



REVELATION

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INTRODUCTION

Predictions of the end have always been with us. In his day, Paul had to deal with teachers that were saying that Jesus had already come back but we just didn't know about it. In our day, too much of our understanding of Jesus' second coming is influenced by Science Fiction writers or T.V. documentaries. We've gotten so confused that the only thing we think of when we hear about the book of Revelation is the number '666'. Many of us spend our lives involved in endless conspiracy theories, trying to see who we can pin that evil 666 number on. We're so obsessed with this that we miss the true meaning of this wonderful book.

As Christians we are to live as if Christ is coming back right now, while at the same time preparing to live to a ripe old age. We live in the tension of constant hope. The book of Revelation is there to help us live in this healthy tension. God gave it to us to encourage us as Christians while also warning the world that the end will come and we must believe in Jesus to escape the future judgement. It's actually a very practical book for our day.

The book of Revelation isn't actually that difficult to understand. The problem is that we have allowed many different commentators and even Hollywood to interpret it for us. It's become a book that many of us find scary and even discouraging. Does it make sense that God would give make His scriptures difficult, complicated, and discouraging? No - we understand the rest of the Bible to be the exact opposite, so why do we approach Revelation in any different way?

Revelation is a hugely encouraging book that God gave us to charge our faith when we are going through difficult circumstances. The overall message is positive and full of hope. The apostle John wrote this book. He also wrote the book of John and 1, 2 and 3 John. He wrote it, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and from a vision God gave to him, to the churches of the day who were being persecuted, so that they could have a sure and living hope of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. The book is written in picture language. From a literary perspective, Revelation is written in an 'apocalyptic' style - a well known style in the early centuries. It speaks of cataclysmic events and makes use of a great deal of imagery.

Instead of disagreeing on the semantics which aren't clear in scripture, it's good for all to agree on the two big things of the book which are: anticipation and joy for the return of Jesus Christ on the one hand and the need for repentance and faith in Jesus on the other. The early disciples encouraged each other around the first of these. The word "Maranatha" was often used in their communication, which means, "He is coming." Jesus is coming again and we must build our lives around that. This will all fade away and the best is yet to come.

Martin Luther once said that when we preach, we should always make sure we preach in a way that the poor servant girl would understand. Scripture isn't confusing - it's us that have made it confusing. As you approach this small study on Revelation, ask God to wash away all your preconceived notions and understandings, and try to understand the book plainly. Don't start with what you've heard, start with scripture. In fact, read the book through first before looking at any studies or commentaries!

This book is made up of a two-year preaching series at Cornerstone Church Johannesburg. It's been transcribed and edited. If you would like a more in-depth commentary we recommend the following two books, which were used in compiling this preaching series together:

- *More Than Conquerors*, by William Hendricksen (ISBN 0801057922)
- *Preaching Through the Bible: Revelation*, by Michael Eaton (No longer available; re-release forthcoming)

Download the audio of the Revelation preaching series at cornerstonechurch.co.za/revelation/

Get more resources at www.cornerstonechurch.co.za.

LIVING BETWEEN THE TIMES

How important it is that believers, those who are born again and have a wonderful relationship with God, should be those who you can pick out from a crowd because of their joy. But most of the time it looks like most of us are the exact opposite - we seem morbid and troubled, confused and fearful.

In our conversations we should always have a different point of view and opinion than what we read in the papers or find in our culture. But usually we're as negative or as shallow as most other people. We ought to be representing an irresistible Christ.

Happiness is based on our circumstances but joy is something we have season by season, regardless of the circumstances. That's the difference. This world is going downhill fast and this world is full of misery, there's no doubt about that, but we cannot linger on this like others do. We can go through all this with joy. How? Well, our joy needs to be founded on something. The question you must ask is: What is your joy founded on?

Jesus. That's your foundation. Hope in Jesus is what we have as Christians. A hope that the world doesn't have but can have, if anyone places their faith in Christ. Peter says you have to give a reason for the hope that you have (1 Peter 3:15). Do we even know that we have hope? Do we know that this book of Revelation is actually written to give us a sure hope?

The two most important events

The two most important events in world history are the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, and we live in-between these. All of history before the first coming pointed to it. Every empire that rose, every event of the world, and even creation pointed to that moment. Right in the beginning, Jesus was prophesied about:

Genesis 3:15

*I [God] will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.*

The Old Testament is important because it gives us a shadow of Jesus. It points to the New and so therefore we don't throw it out, we study it. And all of the New Testament points to the next event - the second coming of Christ.

So we are not without joy or hope because we know that Jesus is coming back and is victorious. The question is: are you living in anticipation of this second coming? Or do you live just for the now? No, we live the now in light of His second coming.

We can't live outside of these two events as both of them will define history forever. The first coming gave us hope because God showed us His grace and love, but at the second coming Jesus will judge. At the first coming the Lamb was slain for our sins; at the second coming the Lion of Judah is going to roar. In-between these two times we can decide how that judgement will look, by either having faith in Christ or

rejecting Christ.

Living between the times

THE PRESENT AGE

Time of the flesh
Satan's time

The Gospel Age

BETWEEN THE TIMES

God uses His Church to usher in the Kingdom

THE COMING AGE

Time of the Spirit
God's time

FIRST COMING
(BEGUN)

SECOND COMING
(CONSUMMATED)

REVELATION

We live between the times

This in-between time is what we call the Gospel Age. After the second coming the Gospel Age will be over. At the first coming a baby was born in a stable and very few people knew about it - it was humble and no one would think that was the hope of the world. But that's God's plan - He used these humble circumstances to introduce His plan. Think of Christ dying on the cross with all the pain and humiliation surrounding that. Is that how God chose to redeem the world? Yes, He became a sacrifice for us. But when He comes again He will ride on a horse, with trumpets blowing, with triumph and angels

and all those who serve him being raptured up to meet Him; and He will then consummate His rule and reign forever. At the first coming He established His rule, it's then that He will consummate it. So if you don't receive the Lamb you're going to have to undergo the judgement of the Lion. Those who receive the Lamb, when they stand before Him at the Great White Throne Judgement, will receive not just entrance into heaven but also rewards.

If you just read Revelation through for the first time it does get a bit confusing. We rely on much of mainstream culture and fiction to guide us through it and this has all caused more harm than good. When this book was written it wasn't written with an intent to scare people or get people besotted with working on charts, trying to discover what all the numbers mean and doing their best to plot out the day and times of each event. Throughout history many people have claimed that this war or that war, this event or that event, this technology or that technology, this person or that person, signifies an event in the book of Revelation or the Mark of the Beast or the Antichrist. But the Mark of the Beast and '666' is not some mystery - we are not going to wake up one day and discover that we have, without knowing, received '666' and now have the Mark of the Beast! Serving the beast is rejecting Christ and we all know if we have done that or if we've accepted Him. Being seduced by the whore we see in Revelation is about sin. All the predictions throughout history have come to nothing because Revelation is using picture language to talk to us about spiritual concepts and life in every generation.

There will always be suffering in this life

Revelation was written to churches that were suffering in every way,

even to the point of death. To encourage them to keep their eyes on Jesus, God gave John this revelation. The revelation shows us that throughout all of the Gospel Age the church will suffer in one form or another. Right now there are many Christians who are being martyred. This will continue until Jesus comes back and we need to understand that.

Things that are hard, difficult, dark, negative and cataclysmic are going to continue to happen in this time between the first and second coming. Evil is going to continue. We can't bind the devil out of our city. The "spiritual mapping" spiritual warfare kind of approach isn't what brings victory.

But these days of evil are also days of grace. It's in this time that God's grace and love is freely available. It's in this time that God's forgiveness can be had and we can be reconciled to God by just believing in Jesus. When Jesus comes back there will no longer be an opportunity for anyone to be reconciled to Him. That's why it's the Gospel Age - it's the age for the Gospel to spread far and wide, to every corner of this earth; and it's our responsibility to bring the Gospel to every person.

The book of Revelation reveals to us the tension in this Gospel Age. We see great evil and we see great grace. We see a furious devil and we see a victorious Christ.

If you want to read about the purpose of the end times, turn to Matthew 24 and 25. Let's extract some truth out of these chapters.

Matthew 24:

As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to

Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

Jesus was talking about end time events. It all seems to climax into one big event where the whole earth is in disarray. "What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?" they ask. They want to know what's going to happen before this end time.

Jesus answers them in verse 4: "See that no one leads you astray." When it comes to these things, too many preachers have built ministries from their own predictions, tables and charts. It's a business for some. But you should not be led astray by any of that. Jesus follows it up by saying: "For many will come in my name saying 'I am the Christ', and will lead many astray. and you will hear of wars and rumours of wars."

How many times have people been led astray by modern prophets who claim to be the Messiah or that the world is going to end or they are going to be raptured by a passing comet? Many of those kinds of stories end in tragedy. We might laugh or scoff at these people, but many of them probably sat in Sunday school classes and many of them probably read their Bibles. But instead of focusing on what God wants us to focus on they got distracted and drawn away.

We are easily led astray. Books like *The Secret* are popular even among believers. Often the problem is that there is a small degree of truth in what's out there but it's mixed in with lies. That's how deception works. And we swallow it hook, line, and sinker.

But Jesus then carries on: "*See that you are not alarmed, for those*

things must take place, but that is not yet the end."

So we are to not be easily led astray and alarmed when disaster strikes. When we hear of cataclysmic events including tsunamis - devastating as they are - we know these are birth pains that are leading to the second coming of Jesus Christ. These kinds of events are a great entry point to talk about the hope we have within. When people see that we are not alarmed, that says something to them. At Cornerstone Church there are people who have lost loved ones in tsunamis. There are people who have lost their livelihood in the financial chaos of today but nevertheless, our hope is firmly in Christ. There is a joy in Christ that we can have and share with others.

Jesus carries on in verse 13: *"But the one who endures to the end will be saved."*

That's the encouragement. This doesn't refer to our justification in Christ, which we cannot lose, it refers to the completion of our salvation - it refers to finishing well in victory - and being saved from being affected by the cataclysmic events that will happen and will continue to happen.

Then the real crux of the matter. Jesus says in verse 14: *"The gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed through the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come."*

Here we see that it's not that the Gospel will diminish but rather that it will be preached through the whole world! There is a tendency, these days, for us to think that the Gospel will diminish and there will only be a small remnant of Christians left, hanging on for dear life for the

rapture, so that they can escape and watch the world burn. No - we are not called to hang on for dear life and watch the world burn! We are called to go to the nations and preach the Gospel! The Gospel will be victorious, despite all the evil that comes against it, because Jesus is victorious! That's what the book of Revelation is showing us.

Jesus goes on to talk about the wise and foolish virgins who fall asleep while waiting for the bridegroom to come. Five fall asleep and the oil in their lamps burn out and they didn't bring extra oil. Jesus is saying that we need to be ready and awake for his return. We need to be continuously filled with the Spirit.

Then Jesus goes on to talk about talents. What does this refer to? He is saying that we need to put those things He gives us to work. And if we do then He will reward us when He comes again. We won't just get to heaven but we will have heaven and treasures in heaven. But for those who refuse to put to work what God has given them there will be gnashing of teeth because they will lose out on the rewards Jesus wants to give them.

If God has made you an accountant, a business owner, an aeronautical engineer, a plastics manufacturer, a pilot, a doctor, or whatever it is you do, you are to use it for the Gospel. It's not enough to be good at what you do (not that that's unimportant) - what counts is how you put what you do to use for the Gospel of the Kingdom. For the King and His Kingdom.

Then in **Matthew 25:30** it talks about sheep and goats. There will be a separating. Listen to what Jesus considers to be a sheep:

“When the Son of man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him and He will sit on His glorious throne [the Great White Throne Judgement] before Him will be gathered all the nations and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And He will place the sheep on His right and the goats on His left. Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you are blessed by My Father inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.’” And when they ask when they did this Jesus says, “Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers you did it to Me.” And to the goats He said, “because you never did it to the least of these, you did it to Me.”

In other words they don't inherit anything. This is the issue. We use what we have to love others in and through the Gospel. What are you doing with your talents? It's only in this Gospel Age that we have an opportunity to tell people about the Lamb of God. After this it will be wrapped up and we will never again have an opportunity.

How to be prepared for the second coming

It doesn't matter how many Bibles you own, or how many crosses you have up, or if you have the Lord's Prayer in your lounge, or how many stickers you have on your bumper - maybe these things make you feel better but the only thing that prepares us is receiving the Blood of the Lamb; believing in Jesus Christ who died for us all.

Then, if you're a believer, use what God has given you for the Gospel.
It's as simple as that. He has given you His Spirit - walk in Him.

INTERPRETIVE VIEWS OF REVELATION

“This book [of Revelation] is as fully up to date today as it was in AD1000. Fifty or a hundred years from now it will still be up to date. It is applicable to conditions in the churches of Europe, of America, of Asia, of every continent.”-- William Hendriksen

Understanding that we live between the times - between the first coming of Christ and the Second Coming of Christ - and that these two times, in a sense, overlap, provides us a foundation for interpreting the book of Revelation. It's important that we rescue some of our understanding from science-fiction, sensationalism, and fear-and-terror. When you read Revelation out of context and mix in a bit of Hollywood imagination, you end up in a nightmare. But when John wrote to these churches it was about giving them hope, not a nightmare.

Living between the times



REVELATION

The rule of God (the Kingdom of God) began at the First Coming (see diagram above) and it's in the Gospel Age that the Holy Spirit is working in our lives, the Church of God is ministering, and the glorious Gospel is going out. You can see that the Second Coming, the consummation, also reaches back into the Gospel Age. This is important. We have to understand that, as Christians, we've had a taste of what's to come - we are, in a way, pulling the coming age into the present through our lives and preaching.

The consummation will be glorious for those who know Christ, but terrifying for those who reject Him. If you do not accept the blood of the Lamb in this Gospel Age - the only time you can - then you will

face the wrath and judgement of the Lamb when He consummates His Kingdom. As Christians we already know the major outcome of our own judgement - we are saved from God's wrath - and so we bring the peace of salvation into the present, preaching it and living it out to save others.

The book of Revelation has an encouraging purpose in this. We're going to outline two purposes of the book in this section - one, the call to patient endurance; two, understanding the things to come.

Revelation 1

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

We can see that the purpose here of the book is to show us the things that 'must soon take place'. Reading this book should give us understanding when we look around and see sin and misery and disaster and persecution. God wants us to be prepared and unsurprised at all the things that go on in this world.

He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

So, here is another purpose of the book: There are things within it that we must "keep". Instructions. As we read through the book we'll pick these up. But firstly, we need to keep our wits about us! We can't allow popular sensationalist opinion on this book to sway us.

1. Patient Endurance

9 I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos ...

Patient endurance. Here's a lesson He is teaching these seven churches that He writes to - they need to endure through their trials patiently. Right from the First Coming until the Second Coming in this glorious age of the Gospel and Kingdom we are called to patient endurance. That's what we need to hear and that's one thing we need to keep.

And you see it again in **Revelation 2:2**

'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, ..

Another way of saying this is "faithful plodding". In other words, the way we're going to make it through our circumstances, no matter how bad they are, is to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Revelation 2

19 "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, ...

That's the third time we see patient endurance mentioned.

Revelation 3

10 Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming ...

Now we see it mentioned four times. Jesus is highlighting and commending patient endurance.

Revelation 13

*10 If anyone is to be taken captive,
to captivity he goes;
if anyone is to be slain with the sword,
with the sword must he be slain.
Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.*

Again, endurance and faith; faithful persistence. We must endure to the end, patiently. There is a loving aspect to this - this doesn't mean we hold on with white knuckles, waiting for that day when the world burns. No, it means we preach the Gospel faithfully, loving those that hate us, enduring the resistance that comes our way, knowing we are storing up treasure in Heaven and one day, soon, Jesus will set everything aright.

Revelation 14

12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

John is not being overwhelmed by visions that are out of control and situations that are inexplicable. He is very definitely hearing from God, prophetically through these dreams and these visions, and

relaying these to the church with a motivation to see the church encouraged. Many of us today are not in the same position those seven churches were in - we're not losing our jobs because of our faith; we're not seeing our family slaughtered because of our faith! But some in this world are, right now. Yes, in the Western world there is a form of persecution and criticism that's coming up against us but, if we read the scriptures correctly, the things as they are now are going to get worse. And we need to be a people prepared to take on the end times.

Many people question whether Jesus is really coming, since it's been so long. But we are called to patient endurance as those who these scriptures were written to originally were called to patient endurance.

What is patient endurance?

1. Patient endurance means to stay awake. The call to the believers that John was writing to was, "Stay awake! Don't fall asleep." To the church of Sardis He says, "Wake up." Because the circumstances got so difficult that they had fallen asleep spiritually. And the times that we live in, with all its pressures, there is a great temptation to fall asleep. But we need to stay awake like those five virgins who were prepared (Matthew 25).

2. Patient endurance means you are ready. Are you ready for the Second Coming? Is your lamp full of oil now? Have you sorted out the relationships that you have, now? Have you fulfilled the obligations that God has called you to now? Are you serving Him in the context of what you should be doing now? Or have you put it off and saying, "Well when I make my first million, then I'll do it," or, "When I've had

two children, then I'll be more available." No, now is the season to get involved, to do what God has called us to.

3. Patient endurance means you are full of hope. Situations in this world can get worse (and it does look like it's going to do that towards the end as the end-time tribulation begins) but we are still people full of hope. Whatever else people have pegged their hope on, whatever systems, whatever indicators, when those crumble, we are full of hope. Because our hope does not depend on the temporal nature of the pleasures that this world has to offer but our hope is in an eternal future. We are hoping towards the second coming.

The original readers of this book were in the middle of persecution and were finding it difficult to see the second coming, but were told to have hope. The worst thing they can do to a believer is kill them. But we know we are going to spend eternity with Christ! So where, oh death, is your sting? (1 Corinthians 15:55.) But if you haven't accepted Christ then death still has its sting. So accept Christ today!

4. Patient endurance means you use your talents. At His second coming Jesus will reward His people for doing what He called them to do. Part of our fallen human nature is that we're cynical and ugly toward each other. Approval and encouragement are the things we long for most. As little kids you want approval and as older men and women we want approval. But let's forget about that and look for approval on only one day - when we stand before Jesus at the Great White Throne Judgement and He says to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Even that is reward in itself! At that time He'll take a crown out and place it on your head and say, "Enter into your rest, the joy of your Father. Go and rule." (Matthew 25:21.) We don't know what

that means, but we know that Jesus has great things in store for us. Let's not be part of the crowd where He says, "You wicked and evil servant," and He gives our rewards to another!

God has anointed us and gifted us and poured His grace into us so that in this Gospel Age we can set up for ourselves an inheritance. You will know what your talent is. You will find the things that you naturally are inclined to do. Serve others and Christ with these. Once the Second Coming arrives you're not going to get another opportunity to do this.

5. Patient endurance is about an attitude of worship. We lead ourselves in worship. Every single one of us has an opportunity every single moment of the day to worship God. Worship is saying, "The King is on the throne and He's got it all under control." Worship is continued prayer and thankfulness toward God, regardless of what's happening. In the book of Revelation we see wonderful displays of worship. That's what we're going to be busy with then. Heaven is going to be full of creative and spontaneous moments, loud moments, bright moments, incredibly emotional moments where there's shouting and exultation and various groups are starting songs. How about that in your own life, now?

2. Understanding the things to come

With the call to patient endurance as a foundation - understanding the core, encouraging purpose of the book of Revelation - let us now delve into understanding how to interpret the 'things to come' purpose of the book, as outlined in Revelation 1:1.

Theologically speaking, there are three classical ways in which the book of Revelation has been interpreted. Before we delve into these (and we won't get into too much detail - there are plenty of other books to help with that) let us keep two interpretive methods in mind:

1. Scripture must always mean to us what it meant to the people it was originally written to.

2. Use scripture to interpret scripture.

Preterist view

Preterists believe that the great tribulation of scripture refers to 70AD when Jerusalem and the Jewish temple was completely destroyed. Jesus prophesied this would take place in Mark 13: 1 - 4. He said that "not one stone will be left upon the other." Historical accounts show that when the Romans attacked Jerusalem it was unusually fierce and violent - it was like the devil himself took over those Roman soldiers and they were filled with a bloodlust to kill and destroy. The generals even had to tell them to cool off and take it easy! Just read the accounts, the Roman General in charge told his men, "The fury is too much. This is too violent!". Caesar even tried to restrain the fury of the soldiers, but to no avail. As they burned the temple all the gold melted down and so they removed every stone until they could get to the gold. Jesus' prophecy was proven true.

Preterists believe that all we're waiting for is the Second Coming and all of Revelation is already fulfilled - it all came to an end at 70AD. Many early church fathers did believe this - if you had to see all that, you might have thought so too. This is a basic way of understanding

the Preterist view.

Historicist view

The Historicist view was popular with the Reformers. They believe that most of Revelation has been fulfilled - mostly the seals, trumpets, events and plagues. They interpret these by looking at the Roman Church, the World Wars, and so on. While there are many different Historicist views, they mostly believe that, historically, as we look back we can see most of Revelation completed and now we're waiting for the final War of Armageddon.

But prophecy can sometimes be fulfilled more than once. All of Isaiah's prophecies of the First Coming of Jesus and the Kingdom were fulfilled with the restoration of Israel as well. There is often double or triple layers of meaning. That's why the Jews missed the coming of the King because Isaiah's prophesy was also pointing at an event that was going to supersede in it's magnitude and magnificence when you compare it to the King being born in Bethlehem in a manger.

So there could be some future fulfilments of these prophecies and maybe what we've seen in history is a fulfilment, with future fulfilments to come. But here's the problem: it gets very subjective. When you look at this theory you can find about fifty different approaches to it, which results in a lot of confusion. Furthermore, it's mainly interpreted using Western history, which is problematic when you think that there is also Eastern history and other parts of history that paint a very different story. The Gospel is for all nations and, therefore, Revelation must be for all nations - not just the Western church. That puts a question mark on this approach.

Futurist view

The futurists often believe in a literal interpretation of the book of Revelation and believe that most of what we see there is still to take place. Right now, they will say, we're waiting for the False Prophet, the Prostitute, the Beast, and the Anti-Christ, etc. Much of what they do is they separate the rapture (when those in Christ are raised and meet Jesus in the clouds) from the Second Coming, seeing these as two separate events.

This is hugely popular today and has been popularised in our culture with fiction stories like *Left Behind*. There is also a tremendous amount of debate here - some hold to a "pre-tribulation" theory; some to a "post-tribulation" theory; and some to a "mid-tribulation" theory.

These, in their basic form, all refer to the timing of the rapture. Pre-tribulation means that believers will be raptured before a great tribulation on earth. Post tribulation means that believers will be raptured afterwards. Mid-tribulation means that Christians will be raptured in the middle of this great tribulation (usually three and a half years after the tribulation starts or the Anti-Christ rules). Some might even mix things and claim two raptures instead of one.

