

Revelation:
a translation and commentary

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introductory matters

authorship and date

Many of the earliest of the church fathers testified in their writings that the apostle John, disciple of Jesus and son of Zebedee, wrote Revelation. Justin Martyr, who died about 165, Irenaeus (d. ca. 200), Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 220), Hippolytus (d. ca. 236), and Origen (d. ca. 254), speak with one voice on this point. Though many objections have been made to this persistent testimony, no adequate reason exists for rejecting it.

Internal evidence supports the traditional view. First, the author calls himself *John* (1:4, 9; 22:8) and adds no qualifying nouns or adjectives to his name. The brevity of the reference argues that the author is a well-known person among the churches in Asia. John the Baptist and John Mark are the only other New Testament candidates who might be so brief, but no historical testimony exists to support either. (2) The author identifies himself not as an apostle (everyone knew that) but as a prophet (1:3; 22:6–10, 18–19) who had been exiled because of his witness to Christ (1:9). That John the apostle was just so treated also finds support in the patristic testimony. (3) The writer's way of using the Old Testament makes it almost certain he was a Palestinian Jew who was deeply familiar with the contents of Hebrew Scripture. (4) The writer uses a literary form—apocalyptic—that was unknown outside Palestine, the home of John the apostle.

John also wrote the Gospel that bears his name and the three epistles of John. Unlike those books, however, Revelation was not simply the product of his writer's craft under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Revelation was given to John in the form of a series of dramatic visions. The book unfolds in separate scenes that God showed John—i.e., revealed to him—for the sake in particular of seven churches of the ancient world and through them to benefit the church at large in succeeding generations.

In spite of the early and strong testimony to John's authorship, from time to time people have sought to attribute Revelation to some other author, or to assert that its author is unknown. Such speculations are said to be demanded by the dissimilarities of content between Revelation and the other writings of John. Those differences, however, are easily attributable to the literary genre of Revelation and the highly unusual method of its composition. While the Gospel of John is narrative in form and his epistles are didactic litera-

ture, Revelation is best described as apocalyptic—of another sort altogether, and the only example of it in the New Testament.

A comparison of John's writings may be helpful. The Gospel of John sets forth a theologically dense but easy-to-follow account of Jesus' earthly ministry. It bears many marks of sober reflection and selectivity, and John intentionally organizes it around seven miracles that Jesus performed. John's letters (an example of a second genre usually called epistolary or didactic literature) are straightforward appeals to people and local churches for godly conduct and careful adherence to received doctrine.

Revelation, by contrast with both, did not issue merely from reflective thought but rather records visions supernaturally placed before the apostle by God while John was "in the Spirit/spirit" on a particular Sunday (1:10). John was essentially recording what was given to him at the time. He needed to "compose" very little. The book was not dictated by God, but John described in Spirit-guided words (often echoing the language of the Old Testament) the content of visions shown to him, typically by a series of angels. The subject matter was thus unique, and it would be surprising to find extensive similarities with the apostle's other writings. Those familiar with the work of C.S. Lewis cannot but notice that *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* hardly reads like the product of the Oxford don who wrote the insightful essays contained in *God in the Dock*, yet no one argues that these two books must have come from different authors. The former is fantasy, the second, didactic, and that one fact is sufficient to explain the differences between the flavors of the writings.

Revelation was written late in John's life, probably sometime around the year 95 or 96. Though some have suggested that it was penned during the period following the death of Nero in AD 64, theological presuppositions lie behind this viewpoint, and the view contradicts the clear statement of Irenaeus that John "*saw the Revelation. . . at the close of Domitian's reign*" (AD 81-96). According to Revelation itself (1:9) and the church fathers, John received this series of visions while in exile on the small island of Patmos off what is today the Turkish coast. He had been sentenced there by the Roman government to work in the mines, though he would have been close to eighty-five years of age at the time. Early church writings maintain that John survived the mines, was released, and then returned to Ephesus, the site of much of his previous ministry. The book of Revelation was probably circulated from Ephesus following John's release.

recipients

Revelation is addressed to seven churches in "Asia." The term refers not to the continent but to a Roman governmental district that consisted of a portion of what is today the nation of Turkey. These churches were probably part of a preaching circuit that was frequented by John before his arrest. Jesus personally selected these seven churches to re-

ceive John's book, and it is likely that they formed a cross-section of churches at the time (and a representative grouping of churches since).

Since the 1880s it has become fashionable in some circles to see these seven churches as representative of the Christian church chronologically as well. The church at Ephesus is said to represent the apostolic or post-apostolic church up to about the year 200. The church at Smyrna is declared to represent the church during the pre-Byzantine era of persecution to about the year 312, and so on. Those who hold such views disagree considerably about its application, and the whole approach is forced and highly questionable. We can say categorically that the letters were aimed primarily at the seven churches that are named in chapters 2 and 3. Like other New Testament epistles, however, the letters—and the entire book of Revelation—were intended to apply to and to be studied by the Christian church in every generation (Rev. 1:3).

literary form

Revelation does contain a mixture of epistolary literature (chapters 1-3) as well as apocalyptic material (chapters 4-22). These two literary forms constitute a key to the understanding of the book. The epistolary portions concern the churches in Asia at the time of John's writing (the mid-90's), and by extension are directed at Christians of all historical periods.

The apocalyptic portion of the book presents visions that concern events leading up to the second coming of Christ and the kingdom that lies beyond it. Apocalyptic is a specialized form of prophetic literature characterized by a heavy use of symbolism, the depiction of catastrophic judgments, and prophetic visions. Revelation bears affinities with other apocalyptic sections of Scripture, especially Isaiah 24-27, Ezekiel, Joel, Daniel, and Zechariah. Many of the symbols of Revelation appear also in other places in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament prophets. A Bible with a good set of cross references is indispensable in the study of Revelation, and the person with a good knowledge of the Old Testament prophets is already far along toward mastery of this final book of the Bible.

symbolism and figures

It should also be remembered that symbols and figures of speech are vehicles for communicating meaning, not obscuring it. They do have the ability, however, to darken meaning as well, hiding it from eyes that are not really interested in grasping its import. Figures are not a license given to readers to attach any meaning that they choose in order to explain the symbol. All figures of speech play by certain well-codified literary rules.

Jesus used figures of speech constantly, and taught his disciples that parables (to cite one figure) sustained a dual effect: "*I speak to [outsiders] in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand*" (Matt. 13:13). Whether a

figure illuminates or obfuscates depends in part on the level of spiritual interest of each individual. Because of this dual-edged quality, interpretive schemes of Revelation number in the hundreds. In addition, interpreters (including myself) often bring theological pre-suppositions to the text that color their judgment.

The meaning of a symbol is controlled by two processes. First, the symbol or figure is built solidly on the literal meaning of the term being used. When John sees in a vision a person who is called “the Root of David” (Rev. 5:5), the meaning of the title is controlled by the literal meaning of *root*. A root is the source of life for a plant. Therefore, the reader is to conclude that Jesus is the source of life for David and his family, and yet—and here is the point of the figure—he was also David’s descendant. The title in Revelation 5:5 is intended to cause the reader to pause and marvel that One who stands to inherit David’s throne—one who is in fact descended from him—should also be the One who gave David life because he was God and existed in eternity past. Jesus once called this very concept to the attention of his critics and thus stumped and embarrassed them in public debate (Matt. 22:41-46).

The second control factor in interpreting symbols links the similarities between those seen in Revelation and the same (or similar) figures found elsewhere in Scripture. It is helpful to recall that the meaning of a symbol in one passage is often explained in another. Jesus appears quite strikingly as a Lamb in Revelation 5, but those familiar with Exodus 12 and John 1, where a lamb pictures a sacrifice for sin, discover that the symbolism is not so strange after all. The Old Testament prophetic books in particular serve as the seed-plot of most of Revelation’s symbols. Revelation displays a strong literary kinship with Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and (in particular) Daniel.

Cp rev 19:11-16

theological resolution

Many writers have observed how Revelation, the biblical book of completion, contrasts and completes the book of Genesis, the book of beginnings. It is useful to ponder these matters, because they testify to the order and genius of God the Holy Spirit, whose business it is to disclose God’s purposes in history. There is evidence here of a single guiding Mind. Note how Genesis 1-3 is complemented by Revelation 20-22:

Genesis 1-3	Revelation 20-22
“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1).	“I saw a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1).
“The darkness He called, ‘Night’” (1:5).	“There shall be no night there” (21:25).

“God made two great lights” (1:16).	“The city had no need of the sun or of the moon” (21:23).
“On the day you eat of it you will surely die” (2:17).	“There shall be no more death” (21:4).
Satan appears as the great deceiver (3:1).	Satan is removed (20:10).
Direct fellowship with God terminated (3:8-10).	Direct fellowship with God resumed (21:3).
Initial triumph of the serpent (3:13).	Ultimate triumph of the Lamb (20:10, 22:3).
“I will greatly multiply your sorrow...” (3:16).	“There shall be no more... sorrow” (21:4).
Man loses dominion through the rebellion of the first man, Adam (3:19).	Man regains dominion in the righteousness of the Son of Man (22:5).
The ground cursed (3:17).	The curse lifted (22:3).
Access lost to the tree of life (3:24).	Access to the tree of life regained (22:14).

Though Scripture was penned by about forty authors over a period of 1,500 years, its first and last books bear the marks of a single guiding Intelligence.

1:1-20

the glorified son of man



summary

Revelation opens with an unveiling of Jesus Christ himself to the human author of the book, the Apostle John. Jesus appears to John as the Son of Man, the glorified Heir of all things. He speaks authoritatively to his apostle and to his church, and encourages them to turn away from fear and endure until, in God's good timing, He returns as Sovereign and Judge.

commentary

1:1a

1:1 A revelation of Jesus Christ...

The opening half of verse 1, **a revelation of Jesus Christ**, should be taken as a title to the book as a whole. Here begins a supernatural unveiling. However, the words are as ambiguous in the original Greek as they are in the English text. They could mean *a revealing by Jesus Christ of what is unknown*, or they might be understood as *a revealing of what is unknown about Jesus Christ*. It should be emphasized that this tension might not even be felt by a native speaker of the language of the New Testament, and some grammarians insist that neither nuance can be ruled out.

The visions that John is about to see will convey truth that God gave Christ to **show his bondslaves**. *Bondslave* should not be taken as a synonym for "Christian." The *bondslaves* of God in Revelation are those Christians who are dedicated to the service of the Lamb (19:5). Only Christians are bondslaves, but not all Christians are bondslaves.

1:1b-2

1:1 ...which God gave him to show his bondslaves what must happen suddenly. He made it clear by sending his angel to his bondslave John, 2 who then testified to everything that he saw concerning the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Casual believers will miss much of what is revealed here as the truth of this book describes things that **must happen suddenly**. *Suddenly* translates a Greek prepositional phrase that often means *quickly* or *in rapid succession*. The exact phrase used here also occurs in the Greek Old Testament or Septuagint (abbr. LXX) rendering of Psalms 2:12, which warns, “Seize upon instruction, lest the Lord be angry, and you will perish from the righteous way, when his anger *suddenly* blazes out.” Clearly Jesus Christ did not see any contradiction between avenging his servants’ mistreatment suddenly and the lapse of a long period: “*Shall God not avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him, though he bears long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them suddenly. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he really find faith on the earth?*” (Luke 18:7-8).

The idea seems to be that most of the events that are predicted in Revelation 4-19 will happen unexpectedly and unfold quickly once they begin—in fact, mostly over a period of seven years, as will be evident from the book’s contents. Some have used the delay in the events described in this book to insist that the book in its entirety was fulfilled in the first century, but the normal meaning of language cannot be reconciled with this perspective, often called the *preterite* view of Revelation. (Few sane people would be willing to say, for example, that Jesus Christ returned in glory 2,000 years ago, raised the dead, and took his place as the honored King of the new earth.)

Revelation is less a composition than a recording. John did not have to create most of its contents, but rather took down what Jesus communicated through his angel (or *messenger*). John simply wrote the things **that he saw**, things that he summarizes by saying that it is **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ**. The truthfulness and integrity of Jesus Himself depends on how accurately the predictions to follow transpire in their proper time. John is at some pains through the book to show the contents of Revelation are not the product of his own mind (1:1–2; 21:5; 22:6; cp. 2 Peter 1:21).

1:3

3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and obey the things written in it, because the time is at hand!

God intends that the book to follow, which he characterizes as **the words of this prophecy** (something that is clearly intended to be predictive of future events), should become a focus of the activities of Christian believers. *Prophecy* includes not only predictions of events but also the ethical and spiritual exhortations and warnings and the words of comfort and hope contained in the book. Thus John puts himself on a par with the Old Testament prophets (cp. 10:8–11).

He promises that two groups will be blessed in the process: **Blessed is the one who reads aloud.** The last word is not in the text, but is clearly implied. Silent reading to oneself was virtually unknown at this time (Acts 8:30), but when Christians gathered, it was always part of a church meeting to read aloud a portion of the text of Scripture (cp. 1 Tim. 4:13).

However, a blessing also awaits **those who hear and obey the things written in it.** Prophecies in general and Revelation in particular always contain moral implications. No other book of the Bible offers such open-ended invitations. To benefit, the reader must take the teaching and encouragement that the book contains as his own, for **the time is at hand.** The last days began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-17). Since that time, the inevitable judgment of the peoples of the earth has shifted from distant to just “outside the door”: *“Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be judged. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!”* (Jas. 5:9).

God could begin the final seven-year sequence on very short notice, and only the foolish will disregard it because centuries have passed since these words were written. God’s patience with sinners issues from his desire not to have them perish (2 Pet. 3:9). It is also worth remembering that the same sort of skepticism once existed with regard to the first coming of Christ, an event that took place many centuries after its original prediction. For example, the prophet Micah predicted his birth in the little village of Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2) seven hundred years before it happened.

1:4-6

4 John, to the seven churches that are in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from God: him who is, and who was, and who is still to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ—the faithful Witness, the Firstborn from among the dead, the Ruler over the kings of the earth. To the one who loves us and washed us from our sins at the cost of his own blood 6 and has appointed us a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father—to him be the glory and the power for ever and ever! Amen.

John issues his book **to seven** representative **churches in Asia**—not the continent, but the Roman governmental district that was then operating in what is now Turkey. He extends them **grace and peace** on behalf of **God: (him who is, and who was, and who is still to come)**, and from **the seven spirits who are before his throne.** Efforts have been made to have this last expression refer to the Holy Spirit, but describing the one Holy Spirit as seven spirits seems grotesque to say the least. Also, in 3:1, Jesus describes himself as “having” the seven spirits in the same way that he “has” the seven stars (angels), and that would be an unlikely—if not heterodox—way of describing the third Person of the Trinity. On the other hand, angels are described in Scripture as spirits (Heb. 1:14),

and they play a prominent role in the conveying of the letters to come in chapters 2-3. In addition, in 5:6 the seven spirits are described as “those sent out into all the earth,” an expression known to describe angels in other texts (Zech. 1:8-11; 4:10; 6:5-8), but one that is never used of the Holy Spirit.

There are seven churches, and seven angels (which are spirits) representing them. The book also issues from **Jesus Christ**, a Person who is known to be free of falsehood—a **faithful Witness**—emphasizing that Revelation should be taken seriously. Jesus is uniquely qualified to issue its contents, since he is **the Firstborn from among the dead**, the only human being ever to conquer death permanently. *Firstborn* in Scripture typically is used in connection with God’s promised inheritance. Though Esau was the firstborn physically, the inheritance of Isaac was given to Jacob and his offspring. The firstborn held the right to the largest portion of the inheritance. In Jesus’ case, the inheritance is the universe itself. Though **the kings of the earth** (cp. Psa. 89:27) labor under the delusion that they are in charge of things, He is their true **Ruler**, so he has the power not only to make the predictions of coming events, but to insure that they transpire. Though those predictions describe many terrible events, we have nothing to fear from them, for he **loves us and He washed us from our sins at the cost of his own blood**. (Some manuscripts read here *freed us from our sins*.) Going far beyond redemption, however, God has **appointed us as a kingdom** (rulers in the age to come) and **priests** (his representatives in the world now and in the age to come).

1:7-8

7 (Look! He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes on the earth will mourn because of him. This will certainly come to pass! Amen.) 8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God—the one who is, and who was, and who is still to come—the Almighty!”

Before beginning a description of the visions that he saw on Patmos, John interjects a reminder of previous revelations about the second coming of Christ. This verse is an amalgam of three other passages. **He is coming with the clouds** represents the classic description of the Son of Man in the Old Testament (Dan. 7:13). **Every eye will see him, even those who pierced him** quotes Zechariah 12:10-12. **All the tribes of the earth will mourn because of him**, while suggested by the Zechariah passage, probably is a direct quote from Jesus in Matthew 24:30, a text that had been published for about 35 years by the time John wrote Revelation. The events connected with the second coming of Christ are not simply predicted in Revelation; they form the fabric of biblical teaching from cover to cover.

1:9-11

9 I, John, your brother and the one who shares with you in the persecution, kingdom, and endurance that are in Christ Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day when I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, 11 saying: "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches—to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

Though **John** describes in the pages ahead mighty visions that he was privileged to see, he writes not as one above the tensions and hardships of the Christian life but as a **brother** and as one who **shares** the experiences of **persecution** that are the common lot of the godly. He writes to promote **endurance**, the quality of rejoicing amid difficulty that is so often seen in the pages of the New Testament—something John knows all too personally because of his exile on **Patmos**. But like all believers he also is part of God's **kingdom** (Col. 1:13), and that reality sustains him through all difficulties. John was apparently worshipping **in the Spirit on the Lord's Day** when Jesus appeared to him and instructed him to **write** about what he was seeing and send it to the **seven churches** of Asia. (The phrase *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last* that appears in the *New King James Version* (NKJV) in verse 11 is missing from nearly all manuscripts.)

1:12-15

12 I turned to see whose voice was speaking to me, and when I did so, I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands was one like a Son of Man. He was dressed in a robe extending down to his feet and he wore a wide golden belt around his chest. 14 his head and hair were as white as wool, even as white as snow, and his eyes were like a fiery flame. 15 his feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

Before John saw Jesus, he saw **seven golden lampstands**. Oil lamps were used at this time. They were typically made from clay pottery with a hole in the top for refilling and a wick of twisted flax emerging at one end. Illumination came from the burning of olive oil. The lampstands here form a picture of the seven churches (1:20), a figure that recognizes the role of the churches in illuminating a dark world: "*I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth*" (1 Tim. 3:15). The church fulfills a critical role in teaching and modeling the truthfulness of the revealed word of God.

John sees standing **in the midst of the lampstands** Jesus Christ, described here as **one like a Son of Man**. Picking up the language of 1:7, John pointedly refers the reader to the scene in Daniel 7:13 where the prophet writes, "*I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like a Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the*

Ancient of Days, and was presented before him.” Jesus typically described Himself in the Gospel records as the Son of Man, and for good reason. He put the world on notice not to be fooled by his humble appearance. He was the one that Daniel had seen centuries before, the one destined to rule the universe: *“Then to [the Son of Man] was given dominion and glory and royal authority, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his royal authority the one that shall not be destroyed”* (7:14). It has been God’s plan from the beginning to give man, the pinnacle of his creative work, authority over the entirety of his creation. Man’s sin deferred the fulfillment of God’s design but did not defeat it. The Man, Jesus Christ, will one day rule everything.

John sees him **dressed in a robe extending down to his feet and he wore a wide golden belt around his chest**. While some are impressed with the similarity of this description to the high priest’s garments in the Old Testament, but it is wise not to press the likenesses. Jesus is the High Priest of a different order, in any case, and this scene is one that emphasizes his purity, his authority, and his justice rather than his priestly function. The descriptions of **his feet (like polished bronze refined in a furnace)**, and **his voice (like the roar of many waters)** emphasize his impeccability and his authority. Though He walks in the world among the churches, He is not contaminated by them or their surroundings. His voice carries such power that no one can drown it out or compete with it.

1:16-18

16 He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp double-edged sword extended out of his mouth. his face shone like the sun shining at full strength. 17 When I saw him I fell at his feet as though I were dead, but He placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid! I am the first and the last, 18 and the one who lives! I was dead, but look, now I am alive— forever and ever—and I hold the keys of death and of Hades!

It should be remembered that John was the youngest of the disciples of Jesus, the one who was so favored that he rested on Jesus’ chest at the Lord’s Supper. That intimacy recedes, however, in the face of the vision he receives here. John sees Jesus as one with a **sharp double-edged sword that extended out of his mouth**. Like so much in Revelation, this language describes the particular vision that John saw on Patmos. It is not intended to describe the way Jesus will appear for eternity to the ordinary observer. Later in the book he will appear as a Lamb that has been slaughtered. Still later he will be seen as a Warrior. Apocalyptic visions emphasize some truth or set of truths that need to be grasped at the moment. The language here is similar to passages like Isaiah 11:4 and 49:2. A sword is an instrument of judgment. Jesus speaks God’s word, which is a discerner of the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12-13). It also represents the standard by which the human race is to be judged. This vision will be seen again in Revelation 19:15

as Jesus comes in judgment at the conclusion of this age, but Jesus is not reluctant to use “the sword” against disobedient believers (cp. 2:12, 16).

Jesus also wields **seven stars in his right hand**, symbolic of seven angels who will carry his message to the churches (1:20). They are mere instruments for his use, and he has assigned them a special role in the life of his churches. Jesus’ **face shone like the sun shining at full strength**. He was not merely dazzling but awesome, and John’s reaction is a natural one: **I fell at his feet as though I were dead**.

The glorified Son of Man encourages the limp apostle, however, for He urges John **not to be afraid**. As **the first and the last** he knows the outcome of all uncertainties. As **the one who lives** He has overcome death and **is alive forever and ever**. As the Victor over man’s most implacable foe, he holds **the keys of death and Hades** (the grave). When he speaks, the tombs will expel all believers and they will rise to share in his triumph.

1:19-20

19 Therefore write what you have already seen, what is, and what will be after these things. 20 As regards the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars represent the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands represent the seven churches.

In these verses, the Lord Jesus comforts John with the knowledge that the visions that he is about to see are rational. The Lord here gives the apostle the outline of the book to come. He is told to write **what you have already seen** (1:1-18), **what is** (the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2-3) and **what will be after these things** (chapters 4-22).

2:1-29

the first four churches



summary

Jesus addresses the first four of the seven churches of Asia in this chapter. In each case, He identifies Himself, commends what he can, rebukes what he must, and urges them (and all the churches) to walk before him in conquering faith day by day. To give this objective force, Jesus holds forth as motivation future privileges and present intimacies.

commentary

2:1

2:1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write the following: This is the solemn word of the one who grips the seven stars in his right hand—the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

The letters to the churches follow a common pattern: (1) identification of the Lord Jesus, (2) qualifications of Jesus, (3) commendation of the church, (4) rebuke of the church, (5) counsel for the church, and (6) an exhortation to conquer and to receive Christ’s reward.

Ephesus was a major city of Asia, a port city mentioned prominently in the book of Acts (19). Timothy was for years Paul’s legate (apostolic representative) there, so Ephesus actually receives four letters in the New Testament: Ephesians, 1-2 Timothy, and Revelation 2:1-7. Jesus instructs **the angel of the church in Ephesus** to write the letter. The *angel* is probably just that—a spirit being, one apparently assigned to oversee the church in Ephesus and (in this case) to see to it that this important letter is placed in the right hands. It is true that on rare occasions the Greek *angelos* refers to a human messenger, but those occasions are mostly in the Greek Old Testament and rare even there. The notion that this word refers to “the pastor” of the church is entirely fanciful and without support.

The Lord wants the Ephesian church to know that He controls what touches their lives. He **grips the seven stars in his right hand**. He also **walks among the seven golden**

lampstands, paying tender care, exercising oversight, and monitoring the motives (2:2-3).

2:2-3

2 'I know your works as well as your labor and steadfast endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil. You have even put to the test those who claim to be apostles (but are not), and have discovered that they are false.
3 I am also aware that you have persisted steadfastly, endured much for the sake of my name, and have not grown weary.

Across the years, the Ephesian Christians had shown many commendable qualities. They were engaged in praiseworthy **labor** and good **works** and had remained **steadfast** in their faith. Ephesus was a church that also exhibited high ethical standards (**you cannot tolerate evil**). Nor did they neglect doctrinal orthodoxy; they had even rejected **those who claimed to be apostles** but were **not**. (In all the letters with a commendation, Jesus' praise always appears in the letter before his rebuke. The Lord is not reluctant to praise what He can, and wants believers to know that they are valued before He issues whatever rebukes are essential. His approach is worth following when dealing with others for whom we bear leadership responsibilities.)

2:4-5

4 But I have this against you: You have departed from your first love! 5 Therefore, remember from what high state you have fallen and repent! Do the deeds you did at the first; if not, I will come to you suddenly and remove your lampstand from its place—that is, if you do not repent.

The Christians at Ephesus had failed in one critical respect, however. They had **departed from their first love**. The last expression might refer to their original love of Christ or for each other or both, since the two have a way of increasing or fading together. Christians who lose the zeal of their love **have fallen** from where they ought to be. It is always a fall for believers to exhibit diminished love—either toward the Lord or toward each other. It doesn't matter how much they accomplish in his name if their love for each other declines. It doesn't matter how doctrinally correct they are if they have lost their longing to draw near to him.

The Lord here, the great Physician, also gives the prescription for a sick church. Ephesus may not have been nearly as ill as some of the other churches that are mentioned in this section, but the church was unhealthy nonetheless. Jesus insists that obedience to three commands will bring improvement. First, they have to **remember** the days of their early zeal to know and love Christ. Secondly, they must **repent**. They must head in a new direction. Thirdly, they must **do the deeds they did at first**. He does not tell them to elevate their emotions. He doesn't tell them to study the Bible more frequently. He tells them to

engage in good works. The Bible teaches that loving motions produce loving emotions. We do not need to feel warmly toward people in order to do what is right for them. If we do what is good toward others, we will soon feel quite warmly toward them, and our love for God will warm up as well. (The principle also works in the other direction. Hateful actions toward another person will harden the antipathy already present toward that person.) Failure to heed this counsel will have grave consequences; the Lord Jesus will remove the church entirely: **I will come to you suddenly and remove your lampstand.**

2:6

6 But you do have this virtue: You hate what the Nicolaitans practice—practices I also hate.

Before ending his letter to the Ephesians, the Lord again commends them: **you do have this virtue: you hate what the Nicolaitans practice.** Unfortunately, no reliable information exists as to what these practices were. The post-New Testament writings disagree with each other about why the Nicolaitans (mentioned again in 2:15 where it is their teaching rather than their practice that is considered objectionable) are so strongly condemned by the Lord Jesus.

2:7

7 The one who has an ear should heed what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will permit him to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.'

The Lord concludes the letter to Ephesus with two exhortations. The first is general and applies to anyone: **The one who has an ear should heed what the Spirit says** to these assemblies. Notice the concluding plural. The letter to Ephesus is also applicable to *all the churches*. The words of Scripture, whether uttered by Christ or by a prophet or by an apostle, constitute the product of the Holy Spirit and carry divine authority and general applicability.

The second exhortation applies to those within the church who **conquer** the particular problems of the church (in this case, diminished love) and engage in conduct that pleases the Lord. They are to know that they will be privileged to **eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God**. The tree of life in question will be located in the New Jerusalem; it is mentioned again in Revelation 22:2, 14. All the exhortations to the churches promise not simply escape from the lake of fire (something the readers already were certain to obtain) but rewards for meritorious behavior.

2:8-10

8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write the following: This is the word of the one who is the first and the last, the one who was dead, but came to life: 9 'I know your works and the distress you are suffering and

your poverty (but you are rich). I also know the slander against you by those who call themselves Jews and really are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of the things you are about to suffer. The devil is about to have some of you thrown into prison so you may be tested, and you will experience distress for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Jesus addresses the church at Smyrna as one who is **the first and the last, the one who was dead, but came to life**. This designation is particularly appropriate for the Smyrnan believers, people who were enduring great distress and suffering. Part of the difficulty came from economic poverty (though Jesus insists that in the ways that matter the Smyrnan believers were in fact **rich**). The church, in spite of its good **works**, was experiencing slander from Jewish unbelievers (**those who call themselves Jews and really are not**), people who in effect had become **a synagogue of Satan**.

The Smyrna church receives no rebuke, but it does receive a compassionate warning: **Do not be afraid of the things you are about to suffer**. The church had already suffered, and more was in the offing. The incipient suffering was satanic in origin and would involve a portion of the church being arrested and **thrown into prison for ten days**. The last two words are not symbolic but quite literal. They would be in jail for ten calendar days. It is noteworthy that the Lord Jesus, who knew full well the history of this commendable congregation, does not promise them relief. It is sometimes essential, for reasons that He knows but does not share, for Christians to bear up under suffering for long periods.

Though Jesus has no rebuke for this church, what He says will not be particularly good news. The ten-day prison sentence will not be terminated by their release, but by their deaths. He warns them in advance so that they can **be faithful even to the point of death** (rather than deny him in the face of it). If they will do so, Jesus promises them **the crown of life**. This apparently is to be understood as “a superlative experience of life in the age to come.” The Scriptures repeatedly hold before believers incentives that are based on careful and merited differentiations in the future based on one’s faithfulness in the present.

2:11

11 The one who has an ear should heed what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will in no way be harmed by the second death.

The motive in this case is reaffirmed in Jesus’ final words: **The one who conquers will in no way be harmed by the second death**. This statement is a figure of speech called *litotes* in which the negation of a negative is used to indicate a strong positive. A common

example from ordinary speech is, “If you’ll do me this favor, I won’t forget it.” The figure thus means, “I’ll certainly remember you and repay you in the future.” Another biblical example: “*God is not unjust so as to forget your work and labor of love*” (Heb. 6:10). By this the writer means, “God will be more than just; he will be lavish and will repay you richly.”

