimate source of righteousness and truth. It is their presence in the new creation that ensures permanent, moral perfection. Happily, when moral perfection is present, as we have discussed earlier in our book, there is also perfect goodness. Being holy, and being where God is, are the two things that make heaven, heaven. These are achievements completely beyond the reach of humanity. No human can make himself or herself holy, it can only be received as a gift of God’s mercy. And no one can build a tower, any kind of

¹²⁶ *Genesis* 3:4,5

tower, that reaches God's presence. His presence is also available only as a gift. The new heaven and earth are not really about streets paved in gold, or pearls the size of city gates, or a 1,500 mile high city. Eternity is about humanity being where God is, in a beautiful relationship with Him and wedded to His Son.

Of course the metaphor of a husband and wife relationship is not easily translatable into concrete terms. What will that actually look like and how will it play out in real life? We can scarcely comprehend how one Groom could have a deep, personal relationship with a billion or more people, even if that Groom is divine. However, God has decided that the metaphor is enough for us. If He cannot explain to us the actual experience of eternity, at least He has given us a "feel" for what it is going to be like.

Under normal circumstances, a wedding is one of the highlights of human experience. Children grow up dreaming of it, married people keep record of it through pictures and memories. If it is your day to experience it, if you have found someone you truly love and you know that he or she truly loves you in return, it can be the best day, the crowning moment of your whole life. Furthermore, if a husband and wife choose to love and be faithful to each other after the wedding, there results a peace, security, and well-being that lasts a lifetime, in spite of all of the ups and downs.

But there is another way that God has granted human beings to have a foretaste of eternity, and that is the experience of Jesus in their life right now. Those who receive His mercy and forgiveness, who invite Him into their life, as they live by His word and cultivate a personal relationship with Him, for them eternal life starts NOW. A prayer of Jesus is recorded in *John 17*, at the beginning of which He says that He has given His followers "eternal life."¹²⁷ That sounds like He has given them a promise that they would go to heaven some day. Not so. Jesus goes on to define what He means by eternal life: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."¹²⁸ This is not something in the future, it is a relationship that starts immediately. Forget what the

¹²⁷ *John 17:2*

¹²⁸ *John 17:3*

circumstances are or are going to be, if you have Jesus in your life and you know that He loves you, you are already experiencing eternal life. In the new heaven and the new earth, that relationship is just going to turn into a “face to face” reality instead of an inner faith journey.¹²⁹ It is just going to be more of what His followers have already experienced - much more! More of His presence, more of His joy, more of His peace and goodness.

Traditional marriage vows declare that the commitment you are making is “for better for worse, for richer for poor, in sickness and in health, ’til death do us part.” These words are an admission that at the wedding altar no one knows what the future holds. Therefore the important thing is not what circumstances are coming, but whom you are marrying! If you marry someone you can love and trust, come what may, you can survive it together. So it is with Jesus. We don’t know what is coming, but we do know with whom we are facing it. For the journey on earth, we do not know all that it will cost us to follow Jesus, nor all the struggles we will face. We flee to Him for mercy and forgiveness and begin the journey with Him. We go through good times and bad, blessings and challenges; but we make it through them all because He is with us. Then when we are taken to the new heaven and earth, even though we don’t know exactly what to expect, we know the one we are meeting there. That is enough! No doubts or fears. We just know it will be amazing, because we know the one giving it to us.

And the mystery of millions or billions of people at a time is also somewhat solved for us by this experience in the here and now. Though it is beyond our intellectual ability to understand, Jesus is available to every single one of the billions of persons on earth at the same time; He is ready to respond instantly to any one of them who would reach out to Him and call upon His name for mercy and forgiveness; and He is always present with every person who has done so and who continues to follow Him. He is never distracted or busy with someone else. Even when His followers are not especially conscious of Him, He is watching over them. And He is doing so for millions or billions of others at the same time. This must have to do with the “seven Spirits of God”

¹²⁹ *1 Corinthians 13:12*

whom we have met throughout *Revelation*. He is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. He is everywhere at once. He successfully multi-tasks *ad infinitum*!

Our problem is that we have no idea just how big God is. All the miracles we talk about in this book, whether from the Bible's accounts of the past, or from *Revelation's* prophecies about the future, may make us roll our eyes and wonder who would ever be so gullible as to believe such things. That is because we have re-created "God" in our own image, and He is not very big! As I said earlier, if the Creator God is big enough to make a universe that stretches over billions of light years of space, there is absolutely nothing too hard for Him. Our belief or unbelief changes nothing, except for how He will deal with us. The new heaven and the new earth are no problem for Him, even if there are a billion of us there. It is going to start with the greatest wedding ever celebrated, and it is going to continue as a glorious, enviable marriage between God and man.