The pre-tribulation rapture is the most popular opinion right now but it's fast losing impact. Biblically speaking, you cannot separate the Second Coming and the rapture, these are one and the same event.

How could the original hearers of this letter identify with the Futurist or Historicist perspectives? It doesn't seem that they could. But what

it meant for them it must mean for us.

The Parallelist View

The parallelist view takes into account the fact that the book of Revelation must mean the same things it meant in its original hearers. This approach also dates back to early church fathers.

What it means is that, essentially, we will keep seeing the same events in the book of Revelation over and again, in different seasons and different places, until the Second Coming. It runs “parallel” to all of history - Western, Eastern, or wherever else. It runs like a play, showing us the same events but from different angles, spiralling towards the end. In all there are eight 'scenes' of this play, which we will look at in detail throughout the rest of this study. In each scene are different emphasis, showing us something else about world history and what to expect. For example, one scene gives us an earthly perspective, while another gives us a heavenly perspective. What's most important is the Gospel Age.

It's important to think in a spiral rather than in a straight line. That's why it's a parallel perspective, not a future or Historicist perspective. It isn't Preterist because it doesn't see the events in Revelation as having been completed - it sees the events as happening again and again until Jesus comes back, with the eighth (and final) scene bringing us into the eternal age with Jesus.

The Parallelist view will be the approach of this study.

666

There are groups of people that resist technology in case somehow we're going to get a chip slipped into our forehead or wrist. This chip, they believe, is '666'. Others think that the barcode is, in fact, '666'. You can buy chips today and put them into your kids so that if they get kidnapped, you can find them. A lot of the rich folk do that. Your phone can even be manipulated so that people will know where you are - and some watches, too. Are we to be afraid of this?

If technology forces us to bow our knee to another god then, of course, we don't do it. But we're not afraid of technology - the original hearers of the book of Revelation wouldn't have been thinking of microchips and so forth! But the book had to be relevant to them as well as to us. Don't try and squeeze something into scripture that isn't there. And be very careful to put your money on one horse. Hold these things lightly.

Millennial views

It's important that we also get to grips with the many "Millennial" views of Revelation. Revelation 20 talks of a thousand years where the devil will be bound. "Millennial" or "Millennium" just means "a thousand".

Revelation 20:

1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into

the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea.

Essentially, there are three classical approaches to understanding this part of scripture. These are called “Pre-millennial”, “Post-millennial”, and “A-Millennial”.

Don't get confused with the three tribulation views, this is different. This has to do with the timing or nature of the Millennium. There is a lot of detail here so we've tried to simplify it as much as possible.

Pre-Millennial

Literal 1000 Years: Pre-Millennialism

FIRST
COMING



SECOND
COMING

SATAN
BOUND

1000 YEARS

GREAT
WHITE
THRONE

REVELATION

As the diagram above shows, this view teaches that the Millennium (the thousand years) occurs **after** the Second Coming of Christ. When Jesus comes back He will bind Satan and there will be a literal thousand years of peace and prosperity where the people of God will reign with Jesus, physically on the earth, and the Gospel will go out to all people with no hindrance. At the end of the Millennium, Satan will be let loose for a short time and will gather people to war against God for one final rebellion. Jesus will defeat him and then there will be a Great White Throne Judgement where all are judged and Satan is thrown into the Lake of Fire.

Note: in this view, the tribulation occurs **before** the Second Coming where Satan is bound - regardless of whether you believe in a pre-, post- or mid-tribulation theory.

Post-millennial

Literal 1000 Years: Post-Millennialism

FIRST
COMING



SATAN
BOUND AT
UNKNOWN
POINT

1000 YEARS

SECOND
COMING

GREAT
WHITE
THRONE

REVELATION

There are many different iterations of post-millennialism and we are simply providing a simple overview here. Post-millennialism teaches the Satan was either bound at the first coming (in this it agrees with a millennialism - see below) or he will be bound at some unknown point. After his binding there is a non-literal thousand years where the Gospel goes out with no hindrance and people live at peace - again, much like with amillennialism below (although, some post-millennialists believe in a literal thousand years). After these thousand years are ended, Jesus comes back and Satan is let loose for a short time to deceive the nations. Jesus defeats him and the Great White Throne

Judgement occurs.

Note: in this view, the Great Tribulation either occurred for the early church (so there is no latter tribulation) or the tribulation is considered to be the short time when Satan is let loose after the thousand years. There is no pre-, post- or mid-tribulation theories as the rapture and the second coming are seen to be one and the same.

A-Millennial

Non-Literal 1000 Years: Amillennialism

FIRST
COMING

SATAN
BOUND
AT THE
CROSS



SATAN BOUND THROUGH THE PREACHING
OF THE GOSPEL TO THE NATIONS (MT 28)

"1000 YEARS" / THE GOSPEL AGE

FIRST RESURRECTION

SECOND
COMING

NEXT
RESURRECTION

GREAT
WHITE
THRONE

REWARDS

LAKE OF
FIRE

NEW
HEAVEN
NEW
EARTH

TRIBULATION

REVELATION

The A-Millennial view is actually much less complicated (even if the diagram seems to have more labels!). Basically, the Millennium is not seen as a literal thousand years, meaning that the Millennium and the Gospel Age are one and the same. As the Gospel is preached, and wherever it is preached, so Satan is bound - like a dog on a leash he only has a limited amount of territory where he can destroy. You have to be enticed into his territory where he will tear you to pieces, but with the Gospel he is always overcome.

In other words, the Millennium is just a period of time where the

Gospel will be preached and the enemy will be more subdued, and the Gospel will go out in even more power. The thousand years is a time of gathering before the end, when all the other events take place - the Second Coming, the Great White Throne, the resurrection, the judgement of Satan, the Lake of Fire, and so on.

Under amillennialism there is a tribulation after the figurative thousand years of peace where Satan is let loose for a short time. The thousand years is also when a 'first resurrection' takes place (as per Revelation 20) where people go to be with Christ when they die, waiting for the second coming in heaven.

This will make sense as we continue this study. **The Amillennial view will be the approach of this study.**

Summary of our approach

Let us summarise the basic interpretive framework of Revelation in this study:

- 1. What scripture meant to the original hearers, it means to us today**
- 2. We will take a Parallelist approach** - the book of Revelation is divided into eight scenes, each showing us what has taken place and what will continue to take place, again and again, in world history, from different angles and emphasis, in a spiral form.
- 3. We will take the Amillennial approach** - The emphasis of the book of Revelation is the "Gospel Age", the time we are living in right now where the Gospel goes out in power. The Gospel Age and the

Millennial Age is the same thing. The Millennium is not a literal thousand years but a picture of the Gospel Age from the perspective of the Kingdom / Church.

4. The book of Revelation is written in Apocalyptic style – this is an ancient style of literature that basically makes use of **picture language** to tell you something else. The Beast, for example, is not a literal beast but a picture of evil government, as we shall see.

The Parallelist view allows for Revelation to be read as it is – it naturally breaks up into eight scenes (with the phrase 'then I saw' or something similar). You don't have to stretch your imagination to see this. If you take note of this you can read Revelation and find the break-up of the scenes on your own without the need of this or any study guide.

Each of the eight scenes contain seven pictures within them. This is how this study guide will be broken up:

Scene 1 - Chapter 1:1 - 3:22

The Seven Churches

Scene 2: Chapter 4:1 - 8:1

Seven Seals of a Scroll

Scene 3: Chapter 8:2 - 11:18

Seven Trumpets: Seven events that happen in the Gospel Age

Scene 4: Chapter 11:19 - 15:4

Seven Visions

Scene 5: Chapter 15:5 - 16:21

Seven Bowls or Plagues

Scene 6: Chapter 17:1 - 19:10

Seven Words of Triumph

Scene 7: Chapter 19:11 - 21:8

Seven Visions of Victory

Scene 8: Chapter 21:9 - 22:21

Seven Glimpses of Glory

In all of those the pace picks up, like a play. You see the same actors in each of them, showing you the same thing from a different view. If you put them all together you see it spirals to the end - it's as if things get more frantic and hectic, until the end comes.

Scene 1: The Seven Churches

A Revelation of Jesus

Revelation: 1

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

This was written two thousand years ago and yet it says, “the time is near.” Isn't that interesting? The truth is that, yes, the time is near because Jesus was talking about an attitude of the heart; the attitude we have when we live in that place of expecting Christ to return at any moment. That's what He's saying. And He could return in the next two minutes.

This whole book of Revelation is a reminder to us to live in expectation and anticipation of the Second Coming all the time. This helps our faith.

Greeting to the Seven Churches

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5

and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

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

When Jesus came the first time not many eyes saw him. Only a few obscure people in an obscure little village saw him. But this time, every eye will see him. And He is the Alpha and Omega - this means the Beginning and the End. It all starts with Him and it ends with Him. That's how simple it is.

Vision of the Son of Man

9 I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the

lampstands (or walking in amongst the lampstands) one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two- edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

Death and hell are the things we all fear the most. We try and prolong these two things with all of our medical remedies and health spas and face lifts and vitamin supplements and diets and so on. We're trying our hardest. And then we allow the artists among us to show movies and make up theories that when we die we all go to heaven - everyone. It doesn't matter what you've done or what you believe, we just all go to this place where everything is nice and perfect. They try to appease our conscience but tomorrow morning we fear again. But Jesus is saying, "I have the keys of Death and Hell." This is the person we can know, personally.

19 Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Here we have the introduction. Notice that the book doesn't tell us that it's the key to understanding the book of Daniel or the mysteries of the future. Rather, it is assuring us that we have a future. We must not be bewildered and overwhelmed and confused because of the conditions we live in. The seven churches who John sent this to originally all lived in many different conditions, including hardship and persecution. Today it's the same and many are dying for this Gospel. But in all of this there is a living hope.

We are not of this world, we are strangers and aliens. And so this world is a mission field - that's why God doesn't just take us to heaven after we're baptised. We have a mission to fulfill.

The drama of Revelation

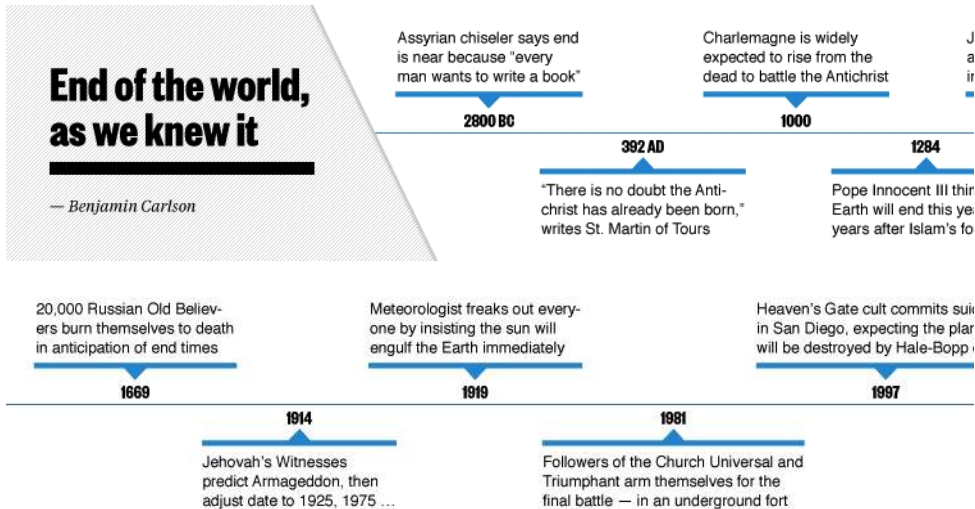
There's a lot of drama and sensationalism around this book. There's a lot of supposition, hearsay and heresy around the end times and the second coming of Jesus. And there have been many attempts to predict the second coming of Jesus, even though scripture says in

Matthew 24:36:

"36 "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."

Only the Father has the game plan in His heart and at the perfect time Jesus is going to come back. Go back to Revelation 1:1 and notice something - God gave Jesus this revelation. Not even Jesus knew until the Father gave it to Him. And Jesus wanted us to have a full assurance and hold onto this revelation, patiently enduring, and not be constantly trying to work it out.

Right from the early days of the first church there were rumours going around that the rapture had taken place. So that sort of thing isn't new. Here's a chart that highlights some of the moments in history where people thought the time had come:



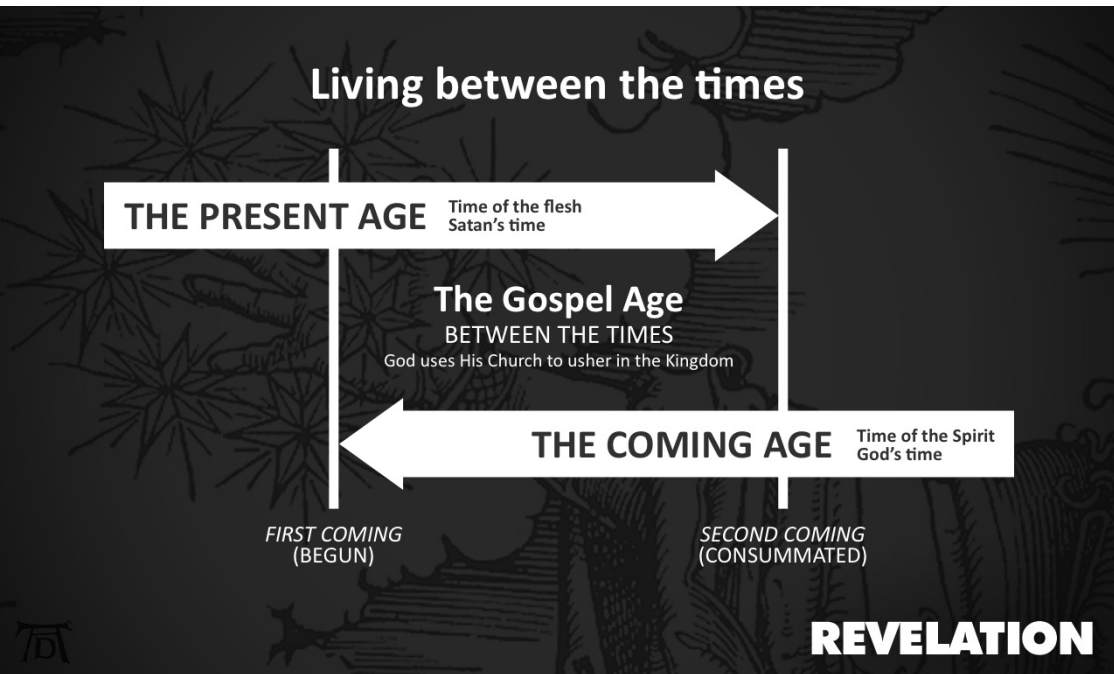
This stuff is ridiculous. None of us have the date and God does not want us to get wound up with trying to predict one. If God knows when and He's going to do it in His perfect time, He'll prepare us for it.

There's also an infatuation with trying to predict the Anti-Christ - people try and add up people's names to see if they add up to '666' in Latin. Maybe yours does. Just shave the back of your head, you might have a little 666 in a tattoo or a birthmark. Through the ages here are some people who have been predicted to be the Anti-Christ:

- o Emperor Nero
- o Many of the popes
- o Napoleon
- o Aleister Crowley (initiator of Satanism)
- o Franklin D Roosevelt
- o Bill Gates
- o Joel Osteen
- o Oprah
- o Barney (yes, Barney!)
- o Prince of Wales
- o And more!

If we truly believe that the Holy Spirit has been given to us in these in between times to prepare us as the Bride of Christ and tell of things to come, then we have nothing to worry about.

Living between the times



We do live in the last days and God will show us what we need to know. This chart above which was also in the first section of this book, reminds us that we live inbetween the time of the first and second coming. In this tumultuous time where the enemy's running rampant we also have the Holy Spirit to prepare us for Christ's return. Revelation 19:7 says the Bride made herself ready and we are given the Helper, the Holy Spirit, to do that. So the Spirit isn't here to help the Church just survive and hold on for dear life, but to help the Church

make herself ready and to go out and witness in power (Acts 1:8).

What we are to do

We want to follow what we read in 1 Chronicles 12:32 that the “men” had “an understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.” We want to have understanding of our times to know what to do. Just knowing about world events is not good enough; instead, we need to know what we're meant to do.

1 Peter 3:13

13 Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you

The more difficult times become, the more unstable economic, political, and philosophical systems become, the more people are going to be asking us why we are like we are. And we should be able to give an answer for the hope within.

The book of Revelation is a letter written to seven churches in Asia Minor who going through all kinds of challenges, including persecution and martyrdom. When we address these letters we must let God speak to us, today, through them.

Revelations of Christ

Revelation 1 is telling us that the book is a revelation of Jesus, and it climaxes to His return. From a revelation of Jesus we'll understand the things that are to come. That's how it works. If you want some sense of security for now and into the future it starts with Jesus Christ. It's a revelation of Him that's going to enable us to pass through the challenges that we have. This should motivate us to draw closer to Him.

Chapter 1 is one of the most comprehensive revelations of Jesus. Let us look at it in some detail:

1:4 him who is and who was and who is to come

He's eternal, He's above time, He's omnipresent. That's what He's showing. Why is He showing that? So we can be seated with Him in where time is not important. The only time that is important for us is while we are alive. We are to witness. We are to use our time to reach out with this Gospel. But we need to understand that He created time, so He's above it.

1:5 Jesus Christ the faithful witness

The faithful witness. As He is so we ought to be. The word in the original Greek here for "witness" is "martyr". He's the faithful Martyr who laid His life down for the sake of others. So our revelation of Him is: I must take this life and lay it down as a living sacrifice to serve Him.

1:5 the firstborn of the dead

There's hope for us when we hear this. "Firstborn" means there's a second born and a third and a fourth. And so He's saying to those presented with imminent danger and every one of us that there's one thing as sure as anything that's going to happen to us is we are going to die. This is a guarantee. And it causes great grief. But the thing is if He's the firstborn from the dead then we will rise from the dead as He did.

1:5 the ruler of kings on earth.

Who's the most powerful man on the earth? Bill Gates? The pope? Who's the most powerful group? The guys who have all the cash? The political rulers? The Illuminati?

It's saying that Jesus is the ruler of all of those rulers on the earth. There is no power greater than Christ. And this comes as an encouragement for us to take heart. His plan will be fulfilled. It doesn't matter what we're going through, He is the One who has ultimate authority. It's not like the enemy has planned something and God has to call in the Spirit and a couple of the senior angels and Jesus and say, "Listen guys we have a problem here. There's something that has taken place that we're not sure of." No, no, everything is under His control. His plan is being worked out.

1:5 him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood

And this is a revelation of the Gospel.

1:6 made us a kingdom, priests

He's made us a Kingdom of priests. He's taken sinners like us, insignificant people who've rebelled against Him, and made us a Kingdom of Priests - those who serve His purposes.

1:6 to him be glory and dominion forever and ever

1:7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him

1:8 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God

1:8 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'

1:13-16 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

Here's a wonderful revelation that we'll see later on in the seven letters. It's a passionate picture of Christ - we see him represented in a purposeful way. Wait on Him, spend time in His presence and you'll see the glory of God that manifests, see the power of God that fills your heart.

Isaiah 40:31 says that, "They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." This picture reminds of that. We need that revelation of Christ continually - that's what will get you through any challenge, not a holiday!

1:17-18 17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, ...

A beautiful picture! He's wanting to lay His right hand on us. That's ownership, a transferring of power. That's acknowledgement. "This is my girl"; "This is my boy." It's safety and reliability. Sometimes we run too fast to actually sense that.

... saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

It's all working out according to His plan.

Stars and lampstands

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

These are important. The lampstands are churches, as the scripture shows us in Revelation 1:20, and we see that Jesus walks among the lampstands. He does the same today.

Even though He is ascended and at the right hand of God, He's busy with the church. He loves the church. He's amongst us and looking to encourage us, like He did with these seven churches here. Lampstands dispense the darkness. He also wants to give us specific revelation.

He reveals a secret to these churches that applies to us today when He says, "This is the name I'm going to give you." He is basically encouraging them with a reward; an inheritance.

He talks about stars which refers to the messengers to the churches. Now there are two main ideas here revealed in commentaries: one is that it's possibly an **angel** that is assigned to each church and the other says that it probably refers to the **leader** of the church (given that the word 'angel' means 'messenger' in the original Greek). But the main point is that God speaks to us and brings us a message which we must hear and live by.

A call to obey

Ephesians 2 : 6,7

And raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

What is our call to obey? When we take what we see in Revelation and consider Ephesians 2:6,7 above, we understand that it is this amazing Jesus who we are seated with in glory. None of the pictures here in Revelation are about a battling Saviour who's trying to fight for supremacy. There's no 'ifs' here but guarantees about Jesus' victory.

This is about an ascended Saviour who destroyed death, who bought us forgiveness, and is now seated at the right hand of God. He holds everything in His hand. That's where we're seated.

That's the glory of this new covenant: We are seated there with Him, triumphant, not because of happy worship or nice people but triumphant because of the solid truth of the scriptures. We are seated with Christ in heavenly places.

Revelation 1:9 is worth looking at again. Here there's a call for patient endurance. If we are to get anything out of this book it's that we are called to patiently endure. We make our best plans, we pay our bonds, we provide for our retirement but Christ could return at any moment and we need to be happy about that, prepared and ready. Patiently enduring is a character issue.

What is the opposite of patiently enduring? Impatiently freaking out. Restless and unsure. We can't have homes with a Star of David and a Koran and a dream-catcher, hoping we've covered all of our bases. Patiently enduring is having that inward assurance that He died for you and saved you, personally, and that you know Him personally. We then carry on, one foot in front of the other, keeping in-step with the Spirit. Plodding is a great word to think of here. We are faithfully plodding with the Lord.

The last encouragement is in verse 17. It says, "Fear not." There are going to be times when men's hearts will fail them. This is what Revelation predicts. There are going to be times when our hearts fail us. When you look at the end time events and you got little kids and you're thinking about education and you're thinking about safety and

the rest of it, your heart begins to fail. And if you're a single mom and you have limited resources and you think of this evil world and you think of you kids, your heart begins to fail. Our hearts fail when we think of all these dynamics that seem completely out of control. There are always wars and rumours of wars; rumours of meteors crashing into the earth; earthquakes and tsunamis and the environment crashing. But He's saying that it doesn't matter what you see out there, fear not. Have faith in God.

THE SEVEN SPIRITS OF GOD

Revelation 1

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

The book opens up by telling us that it is about the “revelation of Jesus Christ”. This passage already challenges us - it says we ought to read it aloud. Why? Because scripture must be the loud voice in our ear when it comes to last things and those things that happen, and not the theories of some or other interpreter. We need to hear scripture and we need to keep what is written in it.

Revelation is applicable to us today

Revelation is not just a collection of history and symbolism and confusion thrown together but it has a historical context just like every other book of the Bible. The apostle John originally wrote it to seven churches to encourage them through the trials and persecution they were going through. He challenges them to keep preaching the Gospel and to hold strong, no matter what and no matter who was coming against them. If that was its message then that is also its message today.