Why does the Lord Jesus make the point this way? Why not just say, “I’m not merely going to save you from eternal condemnation, I’m going to reward you richly”? Jesus does it just that explicitly in most of the letters of Revelation. Using a litotes, however, accomplishes something that a simple positive statement cannot. Because the text doesn’t say *how* He’s going to reward the believer, the Lord stimulates the reader’s imagination. How is He going to reward us? Other texts give us details, but a figure like this does not—or at least it doesn’t always do so. Our imagination is free to think about it, to reflect on it, and to delight in the unnamed prospect. Chances are good it will outstrip our most sanguine expectations.

2:12

12 To the angel of the church in Pergamum write the following: This is the solemn word of him who has the sharp double-edged sword: 13 I know your works and where you live—where Satan’s throne is. Yet you continue to cling to my name and you have not denied your faith in Me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed in your city where Satan lives.

Most of the persecutions endured by believers during the time of the New Testament’s writing came not from the Roman Empire (who regarded Christianity as an obscure sect of Judaism until the second or third century), but from the synagogue. By the time Revelation was written in the days of Domitian, some persecution had begun in scattered parts of the Empire by government officials. By the early second century, Caesar worship was enforced over the Empire—but especially at Pergamum. The believers of this church dwelt **where Satan’s throne** was. Satan does not have to be worshiped overtly; any substitute for the true God will suffice.

Once a year every citizen had to come to one of the city temples and drop a pinch of incense on the coals and utter that important sentence, “Caesar is Lord.” After that, they could worship any deity they chose; but they had to say those words. Pergamum had adopted this state religion on top of all the others. The believers of Pergamum refused to exalt man-made values above all else, even when the worship was enforced at the point of a government sword: **you continue to cling to my name and you have not denied your faith in Me.**

At one point, some years before Jesus dictated this letter, there was a man in the Pergamum church by the name of **Antipas**. He was a very serious Christian, and as so often happened, he was called on the carpet for his refusal to say, “Caesar is Lord.” He eventually was executed for his stubbornness. That was supposed to send a message to those troublesome Pergamese believers. But they still wouldn’t budge, and that is why the Lord congratulates them.

Today Christians are expected to go along with the prevailing social theories of our age. We are supposed to buy into viewpoints that the state officially and unofficially endorses: things like the theory of evolution, and the fundamental sameness of all cultures, and that there are no such things as absolute moral laws, and that all religions are equally true and equally false, and that all traces of religion must be excluded from public life. Those are all articles of faith of our modern age. They are aided and abetted by public institutions, and those who dare to say a word against them will suffer in a variety of ways. Even though no physical threats against believers may be heard in such a culture, it is easier to deny the Lord and go along with the crowd.

2:14-16

14 But I have a few things against you: You have some people there who follow the teaching of Balaam, who instructed Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel so they would eat food sacrificed to idols and commit sexual immorality. 15 In the same way, there are also some among you who likewise follow the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore, repent! If not, I will come against you quickly and make war against those people with the sword of my mouth.

Jesus does **have a few things against** these faithful Pergamese believers. They actually have people in the church who **follow the teaching of Balaam**, the prophet-for-hire whose story is told in Numbers 22-24. Balaam spoke the truth, but he engineered a situation in which the people of Israel yielded to the temptations of idolatry and engaged in **sexual immorality** (Num. 25). Jesus calls on the church to **repent**. Repentance is always necessary when people have gone astray in their relationship from God. Alienation can be the experience of unbelievers, in which case repentance requires an about-face and an acceptance of the gospel of Christ. However, Christians also need repentance when they are out of fellowship with God either through willful rebellion or (as in this case) they have neglected their fundamental duty of sustaining the moral and theological purity of the church.

The Lord Jesus warns the church that **if** they will **not** repent, He will go to **war** with those in the congregation who have gotten involved in the bizarre doctrines of the Balaamites. The “war” will probably come in the form of providential frustration of their goals, but it

might even involve physical affliction (cp. 1 Cor. 11:30-31). **The sword of his mouth will be his preferred instrument of judgment.**

2:17

17 The one who has an ear should heed what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give him some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and on that stone will be written a new name that no one can understand except the one who receives it.'

As always, however, the Lord hopes for better things. He ends his epistle to the Pergamum church by inviting individuals (**one who conquers**) to avoid the mistakes of the group and overcome such false teaching. Those who do so will know the secret (**hidden manna**) of a life that is sustained by Christ's personal and most intimate blessing, sharing a private fellowship and closeness that **no one can understand except the one who receives it.**

2:18-19

18 To the angel of the church in Thyatira write the following: This is the solemn word of the Son of God, the one who has eyes like a fiery flame and whose feet are like polished bronze: 19 'I know your deeds: your love, faith, service, and steadfast endurance. In fact, your more recent deeds are greater than your earlier ones.

The letter to the church at Thyatira emphasizes the utter holiness of the Son of God, **the one who has eyes like a fiery flame and whose feet are like polished bronze.** He knows all about their **love, faith, service, and steadfast endurance,** and the **more recent deeds** of kindness done in his name.

2:20-23

20 But I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and by her teaching deceives my bondslaves to commit sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent, but she is not willing to repent of her sexual immorality. 22 Look! I am throwing her onto a bed of violent illness, and those who commit adultery with her into terrible suffering, unless they repent of her deeds. 23 Furthermore, I will strike her children with a deadly disease, and then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts. I will repay each one of you what your deeds deserve.

The church however—at least **some** of their number—exhibits a major flaw. They **tolerate that woman Jezebel.** Whether this was her actual name or one that others gave her is not important. What matters is that she claims spiritual authority (**she calls herself a prophetess,** though she isn't) while at the same time she **deceives Christ's bondslaves,** promoting in them involvement in **sexual immorality** and the eating of **food sacrificed**

to idols. The Lord Jesus has been patient with her, but by now it is clear that **she is not willing to repent** of either her teaching or her actions.

The Lord Jesus will soon engage in something dramatic (**Look!**). Jezebel is about to undergo some **violent illness**, and **those who commit adultery with her** will engage in similar **suffering**. The English translation allows some ambiguity. Do they commit adultery with her (that is, is she personally the object of their illicit affection), or do they commit adultery along with her (with other women)? The Greek grammar favors the first interpretation.

Her children will also be affected. The term probably refers to her disciples or followers in sexual license, though it is not impossible that physical children are in view here. When all these things transpire, **all the churches** will understand that the Lord Jesus is not merely an observer of folly but in fact is the **one who searches minds and hearts**.

2:24-25

24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, all who do not hold to this teaching (who have not learned the so-called “deep secrets of Satan”), to you I say: I do not put any additional burden on you. 25 However, hold on to what you have until I come.

Not everyone in the church was a follower of Jezebel, and the Lord knows those not guilty of her crimes and who do not **hold to her teaching**. Her doctrine was apparently phrased in esoteric terms, being described as **the deep secrets of Satan**. Some later first-century Gnostic teachers insisted on the absurd idea that in order to appreciate fully the grace of God one must first plumb the depths of evil. Those who are not involved Jesus urges to **hold on to what they have until** He comes.

2:26-29

26 And to the one who conquers and who continues in my deeds until the end, I will give him authority over the nations— 27 he will rule them with an iron rod and like clay jars he will break them to pieces, 28 just as I have received the right to rule from my Father—and I will give him the morning star. 29 The one who has an ear should heed what the Spirit says to the churches.

Still better, they can **conquer** by continuing in the **deeds** of Christ **until the end**. The reward for such conduct will be **authority over the nations**, an authority promised to Christ in the language of Psalm 2: **He will rule them with an iron rod and like clay jars He will break them to pieces**. The language presupposes that the return of Christ will be followed by a period in which He rules not simply because his subjects love him but by the exercise of power as well. He will share his authority with and delegate to con-

quering believers his **right to rule** and will honor them with the prize of **the morning star**, probably a reference to intimacy with Himself (cp. 22:16).

3:1-22

the final three churches



summary

Jesus addresses the last three of the seven churches of Asia in this chapter. In each case, He identifies Himself, commends what He can, rebukes what He must, and urges them (and all the churches) to walk before him in conquering faith day by day, holding forth as motivation future privileges and present intimacies.

commentary

3:1

3:1 To the angel of the church in Sardis write the following: “This is the solemn word of the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: ‘I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.’”

The **church in Sardis** experiences a severe rebuke in this fifth letter in the series. To emphasize the gravity of what He has to say, the Lord Jesus describes Himself as **the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars**. What goes on in connection with the churches (including their response to these letters) is firmly in his grasp.

The Lord knows their **deeds**—unfortunately. Their glowing **name** is undeserved. People think that the church is **alive**, but in reality it is more accurately described as **dead**. This should not be construed as proof that there were no believers in the church, but rather that the state of the congregation’s health is horrific. (As He will soon say, there is some life in the church even at this late date.)

3:2-3

2 Wake up then, and strengthen what remains that was about to die, because I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. 3 Therefore, remember what you received and heard, and obey it, and re-

pent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will never know at what hour I will come against you.

Jesus now issues the prescription for a (not quite) dead patient. The comatose congregation is to **wake up** and **strengthen what remains**. They have **deeds** to perform yet. They are to **remember**, **obey**, and **repent**. If there is hope for a dead church, it will be found in a return to what they have **received and heard** in the word of God. Novelties and new programs rarely provide the answer. Responding to divine truth with obedience and repentance will turn the tide. In the absence of such a healthy response, the church in Sardis may have to experience the judgments of God's Son, who will **come as a thief** (when they least expect it) to discipline them. This figure of speech suggests not a cat burglar sneaking up the back steps, but a highwayman who comes in force and overpowers his victim (notice the other New Testament uses of this phrase in 1 Thess. 5:1-3 and 2 Peter 3:10). There will be nothing secret or covert about Sardis's punishment. Everybody will see it and know what is happening, whether it happens at the time Jesus returns in glory or when He openly embarrasses the guilty by exposing their rebellion.

3:4-6

4 But you have a few individuals in Sardis who have not stained their clothes, and they will walk with me dressed in white, because they are worthy. 5 The one who conquers will be dressed like them in white clothing, and I will never erase his name from the book of life, but will declare his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 The one who has an ear should hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

A few individuals remain in the church **who have not stained their clothes**. This expression may refer to doctrinal or moral pollution or both. Those exceptions to the rule in Sardis can look forward in the future to a life of distinction, **walking with Christ dressed in white**, a reward that goes beyond a recognition of their conversion, being based on spiritual merit (**they are worthy**). This emphasis serves as a natural transition to a more generalized invitation to **conquer** to all the churches. The motivation begins with another litotes when Jesus says, **I will never erase his name from the book of life**. Quite the contrary, He will do the exact opposite. He will see to it that the conquering believer's **name is declared before the Father** (cp. Matt. 10:32-33). Open acknowledgement of a Christian's faithful service will result in a full reward in the future (cp. 2 John 8; 1 Cor. 3:10-15).

3:7

7 To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write the following: "These things says the holy one and the true one, who holds the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens."

The church in Philadelphia is one of only two churches in Revelation 2-3 not receiving a rebuke (Smyrna is the other). Jesus presents Himself to the relevant angel in a dramatic way, as **the Holy One** and **the True One** and **one who holds the key of David**. Unlike earlier identifications, these titles are not borrowed from chapter 1 but have their roots in Hebrew Scripture. The last phrase comes from Isaiah 22:20-22, where it refers to King Eliakim of Judah, one of David's heirs. The key is a symbol of authority. As Messiah, Jesus is the eternal and rightful Heir to the Davidic throne and the terms of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7; Psa. 89). Jesus has never occupied that throne, but the day will come when He will (cp. Luke 1:32-33).

3:8-10

8 'I know your deeds. (Look! I have put in front of you an open door that no one can shut.) I know that you have little strength, but you have obeyed my word and have not denied my name. 9 Listen! I am going to make those people from the synagogue of Satan—who say they are Jews yet are not, but are lying—Look, I will make them come and bow down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you! 10 Because you have kept my admonition to endure steadfastly, I will also keep you from the hour of testing that is about to come on the whole world to test those who live on the earth.

Jesus knows well the **deeds** of this church. He has been opening doors for them all along. Their obedience and faithful confession have been exemplary, though they have suffered persecution from the local Jewish population, which Jesus calls a **synagogue of Satan**. Such people will one day **acknowledge** that Jesus has **loved** the Christians of Philadelphia and all who join them in faithfully following Christ. Those who are doing the persecuting may be **Jews** physically, but they **are not** in the true sense of the term (cp. Rom. 2:28-29).

Verse 10 has occasioned much discussion. Exactly what is Jesus promising when He assures the church that He will **keep them from the hour of testing that is about to come on the whole world**? Does the Greek phrase *tereo ek* ("keep [you] from") constitute a promise of physical removal from the earth and its spiritual tests (i.e., a rapture) or is it an assurance that the Lord will protect these Christians during a period of trial that will impact others more seriously? The only other place in the New Testament where this exact expression occurs is in the high priestly prayer of Jesus when He prays, "*my prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one*" (John 17:15). "Keeping them from" in Jesus' prayer is clearly the exact opposite of removal from the planet and refers to divine protection from Satanic attack. The promise may have to do with protection from a natural disaster such as the famine predicted by Agabus (Acts 11:28).

3:11-13

11 I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have so that no one can take away your crown. 12 The one who conquers I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never depart from it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God (the new Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from my God), and my new name as well. 13 The one who has an ear should hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The believers of Philadelphia are especially dear to the Lord Jesus. He has no advice for them other than to **hold on to what they already have**. He does not want them to lose their **crown**, a reference to rewards for faithful service and loyal love (cp. James 1:12). The promises here to those who **conquer** have mainly to do with intimacy with Christ in the age to come. The faithful believer will be made a **pillar in the temple of God**. This language is clearly figurative, stressing the importance of these people in the kingdom era (cp. the expression “pillar of the church”). Such faithful believers will share privileges unavailable to the unfaithful (cp. Luke 22:28-30). Such matters extend to knowledge shared only between the Lord Jesus and his faithful servants: **I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God ... and my new name as well**. Shared secrets are the marks of closeness and trust between good friends.

3:14

14 To the angel of the church in Laodicea write the following: This is the solemn word of the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Ruler of God's creation:

The **church in Laodicea** serves as a sharp contrast to the believers of Philadelphia. Jesus emphasizes in his identification of Himself his reliability (**the Amen, the faithful and true Witness**) and his power (**the Ruler of God's creation**). Some translations have here “the beginning of God's creation,” but the term *ruler* is a well-established meaning for this Greek word and it fits better here (cp. its use in Titus 3:1, “Remind them to be subject to *rulers*”). The notion that Jesus is the Son of Man through whom humanity shares in sovereignty over the world is a recurring theme in these letters (and in Scripture generally).

3:15-18

15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot! 16 So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am going to vomit you out of my mouth! 17 Because you say, “I am rich and have acquired great wealth, and need nothing,” but do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked, 18 take my advice and buy gold from Me refined by fire so you can become rich! Buy from Me white clothing so you can be clothed and your shameful nakedness will not be exposed, and buy eye salve to put on your eyes so you can see!

The Lord Jesus gives a long rebuke to the Laodiceans, a group that might be called “the useless church.” They were **neither cold nor hot**. It is a mistake to conclude that the temperature of the church indicates their spiritual intensity. (Why would Jesus prefer a cold church to a lukewarm one if that were true?) his point is this: cold water is useful—it slakes thirst; hot water is useful for washing and other things. The Laodiceans are useful for nothing.

Their uselessness is directly attributable to their self-deception: **I am rich and have acquired great wealth, and need nothing**. Any church’s greatest potential begins with a realistic appraisal of its own limitations. Jesus warned the disciples, “*Apart from Me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5). If we sever our connection with Christ because we don’t need anything from him, we are deluded and spiritually destitute. He alone has true wealth: **Buy gold from Me refined by fire**. Jesus can make every church rich in the things that matter, but it will never happen if believers feel no need for him.

3:19-22

19 All those I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent! 20 Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into his home and share a meal with him, and he with Me. 21 I will grant the one who conquers permission to sit with me on my throne, just as I too conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 The one who has an ear should hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The pains that believers experience often constitute divine **rebukes**. **Discipline** is a mark not of hatred but of **love**. If there is any hope for the Laodiceans, it will happen when they become **earnest and repent**. Though the church has become indifferent to Jesus and has ignored him, He issues an invitation to individuals within the church (**if anyone hears my voice**) to allow him to be a part of their lives. Even now He extends a lavish invitation to any individual who would conquer: **I will grant the one who conquers permission to sit with me on my throne, just as I too conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne**. For repentant believers, even such as were in the church of Laodicea, the future holds fabulous possibilities; but none of this will be their experience unless they first repent and change their spiritual direction.

4:1-11

the heavenly throne



summary

Shortly (in Rev. 6, to be precise) a long sequence of visions will begin to unfold the future. Before being shown such events, however, John's perspective changes beginning in chapter 4. He is called into heaven so that he might understand how things are in God's presence, and why God's very character requires that He execute judgments on the earth. God's splendor is seen not only in his surroundings but in the creatures who constantly adore and serve him.

commentary

4:1

4:1 After these things I looked, and there was a door standing open in heaven! The first voice, the one I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said: "Come up here so that I can show you what must happen after these things."

In the first three chapters of Revelation, John saw visions that helped him appreciate the honor to which the Lord Jesus is presently entitled and the authority that He exercises over the churches in the present age. In verse 1 of chapter 4, the perspective changes markedly. John sees a **door standing open in heaven**, suggesting that he will be accorded privileges of vision that reach beyond the ordinary ability of humanity. Not only is his perspective changed, but his vision of the Lord Jesus is as well. John observes that **the one** he had previously **heard speaking to him like a trumpet** was calling to him from heaven. He is invited to **come up** so that he can see **what must happen after the things** that were described in chapter 2. (Alternatively, *after these things* may serve as the introduction to verse 2.) This verse, however, provides more than a mere prophetic re-orientation. It shows that one cannot expect to understand painful events on earth unless he understands something of life from heaven's point of view. People whose lives are affect-

ed by suffering would be deeply comforted if they could, however briefly, understand something of the values of heaven.

Sometimes verse 1 is purported to be a picture of Christ's calling the church to Himself in the air as He returns (what is often called the rapture of the church). Several considerations militate against this identification. Nothing is said in chapter 4 about the second coming of Christ or the events that follow it. Making verse 1 refer to the rapture, however, is ruled out by the recognition that John does not stay in heaven for the rest of the book. In fact, his perspective shifts from heaven to earth and back several times (cp. 10:1; 11:1-12; 13:1, 14:1, 18:1), and few people would want to say that the church leaves heaven and returns to earth when John does in this book. Actually, *Come up here* essentially introduces a shift of John's perspective. It is not code language for the removal of the church.

4:2

2 Immediately I was in the Spirit, and a throne was standing in heaven with someone seated on it!

John's perspective not only changed; he was also conscious that he was about to receive new visions **in the Spirit** (or in the spirit). Most notably, as he viewed the heavenly scene, he saw **a throne there with someone seated on it**. Jesus does not enter the vision until chapter 5, so we are probably on safe ground here to regard the occupant of the throne as God the Father. Or, to use the familiar language of previous visions, we might describe him as the Ancient of Days (cp. Dan. 7:9-10, 13).

Many prophetic portions of Scripture picture God seated on a throne in heaven. Some regard this as grotesque, since Jesus affirmed that God is spirit (that is, He is a spirit being rather than a material one). God has no material body with which to sit on a throne, say the critics, and these visions are contradictions of Jesus' teaching.

The criticism is without merit, however, for these visions are compassionate attempts on God's part to reveal Himself in terms that human beings can understand. The technical term for the figure is *anthropomorphism*, "[God] in the form of man." God has no choice but to use such figures of speech because of our ignorance of the entire concept of an existence in the realm of "spirit." We humans cannot bridge the conceptual chasm from earth to heaven, but God can move in the other direction. He cannot speak to people in purely spiritual language because humans can hardly appreciate it. When He reveals Himself as a King sitting on a throne, readers immediately understand that God resembles in certain ways an earthly king. He is exalted far above his companions and is entitled to reverence and obedience.

4:3

3 He was like jasper and carnelian in appearance. A rainbow apparently of emerald encircled the throne.

John's vision describes God as **like jasper and carnelian in appearance**. Jasper is a semiprecious stone, typically red, yellow, or brown in color, and was sometimes used in jewelry. Carnelian is a reddish gemstone often used in signet rings. Both stones are layered silica, and their beauty was much treasured in the ancient world. The layering itself is suggestive of God's multifaceted character, but the scene is augmented by the appearance of an **emerald rainbow that encircled God's throne**. The rainbow's first appearance in Scripture came after the Flood to serve as a reminder of God's faithfulness to his covenants. The rainbow may well be suggestive of that role in this heavenly vision. In any case, it is evident that John is groping for language adequate to describe the wondrous scene in heaven, so utterly different from anything he had ever viewed on earth.

4:4

4 In a circle around the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on those thrones were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white clothing and had golden crowns on their heads.

The apostle now calls attention to **twenty-four other thrones arranged in a circle around God's throne**. These are chairs of honor that are occupied by **twenty-four elders**. Nothing is said directly as to their identity, and many suggestions have been made in this regard, most of which focus on two options: angels or honored human beings. The elders' appearance is at least suggestive. They are **dressed in white clothing**, garments that typically either indicate (1) a standing in righteousness before God gained through faith in Christ or (2) a merited status of honor. The latter is more likely here by reason of their nearness to the throne and because that is the more common viewpoint in the book of Revelation (cp. 3:4,5,18; 6:11; 7:9,13,14). They also have **golden crowns on their heads**, and the headgear suggests the possession of a right to rule, strongly suggestive of believers who have "conquered" (Rev. 2:10,11; Matt. 19:28-30; Lk. 22:29-30).

It is worth remembering that *elders* is a term that throughout Scripture ordinarily signifies leaders among the people of God. In Israel elders ruled each community, and in the New Testament they lead the local church. A reasonable (though tentative) way to regard these elders is as redeemed saints, representing (by twelve each) Israel and the church. The New Jerusalem will exhibit this same quality (cp. Rev. 21:12, 14).

4:5-6

5 From the throne came out flashes of lightning and roaring and crashes of thunder. Seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God, were burning in front of the throne 6 and in front of the throne was something

like a sea of glass, like crystal. In the middle of the throne and around the throne were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back.

John now notices other qualities of the heavenly scene: **from the throne came out flashes of lightning and roaring and crashes of thunder**. The description recalls Sinai, where God met with Israel to enact his covenant and instruction: *“Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled”* (Exod. 19:16). The visual and aural phenomena then and in John’s vision suggest that it is dangerous for human beings to approach this unique throne, the seat of the government of the universe. The implicit warnings are not born of jealousy, but of divine concern for the preservation of his creatures. He wants no one to wander thoughtlessly into his holy presence.

Seven flaming torches call attention to the presence of **the seven spirits of God** who have appeared before in this book (Rev. 1:4, 3:1). They were burning in front of the throne, a description that is consistent with what Scripture teaches concerning angels: *“He makes his angels winds, his servants a flaming fire”* (Psa. 104:4; cp. Heb. 1:7). **Spread out in front of the throne was something like a sea of glass, like crystal**. The scene is reminiscent of a similar vision given to Ezekiel (1:22) seven centuries before John’s visions. Again, John is groping for words because the scene is so resplendent.

He then sees, very close to God Himself (**in the middle of the throne and around the throne**) **four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back**. These creatures, apparently the same ones viewed by Ezekiel (10:12-14) are called by the latter prophet *cherubs* (or, in some translations *cherubim*, reflecting the Hebrew plural). These are angelic creatures who guard God’s holiness (cp. Gen. 3:24; Exod. 25:18-20) and were represented in molded figures on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. The prominence of their eyes suggests a marked and supernatural awareness of all things that might in any way touch on the purposes of heaven.

4:7

7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second creature like an ox, the third creature had a face like a man’s, and the fourth creature looked like an eagle flying.

The four living creatures resemble, respectively, a **lion**, an **ox**, a **man**, and a **flying eagle**. These descriptions accord closely (though not exactly) with the vision of Ezekiel (1:4-14). It should not concern the reader that such descriptions do not match in every particular. Each prophet received different visions at different times that were intended to convey truths that needed emphasis at the moment of their ministries. John’s vision of heaven is not exactly the same as Ezekiel’s. It was given at a different time, with a different purpose

in view, and thus different details are stressed. Ezekiel was writing from the standpoint of a people in exile, and God was encouraging him and his people by giving them hope of release. Here both the picture and purpose differ. John is about to see God's judgments unfold in a way that earth has never experienced. The ignorant might protest that God has no right to cause such catastrophes. John is about to be shown that God's holiness demands proper justice to be exacted from rebellious creatures.

4:8

8 Each one of the four living creatures had six wings and was full of eyes all around and inside. They never rest day or night, saying: "Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is, and who is still to come!"

John now describes the appearance and activity of **the four living creatures**. They each **had six wings** and each **was full of eyes all around and inside**. They are creatures of stupendous endurance, for **they never rest day or night**, constantly proclaiming to the world of spirits, **Holy holy holy is the Lord God, the Almighty**. This language is consistent with the vision Isaiah was given of heaven (6:1-10), but there the creatures are described as *seraphim* (Heb. "burning ones"). We have already seen, however, that burning is often descriptive of angelic creatures generally. In our vision, the final line of the song is changed to emphasize God's eternity: **who was and who is, and who is to come**. Clearly, one of heaven's grand purposes is to call the created world into sober reflection on the majesty, holiness, and eternity of the triune God. Flippancy with regard to heavenly matters is always out of place, and reverence always appropriate.

4:9-10

9 And whenever the living creatures ascribe glory, honor, and thanks to the one who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders throw themselves to the ground before the one who sits on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever, and they offer their crowns before his throne, saying:

No disagreement on these points exists in heaven. The **living creatures** are routinely joined in their ascriptions of **glory, honor, and thanks** to God by **the twenty-four elders**. They express their humility by **throwing themselves on the ground before** God in **worship**. The **crowns** that He has provided to honor them, their most prized possessions, **they offer before his throne** as a tangible accompaniment to their glorious ascription of verbal praise in the following verse. All proper human honors are rooted in divine grace.

4:11

11 You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, since you created all things, and because of Your will they came into existence and were created!

The assembled heavenly court speaks of God as **worthy to receive glory and honor and power** on the basis (at this stage of the book) that He **created all things**. Everything that exists is the product of his creative intelligence and power. No mention is made here of his grand plan of salvation and redemption. That will come in due course, but one implication is important here and will be made explicit later in the book: men owe God their worship even if they have never heard of Jesus Christ. They do not need to reject his plan of salvation to be eternally guilty. They only need reject the knowledge of him that is given to all men intrinsically. To internally suppress the knowledge of the Creator is a fearful crime (Rom. 1:18-23).

daniel 9:24-27

the seventy sevens



why daniel 9:24-27?

We are about to begin a long section of Revelation (5-19) that is built around an Old Testament passage of such importance (Dan. 9:24-27) that the rest of Revelation becomes far more difficult if we lack a knowledge of it. Therefore, we will turn aside for one week to look at this critical Old Testament prophetic text. First, a bit of background...

background

Daniel, the author and leading figure of the book that bears his name, was a godly young man, probably of royal blood, who was taken captive from Jerusalem by the Babylonian army in 605 BC. Daniel became a member of King Nebuchadnezzar's court at that time, and distinguished himself in service to the king for many years. He learned from reading the book of Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2; Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10) that the Jews would be captives in Babylon for seventy years and after that would be released.

But what would happen then? Did the Jewish people have a future? Until this point, the prophets had been occupied with predicting Israel and Judah's captivity because of their long-standing worship of idols. There was little, however, in prophetic teaching that touched on what would happen to the people of God after God's discipline had been carried out. Daniel began to pray concerning this matter (9:1-19). While he was still in prayer, God dispatched the angel Gabriel with an answer. Daniel received this awesome set of predictions because he was so highly esteemed by God (9:20-23). God's answer to Daniel's concerns about the future is given in Daniel 9:24-27. The events prophesied in Revelation 5-19 all fit within these four theologically and chronologically dense prophetic verses.

summary

The surviving remnant of God's ancient people Israel have a future that is carefully marked out for them. Gabriel gives it in terms of seventy "sevens" (these will turn out to be seventy sets of seven years each). During the 490 years described here, six divine purposes will be achieved, and three events will mark their unfolding: (1) the rebuilding of Jerusalem after its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BC, (2) the execution of Messiah, and (3) the destruction of the coming wicked prince (the one whom Revelation describes as "the beast"). In addition to the predictions concerning Israel's distant future, Daniel's prophecy of the "seventy sevens" gave Israel the ability to predict the timing of the first coming of Jesus Christ into the world and his subsequent execution by the nation's leaders. Jesus carefully called attention to Daniel's prophecy of the seventy sevens during his last discourse on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24:15) two days before his execution.

commentary

9:24

24 Seventy sevens have been determined concerning your people and your holy city: to put an end to rebellion, to bring sin to completion, to atone for iniquity, to bring in perpetual righteousness, to seal up the prophetic vision, and to anoint a most holy place.

Much of Daniel, like Revelation, is composed of apocalyptic literature. In this portion of the book, Gabriel gives specific predictions concerning Israel's future in the words, **Seventy sevens have been determined concerning your people and your holy city**. The language seems cryptic to modern readers as it must have to ancient ones. Why would God use this sort of veiled vocabulary to outline the future of his nation? One obvious answer comes to mind: by doing so He will not reward the casual reader of this passage. One must want to know the meaning of this terminology enough to find out how it fits with other texts of Scripture or the reader will never grasp it. Historically, superficiality has definitely been the case. Reading the history of the interpretation of Daniel 9 is like watching a Three Stooges movie—a vast amount of chaos with more sure to follow.