God is anticipating this "consummation" of His creative plan perhaps more than anyone. When we come to *Revelation 21*, the voice John hears is "from the throne." It is no longer just an angel carrying the message, it is now God that John is hearing: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men." [21:3] God himself is shouting, *I can live together with my people now!*

"He shall dwell among them and they shall be his people and God himself shall be among them. And he shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." [21:3-4]

Again the One speaking is identified, "And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold I am making all things new.'" [21:5] Just in case any of us might think this is all symbolic and shouldn't be taken too seriously, He continues, "'Write, for these words are faithful and true.'" [21:5]

A beautiful picture is painted of this marriage between God and the humanity He has rescued: "And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple."

[21:22] Never again a need for a meeting place or a building or a special worship event in which people will encounter God. The relationship will now be a way of life.

As we read on, we encounter a final dimension that makes the picture all the more right and all the more beautiful.

“And the nations shall walk by its light and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it. And in the daytime (for there shall be no night there) its gates shall never be closed; and they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it.” [21:24-26]

Last time we saw a gathering of the nations, it was at the end of the millennium, and they were nations in defiance of Jesus. This is a completely different gathering of the nations; these are the people who have embraced Jesus and the peace that He offered. They have not arrived upon the new earth as genderless, colourless, homogeneous clones; no, they carry their personal identity along with their ethnic and national background. God created mankind with the potential for diversity, and that is because He wanted it and wants it that way. Humanity is going to celebrate its varied and distinctive origins, and it will do so with “glory and honor.” Apparently enough kings of the world will have chosen to receive the mercy and rescue of Jesus as well, and perhaps new assignments of leadership will be granted to others who are worthy of the role. We will be proud of our special citizenships and the unique accomplishments of our peoples; our national and even tribal honours will be immortalized.

If we carry our national identities and honour into the next dimension of time and space, will we not also carry the memory of our sorrows, injustices, rivalries and hostilities? How can the ravages of war or the crimes of genocide be forgotten? Even those who have chosen to forgive others as they have been forgiven by Jesus, will they not wrestle with deeply felt wounds and persistent memories? Can the new earth really be a place of multi-national peace, love, and good will? God has not forgotten about this challenge.

“And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” [22:1-2]

Again, whether this tree and its leaves are completely symbolic or have a literal dimension, the promise is that healing will be granted.

Imagine the picture: Iranians and Israelis walking together shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm, loving and laughing as they go. For Serbs and Croatians, war is over and somehow those who lost their fathers and sons and wives in battle are healed. Hutus and Tutsis serve one another with pleasure as they dine together, and Rwanda is restored to a nation of dignity and wholeness. The sins of colonization are forgotten and the blessings are embraced. Blacks and whites weep over past abuses and prejudice, but embrace one another as the healing power of forgiveness from God flows in and through them. Humanity’s natural inclinations to racism, patronization, feelings of superiority or inferiority are neutralized and eradicated, so complete is the transformation of the new creation.

“And they shall reign forever and ever.” [22:5] Now there’s a puzzle to end with. This is referring to the nations who have entered the new heaven and earth. Over whom are they going to reign? Is there some new creation yet ahead that we are not being told about? Has God used the present creation project to prepare a people akin to His Son who will be taking charge of some glorious future? Perhaps. But there is another way of reigning. “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.”¹³⁰ If one can but rule his (or her) own heart, guard his tongue, control his temper, live life completely free from dishonesty and all other moral failings; if one can love perfectly and completely; if one can serve selflessly and live altruistically; well, that would be to reign supremely, that would be true freedom, the life of a king. And

¹³⁰ *Proverbs* 16:32

that at least is the destiny of God's creation project if nothing more.

“Tell us, when will these things be?”¹³¹ That has been the question ever since Jesus came to earth the first time; and 2,000 years have already hastened by. Indeed, days and months and years continue to rush by, the “rat race” continues, and time seems boundless; if we are not careful, we will miss the fact that the world is starting to take a shape identifiable from the prophecies of *Revelation*. “The time is near.”

The wrap up of the book of *Revelation* in chapter 22 has an emphasis that can hardly be missed. “Behold, I am coming quickly.” [22:7] “The time is near.” [22:10] “Behold I am coming quickly....” [22:12] Finally in verse 20, “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming quickly.’”

John responds as one ready to be rescued: “Amen, come Lord Jesus.” [22:20] If you can respond as he did, perhaps you too are ready, which would be my hope and my prayer and my purpose in writing this book.

¹³¹ *Matthew* 24:3

“Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Romans 10:13

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Christie received his Ph.D. in Classics from the University of Toronto, with a specialization in first century AD literature and history. Much of his life's work has been devoted to the Greek texts that eventually found their way into the New Testament collection. For 15 years he taught at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, and also served as a pastor in Ontario for 30 years. Jim is a lover of nature and spends much of his free time in the outdoors. He leads a simple, quiet life in Pickering, Ontario; and in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico.

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