He was writing to actual people in the world. We wasn't writing a dissertation or a Doctorate in Theology. John was a pastor and has concern for the people he loves. He is on the island of Patmos because he had been preaching the Gospel and the authorities put him there as a type of imprisonment. And then Jesus gives him a vision that will encourage the churches in that time and will encourage the church today.

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

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

Go and meditate on this scripture and see the blessing, encouragement, strength, hope and joy that comes from it. See, nothing is out of God's control. He knows everything from beginning to end. God made the universe and wants to have a relationship with each and every one of us. That is encouraging!

As you read the book of Revelation you will see many cataclysmic events that are going to make you look in awe. We need to remember that God is in control - everything will happen at just the right time. Despite whatever happens, if you believe in Jesus, you are safe in Jesus - even if you lose your life. Because no one can take away what God has given you: eternal life and a reward. You will see that God has accounted for us and our hearts and He says we have a part to play. Don't get knocked off your horse or get disillusioned. Don't fall into despair. Understand that, in Christ, we are in exactly the place we should be.

The seven-fold spirit

Revelation 1: 4

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,

The first question we will more than likely have here is this: *what are these seven spirits?* We also see these seven spirits mentioned in Revelation 3:1, 4:5 and 5:6.

1. There is only one God in three persons; and one Holy Spirit

Firstly, there is not more than one Holy Spirit. Secondly, God is one God in three persons, not one in seven spirits.

There is light and anointing and power in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. We're living under His rule and under His advice - the Helper (John 14:16). We're not orphans; we haven't been left alone. When

Jesus went He said we would give us another helper – He wouldn't leave us as orphans (John 14:16-18). He told us that the Spirit will show us more about Christ and show us about things to come.

2. The “seven spirits” refers to the Holy Spirit's work

God is on the throne and the seven spirits (also translated as the seven-fold Spirit of God) is before the throne. It's like the Holy Spirit is refracted into a seven-fold kaleidoscope or rainbow of colours, each colour representing something. Think of it like a prism – light coming in one way, colours refracting out the other. This is a metaphor, a picture of the Holy Spirit and His work. It's showing us aspects of who He is.

God's Spirit is filling us with what He does and then we refract and reflect Him. Isaiah 11: 2 – 3 gives us a clue of what we're seeing here:

Isaiah 11:2-3

*And the **Spirit of the Lord** shall rest upon him [Jesus],
the Spirit of **wisdom and understanding**,
the Spirit of **counsel and might**,
the Spirit of **knowledge** and the **fear of the Lord**.*

3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,*

We can see seven aspects of the one Spirit here, or “seven spirits”. (1) the Spirit of the LORD, (2) the Spirit of wisdom, (3) the Spirit of understanding, (4) the Spirit of counsel, (5) the Spirit of power, (6) the Spirit of knowledge, and (7) the Spirit of the fear of the Lord.

The revelation of this anointing is on Jesus and as Jesus lives in us, by His Spirit, so we have this seven-fold Spirit anointing. Think of it this way: what is His Holy Spirit doing? He is doing these seven things in us. This is how we have our relationship with Him. This is the revelation of God to us in whatever season we're in; and He wants to fill our lives with these colours so that we will reveal who He is - in these seven aspects - to the world.

He wants us to come alive with these values and then live through us. He wants to pour that power, revelation, and hope into a hopeless world. That's what it means to have a relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Too many of us, when we think of a relationship with the Spirit, think about sitting down and humming and getting goosebumps, and seeing feathers and gold dust falling. Sure, those things can happen, but let's bring our relationship with the Spirit into a Biblical sanity. We need this. Let's be happy for God to manifest in any way He wants but we must base our understanding of our relationship firmly on the rock of His Word. Because His Word is the primary way we relate to Him. His Word is the final authority in our life and if He says this is the way in which He anoints us, we must want to know how to have this relationship with Him. It can't be that when the day comes that the Spirit doesn't manifest through feathers or gold dust that our faith in God wavers and flickers out. Our faith is not based on feelings but on the Word of God. If He said He's going to send us a Helper, He's sending us a Helper. And if says He's going to anoint us, He anoints us. Every one of us, according to John and Acts 2, have an anointing, and God wants us to operate in that anointing.

But why seven? Because seven is representative of perfection in scripture. We don't need to delve into numerology here – it's a simple picture that's pointing us to the perfect revelation of God in the perfect way with the perfect number, to fulfil his perfect purpose, in and through our lives. So the first of God's anointing is the Spirit of the Lord – a revelation of God. With this comes a Spirit of wisdom, a Spirit of understanding, a Spirit of counsel, a Spirit of might, a Spirit of knowledge and a Spirit of the fear of the Lord. It's seven ways in which God anoints us.

The Spirit of the Lord

Jesus told His disciples that when He goes He would send His Spirit and He'll come to us and we will know that He is in the Father and that the Father and He is in us when the Spirit comes.” (See John 14.) That may be difficult to understand. God is everywhere. He is omnipresent and transcendent and living in us by the power of the Spirit. We never mistake the Spirit for wind or fire or any of His manifestations. We have a relationship with the Father who shows us and what we need to work on and do.

The Spirit of wisdom, understanding, knowledge

Even though knowledge comes second last, these three are grouped together because the Bible groups these three together in Proverbs:

Proverbs 24: 3-4

“By wisdom a house is built,

*and by understanding it is established;
by knowledge the rooms are filled
with all precious and pleasant riches.”*

In Exodus 31, a man called Bezalel gets instruction from Moses on how to build the tabernacle but then he is also anointed by God with wisdom, understanding and knowledge to build it. Instructions are not enough - He needs the anointing too. The tabernacle is the shadow of the church. And so if we want to know how to build the church, if we want to know how to build our families, we need wisdom, we need understanding, and we need knowledge.

Try and describe wisdom without mentioning knowledge and understanding. Try and describe understanding without mentioning knowledge and wisdom. Try and describe knowledge without mentioning wisdom and understanding. They are like God's revealed will for us. It's His revelation and this is how it comes.

Wisdom is the ability to build. Understanding means you can build something that won't collapse. And knowledge is required to fill the rooms. If you want to know how to build your life go to the Spirit of God, not Dr Phil or Oprah. If you want to build your marriage, go to God.

Understanding is about building it right. Building something is one thing but building it right is another. When you build a house you need to build it right - with a solid foundation and pillars and beams and so on. We need understanding so that we know what and how to build and can stand season after season.

Then you want to fill the house. There are certain things you need here, like the sink, a fridge, a toilet, running water, electricity, and so on. But we also want to fill it with “pleasant riches” as Proverbs 24:3-4 says above. Think of the food and the paintings and the décor. If you want your life fitted out right, don't go to your wallet, don't go to the psychologist, and please do not go to astrologers and try and understand what it says about your star sign and base your life on that! No, fill your life with knowledge from God. That's true riches. Who will know the mind of Christ? This is it. The Spirit will translate God's will and God's plan for you - listen to Him.

The Spirit of counsel

Think of boxing. Often they say it's important to know who you have in your corner because that guy is going to help you. To know that the Spirit of God is there for us, we need to go back to Him. How do you face the next round? Last round you got knocked down - but in our Christian life we may be knocked down but we're never knocked out. So go back and ask, "Now, what do I do, Lord?" That's counsel.

The Helper that God has given us wants to counsel us, all the time. And that's literally what that word “Helper” means - advice. In the book of Job, after all his calamity, his friends tell him that he must have disobeyed God and done all sorts of things and that was the reason for his downfall. But God speaks and says, "Who are those that darken My counsel because it comes without understanding?" (Job 38:2).

How many times have we darkened God's counsel? How many times have we said things to our spouses or looked at situations and spoken human wisdom - absolute nonsense? No, through every situation of

life we ask God for counsel – which often goes against human wisdom. Let God reveal His counsel to you.

Spirit of might

As the light of God comes into us He fills us with might. Might is not only power but ability, and authority – it's the ability and authority of God; like dynamite power. He empowers us. He enables us to do what He's called us to do. So not only is He going to show us His counsel but He's going to enable us to do what He's called us to do. We can go to Him and say, "Lord, I'm weak. I need this or that." So often we see Jesus going back to the Father in prayer so that He could continue to soak up the anointing. We need His anointing!

Fear of the Lord

This is not a negative thing. It's difficult to try and explain fear. It's not getting a fright or being scared of God, living and trembling under His hand. This fear is a positive quality that enables us to say no to sin and yes to righteousness. It gives confidence. It causes us to act justly and gives us an understanding that God actually wants to bless us. Under that fear of the Lord we prosper.

The opposite of the fear of the Lord is indignation. Here we think that God is just the big guy in the sky who likes to do arbitrary things and cause great amounts of sadness and misery for people. No, we have reverence for God and understand His sovereignty in a Biblical way.

Keeping in step

All of the above is an indication of what it means to be in relationship with the Spirit, keeping in-step with Him, as Galatians 5:25 says. How do we carry on with this challenge? Here's a scripture that will encourage us to pray and ask:

Matthew 7: 7-11

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTERS

Christ is challenging us; there is a necessity for us to emulate the love of Christ and allow his love to shine to those around us. This is the foundation upon which the rest of the book of Revelation hangs on. The foundation is one chapter, packed full of the revelation of Jesus, so we cannot speak or receive council or take ground outside of building on our foundation of the revelation of Jesus.

The revelation of Jesus in this chapter is encouraging us on the necessity to concentrate on the soon coming of Christ. We will build our lives on the Alpha and the Omega, He was and is, and is to come.

Truth comes out of His mouth. There is a holiness about Him like none other. He owns the church and loves the church. He stands among the lampstands (the churches) and holds in his right hand seven stars.

Jesus is always speaking

The prophetic vision here shows us that Jesus speaks and is actively involved in His church all the time. Too much of the church is built on history and memory, administration and individual interpretations, and Christ has no access. It is a time for spiritual audit. If we are going to change from glory to glory, we need the Spirit of God to shine in our hearts. He is going to reveal Christ to us individually and reveal what Jesus is saying to our church.

The seven letters were actually written to the seven churches and these letters were applicable to them in a way that makes them fully

applicable to us today. He is speaking to us today. You will find the conditions we will see in these seven churches in churches throughout the world and in your own life. When you look at it you will be able to relate. He says He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

The message is for each one of us. God is saying have you got ears to hear what He is saying?

If you have, you have a future; you are able to change from glory to glory, into the likeness and the image of Jesus.

Summarising the prophetic message

Each of these letters to the seven churches are similar to each other and constructed in the same way. Each were written to the 'star' of the church, explained in chapter 1:20 to be the 'angel' of the church. As discussed above, the word 'angel' means 'messenger'. Leaders of a church are there as messengers, representing Christ's message to the church. In other words, God holds the leader of a church and his team responsible for that church.

Each letter has a revelation of Jesus taken from Chapter 1. Every situation we encounter, every season we go through, every challenge we have, every way in which we approach what God is doing, begins with the revelation of Jesus. If we want to take ground we have to have a fresh revelation of Jesus, it is in Him that it happens.

Each letter has the same structure:

- Each letter has a commendation

- Each letter has a criticism or a rebuke
- Each letter has council from Jesus

Christ is involved - His spirit is working with and wanting to take the church through its stages of maturity so that we will stay in the sweet spot of His grace - in the trade winds. We can either be in the roaring forties or in the doldrums and He wants to bring us back to the Trade Winds - the winds that ships would use to get from continent to continent.

There is a challenge in each letter - a challenge to hear what is being said. Why do churches end up as monuments? In many of the Latin countries there are beautiful church buildings with amazing architecture - relics of the past - but they are empty and hollow. They are following their own set of principles blindly, but they do not hear what God is saying.

More than anything we need to hear what God is saying. What does God say? Too much of our time is consumed on other voices.

Climax of the Letters:

The letters also contain a promise of reward to those who conquer and overcome. God has designed that each church can go from season to season and grow and conquer. He has ordained that we are conquerors in Christ Jesus. He has ordained it that we have victory! Even though we may be knocked down we are never knocked out - we have victory in Christ. He is bringing us to this place and bringing us into his eternal rewards.

In our Christianity we work for the reward which is to come. This is our inheritance - it's far greater than anything we can imagine. We do not work for immediate comfort and some of the pleasures of this world. In this world our job is to see the world impacted with the Gospel! Christ has ordained that every believer and every church overcome. And we will see how this is done as we study this book.

Ephesus

A church that lost its first love

Revelation 2:1-7

1 *“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*

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

Background

Ephesus was the leading city in the Roman province of Asia and was the political, commercial and religious centre of that area. It had a population of about one third of a million. Situated on the west coast of what is now Asiatic Turkey, it had a harbour that at that time opened onto the Cayster River and emptied into the Aegean sea.

It was at the intersection of the major trade routes so became a major commercial centre. It had a famous eleven meter wide road, lined with columns, which ran through the city to its fine harbour. It boasted a large theatre (seated 25,000), baths, a library, and a bustling agora (market place). By far the most magnificent building in Ephesus was the temple of Artemis (Greek) or Diana (Latin). It was one of the seven wonders of the world.

Ephesus was the centre of both the worship of Artemis (a many breasted Ionian goddess of fertility) and of 'the Imperial Cult' (the instituted worship of the Roman emperors). Along with the temple of Diana, it had three official 'state' temples. Ephesus had the much acclaimed double title of, 'Temple warden of the Emperors' and 'Temple warden of Artemis/Diana'.

Paul spent three years in Ephesus (early 54-56 A.D.) and 2 years doing evangelistic lectures there in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:23-31) resulting in *all the Jews and Greeks who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord!* (19:10)

The elders had an emotionally charged visit with Paul at Miletus, (Acts 20) where he Paul charged them with their responsibility as leaders, never to see him again. Paul writes a letter to this church in 60 A.D. from imprisonment in Rome and then writes two manuals on leadership to this church in 64 and 66 A.D. (1 & 2 Timothy.)

Revelation was written in about 96 A.D. This church was now 40-45 years old. Paul's evangelism of Ephesus in Acts 19 affected the magic cults and the worship of Artemis, causing damage to the trade in cultic

artifacts, and a riot. Christianity spread from Ephesus to the surrounding cities e.g. Colossae.

Ephesus is addressed first because of its importance and centrality of location to the other churches. Ephesus had probably the largest and most thriving church of its time. It flourished but was troubled by false teachers and apostles (Judaisers, Nicolaitans / Gnostics).

The Ephesians were steadfast but lacked love and love's accompanying works. Reference to '*eating from the tree of life*' is seen as the truth in comparison to 'the sacred date palm of Artemis' which figured on Ephesian coins of that time; or partaking in food offered to idols and pagan feasts as practiced by the Nicolaitans.

Content of the letter

A command that the letter should be written to the 'star' of the church

1 To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

A revelation of Jesus (mostly taken from the first chapter)

1 The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Holds here is a more firmer holding than in chapter 1 and means '*holding fast*'. In chapter 1 Jesus was *standing* amongst the lampstands, whereas here He is *walking* amongst the lampstands - He is more involved. What is primary and most important is that our revelation of

Jesus grows. For every challenge and every season Jesus reveals Himself to us so that in Him we might overcome! There is no victory outside of Christ.

In this verse we see a revelation of Jesus' love and commitment. He won't and doesn't abandon churches, leaders or people! He holds them in His right hand. The picture of Jesus walking amongst the lampstands or churches is a picture of loving care and concern.

The description comes from Chapter 1:9-20. Jesus' right hand holds the stars - He protects His churches by speaking to them. The churches are 'lampstands'; they are people who radiate the light of the Gospel. Jesus watches over them and guides them to see that their light is ever bright.

A commendation

2 I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Jesus doesn't only look for fault to correct it, but He looks at the good to strengthen and encourage it.

Jesus commends them in the following ways:

They were energetic for the Lord

“I know your works, your toil, you have not grown weary”

They stood firm under immense pressure

“your patient endurance, you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake. They made a difference season by season!”

They were careful to maintain godliness

“you cannot bear with those who are evil, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

Evil needs to constantly be confronted. Roughly *Nicolaitans* in Greek is translated ‘power to the people/laity’. They were a sect that practiced a mix of Christianity and pagan worship.

They were open but cautious about apostolic ministry

“have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.”

Discernment is a sign of maturity!

A criticism or rebuke

But yet they had abandoned the love they had at first. Things became a routine; a tradition; rather than passionate and full of spark.

1 Thessalonians 1:3

“[Remember] before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Our work and effort has to be motivated by love. We must come back and keep coming back to that place.

1 Corinthians 13:13

“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

John 15:13

“Greater love has no one than this that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

Are we laying our lives down for others? That's love.

John 3: 17,18

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not

believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

If our hearts don't break for the lost and those in need, then everything we do is nothing else but dead works. Jesus died on the Cross for them. We are nothing without love.

1 Corinthians 13:8

“Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.”

Love never fails. We need to go and find this love again and again. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Hear what God is saying to you.

Counsel from Jesus (an exhortation to repent)

5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

They once had altitude and had fallen from there because they had moved away from love. They needed to change their mind and direction to avoid having their lampstand removed. Our future and longevity depends on us being able to change from glory to glory, as Jesus leads us.

They were in serious danger of ceasing to exist as a church. This happened in 242 A.D.

A challenge to hear what is being said

7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

We need to have ears to hear what Jesus is saying to the churches, and us in particular! He is speaking, are we listening? These letters show us that Jesus speaks through leaders. Are they listening? Are we praying that our local church never stops? If we hear and obey, we overcome!

A promise of reward to those who overcome or conquer

7 To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

“The conqueror is the man who fights against sin, the devil, and his whole dominion and in his love for Christ perseveres to the very end” - William Hendriksen.

To such a conqueror is promised much reward, as we shall see in each letter. In the Greek ‘overcomers’ are those who stand as victors, those who conquer, and it was written in the present continuous tense. Therefore, overcomers are those who continually move forward victoriously in God and His counsel.

Jesus’ destiny for every believer and every church is that despite difficulties, issues and challenges, we overcome! The reward of eating from the tree of life is the reward of eternity, back in God’s paradise! As opposed to eating the date palms of Artemis, food offered to idols

or food at pagan feasts.

In order to overcome, this church had to conquer lovelessness (*you have abandoned the love you had at first*), and forgetfulness (*Remember therefore from where you have fallen*).

The conqueror is the person who fights against sin and the devil. In their love for Christ that person perseveres until the very end. We are called to continually overcome, day by day. Listen to what Jesus is saying to you - in that you will overcome. He sets us up for victory. In Jesus our destiny - every one of us - is to overcome. Know when you're starting to fall.

There is no greater command than to love.

A call to obey

In this letter, what did John counsel the churches to obey?

4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

This church was planted by Paul and John is very concerned for it. John's concern, however, is just as relevant for us today as it was for not only this church but for all the churches at the time.

The whole region where Ephesus was located was impacted by the gospel. Ephesus was a major centre of trade and industry but it was corrupt and was anti-Christianity. Paul brought in the Gospel and it

penetrated society, and he sent in Timothy to pastor the church there. According to church tradition, John's last sermon was simple: "Little children, love one another as you are loved," and this church was steeped in that kind of teaching.

This church was 45 years old when it received this letter. It's important to understand that it is not dead, repetitive processes that keep us going, it is the love of Christ. We never lose our first love and if we do, it is with great urgency and priority that we ought to get back to it. Think back to what drew you into the Gospel? Was it not God's love?

God's love penetrated this society with an amazing Gospel of light. As a base church it was doing great work. But if there is no love for God there is no love for each other. When we love God, we live with a fresh account of our relationship before Him. There is nothing more vulnerable, nothing more risky than, and nothing as important as, love.

The revelation of Jesus who holds the seven stars in his right hand is in control. Listen to Him. That's what we're seeing here. His right hand symbolises protection, love, care, and nurture.

God is revealing himself to this church. He walks among the lamp stands - the churches. He is actively involved today in local churches in the same way. He is concerned for the light of his lamp stands; He is protecting this light from being snubbed out. The light of the Gospel will penetrate the darkness of our city, our country, and every place He sends us. This is about having a worldwide impact.

Do you love God like you should? Do you love your neighbour like you should? Do you love the nations like He loves the nations? These are

questions we must ask ourselves.

Smyrna

A church commended

Revelation 2: 8-12

To the Angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your affliction and your poverty - you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you into prison to test you and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Background

Smyrna was a very beautiful and important city, about 40 - 50km North of Ephesus. It was called "the Port of Asia". It was prosperous but the church was struggling. This is because there were two main groups of people who were hostile to the church: first the Jewish people who were very much opposed to Christianity, and then those people who were loyal to Rome and supported the Roman emperor worship - the acceptable religion of the day. So the Smyrna church faced much suffering and persecution. It stands in contrast to the church in Ephesus which wasn't suffering but had back-slidden.

Content of the letter

“These are the words of Him who is the first and the last. Who died and came to life again.”

The letter starts with an awesome revelation of Jesus. This revelation changes everything. When we can see Jesus for who He is – when we have a revelation of his magnificence, majesty, awesomeness, and sovereignty, everything changes.

Colossians 1

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

When we truly understand this scripture above we can face whatever persecution or difficulties that come our way. A revelation of Jesus' sovereignty and pre-eminence is something we need to have continually as it will sustain us.

Nothing can snatch us out of Jesus' hands. Jesus is the Lord of history – and we're reminded of this again in this passage in Revelation. He is

the first and the last; the conqueror of death; the one who died and came to life again. This church was suffering and Jesus reminds us that He is at the beginning of their story and will be with them at the end of their story. Today you may be suffering too, so you can be reminded here that Jesus is at the beginning of your story and will be with you to the very end.

Jesus has conquered death. Therefore, death and the fear of death has no grip on those who believe in Him. That's why Paul could say that death is like a scorpion that has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). For those who do know Christ - not an intellectual knowing but a personal, intimate knowing in the heart - death can do no harm. In Jesus we have victory. This victory was for the believers in this church in Smyrna. Because Christ has taken away our sins; because He died and came alive again; death has no power to harm or terrify us. The Christian lives for what is his destiny beyond the grave.

Jesus said in John 14:19 that: *"Because I live, you also will live."* Today we have that same assurance. He said in John 11:25: *"I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."* Death is just a door that we go through to be eternally with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

If today you feel that the fear of death overwhelms you, discover the victory that can be yours in Christ Jesus. In Christ, death is not to be mourned. We do not mourn like those who have no hope, we celebrate the eternity we have in Christ. (1 Thessalonians 4:13.)

No matter the pain and suffering or persecution or whatever else, our

real life is beyond the grave. Jesus reminds the church in Smyrna of this face in this passage and it serves as a reminder to us as well. Our suffering and pain here is a very, very short time when we compare it to the eternity we will have with our Father in heaven.

Commendation

“I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan.”

Jesus knows and cares about everything you are going through. The church in Smyrna was 'rich' because they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus. This isn't a prosperity Gospel - there are things of much more value than money.