The starting point for everything lies in determining the length of the period that is being presented, for the history of Israel after the Babylonian Captivity is contained in it. Here the reader meets a problem immediately. Some translations read "seventy weeks," but the Hebrew text simply says "seventy sevens." Seventy sevens of what? Days? Weeks? Years? The last is clearly the only real option.

How do we know this? First, verse 24 specifies a series of objectives that are going to be accomplished during this period of time. Seventy sevens of days (about 14 months) simply isn't adequate, nor is seventy sevens of months (a little over forty years). The city of Jerusalem will have to be rebuilt during this time. That would take 49 years, seven sevens,

seal up the prophetic vision means to block its implications from public knowledge, since many generations must pass before it all comes about (Is 29.11; Dan 8.26; Rev 22.10).

To anoint a most holy place may be a reference to the sanctification of God's Temple in the millennial age (Ezek. 40-44), but probably refers to the renewing of the Jewish Temple during the last week of Daniel's prophecy (cp. vs. 27).

9:25

25 So know and understand: From the issuing of the command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah, a prince, arrives, there will be a period of seven sevens and sixty-two sevens. The city will again be built, with plaza and moat, but in distressful times.

Daniel is **to know and understand** how Israel's future will unfold. The prophetic clock will begin to tick with the issuing of a **command to restore and rebuild Jerusalem**. That decree was issued by Artaxerses, emperor of Persia, on or about March 5 of the year 444 BC, a century after Daniel's death. The clock would be punctuated after a **period of seven sevens** (49 years) during which Jerusalem would be **built, including plaza and moat, in distressful times**. After an additional sixty-two sevens ($7 + 62 = 69$ weeks or 483 years), **Messiah, a prince, arrives** on the scene.

The math forms a minor problem. If we calculate 483 years from 444 BC, we arrive at AD 39, too late a date for the arrival of Jesus as a royal prince. However, the problem is only apparent. The difficulty is solved by recalling that the Hebrew calendar used 360-day lunar years. To conform to our calendar, 365-day solar years must be used. Four hundred eighty-three lunar years is the equivalent of 173,880 days. Divide that by the length of the solar year (365.25 days) and you get 476.06 solar years. March 5, 444 BC plus 476 solar years comes out to March 30, AD 32. That date works (but poorly), for Jesus was killed in the year 33. The solution lies in a well-known mistake in the modern calendar. When it was first calculated, no provision was made for a Year Zero. Allowing for the calendar-maker's mistake yields March 30, 33, the very day that Jesus rode into Jerusalem, presenting Himself as the Prince, the Son of David: *"Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes'"* (Luke 19:41-42). The city of Jerusalem, spiritually insensitive and led by a corrupt priesthood, missed the most important day in the history of the nation. It was not merely oversight, however. The jealous rage of the city's leadership virtually guaranteed that they were going to commit the most severe spiritual blunder it was possible to make, as Peter later explained: *"The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was deter-*

mined to let him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses” (Acts 3:13-15).

9:26

26 Now after the sixty-two sevens, Messiah will be executed and have nothing. As for the city and the sanctuary, the people of the coming prince will destroy them. But his end will come speedily like a flood. Until the end of the war that has been decreed there will be destruction.

Jesus was not executed on the day He rode into Jerusalem, of course, but several days later. The prophecy carefully recognizes this by saying, **Now after the sixty-two sevens, Messiah will be executed.** Five days after the sixty-ninth week terminated, Messiah was executed (April 3, 33). Some translations here read “Messiah will be cut off.” To ‘cut off’ someone in Hebrew Scripture, however, is an idiom that means “to execute” as a punishment for crimes (Gen. 17:14; Exod. 12:15,19; 30:33; 31:14; Lev. 7:20-21, and many other texts). Messiah also will **have nothing** or perhaps “no one.” Messiah would die alone and without resources (or, if the alternate translation is preferred, abandoned by all his friends). The *New King James Version* rendering, *but not for Himself*, cannot be defended as the meaning of this text, though it reflects valid theology.

The scene now shifts to the aftermath of Messiah’s execution: **as for the city of Jerusalem and the sanctuary located there, the people of the coming prince will destroy them.** This undoubtedly refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Romans. Please note: *the coming prince* does not destroy them; his people destroy them. This identifies the coming prince as a Gentile and as someone different from Messiah, the prince mentioned in verse 25.

Now that the coming prince is brought to the front of the vision, Gabriel assures Daniel that the wicked prince to come **will have his own end come speedily like a flood.** All that has been **decreed** about him God will quickly bring to completion.

9:27

27 He will confirm a covenant with many for one seven. But in the middle of that week he will bring sacrifices and offerings to a halt. On the wing of abominations will come one who destroys, until the decreed end is poured out on the one who destroys.

How will this wicked man be recognized? **He will confirm a covenant with many for one seven.** At last we meet the missing seven of Daniel’s prophecy. That this last seven is segregated from the previous sixty-nine is evident from verse 26. Messiah will be executed *after* the sixty-ninth week. He does not say, “during the seventieth week,” which would be natural were they contiguous. The seventieth week begins only when the wicked

prince to come enters into an agreement *with many*. Those in view as the other party to the covenant are indicated by the next two lines: **he will bring sacrifices and offerings to a halt**. No offerings have been made in Jerusalem since AD 70, for there has been no temple there. As the prophetic clock is renewed, a temple will be rebuilt, however, and its freedom of worship will be guaranteed by the evil prince. Halfway through the term of the agreement (**in the middle of the week**, i.e., at the three and one-half year mark of the seventieth seven) the coming prince will terminate the new temple worship and install his own image in the most holy place. When *“the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, [he] opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God”* (2 Thess. 2:3-4). By instituting such **abominations**, he sets events in motion that will result in his **decreed end** (2 Thess. 2:8).

The middle chapters of Revelation are largely concerned with showing how events during Daniel’s seventieth week or seven will unfold. These are easy to track, since the numbers that describe such events generally refer to portions of a seven-year period. For example, *“[The Gentiles] will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months”* (Rev. 11:2); or, *“He was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months”* (13:5); or, *“I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth”* (11:3); or, *“Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days”* (12:6). In all such texts, one of the great purposes of God is to show that He *always* remembers his promises. No matter how delayed events seem, if God has decreed them, they will in due course come about. It is worth remembering that the first coming of Christ came many centuries after it was initially predicted, and there were skeptics then, too.

Daniel’s seventy sevens includes predictions that were fulfilled as little as 145 years after they were given (the reconstruction of Jerusalem after seven sevens (49 years; i.e., about 395 BC) and as distant as the crucifixion of Christ (after March 30, AD 33). The fact that these predictions came about precisely as scheduled argues strongly for the likelihood that Daniel’s seventieth seven will also in due course arrive and be fulfilled in the same way. Jesus affirmed that Daniel 9:24-27 had not yet taken place as He spoke on the Mount of Olives shortly before his crucifixion, showing that He regarded it as certain to be fulfilled. The bulk of the book of Revelation (chapters 6-19) is carefully framed to interlock with Daniel’s prophecy so that the modern reader can follow the interrelationships between these two great pivotal books of biblical prophecy.

The importance of Daniel's seventieth seven in the study of Revelation is hard to overestimate. It must be stressed, however, that Revelation has essentially nothing to say about events between its writing and the onset of the seventieth seven. The prophecies of Revelation concentrate on Daniel's last seven years. They say nothing about the course of the present age: nothing about medieval times, nothing about the World Wars, and nothing whatever about the United States. Revelation's predictions have to do with the close of history after a long and gracious period of time granted to the nations to recognize Messiah and believe the gospel. Israel (mostly) is still in a state of unbelief as events unfold.

There have always been those who dismiss the clear indications in Scripture that God intends to fully honor the promises He made to the Jewish patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is sometimes asserted that Israel has no future as the people of God, and that the nation has been replaced in God's affections by the church. However, the fulfillment of the promises of God is undergirded not just by technical command of the intent of specific prophecies but by an emphatic affirmation of God's commitment to his ancient people: *"Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, who disturbs the sea, and its waves roar (The Lord of hosts is his name): 'If those ordinances depart from before Me, says the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever.'*

Thus says the Lord: 'If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done,' says the Lord. 'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord, 'that the city shall be built for the Lord from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. The surveyor's line shall again extend straight forward over the hill Gareb; then it shall turn toward Goath. And the whole valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes, and all the fields as far as the Brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be holy to the Lord. It shall not be plucked up or thrown down anymore forever'" (Jer. 31:35-40). On the future existence of a redeemed nation of Israel, converts to Jesus Christ, depends not just a particular view of biblical prophecy, but the veracity and faithfulness of the word of God itself.

5:1-14

the seven-sealed scroll



summary

A dramatic scene unfolds in heaven. John sees God holding a seven-sealed scroll with writing on both inside and outside surfaces. The information contained in the scroll will unveil God's plans for the future of humanity, but no one is initially found worthy to break its seals (making it accessible). At last One is found who is qualified, and heaven breaks into worship, rejoicing in the knowledge that the Person whose commitment to the holiness and the happiness of mankind is unquestioned will now unveil events yet to come.

commentary

5:1

1 Then I saw in the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne a scroll written on the front and back and sealed with seven seals.

The heavenly scene continues now with a new feature of interest. John sees God **seated on the throne**, and He is holding **in his right hand a scroll written on the front and back**. At the time of the New Testament, written records were either recorded on wax tablets or on scrolls made of vellum or papyrus. Because such materials were extremely expensive, both sides of the writing surfaces were typically (though not always) used. Such a scroll was called an *opisthograph*, and many have survived.

Only a small portion of the scroll's contents are visible, however, because it is **sealed with seven seals running one after another down the outside edge**. The interior message of the scroll will only be accessible when all seven seals are broken and the scroll is unfurled. The breaking of the seventh seal allows everything in the book—the seventieth seven of Daniel—to become visible to the viewer.

5:2-3

2 And I saw a powerful angel proclaiming in a loud voice: “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?” 3 But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it.

Clearly this scroll is of gargantuan importance. Its contents will unveil the concluding installment of Daniel’s prophecy of the seventy sevens—the last “seven”—and will summarize what will transpire in human history following the end of that period. John’s vision emphasizes its dramatic presence, as **a powerful angel proclaims throughout heaven in a loud voice** the necessary question: **Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?**

Another dramatic moment passes as a search is made for someone who possesses the qualifications to unveil such important information. Alas, **no one** is found, either **in heaven** (even among such noble and royal company) or **on earth** (despite all its reigning monarchs) or **under the earth**. The last expression may be a reference to the spirits of people who have died, though it seems strange to look under the earth for people whose spirits are in heaven (some will appear there in chapter 6). The emphasis, however, is clear: nowhere can a qualified candidate be found. The scroll’s secrets belong to God and its presence in his hand suggests that He is open to its being accessed should a worthy candidate be found.

5:4

4 So I began weeping bitterly because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

The failure of the search is immeasurably distressing to the prophet/apostle: **I began weeping bitterly because no one was found who was worthy**. It is human nature to want to know the future prospects of humanity and of history itself, since such matters are inextricably bound with the question of meaning in human experience. At this point John is openly dismayed.

5:5

5 Then one of the elders said to me, “Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered; thus He can open the scroll and break its seven seals.”

John’s reaction is premature, however. One of the elders interrupts his outburst of sorrow by saying, **Stop weeping!** Sorrow is fundamentally foreign to God’s nature and presence. He is full of joy Himself, and all the creatures in his presence are filled with joy in him. The elder introduces one who is worthy: **the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root**

of David, will open the scroll, allowing its contents to be seen—a task that will not be complete until chapter 19. The reference to *the lion of the tribe of Judah* links Jesus with the royal destiny of his great ancestor Judah (cp. Gen. 49:9-10). *The root of David* issues from Isaiah 11:1, 10. There a future messianic king is promised, and that promise will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus. Though He is not ruling as David's greater Son as the vision unfolds, He has qualified Himself for such an office because He **has conquered**, fulfilling the proper design of humankind. Like Christ, the Christian conquers both external oppressors and temptations to sin against God. What Jesus invites the churches to do, He has already done Himself: **Thus He can open the scroll**. Human beings are not designed to be conquered by hardship, but to conquer and overcome it with God's help.

5:6

6 Then I saw standing in the middle of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the middle of the elders, a Lamb that appeared to have been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

The worthy figure is now more closely identified. John saw **standing in the middle of the throne and of the four living creatures and in the middle of the elders** one whose centrality is only too proper. He sees a **Lamb that appeared to have been slain**. *Appeared* is the right description, because this Lamb is very much alive as John views him. The Lamb, in fact, is anything but ordinary, possessing **seven horns and seven eyes**, identified as **the seven spirits of God that are sent out into all the earth**. We have seen these seven spirits before (1:4, 3:1, 4:5). They surface in different guises, but when creatures are “sent out into all the earth” in Scripture, they seem always to be angels (Zech. 1:8-11; 6:5-8; Heb. 1:14). The Lamb—unlike ordinary sheep—possesses power (the horns) and exceptional vision and insight (the eyes). (*Seven* in Scripture often indicates completeness and has no particular significance beyond that.)

5:7

7 Then He came and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne, 8 and when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders threw themselves to the ground before the Lamb. Each of them had a harp and golden bowls full of incense (which are the prayers of the saints).

As John watched in the vision, the Lamb **came and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne**. So certain were the **four living creatures** and the **elders** that glorious revelations lay ahead that they **threw themselves to the ground before the Lamb**. They had already prepared themselves for what followed. Each had a **harp** and **golden bowls full of incense**, representing **the prayers of the saints**. The company musically enters into worship (the harps) and joins in the prayers of

(perhaps earthly, but probably both earthly and heavenly) believers with regard to God's revelation of his unfolding purpose.

5:9

9 They were singing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to break its seals because you were slain, and at the cost of your own blood you have purchased us for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation."

The company of worshipers engage in **singing a new song**. It is new because revealing the future is not something God is forced to do. It is a fresh act of mercy extended to the undeserving. They use a phrase, **You are worthy**, that was used in apostolic times to greet the emperor of Rome on his visit to a new community. In the case of the heavenly vision, however, the words are true instead of flattery. It is the Lamb's offering of Himself above all else that makes him worthy: **You were slain, and at the cost of Your own blood You have purchased us for God**. The beginning of wisdom for human beings comes when they realize that they are not their own but were bought at great cost by the Lamb, the breadth of whose love is beyond understanding: **from every tribe, language, people, and nation**. The mere notion of ethnic prejudice ought to be reprehensible to every Christian believer. Christ died for us all. It is impossible that any of the objects of his great devotion should be thought insignificant.

5:10

10 You have appointed them as kings and priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth.

The last line of the song shifts to the third person **they** for no obvious reason. It may be that the song is sung by the four living creatures, who, as angels, are *not appointed as kings and priests* but who can rightly refer to the God of the Bible as **our God**. Men and not angels will rule the age to come (Heb. 2:5-6; 1 Cor. 6:3). Those redeemed by Christ will in due time **reign on the earth**. Earth rather than heaven is the proper eternal abode of human beings, as Scripture everywhere affirms. Those who die in the Lord leave their bodies behind in the grave while their spirits go to be with God, to be sure. But heaven is simply a transitional staging area until what Revelation calls "the first resurrection" takes place (20:5-6). When Christ returns, believers will return with him (1 Thess. 4:13-18), and they will then serve in glorified bodies on the earth during the kingly rule of Christ.

5:11-12

11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels in a circle around the throne, as well as the living creatures and the elders. Their number was ten thousand times ten thousand—thousands times thousands— 12 all of whom were singing in a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to

receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and praise!”

Angels nonetheless have a stake in the life of the coming earth. They, who know far better than we do now the full extent of the glory and majesty of the One who receives constant affronts from the world of men, long for him to be vindicated and glorified. So, **many angels in a circle around the throne** join in the heavenly worship throng. Their number was past counting by John, who merely describes it as **ten thousand times ten thousands**. Though it is sometimes declared that angels cannot or do not sing, verse 12 affirms that they do, for it pictures them singing in a loud voice of the worth of **the Lamb**. In due time the entire universe will recognize that He deserves all the honors that can be enjoyed: **power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and praise**. The story of how He attains them is detailed in the remaining chapters of this book.

5:13-14

13 Then I heard every creature—in heaven, on earth, under the earth, in the sea, and all that is in them—singing: “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be praise, honor, glory, and ruling power forever and ever!” 14 And the four living creatures were saying “Amen,” and the elders threw themselves to the ground and worshiped.

Finally, **every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, in the sea, and all that is in them** joins in praise not only to **the Lamb** but to **the one seated on the throne**. The **creatures** add a heavenly **Amen** to this amazing scene, and the **elders** again **throw themselves to the ground in worship**.

6:1-17

the first six seals



summary

John sees the seventieth seven—the last seven years of history—played out before him in a heavenly vision. The first six seals of the heavenly scroll are broken, taking history forward to the point at which God’s wrath against a rebellious earth is inescapably obvious.

commentary

6:1-2

6:1 I looked on when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures saying with a thunderous voice, “Come and see!” 2 So I looked, and here came a white horse! The one who rode it had a bow, and he was given a crown, and as a conqueror he rode out to conquer.

The Lord Jesus Christ, **the Lamb**, begins to unlock the scroll of the seventieth seven by breaking the first **seal**. At this point the scroll is still mostly obscured, so **one of the four living creatures** previously described in the vision shouts **with a thunderous voice, Come and see!** calling to John to observe what is contained in the scroll itself. In the first case, it is a **white horse** whose rider had a **bow and a crown** and who **rode out to conquer** (presumably the earth or some portion of it).

Commentators have differed across the centuries in assessing the identity of the rider. Three primary approaches are taken: (1) As far back as Irenaeus in the second century people have suggested that the rider is Christ. In its favor, this interpretation depends largely on identifying this white horse rider with the white horse rider of 19:11-16 who is

unquestionably Christ. His “conquering” according to those who hold this view would represent the ever-successful progress of the gospel.

However, there are major problems with this view: (1) there is little similarity between the two figures other than the white horse; (2) in addition, Christ the Lamb is in this interpretation releasing Christ on a horse, which seems grotesque; and (3) all the other seals are judgments rather than blessings or pictures designed to encourage the reader. Also (4) the visions of Revelation are each self-contained and must be interpreted by means of data contained in each vision itself. There is no reason to think that the white horse of Jesus is designed to illuminate the white horse of the first seal. Revelation 19:11-16 exhibits a single clear purpose: to extol and magnify Jesus in his mighty return.

A second approach is to regard the rider as Antichrist (ch. 13). This view sees Antichrist as a military conqueror who ensnares the whole world in his deception.

A third approach first asks a broader interpretive question: why does the rider need to be identified at all? All the succeeding seals have to do with events, not specific people. No one attempts to identify the last three riders, though consistency would strongly suggest this.

It is better to see the white horse and his rider as a general description of a time in which military power will be extolled and conquest will be the leading motive of those who use it. That fits well with what follows in the next five seals. The fact that the rider has a bow but no arrows *may* suggest that the rider’s activity may not accomplish very much. Perhaps this reflects Jesus prediction of “rumors of wars” (Matt. 24:6). Militarism, the practice that views all foreign policy questions as soluble by military force, seems to lie behind the first seal.

6:3-4

3 Then when the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature saying, “Come!” 4 And another horse, fiery red, came out, and the one who rode it was granted permission to take peace from the earth, so that people would butcher one another, and he was given a huge sword.

The sequence is repeated in the **second seal**. **The Lamb opens it**, and the **second living creature** invites the content of the seal to emerge. Another **horse** appears, **fiery red**. The one who rode it (again unnamed) **was granted permission to take peace from the earth**. By this language we are to understand the way things are: if God gave permission, bloodshed and famine would be the normal condition of human experience. He restrains it out of his immense compassion; but the time is approaching when He will grant to rebellious human beings the ability to engage the masses in open conflict. This time more than threats are involved: **people butcher one another**, for the rider has a **huge sword**.

6:5-6

5 Then when the Lamb opened the third seal I heard the third living creature saying, "Come and see!" So I looked, and out came a black horse. The one who rode it had a balance scale in his hand. 6 Then I heard something like a voice from among the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat will cost a day's pay and three quarts of barley will cost a day's pay. But do not damage the olive oil and the wine."

From the third seal emerges a **black horse**. The one who rode it had a **balance in his hand**. The reference is not to justice but to commerce and accessibility to food. John hears a voice saying, **A quart of wheat will cost a day's pay and three quarts of barley will cost a day's pay**. These are exorbitant prices and suggest that the black horse represents famine, perhaps caused by the eruption of actual wars on the earth, elevating the cost of foodstuffs. But the voice also says, **Do not damage the olive oil and the wine**. This appears to be the divine placement of a restraint on the extent of the famine. Grain may be scarce, but it will be possible to find some food even during this time.

6:7-8

7 Then when the Lamb opened the fourth seal I heard the voice of the fourth living creature saying, "Come and see!" 8 So I looked and out came a pale green horse. The name of the one who rode it was Death, and Hades followed right behind. They were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill its population with the sword, famine, and disease, and by the wild animals of the earth.

The representation of **the fourth seal is a pale green horse**. The new vision shows deteriorating conditions on the earth: **death** rides it, and **Hades** (the grave) is close **behind**. These "riders" were **given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill its population**. The pale horse will employ war (or at least authoritative coercion exemplified by a **sword**), **famine**, **disease**, and carnivores to accomplish these objectives.

6:9-11

9 Now when the Lamb opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been violently killed because of the word of God and because of the testimony to the Lamb they had given. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Master, holy and true, before you judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?" 11 Each of them was given a long white robe and they were told to rest for a little longer, until the full number was reached of both their fellow bondslaves and their brothers who were going to be killed just as they had been.

The fifth seal would have been particularly painful (but not unfamiliar) to John, for He **saw under the heavenly altar the souls of those who had been violently killed because of the word of God and because of their testimony to the Lamb they had**

given. They are associated with the altar probably because God does not regard their martyrdom as the outcome of random events but as love offerings to him (cp. the same idea expressed by the Apostle Paul in 2 Tim. 4:6).

In short, the fifth seal represents the martyrdom of believers during Daniel's seventieth seven. These martyrs, fully conscious before God and able to pray just as they had when they were living on the earth, have a request. They address God with great reverence as the **Sovereign One** (Gk. *despotes*) and ask, **How long before You judge those who live on the earth and avenge our blood?** They are **given a long white robe and told to rest for a little longer.** After all, they have only been in heaven a short while, and the last seven years of history have yet to play out. Eventually **the full number of the martyrs, God's bondslaves, their brothers, will be increased still further, because others are to be killed just as they had been.**

6:12-17

12 Then I looked when the Lamb opened the sixth seal, and a huge earthquake took place; the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair, and the full moon became blood red; 13 and the stars in the sky fell to the earth like a fig tree dropping its unripe figs when shaken by a fierce wind. 14 The sky was split apart like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth, the very important people, the generals, the rich, the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 16 They said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 because the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to withstand it?"

The **sixth seal** is begun by both seismic and astronomical judgments. The seismic is seen in a devastating **earthquake** and **mountains and islands being moved** out of position. The astronomical judgments are even more severe: **the sun became as black as sackcloth.** The **full moon became blood red,** and the **stars in the sky fell to the earth like the fruit of a fig tree.** The **sky was split apart like a scroll being rolled up.**

It is clear from these descriptions alone that human life as such is in serious jeopardy, and that is confirmed by two points. First, these events were also prophesied by Jesus personally in Matthew 24:29-30, "*The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.*" Jesus' words march in lockstep with John's vision of the sixth seal, which concludes, as does the Matthew passage, with the second coming of Christ viewed from the perspective of one living on earth: **Then the kings of the earth, the very im-**

The book of Revelation is not a simple stringing together of one event after the other, but an intensifying of a long series of divine judgments that lead up to and even go beyond the arrival of Christ Himself. Thus the second coming of Christ is described in the sixth seal (from the point of view of the rebellious “nobility” of the earth [6:11-15]), in the seventh trumpet (from the point of view of heaven [11:15]), and in the seventh bowl (from the point of view of divine justice [16:17]).

7:1-17

the 144,000 and the multitude



summary

A new vision is introduced and the chronology is interrupted between the sixth and seventh seals. The fourth seal's description of the loss of human life on a vast scale demands that a pending question be answered: Is God determined to extinguish *all* human life in these last seven years? The answer: No, for God has plans to protect 144,000 descendants of Jacob, who will survive this terrible period (1-8). Many Christian believers, however, will not survive physically (9-17). Their deaths, however, will soon be succeeded by a grand and glorious resurrected future.

commentary

7:1-3

1 After these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, on the sea, or on any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he cried with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we have sealed the bondslaves of our God on their foreheads."

The visions of Revelation are not necessarily chronological, as though the events of chapter 7 unfold later in time than those of chapter 6. As we have seen, chapter 6 takes us all the way to the second coming of Christ. Thus **after these things** refers to *the order in which John is presented with the visions* rather than the way that the future fulfillment of the visions succeed each other in history. Chapter 7 retreats to fill in details of that last week of years pictured by the six seals. This literary device will be repeated in coming chapters.

In the ordinary course of things, God might be expected to disburse his judgments on the earth in a random fashion, showing no favoritism, and Revelation bears that out. However, God also has his eye on the world that will follow his judgments. In time He will return in glory to set up a kingdom that will never end, and He has sworn an oath to the

patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) that they will possess the land of promise alongside their offspring. That means that people of Israelite blood must survive to populate and replenish the land of promise in the future that will follow the return of Christ. Before the judgments are let loose by **the four angels standing at the four corners of the earth**, God will make a provision in his plan to see to it that certain important people are protected from those judgments. Though destructive **winds** are poised to **blow on the earth, the sea**, and the **trees** to do terrible harm, **another angel** is dispatched to protect one group of earth's citizens.

This fifth angel possesses **the seal of the living God**. This seal, like those on the heavenly scroll, presents a figurative way of describing a mark of security. However, in this case the angel is being dispatched to protect people rather than information. He calls out **with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea**, issuing a warning. They are **not to harm the earth, the sea, or the trees till we** (the angel and his colleagues) **have sealed the bondslaves of our God on their foreheads**. Though it is possible that this seal is intended to be visible to other human beings, the ones concerned are judging angels. It is, therefore, quite likely that the seals in question are visible to angels (the executors of God's judgment) but not to people. The targets of this sealing activity are called here *the bondservants of our God*. It is extremely likely, however, that the people to be protected are given this title not on the basis of their current spiritual condition (as John sees them), but on the basis of their future beliefs and behavior following the return of Christ.

7:4-8

4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed. One hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed: 5 of the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed; of the tribe of Reuben 12,000 were sealed; of the tribe of Gad 12,000 were sealed; 6 of the tribe of Asher 12,000 were sealed; of the tribe of Naphtali 12,000 were sealed; of the tribe of Manasseh 12,000 were sealed; 7 of the tribe of Simeon 12,000 were sealed; of the tribe of Levi 12,000 were sealed; of the tribe of Issachar 12,000 were sealed; 8 of the tribe of Zebulun 12,000 were sealed; of the tribe of Joseph 12,000 were sealed; of the tribe of Benjamin 12,000 were sealed.

Who are these people who are so favored? John is informed that they were **one hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel**. **Twelve thousand** from each of the tribes are designated for divine protection during the judgments of the final "week" of years.

Without anticipating too strongly matters that will be revealed later in this book and elsewhere in Scripture, it is highly likely that these people will be unconverted when Daniel's

final week begins. They will be people like the Gentiles in Paul's day in Corinth who were part of a city that was resistant to the message. When the opposition in Corinth threatened to do bodily harm to Paul, God encouraged him in a vision by saying, "*Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city*" (Acts 18:9-10). Jesus said this even though the gospel, to that point, had made little progress in Corinth. The identity of God's people in Corinth, known to him already, would only be revealed to people with the passing of time and the preaching of the gospel.

It is sometimes objected that God would be showing favoritism by preserving 144,000 unbelieving Jews so that they would be alive to believe in Christ later. However, He clearly has no plans to preserve all the Jews on the earth. Based on the world's present Jewish population, the number 144,000 would represent a survival rate of only about one percent. The rest of the Jewish population of the globe will be subject to a fate like that of the unbelieving Gentiles though some of both groups will survive.

These descendants of Jacob represent a seed-plot from which a new nation will rise physically and spiritually following the second coming of Christ. All those who are already believers before the final week begins (or who believe during it) will be caught up to meet Christ at his return. At that time they will receive new and glorified bodies that will no longer be capable of procreation. The 144,000 described here, by contrast, will represent the beginnings of a new harvest of post-second coming believers. They will later in the book be described in the following way: "*These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb*" (14:4). By believing *after* the return of Christ, they continue into the age to come in mortal bodies so that they possess the ability to procreate.

7:9-12

9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

A second vision now appears to John (vss. 9-17). After the vision of the 144,000, the apostle **looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues.** Instead of being from a single nation, these people are from everywhere. John sees them **standing before the throne and before the Lamb,**

clothed with white robes. The white robes suggest that these people have passed a test of faith and have been recognized for it, and the following context affirms that perspective.

Clearly, there is little discernible that is chronological between the two visions. Conceptually, however, they are related. In the first eight verses, God reserves for Himself people yet unconverted. In the second, He calls attention to people who are engaged in heavenly worship because they have died physically. They are engaged in praise **to God and to the Lamb**, recognizing the provision of his **salvation** to which their conscious presence before him testifies. They are joined in this heavenly service of **worship** by the **angels** and the **elders** and the **four living creatures**.

7:13-14

13 Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" 14 I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

At this point John is questioned about the vision he is seeing. **One of the elders** asks, **Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?** John is unable to answer, but is confident that the answer will be revealed to him by the elder, to whom he replies, **Sir, you know**.