Because of your faith and your values you might find that people don't even want to do business with you. This kind of reaction to the Christian faith is what this church suffered through. People refused to do business with them. The Bible promises prosperity to every believer but it's a very different kind of prosperity - it's a spiritual joy, overflowing, and it's a crown of life in the age to come.

Jesus knows the slander this church is enduring. But He exhorts them not to retaliate or justify themselves, but to throw themselves at God's mercy.

1 Peter 4:12

“Dear Friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.”

Don't be ashamed if you are suffering as a Christian. Rather, praise God because He knows your name. In this world you are guaranteed to have trouble but Jesus said, "I have overcome the world." (John 16:33.) You don't have to be anxious because He is with you right now and will always be with you.

Living for Christ is not easy. Expect to be persecuted, put down, mocked and ostracised. Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12 that, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." But the good news is we are not alone, through all the storms and fire we walk through. Any persecution or suffering is minuscule when we compare it to the eternity God has for us.

2 Corinthians 4:17

"For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

How could Paul say such things? He had an eternal perspective. He knew that eternal glory far outweighs our suffering here.

2 Corinthians 4:18

"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

When you are slandered, react in the Bible way:

Romans 12:14

"Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse."

1 Peter 2:23

“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly.”

1 Peter 3:9

“Do not repay evil with evil, or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

When slander comes (it will come from the world and even believers) you must guard your heart, which is the wellspring of life (Proverbs 4:23) and pour your heart out to the Lord.

Criticism

Jesus has no criticism for this church. Rather, He commends them and says, *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you into prison to test you...”*

Jesus often tells us not to be afraid. The Bible is full of words of comfort. He keeps us and we need not be afraid of anything that comes our way. An ongoing revelation of Jesus as our rock, our fortress, our sure deliverance, makes this easier. He is our God who we can trust and He will always be faithful to us. Mother Theresa said: *“you will never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have.”*

Habakkuk 3:17-19

“Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Saviour.”

That kind of faithfulness is remarkable. When difficulties and persecution and suffering come our way, we run to God rather than running from Him. We don't blame Him but abandon ourselves to Him, throwing ourselves at His grace and mercy.

The Promise

When this church stands through it all, trusting in Jesus, He gives them this wonderful promise:

I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

The crown represents Kingship, triumph, visible honour and victory. The Christian will receive a reward of visible glory - this is not just about heaven but also about rewards God gives us in addition to the promise of heaven, which we all have already when we believe in Jesus. This is the hope we have. The phrase about “not being hurt by the second death” means that they will be entirely free from the second death - it will not touch them in any way. They will not lose their reward.

Revelation 21:8 refers to the second death as being thrown into a fiery

lake of burning sulphur. It is an eternal suffering. When you compare that to Smyrna suffering for ten days (it's a figurative ten days) you can see the massive difference. That's the encouragement here.

But the believer who does not overcome will be hurt in some way by the second death. They won't go to hell, but they will lose the additional rewards God wants to give them. We cannot lose our salvation but we can lose the 'more' that God wants to give us, which the Bible speaks of as in an inheritance or a reward. When we overcome we lay up treasures in heaven, but if we refuse to overcome we lay up no treasures at all. Overcoming does not mean that we are finally able to get over sinful desire in this life, or that suffering does not affect us emotionally or in any way. Rather, overcoming means that we don't give in to our sinful desire and we keep Christ as our focus even in the face of suffering. Our sinful desire and our suffering will always be with us, but we are empowered by the Spirit to overcome these – to not give into sin and to see Christ even in suffering. God will reward us when we do.

A call to obey

No matter what we go through we are not alone. He knows. He cares. Any challenge, any pain, any disappointment is only for a short period of time compared to eternity. And the reward we receive for overcoming is forever – it is treasure that moth and rust cannot destroy and the thief cannot steal (Matthew 6:20). This is good news. We have to live with eternity in mind, not just the here and now; we don't have to fear death or the consequences of death.

But **unbelievers** do need to fear death and its consequences.

Therefore we need to go and enable these to be reconciled to Christ so they too won't be hurt by the second death. Lasting riches and spiritual wealth in Christ are the only things that last.

A crown is laid up for us who are faithful. It's not how we start, or how faithful we have been, or how faithful we are now, but how we finish. Will we finish faithful or will we be those escaping through the flames (1 Corinthians 3:15)? Will we hear Jesus' words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant; you have been faithful, you haven't given up, no matter how much the suffering, the pain the persecution, you have been faithful to me."?

That is the call and that is the challenge!

Are you suffering in your relationships, or financially, in your work place, or in your marriage? He knows. He is with you. He is faithful to bring you through it. Don't lose your faith in the midst of difficult and adverse situations - know that God is with you, He can and wants to bring you through it.

Smyrna was a suffering church. His commendation to them was "I know, I know. I am with you, and I am going to bring you through it." Let that truth sink in. It is our revelation of Jesus, our knowing and understanding of who He is - a revelation of the awesomeness and magnificence of Jesus - that will enable us to persevere, to push through and will enable us to not give up.

Pergamum

A church compromising

Revelation 2:12-17

12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

Background

Pergamum was the administrative and legal capital of the Roman province of Asia. It was famous for its literature and idolatry - being the site of the first Caesar-cult temple in 29 BC, built to the 'divine' Augustus Caesar and the goddess, Roma. Some time later another shrine was built for the god, Trojan, and the city became a centre of worship for many of the main cults of the time. Zeus, the supreme god

of the Greeks, was worshipped here extensively, with a massive throne-like altar built to him on a hill outside Pergamum. What's interesting is that this shrine was called "Zeus sater" which means "Zeus the Saviour."

Athena, the Greek virgin goddess of wisdom, practical skills and prudent warfare, was also worshipped in Pergamum as well as Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fruitfulness, vegetation and giver of ecstasy. Worship of both of these included orgiastic rites.

Aesculapius, the Greek god of healing, was also worshipped here, and was depicted by a serpent. Aesculapius was eventually known as the 'god of Pergamum'. Some commentators believe that 'Satan's seat' in this scripture refers to the worship of Aesculapius. Others think it refers to all the wicked idolatry that went on in the city. There were also temples there for Apollo, Minerva, Venus and Bacchus! With such an abundance of pagan temples that adorned a hill outside of the city it's no wonder that Pergamum was where "Satan has his throne" or "where Satan lives" (2:14).

Pergamum's library rivalled Alexandria's in Egypt and it was a very cultural city. Parchment was perfected in Pergamum, which allowed for the library to be freed from an Egyptian ban on the export of papyrus. It's thought that Pergamum's library consisted of over 200 000 volumes.

Because of the rampant idolatry in the city, peculiar difficulties faced the Christians there, which we shall see.

Content of the letter

A command that the letter should be written to the 'star' of the church

12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

A revelation of Jesus (mostly taken from 1:9-20)

12 'The words of him who has the sharp two- edged sword.

The revelation of Jesus here is that He comes to judge with the word of His mouth - His Word. Later on you read that if they don't repent He will 'war against them with the sword of my mouth'.

A commendation

13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

Jesus is going to challenge the compromise of this church, but before He does that He has encouraging words for them. Despite His criticisms He wants them to know that He has not abandoned them. They have remained faithful to His name (the revelation of Jesus) and in the face of martyrdom and satanic opposition, some have stood firm and faithful to the Gospel. Antipas, called a "faithful witness", was one of them. Tradition says that Domitian (the Roman emperor of the time)

had him roasted in a huge brazen bull shaped altar used for casting out demons.

A criticism or rebuke

14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Jesus is faithful to them by being honest about a serious weakness – their compromise. While they were holding to Christ's name they were also tolerating people who were holding to the 'teaching of Balaam'. They were trying to hold two contradictory things at the same time.

Balaam (whose story is found in Numbers 22–24) was a money-loving prophet who decided to persuade Balak, the king of Moab, to create a religious unity with Israel. The plan was simple: send in beautiful Moabite girls to encourage the men to come to the licentious religious festivals. Balaam knew that if they did that, God would be angry, and thus Israel would not find His blessing and victory.

The same thing was happening in Pergamum. There were various groups (Jesus mentions two, and 'Jezebel' (2:20) was a third) that were persuading Christians to take part in pagan worship. The areas of compromise were specifically 'eating food sacrificed to idols and [practicing] sexual immorality'. In Acts 15:29 these were both restricted by the Jerusalem church when they sent a letter to the Gentile church. Tolerating this was a serious compromise.

Counsel from Jesus

16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

Jesus wants immediate repentance. If they do not repent then He will 'come to you soon.' He would especially deal with the leadership of this church. He says that He will come to war against those who were compromising and encouraging others to do the same, and to the leaders for allowing to to take place and doing nothing about it.

Michael Eaton says this: "Jesus will deal with the unrepentant with 'the sword of [his] mouth'. Jesus' words will bring judgement and make war against unrepentant compromisers. God will start conducting a holy war against us if we, who are his people, deny what we believe and compromise with what we know to be pagan wickedness. The Christians were surrounded by a pagan society and there was pressure on them to comply to pagan worship because it affected every aspect of life - trade, recreation, entertainment, etc. But Jesus will speak a word and things will happen. His word - both his teaching and His way of life, have a sword-like quality. He stabs our consciences, cuts down our plans, slays our false ideas. It's better for us to repent than for him to start crusading against us."

We are always tempted to compromise. Think of how people speak of our views of sexuality, money, sex, and general morality. The world often invites us to take part in its worship of these things and scoffs at us when we refuse or make a stand. The temptation to let just 'a little bit' in is very real. But we cannot compromise. If we do Jesus always

gives us space to repent - but there is judgement for those who refuse to repent.

A challenge to hear what is being said

17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

There are so many contradictory and competing voices today and so we must take this to heart - we ought to hear what the Spirit says to us, not all the voices.

A promise of reward to those who overcome or conquer

17 To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

The manna is referring to God's grace which He supplies. It most likely refers to the manna given during the time when the Israelites were in the desert that was taken and put into the Ark of the Covenant, hidden within the seat of God's glory (Exodus 25: 17 - 22). This manna remained fresh, unlike the manna provided daily to the Israelites. That freshness represents eternal life. But the manna here in this scripture is also 'hidden' because it most likely refers to the future glory of God's Kingdom (1 Corinthians 2:9; 1 John 3:2). And, of course, manna is about God's provision, which is in contrast to the Nicolaitans who taught and encouraged provision from idols (eating food sacrificed to idols).

The white stone appears to refer to a jewel or precious stone given as a gift from God; the approval of God. This is given to those who overcome. The “new name” is our reward for overcoming as well – we are given a new empowering as a Christian, which empowers us (Isaiah 62:2; 65:15). Abram, Sarai, Jacob all received a change of name in the Old Testament – Abraham, Sarah and Israel, respectively. The name change was given after each of these had gone through a season of persistent faith. Steady loyalty brings a new empowering from God.

A call to obey

Jesus desires for us to live in a way that is in accord with His Word – the Word of His mouth. It is by this Word that He judges us by. It's imperative, then, that we listen closely to what Jesus has to say to the church here in the scripture, and apply it to ourselves!

The call is to hold fast to the name of Jesus regardless of our circumstances. We cannot have two masters – we can't hold on to Christ and idolatry. Today we might not realise the idols that we have as it's much more subtle – but the love of money, crooked ways, adultery, and so on, are some of our modern day idols. Despite that these idols are entrenched in our culture, we are called to only trust in Jesus – He is the only way to the Father (John 14:7).

There's nothing that we cannot repent of. The love of the Father calls us out to come back to Him and follow in His ways. Jesus has set us up for victory and there are even rewards for those who overcome. These rewards motivate us to pursue a life in accordance with the Word of His mouth.

Thyatira

A church tolerating a false prophetess

Revelation 2:18-29

18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

19 “ ‘I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. 20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. 25 Only hold fast what you have until I come. 26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, 27 and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. 28 And I will give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Background

Lydia, a merchant from Acts 16:14, lived in Thyatira, which was the smallest of the seven churches these letters were written to, but it has the longest letter. It was located in Asia Minor, bordering Lydia and Mysia. It was located on the highway that linked the great river valleys of Hermus and Caicus and led to Pergamum, the capital of Asia Minor. This was strategic for the Romans who used it as a garrison town.

Despite its size, Thyatira was a commercial hub, given its location. Historical records show that it probably had more trade guilds than any other city in the Asia Minor area. Acts 16:14 shows us that it was the place where “purple” was made (Lydia was a dealer in “purple”) which was expensive clothing that only the rich could afford. Therefore, kings and nobles would travel from all around to Thyatira to buy purple.

The guild system basically ran business. You had to belong to a guild if you wanted to trade. The guilds had many requirements you had to live by, which included sharing meals which were probably sacrificed to some or other god (each guild had its own patron god). Often these meals would also include orgies. If you did not live by these requirements you would be shunned or expelled from the guild - meaning you cannot trade.

This placed many Christians - particularly craftsmen - in a predicament, given their new life in Christ. Some probably would have complied to the guild's demands, hence the stern warning in the letter.

Being a Christian meant that you could possibly lose your livelihood, which would also mean financial burden on the church. Jezebel was probably a prophetess who taught that it was okay to compromise in this area and other pagan activities.

The description of Jesus in 2:18 probably points to the bronze works in this city. Jesus uses imagery they will know and understand. The pagan deities of the city were warlike male figures armed with battle axes.

Content of the letter

A command that the letter should be written to the 'star' of the church

18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

A revelation of Jesus

18 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

Jesus sees everything - the realities of life. The symbolism of his feet refers to purity and strength, and it would have been something the church of this city would understand well, given the many craftsman there. It's all a very good description for a church suffering under a seducing spirit - Jesus comes to bring purity and strength and He sees everything.

A commendation

19 “ *I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.*

There is an encouragement here – Jesus knows all of our works. He sees everything we do and rewards us. But this means that He also sees what's not in order – which is encouraging as He knows what we need to do to overcome.

Thyatira was commended because of their works of love, faith, service and patient endurance. Paul commended the Thessalonians similarly in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 – “*Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father.*” Thyatira were growing in these works, as opposed to Ephesus which was going backwards. Thyatira was growing in these works despite their circumstances.

A criticism or rebuke

20 *But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.*

After encouraging this church in its works Jesus now shows them where they are going wrong. In Greek, the first statement is more along the lines of, *I have this one thing against you.* It was this one issue corrupting this church and it was a problem from within, not outside. They were tolerating the false prophetess, who Jesus likens to

Jezebel from the Old Testament. Jezebel was Ahab's wife (1 Kings 16; 2 Kings 9) who corrupted Israel with pagan idolatry that included feasts and orgies. She killed God's true prophets and entertained the prophets of Baal.

The problem was that this church was tolerating the spirit of Jezebel – a seducing, misleading, corrupting, deceiving spirit. It appears that a woman had come into this church and proclaimed herself to be a prophetess, saying it was God's will that they should compromise. A 'Jezebel spirit' often arrives where there is a 'king Ahab spirit' or weak leaders. This is because the leaders of this church were not dealing with her.

You had to belong to a guild if you wanted to trade in Thyatira, but these guilds would often require for you to attend their pagan feasts and idol worship (eating food sacrificed to idols) and orgies (sexual immorality). This made it difficult for Christians. It appears this false prophetess claimed that God said it was alright – they could still be Christian and be a part of the 'normal' way of life.

This has massive implications for our own Christian walk. Where do we compromise under the guise of it being 'normal'? The devil will attack a church in one way or another – whether it means a church loses its first love or falls under persecution or decides to compromise. We must be on guard to such things.

We also need to carefully test and weight prophecies (and prophets). Prophecies which encourage sin are not prophecies at all. We judge by the fruit of the lives of the prophet or prophetess and whether what they say lines up or contradicts God's Word. This is a responsibility of

the leaders and the rest of the church. But if we don't know God's Word, will we do this correctly? No. So we must know His Word.

Counsel from Jesus

21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. 25 Only hold fast what you have until I come.

Jesus makes an appeal to those who are caught in Jezebel's seduction. God always gives us time to repent. Therefore, when we compromise, we should repent!

As to those who have not compromised, they are encouraged to not give up but hold on.

Lastly, the so-called 'deep truths' refer to philosophies / theologies / ideas that sounded as if you would be more 'spiritual' if you believed and practiced them. This is relevant for us as well. There are many ideas out there that come under the guise of being 'spiritual' and 'deep' and so forth. We see these from the many self-made gurus - TV show hosts, celebrities, motivational speakers, respected authors, and the like. But they are lies that will trip us up. We follow God's Word

alone – we do not add a little bit of this or that to God's Word.

A challenge to hear what is being said

29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

We must hear the voice of God if we are going to have any kind of future. This requires discipline and time, but we must not neglect it. Rather, we ought to celebrate it! God speaks to you! Listen to Him – what is He saying? Do it.

A promise of reward to those who overcome or conquer

26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, 27 and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. 28 And I will give him the morning star.

God provides wonderful promises to those who stand firm in Jesus – they will even affect nations for the Lord. If they would defeat Satan in the place where they are, God would honour them to defeat Satan even more powerfully ('with a rod of iron') in other places in the world – breaking the wicked influence of Satan wherever it is. Their work is something all Christians will share in. God exalts those who humble themselves and if they overcome they will share in Jesus' overcoming.

If they resist Jezebel then the 'morning star' will rise. The morning star is the planet Venus – visible in the early morning just as night time is

ending. It means that the great rule of Jesus will appear in their lives and in the life of their church. The same is true for us.

A call to obey

There are several challenges here that we must obey:

- Nothing escapes Jesus' piercing vision - He sees everything and knows the thoughts of our heart. We are called to live in His holiness - flames of fire and burnished bronze - referring to the purity we can have in Jesus.
- Leaders must deal with a 'Jezebel' - manipulation and seduction. This sort of thing flourishes when there is an 'Ahab' leader (selfish and weak, without conviction). Know the scriptures and you will know what is not God's voice. If you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything.
- Jesus desires that every church, and every person in every church, overcomes. He sets us up for victory and shows us how we can burn even brighter. He holds out eternal rewards for us which motivate us to never settle for the temporal pleasures of this temporal life but to overcome and enjoy his eternal pleasures.

Sardis

A church in danger of dying

Revelation 3:1-6:

1 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “ ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. 4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Background

Sardis was a fortified city under a spur of Mount Timulus in the Hermes valley. It was therefore impregnable as the capital of the kingdom of Lydia. It features in many epic battles and surprise attacks, like one in 549 BC by the Medo-Persians and 214 BC by the Romans. Jesus's phrase, “*I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief*” (3:3) would have been quite relevant for this church.

It was also very well known for its arts and crafts and carpet industry and was situated on an important trade route. The chief trade was making and dyeing woolen garments. Again, when Jesus speaks of those who have soiled their clothes (3:4) it would have been significant to them.

Sardis experienced a great earthquake in 17 AD which completely ruined it. The emperor did rebuild it but it never returned to its former glory. But in its peak, "Sardis" actually became a word used to signify wealth. But the city was also known for its debauchery and the Christians weren't clean in this department either - hence the letter saying that only a 'few' had not 'soiled their garments.'

The church in Sardis seemed to be resting on its past reputation - much like the whole city. It was, quite simply, a dead church. There's no mention of persecution or heresy here - it seems its problem was a 'dry rot' from within.

Content of the letter

A command that the letter should be written to the 'star' of the church

1 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write:

Jesus is always speaking. Are we listening?

A revelation of Jesus

1 The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

This is written to a church that is dying and is in danger of its lamp going completely out. Jesus reveals himself to this church as the one who holds out the life of God to them - who has the sevenfold spirit of God. He holds leadership in his hand (the seven stars) and this also means that the leaders were not living under the guidance of Jesus but just doing their own thing.

A commendation

4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

Despite what was going on there was a remnant. These were living cleanly in the righteousness of God.

A criticism or rebuke

1 I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

They had the outward appearance of life but were inwardly dead. We can do this all the time - having the outward appearance of religion, but having no inward life at all. Perhaps we attend church, worship, sit and listen to the preaching, and smile to everyone, but we have no relationship with God - we are just 'playing church'. Religion without relationship; Christianity without conviction.

Counsel from Jesus

2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

Jesus' counsel is simple: *Wake up!* Here is how you can burn brightly again - wake up and strengthen what is about to die. Go back to your first commitment and love and remember what you received and heard.

What did you first receive and hear? God's whispers of love; His call to an intimate and deep; relationship; His resurrection life; His Gospel of grace.

Keep what you received and heard - don't let apathy, lukewarmness and hypocrisy steal it. Guard your relationship with God fiercely. This is for the church and for those in the church and will require repentance from the church and those in it. But if we do not repent, Jesus Himself will come against us. Don't 'move on' from the Gospel but always remember it. Find ways to keep reminding yourself of it!

A challenge to hear what is being said

6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The common advice to all the churches is to hear. So listen to the Spirit, understand what's being said, and live accordingly.

A promise of reward to those who overcome or conquer

5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

Instead of having dirty garments we can have white garments - the righteousness of Jesus. This is all about a relationship with Him. We belong to Jesus - our names are in His book of life!

A call to obey

What do we need to apply here?

- Get serious with God.
- Be honest and take stock of your life
- If you are dying inside or dead, wake up!
- Repent - change the direction you're going
- Live in deep intimacy with God

Philadelphia

A church with opportunity

Revelation 3:7-13

7 *“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.*

8 *“‘I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. 11 I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’*

Background

Philadelphia means 'brotherly love'. It got this name from its founder, Attalus II, who was called 'Philadelphus' (meaning 'brother lover') in 159 BC. He got this nickname because of his loyalty to his brother.

It was part of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and lay under Mount Tmolus on a fertile tract of plateau country, opening into the Hermes Valley. The postal road ran alongside it. Symbolically it was seen as the 'open door' into the region from where it got its wealth - similarly, the church is seen as an 'open door' for the Gospel (Revelation 3:8 and 2 Corinthians 2:12).

Like Sardis, Philadelphia suffered a devastating earthquake in 17AD. Many earthquakes hit the region afterwards as well - so much so that people began to rather live in tents. Jesus speaking of being a 'pillar' in God's sanctuary and that those who overcome 'would never again leave' His sanctuary therefore would have carried great significance to the believers there.

The Philadelphian church was poor and small but enjoyed great doors of opportunity for the Gospel. Philadelphia was chosen as a city to teach Greco-Asian culture and language in the region.

Jesus promises a 'new name' which is significant, because throughout history this city has been called many names.

- PHILADELPHIA by Attalus II
- NEOCAESAREA in gratitude to Tiberius for his earthquake relief in 17 AD
- FLAVIA under the rule of Vespian, another Roman emperor
- NEOKOROS (or Temple Warden) 211 AD with establishment of the Emperor cult
- LITTLE ATHENS because of the proliferation of festivals and

- pagan cults
- ALASEHIR today, as a city in Asiatic Turkey.

There was material prosperity due to the fertile lands of the region. There was also vine growing, which is why the Greek god of produce and wine, Dionysus, was worshipped there quite prominently. The city also had a large reputation for its pagan worship and festivals - and despite all this, the church there, as small as it was, stood. Throughout history the Christian witness there has continued to stand - withstanding Moslem invasion and pressure under Turkey. It was in 1392 that the Seljuk Turks finally massacred the Christians, but up until that time it had stood.