John's confidence is vindicated when the elder responds by saying, **These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation.** The last three words are drawn from Christ's teaching given the day before the crucifixion, spoken on the Mount of Olives in private to the disciples, John among them: "*Then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be*" (Matt. 24:21). Jesus describes this period as inaugurated following the middle of Daniel's seventieth seven (Matt. 24:15); i.e., three and one-half years after its beginning. The people seen in Revelation 7:9-17 were apparently the victims of "the prince's" cruel persecutions and are martyrs in the cause of Christ. Though their experience has been harsh, their future is great beyond imagining: **they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his heavenly temple.** But that is not the end of their delights. In the future, after Daniel's week and the millennial age, **He who sits on the throne will dwell among them** (cp. Rev. 21:1-3). None of the world's conditions can ever disturb them again: **they shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore.** Their primary joy lies not in the absence of discomfort, however, but in the presence of **the Lamb, who will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters.** All suffering will be past, and **God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.**

7:15-17

15 Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them.

16 They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; 17 for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Contemplating the cruelties perpetrated on the saints leads the angel to leap forward in time to the day (elaborated in chapters 21-22) when **He who presently sits on heaven's throne will dwell among** those same saints on the earth. It is not as though they are presently useless, however. Even as the angel speaks, those saints are in spirit **before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple**. Even greater joys lie ahead. In the eternal state, **they shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore**. In that unending era **the sun shall not strike them**, for there shall be no sun, **nor any heat**. Their lives will be forever joyful as **the Lamb shepherds them and leads them to living fountains of waters**. The **tears** that led up to their martyrdom will be but distant memories.

8:1-13

the first four trumpets



summary

A new series of God's judgments are loosed on the earth. These are presented as the blares of trumpets sounded by specially appointed angels. Chapter 8 contains the first four of seven, and emphasizes a distinction between the first four and the final three.

commentary

8:1

1 When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

The final seal turns out to be a breathless pause before the description of the first four trumpets: **When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.** A profound quiet interrupts the worshiping creatures of heaven. The silence is literal (in the context of the vision John was seeing), not symbolic. It pictures neither eternal rest nor an effort to hear the appeals of suffering believers. It suggests a valid reluctance on the part of heaven's inhabitants to proceed with the devastating events that are pictured in the seven trumpets. Zephaniah's words suggest this connection: *"Be silent in the presence of the Lord God; for the day of the Lord is at hand, for the Lord has prepared a sacrifice; He has invited his guests"* (1:7). The sacrifice will not be prepared by men for God's pleasure, but prepared by God for the birds and carrion-eaters of the earth: *"Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, 'Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great'"* (Rev. 19:17-18).

8:2

2 And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

The **seven** judgments to come are divided into two sections, the first four, described in chapter 8, and the last three that continue into the next chapter and are called “woes.” Their onset is so terrible that they will be announced by **seven angels who stand before God**. “To stand before” someone in Scripture is customarily a way of describing the servant of an important personage. Zecharias, John the Baptist’s father, was rebuked by the angel Gabriel using these terms: *“I am Gabriel, who stands before God, and I was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time”* (Luke 1:19-20).

As the sequence of judgments unfolds, each angel will issue forth a terrible **trumpet** blast that will announce a new catastrophe on the people on the earth. Though Bible students disagree about whether the Christian church will be on the earth at the time of these judgments, it is indisputable that *some* believers will be living on the earth at this time. The believers of every nation that appear in 7:9-17 have *come out of* the great tribulation, requiring them to have first been in it. The wrath of godless human beings caused the martyrdom of such people, but the wrath of God is never to be the experience of his people. Just as God protected Israel through the Egyptian plagues without harm, so He is committed to keeping his family from his wrath: *“God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thess. 5:9; cp. 1:10). There is no separate sealing of believers (as in the case of the 144,000), for none is needed. Believers are already safe from divine (but not human) wrath. In the case of the 144,000, it is their condition of unbelief at the time the judgments are loosed that requires special protective treatment, for the loss of life in the closing day’s of Daniel’s seventieth week will be staggering: *“A curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth’s inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left”* (Isa. 24:6). *Jesus said, speaking of the close of history and the 144,000, “Then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened”* (Matt. 24:21-22).

8:3-4

3 Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a golden censer; and much incense was given to him, so that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. 4 And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel’s hand.

Another scene takes place here. A separate **angel**, not one of the seven, **came and stood at the altar**. An altar is a place of mediation, but the hour of mediation in human history has come and gone. As the vision unfolds, it is time for judgment, a judgment that cannot be stopped. The angel holds a **golden censer**, an instrument used to fill the sanctuary with the smoke of incense, often symbolizing the prayers of believers. In addition to those prayers, however, the angel has **much incense given to him, that he might add it to the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne**. Both the original incense (the saints' prayers) and the added incense in the vision went up before the throne.

The reader confronts a natural question here: for what are the saints asking? It is hard to resist the notion that they are asking for relief from their persecutions. Jesus once told a parable about prayer that suggested that the second coming of Christ would in the final analysis come in response to the prayers of suffering Christians (Luke 18:1-8).

8:5-6

5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there followed peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. 6 And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them.

In response to these events, **the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar**, the representation of God's purity and holiness. Instead of being presented before God, however, the angel threw the hot censer **to the earth**, an act of judgment (no doubt at God's direction), that resulted in **peals of thunder, loud sounds, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake**. These events, however, only presage what is about to take place. Suitably "announced," **the seven angels with the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound them**.

8:7

7 The first sounded, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were thrown to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.

It quickly becomes apparent that the character of the trumpets is far more intense than the character of (at least) the first five seals. As a result of the **first** angel's trumpet blast, there **came forth on the earth hail and fire mixed with blood**. The effects are catastrophic: **a third of the earth is burned up**, including **a third of the trees** and the entirety of the **green grass** of the planet.

8:8-9

8 The second angel sounded, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood, 9 and a third of the creatures which were in the sea and had life, died; and a third of the ships were destroyed.

Now **the second angel** sounds, and **something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea**. Many expositors have seen in this description the representation of an atomic blast. But though it is possible that God might use a humanly engineered weapon to achieve his ends (He has before many times), in this dramatic final unveiling of his purposes it seems highly unlikely that He will choose to depend on human inventiveness to attain his ends. In any case, we are told that as a result of this devastation **a third of the sea became blood, and a third of the creatures which were in the sea and had life died**. Not too surprisingly, there is great loss of human life as well: **a third of the ships** on the ocean are **destroyed**. When God finally issues judgments of this sort, human ingenuity will count for little. There is simply no place to hide from these devastations.

8:10-11

10 The third angel sounded, and a great star fell from heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of waters. 11 The name of the star is called Wormwood; and a third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the waters, because they were made bitter.

It is not the earth's salt water alone that is the subject of God's judgmental focus; the fresh water of the planet, essential for human life, also forms the focus of **the third angel** and his trumpet blast. John sees **a great star fall from heaven**. (This is a visionary representation of reality rather than reality itself. All biblical prophecies are characterized by appearance. John is not attempting to be scientific but is merely describing what he sees.) This star is unlike other stars. It even has a **name: Wormwood**. As a result of its collision with earth, **a third of the rivers** and **a third of the planet's springs of waters** are **made bitter**. As one might expect, human life is again endangered: many **men died from such waters**. Wormwood is the name of a well-known plant in the Middle East from which is produced a bitter dark oil. This oil forms one of the elements of the green liqueur known as Absinthe. Its taste is exceptionally bitter, and the oil is often used to kill intestinal worms. Jeremiah used wormwood as a picture of the divine judgments he went through at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (Lam. 3:15).

8:12

12 The fourth angel sounded, and a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them would be

darkened and the day would not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way.

The product of the fourth angel bears a remarkable resemblance to the sixth seal. Here **a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them would be darkened.** In the sixth seal (6:12-13), *“The sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth.”* It is unlikely that this resemblance is coincidental. At the conclusion of the sixth seal, an enthroned Jesus is seen by the kings of the earth. In the fourth trumpet, we are at the same (or approximately the same) location in time. The result of this judgment is a lengthening and intensifying of darkness: **the day would not shine for a third of it, and the night in the same way.** The scene recalls the ninth plague in Egypt, when the nation was confronted by an intense darkness that would not be relieved.

8:13

13 Then I looked, and I heard an eagle flying in midheaven, saying with a loud voice, “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!”

At this point John is confronted by another dramatic pause. As the judgments approach the end, they intensify; and to support that observation, John sees (or rather hears) **an eagle** (some manuscripts read here *an angel*) **flying in midheaven.** He has a message to proclaim that is critical, and so he delivers it **with a loud voice: 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.** The last three trumpet blasts (which will occupy chapter 9) are so awful that they are called *woes*.

9:1-21

the fifth and sixth trumpets



summary

While the first four trumpets announced disaster on earth's ecosystems, the fifth and sixth trumpets declare catastrophes on man himself. Chapter 9 includes trumpets five and six—the first two woes—divine judgments that are manifested in the form of torturing angelic plagues: locusts and horses that first torment and then kill those not protected by God from their destructive effects.

commentary

9:1-2

9:1 Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the shaft of the pit. 2 And he opened the shaft of the pit, and smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace. So the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the pit.

In John's vision, the trumpet of **the fifth angel sounded** (thus introducing the first of the three woes, i.e., the fifth, sixth, and seventh trumpet judgments). The terrible catastrophe to come will be set loose by **a star fallen from heaven**. *Star* is a common figure in Scripture to represent an angel, and so it is here. It would be a mistake to infer that the angel is being judged (as Satan is elsewhere described) by being removed from God's presence. The angel is merely filling the function of a servant here, doing the bidding of heaven. His responsibility is to serve as the gatekeeper of **the shaft of the pit** or abyss, and he is therefore provided **a key** to use to open it. Since the abyss is not located in heaven, he descends from heaven to attend to his task.

For God, judgment is an awesome but unnatural activity (cp. Isa. 28:21). That does not mean that He makes no provisions for it. The **shaft of the pit** represents an unseen place that God has reserved to lock away from humanity the terrible judgments that sinners deserve and have not suffered for thousands of years by his grace. John now sees the

horrors begin to unfold. When the door to the pit is unlocked in the vision, **smoke arose out of the pit like the smoke of a great furnace**. The contents of the pit are so terrible that **the sun and the air** of the earth are **darkened**, closed off from human vision.

9:3

3 Then out of the smoke locusts came upon the earth. And to them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power.

Smoke and darkness do not constitute the real threat of the pit, however. **Out of the smoke locusts came upon the earth**. It would be a mistake to think of the grotesque entities of the fifth and sixth trumpets as products of an unbridled imagination on John's part. God is presenting to the prophet's vision unprecedented new descriptions of judgment that have been reserved for earth's closing days. It would also be a mistake to try to connect these words with modern equivalents, as though John were trying to describe a flamethrower or a tank and merely lacked the vocabulary or the intelligence to describe them. Locusts—the literal kind—brought frequent visitations of judgment on the people of God in the Old Testament, and it is quite natural that John would see extraordinary locusts as part of the final stage of God's judgment of the earth.

Apparently these creatures are in reality angels, since they have "*as king over them the angel of the pit, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, but in Greek he has the name Apollyon*" (vs. 11). Just as God sent destructive angels into Egypt to slay that nation's firstborn (Psa. 78:49), here he sends angels out against the whole planet. **They are given power to inflict pain on human beings in the same manner as the scorpions of the earth have power**. They are directed in this mission by an angel in the same way that so many of these end-time judgments involve angels.

9:4

4 They were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green thing, or any tree, but only those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.

The scorpion-like creatures are given very specific instruction in their earthly mission. They are **commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green thing, or any tree**. Other angels will deal with those matters, but Abaddon ("Destruction") orders his minions to touch only **those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads**. The last expression describes the Israelites from chapter 7, the 144,000, who were sealed specifically to enable them to survive the events of these closing days of history. A point is made of sealing them because without that gracious action they (as unbelievers) might be subject to the destructive events of this period and fail to survive. Their death would eliminate the possibility of a renewed Jewish nation in the millennial age and therefore their safety merits special divine attention. Revelation makes no specific statement about other

believers during this period because it is assumed that they are already sealed: “*God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Thess. 5:9). Christians may and often do suffer the wrath of human beings in the form of oppression or persecution, but they will not undergo God’s wrath.

9:5-6

5 And they were not given authority to kill them, but to torment them for five months. Their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it strikes a man. 6 In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire to die, and death will flee from them.

These scorpion-angels **were not given authority to kill** the objects of God’s wrath, **but only to torment them for five months**. Since it is unlikely that those who endured five months of torment would survive into the millennial age, and since the coming of Christ will mark the end of all expressions of divine wrath (Rev. 16:17), Revelation 9:5-6 may well give a clue as to the fifth trumpet’s place in Daniel’s seventieth seven. It is reasonable, on this basis, to conclude that the fifth trumpet is approximately six and a half years into Daniel’s seventieth week. As in the previous sequence of seals, the seventh trumpet marks the end of the period in any case (16:17). The torments that John sees are likened to **the torment of a scorpion when it strikes a man**. Allergic reactions to such stings are common, and one who experienced a scorpion sting wrote, “I began to get little red bumps around the painful area and the affected area soon became larger . . . The pain is the worst ever. The sting is on my left forearm. It has been sixteen hours and the pain is still terrible.” (The description is of a single bite.) Such experiences are consistent with the closing comment: **In those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will desire to die, and death will flee from them.**

9:7-10

7 The shape of the locusts was like horses prepared for battle. On their heads were crowns of something like gold, and their faces were like the faces of men. 8 They had hair like women’s hair, and their teeth were like lions’ teeth. 9 And they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots with many horses running into battle. 10 They had tails like scorpions, and there were stings in their tails. Their power was to hurt men five months.

John now adds details to the vision of **the locusts**. Their **shape was like horses prepared for battle**. They were anything but ordinary locusts, for **on their heads were crowns of something like gold**, and ordinary locusts are not adorned with crowns. Human beings often wear crowns, however, and the faces of these creatures that John saw **were like the faces of men**. Nonetheless, they apparently possessed longer hair, for John describes them as having **hair like women’s hair, and teeth like lions’ teeth**.

These creatures possessed military characteristics as well, with **breastplates of iron**, and with **wings** that remind John of **the sound of chariots with many horses running into battle**. But their primary focus is not to destroy but **to hurt men five months with the stings in their tails**.

9:11-12

11 And they had as king over them the angel of the pit, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, but in Greek he has the name Apollyon. 12 One woe is past. Behold, still two more woes are coming after these things.

These punishing armies are organized as well. They are led by **the angel** who rules over **the pit**. His name, "Destruction," translates both the **Hebrew word Abaddon** and the **Greek Apollyon**. Thus ends John's description of the fifth trumpet and the first woe. He warns the reader that **two more woes are coming**, and his words suggest that the worst has not yet been seen.

9:13-14

13 Then the sixth angel sounded: And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates."

The second woe (and the **sixth** trumpet) now is **heard** in John's vision, quickly accompanied by **a voice from the four horns of the golden altar that is before God** in heaven. The voice is not identified, but clearly it is one of authority, for it issues orders to the sixth angel-trumpeter, who now becomes personally involved in the execution of the judgments that his trumpet announced. He is to effect the **release of the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates**. We are not to seek to identify these four angels any more than we should seek to identify the many angels who appear at other points in the unfolding of John's vision. They are nameless because they are faithful servants. God could effect all of the judgments of Revelation without angelic participation by a single destructive word; but as so often throughout the Bible, He chooses to enlist angels in his judgmental work. One reason for this is their acknowledged personal righteousness and impeccable character. The destructions to come issue not simply from God's own holy character, but also from an innumerable army of holy angels who both affirm their propriety and who are themselves above reproach. The location of these angels, however, is probably significant. The Euphrates River always marked the traditional boundary between Israel and its historic Gentile enemies.

9:15-17

15 So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of mankind. 16 Now the num-

ber of the army of the horsemen was two hundred million; I heard the number of them. 17 And thus I saw the horses in the vision: those who sat on them had breastplates of fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulfur yellow; and the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions; and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and brimstone.

The four angels who are summoned to do God's bidding here have been idle for centuries, merely waiting **for the hour and day and month and year** of God's call to go to work. Though many creatures and portions of the earth have been affected by previous judgments, God is now closing down history as we know it, and the angelic judgments of the sixth seal **kill a third of mankind**. To accomplish this objective, the four angels muster a vast **army of horsemen two hundred million** strong. It is a mistake to attempt to identify this group with any particular earthly army. Though in the past God has often condescended to use as his instruments the military forces of many countries, in the book of Revelation God consistently takes a fresh approach and uses angelic hordes to accomplish his holy purpose. Like the locusts of the first woe, these creatures wore unusual equipment: breastplates of fiery red, hyacinth blue, and sulfur yellow. Also in the same vein, their "anatomy" is highly unusual: **the heads of the horses were like the heads of lions, and out of their mouth came fire, smoke, and brimstone.**

9:18-19

18 By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed—by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths. 19 For the power of the horses is in their mouth and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they do harm.

It is these last items—**the fire and the smoke and the brimstone**—that prove lethal. The **third of mankind** mentioned in verse 15 actually dies through the application of these three plagues. The judgmental force of these creatures lies not in humanly crafted weapons, but in their **mouths** and their tails. Their **tails** are like the **heads of serpents**, and with those heads they inflict **harm** on humanity.

9:20-21

20 But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. 21 And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

The terrible judgments inflicted in the second woe leave two-thirds of the human race alive. Yet though they escape the effect of such plagues, they learn nothing from them. They do not **repent of the works of their hands**, nor did they turn in terrified appeals to God for mercy. Indeed they continued to **worship demons and idols of gold, silver,**

brass, stone, and wood. Though idolatry is typically explained by modern man as an error caused by simple ignorance and lack of scientific progress, Scripture provides a different assessment. In 1 Corinthians 10:20, speaking to Christians newly emergent from idolatry, Paul wrote, *“The things that the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God.”* Behind every false object of worship lurks a demon, doing his best to deflect the eyes of the “worshiper” toward things that **can neither see nor hear nor walk** and are powerless with regard to moral choices. As millions die around them, humanity continues to be characterized by **murders** and **sorceries**, by **sexual immorality** and **thefts**.

10:1-11

the little book



summary

Before the seventh and final trumpet sounds—as before the final seal was broken—John pauses for an interlude in which he is given two visions that fill in details that have not heretofore been revealed. An unusual and powerful angel appears and issues an announcement that cannot be shared with the readers. This interlude, however, does not mean a pause in the timing of God’s judgments will take place here. Indeed, the angel’s message is simple: “No more delays!” John is given a book to “eat” that contains the language of God’s purposes, and he finds that it is a bittersweet revelation: the road to future bliss is traversed via human destruction.

commentary

10:1

10:1 I saw still another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud. And a rainbow was on his head, his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire.

Often when John writes **I saw**, he is describing a fresh vision (cp. 4:1; 7:1, 9; 15:5; 18:1; 19:1) and that seems to be the case here. Six trumpets have already been described, and the seventh will be sounded at Revelation 11:15. The seventh trumpet will not advance the chronology of events, however, but will merely announce that the end of conventional history has arrived. The interlude will provide certain details that are important to the reader but which do not advance the sequence of divine judgments themselves.

The leading actor in the first interlude is **another mighty angel** in addition to those described in the previous three chapters. The description of this angel is quite impressive. He is seen as **coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud**. The similarities of this language to the vision of the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14 and the description of Christ in Revelation 1:12-17 have led some to suggest that the angel of Revelation 10:1 is Christ, but that is unwarranted. It is true that the expression “Angel of the Lord” is used of the

Second Person of the Triune God in the Old Testament, but since the Incarnation of Christ He has not been so described. Also, John here omits all of the common titles of Jesus that appear so widely throughout the rest of the book. He also uses the term “mighty angel” in 5:2 and 18:21 in contexts that certainly do not refer to Christ. Some have also suggested that the description represents Michael, the angel particularly assigned responsibility for the welfare of Israel (Dan. 12:1). This has much to commend it, but remains merely a possibility.

The description of this angel provides more detail than the description of any other angel in Revelation, however. The fact that this servant of God exhibits a **rainbow on his head** suggests his nearness to God, as does **his face** exhibiting a brightness **like the sun**. The angel’s feet remind John of pillars of fire, the instrument God used to lead Israel toward the Promised Land (Exod. 13:21).

10:2-3

2 He had a book open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, 3 and cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roars. When he cried out, seven thunders uttered their voices.

Two special features mark out this majestic creature. First, **he had a book open in his hand**. Then, too, **he set his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land**, suggesting enormous size and an ability to exist comfortably in both environments. This posture gives the announcement that he makes an unusually broad audience.

The word *book* appears as *little book* in many translations, though most manuscripts use *book* in this location and *little book* in verse 8. The word in either case signifies a scroll rather than a codex (the form of modern books), since the latter was being invented about this time. (The same Greek word, *biblion*, is translated *scroll* in 5:1 and there it is clearly a rolled-up scroll.)

10:3

3 and cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roars. When he cried out, seven thunders uttered their voices.

The mighty angel **cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roars**. We should not understand this as a description that was heard by earth’s population as these events are unfolding. The sound is heard by John and its effects appear only in the vision. Coterminal with this angel’s loud utterance, **seven thunders uttered their voices**. These are not, apparently, mere peals of natural thunder, but the voices of creatures “off-stage,” for there is profound meaning in what they “say.”

10:4

4 Now when the seven thunders uttered their voices, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Seal up the things that the seven thunders uttered, and do not write them."

At least John considered **the voices of the seven thunders** to be quite intelligible. As he (per his earlier instructions) is about to write down what the thunders said for the record, John hears **a voice from heaven saying to him, Seal up the things that the seven thunders uttered**. This is not the first occasion in biblical history when a prophet was told not to record his message for posterity. In Daniel 8:26, Daniel was told, "*The vision of the evenings and mornings that was told is true; therefore seal up the vision, for it refers to many days in the future.*" Something in the content of the thunders' profound utterance was deemed by God not suitable for human eyes and ears at the moment John was writing Revelation. God's reasons for his order **do not write them** remain unexpressed to this day. Deuteronomy 29:29 issues the general principle, however, that God retains for his own purposes some truths that may be valid but are not necessary in the strict sense for believers: "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*"

10:5-6

5 The angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised up his hand to heaven 6 and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things that are in it, the earth and the things that are in it, and the sea and the things that are in it, that there should be delay no longer,

The mighty **angel** of verse 1, the one **whom John saw standing on the sea and on the land**, did have something of great importance to say, however. As John watched, he **raised up his hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever**, the one **who created heaven and the things that are in it**, as well as **the earth and the sea** and all their contents. His oath was simply the assurance **that there should be delay no longer**. Jesus warned his followers not to behave as though the Second Coming of Christ and its attendant judgments were to be postponed indefinitely. However, He did at least suggest that there would be a delay in his return that would tempt some servants of his to act as though He would be gone for a long time. Second Peter explains the delay: "*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*" (3:9). The angel of Revelation 10, positioned at the end of judgments already unleashed, is now ready to unveil the highly concentrated cataclysms of the very last time, and in effect says that God's patient endurance has now reached its conclusion.

10:7

7 ...but in the days of the sounding of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, the mystery of God would be finished, as He declared to his servants the prophets.

For centuries God has spoken through **his servants the prophets** of a day when He could bring to culmination his plans to restore a broken relationship with mankind and inaugurate a new eternity of harmony and happiness on the earth. **In the days of the sounding of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, this mystery of God—presumably why He has delayed his kingdom’s consummation so very long—will be finished.** That moment comes in the announcement of the seventh angel in Revelation 11:15, *“Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!’ ”*

10:8

8 Then the voice that I heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, “Go, take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the earth.”

Though the words of the thunders are not to be recorded by John, the prophet is to interact with the strong angel who is the central person in this vision: **the voice that I heard from heaven back in verse 4 spoke to me again and said, Go, take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel who stands on the sea and on the earth.** The little book in question contains the truth, apparently, of the culminating, irreversible, and painful judgments about to be poured out on the earth (the “bowls”). Ezekiel once underwent a similar exercise in which, like John, he became an actor inside one of his prophetic visions: *“Now when I looked, there was a hand stretched out to me; and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. Then He spread it before me; and there was writing on the inside and on the outside, and written on it were lamentations and mourning and woe. Moreover He said to me, ‘Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.’ So I opened my mouth, and He caused me to eat that scroll. And He said to me, ‘Son of man, feed your belly, and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you.’ So I ate, and it was in my mouth like honey in sweetness”* (Ezek. 2:9-3:3).

10:9-10

9 So I went to the angel and said to him, “Give me the little book.” And he said to me, “Take and eat it; and it will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth.” 10 Then I took the little book out of the angel’s hand and ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth. But when I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter.

John, even in a vision true to his obedient character, **went to the fearsome angel** with the book and **said to him, Give me the little book.** He (apparently the angel himself) **said to John** as God had said to Ezekiel, **Take and eat it.** What would be impossible in the circumstances of actual temporal existence is possible within the confines of a vision, and John cooperates with the angel in spite of the latter's warning: **It will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth.** This paradoxical warning is easily understandable in context. All genuine Christians are ambivalent concerning God's promised judgments. On the one hand, they pose no danger to us whatever and form the historical colonnade through which future glory opens to us. On the other hand, they will involve the destruction of unrepentant people, many of whom we may love and many to whom we are related. And even those who match neither description are fellow human beings in whose death we can take no pleasure.

10:11

11 And he said to me, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings."

The bittersweet taste of the prophetic oracles would have sustained a further meaning to the apostle. The angel explains at this point to John that his prophetic work is not yet complete. Two cycles of future judgments—seals and trumpets, both of which lead to the Second Coming itself—have been described so far in Revelation. A third cycle must also be endured: **You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings.** The judgments of the third cycle will be still more severe and will fill in details not mentioned in the previous cycles.

11:1-19

the two witnesses



summary

The trumpets, the second cycle of judgments, ends like the first with the exaltation of Jesus Christ as He comes in glory and power at the second advent to assume control over the earth. Before that happens, however, God in grace makes one last attempt to reach a planet in rebellion. He raises up and appoints two special prophetic messengers to bear witness to the reality of his Son. They spend three and a half years prophesying of the events to follow. Combining the power of Moses and Elijah, they not only speak openly of the close of history, they exhibit supernatural power in the miraculous judgments they perform. God vindicates their words by raising them from the grave in a very public manner. Their resurrection signals the coming of Jesus to take sovereignty over the kingdoms of the earth, causing rejoicing in heaven.

commentary

11:1

11:1 Then I was given a reed like a measuring rod. And the angel stood, saying, "Rise and measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there.

The mighty angel of chapter 10 continues his visionary instructions into chapter 11, which continues the previous prophetic interlude, supplying added detail to events at the close of history. John is again invited to "participate" in the events of the vision he is seeing. He is **given a reed like a measuring rod** and told to **measure the temple of God**. Measuring a building or city is a frequently-used prophetic motif that meant "to hold (it) to a standard," i.e., to examine its suitability and judge it if necessary (cp. 2 Sam. 8:2; 2 Kings 21:13; Isa. 28:17; Lam. 2:8; Amos 7:7-9, 17).

At the end of this chapter, **the temple of God** in heaven is the focus of the reader, but here it is the *earthly* temple in view (the Gentiles tread the holy city, Jerusalem, the location of this temple, underfoot; i.e., barging in uninvited). At the time John received this vision, the temple that Jesus visited in Jerusalem had been in ruins for 25 years, and no Jewish temple has ever been built to replace it. In due time, however, it will be rebuilt, since Daniel 9:27 insists that Daniel's seventieth seven is interrupted when the Man of Sin (the Beast of Revelation 13) issues orders to shut down the temple worship in Jerusalem. Paul also affirms that the Man of Sin will be identified by his gesture of declaring himself to be God in the temple of God. John is also told to **measure the altar and those who worship there**. The entire system will soon be destroyed and discredited, and so it is measured so that John and the whole world can see its shortcomings.

11:2

2 But leave out the court which is outside the temple, and do not measure it, for it has been given to the Gentiles. And they will tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months.

However, the apostle is to **leave out the outer court outside the rebuilt temple**. That court, according to the angel, has been **given to the Gentiles** who have no business being there. When the covenant with Israel is broken in the middle of the seventieth week of Daniel, Gentiles will **tread the holy city underfoot for forty-two months**. It seems most natural to see this time period as the second half of Daniel's week, and the Gentiles' presence in the temple precincts is probably best explained as representing the security forces of the Man of Sin. It is in the middle of the week (Dan. 9:27) that the Man of Sin sets up his image in the temple and demands worship (2 Thess. 2:1-12). Since he will be able to perform remarkable signs and wonders (Rev. 13:13-14), people will be greatly deceived and offer him what he demands.

11:3

3 And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.

Into this gruesome darkness at the midpoint of Daniel's seventieth week God sends one last testimony. He raises up **two** divinely appointed special **witnesses**. These men will be prophets: **they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days** (3½ prophetic years). Though the time period is given in days rather than months, we are probably to understand that the era of the witnesses' ministry is the second half of Daniel's last week. The emergence of the Man of Sin and the idolatry of the earth in its last days requires them to be **clothed in sackcloth**, a biblical sign of mourning (1 Chr. 21:16; Esth. 4:1-2). When they finish their work 3½ years later, the guilt of humanity will reach an all-time high, and Jesus Christ will begin his return in glory.

11:4

4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord of the earth.

These two prophets will not fail to have an impact because they lack credentials. They are **the two olive trees and the two lampstands**—common symbols in Scripture for fruitfulness and verbal power in Israel—and they are pictured as **standing before the Lord of the earth**. To *stand before the Lord* is a phrase that often identified prophets or royalty as special anointed servants of God (cp. 1 Kgs. 17:1; 1 Sam. 6:20, 16:22) and emphasized their ready availability to do God's bidding.