Content of the letter

A command that the letter should be written to the 'star' of the church

7 "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write

A revelation of Jesus

7 The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

Jesus is the head of the church and is utterly sovereign. We must remember his character - He is Holy; He is true; He will never do any

evil; He will never deceive; He will always be faithful. Jesus has the key to the churches.

The picture-language here is taken from Isaiah 22:22 - “*And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.*” Jesus has the power to open and close opportunity to serve Him and in His Kingdom. If we obey Him faithfully He will open up these opportunities - faithfulness opens doors.

A commendation

8 “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. 11 I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

Even though they were a weak church without any influence, they were faithful and committed, and Jesus commends them for this.

A criticism or rebuke

As with Smyrna, Jesus has no rebuke for Philadelphia.

Counsel from Jesus

7 The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. 8 "I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. 11 I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

- 3:7 - Jesus leads us to effective ministry, closing doors that need to be closed, and opening doors that need to be opened. No one can resist.
- 3:8 - God is a God of opportunity and power. For every believer and every church, God opens doors of great opportunity! See Corinthians 16:9; Colossians 4:3.
- 3:9 - God will deal with those who oppose us. For the Jews that were persecuting them, Jesus would bring them to salvation!
- 3:10 - God keeps us. If we are in Him, He protects us from judgment. NOTE: This is not a scripture to back up the pre-tribulation rapture theory. The scripture cannot mean something different than it meant to it's original audience!

- 3:11 - We are to be encouraged with the hope that Jesus IS coming soon! We are called to hold on to our faith and good works, because we will be rewarded. Don't allow anything to take our rewards away, and use the opportunities He provides, with His power.

A challenge to hear what is being said

13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

A promise of reward to those who overcome or conquer

12 The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

To those who conquer (overcome) Jesus will make them a pillar in His temple. The people of Philadelphia lived in constant fear of earthquakes and often, after an earthquake, the only parts of a city left standing would be strong pillars. Pillars were also erected to honour priests or faithful state servants. We can see the picture language being used here - Jesus promises that they will stand regardless of what comes, and that they will be honoured. Also, Jesus will never leave His temple!

The city had many names. Christ will write many names on us - the

name of the Father; the name of the new Jerusalem (the name of His people); and His own new name for us personally. When the letter was written the city was still to bear many new names - this would have served as a source of encouragement for the future as well.

A call to obey

- No matter what - and no matter our size or influence - we are called to keep His word and not deny His name.
- Patient endurance is our default, through every season. We take ground by consistently plodding. This church lasted over 1300 years as a Christian witness, even in during the initial Moslem invasion!
- There is always great promise in serving God: -
 - **Opportunities.** There are always great doors of opportunity, no matter how small and insignificant we are. Faithfulness opens those doors. We are to use the opportunity God gives with the power He provides.
 - **Success** in the witness of our enemies.
 - **Protection.** (3:10) *Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.* Christians who endure to the end of whatever trial they are going through will find that they will be safe.

- Jesus rewards those who endure through all the troubles that come.

Laodicea

A church that was lukewarm

Revelation 3:14-22:

14 *“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.*

15 *“ ‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. 21 The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ”*

Background

Laodicia was founded in the 3rd century BC by Seleucid Antiochus II, a king of the ancient kingdom of Lydia. His wife's name was Laodicea.

The city was steeped in Greek culture and learning and lay on a very important trade route connecting Ephesus and Miletus, on the road to the capital, Pergamum. It also benefited from the fertile land of the Lycos valley which surrounded it. It was well known for its carpets and glossy black wool garments.

It became an important banking capital and enjoyed tremendous prosperity - so much so that when it also suffered an earthquake in 17AD, it turned down help from the Roman government as it didn't need it. The Laodicean banks financed everything the city needed.

The city was also known for manufacturing an eye salve, collyrium. When Jesus urges the church to buy salve to anoint their eyes, this would have been significant for them. Also, the city didn't have a permanent supply of water, so it piped water in from Colossae and Hierapolis. The former provided hot waters from its hot springs, the latter cold water from the melted snow in the mountains. But when it got to Laodicia it was lukewarm and laden with soda ash, inducing vomiting (useful as an emetic). Note how the church was rebuked for being 'lukewarm' and needing to be vomited out of Jesus' mouth.

Laodicia had found quick success and grew quickly. Easy wealth meant compromise and worldliness in the community. Laodicians were proud of their wealth and, like the city, the church there felt it had need of nothing (3:17). But Jesus shows them their poverty - they needed gold, white clothes, and eye salve from the Lord - which would be more effective than anything their bankers, merchants or physicians could give them. The church in Laodicia had actually closed the door on their true provider (3:20).

Interestingly, the church was not accused of abandoning the faith, being immoral, or engaging in idolatry. It didn't suffer persecution either. But the letter is actually the most grave compared to the other churches - they were full of self-satisfaction and pride. They neglected fellowship with Jesus - so much so that He was standing outside the church!

This is the last of the seven letters and represents a church that seems to have been quite disappointing. Laodicia is mentioned in Colossians 4:16 as well and in 361, a council was held there to establish the New Testament canon. Perhaps they listened to Jesus?

Content of the letter

A command that the letter should be written to the 'star' of the church

14 And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write...

A revelation of Jesus

14 The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

Jesus reveals himself using three phrases here:

1. The Amen - He is the embodiment of the faithfulness, and truthfulness, of God. (See Isaiah 65:16; John 14:6). He is the one who

executes God's purposes. A quote by Merrill C. Tenney best describes Jesus as *the Amen* - "*Christ is the seal of God's revealed truth, the finality of all that the Father has spoken. Beyond Him, God has nothing more to say to man.*" This contrasts with the attitude of the Laodicean church.

2. *The faithful and true witness* - Jesus has no pretense and His message is filled with no pretense. Again, this contrasts with the Laodicean church.

3. *The ruler of God's creation* - Jesus is the beginner and principle source of creation (Colossians 1:15-18; John 1:3,10). The Laodiceans would do well to remember this. He is the source of life and therefore the real, true, provision of all.

These three revelations of Christ show the pre-eminence of Jesus.

A commendation

There was no commendation for this church. That is sad!

A criticism or rebuke

15 " 'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Jesus says that they were so lukewarm that it was actually sickening.

They were deceived about their own importance and provision. There are few places in the New Testament where anyone gets a rebuke as severe as this. Jesus says He will spit (vomit) them out of his mouth! (3:16.)

Jesus knows their deeds. He knows everything. Many times we are blind to what we are actually doing. He says they were lukewarm - hot water from hot springs is healing; cold water from the mountains is refreshing. Jesus wants them to be one or the other, but they are neither. Their faith and spiritual life had become apathetic, to the point it was no longer even tolerable. The Laodiceans seemed to be very similar to the Pharisees (Luke 16:15) who also thought themselves in a good place and in need of nothing. Jesus provides five aspects of this condition:

- wretched
- pitiable
- poor
- blind
- naked

All in stark contrast to the high opinion they had of themselves!

Counsel from Jesus

18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to

anoint your eyes, so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Counseling them to 'buy' from Him is significant - only Jesus has true treasure and the words of eternal life (1 John 6:68). To 'buy' is to find the priceless treasure in Matthew 13:44 - selling all we have so we can attain it. This speaks of self-surrender and giving up on all other worthless pursuits.

Jesus gives time to repent - He counsels them to buy:

1. Gold refined in the fire - tested and purified, where God's Word has gripped a heart.

2. White clothes to wear - Jesus' robe of righteousness, covering the shame of our sin (Isaiah 61:10). Jesus wants purity of heart.

3. Salve to put on the eyes - an offer of spiritual vision to cure spiritual blindness. There is more to Christianity to personal wealth. (Acts 1:8; Matt 28:18-20.)

Jesus explains why He is dealing with the Laodiceans so harshly in **verse 19a**, saying, "those I love I reprove and discipline." If Jesus left us to our own it would be like abandoning a baby! No, He disciplines because of love like a loving father with his children (Hebrews 12:6).

He encourages them in **verse 19b** to be earnest and repent. 'Earnest' can be translated as 'zealous'. We are not just called to repent but also be zealous - and in so doing become the passionate Christians we ought to be.

Verse 20 speaks of Jesus standing outside the church! He is knocking at the door with all the gentleness, love and power of the Gospel, seeking to win His people. He moves from His throne (3:21) to ask a beggar (3:17) to receive Him. He comes to visit!

The tense of this scripture in the original Greek implies that Jesus stands and knocks, waiting for a reply and not rushing off. He lingers. He calls out. We should open the door and let Him come in!

“I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” - this is a fantastic picture of the relationship Jesus wants to have with every single person. It refers to an evening meal - a time of fellowship and joy; deep and meaningful and without rushing. A devoted way of life (Acts 2:42).

A challenge to hear what is being said

22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

A promise of reward to those who overcome or conquer

21 The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

The dining and fellowship which began in 3:20 is now consummated in 3:21 - He invites us now to share in His throne in the age to come (Revelation 20:4-6; Revelation 22:15).

A call to obey

- We can learn from the Laodicean's ever worsening condition
 - You are neither cold nor hot
 - You are lukewarm
 - You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and shamefully naked, even though you say you are rich, you have prospered, and you have need nothing. And don't realise it!!!
 - Jesus is standing on the outside and knocking!
- Jesus' counsel
 - We need to buy from Him
 - Gold refined in fire - we need to be rich toward Him
 - White garments - that cover our shameful nakedness
 - Salve to anoint your eyes - spiritual vision again
 - Those whom He loves, He reproves and disciplines
 - So be zealous and repent
 - When He knocks and calls out
 - Hear His voice
 - Open the door
 - Eat the evening meal together - enjoy the intimacy!

- This invite is to anyone!

WHAT HAVE I BEEN SAVED INTO?

Summarising the letters

Jesus is amongst the lampstands, omni-present, everywhere all the time, and we've been given this revelation so we can understand what He is doing. In Romans 8:34 it says He is interceding for us. Think of the hardship of life and the challenges we face and, even when we forget, He is still interceding. He is walking amongst the lampstands, the churches, and in those churches walking amongst the people. He is involved with our lives.

These seven letters to the churches are a vivid reminder of His love. He is saying: How can we get that flame inside you to burn brighter? How can He tend the vine that it can produce more fruit? He is busy with us. The best response we can have to this is, "Lord, have your way."

We need to challenge ourselves. We need to challenge our status quo, our lethargy, our luke-warmness. We need to be alive with the gospel and front footed. We need Him, His anointing, and His direction.

We like doing things our way, but we must realise that we need to keep giving in to his will. We like our comfort and plan most things around this, but must realise that serving Him requires sacrifice. As He walks among the lamp-stands He works the flame in us, fills the oil and trims the wick – serving Him requires sacrifice.

We like our opinion, but we must bow to His more and more,

We like it when we are at the centre. As soon as people talk about

themselves it becomes boring – we prefer it when people are talking about us. Even if we know this kind of attitude is dangerous, we trap ourselves, and we find ourselves in dead ends with a fruitless Christianity. But Jesus isn't going to let go of dealing with us until He gets every one of us where He wants us.

He says: "I know your works." He knows your works and your heart. He is walking among the lampstands and can see those places in us where it really matters. He is interested in the condition of your heart and what needs to change.

What we are saved into is more important than what we are saved out of. What we have been saved into is far more exciting than the things of the past. We need to increasingly celebrate the Kingdom values. We need to celebrate what we have been saved into and look at these. At times we'll need to consolidate these.

Matthew 28: 19-20

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

We have been commissioned to go into all nations and we need to make disciples of all people, and to mobilise them and see them released into ministry. It is not about us pitching up front – every one of us has great potential. We need to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12) – this doesn't mean we work *for* our salvation, it means we work *out* our salvation. Jesus is evaluating us so we can move into what He has for us.

In Acts 6 there was tremendous growth in the church – so much so that the ministry of God was beginning to take second place due to administrative problems. So they needed to make adjustments. Adjustments are necessary – we shouldn't run from them. They are a normal part of this Christian life. What is abnormal, however, is when we don't make adjustments.

Acts 2:42

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Ask the Father to help you display those kingdom values. Pick up God's heart-beat, purpose and desire for your life. When you stop working out your salvation (Philippians 2:12) you go backwards. God shows us through the seven letters to these churches how we can do a spiritual audit. We must get back to Kingdom values and flourish. He shows us here how we can get back to a relationship with the Holy Spirit, which is crucial.

God is building His Church His way. It's not about us and our comfort. It's when He builds the Church His way that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. But we love to do things our way and therefore give the enemy opportunities to make a mess of things.

How does Jesus build His church?

1. Through leaders. We need to train more leaders to come through – not live for our ourselves! (Ephesians 4:11.) Therefore, we must live our church life in a way where we are bringing through more leaders!

2. Through the devoted life of meeting together, prayer, breaking bread and commitment to the Word of God (Acts 2:42)

3. Through the continued work of the Holy Spirit - listening to what He is saying to the churches, to your local church, and to you.

Jesus is amongst the lampstands. He challenges our hearts. There's no condemnation whatsoever, but let's get on board with what He is doing in this Gospel Age.

Scene 2: The Seven Seals

A VISION OF GOD'S POWER

“Whenever in history the church is faithful to its calling and bears testimony concerning the truth, tribulation is bound to follow. Apart even from this fact the church is in the world and accordingly it suffers along with the world. Children of God do not escape the horrors of war, famine and pestilence. The church needs these tribulations. It needs both the direct antagonism of the world and participation in the common woes that pertain to this earthly life as a result of sin. The church too is sinful. It's in constant need of purification and sanctification. These tribulations therefore, are employed by our Lord as an instrument of our own spiritual advancement. We see God's footstool, let us not forget His throne.” - William Hendrickson, More than Conquerers.

We are sinful. We must never forget this. And we are in constant need of God's power to sanctify us.

In these next two chapters, Revelation 4 and 5, we will see God's throne. All things work together for good, but do we really believe this? Sometimes we speak and act as if the control of events and the destiny of the world rests in the hands of men and not in the hands of God. These next two chapters will give us the needed correction and bring us a vision of the one on the throne who rules the universe. In the midst of the trial and tribulation we experience, may our gaze be toward the one who is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The scene opens up with John getting a heavenly perspective of what's happening.

Revelation 4

*1 After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." 2 At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. 3 And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. 4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. 5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings*ⁿ¹ and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, 6 and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.*

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

*"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!"*

9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

That song is known as the song of creation. It's reminding us that God is the creator and therefore the all-powerful One. It's also reminding us that heaven is our home. If you were a Christian at the time this letter was written, waiting in the Colosseum holding cell, hearing the wild animals tearing your Christian friends and family apart and waiting for your turn, this became real to you. You thanked your Father in heaven that this isn't all there is. We are citizens of that Kingdom and aliens in this world. We must never forget this. Suffering will come but this isn't all there is - heaven is our home!

Revelation 5:

1 Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. 2 And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" 3 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, 4 and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 5 And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the

Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Jesus died and conquered. He can unfold history and He is in charge.

6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. 8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying,

*“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for
God from every tribe and language and people and nation,
10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”*

See how worship happens at each event and revelation. We are called to worship Him. So here we have the song of salvation and we can see that this Word is written to every tribe, people, nation and tongue. The Gospel is for all.

But there is also something else we can see here. Most interpretations of Revelation that try and tie the book up to historic events tend to only interpret things from a European or American perspective. But

you can't apply those interpretations to China or Africa because it's all European or American history. That should immediately make us question the interpretation because the Gospel is for all and this book should therefore apply to all.

11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!"

We can so easily become complacent and need special events to get us excited. But we can be spontaneous and full of praise. We need the Lord to revive us. If this is what it's like in heaven, what are we doing here? Don't we pray 'may your will be done in heaven and earth'?

13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!" 14 And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshipped.

If you were a first century Christian and waiting in your holding cell for your turn to be fed to the animals you might have said to yourself, "If God is a God of love, this doesn't make sense." But we see here that there is a greater plan. You would be encouraged by this. So be encouraged by this today. God does not plan the hurt and pain of any person but we're in a fallen world with fallen systems and we have an enemy, the devil, who opposes us. But yet in the first century when

Christians were being fed to animals, boiled or burned alive, with each Caesar basically competed with the other in terms of how badly they could hurt the Christians, the Gospel grew the most. But it's when Christianity became the State religion that it fell into its darkest time. That turned out to be the greater deception.

Jesus is in charge. It doesn't matter how bad it looks or how many megalomaniacs rise to power and how many men pull the strings of the systems of this world, there is one who rules over it all – Jesus. The scroll here represents the history of mankind and only He is worthy to open it because He paid the price.

Why do believers have bad things happen to them? Because bad things happen to everyone. We're not exempt from bad things. God doesn't break arms to teach a lesson but heals in the midst of all this. We have to hold things in tension. There are things happening in this world that are inexplicable but heaven is our home.

There will also be beautiful purple patches for the Gospel where we enjoy revival and people getting saved. The key issue is that the Gospel will prevail in good or bad times. And it must be preached to all the world. Many preachers today preach comfort. But it's about serving Him, not us, even at great expense and great discomfort.

We see in heaven here. There were twenty four elders on thrones and commentators believe that these represent the church, the believers. See, we surround God in heaven. That's our place!

The four creatures represent creation. The chief among the wild animals, domestic animals, man, the eagle. So you have all of creation

surrounding the throne. All the believers are there in the presence of the Lord, where we belong.

We see heaven is full of colour – emerald rainbow, gemstones everywhere, a sea of glass. This is all telling us that it has things we've never seen before.

And then Jesus says that He will intervene. And He did at the first coming. As much as the secularists and atheists and so on would not like to admit, Jesus changed history – so much so that we even changed our calendar to match his birth.

Final revelations we see of heaven here:

- A place where the Glory of God is obvious.
- A place of the entire people of God, where we belong. There's no half-way house for us.
- A place of ultimate peace, purity and power.
- Heaven worships God for His creation and salvation

Chapter 5 reveals Jesus in history

- Only He is able to bring about God's plans and purposes
- He is in charge, He reigns
- He is working it out
- He is both Lion and Lamb.

So we need not fear in times of trial and tribulation because Jesus is in charge. But we must know that we are ready for his second coming. We can know that by believing in Jesus. And the only time we can do

that is now because when Jesus comes back there will be no more opportunity.

PATTERNS OF HISTORY

As Jesus opens these seals He is going to show us the patterns of history from between when this letter was written to the second coming. He was telling them what to expect then and He is telling us what to expect today and what we can expect in the future. History has a pattern to it - the same thing happens again and again.

At the beginning we said that Revelation is like a spiral. It shows us different perspectives - scenes - of the same revelation, spiralling to a climax. This section, like all of Revelation, has been sensationalised to the place where we let world history interpret scripture instead of the other way around. We're actually meant to let scripture interpret history for us like we let scripture interpret everything else for us. The Holy Spirit interprets history, not the other way around.

The seals, trumpets, bowls of wrath and similar symbols refer not to specific events or details of history but to principles, waves, flows and patterns of human conduct and divine moral government, operating throughout the history of the world until we get to the end.

We're also going to look at the Four Horses of the Apocalypse. People have made movies about this and many have said that these represent the First World War, the Second World War and so on. They've tied other great historical events into these - usually, again, only from a European or American perspective. But the Four Horses are actually there to show us about the rhythms that we will all be busy with until we die. You can apply this personally as well as the church. Those rhythms are basically summarised in this way: when the Gospel comes into your life you will have tribulation. When you preach the Gospel

you will have tribulation. You don't have to pray for tribulation - it's a guarantee. As good as the good news is the systems of this world are arranged against the preaching of it. The enemy wants to extinguish all fire and light and wants us to live in darkness.

That's why the Gospel went through the dark ages - the devil first came against it through massive persecution where Christians were killed in the most despicable ways. The Emperor Nero used to pour oil and wax over the Christians and set them alight, using their burning bodies as lamps for a track in his garden so he could ride his chariot on the track. Others were boiled alive while others were put into arenas to be eaten by wild animals; and still others were run through with the sword, beheaded, or crucified. But the Gospel spread like wildfire. That's what happens - when the church is martyred the Gospel spreads.

The enemy is not trying to destroy the Muslim message or Hinduism. Christians are the ones dying today and God uses the martyrs to get the Gospel out.

It was when Christianity became the State religion - initiated by the Emperor Constantine - that we were put into rows and building and idolatry crept in, with statues of Mary and Jesus and Saints and so on. Eventually the Word of God was taken out of people's hands and a system of religion replaced it. This was the church's darkest time. But the Reformation came and if it hadn't, the fire of God may have been extinguished. But history is in God's hands and the Spirit of God cannot be put out.

When Elijah took on the Baal priests in the Old Testament (scripture)

he thought he was the only one who still worshipped Yahweh but God told him that he had a cave full of worshippers. Likewise, throughout the dark ages there was still a witness and then the Spirit of God moved and Luther got this revelation of justification by faith and the fire spread again.

But guess what? Since the Reformation oppression and opposition has come again and again. What are the giants today that oppose the Gospel? Materialism. Self-satisfaction. The idea that clothes and cars and houses and all that means you're taken care of. Those are not signs of success. The New Age movement has also permeated our society. These days we have this strange mix between Christian ideas and Pagan ones. We approach God in esoteric ways - crystals, auras, etc. And of course there is Islam. These are the giants we're facing and they're opposing Christianity and we will go through the fire of martyrdom again. There are those dying today for the sake of the Gospel.

1 Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" 2 And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" 4 And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature

say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!"

In other words there will only be enough wheat for one person for a day's wage. So it's saying it will be difficult. Secondly, the three quarts of barley is something you couldn't even feed your family on, for a day's wage. The oil and wine, however, refers to people who have plenty but don't care about those who have none. This is the world today, isn't it? Isn't it also just how it's always been?

7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 8 And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

The pale colour here, in the original Greek, is actually the colour of a corpse. Hades always follows death because as death comes the enemy wants you in hell. But you can only escape that through Jesus. Sword, famine, pestilence and the wild beasts refer to Old Testament terms of judgement that came against Israel. These things will all come to try and destroy the Gospel as well. The enemy not only wants to wipe the Gospel out but us, who are created in the image of God.

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness

they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

The white robe represents our righteousness and the promise of heaven. Can you see what's been said here? The fact that during this tribulation there will be martyrs is for the sake of new believers. In other words, God allows martyrdom for the sake of bringing more in.

Jesus died so that humanity can be born again. He is saying here that He wants to stop the suffering but at the same time there are still more people that need to be born again. He is asking - who will stand up and shoulder the responsibility? Don't give up - find the people that still need to hear. But there's a limit to the number of martyrs, so God doesn't rejoice and let it go on forever. However, the point is, since Christ died for the sake of our being born again then we ought to see ourselves as a seed too, being prepared to die so that others can be born again.