11:5

5 And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner.

These two prophets do not simply exercise a verbal ministry, however. They carry out a ministry of signs and wonders of their own. Though they are lonely figures, they are not vulnerable to the displeasure or whims of the most powerful earthly rulers: **if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies**. Because they will speak of earth's coming King, the Lord Jesus Christ, it will follow that earth's pretender king, the Man of Sin, will dispatch people **to harm them**, but the swift death of their opponents will sober the rest, for people will not want to **be killed in this manner**.

11:6

6 These have power to shut heaven, so that no rain falls in the days of their prophecy; and they have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to strike the earth with all plagues, as often as they desire.

Like Elijah (1 Kgs. 17:1), the two prophets **have power to shut heaven, so that no rain falls during the days of their prophecy**. (Elijah had God withhold rain for three-and-a-half years [Jas. 5:17].) Like Moses, **they have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to strike the earth with all plagues, as often as they desire**. Apparently they will exercise these powers from time to time during their brief ministry—a ministry that will last (like their Lord's) for only a little more than three years. Jesus' first forerunner, John the Baptist, produced no miracles but had a profound impact (John 10:41). Jesus' last forerunners will do numerous signs, and have little impact. Humanity's ears will be fatally clogged.

11:7

7 When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them.

After their brief **testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them.** This is the first mention in Revelation of a figure who will be featured beginning in chapter 13. Elsewhere in the Bible the Beast of the abyss assumes other names. In Daniel 9:24-27 he is the prince who is to come. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3 he is the “Man of Sin” or the “son of destruction.” In 2 Thessalonians 2:8-9 he is “the lawless one,” and in Daniel 7:20 he is the “little horn.” The biblical description of this person is remarkably consistent throughout the prophetic writings, and his character emerges clearly in this first mention. The Beast takes on God’s two witnesses and (unlike lesser figures who made the attempt) he does **overcome them and kill them.** This success adds enormously to his public credibility.

11:8

8 And their dead bodies will lie in the square of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.

At the end, their ministry apparently brings them to Jerusalem, or at least that is where **their dead bodies lie** in state **in the square of the great city.** John identifies Jerusalem clearly by pointing out that their deaths culminate in the place **where also their Lord was crucified.** By the time of their deaths, however, Jerusalem has forfeited any claims to being a holy city. **Spiritually,** John insists, it **is better called Sodom** for its moral depravity **and Egypt** for its participation in the enslavement of God’s people.

11:9-10

9 Then those from the peoples, tribes, tongues, and nations will see their dead bodies three-and-a-half days, and not allow their dead bodies to be put into graves. 10 And those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them, make merry, and send gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who dwell on the earth.

For a happy **three-and-a-half days,** the **peoples** of the earth **see the dead bodies** of God’s choice servants, a visual event that will no doubt be featured on international television. Public sentiment will be so strong against these remarkable men that the local leaders forego ordinary decency and health concerns and refuse to **allow their dead bodies to be put into graves.** People are so thrilled to have them silenced that **they rejoice over them,** call for celebrations, **and send gifts to one another.** The world could not tolerate hearing the truth. **It tormented those who dwell on the earth.**

11:11-12

11 Now after the 3½ days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. 12 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here.” And they ascended to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies saw them.

The parties soon came to an abrupt end in John's vision, however. **After the three-and-a-half days of abuse, the breath of life from God** entered the two witnesses, and their last testimony to the world became their greatest. **They stood on their feet** in a newly restored condition. Their detractors, not too surprisingly, were gripped by **great fear**, an apprehension intensified when John **heard a loud voice from heaven saying** to the witnesses, **Come up here**. Like their Lord, they were taken to God, and before a watching world **ascended to heaven in a cloud** (Acts 1:11). **Their enemies**, the people who took their lives, found that death could not hold them, and **saw** God's purpose unfold before their eyes.

11:13-14

13 In the same hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. In the earthquake seven thousand people were killed, and the rest were afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven. 14 The second woe is past. Behold, the third woe is coming quickly.

These verses help the reader to mark the time frame in which these events transpire. We have now reached the end of the second cycle of divine judgments. As happened in the sixth seal (6:14), the sixth trumpet is marked by a **great earthquake**. At this time a **tenth of the city** of Jerusalem **fell**. This language is sufficiently broad to permit it to mean either (1) a tenth of the population was wiped out or seriously wounded, or (2) a tenth of the topography of the city was moved out of place. If the former, John's statement that **in the earthquake seven thousand people were killed** would be somewhat redundant, and reflective of Jerusalem's reduced population after many months of divine judgments. A hint at coming events may lie nestled in the statement that **the rest were afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven**. This unexpected behavior on the part of the Jewish population of the city may well indicate the first tiny steps of the 144,000 toward what will be their conversion following the second coming of the Savior.

John notes that **the second woe** (the sixth trumpet) **is now past**, and **the third woe** (the seventh trumpet) **is coming quickly**. This is the second coming itself, as the following verse makes explicit.

11:15

15 Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!"

When **the seventh angel sounded** his trumpet in the vision, **loud voices in heaven** begin to celebrate. Their celebration consists in the recognition that the one Person in the universe who can make the world whole again has now assumed his proper office (note the tense): **The kingdom** (most manuscripts have the singular here) **of this world has**

become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Christ has come to earth and begun his rule of the earth. The royal authority, the right to rule the earth, has now (in the vision) become the worldwide kingdom and royal authority of the God of heaven and of his Messiah. This event constitutes the fulfillment of the Father's ancient promise to his Son: *"Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel"* (Psa. 2:8-9). No rival will ever be able to dethrone him: **He shall reign forever and ever!**

11:16-18

16 And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 saying: "We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was, Because You have taken Your great power and begun to reign. 18 The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, And the time of the dead, that they should be judged, And that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, And those who fear Your name, small and great, And should destroy those who destroy the earth."

This is the moment toward which history has been moving since the fall of man in Genesis 3. The population of heaven is ecstatic and they celebrate, led by **the twenty-four elders who**, as John watched, **fell on their faces and worshiped**. Their song begins with thanksgiving to the **Lord God Almighty**. They applaud his eternity (**the One who is and who was**), but their praise is especially provoked by Christ's new role in the world: **You have taken Your great power and begun to reign**. God has always ruled (Psa. 103:19) providentially, but now He has begun to openly use the authority that He is properly entitled to exercise. Looking back on the terrible cataclysms of Daniel's seventieth week, the elders recall how **the nations were angry** and resisted instead of repenting. But because his **wrath** (cp. Psa. 2:12) has now been experienced, the world will soon sing a different tune. All that is wrong will soon be set right. **The dead** who have died in the Lord will now (Matt. 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:10) be **judged** and receive their just recompense of glory. **The prophets and saints** of old will now be resurrected and given the **reward** that is properly theirs, a reward that includes sharing Christ's authority: *"Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him"* (Dan. 7:27).

11:19

19 Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of his covenant was seen in his temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail.

The essential event has now taken place to restore the proper relationship between God and humanity. Heaven celebrates by giving non-inhabitants a look into **the temple of God**, where **the ark of his covenant is seen**. This is the only time the ark of the covenant is mentioned in Revelation. It is the heavenly reality of which the ancient tabernacle's ark was merely a copy. The ark speaks of God's faithfulness to his promises (it stored the word of God, the Ten Commandments) and his holy character (it was the place of atonement). The conclusion of the heavenly celebration is attended by **lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail**. We have earlier seen some of these in heaven: "*From the throne came out flashes of lightning and roaring and crashes of thunder.*" (4:5). The earthquake and great hail, however, are more likely to be earthly phenomena in conjunction with the last phase of the second coming (Zech. 14:3-4).

12:1-17

explanatory prophecies 1



summary

Before the final set of judgments is introduced, John receives another set of explanatory visions. The key players in the final drama are brought forward. Hitherto little has been said about persecution at the close of history and the fate of faithful believers. Now we are given a vision that explains how the closing days of history will witness an intensification of a conflict that has gone on for centuries—one with which John was all too personally familiar.

commentary

12:1-2

12:1 Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, with a garland of twelve stars on her head.

2 She was pregnant, and cried out in labor and in pain as she was about to give birth.

The central feature of Revelation 12 is now seen: **a great sign appeared in heaven**. The sign is so great, in fact, that it recapitulates the entire history of both testaments and the present age. **A woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, with a garland of twelve stars on her head** appears. The woman was **pregnant, and cried out with the pain** of labor as the moment of her child's birth approached.

The woman in the vision ranks in importance with the major figures of this book: the dragon, the bride of the Lamb, and especially the Babylonian prostitute of chapters 17-18. Like the latter, this woman's identity must be inferred from the characteristics that are attributed to her in the vision. The notion that she is to be identified with Mary, the mother of Jesus, can be dismissed at once. The woman has multitudes of offspring, all of whom *"keep the commandments of God and bear the testimony of Jesus Christ"* (vs. 17).

As the prostitute called Babylon cannot be identified as an individual, neither can this woman. She is a symbol for something else that must be deduced from the information presented in the context. Her being clothed with the sun and having the moon under her feet suggests that she is destined to possess a position of (perhaps political and/or spiritual) sovereignty at some point. Joseph used similar language and his family understood the symbolism just that way: *“Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me.’ So he told it to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, ‘What is this dream that you have had? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you?’”* (Gen. 37:9-10).

12:3

3 Then another sign appeared in heaven: there was a great, fiery red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.

Another equally striking **sign** now appears: **a great fiery red dragon**. He is described as having **seven heads and ten horns, with seven diadems on his seven heads**. Identification of the dragon is much easier, since it is specified in verse 9 that he represents Satan.

12:4

4 his tail swept a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, looking to devour her Child as soon as it was born.

That identification is confirmed by John’s statement that the dragon’s **tail swept a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth**. Since *stars* often in Scripture generally (and in Revelation in particular) form a common figure of speech for angels, a natural reading of this sentence sees it as a reference to the rebellion of Satan and his angels for whom God prepared the lake of fire originally (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 12:7, 9). Since Satan appears in Genesis 3 in an already fallen condition, this rebellion may have taken place even before the earth was created. Or, the figure may represent nothing more identifiable than a heavenly upheaval caused by Satan’s rebellion. On the analogy of Daniel 8:10, 24, the casting down may refer to Satan’s oppression of believers during Daniel’s seventieth week.

Since God announced his great plan to crush Satan’s head by means of the woman’s Seed (Gen. 3:15), the Lord Jesus Christ, Satan’s antagonism for Jesus has known no bounds. In the vision **the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, looking to devour her Child as soon as it was born**. (The capital letter in the translation is based on interpretive judgment, but not much judgment is required, since verse 5 declares that the Child in the vision is destined to rule all nations with a rod of iron, a com-

mon description of Jesus. This fulfillment of the Child's destiny is the centerpiece of Revelation and is described in chapters 19-22.) Satan was determined from the beginning to ruin God's great plan to save the human race by means of a righteous Substitute, and has always sought opportunities to destroy him.

12:5

5 She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with an iron scepter. And her Child was caught up to God and his throne.

John expresses what he saw in the vision by using language lifted from the great enthronement psalm (Psa. 2:9-10) and repeated earlier (Rev. 2:26-27) and later (19:10) in this book: to **rule all nations with an iron scepter**. The newborn is then described this way: **her Child was caught up to God and his throne**. The last sentence is generally thought to refer to the ascension of Christ, so this verse spans the entire earthly life of Christ. It is clear from this vision that attempts to regard Revelation as a simple presentation of chronologically successive events will not work. Each vision must stand on its own with its own message.

12:6

6 Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God, that she might be nourished there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

This interlude resurfaces a theme that has been touched only lightly in Revelation thus far—the persecution of believers during Daniel's seventieth week. The (as yet unidentified) woman now becomes a picture of God's preservation of believers. As John watched, **the woman fled into the wilderness**. In the case of Israel's early experience, the wilderness formed a place of divine discipline for unbelief; but that does not seem to be the case here. The passage that underlies verse 6 is 1 Kings 17:3-4, where God instructs Elijah, *"Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."* God then prepared a place for his servant and sustained him there from persecution. Here the situation is similar: **she had a place prepared by God, that she might be nourished there one thousand two hundred and sixty days**. The dragon is the aggressor in a violent persecution of believers, and this expanded in the verses that follow below. Again, it should be noted that the 1,260 days form part of Daniel's seventieth week, most likely the latter half. It is worth remembering at this point that Daniel's prophecy concerns in particular Jerusalem and Israel: *"Seventy sevens have been determined concerning your people and your holy city"* (9:24). Yet at the time Daniel's last "seven" begins to unfold, Israel and Jerusalem are in a state of unbelief. Only a remnant of the nation will in the end believe following Messiah's second ad-

vent—the 144,000 that are singled out for divine protection in Revelation 7. At this point a tentative identification can be given to the woman of Revelation 12. It is tempting to simply identify her with Israel on two grounds: (1) she is wearing a crown of twelve stars, suggesting the twelve tribes, and (2) she produces the Messiah, the ruler of all. However, this identification falls short in one critical respect. The “*rest of her offspring*” are identified as “*those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ*” (Rev. 12:17). This description almost certainly applies to the predominantly Gentile church in the latter stages of Daniel’s seventieth week (see below). A refinement is therefore necessary. The woman is not Israel in its entirety, but the real Israel, “Zion that is above,” the one Paul calls “the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:26), that is, of both Jewish and Gentile believers as well as Christ.

Paul uses an allegory in Galatians 4 to explain how Sinai and Zion picture, respectively, the false and the true source of the people of God: “*Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the Jerusalem that now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written: ‘Rejoice, O barren, you who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband’*” (vss. 25-57).

12:7-9

7 Now war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels had to fight against the dragon; the dragon and his angels fought, 8 but he did not prevail, nor was a place found for him in heaven any longer. 9 So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

God’s commitment to preserve the children of heavenly Zion now appears as **war** breaks out **in heaven**. John sees **Michael**, the archangel assigned to protect the interests of God’s covenant people Israel, **fighting alongside his angels against the dragon and his angels**. Michael is fighting for the safety of the 144,000, who have been sealed to protect them from God’s wrath (Rev. 7:3), but they have not heretofore been protected from satanic persecution. This scenario finds support in Daniel 12:1, where an angel explains to Daniel, “*At that time Michael will stand up, the great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. At that time your people shall be delivered...*” This promise is true though the 144,000 are not yet converted; but their names are known to God. The promise of Daniel does not apply to Israel in its entirety, but to “...*every one who is found written in the book,*” i.e., the 144,000. As a result, Satan (and his angels) **did not prevail, nor was a place found for him in heaven any longer**. The casting out of Satan (at least in this verse) does not describe what happened to Satan at his original

rebellion, but is the consequence of his defeat at the time he makes war on the saints during the second half of Daniel's seventieth week. It is thus an event yet future. As John watched, **the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world.**

12:10-12

10 Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now deliverance, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ have come; for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.¹¹ And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. 12 Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has but a short time."

The expulsion of Satan from heaven provokes a loud voice in heaven celebrating the inevitable triumph of the people of God: **Now deliverance, and strength, and the royal authority of our God, and the power of his Christ have come; for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.** That triumph has not actually been achieved yet (note the second half of verse 12), but God's triumph is as good as done. As a result, heaven celebrates as though it were already in the past: **They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.** Note that the people in question win by losing. Their faithful testimony leads to their martyrdom, and after their resurrection they rule with Christ (Rev. 20:1-6). Nonetheless, the earth is warned: **Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has but a short time.**

12:13-14

13 Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he sought to persecute the woman who gave birth to the male Child. 14 But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.

The dragon, in view of his imminent demise (which takes place following the second coming of Christ (20:1-3), **sought to persecute the woman.** God, however, placed her beyond reach of Satan **that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent.** Here the timing is unmistakably the second half of Daniel's seventieth seven, since

Satan “has but a short time.” She (and by implication, her children [vs. 17]) remain safe until the return of Christ, though Satan’s efforts do not stop.

12:15-16

15 So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. 16 But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.

Though Satan is restricted, he continues to make attempts to destroy the woman: **the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.** Satan finds no cooperation anywhere. Even the earth itself conspires with God against him, and the woman remains far from his grasp. The elect remnant of Israel, the 144,000, live (unbeknownst to them) under God’s complete protection as the clock of history counts down to Satan’s destruction.

12:17

17 And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus.

The dragon abandons his efforts to destroy the protected remnant and turns his attention to a new group: **enraged with the woman, Satan went to make war with the rest of her offspring.** He could not get at the 144,000, but the church was still available, though they are not called the church here. They are identified as those **who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus.** Their righteous conduct and their faithful testimony will in time provide the impetus to their martyrdom, for while God will resurrect them in due course, He will not exempt them from suffering for their faith during the closing days of history. The mechanics of this coming persecution of believers will occupy much of the next section (14-19) of Revelation.

13:1-18

explanatory prophecies 2



summary

The explanatory interlude now shifts to include an introduction to two key figures in the last days: the Man of Sin and the False Prophet. The first is a world leader who gains great renown and credibility. The second is his public relations and propaganda expert. The two together will make life for believers very uncomfortable as the last half of Daniel's week unfolds.

commentary

13:1

13:1 Now I stood upon the sand of the seashore. And I saw a beast coming up out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads. On his horns were ten diadems, and on his heads were blasphemous names.

John's perspective changes once again as this vision opens: **Now I stood upon the sand of the seashore.** (Some manuscripts read here, "And he (the beast) stood upon the sand of the seashore.") From this angle John was given a close-up view of the next key player in the drama of the last days. Reminiscent of the visions of Daniel, John's present view is dominated by an awesome animal-like figure. Daniel's "*prince who is to come*" (Dan. 9:27) now becomes prominent in Revelation, being described as a **beast coming up out of the sea**. And what a creature! He is virtually a duplicate of the dragon of Daniel 12:3. He has **ten horns and seven heads**. Horns typically speak of power to act aggressively, and heads often suggest ruling authority. Curiously, **on** the beast's seven **horns** sat not seven **diadems** but **ten**. (A diadem was a victor's crown, the sort of award given to Olympic athletes. Many were simple ribbons tied off at the back, so a given head could easily accommodate more than one.) The creature's seven **heads** contained no crowns, but **blasphemous names** or titles, apparently written out.

13:2

2 The beast I saw was like a leopard, his feet were like a bear's, and his mouth was like a lion's mouth. The dragon gave the beast his power, his throne, and great authority.

John's beast resembles all four beasts that Daniel saw issuing from the sea before the vision of the Son of Man (Dan. 7:1–8, 13, 21). This beast was **like a leopard with feet like a bear's and a mouth like a lion's**. Just as those creatures pictured individual kingdoms (cp. Dan. 7:17, 23), John's beast seems to be a composite of all of them. Such great empires typically demand wholesale allegiance and are contemptuous of heavenly authority. Satan, **the dragon, gave John's beast his power, his throne, and great authority**.

13:3-4

3 One of the beast's heads appeared to be fatally wounded, but his lethal wound had been healed. The whole earth was amazed and followed the beast. 4 They worshiped the dragon because he gave authority to the beast. And they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast? Who is able to wage war against him?"

The beast will be the great world ruler who will, with Satan's help, gain universal authority during Daniel's seventieth seven. He amazes the world and gains attention by surviving (either politically or physically) a devastating attack: **one of the beast's heads appeared to be fatally wounded**. The world came to regard him as defunct, yet in time **his lethal wound had been healed**. His public vindication/restoration created an awesome impression on the population of the earth: **the whole earth was amazed and followed the beast**, giving him their loyalty and political devotion. As a result of his accomplishment, the people of **the world worshiped Satan, the dragon**. This does not necessarily mean that they were consciously bowing down to Satan in their places of worship; by bowing the knee to human authority or idolatrous religions people are worshiping Satan in disguise, who is the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4). The unprecedented satanic power possessed by the beast causes him to be regarded as invincible: **Who is like the beast? Who is able to wage war against him?**

13:5-6

5 He was given a mouth with which to speak boasts and blasphemies. He was also given authority to make war for 42 months. 6 He began to speak blasphemies against God: to blaspheme his name and his dwelling and those who dwell in heaven.

The beast, unbeknownst to the world, is living on borrowed time. **He was given a mouth with which to speak boasts and blasphemies against God** and his people, but only for a short season: **42 months**. This period is identifiable as the second half of Daniel's seventieth seven ending at the return of Christ. The beast's blasphemy extends

beyond God to **those who already dwell in heaven** with him. We are probably to understand this as those who have died in the Lord before Daniel's last week begins and are beyond the reach of the beast. He dishonors even the honored dead.

13:7-8

7 The beast was permitted to wage war against the saints and to conquer them. He was also given authority over every tribe, language, and nation. 8 All those who live on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered.

The beast does more than merely blaspheme, however. In John's vision, **the beast was permitted to wage war against the saints and to conquer them** (i.e., put them to death). His rage against believers issues from their refusal to worship him, especially since **he was given authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation** by Satan. John's language is carefully chosen here. He explains that the beast's popularity extends across the whole human race: **all those who live on the earth will worship him**. However, it is clear from the preceding statement that the saints do not worship him (that is the problem), so the apostle carefully defines what he means by **all those who live on the earth**. That phrase is defined by the words **everyone whose name was not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slaughtered**. This language allows for the possibility that even people who are not converted at the time such edicts are issued to resist for a while and might well suggest that some will be converted to Christ after these restrictions are already in force.

13:9

9 If anyone has an ear, he should listen.

At this point John pauses and issues a warning, using the same language that Jesus used in writing the churches: **If anyone has an ear, he should listen**. This statement is (perhaps intentionally) ambiguous. It could be pointing backwards to the words just written concerning the extent of the beast's power. (In the letters to the churches in chapters 2-3, the phrase is always retrospective, referring to the preceding letter.)

However, the verse may also be prospective, referring to verse 10 and the solemn warnings it contains.

13:10

10 If anyone is destined for captivity, into captivity he goes. If anyone is to be killed with a sword, with a sword he will be killed. This demands the perseverance and faith of the saints.

To this point, John has described the fierce violence of the beast, but he has said nothing about the believers' response to such attacks. Now he does: **if anyone** (that is, any saint targeted by the beast) **is destined for captivity, into captivity he goes**. He must not bow down to the beast and deny his faith. Alternatively, **if anyone is to be killed with a sword, with a sword he will be killed**. Apparently exile and execution are the only options offered. Either fate **demands the perseverance and faith of the saints** and the third choice (worshipping the beast) is unthinkable.

13:11-12

11 Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth; this one had two horns like a lamb, but he sounded like a dragon. 12 He exercises all the authority of the first beast on his behalf and compels the earth and those who live on it to worship the first beast, whose lethal wound was healed.

Now a new member of the closing cast is unveiled: **I saw another beast coming up out of the earth**. This creature assumes responsibility for the public persona of the first beast. He is deceptive and superficially gentle, with **two horns like a lamb**. However, he is a false prophet and is given away by his words: **he sounded like a dragon**. He is the front man for the beast and **exercises all his authority on his behalf**. He uses all the power of the beast's government to **compel the earth and those who live on it to worship the first beast**. That will be made easier because of the public nature of the first beast's "success" and survival: **whose lethal wound was healed**.

13:13-14

13 He also performs great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in front of people. 14 He deceives those who live on the earth because of the signs that he is permitted to perform on behalf of the beast, telling those who live on the earth to make an image of the beast who had the sword wound and yet lived.

The false prophet gains great fame of his own during this period. **He performs great signs** such as causing **fire to come down from heaven to earth in front of people**. He thus bears a startling resemblance to Elijah— except when he opens his mouth. (Biblically the test of a true prophet is not just prophetic accuracy but doctrinal orthodoxy [cp. Deut. 13:1-5], and the false prophet lacks it). His power does not come from God but from Satan.

The false prophet **deceives those who live on the earth because of those impressive signs**. The greatest of these involves telling **those who live on the earth to make an image of the beast who had the sword wound and yet lived**.

13:15

15 He was permitted to give a spirit to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast could both speak and cause whoever would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

The false prophet does something unprecedented: **he was permitted to give a spirit to the image of the beast**, giving it (apparently) life. As this transpires, the consequences are far-reaching. The image of the beast will speak, apparently settling once and for all the supernatural credentials of the false prophet. He uses this leverage to **cause whoever would not worship the image of the beast to be killed**.

13:16-17

16 And he requires everyone— small and great, rich and poor, free and slave—to be given a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, 17 so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark: the beast’s name or the number of his name.

Those who cooperate with this demonic program—and those who don’t—will be easy to identify. The false prophet uses economic sanctions in the interests of the beast: **he requires everyone— small and great, rich and poor, free and slave—to be given a mark on his right hand or on his forehead**. This mark will become the key to financial transactions in these awful days: **no one can buy or sell** unless he has one of the two marks—either **the beast’s name or the number of his name**. What once would have been technologically unlikely (a universal economic system of buying and selling), now is perfectly plausible, and economic hard times will motivate people who are driven by survival to yield their wills to such a seemingly invincible ruler.

13:18

18 Here is wisdom: The one who has understanding must calculate the number of the beast, because it is the number of man. his number is 666.

Living during the 42 months of infernal domination will take some doing, and John warns his readers not to be taken in. He offers **wisdom** in the matter of loyalty to God: **The one who has understanding** (and that ought to apply to any reader of Revelation) **must calculate the number of the beast**. That number will form part of the identity of the beast, though it does not necessarily equate with the mark of the beast. The mark identifies those who have yielded to satanic influence. The number identifies the source of that influence in these last days that are totally given over to the glorification of **man**. The beast’s **number is 666**. That knowledge will be adequate to identify him for those who will actually need to do so.

2 thessalonians :1-12; daniel 19-28

the man of sin



summary

The beast of Revelation 13 is an extraordinary figure, a world leader of unparalleled authority. He is, however, a familiar person to those acquainted with Daniel 7 and 2 Thessalonians 2. In these texts many features are added to the descriptions in Revelation 13.

commentary

2 thessalonians 2:1-2

1 Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him: We ask you, brothers, 2 not to be easily upset in mind or troubled, either by a prophetic utterance or by a message or by a letter as if from us, alleging that the Day of the Lord has come.

The church in Thessalonica, started by the Apostle Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-9), had only received three weeks of Paul's teaching before he had to flee for his life. After his departure, they had apparently been told that **the Day of the Lord** had already come. This phrase, a familiar theme of the Old Testament prophets, means "the day when God steps into history to judge evildoers." As such, there have been many "days of the Lord" in the past, since God has often punished kingdoms for their waywardness. He has done this by causing rival nations or confederacies to arise and be used as his instruments in divine discipline. He used Babylon, for example, to judge his people Judah and to carry them into captivity.

All such punishments pale, however, beside the future Day of the Lord that was the topic of this passage, for then a far more extensive and personal settling of affairs will take place. The Thessalonian Christians were concerned (perhaps because of local persecution) that the Day of the Lord was already under way. Paul writes to comfort them: **we**

ask you, brothers, not to be easily upset in mind or troubled about the matter. Someone apparently even claimed to be bearing such a message from Paul and his company. The apostle warned the church not to entertain any such idea, whether it came from a **prophetic utterance** or by a verbal **message** or by a **letter**.

2 thessalonians 2:3

3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way. For that Day will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.

Certain events, Paul insists, must precede the final Day of the Lord, which comes only at the conclusion of Daniel's seventieth week. People may try to **deceive** the Thessalonians, but the fact is that **that Day will not come unless the apostasy comes first**. "Apostasy" can mean *rebellion, abandonment, or departure* generally and can be used in military or political contexts. In Scripture it sometimes refers to abandonment of the essential doctrines or practices of the Christian faith: "*Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart (Gk. apostesontai) from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth*" (1 Tim. 4:1-3). As an identifier of the Day of the Lord, however, theological defection would be of limited value. The rebellion in question is far more likely to be the public outbreak against God that will be epitomized by the great world leader of the last days, **the man of lawlessness** or the Beast (also called here **the son of destruction** because of his ultimate fate). He is the ultimate rebel.

2 thessalonians 2:4

4 He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits in God's sanctuary, proclaiming that he himself is God.

The man of lawlessness exhibits hubris to an unparalleled degree: **he opposes** not only the God of the Bible, but every **so-called god or object of worship**. The ultimate expression of his arrogance will take place when **he sits in God's sanctuary** in Jerusalem, **proclaiming that he himself is God**. This ultimate assertion of the human over the divine is the same event that Daniel and Jesus referred to as "*the abomination of desolation*" (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15). Since at present the ancient temple of Israel lies in ruins, the fulfillment of this verse will require its reconstruction at some point in the future. At that time it will not be regarded as a legitimate place of worship by God, since those who construct it will still be in a state of unbelief with respect to Jesus Christ. Still, the location

is holy, and this violation a very serious crime. God has plans for the ancient site (Psa. 2:5-6).

2 thessalonians 2:5

5 Don't you remember that when I was still with you I told you about this?

Though Paul was only in Thessalonica for three weeks, he made a point of teaching the young Christians there the essentials of what the Bible says about the close of history: **don't you remember that when I was still with you I told you about this?** The apostle did not consider the prophetic teaching of Scripture to be exotic or abstruse. He regarded it as essential material even for young Christians like the Thessalonians. History is not aimless, but moving in the very direction that the Author of history has designed for it, and Christians who know the prophetic outline of the future will be greatly comforted in the present.

2 thessalonians 2:6-8

6 And you know what currently restrains him, so that he will be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but the one now restraining will do so until he is out of the way, 8 and then the lawless one will be revealed. The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth and will bring him to nothing with the brightness of his coming.

Events are not out of control even now. The emergence of this world-historical figure has not happened only because something **currently restrains him**. Paul does not identify this force or person, but he had taught the Thessalonian believers what "the restrainer" was: **you know**. There is little point in being more specific, since in any case the only force in the universe strong enough to thwart the satanic program of which the Beast is the key figure is God Himself. God will see to it that the man of lawlessness is **revealed in his time** and not before.