This is a hard message. But it's a real message because there's a world that's waiting to be reached with the Gospel. Jesus is giving us a perspective of suffering here. Often we think successful Christianity is when we're not having trouble but that's not true. It's the Gospel of Jesus going out that defines successful Christianity. God looks at our churches in this light.

But there's a crowd of millions of the bride of Christ here. That's what we're living for, our final rest.

12 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14 The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Notice the phrase used here – the “wrath of the Lamb”. This is the Lamb who humbly submitted himself to the systems and evil and viciousness of this world; like a Lamb to the slaughter. But there will be a time at the Great White Throne where we will see the wrath of this Lamb. This is such an interesting picture – you never see a wrathful lamb in nature. You don't find a wolf hiding behind a bush because an angry lamb is coming past. So this is important imagery – for many Jesus is sweet and wonderful and really just a nice guy who is going to let everyone into heaven and never judges anyone at any time. He is just a big grandpa or a Father Christmas. But that's not the truth. On that day when He comes again the Lamb will be full of wrath – so much so that the leaders of this world who think that everything is in their

hands are going to rather wish that Mount Everest would fall and them than they face this Lamb.

Of course, in chapter 7 we'll see that there's no wrath for those in Christ. For us our Lion of Judah is going to roar and we're going to come into the victory that is ours and the eternity that is ours. For us our judgement is already decided and we will never stand condemned. And all people can be where we are today if they trust in Jesus.

The sixth seal occurs and just before we see Jesus wrapping it up with the seventh seal there is an interlude and we're given a vision of the multitude that have come to know Christ. That's what Chapter 7 is about.

Revelation 7

1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."

Here we see that the earth cannot be destroyed until the full number of believers has come in.

4 And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

*5 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,
12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,
12,000 from the tribe of Gad,
6 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,
12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,
12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,
7 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,
12,000 from the tribe of Levi,
12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,
8 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,
12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,
12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.*

This is not the Jehovah's Witness chapter. The 144,000 is figurative! Here's what it means: 12 x 12 is 144. 144 x 1,000 is 144,000. There are twelve tribes of Israel and twelve disciples, representative of the Old Testament tribes. Times it by 1,000 and you get a number that represents multitudes (that is how the imagery would have been understood at the time). See, the very next verse explains it:

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Those who think that God is only going to save 144,000 people, literally, better start tithing big time if they want to make it! Who can make it? No, the scripture means 'multitudes' and we are saved freely

by His grace. God is not coming back for an insignificant little group of people crying out to be raptured and saved from this world. No, it's a great multitude - let's go make them! Let's go preach the Gospel!

11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, 12 saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

3 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

*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 **shelter them** with his presence.*

16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.

17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

God is saying that all of this has a purpose - all this suffering is going to produce multitudes of believers.

The Seventh Seal and the Golden Censer

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

So now we reach the seventh seal, the climax and the end. The King judges and all sit silent.

So let us look at each of the seals:

First seal

This is the white horse. It represents the Gospel going out with a two edged sword. He is going to conquer and carry on conquering until the end.

Second seal

This is the second horse - bright and fiery red. It was given a great sword. It's actually a short sword in the original Greek, a sword that was used for sacrifice. The first persecution that comes up against Christians is direct and violent. Those who preach it will be sacrificed. Today there are more Christians than you realise that are sacrificed for the Gospel - it just doesn't make our mainstream news channels.

Third seal

This is the black horse, representing economic scarcity and financial struggle because of the Gospel. This is something we will always face.

Ephesians 3:20,21 says that God is able to do far more abundantly than we ask or think and we know that God will supply every single cent we need to advance the Gospel. But there's a difference here. These days people believe God to supply everything they need for their comfort but actually God finances the Gospel going out. He will supply all your needs for the sake of the Gospel but he is not about a Prosperity Gospel.

Fourth seal

This is a pale horse that also has a sword – a long sword used for war. This is about pestilence and disease that hits this planet and is used by the enemy to come against us. This is an attack on humanity as a whole but is about preventing the Gospel going out.

Fifth seal

Here we see those who were slain for the Gospel. It ties into the previous seals because these are people affected by the horses. But there are still multitudes to reach!

Sixth seal

This is just before the end where the known universe begins to crumble and the terror of man is seen. This is when the final end will come but on our way there God is also dispensing judgement. We've seen many systems crumble and fall apart that have come up against God. Don't be surprised if those systems that control the world today fall apart. Right now materialism and capitalism is falling apart. No system will last and all will bow the knee.

These six seals are patterns of history – we see them time and again. The horses don't represent events but patterns.

Seventh seal

God wraps it all up. Jesus judges all. Then everything will move to the new heavens and new earth but before that's explained in detail we begin to see everything from another perspective again – this time in the form of the seven trumpets.

Scene 3: The Seven Trumpets

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

For those who have been given much, much is required (Luke 12:48). Often Christianity is preached from the point of view of its wonderful privilege, but we have the privileges we do so that we can fulfil what God has called us to.

We don't want to see the majority of people being sent into a Christ-less eternity in the lake of fire. This is a reality we have to deal with.

Revelation 8:2

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

The trumpets represent sounds of warning. The seals gave us a closer view of things from the believer's point of view but now the trumpets show us things from the unbeliever's point of view. It's a warning to all to put their faith in Christ.

3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

In the previous scene we were told about the blood of the martyrs on the altar. The martyrs cried out to God and asked: "How long before the end comes?" God said, "I've given you a robe of righteousness."

But now on that same altar there is incense that rises up from it as smoke. This represents the intercession of Christ mixed with our prayers. We pray and he prays – it works together. We are encouraged to see how important prayer actually is.

5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

The prayers reached God and now through these trumpets He is going to answer the prayers of the saints. Are we puppets and is this just a big ant farm? A human experiment? No, God is saying we change history by our prayers. Many of us are saved as a result of prayer. As Christians we look at life through prayer. Many times we are faced with impossibilities, sickness, hurt and pain, and people we love not being saved, but God can do anything. Can some of today's most wicked people be saved? Yes, if we would pray. Here we see that our response to God is prayer to endure and see history change.

And enduring is key. Sometimes things don't change and we need to endure through them. But God is just, He will reward each and every one of us for our endurance. If you die as a martyr you will find great reward in heaven. And despite what people do to us we pray that they, and many more, will come to know Jesus as Lord and saviour.

How did the iron curtain fall? Through a political decision? How did South Africa change from Apartheid into a democracy? People were considered second class or animals because of the colour of their skin. Was it politics? Economics? What saved us from that?

And how will things change today? Our oppression today comes from this system of materialism, with big companies ruling and economics defining our lives. Where marriages are broken up and people are seen as nothing else but robots and labour to keep the system going. And what is going to change all the people courting communism as an alternative?

Evil systems have come and gone. It doesn't matter how big the system is that rules. Peasants who lives under the Feudal system, where they lived like slaves, thought it would exist forever. But it didn't. What changed it?

Prayer. Our call is not to shout and scream and protest, but to pray and continue with the mission of God. It's God that rules history. All systems will crash and burn, but His throne is forever.

Go through the book of Luke and see how Jesus' prayer life is interspersed through it. Look at Acts and how often the apostles go to the place of prayer. Acts 2:42 tells us that the early church devoted itself to prayer. So here in the book of Revelation we see God encouraging us to handle life through prayer. We don't lose our hope and vision of the future, our joy and faith, regardless of the circumstances. God has given us prayer as a gift. Today many of us are trapped in prisons of despair and doubt and confusion and fear of the future. What must we do? We must pray. In prayer we interact with the king of the universe. As his grace starts to fill us, his love overwhelmed us, and our hearts become soft. In prayer we get a heavenly perspective and we begin to deal with issues, and things change. You change. From glory to glory.

As we handle the big affairs of the universe God has given us a partnership with him and our part is to pray. We pray that all these systems that oppress people fall. This isn't Christian extremism where we go and shoot people and have a crusade. Prayer is our weapon. God loves people and we will die in the process of preaching the Gospel.

We need to have prayer as a daily devotion and lifestyle. It's an all-day practice. And we also need to make prayer a congregational practice. We see how Jesus and the disciples went regularly to congregational prayer all through the Gospel accounts and Acts. In fact, it was every day. But only about 25 percent of the church comes to congregational prayer. We have to pray together to be effective in this Gospel Age and see the systems of this world change. Too many of us say we don't have the time for that and we ask how congregational prayer benefits ourselves. But it's in our prayer times together that we take up our swords and fight for the sake of oppressed and lost. Our city will not change until we keep it in prayer, asking God for revival.

Some of us have our own agendas and corporate prayer doesn't fit into our plans. But we cannot afford not to pray. Christ at times said he was going to pray all night. So prayer has to have all these characteristics to it. One of the phrases we see in the gospel accounts is this one: "As usual" Jesus went to pray. "As usual" Paul, Peter and John went to the place to pray. It should be "as usual" for us too.

These trumpets show us that God holds all of creation together. He knows every thorn on a thorn tree. We can't reduce a sovereign god to our understanding or thinking. He is sovereign, loving and just. What is the purpose of these dangers and trumpets being blown, and this

turmoil in the air and water etc.? It's the same as the purpose of this Gospel Age. It's so that lost people would be saved.

Do you know that the agenda for you today is not your comfort? Sure, God loves us and wants to bless us abundantly - but being ready for the second coming is life in abundance. We're not called to five star hotels or luxury but are called to preach the Gospel, so that lost people can be saved.

6 Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.

7 The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

These first four trumpets represent natural disaster on the earth.

8 The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. 9 A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

Ships represented trade. Similarly in the second scene, the Black Horse with the scales represented economic turmoil. From the first coming to the second coming our finances are never going to be predictable. They are constantly going to go through phases and we can never rely on them. We are not called to find our joy in economic upturn. The only way we have peace is with Jesus Christ, not with

having a full bank account.

10 The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. 11 The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter.

Now we enter into some common predictions and misunderstandings of this scripture. Many think that Wormwood is a meteor - a star - that's headed toward earth and when it crashes into us a third of everything on our planet will be destroyed. But actually the point here is to show us that there will always be trouble on the earth. "Wormwood" means bitterness and we will always find bitterness here on earth. And people died from the water they drank from this bitterness.

12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

13 Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"

Supernatural disaster now follows, along with judgement. Then it all ends with the Great White Throne judgement. The earth is going through birth pains. We know that the closer we get towards the

second coming the more these birth pains are going to increase. These trumpets are describing these birth pains. There's oppression and depression, natural and supernatural disaster. The enemy is busy and wants to destroy all life. But Jesus has come that we might have life and have it in abundance. (John 10:10.)

Because of the suffering believers endure, God is wanting to hasten these events. Believers suffer along with the wicked being judged.

Here's the dilemma. Jesus says "There will be great tribulation... seen until now... and never will be... and if those days had not been cut short... elect these days will be cut short." It also says in [scripture] "The lord is not slow to fulfil his promises... patient... any should perish... reach repentance... patience."

Delay means more souls being saved but also means that believers suffer. God wants to delay the second coming for the sake of the lost, but hasten it so that believers do not need to suffer. How would you like to be God? What would you do? Let's let God be God.

"But now concerning that day or hour... father only knows." That date only the Father knows it. That's why he is God and sovereign, and every single event of this world comes under his control. Nothing catches him by surprise. There is an agenda being worked out. So we pray and trust. At the perfect time Jesus will come back and the maximum amount of people would have been saved and evil will finally be judged.

WOE AND TRIBULATION

The last three trumpets are “woes” that are going to come on the earth. In other words, we are going to live under this kind of attack and atmosphere, spiritually, until the end comes. And when we look at these we'll see that the fifth trumpet is all about evil, the sixth is all about tribulation building up, and then there is an interlude before the seventh trumpet, which is the final judgement.

What does tribulation mean? It means trouble. We're going to have trouble when we preach the Gospel. We're going to be resisted when we live out Christianity. And tribulation will culminate before the second coming. It's like the whole world is gripped with it in every way - every kind of war is taking place and then the end comes.

In the previous scene with the seven seals there was an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal. Likewise there is an interlude here between the sixth and seventh trumpet. The interlude in the last scene showed us the salvation of Christ and the multitudes that had been saved. Before we get to the end, God shows us that His people are safe. Now before the seventh trumpet sounds he is going to show us again that His people are safe, despite all the trouble. We are saved and because of that we're safe in him.

We need to hold on to that. This is what Hendrickson says in his book *More than Conquerors*:

“These woes do not symbolise God's final judgement and complete displeasure. On the contrary, they indicate his initial judgements, they are charged with serious warning, not with final

doom.”

Trumpets warn. So the question is: are you hearing the sound of the trumpet? These are warnings for the wicked - first the seals were directly aimed at believers, showing them it doesn't matter what happens because God has history under control; now we see things from the perspective of the wicked. As these trumpets sound God is saying you need to turn. Every disaster that happens on earth is a reminder to this world that life can just leave you at an instant and you must therefore turn before it's too late.

Revelation 8:13

“Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!”

Each one of these woes is going to be worse. If natural judgements (floods, tsunamis etc.) are bad, what's coming now is more monumental, more cataclysmic, and bigger in every way.

1 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit.

2 He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. 3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. 4 They were told not to

harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. 6 And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.

7 In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, 8 their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth;

9 they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle.

Apparently that sound was deafening. When armies and chariots would ride you couldn't hear anything.

10 They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. 11 They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.

Abaddon means “destroyer”. So what have we seen here? A picture of evil and hell. Remember this is apocalyptic end-time literature of the day so we need to know that they were using pictures of the day to describe this evil. The scriptures are showing us here that behind all the evil going on there is an angel - a star who fell - who took a third of

the angels with him and has command over them. They've all been locked in this abyss until the second coming of Christ but they have some kind of power still available to them. So when you look around in the world today you need to understand that there is a destroyer behind it with an evil plan.

12 The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

Surely not – could it get worse?

13 Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God,

Remember, the altar is where prayers of the saints are.

14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." 15 So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind.

God is in control. At exactly the right time this happens.

16 The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. 17 And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the colour of fire and of sapphire and of sulphur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulphur came out of their mouths. 18 By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur coming out of their mouths. 19 For the power of the horses is in

their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

In other words, everything the enemy does is to wound.

20 The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, 21 nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

This is talking about unbelievers. Even with all this evil happening they did not repent. Can you see from the beginning God has always dealt with this problem? He said to Israel, who had adopted the gods of their neighbours (Baal Asherah etc.) and made idols and put them on their mantelpieces, that if they love their idols so much then they could have them; and He handed them over to them. (See Ezekiel.) So he sent them to Babylon where they could worship all their idols all the time. And that's what God does - if we love evil so much he eventually hands us over to evil.

Revelation 10

1 Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire.

This is now the interlude. We see Christ here.

2 He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot

on the sea, and his left foot on the land, 3 and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. 4 And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down."

There are some mysteries - things we're never going to know until they happen.

5 And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven 6 and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, 7 but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

What is the mystery? What is the little scroll? The Gospel. Up until the seventh trumpet there is going to be intense persecution, intense danger, and intense judgement; and it's going to get worse as we approach the end; but we still preach the Gospel. We keep on preaching the Gospel. We do not stop preaching the Gospel, it doesn't matter what happens.

8 Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." 9 So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your

mouth it will be sweet as honey.”

In other words, there is always another side to the Gospel: if you do not receive it there will be a judgement of bitterness. But even if you do receive it there will be a price to pay. If you get born again and try and apply Gospel principles to your business there will be trouble and all kinds of resistance. Try and get the Gospel into your marriage and you see how quickly things start to heat up and the attack comes. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians that those who marry will have trouble (the Greek word is “tribulation”). Why do we have so much trouble when we try to follow the Bible? Because the flesh doesn't want to die; it doesn't want to accept this Gospel message. The Gospel is incredibly sweet; love like we've never seen before; but there's a bitterness. The bitterness of this world will constantly be arranged against the principles of this Gospel.

10 And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. 11 And I was told, “You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”

In other words, keep preaching.

Revelation 11

1 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, “Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there,

As in the previous scene where John could not count the multitude, now he is told to measure those in the court of God. You are sealed,

safe, with a mark of God on you, so it doesn't matter what happens – the end time White Throne Judgement cannot touch those who are sealed and measured in Christ. Isn't that a relief?

2 but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. 3 And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.”

So there will be preaching going on right until the end. We're not sure who these witnesses are but perhaps it represents the Word and Spirit, or His name and His blood. We know that Jesus called his disciples to go out two-by-two to preach. So whatever is being said the crux of the matter is that there is a witness of the Gospel right until the end. No matter how dark the days, no matter how large the beasts of pagan government and false religion, there will always be a witness of the Gospel. The Greek Word for witness is the same root word for “martyr”. So God expects every one of us to have the understanding that even if it costs us our life, we are called to preach the Gospel to the very end.

If our Christianity ever becomes about sitting around and just enjoying, or just surviving, then we've reached a place where God must come and minister to us with solid discipline. We see how he did that to the Jerusalem church in Acts – they kept this Gospel in their culture, their language, and even in their location. They thought this was their Gospel and enjoyed it and its benefits and it grew. Apparently twenty-five percent of the city was saved, but they all thought it was just a Jewish thing. Then Steven was stoned and he

became the first martyr and persecution followed. The believers were scattered as a result. But everywhere they went they preached the Gospel and in Acts 13 one of the churches that were planted out of this scattering was Antioch – the same church where the Spirit separated Paul and Barnabas for their apostolic work. Persecution actually doesn't hurt the Church, it multiplies the Church. If we're not preaching when things are going well, perhaps we need a bit of persecution? What if God in His wisdom decides that it's time for that?

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

5 And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. 6 They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. 7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, 8 and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.

Where was Jesus crucified? This is symbolism and picture language. It's saying here that God will judge whatever is of Sodom and Egypt. Egypt is constantly used as a picture in the Bible for something that is against God. For Israel it represented oppression and slavery. Sodom represented debauchery of every kind. When you read what

happened there and the way in which Lot gave his daughters to those who were seeking to rape angels then you get an idea on what Sodom means (this account is in Genesis 19). It was wicked. And here God is saying that He will judge that kind of wickedness - all wickedness, in fact.

9 For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, 10 and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. 11 But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. 12 Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here!" And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. 13 And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

When you read some of that you're inclined to wonder if this should be read literally or if this is about historical events. Some have interpreted these locusts to be helicopters, saying that John wouldn't have known how to describe what a helicopter looks like so he came up with this. No, this is picture language for deeper things than that! So what is it describing? Pure evil like most of us have never seen it.

14 The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

So now in history we've got to this point.

The Seventh Trumpet

15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." 16 And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God, 17 saying,

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.

18 The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."

A day will come when the seventh trumpet blows and God will destroy the destroyer. Abaddon will meet his end. Death and Hades will be thrown into the Lake of Fire along with every single person not in Christ. That's the last woe; in other words as the seventh trumpet is sounded the Gospel Age comes to an end and the Kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of Christ. The job's done. God knows

the exact timing. He delays this so that more can be saved; he hastens this for the sake of the suffering of His people. The timing will be perfect.

The new heavens and new earth follows this. So as you can see, what this is all telling us is that we are going to have to deal with evil at every turn until everything is wrapped up. There's not a season in the life of humanity between the first and second coming that there is going to be no attack of the enemy. There will be seasons where for a while it's going to be easier to preach the Gospel, but we're always going to have opposition. It's bitter-sweet.

The seven churches in Asia Minor weren't taking notes when they read the book of Revelation and they didn't have rich scholars studying it. They sat and listened and dramas were painted in front of them. Don't get stuck on grasshoppers or woman's hair. See the big picture - God is showing us there will always be evil and that we must turn to Him if we are to be saved. He is warning all that if they do not turn they will be at the mercy of evil and then they will face judgement. Therefore, if you aren't saved, get saved! Trust Jesus today! There is no other way. Don't be like these people in the scripture who refused to repent even though things got so bad. Rather be part of the multitude who are safe in Christ, even in the face of death.

It says in Revelation 8:5 that the spiritual powers of wickedness - Satan and his demons - cannot harm the people of God. If we have the mark of God on us then not even death has any victory over us. It says they overcame the devil by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony and they didn't love their lives unto death (Revelation 12:11). That's about the Gospel in us and through us. We will examine this

more closely in the chapters to come.

Scene 4: Seven Visions

BEHIND THE SCENES

Up to this point we've been seeing visible things - in other words, the results of all the evil around us. But now in Revelation 12 the fourth scene opens up and we're going to start looking behind the scenes. Here is where we start understanding world history and our own personal struggles through a very different lens.

Revelation 11:19

(Here the new scene opens up)

19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

This shows us a picture of power - a demonstration of God's glory and His covenant. It's also a picture of God's promises and goodness.

Revelation 12:

1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon...

Who is the woman? Us - Israel, the Church, and mankind. The red dragon is Satan in his fallen state. He was a glorious being but now he is fallen. Why red? Because he is intent on bloodshed and destruction.

“...with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.”

Which is a picture of his power. The imagery is the same used in the book of Daniel. Horns mean power.

4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.

That has to be the most atrociously sick picture of opportunism. In South Africa it reminds of the hyena - always on the prowl for what's weak and susceptible. That's what the devil is like.

The male child is Christ. When Herod heard about Christ's birth he arranged to have all the kids under a certain age killed (Matthew 2). There were also times in Jesus' life where they tried to kill him before His time. The devil knew the prophecy in Genesis 3 that the seed of the woman would bruise his heel so he's been on the lookout throughout history, waiting for this child to be born. The devil is the same with all of God's promises - he waits to destroy God's promises as they are born. What we've got to understand here is that there is always going to be resistance from the devil - that's the nature of our enemy.

5 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne,

This fast-forwards to the point where Christ has ascended. The 'rod of iron' refers to a shepherd's rod.

6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

Don't get sidetracked by the days and the time periods - these are symbolic. They represent seasons when the Gospel has huge resistance and there is apostasy. The significance of the number seems to tie up to the time when King Ahab persecuted the nation of Israel and there was great apostasy. It's simply saying that it will be a similar time.

7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

In the book of Job we read that Satan had access to heaven. He pointed out Job to God and accused him. It shows us that there was a time when Satan could accuse us, but that time is now over. Now that Christ has ascended and paid in full for our sin the devil cannot accuse

us. So there's no more place for him in heaven; he does not reside there; he has no access into heaven. We saw a picture of heaven in the previous scene and there was no mention of a dragon there at all. His realm is here on earth, behind the scenes. He also has fallen angelic beings (demons) who operate with him. This is all very real and they are all resisting God's plan of salvation, the Gospel, wherever it is preached. Plus, whenever you stand on the Word of God, whenever you walk forward in your salvation, or make a statement in Christ, or move into your call and inheritance, you will find resistance from this enemy. This is what the scriptures are showing us here.

11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

This is us. This is you. The conquerors.