But though the full revelation of the Beast is future, **the mystery of lawlessness is already at work**. Lawlessness is a mystery to angels and to the righteous. Rational creatures are amazed that God remains so patient when the order He designed to bless human life is violated so commonly. Later in the book of Revelation, this persistent tendency to falsehood and waywardness will be personified in the prostitute named Babylon who pictures the deceptions of the present age (Rev. 17-18).

Once God steps out of the way and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the Lord Jesus will soon return. He **will destroy the Beast with the breath of his mouth** (cp. Isa. 11:4) and quickly remove the Beast's brief exercise of power by **the brightness of his coming**.

2 thessalonians 2:9-10

9 The coming of the lawless one is based on Satan's working, with all kinds of false miracles, signs, and wonders, 10 and with every unrighteous deception among those who are perishing. They perish because they did not accept the love of the truth in order to be saved.

The lawless one would have no credibility at all outside of Satan's supernatural working. But because he is in league with the enemy of souls, he will demonstrate **all kinds of false miracles, signs, and wonders**. "False" in this connection does not mean "staged" but "designed to deceive."

The effect will be a widespread and **unrighteous deception among those who are perishing**. By the time to which Paul refers, the gospel will have gone throughout the nations (Matt. 24:14), bringing the truth to the world. People will **perish** because **they did not accept the love of the truth in order to be saved**.

2 thessalonians 2:11-12

11 For this reason God sends them a strong delusion so that they will believe what is false, 12 so that all will be judged—those who did not believe the truth but enjoyed unrighteousness.

When people reject the truth that God has presented, He is under no further obligation to provide it again—or in more detail. As history approaches its climax, God will go further. **He will send them a strong delusion so that they will believe what is false**. This delusion will guarantee **that all will be judged**. As is often the case, the last word is ambiguous, referring either to physical judgment and death as Christ returns, or to eternal judgment at the Great White Throne (Rev. 20:11-15), or to both. This terrible experience will be the fate shared by **those who did not believe the truth but enjoyed unrighteousness**.

daniel 7:19

19 Then I wanted to know the true meaning of the fourth beast, the one different from all the others, extremely terrifying, with iron teeth and bronze claws, devouring, crushing, and trampling with its feet whatever was left.

In the opening paragraphs of Daniel 7, the prophet had been given a vision of four predatory creatures symbolizing a succession of great world empires. Of these, the **fourth** was easily the most interesting, since it was **extremely terrifying**. Daniel wanted to know the **meaning** of this predatory creature that featured **iron teeth and bronze claws** and spent its days **devouring, crushing, and trampling** all opposition.

daniel 7:20

20 I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up, before which three fell—the horn that had eyes,

and a mouth that spoke arrogantly, and that was more visible than the others.

But more than the beast itself, Daniel wanted to **know about the ten horns on its head**, and in particular **about the other horn that came up, before which three** (of the horns) **fell**. This little horn **had eyes**, and possessed a **mouth that spoke arrogantly**. This language echoes the reference in Revelation that describes the Beast this way: *“He was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months”* (Rev. 13:5). The horn was further distinguished by being **more visible than the others**.

daniel 7:21-22

21 As I was watching, this horn waged war against the holy ones and was prevailing over them 22 until the Ancient of Days arrived and a judgment was given in favor of the holy ones of the Most High, for the time had come, and the holy ones took possession of the kingdom.

These two verses summarize, in Daniel’s own words, what he learned from the angel in the vision (7:16). Some of the mystery of the previous verses began to clear up for Daniel as he continued **watching**. The horn that so intrigued him was brazen enough that he **waged war against the holy ones** (believers). Because he possessed such extraordinary power, for an unspecified length of time the horn **was prevailing over them**. His persecution was unsustainable, however, because **the Ancient of Days** arrived on the scene to defend the holy ones. Behind the earthly scenes of hardship and oppression, the Ancient of Days convened a heavenly court, and **judgment** was issued **in favor of the holy ones of the Most High**. The glorious time promised for generations had at last arrived, and **the holy ones took possession of the kingdom** and began to rule under the authority they shared with Messiah Jesus: *“And he who overcomes, and keeps my works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—“He shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels”—as I also have received from my Father* (Rev. 2:26-27). The saints’ possession of the kingdom does not deny that Jesus is the supreme ruler of it. Indeed, their authority is derived from his and their rule is a rule that He shares with them.

daniel 7:23-24

23 “This is what he said: ‘The fourth beast will be a fourth kingdom on the earth, different from all the other kingdoms. It will devour the whole earth, trample it down, and crush it. 24 The ten horns are ten kings who will rise from this kingdom. Another, different from the previous ones, will rise after them and subdue three kings.

Verses 23-27 now give the words of the angel: **This is what he said**. The creatures in the vision that so troubled Daniel represented a **fourth kingdom on the earth**. The ruling

authority of this final creature in the vision will be **different from all the other kingdoms that the angel described**. Instead of being local or even regional, this kingdom will be global in scope: **it will devour the whole earth**. The fourth beast will **trample the earth down and crush it**—not in the sense of destruction but of domination. It will not begin as a dictatorship, however. The **ten horns** in the vision represent **ten kings who will arise from this kingdom**. Though the angel does not specify if these kings will rule successively or coterminously, the latter seems to be the case, for an eleventh ruler **will arise after them and subdue three kings**—perhaps three of the ten, though this is not entirely clear (cp. Dan. 7:20). This eleventh king that will come to dominate the earth is described in language that is strikingly similar to the Beast of Revelation 13.

daniel 7:25-26

25 He will speak words against the Most High and oppress the holy ones of the Most High. He will intend to change religious festivals and laws, and the holy ones will be handed over to him for a time, times, and half a time.

26 But the court will convene, and his dominion will be taken away, to be completely destroyed forever.

The eleventh king's actions accord closely with that of the man of lawlessness of 2 Thessalonians 2: **He will speak words against the Most High and oppress the holy ones of the Most High**. One way he will exercise his unprecedented political power will be to alter long-standing religious practices: **he will intend to change religious festivals and laws**. His primary usurpation, however, will have to do with Christian believers, **the holy ones, who will be handed over to him for a time, times, and half a time**. The language is similar to Revelation 13:5, "*He was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months.*" A natural way to understand these two time periods (*a time, times, and half a time* and *forty-two months*) is to see them as referring to the same 3½ year period (the second half of Daniel's seventieth week) during which the Beast dominates the earth in general and oppresses Christian believers in particular. His rule will come to an end at the point when the heavenly **court** will convene and the Beast's **dominion is taken away and ended forever**.

daniel 7:27

27 The kingdom, dominion, and greatness of the kingdoms under all of heaven will be given to the people, the holy ones of the Most High. his kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will serve and obey him.'

The angel's final words of interpretation to Daniel are wonderfully hopeful. The dominion of the Beast is a brief one, after which the ruling authority, **dominion, and greatness of the kingdoms under all of heaven** will be granted to **the holy ones of the Most**

High. God's original design for humanity was to exercise godly dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26), and the closing scenes of human history will find him doing just that. Mankind will rule the earth, however, as a vice-regent, for ultimately the earth will be the scene of **his kingdom**. Jesus will rule all the other rulers of the earth as King over other kings and Lord over other lords. **All rulers will serve and obey him.**

daniel 7:28

28 This is the end of the interpretation. As for me, Daniel, my thoughts terrified me greatly, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself.

Daniel again speaks by pointing out that verse 27 forms **the end of the angelic interpretation**. It was not the conclusion of Daniel's interaction with the vision, however. The dark time of the end that the prophet saw in the vision **terrified** him and **turned his face pale**. He did not consult with his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, but **kept the matter** to himself. He did, however, record what he had seen, and the written record of his experience has descended to us today in this passage.

14:1-20

explanatory prophecies 3



summary

Revelation 14 contains a series of seven announcements, in the shape of angelic voices from heaven, that add important details to visions given earlier in the book. These have in common the recognition that judgment is imminent.

commentary

14:1

1 Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.

The opening announcement in the series concerns a group first encountered in chapter 7, the **144,000**, twelve thousand people from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. In John's vision, they are standing with Jesus, **the Lamb, on Mount Zion**. (This is the only mention of Mount Zion in Revelation.) The obvious question: is this the earthly or the heavenly Mount Zion? There certainly is a heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:22; Gal. 4:26), but it is highly unlikely that such is the intent here. In the next verse, John hears a voice "*from heaven*" which would be odd if he were already there looking at the heavenly Zion. It is far more likely that we are privy to a scene here that pictures God's relationship with the core of his new nation following the return of Christ. As John sees them, these people are those who bear the mark of the Lamb's ownership: **they had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads**. The Old Testament speaks with one voice that the kingdom of God will be governed by Christ from Mount Zion, the site of Jerusalem, in the age to come: "*I will make the lame a remnant, and the outcast a strong nation; so the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on, even forever*" (Mic. 4:7; cp. Joel 2:32; Isa. 2:1-4; 31:4; Zech. 14:4-5, 9). Isaiah anticipates the Lamb's rule in these words: "*Then the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for the Lord of hosts will reign on*

Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory” (Isa. 24:23).

14:2-3

2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, 3 and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.

John not only sees the 144,000 on earth, he hears a choir in heaven expressing its joy over what has transpired. He gropes to verbalize what the sound of the choir is like. It is a voice from heaven **like the roar of many waters, like thunder, like the sound of harpists playing**. In fact, he hears **many voices singing a new song before the throne of God in heaven**. The song was apparently composed specifically for **the 144,000**, for only they could **learn** it. Nothing further is given about the song, but John sees it as appropriate for this special group, since **they had been redeemed from the earth**. The last three words do not imply that they are now in heaven, since we have already been told otherwise. They are redeemed from earth in the sense that (unlike most of the world) they have been preserved alive because of God’s special protection on them (cp. Rev. 7:1-4) to see the second coming. As they see Messiah in his proper place of honor, they respond to Zechariah’s invitation: *“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,” says the Lord* (2:10). (“Daughter of Zion” is a common prophetic figure for “Jerusalem.”)

14:4-5

4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been redeemed from mankind by Jesus as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

These new Hebrew converts form the perfect representative group for the dawning of a new age of gladness and ministry. They **have not defiled themselves with women**. Defilement in Scripture refers to anything that would exclude a person (even temporarily) from the life of the covenant community. It is not a moral category but a ceremonial and public one. A person with a running sore, for example, would be considered ceremonially defiled and be unable to participate in some public convocations. Marriage is held throughout Scripture to be an honorable state (Heb. 13:4), but these 144,000 have (thus far) chosen to **follow the Lamb** as his devoted servants at this strategic moment in history. **They are unmarried virgins** at the time Christ returns. They are the first converts—the **firstfruits**— of Israel following the second coming, and their moral lives, like their cere-

monial conditions, are **blameless. No lie was found in their mouths.** In time to come they may marry and raise families; but at the time this scene unfolds they have not yet begun to do so. There will be plenty of time, for a kingdom that will last for a thousand years has only begun in the vision.

14:6-7

6 Then I saw an angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

A second announcement now is heard, this one issuing from an **angel whom John sees flying directly overhead.** The angel has been given **an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth.** The use of "gospel" here is somewhat surprising, for the message that follows is hardly the good news of the apostolic church. Jesus Christ is not mentioned in it, though the message of the angel, like the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) is aimed toward **every nation and tribe and language and people.** The call of the angel may give the urgent motivation to believe rather than the content of belief, for the angel cries **with a loud voice, Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come.** If the inhabitants of earth are to believe while breath remains in their bodies, now is the time. Men are commanded to **worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water,** a description that this very author claims is descriptive of Jesus Christ (John 1:3). Only the briefest interval remains. Though some will survive and will believe after the second coming, the likelihood of individual survival is so remote that no sane person would consider postponing faith until after the remaining judgments. Isaiah describes developments in these words: *"Therefore, a curse devours the earth, and those who live in it are held guilty. Therefore, the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men are left"* (Isa. 24:6).

14:8

8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality."

A third announcement is now introduced. Like the first two, this announcement has no essential connection with the others, but it introduces a central theme of the remaining chapters of Revelation. This, too, comes from an angel, who cries out, **Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.** The fall of Babylon will occupy all of chapters 17 and 18, but here the subject is only briefly introduced. Like the woman in chapter 12, lady Babylon represents not an individual but a concept. Her *sexual immorality* represents not bodily sins

but the seductions of the world system, just as sexual immorality in the Old Testament represented the idolatrous temptations of false gods: *“Israel would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods, and bowed down to them”* (Judg. 2:17; cp. Exod. 34:15-16; 1 Chr. 5:25).

14:9-12

9 And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.” 12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

The fourth announcement also is delivered by an **angel** and is both solemn and lengthy: **If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives the beast’s mark, he will also drink the wine of God’s wrath.** The figure of a wine cup in the Old Testament prophets often conveys the notion of confusion (as excessive wine drinking naturally does): *“Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, that made all the earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore the nations are deranged”* (Jer. 51:7). Sometimes, however, as here, the emphasis is on bitter experience: **he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength** (in the ancient world wine was typically diluted with water in social settings) **into the cup of his anger.** Thus far the verse might be predicting mere physical death by means of the closing judgments of chapters 15 and 16. At this point, however, the angel clarifies that cooperation with the beast represents the slamming of a door inaugurating an eternity of misery: **he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the sight of the Lamb.** The consciousness of what they have lost is made more intense because the judgment is carried out in the sight of Jesus Christ, the innocent Lamb who gave his life for the sins of the world and whose message was proclaimed to the whole world. These people **have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.** As Revelation 20:1-15 makes clear, the consignment of unbelievers to the lake of fire takes place a thousand years after the second coming of Christ. However, its certainty—and the limited time that people have to believe—makes it a potent motive for addressing the problem while there is time. Peter uses the same distant motivation in 2 Peter 3:1-10. The ultimate vindication of the Lamb becomes **a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.** Whatever persecutions are coming can be endured in the sure knowledge that the time is short and God’s justice is eternal.

14:13-20

13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!"

The fifth announcement addresses earth only indirectly but also concerns those saints. John is told: **Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.** Many deceased believers have been waiting on the resolution of the last days for centuries. In the drama of heaven, however, the time is quite short now. Those who die at the hand of the beast will **rest from their labors**, but their deeds will not be forgotten. Far from it, those **deeds will follow them** and determine their post of glorious service into endless ages.

14:14-16

14 Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in Your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." 16 So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

The sixth announcement again involves a shift of scene, but one quite familiar to readers of Daniel 7:10-13. John sees **a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a Son of Man.** In Daniel's vision, the Son of Man comes to the Ancient of Days and is presented as the one worthy to rule the earth and possess it as its eternal Ruler. That office is strongly suggested here by the **golden crown on his head.** In this case, however, his ruling destiny takes a back seat to his role in judgment. He has **a sharp sickle in his hand.** He is not acting out of hand, but in keeping with the Father's plan, the time to reap the harvest of the earth has now arrived, and **another angel** announces the event: **Put in Your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.** As a result of this heavenly call, the **One who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.** The reader of Revelation must always remember that John is seeing a vision from the standpoint of heaven. The sickle is a figurative representation of an actual event, but not one that will be visible as such at this time on the earth. Jesus "reaps" the earth—which means that He judges it by means of war, sickness, or other catastrophes that are not specified here. Earth's citizens will see the war, sickness, and catastrophes; the reader understands, because of this vision, that those are not random events but part of divine judgment.

17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." 19 So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. 20 And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

The final announcement in the series is delivered by still **another angel** who steps out of **the temple in heaven** with his own **sharp sickle**. One special group needs to be harvested and made subject to God's wrath. At the very climax of history, armies will surround and invade Jerusalem, seeking the destruction of the people in the city (Zech. 14:1-4). The Lord Jesus will return and rescue the desperate defenders of the city and destroy their attackers. This is represented by the command to **put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the wine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe**. This "reaping" is done in verse 19, and those who are "harvested" are **thrown into the great winepress of the wrath of God**. The city of Jerusalem, which has not been mentioned since 14:1, receives special treatment in this climactic day. The city will be invaded, but its inhabitants will be safeguarded (Zech. 14:1-9). The divine "reaping" will avoid Jerusalem itself: **the winepress was trodden outside the city** with devastating effect. This last expression of divine wrath includes so many people that **blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle for 1,600 stadia** (about 200 miles). It must be remembered that this language is metaphorical. The harvest is a figurative representation of a real event—God's destruction of much of human life. Grapes are harvested, but they are not really grapes, they are human lives taken through judgments falling from the sky, the heat of the sun, famine, sickness, and a variety of other sources. The sickle is not a battle between armies but a supernaturally supervised destruction. The winepress is a reality, but not one that men can see (other than in the final carnage). It does, however, represent an unimaginable collection of events resulting in human destruction: "*Unless those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been preserved alive*" (Matt. 24:22).

The imagery echoes Isaiah 63:1-6, where the Lord Jesus is pictured in a highly unusual way—acting in vengeance. The prophet is so stunned by what he sees that he interviews the Son of God in the vision:

(ISAIAH) "Who is this who comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah, this One who is glorious in his apparel, traveling in the greatness of his strength?"

(JESUS) "I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save."

(ISAIAH) "Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like one who treads in the winepress?"

(JESUS) "I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with Me. For I have trodden them in my anger, and trampled them in my fury; their blood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my robes. For the day of vengeance is in my heart, and the year of my redeemed has come. I looked, but there was no one to help, and I wondered that there was no one to uphold; therefore my own arm brought salvation for Me; and my own fury, it sustained Me. I have trodden down the peoples in my anger, made them drunk in my fury, and brought down their strength to the earth."

15:1-8

preparing the bowls



summary

The sequence of Daniel's seventieth week is now resumed, though little actual time elapses in the next two chapters. Revelation 15:1-8 provides the dramatic prelude to the very final judgments of the end, and chapter 16 describes the judgments themselves. Chapter 15 relives the events of the Hebrew exodus out of Egypt and comprises two visions: (1) a description of the "overcomers" who have emerged victorious from the persecutions of the Beast (vss. 2-4) and (2) an account of the seven resplendent angels who possess the bowls filled with the final plagues (vss. 5-8). The bowl judgments together constitute the "third woe" announced in 11:14 as "coming soon."

commentary

15:1

1 I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed.

Since chapters 15 and 16 form a single sequence, this verse serves as an introduction to the two chapters. For the third time in Revelation, the vision about to be described is called a **sign**. (Previous signs included the woman who gave birth to the child as well as the dragon, both appearing in chapter 12.) In this case, however, it is exceptional because it consists of **seven angels with the seven last plagues**. That makes it a **great and marvelous sign**. In the entire history of the earth, nothing like the seven "bowls" that are coming have been seen. **With them**, in fact, **God's wrath is completed**. The word *completed* is a translation of the Greek verb *teleoo*, "to finish" that appears around the New Testament in the most significant places (cp., for example, Rev 10:7; 11:7; 15:8; 17:17;

20:3, 5, 7). The bowls are the completion of a sequence that is first summarized in 6:17 in the sixth seal. There the rulers of the earth see the Lord Jesus returning and invite the rocks and hills to fall on them: *“The great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”*

Though modern man objects to the entire notion of the wrath of God, it forms a clear, elaborate, and unmistakable biblical teaching that cannot be erased from the text of Scripture. Nor should it be confused with the unhinged excesses that are so common to human rage. God’s wrath is subject to his holy intent, always measured, just, and suitable. It is, however, comparatively rare in human experience because God is gracious and long-suffering by nature. Jonah complained—in the Old Testament, no less—that God was entirely too patient with sinners. The prophet ran away from a divinely ordained prophetic commission and remonstrated with God in no uncertain terms: *“He prayed to the Lord, and said, ‘Ab, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm”* (Jonah 4:2). Jonah wanted the Assyrians killed. They were the dread enemies of his own people, and he knew that God was likely to pardon them if they appealed to him—a pardon that was unthinkable to the prophet. However, if God is holy—and Scripture repeatedly insists that He is—and human beings are not, then God’s creatures will eventually be called before the bar of God’s justice to give account for their actions. The expressions of wrath found in Revelation include, but are not limited to, that great tribunal described in 20:11-15. His judgments also are seen in the large-scale cosmic disasters that bring human history to a violent close. The seven last plagues form part of that scenario and find an appropriate introduction in chapter 15.

15:2-3

2 And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God
3 and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

John now sees **what looked like a sea of glass**. This sight has appeared before in Revelation (4:6) and here as there the scene is a heavenly one. As in the earlier case, the activity around that glassy sea is worship. In 4:6-9, the four living creatures praised God continually with a doxology extolling his holiness. In this case, the glassy sea is **mixed with fire**, a regular biblical figure associated with the holiness of God (cp. Isa. 4:4-5; Exod. 24:17; Deut. 4:24; 9:3; Heb. 12:29). Instead of the living creatures, however, John’s attention is focused on a group **standing beside the sea**. Only a short time before the vision, they had been on earth, suffering the persecutions and hostilities of the Beast. Now they are in

God's presence, having **been victorious over the beast and his image** and having escaped—at deadly cost—the consequences of failing to bear **the number of the Beast's name**.

The reader must remember that “victory” in Revelation holds a special connotation. It is always won by faithfulness, never by “success.” Martyrdom is victory if “success” requires unfaithfulness to God. The victors in the vision are now poised to sing a song of victory: **they held harps given to them by God**. Appropriately, in view of the similarities between the harrowing experience they have escaped—so like Israel's escape from the plagues of Egypt—**they sang the song of Moses**. The great lawgiver's name reminds readers of that violent era in the history of God's people when He gave his people a victory over a powerful ruler by the hand of a **servant of God**. A song of Moses is mentioned four times in the Old Testament (Exod. 15:1; Deut. 31:22, 30; 32:44). The first song of Moses celebrated the deliverance at the Red Sea. The last three, all in Deuteronomy, acknowledged God's faithfulness in bringing Israel to the border of the Promised Land. The song now to be sung shares similar themes and is styled **the song of the Lamb**, the One who was the centerpiece of the Passover meal.

15:3-4

3 ...“Great and marvelous are Your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are Your ways, King of the nations. 4 Who will not fear You, O Lord, and bring glory to Your name? For You alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before You, for Your righteous acts have been revealed.”

The martyrs praise God for reasons that might seem surprising to onlookers. Though these heavenly choir members have lost their lives to an unjust earthly ruler, they extol God for his **deeds**, which they declare to be **great and marvelous**. They also address him as **Lord God Almighty**, the last term being the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament term *Shaddai*. Perversely, human beings generally regard prosperity as no great achievement, but are quick to blame God for any restriction of it. Glorified saints know very well—and here sing of it—that God is **just and true in all his ways**, including the terrible events that are soon to unfold. Instead of driving human beings away from God, the terrible judgments of the coming hours will bring large numbers to him (from those who survive the events). Anticipating the spiritual harvest to come, the martyrs address God as **King of the nations**. Their repentance will repudiate the arrogant words of Pharaoh, who rebuked Moses by saying, “*Who is Yabweh, that I should obey his voice by letting Israel go? I do not know Yabweh, nor will I let Israel go*” (Exod. 5:2).

To fail to acknowledge God is unthinkable to those who have proven their own faithfulness. They ask, **Who will not fear You, O Lord, and bring glory to Your name?** The

God of heaven is incomparable: **You alone are holy**. As an eventual consequence of the death of millions, **all kinds of nations will come and worship** in Jerusalem. The manifold kindnesses of God will not accomplish this; only wholesale death will do it. Humankind will dwindle to a fraction of its current numbers when God's judgments fall and his **righteous acts are revealed**. So terrible will be the slaughter that it will take months just to bury the dead: *"For seven months the house of Israel will be burying them, in order to cleanse the land. Indeed all the people of the land will be burying, and they will gain renown for it on the day that I am glorified," says the Lord Yahweh. They will set apart men regularly employed, with the help of a search party, to pass through the land and bury those bodies remaining on the ground, in order to cleanse it*" (Ezek. 39:12-14). As human life returns to normal, Gentiles will come to see the great wisdom of God and make sincere efforts to learn more of it: *"In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of all—the most important place on earth. It will be raised above the other hills, and people from all over the world will stream there to worship. People from many nations will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of Jacob's God. There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths. For the Lord's teaching will go out from Zion; his word will go out from Jerusalem. The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore"* (Isa. 2:2-4).

15:5

5 After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened.

The gravity of events in the closing hours of history is seen in John's vision when he **looked, and in heaven the temple was opened** (cp. 11:19). This holiest of all locations is normally off limits to human eyes, but the conclusion of history will prove to be a demonstration of God's holiness, an unveiling of his uniqueness and his justice. Hence the temple is here described as **the tabernacle of the Testimony**. The name issues from the fact that in that holiest place of all in Israel's life the ark of the covenant was placed, containing the tablets of stone upon which were written the Ten Commandments, God's revelation of his holy character. It stayed there as a testimony on God's part, a reminder of who He was and of the obedience that Israel owed him. The law bore mute but eloquent testimony to God's moral requirements. God's testimonies have long been violated by humankind, and now the price of rebellion will have to be paid.

15:6-7

6 Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their

chest. 7Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever.

New **angels** now appear before John—**seven** of them, possessing together **the seven plagues** that still have to be administered to a wayward planet. As representatives of God's holiness, the angels appear in clean, shining linen symbolic of moral purity. Like the Son of Man in Revelation (1:13), they wear **golden sashes around their chests**. The preparations for the conclusion of God's work of judgment continues when **one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels** who will disperse that judgment **seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God**. To emphasize God's enduring authority to bring justice to the lives of moral creatures, John reminds the reader that the God who is about to dispense justice is the One **who lives forever and ever**.

15:8

8 And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

As the atmosphere in Israel's tabernacle and (later) its temple was characterized by the smoke of incense, **the heavenly temple** in John's vision was **filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power** (cp. Isa 6:4). The glory of God is his splendor and beauty, called to the reader's attention by the events that are unfolding. Those who question God's purity or justice will soon be forced to admit that they have been living in a fool's paradise. His power will be exhibited through the bowl judgments in an entirely unprecedented way. He is the author of these destructive judgments (cp. Exod. 40:34–38; 1 Kgs. 8:10–11; Ezek. 11:23; 44:4). For these last terrible moments of history, **no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed**. Even the angels, who have for centuries reflected the holiness of God and sung of it, are excluded while justice is meted out on the earth. The stage is now set for the pouring out of God's bowl judgments, a process that will occupy all of chapter 16.

16:1-21

the bowl judgments



summary

The seven last judgments are poured out on the earth, concluding God's design to give to the last generation (the people who participated in the design of Satan to persecute God's servants) the punishments it deserves. These judgments conclude the chronology of Daniel's seventieth seven, though chapters 17 and 18 will expand on the prior mention here of Babylon the Great.

commentary

16:1-2

16:1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go and pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God on the earth." 2

So the first went and poured out his bowl upon the earth, and a foul and loathsome sore came upon the men who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped his image.

After the prelude of chapter 15, it is at last time to present the concluding judgments of God on a rebellious world. John hears a **loud voice** coming **from the** direction of the heavenly **temple**. The degree to which God is holy will now be exhibited; it will be seen in the carrying out of the dreadful command **Go and pour out the seven bowls full of the wrath of God on the earth**. Presumably, the voice comes from a mighty angel—one in a place to know the purity and holiness of God. When the first **bowl is poured out on the earth**, those who **had the mark of the beast**, the people who **worshiped his image**, broke out in **loathsome sores**. (The fact that these men have to be specified shows that other people—those who have not taken the mark of the beast—are still living on the earth.) The description here recalls the sixth plague of Egypt, when boils struck the Egyptians at the direction of Moses (Exod. 9:10–11).

16:3-7

3 Then the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it became blood as of a dead man; and every living creature in the sea died. 4 Then the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel in charge of the waters saying: "You are just, the one who is and who was, the Holy One, because You have judged these things. 6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and You have given them blood to drink. For it is their just due." 7 And I heard one from the altar saying, "Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments."

Things move swiftly now. The **second angel** dispenses his bowl **on the sea** and those life-sustaining waters **became like the blood of a dead man**. This judgment again recalls the Egyptian plague when the Nile was turned to blood. This bowl insured the death of **every living creature** in the sea. The **third bowl** has a similar effect on **the rivers of the earth and the springs of water**. Human life in its entirety is now in deep jeopardy, for without fresh water human beings can only live a few days. Nonetheless, **the third angel**, the one **in charge of the waters**, makes a point of acknowledging what heaven knows and earth stubbornly refuses to accept: **You are just... the Holy One**. For millennia human beings have interpreted the gracious favor of God in giving them prosperity and pleasant lives as only what is right. But God is eternal: **the One who is and who was**, and He has now **judged these things** that people take for granted, and He has judged the people at the same time. Those who suffer the judgments of the bowls are defined here as those who **have shed the blood of saints and prophets**. God will now pay them in kind by **giving them blood to drink**. (Since there are still people living on the earth who have not shed the blood of saints and prophets, it stands to reason that they are being protected from God's wrath through these awful times just as Israel was protected in Egypt.) The discomforts of earth's rebels is again affirmed in a cry from the altar: **Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments**. There is no question among the inhabitants of heaven as to the rightness of what is happening on earth as the bowls are poured out.

16:8-9

8 Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire. 9 And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they refused to repent and give him glory.

As in the previous descriptions of divine judgments (the seals and trumpets) **the sun** suffers the effects of God's wrath. The **fourth bowl** is **poured** on the earth's source of light and energy, and instead of blessing humanity the sun becomes a source of pain: **power was given to him** (i.e., the angel, or *to it*, referring to the sun) **to scorch men**

with fire. The fourth trumpet brought the sun's darkness upon the world, but we see here that though the light is diminished the sun's heat is not. Though the effect is unprecedented, humanity is so hard by this time that **they blaspheme the name of God** for their punishments and they **refused to repent and give him glory.**

16:10-11

10 Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness; and men gnawed their tongues because of the pain. 11 They cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and they refused to repent of their deeds.