In our day we probably know more about how to kill a zombie or vampire than we know how to overcome the enemy of our souls. Whenever we speak of the devil many people are overwhelmed with fear. But guess what? We don't overcome the devil through garlic or anointing our houses with oil or wearing a crucifix. It's not done by having praying hands on your door frames or having the Lord's prayer crocheted in your bathroom. If you've got that, let it remind you of the Word of God, but no fish sticker on your car or laying hands on your car is going to prevent you from having a fine! Why? Because you drive the car!

How do we overcome the devil? This is Christianity 101. John is ripping back life as we see it and is saying that we should look behind the

scenes – there's a very real realm of evil fighting all the time, but verse 11 puts all that into perspective and focus. It's the silver bullet. It's our deliverance.

Three principles of overcoming

The three principles highlighted are “the blood of the Lamb”, “the word of their testimony” and “they loved not their lives unto death.” We can divide this into (1) the Gospel, (2) the Gospel *in* you, (3) the Gospel *through* you.

You overcome step by step, day by day. Storms and earthquakes and persecution will come your way, but you stand through these all, even to the point of death. Death cannot beat you. That's the biggest thing that's been overcome at the first coming. Death no longer has any sting.

(1) The Gospel (the Blood of the Lamb)

The only way to overcome the enemy is through the Gospel of Christ. There is no other Gospel that saves. And that Gospel must be accepted – it doesn't matter if you baptise someone who has died, it doesn't count. It doesn't matter whether you wear Christian clothes, it doesn't count. It doesn't matter if you sit in Christian auditoriums for the rest of your life, it doesn't count. The only way is the Gospel.

The victory is celebrated in heaven and there is great rejoicing because the enemy has been defeated. The enemy thought he had Christ at the cross but it turned out that, actually, it was the devil's defeat as Jesus died for the sins of the world. For us all.

(2) The Word of your testimony (the Gospel in you)

What's your testimony? This is the most important thing in your life. Your testimony is you having applied the Gospel. The Gospel is the victory that we work out in our lives. Everything about salvation is going to be resisted – as you make decisions to go on a trip or give your finances or look for a Christian spouse, it will be resisted. But you conquer the devil through applying this Gospel, standing in its values season after season. It doesn't matter what powers rise and fall in this world, or how unjust your boss is, or the weather, or the economy – you conquer because you apply the Gospel of Christ.

(3) Loved not their lives (the Gospel through you)

This is where the church misses it the most. If you want ongoing victory it's not about being an end user or consumer that's interested only in benefits and comfort. Does your life count for the Gospel? Your life counting is how you overcome the devil.

The enemy will endeavour to shut us up, to silence us through economics and severe discomfort and threats of death, and even these things will intimidate you when you think of going on a trip for the Kingdom. The devil knows that our victory is when we start to give out. There is no sweeter spot of grace than taking the Gospel to others. The sweet spot of grace is not standing at the front and soaking in God's presence. Instead, it's when you're sharing the values of this Kingdom in a dying, hurting, world full of pain. When you're sharing the Gospel and God's love at a home where the girls have been abandoned because they are pregnant, you're in the

sweetest spot of grace you could ever be. It's about giving – as freely as we receive we give.

Let us always be a loving people – taking this great Gospel, which overcomes and conquers, and find how to make it work in classrooms, at our work, and on trips. We don't have a Gospel of sitting and spectating but a Gospel of going and making a difference.

12 Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

In eternity, our present time is short. Satan is well aware of that.

13 And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.

“Pursued” is in the present continuous tense in the original. He is always pursuing and looking to destroy us.

14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.

Remember God said to the Israelites in the wilderness that he would give them wings like eagles. (Exodus 19:4; Deutoronomy 32:11; Isaiah 40:31.) The same picture is used here. God gives us deliverance.

15 The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

This is the devil's approach to us who want to live our lives according to the Gospel. He is furious. So we see that us, the Church, feature here - we are the offspring. Satan is making war on those who keep the commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. The Bible tells us that if we live out the Gospel the devil makes war on us. But we remember verse 11 - that we overcome through the Gospel, the Gospel in us, and the Gospel through us. We're on a mission and intent on making a difference. We have one chance to do this and one chance only.

The mark on us is that we are under the blood and are prepared to preach this Gospel. If you want to remain in a place of front-footedness and victory, preach the Gospel.

Opportunities for the devil

Ephesians 4:26

"Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity for the devil."

We can give Satan opportunities through not living the Gospel out.

Anger and bitterness and unforgiveness is not living the Gospel out, and living in these things opens up opportunity for the devil to operate.

Don't give him an opportunity. He is looking to destroy you. There are several other scriptures that talk about this. 1 Timothy 5 talks of widows and says, "Some have already strayed after Satan." The context isn't that widows were making idols and sacrificing cats and drinking bats' blood, but they were idle and became gossipers and whisperers. Gossiping is allowing Satan an opportunity! When you do it you divide the body of Christ and give the enemy a gap.

In 1 Corinthians 7: 5 it talks about sex in marriage - "Do not withhold sex from your partner, except for prayer and fasting. But afterwards he says come back together because of your lack of self control, "the enemy will tempt you." So the enemy is looking for every weak moment to take advantage, but we are victorious in Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:14

"Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light."

1 Peter 5:8

"Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour."

2 Corinthians 2:11

"... so that we would not be outwitted by Satan."

The scriptures give us instruction not to be outwitted by Satan. We

even see that God can use the enemy to produce godliness in us! (2 Corinthians 12:7.) That doesn't fit with some modern teaching!

Whatever God needs to do He is going to do to produce results for the Gospel and godliness in our lives. God doesn't break arms but is always about our good.

Satan hindered Paul from preaching the Gospel in an area in 1 Thessalonians 2:18. But remember who is in charge of all this history? We must remember the big picture. God is working it all out.

2 Corinthians 10: 3-6

“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.”

As Martin Luther once said, you can't stop a bird flying over your head but you can stop it from making a nest in your head. You can't stop a thought but you can stop it lodging in your thinking. So when you see that pretty girl walk past and she looks well fitted, remember that the first look is free but the second look is going to cost you, because the thought has taken some kind of dominion in your mind and you need to get rid of it. When someone does you harm you may think, “I'm going to cut him off,” but get rid of that thought - don't let it become established, it will destroy your life in every way.

Remember - we overcome the devil through the Gospel, the Gospel in us, and the Gospel through us. That's the crux of all of this - we don't talk of the devil without ever talking about the fact that he is defeated through Christ's victory. And this is how we apply the victory.

THAT SERPENT THE DEVIL

Revelation 12 is a focal and grounding point for how we should see the book of Revelation book. It's an exciting, dramatic chapter, with pictures of war and turmoil.

It also helps to set us free from our common understanding of the enemy – too many of our ideas of Satan are shaped by Hollywood – either by cartoons like Hot Stuff or the other extremes where the devil is a foe that simply cannot be defeated. Too many of us get superstitious about the devil – looking over our shoulder, not stepping under ladders, or being careful of black cats, and doing other things “just in case”. We need to sweep aside all of our superstitions, many of them shaped by modern understandings of spiritual warfare, and get a good Biblical understanding.

Revelation 12

12 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.

In one sentence you have the nature of the devil explained. He wants to kill all life and hope, anything that has to do with birth. He is out to

destroy. He wants to destroy any sense of future in our lives. This is important - he is looking to make us think that we have no inheritance in Christ.

He has been cast down from the heavens and is seeking who he may devour. He also has many tools available to him - all kinds of deception. This scripture takes us back to Genesis 3 where God promises the devil that the woman will give birth to a child who will crush the devil's head - and this is an important picture here. This is a picture of our salvation, Jesus Christ, who the devil tried to kill from the beginning. You might recall that Herod issued a decree that all babies of a certain age were to be killed, because he believed Jesus might be a rival (Matthew 2:16-18). But Jesus was saved because an angel told Mary and Joseph to go back to Egypt and they came back when it was all over.

5 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

The devil couldn't destroy Jesus but now has his eyes set on those who follow Jesus. Any sense of hope you have, or any decision you make to live in line with the Gospel, will be opposed. The devil will oppose you.

When we read about 1,260 days we are tempted to work this out and make some kind of prediction on the return of Christ. Push that side and pick up the heart of this.

7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

The devil was cast down. This book is going to tell us how we overcome the devil. Have you thought about that? Or is that a debatable subject? Many false doctrines have taken advantage of this idea and skewed it. There are many books about deliverance from the devil. There are many books about spiritual warfare - it's one of the subjects where people write a lot but know very little. And so we have all kinds of superstitions like anointing door posts with oil, laying hands on buildings, and so on. Where is any of that in the New Testament? We attach value to all kinds of things that just aren't in the Bible. But the Bible tells us how we overcome the enemy and it's not complicated.

10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying,... .. "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

How was he thrown down? He was thrown down at the Cross. He was thrown down through the Gospel. See, the defeat of the devil is the Gospel. The devil is not defeated by some unknown mystery or

formula that has to do with some symbol or icon, or something you wear around your neck. What's in your heart is what matters. Is the Gospel in your heart?

11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. 12 Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" 13 And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. 15 The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

Hollywood has made money on fear. Horror shows make us constantly fearful but yet we feed on it like an addiction. As long as fear reigns it's impossible for us to have faith because everything that the enemy does is about getting us to doubt and live in fear. If he can control your life through fear then he's won the victory. If he can just put that doubt in you like he did with Eve and everyone we know who has slipped, he can keep you from overcoming.

Fear and doubt is not of God and are not based on reality. There is nothing we need to fear. Even death need not make us afraid because we are in Christ. Beware of the distractions of the enemy. One of the best ways in which he distracts us is that he lies to us about who he is. He is not this big awesome uncontrolled creature that cannot be destroyed. Not at all.

As we look around us we can see the signs of his destruction. Systems of this world are under his control. We see the decay that has set in through the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Everything is rushing toward a final destruction. But God has got it under control.

Let's summarise how the Bible reveals the devil in this passage:

- He is rebellious and full of pride. He takes a third of the angels and rebels against God because of his pride. You can read in other passages where the devil looks up at God and aspires to be God and he wants people to worship him. Because of that pride he is cast down and takes a third of the angels with him. He wants to make us rebellious, too.
- The devil's nature is to **devour**. He is out to steal and kill your life. He's got a plan of action that he's busy with.
- He **wages war**. He is about war. God is about peace and the Gospel brings peace. The devil has an arsenal too, with plenty of weapons he can throw at us. There's lots of mystery to your life - things that have happened that have been unfair;

and there's lots of sin in your life. He's going to remind you of these . How often have you lifted your hands in worship and then the devil reminds you, "But you're a liar"? And then your mind is off God and the war begins. If we read 2 Corinthians 4, this war rages in our minds, in our thoughts. He's constantly at work without stopping, bringing thoughts in all the time. He's bombing us. His artillery is furious and it's frequent.

- He is the **accuser**. Like he did with Job (see the book of Job), he is going to accuse you before the Father, and accuse you directly, telling you that you're not worth anything.
- He **pursues the church**. He's going to be at your heels all the time. It'll seem like when you rest and think, "Well, that season's over," he's back again. Like in the life of Jesus in the desert - Jesus handles him for 40 days in prayer and fasting and he destroys the arguments the devil brings up at him and it says that the devil left him for a season, for a more opportune time. The devil came back in a myriad of other ways, even through the Pharisees and the religious people of the time, who accused Jesus of wrongdoing. They called him a drunkard and someone who mixes with common people (as if that was such a bad thing!). So much so did they continue with that to the point that they got the Roman government interested and crucified Jesus. But that wasn't a victory for the enemy - in fact, that resulted in the freedom of mankind!

And so he's going to pursue us. He's going to keep at it, looking for weakness. And he's going to constantly work at it.

- He **floods**. The scripture says, "... the devil comes in like a flood". And in the world today the flood is one of error and distraction. There is so much deception out there. We keep wondering, what's the real way? What's the real Gospel? And when you finally find the real Gospel you're distracted on every side, flooded with concerns and responsibilities and the weaknesses of your own flesh. We know what we ought to do but we say we have no time. This is when we give into the flood, allowing it to sweep us away.

Fortunately in Isaiah 59:19 it says, "The enemy comes in like a flood, but God raises up a standard." God knows and has a way through it all.

- He's **furious** with the church. As if it couldn't get any worse! Why all the attacks from within and without? Do you think he was happy with Paul and Barnabas and those that preached the Gospel? Those people in the early church were martyred because they refused to stop preaching the Gospel! But this Gospel says that God will protect us. It says that He loves us. The devil is furious with us and will constantly come against our efforts to live by the Gospel and preach it.

We see this in history. The early church went through ten successive emperors who each tried to out-do each other in the wicked ways in which they tortured and murdered Christians. When that didn't work the devil moved on to deception - a state religion that plunged us into the dark ages. But God raised up a standard and brought revivals and reformations. The Word of God was discovered again. Brave

men and women laid down their lives so we could have what we have today.

Two errors

There are two erroneous approaches to the enemy and we need to avoid them.

The first one is we trivialise the enemy. We see him as nothing more than the bad angel on our shoulder, telling us to do bad things. Don't do this - the devil is out to destroy you, he's not just a cute, naughty little devil.

The second one is we sensationalise the enemy. He's not mysterious. He is not like God. He is finite and when Jesus comes again and judges all, we are told that the devil will be thrown into the great lake of fire with all that belong to him - including those who have not received Jesus Christ.

Don't minimise or maximise who the enemy is. Get a good bible understanding of what is going on. The book of Revelation helps us to do this.

But now, the real story

We have victory in all of this - and this is the real point. Despite how bad the enemy is he can be defeated.

11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even

unto death.

Let's understand this. This isn't a mantra which we repeat when we are attacked by the enemy. We don't say "the blood" several times out loud as if these are some kind of magic words that chase the devil away. The blood of the Lamb is the Gospel message and that's the victory we have. Jesus brought us the Gospel through His blood. If you want victory, bring everything under the Gospel. Bring your heart under the Gospel. That's how we bring it under the blood - by accepting and believing what was done for us on the cross. Spiritual warfare is about Jesus having won the victory for us at the cross and we take that victory and apply it to our lives. We don't do that through mantras, we do that by bringing everything under this victory.

For example, bring your marriage under the blood. Bring it into the Gospel with its values and its new ways of looking at things; with its ability to empower us to love as God loves. Bring your business under the blood. Bring your money under the blood. Bring it under the Gospel.

Secondly it talks about "the word of their testimony" which refers to the Gospel in a general sense and a personal sense. It's *your* personal testimony of the Gospel in your life that's your victory over the enemy. Paul urges us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Continually keep your testimony alive so that when the enemy comes in like a flood you can live on God's word and your house will stand. You don't have to doubt whether you are a son of God or whether you are truly saved - the Word tells you plainly that you are.

Thirdly it says, "... they loved not their lives, even unto death". This is the Gospel through you to others. It's not just about bringing your marriage or your business or your money under the blood - your comfort and peace is not the end goal - it's also about giving the Gospel out. The goal is that now that we have received such great forgiveness, let's begin to give it.

Every one of us have been ordained by God to be those who take this Gospel out wherever we are. Can you see how we've failed? We get taken out because we sit around doing nothing, living for our own comfort. We're not praying for others and looking to impact others with the Gospel.

Too much of the Church has been hypnotised by the devil. We're comfortable with the Gospel and our salvation and so the devil puts us to sleep. There are people groups, people in our office, people in the nations, and our own city going to hell. Jesus never saved us for our own comfort! He saved us so that we can get involved with other people. So we love not our lives so much as to not shrink back from death.

The time when you will see the most growth, change, anointing and joy in your life is the time when you're giving it out. It's not when you're sitting there being a receptacle saying, "Fill me again"; when Christianity is all about "filling me" and pleasing ourselves. No, we gather together to equip ourselves to do take the Gospel out to others. Every one of us needs to be on board, busy with what He's called us to do. Faith without works is dead.

No talisman

When we're looking for some kind of talisman or key where we can overcome the enemy we have got the completely wrong idea. No, we overcome him through preaching of the Gospel. No war is ever fought and won by securing yourself and building up walls. Instead you push out and take them out. The only way to overcome, ensuring victory, is to be on the offensive. And the offensive is the Gospel.

And in this process, like with the first Christians, not only will we be inconvenienced or misunderstood or criticised but some of us might lose our very lives. God wants us to approach this Gospel with a heart that knows that it's worth dying for. He died to give it to us and we will die to take it to others.

Don't approach the subject of the devil with fear or superstition, but with good Biblical backing. As we continue to explore the next few chapters we'll see how this book helps us do that.

THE BEASTS AND THE WICKEDNESS OF MAN

When most Christians see '666' they think of the Illuminati or the Pope or some or other person or secret organisation. There are so many different characters or organisations who could fit the 666 bill. But it's time to debunk all that and just get back to the Bible.

Volumes have been written about what 666 number means. But when the Christians in the first century read this book, is it possible that they thought it referred to the Illuminati? Or the myriad of other modern day theories? Of course not. This book was relevant for them in those early centuries - it wasn't some mysterious book that they couldn't understand. Likewise, it's not some mysterious book that we can't understand. It has a practical message that we can apply faithfully. The Illuminati don't feature in Scripture but only in fiction and imagination.

The way the devil gets us to lose hope is to help us forget that there is a big picture future waiting for us. The end is good! There is a great reward waiting for us! Those with no sense of future lose hope. The Lord encourages us to be a people of hope and faith in the scriptures we read here; we should be a people of hope no matter what the circumstances.

God's appeal to us is never on the basis of scaring us into heaven. The point of this book is not to show us some scary, beastly things that will make us make a decision for God! Rather, the appeal of the Gospel is love. The Gospel brings a sense of the future - a purpose beyond this in the Kingdom of God. It's when yesterday is black and today is black that we project our experiences into the future, believing that it, too,

will be black. And this is a modern day disease. Mental illness is rife. There are physical issues that cause it, yes, but when you take hope away you get to a place where there's nothing to live for.

There's a slow creep that takes place with depression and if we don't allow Scripture to encourage us we'll see no more hope. If you're suffering from depression, in Christ there is always a future! It doesn't matter if you've lost your job, you have not lost your salvation! God will not abandon you!

Some of us have come through extremely difficult circumstances, but have you watched a family member being tarred with oil and burned? Have you had a son put into a big dish and cooked because you wouldn't say that Caesar is Lord? If we compare our problems to that, it doesn't seem as severe; but perhaps it is, relatively speaking, because it's now those hidden diseases that consume our hearts. We need to get hope back in our lives like never before and that's why we cannot allow what's written in the book of Revelation to be reduced to science fiction and confusion. We have an assurance as we read these scriptures.

Revelation 12:17

1 Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

Revelation 13

1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on

its heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marvelled as they followed the beast. 4 And they worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

5 And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. 6 It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.[b] And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, 8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. 9 If anyone has an ear, let him hear:

10 If anyone is to be taken captive,
to captivity he goes;
if anyone is to be slain with the sword,
with the sword must he be slain.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

11 Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 12 It exercises all the

authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. 13 It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, 14 and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. 16 Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, 17 so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. 18 This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

The picture we're seeing here is that Satan is standing on the beach and certain things are about to happen. First, a beast rises out of the sea with ten horns. Sounds like Hollywood already, doesn't it? Verse 2 has so many different interpretations but actually all we really need to know is that Satan is summoning some kind of system - the imagery tells us that this system is terrible, more terrible than anyone's imagination or any movie. This is a great evil and we must understand that.

Verse 3 shows how the world marvelled at this beast and there were miraculous things happening. Now note verse 5 which says that it 'was allowed' to do things. See, God is in control.

The forty-two months refer to times in history when persecution is going to be more intense than others. Verse 7 shows us that not every saint who prays for protection is going to live. Many die because of their faith. Verse 10 highlights what was happening at the time - The Christians were being slaughtered by those who had taken them captive.

At the end of that verse it says, "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." So with this all in mind, can you see what we're called to do here? Are we called to find a hole and bury ourselves? No, we're called to endure and have faith, because the enemy is intent on destroying this message of the Gospel as which is making sure that there is going to be a great multitude of saved people at the second coming. Our job is to get behind this message no matter what the price. In today's terms this means we give my life to mission, not to comfort. We're here to see this message go out, no matter how bad things get.

So the point of this is to show us that the devil is going to employ many different means to come against the preaching of the Gospel and to come against the people of God. But, no matter what He does, Jesus is always victorious - no matter how much is rising against us, we will be rescued and victorious in Jesus.

The two beasts and the harlot represent three things that Satan employs to bring destruction and death to come against the Church and the Gospel. What do these pictures represent? Let us see.

The first beast

The first beast rises from the sea; from the restlessness of humankind. This beast is best described as pagan government – note heads, thrones, and terror. It lines up with what we can read in Daniel 7 where it talks of Babylon, Persia and other kingdoms. Here it puts all of these into one and is telling us that throughout history we're going to have pagan governments that are used by Satan against God's people. We know this is true throughout all of history.

The world and its systems are corrupt and we need to understand that it's actually what's going on behind the scenes that makes things so corrupt. Revelation 12 onwards gives us a behind-the-scenes look at what the enemy is doing, employing and rising up evil governments to do his work.

There are places today that go beyond just an intolerance of the Gospel but will kill you for believing it. Not just China but South-East Asia as well. Here you can lose your life for the Gospel. Also North-Eastern Nigeria. Pagan government is against the Gospel and that's one thing Satan uses to get his job done.

The second beast

In verse 11 we see the second beast rising from the earth with two horns like a lamb. Why a lamb? Because it looks like Jesus; but it speaks like a dragon! This is false religion – it dresses up to look good but it is, in fact, evil.

One of the most deceptive false religions in the world today is a brand

of Christianity that talks about how everything is for your benefit; that there's nothing required on your part to live the Christian life; that God is your waiter. It comes close to the truth but is actually a grievous error.

False religion comes in many guises. Verse 12 shows us how pagan government makes opportunities for false religion. In its original context, the Roman government began to institute Caesar worship, claiming that Caesar is God. It was about worshipping the government. Exactly what it meant then is what it means today - pagan governments set up opportunities for false religion and call us to worship them. They work hand-in-hand. It doesn't necessarily need to be obvious idolatry - even modern day materialism is a false religion.

So these two beasts - pagan government and false religion - are being used by the enemy against God's people. But there is also the harlot, which we'll get to in the next section. First we need to uncover what '666' means.

666

When the Bible talks of 666 in verse 18 it says that "this calls for wisdom." Isn't it true, however, that for the most part there's only been stupidity about this number? And we suck it all in.

Where does this wisdom come from? Heaven. If you were to translate 'number of the man' (as it states in the scripture) in the original Greek language of the Bible it says 'the number of humanity'. Whenever something is mentioned three times in scripture it's emphasizing a point and speaking of the most extreme version of something. For

example, in Isaiah 6 we see the angels singing to God and saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy...”. God is extremely holy!

So why 666? Man was created on the sixth day. 666 is talking of humanity in its most extreme fallen state. It's not meant to be some mind-bending scripture - there are more candidates than we can imagine that fit 666. Most names if you manipulate them in some language and translate them to numerology could stand for 666. History has had its fair share of insanely evil people that we could claim were the anti-christ, and probably will still have more. So the point isn't that it's a specific someone but it's a number representing the extreme evil of mankind.