The brief rule of **the beast** comes to an ignominious end as **the fifth angel pours out his bowl.** It affects not nature but **the throne** (i.e., the governmental authority) of the beast. Those under his rule and share his mark **gnaw their tongues because of the pain** that is associated with these judgments. The beast's subjects curse the God of heaven for their miseries and continue to **refuse to repent of their deeds.**

16:12-16

12 Then the sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared. 13 Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. 14 They are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. 15 ("Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.") 16 And they gathered them together to the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon.

By this time armies are on the march. Many of the beast's subjects have now decided that he must be deposed. His army surrounds Jerusalem and those who live to the east are headed to the Holy Land for a confrontation. The sixth angel simplifies this process by drying up **the great river Euphrates so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared.** The character of the beast's administration now becomes apparent (at least to John) as the apostle sees issuing **from his mouth** (and **the mouths of the dragon and the false prophet**) **evil spirits** that looked like **frogs** (here the reader will notice still another connection with Israel's delivery from Egypt). These creatures are not quite finished. They hope to resurrect the career of the beast by performing **signs**, but the effect of these miracles is merely to intensify the coming conflict. The armies gather to the final **battle of the great day of God Almighty.**

As events draw to a rapid close, in verse 15 Jesus—whose revelation this book is—issues a parenthetical remark to those who will be concerned directly with these developments, the remaining believers inhabiting the earth: **Behold, I am coming like a thief!** These words are often misconstrued as though the return of Christ is being compared to the practices of a cat burglar. Every eye will see the second coming. It will neither be secret nor subtle. Jesus will appear like a thief in the sense of a highwayman, returning with myriads in his train in glory to take what is rightfully his, the earth itself. The remark is given as an encouragement for those who are surrounded by people and a system hostile to their interests. They are also encouraged to stay alert spiritually, to **keep their clothes**. The imagery comes from the practice of Roman army commanders, who would patrol outposts at night to determine who was sleeping on duty. If a legionnaire was found napping, the commander would take his torch and set the sleeper's clothes ablaze. If the negligent soldier survived, for days afterward his missing garments would testify to his neglect as he was shamefully exposed before his comrades.

Verse 16 completes the interrupted thought of verse 14. The armies of the east **gathered together to the place called in Hebrew Armageddon**. (Some manuscripts have “Megiddo” here, the name of the ancient town, rather than “Armageddon,” meaning, “the hill/mountain of Megiddo”.) Megiddo lies in ruins today, but was an important city at the time of Solomon. It sits at the opening of a crucial mountain pass and overlooks a vast valley called the Valley of Jezreel in Hebrew Scripture. This enormous flat area provides a perfect staging area for the armies' final assault on Jerusalem. Whether they actually arrive there is an open question, though the beast's troops will certainly be attacking the city of Jerusalem (Zech. 14). It may be that God will choose to destroy these armies near Megiddo, thus not allowing them to pose a threat on Jerusalem.

16:17-19a

17 Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” 18 And there were noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such a mighty and great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth. 19 Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell.

The **seventh angel's bowl** results in more judgments and an announcement that the end has at last arrived: **It is done**. The seventieth week of Daniel at last is at an end. Noises, thunderings, lightnings and an unprecedented earthquake attend the events of the second coming. (The reader may notice here an echo of Jesus' experience at his first coming, when the words “It is finished” were also accompanied by an earthquake.) The city of Jerusalem itself is heavily affected: **the great city was divided into three parts** (an event

predicted in Zechariah 14) and **the cities of the nations fell**. The Jerusalem of the millennial age will be rebuilt near the site of the present city.

16:19b-21

19b And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. 20 Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. 21 And great hail from heaven fell upon men, each hailstone about the weight of a talent. Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, since that plague was exceedingly great.

Another city in particular is mentioned as getting what she deserves: **great Babylon was remembered before God**. She had been functioning for centuries, acting contrary to God's interests, and now she will have to swallow **the cup of the wine of the fierceness of God's wrath**. (The identity of Babylon and the theme of her destruction will be explored at some length in chapter 17.) At the very moment Babylon begins her bitter drink, the topography of the earth is disintegrating: **every island fled away**, and the very **mountains** themselves were **not found**. Even in such extremes, some few people survive: **great hail fell from heaven upon men**. This unprecedented barrage contained stones the weight of a **talent** (about 66 lbs.). Again, such violent judgments produce no repentance, but only hardness: **men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail**. God will bring these judgments to an end earlier than planned: *"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened"* (Matt. 24:21-22).

17:1-18

the identity of babylon



summary

Chapters 17 and 18 serve as an expansion and explanation of the seventh and final bowl judgment in Revelation 16:19. Babylon is so significant that her destruction cannot be described in a single chapter. Chapter 17 gives many prophetic clues to her identity, and Chapter 18 gives details of her destruction.

commentary

17:1-2

1 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. 2 With her the kings of the earth committed sexual immorality and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her immoral acts.”

Chapter 17 consists in its entirety of a briefing that John receives from **one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls**. Once the angel’s work was done, he **came and** spoke to John to give him insight into one of the leading features of the seventh bowl, the figure of Babylon the great, whom the angel calls **the great prostitute**. Already the meaning of the figure is taking shape, for clearly Babylon is a metaphor. She is no more a literal woman than the woman of chapter 12, and the references to her sexual immorality cannot be intended as literal descriptions: **the kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her** makes perfect sense if taken figuratively (preferring the creature, Satan, to the Creator), but is impossible if taken literally. The metaphorical character of the woman is further confirmed by the highly unusual notice that she **sits on many waters**. This language finds its meaning in an earlier prophetic condemnation of the ancient city of Babylon (Jer. 51). There the city, the destroyer of Jerusalem and much more, is told, *“O you who dwell by many waters, abundant in treasures, your end has come, the mea-*

sure of your covetousness” (vs. 13). Revelation 17:15 clarifies this figure, as the angel explains the meaning of the waters on which Babylon sits: “*The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.*” In Hebrew Scripture, the figure of a “prostitute-city” is used of Nineveh (Nah. 3:4), of Tyre (Isa. 23:16–17), and most often of idolatrous Jerusalem (Ezek. 16:15–42). Babylon of Revelation 17, however, is no more a physical city than she is a physical prostitute. Revelation 17 takes the metaphor to a new level. She is not merely a great prostitute, but is *the mother of prostitutes*, i.e., the real source of the moral degradation of the entire world, not merely one expression of the problem.

The roots of this figure, indeed, go all the way back to Genesis 11, but they are camouflaged there by the strange translation of verse 9: “*Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*” The Hebrew word *babel* appears 233 times in the Old Testament, and 231 times it is translated *Babylon*. Only in Genesis 10:10 and 11:9 is *Babel* the rendering.

Babylon was the first humanly organized attempt in history to break free from God’s restrictions and to acquire fame and power by gaining independence from God. It was far from the last, however. God frustrated the first attempt by imposing varying languages on the human race so that they could not pursue their desired autonomy without difficulty, but the process has been attempted continually since. The entire human race has yielded to the seductive temptation of becoming autonomous: **the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her immoral acts.** Man cannot be happy apart from a harmonious unity with God. To yield the affections to anyone or anything else is the severest form of unfaithfulness to God’s design and a blatant rejection of his purposes—so obvious and personal that sexual immorality is a suitable figure to be used in describing it. Indeed, it is arguably the most common metaphor in Scripture to define human waywardness (Gen. 38:24; Jer. 2:20; 3:1, 6, 8; Ezek. 16:28, 41; 23:5, 19; Hos. 2:5; 3:3; 4:15).

Even at this early stage of our study, we can provide a tentative definition of Babylon that ties together all that has been revealed so far and all that will follow. Babylon is what John elsewhere calls *the world*. By this he does not mean the planet but the spiritual system that pervades it in the age of human rebellion. Elsewhere, John warns against it with these words: “*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is*

coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:15-18). Antichrist is closely linked in First John with the world, and Revelation 17–18 merely dresses the association in metaphorical clothing. The world is that system of wickedness whose chief administrator is Satan and which acts as a rival to God's interests—not only in his plan of redemption, but in the process of learning to love God with the whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Its stock in trade is deception, and before the new world order under the Son of Man can be set up, the world (Babylon) will have to be not merely overcome but entirely destroyed.

17:3

3 Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.

The second clue to Babylon's identity comes when John is **carried away in the Spirit to a wilderness**. There the apostle saw Babylon (unnamed here) **sitting on a scarlet beast**. This beast we have met before in the first appearance of the dragon in Revelation 12:3: *"And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads."* Babylon **sits on** (is dependent on and associated with) Satan himself. The link is not immediately apparent to the inhabitants of the earth, however. John has to be taken away to the wilderness so that he can see what most cannot. Satan is described, as in chapter 13, as one **covered with blasphemous names**, with **seven heads and ten horns**. Hatred of the true God and a desire for autonomy form the motivations of the world system.

17:4-6

4 The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of the immoral acts of the earth. 5 This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY • BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

6 I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

Since the fall, human beings have been craving all the wrong things, and Babylon as a system offers them all. She is **dressed in purple and scarlet** clothing, the apparel of royalty (men desire power). She is **glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls** (men desire wealth). She is holding a **golden cup in her hand** (men desire pleasures), but the

cup conceals not real pleasures but **abominable things and the filth of her immoral acts** (people succumb to deception in order to gain all these things).

The angel exposes not just her temptations but her true identity to John through a label **on her forehead**. She is a **mystery**. What people see does not reflect the way things are. Like Satan, from which she draws her force and deceptiveness, she is a living combination of lies and dangerous half-truths. She is not just a prostitute, she is **the mother of prostitutes**. She is the driving force behind the lies men believe and the price they have to pay to gain what the world advertises: **the abominations of the earth**. The term *abomination* in Scripture generally refers to the idols that people worship, and when it doesn't it refers to the actions that people take because they have believed the falsehoods issuing from Satan's schemes. Because the world system is Satan's domain, the woman promotes his interests. As John sees her, she is **drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus**. Jesus warned his followers, *"If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you"* (John 15:19; cp. 15:18; 17:14; 1 John 3:13). Babylon is a personification of that system that is under the control of Satan and that seeks to defeat God's interests and deny his Son his rightful title to rule of the earth.

17:6-8

6 When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. 7 Then the angel said to me: "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. 8 The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

Babylon confused John, too: **when I saw her, I was greatly astonished**. He should not have been, however. John at that very hour was imprisoned for his faith, working in the lead mines of Patmos. John himself would write, *"Do not be amazed, brethren, if the world hates you"* (1 John 3:13). In this case, however, because of the way she is presented, John does not recognize her and is amazed at the hostile intent that she represents. That, indeed is the problem with the world system. She looks appealing but conceals a deadly design.

All this deserves careful explanation, and the angel provides it: **I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns**. As the angel explains it, the beast is the source of the monster of chapter 13, the satanic "incarnation" of worldly power. Further, this creature **once was**, apparently a

reference to what was earlier described in 13:3, 14, where the sword severely wounds the beast, but the wound was healed. Readers will notice how similar is the language of these two passages, and how closely the public reactions of chapter 13 resemble the description in chapter 17. That the beast **is not** refers to his defeat by the Lamb at the cross. Believers know that Satan is nothing and all his plans will come to nothing. He once enjoyed unparalleled control over the earth (**he was**), but now has been defeated by the death of Christ: *“We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory”* (1 Cor. 2:7-8). As a result of his defeat at Calvary, Satan’s days are numbered. He will now **go to his destruction**. Still, **he will come** for a little time (Rev. 12:12) to resist God and to oppose his people. Above all other influences, it is the apparent revival of the beast’s power over the earth after his great healed wound that will deceive the world and make people decide to follow him. **The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast**. They will be so confused by it that they will adore it, though its intent is their destruction. Note that not all the inhabitants of the earth succumb, but only those **whose names have not been written in the book of life**; i.e., unbelievers.

17:9-11

9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits; 10 they are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. 11 The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

Now the angel issues a caution: **This calls for a mind with wisdom**. The description of Babylon is about to take a turn that will lose many interpreters, and it comes in the statement **the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits**. Expositors here often take the wrong turn that regards this statement as code language to represent the city of Rome, known from early times to be constructed around seven hills (not mountains, however, which is the normal meaning of this Greek word).

However, how does that interpretation call for a mind with wisdom? The connection is obvious and a matter of geography, not spiritual insight. Also, it is frequently overlooked that John has already been told that the prostitute *sits on many waters* (vs. 1) which he later defines as *peoples, multitudes, nations and languages* (vs. 15). Here she sits on seven mountains. How are these two figures compatible? In the prophets, mountains are commonly used to describe world powers or heads of state (Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; Dan. 2:35; Zech. 4:7). That interpretation is confirmed by the next sentence: the mountains **are also seven kings**. The woman exercises pervasive influence over peoples, multi-

tudes, nations, and languages as well as their leaders. These kings are described in a complex and enigmatic way: **Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come.** It must be remembered that the heads describe the beast, not Babylon. His power, as John watches, is progressively declining; he is on his last legs: **when he does come, he must remain for a little while**, which is all he has left to do his destructive work. Only the eighth king is identifiable, for he is **the beast who once was, and now is not.** The beast **belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction** (cp. vs. 8).

17:12-14

12 The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received ruling authority, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. 13 They have one purpose; they will give their power and authority to the beast. 14 They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because He is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called ones, chosen and faithful followers.

Like the heads in the vision of the beast, then **ten horns** also have significance in identifying him. They represent **kings who as John writes have not yet received ruling authority.** In this statement lies an important principle in understanding Revelation. Many of its symbols are obscure only because the era it describes has not yet arrived. When the closing generation of Christians finds itself in need of clarifying insights, they will be there. The ten kings will be discernible in part because for a brief time—John describes it as **one hour**—they **receive political authority as kings along with the beast.** Unlike ordinary monarchs, as a group they sublimate personal ambition to serve **one purpose: to give their power and authority to the beast.** Like Pilate, Herod, and the Jerusalem priesthood in the New Testament era, they may hate each other but they are united in their antipathy to **the Lamb.** Their union will not matter, however, in the end. **The Lamb will overcome them because He is Lord of lords and King of kings.** After his victory, the Lamb will rule **with his called ones, chosen and faithful followers** (cp. Rev. 3:21).

17:15-18

15 Then the angel said to me, “The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. 16 The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. 17 For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God’s words are fulfilled. 18 The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.”

Complicating the meaning of Babylon still further, these verses explain to the reader her sordid end. **The angel** reminds us at the outset that Babylon is a universal system: **The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages.** But the present pervasiveness of Babylon is based on deception. She is a mys-

tery, unseen and little understood by the world's population. In fact, they routinely deny her existence. In the end, however, deception will not serve Satan's purpose. He will **hate the prostitute** and destroy her, coming out into the open in a naked bid for power over the Lamb. The ten horns believe they can add their weight to the **power** of the beast and allow him to defeat the Lamb; but the beast's open grab for authority will merely accomplish the divine **purpose** and ensure that all God's **words are fulfilled**. The woman's rule will come to an end, though at present she is **the great city that rules over the kings of the earth**. Abraham sought a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). Satan has a city as well, which, in the end, he will choose to discard and destroy. Evil cannot sustain itself, since it is built on a foundation of falsehood. If open antagonism assists Satan better than deception, he will abandon deception and pursue his ends openly.

18:1-19:5

Babylon destroyed



summary

The eternal kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ is about to begin, but before its inauguration an important enemy must be removed. Babylon, personified as a city, a prostitute, and a sorceress, is the world system that has since the Garden of Eden promoted the spiritual slavery of mankind through her deceptions. Before a new society can be established, she must be destroyed entirely, and in this passage she is destroyed, in a single hour, at the return of Christ (19:11-16).

commentary

18:1-3

1 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. 2 And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. 3 For all nations have drunk the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living."

Shadows are beginning to fade in the dawning light of the second coming of Christ (19:11-16). Still **another angel** comes **down from heaven** to offer an important announcement. He possesses **great authority** and from him issues an aura of coming blessings: **the earth was made bright with his glory**. The announcement is uttered **with a mighty voice: Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the great!** The system that has deceived the human race from earliest days has been destroyed. The kingdom to come will be of a different sort than present earthly kingdoms. Satan, the dragon, will be absent from it, for he will be confined and unable to influence the life of humanity for the next thousand years (Rev. 20:2-3). Babylon, the constant prejudice that has been a routine part of daily life in

the world, the prejudice that favors satanic interests—will be destroyed and Christ's kingdom inaugurated. Babylon will join Satan in the lake of fire, **a dwelling place for demons** and a **haunt for everything unclean**. For centuries, **all nations have drunk the wine** of her deceptions and she has led mankind into all manner of **immorality** and licentious living. All the true beauties of human life that God intended to give to his human creatures will now be enjoyed as his gifts instead of being purchased at the expense of giving loyalty to the dragon.

18:4-8

4 Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; 5 for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. 6 Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. 7 As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, 'I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.' 8 For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her."

Even at this late hour Babylon poses dangers for the people of God. They must not be ensnared by her seductions or take part in **her sins**. A **voice from heaven** warns his beloved to **come out of her** and avoid her **plagues**. In verse 6 the heavenly voice shifts from commentary to command: **pay her back as she herself has paid back others**. At first blush, this might be taken as a prayer to God to apply his just recompense to Babylon. However, the command (*pay... back*) is plural, not singular, and is almost certainly addressed to the angels involved in the overthrow of Babylon. She deserves **double** repayment for her iniquities, for most human misery since the dawn of time can be traced to her, the brainchild of Satan himself. As Jesus explained to the leaders of Jerusalem, "*Why do you not understand my speech? Because you are not able to listen to my word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of lies*" (John 8:43-44). The human inability to hear the word of the Son of Man must be removed before his kingdom is instituted, and when it is, the nations will respond with great joy and deep spiritual interest (Isa. 2:1-4). Babylon will no longer be a **queen**, for her punishment will **come in a single day**, the day of the second coming. The **Lord God** will show Himself **mighty**, as he **judges** the source of so much human woe and misery.

18:9-10

9 And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. 10 They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, "Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come."

It is **the kings of the earth** who will mourn **Babylon's** passing most painfully, for they **committed sexual immorality** with her and **lived in luxury** by her provision. They will be astonished that the power that had enslaved their subjects has at last been overthrown. She seemed impervious to danger as a **great and mighty city**, but **in a single hour** her judgment arrived.

18:11-14

11 And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, for no one buys their merchandise anymore: 12 merchandise of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen and purple, silk and scarlet, every kind of citron wood, every kind of object of ivory, every kind of object of most precious wood, bronze, iron, and marble; 13 and cinnamon and incense, fragrant oil and frankincense, wine and oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and bodies and souls of men. 14 The fruit that your soul longed for has gone from you, and all the things which are rich and splendid have gone from you, and you shall find them no more at all.

Perhaps Babylon's chief lie down through the ages was her promise to make men satisfied and happy if they obtained enough (or the proper) possessions. Her demise will mean that the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore. The goods deemed most desirable by the world system (**gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen**, etc.) will suddenly be regarded as of little value. As the kingdom begins, **the fruit for which men's souls longed** will suddenly be of no importance. All the **splendors** Babylon advertised will perish with her, and society will rejoice under an entirely different principle. The liberated population of earth will offer themselves as Christ's servants and not seek to lord it over each other any longer.

18:15-20

15 The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, 16 "Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! 17 For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste." And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off 18 and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, "What city was like the great city?" 19 And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out, "Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich

by her wealth! For in a single hour she has been laid waste.” 20 Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!”

Those **merchants** who had offered such **wares** and **gained wealth** from the lies of the Babylonian system will distance themselves from her destruction and **mourn** the loss of **the great city** (and their own impoverishment from her demise). They will be stunned that a system that had existed and dominated humanity from the time of Adam and Eve onward could perish **in a single hour**. They will be joined in their laments by **the shipmasters and seafaring men** whose commercial interests were dependent on Babylon, **the great city**. They will lament the fact that **in a single hour** their monetary benefits from Babylon will be laid waste. Only believers (**saints and apostles and prophets**) will **rejoice** as they see how **God has given** her the **judgment** she so richly deserves.

18:21-24

21 Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more; 22 and the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters, will be heard in you no more, and a craftsman of any craft will be found in you no more, and the sound of the mill will be heard in you no more, 23 and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more, for your merchants were the great ones of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery. 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.

For a fourth time in this chapter emphasis is given to the speed with which Babylon will be judged. John sees **a mighty angel take up a heavy stone and throw it into the sea**. As quickly as that stone disappears into the water, **so** quickly will Babylon be **thrown down with violence and be found no more**. In the age to come, people will hear the sound of **harpists and musicians** and enjoy the work of **craftsmen** and the labor of the **mill**, but never know them to be used in the service of the lies of Babylon. Instead, human gifts will be used in praise of God and for the sufficiency of humanity. In the Babylonian system merchants were the great ones of the earth. So pervasively was materialism accepted by the human race that it is impossible to explain its universal adoption except on the basis of mankind’s being **deceived** by Babylon’s **sorcery**. And while she was deceiving the world she was attacking **prophets** and **saints** and seeing their **blood** shed. Like her sponsor, Satan, she was a murderer from the beginning.

19:1-2

19:1 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, 2 for his judgments are true and just; for He has judged

the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

If kings and merchants were stunned and saddened by Babylon’s passing, the reaction of heaven will be a different story. John hears **the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven** whose voices are lifted in praise of God: **Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.** Their praise is not offered in general, however, but in acknowledgement of God’s justice: **his judgments are true and just, for He has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth.** Heaven extols him as well for righting a series of great wrongs: **He has avenged on Babylon the blood of his servants.**

19:3-5

3 Once more they cried out, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” 4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!” 5 And from the throne came a voice saying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.”

Little in the entire scope of Revelation compares to both the mourning and the celebration of Babylon’s fall. The inhabitants of heaven **once more cried out, Hallelujah! The smoke from Babylon goes up forever and ever.** And why not? So much misery came to humanity through deception that it seems only fitting that her downfall should be celebrated repeatedly. Those closest to God, the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures, join themselves to the celebration: **they fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, Amen. Hallelujah!**

The judgments of God (seals, trumpets, and bowls) are now concluded. The earth now waits expectantly for the appearance of her rightful King. A last voice from the throne now is heard: **Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.**

19:6-21

the second coming of christ



summary

At last John comes to the climactic moment of “normal” human history, for after this, in chapters 20-22, events will move in entirely new directions. Heaven rejoices as Christ, the Groom, and the combined believers of all ages (the bride) meet in the air to begin their union as one. It is the moment of great glorification of the Lamb, the theme and spirit of prophecy throughout Scripture. Whereas before He came as a Servant, now He comes in triumph, and He engages in warfare against his enemies in a frightful slaughter. His victory is consummated by the removal of Satan, the beast, and the false prophet.

commentary

19:6

6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty has begun to rule!

After agonizing descriptions of awful catastrophes and devastations, the climactic moment arrives, but not without an attention-riveting announcement. John **heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude** (probably best understood as the inhabitants of heaven). The sound was vast, **like the roar of many waters or like the sound of mighty peals of thunder**. The multitudes lift their voices in long-awaited triumph, **crying out, Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty has begun to rule!** All the aspirations of redeemed humanity are on the verge of being fulfilled. It is time that international celebrations should begin.

19:7-8

7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready; 8 it has been granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure.” (The fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.)

The principal celebration will be **the marriage of the Lamb**, the joining of the Son of God with his **bride**, the redeemed peoples of the earth. The inhabitants of heaven **rejoice and exult** at the occasion. Though at modern weddings the bride is typically featured, on this august occasion the Groom will be the centerpiece, for heaven will **give him the glory**. At the same time, the multitudes rejoice because the bride **has made herself ready**. She has donned her wedding gown: **it has been granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure**. John (apparently) clarifies by saying that **the fine linen** of her gown represents **the righteous deeds of the saints**. Though righteousness is imputed to all believers, it is right actions that form the adornment of the gospel and make the believing community attractive (cp. Col. 3:12-14; Tit. 2:9-10).

19:9-10

9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." 10 Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God, for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

Amid the celebration, the revealing **angel** tells John to be sure and **write** the words that follow: **blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb**, the festive occasion to follow his triumphant return. That happy condition is most desirable and not to be missed. The angel emphasizes the invitation's importance by solemnly avowing, **These are the true words of God**. The entire episode so impressed John with the awesomeness of the angel that he **fell down at his feet to worship him**. This brought a stern rebuke from the angel: **You must not do that!** The angelic messenger cringes at taking any adoration from a **fellow servant**. John and his **brothers** are not to confuse even the most striking creature with the Creator. The angel concludes his rebuff with the words, **worship God, for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy**. Some translations end the angel's words after, "Worship God." This view may be correct, but it seems more natural to attribute the following statement to the angel as part of his spiritual advice. John has forgotten that the essence of the prophetic task—what John was currently doing—involved testimony about the worth and uniqueness of Jesus, not about the value of angels or any of God's creatures.

19:11

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.

Now that One about whom the prophets have long written emerges from an **opened heaven**. His appearance contrasts strikingly with his first advent. He is no longer "gentle

Jesus, meek and mild,” but comes to earth as a conqueror. He who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey now approaches on a **white horse**, the mount of a victorious general. (It should be remembered that this description is what *John* saw in a vision, not necessarily exactly what the population of earth will see. They will certainly recognize him in his glory and triumphant power, but they will probably not see precisely what the prophet saw in the same way he saw it.)

Jesus’ absence has been prolonged, but now everyone will be compelled to admit that He is **Faithful and True** to all his promises. His compassion for unrepentant humanity has motivated him to patiently wait for the Father’s time, and now it has arrived. His return will bring with it many human fatalities, but no legitimate charge can be brought against him: **in righteousness he judges and makes war.**

19:12-13

12 his eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and He has a name written that no one knows but Himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is, “The Word of God.”

That righteousness is now elaborated in the description of the Rider on the white horse. **His eyes are like a flame of fire** invokes his holy inspection of a world that has been for long centuries in rebellion (and recalls Rev. 1:14). He wears **many diadems**, for He is King of many kings and Lord of many lords, and his sovereign rights take in the globe. While He will soon be acknowledged by all, He is unique in that He **has a name written that no one knows but Himself**. John notes that He does not shrink from the righteous vindication of his holiness, for He is clothed in **a robe dipped in blood**. This language is drawn from Isaiah 63:2-6. (See the discussion at the end of Lesson 16.)

Lest there be any doubt as to the identity of the white horse rider, John notes, **The name by which He is called is the Word of God**, an obvious allusion to John 1:1, “*In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*”

19:14

14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses.

The Lord Jesus does not come alone. **Following him on white horses were the armies of heaven**. The terminology is broad enough to include both angels and redeemed humans, but when John describes the “soldiers” as **arrayed in fine linen, white and pure**, he is repeating the description that he has just used (19:8) to describe Christian believers, the bride of Christ. The description captures the believing community the moment after the dead in Christ are raised: “*The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout,*

with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess. 4:16-17). In the Roman world, cities would honor visiting dignitaries by sending a delegation to meet them and to accompany them back into the city proper. Such is the concept here. Both living and dead are transformed and resurrected and in their newfound state then become members of the Lord’s entourage as He arrives in the world after centuries of waiting to claim what is rightfully his. They follow in his train as He returns victoriously to earth.

19:15-16

15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh He has a name written: King of kings and Lord of lords.

The power motif continues as John describes the returning Christ: **from his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike the nations**. The imagery at first seems bizarre. What conqueror wields a sword with his mouth? Verse 15 clarifies the intent. The most powerful force in the universe is the word of God. With it He created the universe itself (Psa. 33:4-9), and with it He establishes all his works. The feeblest person who believes that Jesus speaks the truth will possess eternal life, and the one who believes that He rewards those who believe will find a rich place in his kingdom (Heb. 11:6). As He comes, He demonstrates the power of his truth as he **treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty**—the very thing He promised to do. Those who question his truthfulness, if they survive at all, will experience the power and authority of that truth as He **rules them with a rod of iron**, language lifted directly from Psalm 2, the great enthronement psalm of the Messiah, who comes to rule from Mount Zion. In that rule, which will soon be described (Rev. 20), He will not rule alone, but will be assisted by others who have demonstrated their loyalty to him through their lives. They will be **kings and lords** under his banner as He governs as supreme sovereign. The writer, the Apostle John, had once asked his mother to ask Jesus to grant him preeminence during his coming kingdom and was told that it was available for those who would act as servants to all (Matt. 20:21-28; cp. 19:28-30).

19:17-18

17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, 18 to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.”

The climactic judgments connected with the re-entry of Jesus into the world have caused an awesome loss of life among the earth's population (Isa. 24:6; Matt. 24:21-22). The carnage will be extensive, and John now hears a new announcement from **an angel standing in the sun**. The angel's call is directed to **all the birds that fly: Come, gather for the great supper of God**. This supper is not to be confused with the marriage feast of the Lamb, which is a celebration of the vindication of Jesus Christ. The great supper of God emphasizes the extent of divine judgment as the decaying flesh of the dead, **the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men** become food for birds. No one is exempt by virtue of importance or social standing. Those who died include **both free and slave, both small and great**.

19:19-21

19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. 20 And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. 21 And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Before the new administration can proceed, however, more than flesh will have to be removed. John sees in his vision how **the beast and the kings of the earth gathered to make war against him who was sitting on his horse**. The imagination boggles. To see Christ returning in glory and to have the audacity to oppose him makes an enormous comment on the degree of angelic and human perversity still present on the earth as Christ returns.

The outcome, of course, is predictable: **the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast**. No kingdom of peace and goodness can be established while the masters of deception roam free to plague the earth. As a result, John saw **the two thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur**. The rest of the beast's army was not thrown into the lake of fire, but they were **slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse**. This final destruction connected with the second coming adds to the food for the already-gorging **birds** of the earth. The enemies of Christ are thus vanquished, and the establishment of his kingdom can proceed.

20:1-10

the millennial kingdom



summary

The reign of the Son of God is inaugurated. First comes a transitional phase on the present earth lasting a thousand years. This millennial age will be bracketed by two resurrections: the first consisting of believers and the second of unbelievers. Just before the second resurrection—that of the unrighteous—humanity’s final rebellion is crushed.

commentary

20:1-3

20:1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. 2 And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; 3 and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time.

Some unfinished business from the old era must be transacted before the reign of Christ can begin properly. No golden age can transpire if **the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan**, is present to fill it with his deception. John sees **an angel coming down from heaven** who is dispatched to confine Satan for the duration of the Millennial phase of Christ’s kingdom. He has access to **the abyss** where Satan will be confined, and a **great chain** with which to bind him. **For a thousand years** the enemy of humanity will be **shut** in and **sealed** away from the earth and from God’s kingdom. During that time he will have no opportunity to **deceive the nations**. At the conclusion of **the thousand years**, however, he will be **released** briefly.

This last statement, far from indicating an anticlimax, provides a clue to the character of the Millennium. The population of earth during this time will be made up of people falling into two broad categories: (1) those who are believers prior to the appearing of Christ. All such will be either resurrected or transformed at his appearing to possess new

and glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:51-58; 1 Thess. 4:13-18) in which they will enjoy the glories of the Son of God and his kingdom; and (2) people in ordinary mortal bodies who survive the judgments of the last days (cp. Zech. 14:16-19) to enter the kingdom age. Some (the 144,000 fit here) will be converted as Jesus is revealed. Others (not all) will be converted during the course of the Millennium. The second category (in mortal bodies) will live side by side with the first just as the unglorified disciples lived for six weeks alongside Jesus after his resurrection. The spiritual destiny of the second group will be determined by their response to the person of Christ during the Millennium. They will have extraordinary advantages over people living in the present age with Satan absent and Christ personally present, but they will have the ability to rebel against his rule and to reject his personal authority, and some will do so as late as the end of the Millennium.

20:4

4 Then I saw thrones, and people sat on them, and authority to govern was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their 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 ruled with Christ for a thousand years.

I saw thrones, and people sat on them, and authority to govern was given to them. This language is lifted from Daniel 7:9-18, where the prophet is given a glimpse of the inauguration of the kingdom of the Son of Man. In Revelation 20:4 the identity of the people seated on the thrones is not specified, but the reference is undoubtedly to faithful believers, now resurrected and honored for their loyalty to Christ. Among these will be the original disciples of Jesus, as He promised them: *“You are those who have continued with Me in my trials. And I bestow upon you royal authority, just as my Father bestowed upon Me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones governing the twelve tribes of Israel”* (Luke 22:28-30). In the same way, verse 4 calls special attention to two other groups: (1) **those who had been beheaded by the beast because of their testimony for Jesus and because of their faithfulness to the word of God**, and (2) **those who had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand**. (The two groups are not identical. The first gave their lives; the second might have, but were not called upon to do so. They lived for Christ, which in the circumstances is demanding enough.) These people **came to life and** were transformed into eternal bodies and **ruled with Christ for a thousand years**. Their resurrection came about because of their faith in Christ, but their ruling authority (“joint heirs with Christ”), like that of the disciples, was granted because of their faithfulness during the trying days of Daniel’s seventieth week (cp. Rom. 8:17; Col. 3:23-24; Rev. 2:26-27).

20:5-6

5 (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed.) This is the first resurrection. 6 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 rule with him for a thousand years.

Verse 5 provides a parenthetical statement that anticipates the question, “If believers only are raised, what about unbelievers?” John describes these as **the rest of the dead** and observes that they remain in their graves **until the thousand years were completed**. Here for the first time in Scripture God reveals that the two resurrections are not simultaneous (cp. Dan. 12:2). It should be noted that the probability of human beings living forever is 100 percent. Even those outside of Christ are raised from the dead in due time. However, eternity will not be appealing to them, nor are they ever said in Scripture to possess eternal life, which is a qualitative as well as a chronological term. What they experience is characterized in Scripture not as life but as a **second death**.

John resumes his original description with the words **this** (resurrection of believers) **is the first resurrection**. Believers have nothing whatever to fear from the second death (the lake of fire, Rev. 20:14). The life of believers during the Millennium is suggested by the final words of verse 6: **they will be priests of God and of Christ and will rule with him for a thousand years**. As long as there are fallen humans living on the earth, there will be a need for both priests and governors.

20:7-9

7 When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that 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. 9 And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them.

At the end of **the thousand years**, the population of the earth still living in mortal bodies (cp. Isa. 65:20) will have enjoyed the awesome privilege of living (as the first generation in history) under a righteous government presided over by a perfect Ruler. During that time two of man’s three deadly enemies (the world and the devil) will be inoperative. The third, however (the flesh or the sin nature) will still be present among those living in mortal bodies. Though it is likely that most people, by the end of the era, will have a personal relationship of faith with the King, they will still possess the ability to sin and rebel against him.

Thus not all will be people of faith. Their condition will be tested when **Satan is released from his prison** and is allowed to **come out to deceive the nations that are in the**

four corners of the earth. This final rebellion will deal a death blow to the myth that an ideal environment will solve the problems of the human race. Satanic deception will test the spiritual condition of people at the end of the Millennium and many people around the world, though living under the kingship of Jesus Christ, will be more than ready to reject him as their ruler. They will band together and attempt by means of **war** to depose him (cp. Psa. 2). **Gog and Magog**, being distant Gentile nations (cp. Ezek. 38-39), are named (via a figure of speech known as synecdoche) as typical of the nation-groups that will participate in this final rebellion. In John's vision, **they came up and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city.** The Millennium will be marked by large international celebrations in Jerusalem (cp. Isa. 25, Zech. 14, Matt. 8:11), and it may well be—and how ironic if so—that this final attack is launched at the very hour that King Jesus girds Himself and has his servants sit down so that He can serve them (Luke 12:37). The crisis is described as taking place on **the broad plain of the earth**, since at the return of Christ the topography of Jerusalem will be altered and made into a plain (Zech. 14:10). This rebellion, however, is dealt with summarily: **fire came down from heaven and devoured them.**

20:10

10 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.

The end of Phase 1 of God's kingdom takes place when Satan meets his final end: **the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone** along with his demonic associates (Matt. 25:41). That lake will already be occupied by **the beast and the false prophet.** This group, which once dominated the earth, **will be tormented day and night forever and ever.** For those who can live under the beneficent rule of the King of kings and still join in rebellion against him, justice will be swift. And what a commentary upon the depth of human fallenness! The problems of man cannot be dismissed simply by changing his environment. Paradise is not enough for the person who is not willing to live in it unless he can be king.

20:11-21:5

a throne and the new earth



summary

Before Phase 2 of God's everlasting kingdom can begin, those who have died without a knowledge of the Son of God must be judged, and that judgment reveals God's holiness so powerfully that the material universe itself disintegrates—everything but the people it contained. These now answer for their conduct and are judged by being banished from the presence of God forever. The eternal kingdom begins with an entirely new earth made all the more awesome by the personal presence of the God-Man Jesus Christ.

commentary

20:11

20:11 Then I saw a large white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.

The five verses that conclude Revelation 20 portray the most somber scene imaginable. It features **a large white throne and him who was seated on it**. In dramatic terms, John describes how God, prior to beginning his eternal and unchanging kingdom, will sit as a Judge in unimaginable holiness. Everything in the description is calculated to emphasize the moral distance between God and man. The Judge in the scene is not even named, as though the speaking of it might be presumptuous, though the Lord Jesus Christ long ago declared that He would be the one sitting there: *“The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him”* (John 5:22-23).

When the righteous God sits in judgment, the earth itself (where the last recorded act of humanity was a war against the Creator) and all its accoutrements disappear: **from his presence earth and sky** (including the celestial heavens) **fled away, and no place was found for them**. When *heaven and earth* are used as a phrase in Scripture, ordinarily

heaven refers to the atmospheric and celestial heavens rather than the abode of God. In any case, the emphasis is on the earth, as it is to be the resting place of the new Jerusalem (Hag. 2:6; Matt. 5:18; 24:35; Rev. 14:7).

The sin-touched old creation vanishes in the presence of pure holiness, in keeping with Peter's prophecy: *"The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells"* (2 Pet. 3:10-13).

20:12

12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.

Though the dirt in which they were buried has dissolved, **the dead** now are brought before God's bar of justice. The term *the dead* is suggestive, occurring five times in Revelation 20. The subjects of this judgment are those who died before the millennial age and who were not believers (otherwise they would have had a part in the first resurrection). Apparently no believers in Jesus are present at this event, for the Lord Himself promised, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life"* (John 5:24). Believers are not examined at this large white throne. They are not even present.

As for the dead, they all come, of every type: **great and small** alike as to their earthly esteem. They come as resurrected creatures, **standing before God's throne**. The judgment will be one of absolute objectivity. It is not based on the Judge's memory (as though that were fallible), but on written records: the **books** of works **were opened**. Another book is standing by just in case. Those who stand at this tribunal are certain to fail the test of their actions. Before dismissing them, however, the book of life will be consulted. Though **the dead are judged according to what they had done**, if their names were present in **the book of life** they will be passed.

Most striking in this description is what is *not* present. There is no religious test applied to anyone. No one is asked concerning his theology or his philosophy or any opinion

whatever ~~works~~ are the sole subject of judgment. Works are inadequate to save, but more than adequate to condemn.

20:13

13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done.

The numbers at this judgment will be staggering. All **the dead** from Eden and afterward are present. **The sea** gives back those who drowned, the grave (**Death and Hades**) give up their **dead**. All alike were judged, not in groups or tribes but as individuals (**each one of them**) **according to what they had done**. Again and again the last principle is reinforced: *“For there is no partiality with God”* (Rom. 2:11).

20:14-15

14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

At the conclusion of the judgment at the large white throne, anyone who fails the test of righteous works is **thrown into the lake of fire**. **Death** itself ceases to exist as of this point (people will die during the Millennium [Isa. 65:20]). The one hope for the guilty is that their names might be **found written in the book of life**. Barring that, perdition awaits. There is no suggestion in this account that anyone survives the judgment, though there is no explicit statement to the contrary. Death, the last enemy, is now overcome.

21:1

1 Then I saw a new sky and a new earth, for the first sky and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

Only the redeemed in Christ remain, and for them God has prepared something amazing. John sees in his vision a **new sky and a new earth**. The original **earth** has **passed away**, and the **new earth** is markedly different. It has land, vegetation, and a river, but **the sea** will be **no more**. Isaiah predicts God’s fashioning of a new heaven and a new earth, but his words actually describe the Millennium: *“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, and her people a joy”* (Isa. 65:17-18). (Most people would fully support the idea that the Millennial earth is a radical departure from the present one, but the eternal state will be experienced not on a renewed earth, but on an entirely new planet.)

21:2

2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Contrary to nearly universal modern (at least western) belief, the destiny of redeemed humanity is not to live in heaven. John sees **the holy city, new Jerusalem**—not *in* heaven, but **coming down out of heaven**. The new Jerusalem was from the very beginning the hope of believers. As far back as Abraham godly people knew that the world as it presently was could not fulfill the promises of a faithful God: *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God”* (Heb. 11:8-10). That city now descends to earth, the place always designed as the perfect location in which to exercise human dominion.

How did Christendom jettison such a plain and unmistakable teaching of Scripture? Largely through two influences: (1) through the projection of the equally plain teaching that heaven is the residence of believers who die before the consummation of the kingdom (2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 6:9-11). That believers who die go to God, of course, does not mean that they will remain there. Indeed, believers in heaven celebrate the knowledge that they will return to earth to reign and serve as priests under Christ’s direction (Rev. 5:10). (2) More insidiously, an early form of false doctrine known as Docetism (and later, Gnosticism) gained great influence and taught that all things material are evil and that an ethereal, bodiless existence is to be preferred and sought. Jesus, however, taught precisely the opposite and today sits in heaven in a physical body awaiting his return to the earth (Luke 24:38-43).

John describes the event as the fulfillment of the deepest longing of the human heart. The city is **prepared as a bride adorned for Christ, her husband**. Indeed, He has been the chief Preparer of this eternal capital of his enduring kingdom (John 14:1-3). A minor puzzle appears, however, in the words **from God**. If believers are to live on a newly created earth, must they live apart from him?

21:3

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.

The question is immediately answered by a loud voice from the throne. Believers will not remain in heaven so that they can be with God. On the contrary, this most authoritative voice of all insists that we look (**behold**), for something marvelous is happening. **The**

dwelling place of God is with man. He will, in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, make his home among his creatures forever. As though expecting resistance from those who hear, the voice repeats the same theology three times over: **He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.** Though in the visions of Revelation—out of necessity—on occasion the Father and the Son are simultaneously visible and distinct from one another, in eternity human beings will see and interact with the one God in the Person of the Son. God allows us to see him in reality, but not in essence. The Apostle Paul noted that humanity is unable to grasp all of God that there is: *“Keep this charge without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ’s appearing, which He will manifest in his own time, He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen”* (1 Tim. 6:14-16). No one will feel in any way deprived, for in Jesus Christ we see all of God that we long for (John 14:9).

21:4

4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

In the eternal state all the difficulties caused by human rebellion will be absent. Distress will be gone, for **He will wipe away every tear** from the eyes of his blessed people. No one will ever have to suffer the loss of a loved one, for **death shall be no more**. Along with it, **mourning** and **crying** and **pain** will be absent. Few details beyond this are given—but then, knowing that **the former things have passed away** is enough to create a profound contentment.

21:5

5 And He who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also He said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Since the human imagination has no categories for such conditions, **He who was seated on the throne** reaffirms the previous statements: **Behold, I am making all things new.** John may have been stunned by what he heard and saw, for God makes a point of commanding him, **Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.** They are essential for the spiritual health of Christians, especially those living in countries where persecution and oppression of believers are rife. Such atrocities will one day be only a fading memory.

21:6-27

the eternal state



summary

The millennium and the eternal state form two different “phases” of the kingdom of God. The apostle is now given added details about the eternal state and especially concerning the new Jerusalem. For the third time in the book, a “woman” becomes the centerpiece of a vision. This time the woman is the bride of Christ, the people of God from all generations who at last realize their deepest longings as they live in security and gladness before the Lamb.

commentary

21:6

21:6 And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.”

Just as the Son of God began the created order (John 1:1-4), so He completes his creation by the new earth and its capital city. The voice from the throne (21:5) is heard again by John, giving affirmation of this truth: **It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.** Though the title sounds forbidding, the Son of God is incredibly inviting. He offers to **give** readers a satisfying drink from **the fountain of the water of life**. The invitation is not made to satisfy the expectations of people in the future (they already possess eternal life or they would not be present), but is issued for the edification of John’s readers. In view of the terrifying judgments that are sure to come, why not assure one’s eternal destiny by receiving that most precious of all commodities? The terms of receiving the water of life could not be simpler. It is given **freely**—without any cost to the recipient. The Lamb paid the bill, so the gift is without price. Only one thing is need-

ed. The water of life is given only **to him who thirsts**. Wanting the gift provided by the Lamb and asking him for it (John 4:10) will complete the transaction, for He is as good as his word: *“Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life’”* (John 4:13-14). The gift is given not just for the recipient, but for the benefit of others who will be drawn to drink of it.

21:7

7 He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be my son.

Among those who have drunk from that fountain, still another prospect is presented (again) by the Lord Jesus: **he who overcomes shall inherit all things**. To overcome (as we saw in the letters to the churches) requires more than belief. It requires persistence and faithfulness: *“And he who overcomes, and keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations”* (Rev. 2:26). He enters into the experience of sharing the rule of the Lord Jesus: *“He shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels”—as I also have received from my Father”* (Rev. 2:27). The process will yield a rich and deeply personal experience for the one who overcomes and shares in his authority: **I will be his God and he shall be my son**. The believer’s inheritance goes far beyond merely living forever; it consists in sharing in the very ownership of the world as a child of Abraham (Rom. 4:13). All believers, as God’s children, are spiritually born with a right of inheritance. However, that inheritance can be forfeited by irresponsible or rebellious behavior (Heb. 12:14-17; Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 2:11-13). Like a child who is disinherited by his parents, however, he retains his membership in the family of God.

21:8

8 But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

The offer of life and inheritance is especially appealing in the light of the alternative. Those who did not drink of the offered water have no part in the holy city. Their exclusion from the new earth issues from their works. They are characterized as **cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and liars**. Instead of a life of joy and fulfillment, they **have their part in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur**. Though they are “alive” in some sense, what they experience can hardly be called life at all. The Lord Jesus in fact describes it as **the second death**. The person in Scripture who most persistently speaks of eternal punishment is the Lord Jesus

Himself, and no obedient Christian can afford to reject his word on this point (Matt. 5:29–30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5).

21:9-11a

9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, “Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God.

The reader of Revelation might easily conclude, since angels are routinely involved in inflicting divine judgments in the book, that such is their only function in the purpose of God. That would be an error, however, for **one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues** now comes to John with a vision not of judgment but of loveliness: **Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife**. For the third time in Revelation, the figure of a woman will dominate the scene. To emphasize the importance of what John is about to see, the angel **carried John away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain**. As so often in Revelation, this transportation is to provide a better perspective on the marvelous sight, **the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God**. The city descends to rest on the new earth and becomes the principal dwelling place of faithful believers. As such, it possesses **the glory of God**. It is apparent that not all believers will live there, for it has open gates on every side and traffic moves in and out of it (vss. 24-27).

21:11b-13

11... Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. 12 Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: 13 three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west.

The city proper is a visual feast, reflecting the **light of the King like a most precious stone**. Though no enemy will ever threaten it, the new Jerusalem is surrounded by a **great and high wall with twelve gates**. The gates have **names written on them—the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel**. The land of Israel as such was destroyed with the dissolving of the old earth, but it is the people who count, and the names of the sons of Israel will become permanently extolled on this magnificent city’s entryways. The twelve gates face in every direction insuring ready access to those who are living or working elsewhere.

21:14-17

14 Now the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. 15 And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. 16 The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: 12,000 stadia. Its length, breadth, and height are equal. 17 Then he measured its wall: 144 cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel.

The wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and these too give testimony of the Lamb's great love of his own, for they bear **the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb**. Though the city is named for the ancient city of Jerusalem from the old earth, it is not distinctively Jewish. The physical structure combines the two great groups—Israel and the church, made up mostly of Gentiles—that will live side by side throughout eternity in harmony and love.

The angel demonstrated for John the size of the new Jerusalem as John had **measured** the size of the old one (11:1). The new Jerusalem is **laid out as a square** (or cube, for **its length, breadth, and height were equal**), and the angel's measurements showed that the city was **12,000 stadia** (about 1,400 miles) on a side. The **walls** are astoundingly thick, **144 cubits** (about 200 feet). Some have scoffed at such details and questioned whether even such a large city could provide adequate space for the believers of all ages. While it undoubtedly could, there is no suggestion in this description that everyone on the new earth will live inside Jerusalem's walls. The city will rest on a new earth that will be appropriately sized to contain such a large city.

21:18-21

18 The construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. 21 The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

The construction of the city was designed to be pleasing to the eye, with a wall of **jasper** and construction of **pure gold like clear glass**. Even the city **foundations** were elaborately **adorned with all kinds of precious stones**. Materials like **sapphire, emerald, and topaz**, esteemed in this world largely because of their rarity, will be enjoyed for their beauty but not for their scarcity. The artistic sense of the great Designer seems evident enough in this sin-cursed world, and even more so in the world that is coming.

The **twelve city gates** are given special mention by John. **Each individual gate was made of a single pearl.** Contrary to popular mythology, these gates have no judicial function, and Peter does not guard them or issue tests for those who arrive. The citizenry of the city was determined long before the city descended out of heaven, and its street (only one is mentioned) is made of **pure gold** with a **transparent** cast.

21:22-23

22 But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.

Because **the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb** are present, the new Jerusalem will have **no temple**. Temples speak of restrictions, segregating the holy from the unholy, and in the new Jerusalem nothing unholy will be present. The new earth differs from the old as well with regard to its light source. The new Jerusalem and its earth **have no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it.** Those ancient sources are pitiful when compared to **the glory of God**, which will form the light of that remarkable city. God is often spoken of as light in Scripture (Psa. 27:1; 89:15; Isa. 2:5; 60:1, 19; John 1:4), though readers often assume that such references are a literary device. In the eternal state, however, these texts will be seen to be understatement.

21:24-27

24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. 25 Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). 26 And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. 27 But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

The political structure of the eternal state will be minimal, but the city will exhibit a degree of it. Political forms exist today to manage and restrain personal freedom in the interests of the community. Little structure is needed, however, in a society in which the aim of every person is to please God and to serve others. The new Jerusalem serves as the capital of the new **earth**, and that earth will still have **kings who bring their glory and honor into it.** The nature of this glory and honor is not specified, but they will certainly not consist of war trophies and symbols of domination as they do at present. The earth itself (if Eden provides a pattern) will be the focus of human dominion rather than other people. The new Jerusalem will, because of the Lamb's presence) provide the **light** not only for its own purposes but for the life of **the saved nations.** Traffic will move in and out of the city in this land of perpetual **day.** Its **gates will not be closed** to defend the city against invaders, for nothing that **defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie** will

enter it, **but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life** will live on the new earth. The city's security and harmony will be as permanent as its light.

22:1-21

parting words



summary

The angel of the plagues gives John some added details concerning life in the eternal state. John is so overwhelmed that he bows to worship the messenger and is rebuffed. The angel urges him to see to it that the words of Revelation are placed in circulation in the world and particularly to those who are believers in him. Its text is to remain inviolate at the risk of losing residence in the holy city. Jesus ends by extending the possibility of a personal reward to the reader.

commentary

22:1

1 Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, 2 in the middle of its street. 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.

While there is no sea on the new earth, there is a notable **river**, one that flows with **the water of life**. It is described as **clear as crystal** and as having its origin in **the throne of God and of the Lamb**. These words echo conditions in the Millennium, when Jesus Christ rules in Jerusalem and waters flow from his throne into both the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead Sea (making the latter teem with life [cp. Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8]). The river does not flow aimlessly, but is centered **in the middle of its street**. This main boulevard is separated from the river waters by the presence of the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, a different strain each month. The **leaves of the tree** are designed **for the healing of the nations**. The healing in question probably is intended to be physical, reminding the reader that the life of the eternal state will be a life lived out forever in the flesh of a material (though eternal) body. Food will be needed (as it was in Eden) to

sustain human health and strength. (Disease will not be present, but human finiteness will be.) The need for food is neither a penalty nor a shortcoming but a reminder that human beings are not self-sustaining and were never designed to be so. Both now and eternally, if God does not supply our needs we will not survive. Humanity today often denies that principle through arrogance, but in the eternal state people will be wise enough to realize that for a creature there can be no true independence from the Creator. If we saw things clearly, we would love our limits. While there is no suggestion that the tree of life—what Adam and Eve happily missed out on after the fall—is the only source of healing or sustenance in the eternal state, it seems to be a source that is accessible only to faithful followers of the Lord Jesus during this life (cp. Rev. 22:14).

22:3-5

3 There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his bondslaves will serve him; 4 they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.

Though healing will be always needful, **there will no longer be any curse** in the eternal state. “Nature” will work with the glorious efficiency that multiplies human effort and that was designed into the original creation before it was placed under judgment. It will be remembered that work and productivity were part of the *uncursed* earth (cp. Gen. 2:15). **The throne of God and of the Lamb** will be present, and regenerated human beings will be willing **bondslaves who will serve** God with joy forever. They will delight in him as they see his face, and **his name will be on their foreheads** not as a vehicle of coercion but as a symbol of ownership and service. In that place of unending day the servants of the Lamb will **have no need of light** sources other than that which issues from **the Lord God**. As partners of the great King, **they will reign forever and ever**.

22:6

6 And he said to me, “These words are faithful and true”; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show to his bondslaves the things which must suddenly take place.

The story of the closing and renewal of human history under God is one so grand that those who read it might regard it as too good to be true. The angel now dismisses any such idea by saying, **These words are faithful and true**. It is valid according to the testimony of no less than **the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets**, and is attested by his attending **angel**. As Jesus said in chapter 1, Revelation is a special gift **to his bondslaves** and an elaboration of **things that must suddenly take place**.

22:7

7 And behold, I am coming suddenly. Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.

A new voice is now heard, or the angel quotes Jesus, for the solemn declaration of the Son of God is now repeated: **Behold, I am coming suddenly**. That assertion is only unwelcome to those who are not spiritually prepared, and the book of Revelation will supply what is needed to make those preparations: **Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book**.

22:8

8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things. 9 But he said to me, "Do not do that! I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book. Worship God."

Still another voice comes to the fore now, as the apostle/prophet solemnly avows that **he is the one who heard and saw these things**. Though Daniel was physically sickened by the content of some of the visions he saw, John has been the recipient of special training by the Son of Man Himself, and his reaction is one of appreciation: **When I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things**. That, of course, was a mistake, and the angel sternly rebuked John: **Do not do that! I am a fellow slave of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who need the words of Revelation**. Appreciation is always in order, but **worship** is for **God** alone.

22:10-11

10 And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and the one who is filthy, still be filthy; and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness; and the one who is holy, still keep himself holy."

The revealing angel now issues his final words with respect to the book of Revelation: **Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book**. To seal up a prophecy is to keep it from public view (Dan. 8:26; 12:4, 9-10; Rev. 5:1-9; 10:4). Christians need to be able to read and study this great prophetic oracle, **for the time is near**. The consistent position of the New Testament is that the last days began at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-17). Since then, the world has been living on borrowed time, solely contingent on God's mercy. Verse 11's admonition, **Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and the one who is filthy, still be filthy; and let the one who is righteous, still practice righteousness; and the one who is holy, still keep himself holy**, sounds at first either like fatalism or cynicism, but neither is the case. The four lines must be understood as part of the command to John and is closely related to the command not to seal up the prophecy. On the contrary,

John is to be careful to publish the hopeful message of Christ (unseal Revelation) regardless of how people respond to it. The wicked may persist in wickedness or the righteous in righteousness. No matter—the prophecy must be published and preached. The church must not stutter because the message is unpopular.

22:12-13

12 “Behold, I am coming suddenly, and my reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

Again, the voice of the Lord Jesus interjects a dose of reality: **Behold, I am coming suddenly**. After the conflagrations begin it is too late. When death may ensue at any second it is not the right time to reflect on the gravity and truthfulness of the message. For those who are faithful, the Lord holds forth a lovely promise: **my reward is with Me**. The words echo Isaiah 40:10, where the prophet proclaims, “*Behold, the Lord God will come with might, with his arm ruling for him. Behold, his reward is with him and his recompense before him.*” Just as God judges unbelievers on the basis of their works, so He will judge believers at the judgment-seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:10-15). Good intentions and good theology are irrelevant. Only actions count: **to give to everyone according to what he has done**. Jesus can do this not only because He is the perfect Man but also because He is **the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end**.

22:14-15

14 Blessed are those who do his commandments, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. 15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.

An important textual variant appears in verse 14. Some manuscripts (and thus some translations) read here, “*Blessed are those who wash their robes...*” but most read, **Blessed are those who do his commandments**. The **right to the tree of life** is not automatic for believers but is a reward of obedient believers, as is the right to **enter by the gates into the city**. The imagery of intimacy for loyal conduct is a recurring one in the New Testament. The Christian who takes an indifferent approach to living for Christ has something to lose (1 Cor. 3:15). Jesus linked faithfulness and future intimacy when He said to the Eleven on the night of the last supper, “*You are those who have stood by Me in my trials; and just as my Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones governing the twelve tribes of Israel*” (Luke 22:28-30). Those who are closest to Christ in this world will also be closest to him in the next.

All believers will be heirs of God as subjects of the King, but co-heirship with Christ is contingent on paying a price to do what is right (Rom. 8:17). Entry into **the city** is a privilege not possessed by the **dogs** (a slang term in the Old Testament for male cult prostitutes (Deut. 23:18). Nor are **sorcerers** or **immoral persons** or **murderers, idolaters, or everyone who loves and practices lying** admitted.

22:16

16 I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.

For whom was this remarkable book prepared? The Lord Jesus continues: **I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you people these things for the churches.** Revelation is designed to prepare Christian believers to suffer faithfully if necessary. (It should always be remembered that the persecutions described in these pages will only be experienced by the last generation of Christian believers before the kingdom of God comes.) As the book closes, the Lord Jesus encourages us by the terms He used when first appearing to John back in chapter 1. He says, **I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.** He is both David's Son and David's Source, and as such should be taken seriously by those to whom He speaks.

22:17

17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

Based on the scenario laid out in Revelation and the ultimate glorification of the Lamb, **the Spirit** of God and the redeemed of all ages (**the bride**) concur in saying to him, **Come to earth soon! The one who hears** these texts read in the assembly (how most people would experience Revelation in John's day) is urged to agree. Most of all, anyone who is outside the church yet who **is thirsty** is encouraged to **come** in a different sense. The door to life is open. All that is needed is to **wish** to drink of it. **The water of life is without cost** to such a person. That water is the price of admission to the kingdom and the beginning of an entirely new experience of life.

22:18-21

18 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; 19 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.

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

21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

The importance of Revelation is underscored by the solemn warning given here. No one should **add to the words** of Revelation, for it is complete as John received it. No one should **take away from its words**, either, lest something important be lost. These warnings are pointed not at unbelievers but at believers (**everyone who hears**). Violations of the warning may result in violent physical death from these **plagues** or the loss of access to **the tree of life and from the holy city**. (Some translations have *take away his part from the book of life*, but that reading is based on very few manuscripts.)