Back when this book was written, Nero's name in Latin numerology was 666. This was actually a code they used to refer to him (they needed to speak in code, especially in writing, otherwise they would be seen as rebels against the government). It's essentially a code for evil - evil government married to false religion. It's a code for absolute evil that's against the Kingdom of God and the church.

The passage goes on to talk about miracles and signs and wonders coming out of these systems. When pagan government and false religion pair, great, almost miraculous, evil takes place. Miracles are not a sign of truth. Often miracles are used as a deception to draw people in.

In verse 17 it talks about how people couldn't trade unless they worshipped the beast. In the time of the seven churches of this book, if you were a metalworker you belonged to a metalworkers guild who would serve certain gods. If you weren't a part of the guild you

couldn't trade. Their meetings would typically consist of dinner, orgies, and worship to their gods. Christians obviously said they couldn't be involved in that and as a result they couldn't trade. Essentially, their livelihood was taken away.

One of the Roman emperors at one stage instituted the need for you to carry a certificate that stated that you had visited the temple where Caesar worship had taken place and done your duty of worship. If you didn't have that certificate they could kill you. That's what the mark of the beast is all about - and it represents similar realities today. In our South African modern day history we've gone through a state religion that said there was a superiority to a certain group of people and covenants were made to secure that. That caused tremendous heartache. We're thankfully emerging out of that, but it's another example of pagan government mixing with false religion as our government even put forth its own heretical theology that campaigned for its prejudice.

There is only one kingdom worthy of being a government - the Kingdom of God. So what is this passage telling us? It's saying that we're going to suffer under pagan government and false religion until the end. There are times and seasons where governments will be good to us and the Gospel, and there are times and seasons when governments won't. We shouldn't be surprised by either situation.

With all this in mind verse 10 encourages us to endure and stay strong in the faith. It doesn't matter what happens, we need to go into some of the hostile areas of today and preach the Gospel. Some will be taken into captivity and so you will go; some will die and so you will go. All so that this message, the Gospel, goes out. Some of the remaining

mission fields in the world are hostile towards the Gospel. You've got to go and preach undercover and one mistake sends you to jail. We need to muscle up and understand that endurance and faith is what God calls us to. Christianity is not about everything at our convenience; we're not called to be fair-weather Christians.

Daniel 7 is another great picture of this. It shows us a statue made up of different pagan governments but a rock comes and utterly destroys it. That rock is the Kingdom of God. Governments will come and go but the Kingdom lasts forever.

Christ is a deliverer and we can push through. Those who were martyred in the early church were tied to poles and set alight, yet there are accounts of how they died with joy. Regardless of the government or the reigning religion, we are able to overcome in Christ.

Is there a willingness for us to understand this and do it? Be free of the fear of 666. It's not a computer or the barcode or some new technology. If you want to think of it in that way, in 15 years time there will be new technology and we'll need to revise our teaching all over again.

When pagan government and false religion mix, all hell explodes. Whenever humanity reaches its fallen extreme of wickedness, that's 666. But we have no reason to fear anything like that.

Be encouraged

We carry the mark of the Kingdom. We carry lives that have been stamped with the Kingdom through the blood of the Lamb. Let's be

encouraged because God's Kingdom will be forever. Pagan government and false religion will die.

THE THIRD ENEMY

After having looked at the two weapons the enemy uses against us – pagan government and false religion – it's now time to look at the third. This third enemy is what we read about in Revelation 14.

Revelation 14:

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. 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. 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 as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

6 Then I saw another 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 judgement has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

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.”

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 sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”

12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

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 labours, for their deeds follow them!”

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.

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 wine press of the wrath of God. 20 And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

After we read about the two beasts in the previous chapter we read about the the Lamb in verse 1. In case the two beasts made you fear, you read about the Lamb and His victory, and are once again reminded of the fact that Jesus is always victorious. Satan can throw whatever He wants at Jesus' church, Jesus' church are safe in Him.

The 144,000 is a metaphorical number of the vast multitude that have received Christ. They have the name of God on their forehead. Verse 4 talks of them being virgins which means that they have kept themselves from idolatry. Sex and adultery are often used as ways of talking about idolatry in the Bible - this verse doesn't mean they never got married, it means they never committed spiritual adultery.

This is now a third vision of victory and we see here that God's people are safe. It doesn't matter that beasts rise and take control, in Christ we are safe. If your name is written in that Lamb's book of life you don't have to build a shelter and stock up with bully beef and torch batteries, because you're worried about zombies or something else taking over this earth. No, the only way we're going to make it through these trials and beasts and the harlot (which we'll see now in more

detail) is in the safe place we have in Christ.

But if you're not in Jesus today - if you don't know him - it's easy to be safe in Jesus. Just surrender your life to him and ask him to be your Lord and Saviour. That means that you will take His name and belong to Him and bear His characteristics, righteousness and love.

We see that God's people in this vision are a powerful worship team (verse 2, 3). There's power and loud thunder but it's beautiful and full of melody. When we're caught up in worship (and not thinking about who's leading the worship) we reach a place of unity. Worship is our weapon and we worship because we can. All these evils can be bearing down on us but we're worshipping the King. This is a lovely picture of the Church - steady and persistent, loud like thunder, spontaneous, creative and real.

We are pure and holy in Christ - that's why it says God's people were blameless in verse 5. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling as a result. We've got to constantly fight the beasts and the harlot with the Word of God. We don't get entangled in those things and succumb to the seduction of the harlot.

The first angel

Verse 6 - 9 shows us three angels and moves into the next vision of the seven visions of victory in this section of Revelation. The first angel declares the eternal Gospel. In this age where all this turmoil is taking place the Gospel is declared through us, and we see it has two aspects to it.

The **first aspect** is good news for the Gospel's recipients - total forgiveness of sin and us being made brand new; being born again. But the **second aspect** is punishment for the wicked, those who refuse this Gospel. Wickedness will come to an end and be judged - there *will* be a punishment! The fact is that in his justice God loved us and His son died so we may be free. But if we do not accept Jesus we do will not go free. This isn't a scare tactic - the appeal of the Gospel is "God loved the world" not "God hated the world"! But the consequence of not accepting the good news of Jesus - accepting Jesus as saviour - is eternal punishment.

The second angel and the harlot

Revelation 14:8

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality."

In scripture, Babylon represents wicked seduction and sensuality - the seducing nature of the enemy. Another way the scriptures represent this is through a picture of a harlot. In other words, this is referring to the seduction of sin, which is a weapon the enemy uses against us.

The second angel speaks out doom for Babylon (the harlot) and this shows us that this aspect of Satan and his attack, this seducing, will come to an end. What does Babylon - the harlot - seduce us with? Worldly indulgence - the love of money; of ease; the desire of the eyes; the pride of life; the sins of the flesh.

So we see that Satan uses these three weapons against us - pagan government; false religion; and the seduction of sin. These three are

always going to be an issue for us in the Gospel Age.

We have been saved and are *justified* with Christ. But we also are *being* saved, which we call *sanctification*. Finally, we will be saved, which is when we will be *glorified*. It's in this process of 'being saved', of sanctification, where we must apply the Gospel, because this harlot is seducing us into places where there is bondage. Many Christians are in bondage to Mammon (the love of money), sex, pride, the pleasures of the flesh and so on. Therapy is never going to make us overcome these things. Good intent will never work. No, we need the Gospel applied to overcome the harlot.

We apply the Gospel (being saved) and then there is a wonderful inheritance in Christ. In and through that we receive rewards ("will be" saved) at the second coming. We need to trust God for freedom from these bondages, which are designed to pull us down. We must walk in his grace and forgiveness.

The modern day disease of depression is another area where the enemy has seduced us and even whole churches into places of ineffectiveness. Churches have also been seduced into believing that Christianity is about sitting and enjoying. But God can deal with this.

The third angel

The third angel warns of the punishment to come at the second coming. There is reward for believers in Christ but punishment for the wicked. This is something God has ordained from the beginning.

Why does the verse talk of drinking wine (verse 10)? Because, in those

days, people would drink diluted wine and the 'real stuff' was the full-bodied, undiluted wine. This is showing us that up to now God's judgements have been like diluted wine, but there's coming a day when His judgement will be full-bodied.

There are those that say that this life, with its difficulties, is hell. But we "ain't seen nothing yet". God's anger against the wicked is hell. We have not really seen His wrath yet - it's unbroken, unmerciful, eternal torment. Hell has been trivialised and the state after death has been softened because commentators want it to be a whole lot better. But we must never forget that God's justice and judgement is always a part of this Gospel.

Revelation 14:

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.

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 wine press of the wrath of God. 20 And the wine press was

trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

Why does the angel look “like a son of man” (verse 14)? Because the angel looks like Jesus. The word for 'sickle' in the original Greek in the same verse refers to a sickle that's used for harvesting wheat. But the second sickle in verse 17 is one used for vines. That sickle is smaller, sharper and more specific.

This is showing us two harvests, which are two resurrections. The first is a harvest / resurrection of the righteous, done with a wheat sickle. But the second harvest / resurrection is of the wicked, done with that small, sharper sickle for vines. So there's going to be a **huge** harvest for the Kingdom but there is also going to be a harvest of those who resisted Jesus and the Gospel. This sixth vision of victory ends where we see the wrath of God finally being finished – blood flowing from the wine press.

The seventh vision of victory

Revelation 15:

1 Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

2 And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire –and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. 3 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant[a] of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

*“Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations! [b]
4 Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.”*

Here we move into seventh vision of victory. Every scene in Revelation ends with a seventh vision where God's people triumph and eternity with God begins. We cannot comprehend what God has for us - there have been many who have tried to guess and put forth what a “sea of glass mingled with fire” means, but all such extra-Biblical stuff is worthless. Throw it away! The reality is that, in our fallen nature, we cannot fully comprehend or understand what God has prepared for us. Ask God to heal you from those images burned into your mind from extra-Biblical sources on what heaven is about. They destroy our understanding.

The seventh vision also shows us that we will never again have to battle with beasts and a false prophet and a harlot. All that has come to its end.

Challenges

If we look at this there are challenges for us to apply.

We see how Satan works in this passage of scripture, with pagan government which will always rise and fall; false religion that comes to destroy the saints; and the seduction of sin. Twice we are called to endure (Revelation 13:10 and 14:12). We endure by having faith in Christ. Work out your salvation right until the end - that's the message!

We're told over and over again that there might be extreme times of difficulty but we win in Christ in the end. He leaves us with no "ifs", "buts" or "maybes". He is preparing us for tough times and the systems of this world will get worse until the end. But we faithfully persevere and we win in the end. All of us can say thank you Lord Jesus!

Many of us are caught up in the seduction of the enemy and we need that broken in our lives. It could be depression, a love of money, pornography, or any number of things. These things are not God's plan for our lives. God will break the cycle of not being able to break through - pray and ask Him right now to do that.

Scene 5: Seven Bowls

THE WRATH OF GOD

In this section we will look at the wrath of God. It's amazing how we misunderstand this and sometimes have a very one-dimensional approach to God. For some people today, God is just about wrath, taking great delight in residing over the ant farm of the earth and squashing us all day long. Meanwhile, others believe that God is so sweet and sin doesn't matter and we can believe whatever we want, because we're all going to live in a wonderful eternity with him on our cloud with our harp (and an eternity of boredom).

Setting the context

This fifth scene which we're looking at now is possibly the harshest point of Revelation. It consists of seven bowls which bring seven plagues, representing the wrath of God.

After this scene there are seven words of triumph and John is carried by an angel into a wilderness where he sees the harlot, called Babylon, dealt with. Remember, in the previous scene we were introduced to the dragon, Satan; the beast from the sea, which is pagan government; the beast from out of the earth, which is false religion; and Babylon, the harlot, which is the seduction of sin. These are from Satan and his helpers. And we saw that those who bore his mark '666' were those who had submitted themselves to the enemy and his systems. They are anti-christ and they will be dealt with. We now see God's wrath poured out on all this.

Then we will see, in the end, the Great White Throne judgement when God judges everyone and everything is finally dealt with. But along the way, God is blowing trumpets, warning humankind, and He is going to be pouring out bowls of wrath as warnings until the end. The point is - He always warns first, giving us opportunity to repent. But He eventually does come and judge.

In the seventh scene we see seven visions of victory. Heaven is opened and John sees the triumphant Christ riding on his white horse and an incredible victory. Then in scene eight we see seven glimpses of glory and it ends with a new hope.

Why eight scenes? Because this lines up with the resurrection of Christ. The week starts on Sunday and ends on Saturday and the next Sunday is the eighth day - the start of a new week. Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday and the church started meeting on Sundays in celebration of this and anticipation for the time when all things will be made new.

So it's eight scenes because it points to a new beginning. We have to always remember this because that's what all this is moving towards - a new hope for those that trust Christ. The Christians who would have read this book of Revelation back in the first centuries would have been filled with tremendous hope throughout their persecution. As a result, they were able to lay their lives down as living sacrifices for the sake of the Gospel. And that's why we're here today, to reach into the heart of God and say, "Lord, whatever it takes, we want this Gospel to go out, even to the point of death." This is how the book of Revelation is meant to encourage us.

Should we really speak about the wrath of God?

In **Acts 20:26** we see Paul tell the Ephesian elders that he taught them the “whole counsel” of God and is therefore innocent of any man's blood. Nobody who ever sat under his ministry could say he “never told them so”. What is it easier to eat? Meat, potatoes, broccoli? or malva pudding? Obviously the pudding. Because of the desire to please people and get people to like them (especially the masses) preachers often won't preach about the difficult stuff, like the wrath of God. But we are worse off without having a proper, grounded understanding of the wrath of God.

We are going to look at the first four “bowls of wrath” in this section and look at the remaining three in the next part.

Revelation 15:5 – 16:9

5 After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, 6 and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes round their chests. 7 And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives for ever and ever, 8 and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath

1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the

wrath of God.”

2 So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshipped its image.

3 The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

4 The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say,

*“Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was,
for you brought these judgements.*

*6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink.*

It is what they deserve!”

7 And I heard the altar saying,

*“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgements!”*

8 The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. 9 They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.

Verse 6 shows us the opening of a new scene (“After this I looked...”). The picture of the sanctuary and God's glory is a picture of righteousness, holiness, glory and power. It's very similar to what we see in Revelation 1 where Christ is revealed. What it's showing us here is that this judgement that's about to come, this wrath, is from the heart of God. Notice in heaven there is wrath and this wrath is a part of God's nature. We'll see why that is a little later.

The end of verse 8 shows us that the time when we could intercede and pray for God to save others, and God would listen, will come to an end. The time when the wicked can pray and God will listen will also come to an end. You might recall in Revelation 8:4 that the prayers of the saints were poured out like incense before God, but now the sanctuary of God is closed and there is no more intercession for the wicked; God will no longer listen to their prayers, that time of mercy is over.

There comes a time when God has warned with trumpets and tried to appeal to people to turn to Christ through those that He sends - those that preach the Gospel and even die preaching it (as was happening in the time this letter was written) - but then there comes a time when He stops warning and pours out His wrath, for they refuse to repent and listen.

Chapter 16, verse 1 shows us that this is serious. Remember the first time you got disciplined with the rod at high school? How you sat there, outside the office, knowing that punishment was going to be dealt out to you? But it's over within a few minutes. But think about how people feel when they sit outside the courtroom, knowing that they've murdered someone, that they're guilty, and in a few minutes they will go in and be sentenced to jail for the rest of their life. That's quite hectic. But there's one place you don't want to be out of all those and that is guilty before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, because He will pour out His wrath. And when He does, He doesn't stop half-way and say, "Your curdling cries are cutting my heart." No, by the time God does this He would have given every person every opportunity to repent and receive Him, but those that continue in

their wickedness and continue to go after Satan and his plans and turn their backs on God, He will pour out His bowls of wrath without relenting. That time will come - God is patient and His love is forever, but a time of reckoning will come.

So we see that the first angel went and poured out His bowl on the earth and painful sores broke out on those who worshipped the Beast and his image. Now please don't relegate this to a science-fiction understanding of the end times. God loves every single person today and He doesn't want anybody to have sores and that kind of plague come on them. As long as we've got breath we are going to be motivated to preach His word and reach out in love. When we read this we don't say to ourselves, "Yes! I'm so glad! Sores! Because you deserve it!" We don't look at mankind like that in any way. God is the judge and is just in everything he does. So don't relegate this to some end time because this does happen today - the pattern here is that it gets worse and worse until eventually that bowl is poured out in its entirety.

There are seasons we go through where we see a system rise, like Nazism, and God judges that system and it falls. The same happened with communism and every other form of pagan government, and the same will continue to happen - God will continue to sound out trumpets of warning and every system of man, **including the materialism that seems to be so accepted by everyone today** but is a great evil in this world, will be judged and destroyed.

Materialism says we can be super rich but, in proportion, for every one of the super-rich there will (and are) thousands that live in poverty. When we see what people do in the name of materialism it's horrific.

We dress it up. But God will judge it and sound out trumpets; we have to see that behind the scenes the enemy is fighting the people of God and wants to get them.

We don't have to wait for the end times to see God bring his judgement. God will sound trumpets of warning and eventually judge. There are consequences to what we do. Remember, we saw in the second scene of Revelation that God is in charge of history. Do you think that every consequence of evil is the enemy having fun? No, God is supreme, he knows the beginning from the end, and if we try and apply some kind of logical way to look at it we'll fail every time.

What is our hope? Stay in Christ. If you're not in Christ, make sure you make a decision and you stay there. That's our motivation.

Sores. We think of aids as one of the examples that can be applied here. It's horrific. But it spreads through adulterous, sexual relationships and promiscuity. You can now also get it through blood transfusions and many believers and innocents have died that way. But the point is that there are consequences to the things we've done, not just in our individual lives - our lives do affect others. Our lives affect our family, our church, our community, and our nation. See how sexual promiscuity has made Aids such a problem! We can't just carry on and hope everything is fine, because those consequences are God's bowls being poured out.

This isn't about being a doomsayer and having a cold heart towards people who are hurting and who have made a mistake - God is gracious, loving, accepting, and always open. Come to him. But the truth is that, when we look at a bigger picture, if mankind continues

going in one direction God does bring His judgement on whatever it is we are doing. God is just.

Verse 3 talks about the sea looking like the blood of a corpse where every living thing died. That is quite chronic. We are seeing some of that today. Some parts of the Great Barrier Reef, which is supposed to be pristine in every way, is starting to decay; and you go to some of the third world islands, in the tropical zones, and you find they're just desert wastelands. Think of the pollution all over, oil spills, and the like. Everything that should have been a blessing to us we make into a curse. There are consequences to our way of life.

We see this continue in verse 4 - the rivers and springs became blood. In Gauteng here in South Africa there's only one river that's not classified as irrecoverable by the ecologists. Otherwise, every one of our rivers is rated a "level 7" in terms of pollution and the ecologists say these rivers cannot be recovered from the sewage, mine waste, and bad management they have suffered.

Note the end of verse 4 - the angel says, "Just are you, oh Holy One." We think, "But God's loving. Surely he should just fix up the water quickly? And make sure every sewerage plant works again so we can keep doing these things?" No, God is just, "Who is and who was and brought these judgements." God is loving and just at the same time. He perfectly balances these two characteristics.

God brings judgements and judges evil. We need to understand that this is part of his nature. Would you want him not to judge evil? What kind of systems would we be living under today, if that were the case? If God ignored evil because he was too "loving" to do anything about

it, He wouldn't be loving, He would be uninterested. We live in a broken world and God will judge man and His evil ways. The verse continues, highlighting how the wicked have spilt the blood of His people and how God gives these what they deserve.

When we fast-forward and get to the end we see evil and all the wicked thrown into a lake of fire which will burn for eternity. But up until then there are consequences for everything. God will give us what we deserve.

We can't just look at this and say, "Yes, let God judge the Nazis and Hitler and those kinds of people." That's self-righteous blindness. All of us have sinned and all of us have contributed to the evil around us. If you don't think that's true you're not thinking clearly. You're avoiding the reality. But in Christ our sins are forgiven and we can live new lives.

Verse 7 continues to talk about how God's judgements are true and just. For us who understand His love, we know His love is true and just. But if we do not accept His ways and if we continue to live with reckless abandon to every evil desire we have, we will suffer his judgement. The consequences we see in the earth today of reckless, sinful living are just reminders of what's coming in a fuller, bigger way. Remember, the book of Revelation has an upwards spiral about it - we see things happen through history little by little, gradually increasing and getting bigger, on and on until it all climaxes at the end, when the final consummation of everything takes place. But let all of these spirals be a warning.

In Luke 13 a tower (the tower of Siloam) fell and killed 14 people and they asked Jesus that, if there were believers there, where was the

justice in the event? They asked him, “How can you let a tower fall on these people, Lord?” Today, we ask things like, “How can you let the Tsunami kill believers?” But these are signs to us which point to our need to understand that God is in control, and he will judge all evil, and that we need to turn to him today.

In verse 8 we see the sun scorch people with fire. What's amazing here is that we see that people still decide not to repent or give glory to God. There are people today where that happens and they will still never give glory to God. They will remain hard-hearted.

I know we do see some of the first signs of this – solar flares; global warming (if it's true); and all these things that tell us that we're not as safe as we first thought we were. Life is precariously balanced. But Jesus is in control. And the important thing to understand is that God has a bigger agenda here. Of the seven billion people currently populating this earth, while they have breath and can hear the warning of this prophecy, they have an opportunity to repent and receive Christ. But there will come a day at the end where there's no more place for repentance and they will die and live an eternity without him in a state of torment.

So let's try and understand the wrath of God. Does it bother you? It should. But it's His nature. He has to punish sin because He is a righteous God. John 3:16 talks of how God loved the world that He gave His only son. His appeal to us is love, but the consequence of not accepting His love is wrath, because of our sin, not because He enjoys pouring out wrath.

God proved His love to us by sending His Son. Despite our fallen

world God is gathering to Himself a people that want to be with Him. In the end He will deal with rebellion, but no one needs to perish at that time - all can turn to him. **You do not have to endure the wrath of God.** If you believe in Jesus, God's wrath will not fall on you. That's proof of God's love for you.

For believers

It's important that believers get this truth out! God loves unconditionally and God has wrath on those who reject His way out.

What have believers got to look forward to at the second coming of Christ? Our rewards. We're going to be with him forever. We cannot lose our salvation because that's what God has given us already, but we can lose the extra that God wants to give us. Try and imagine that day when He calls out your name and there, in front of all of the believers, all of heaven, all of the angels, He says, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your rest and take this as your reward." What an awesome moment.

But will it be an awesome moment for you? Or will it be a moment when you gnash your teeth as Jesus tells you, "You hid your talent. You didn't use it." You can't be motivated to get on with God's work by being taught that you are going to lose your salvation. If you're saved you are always a son or daughter of God, just a naughty one if you're not serving God. So you need to repent and sort out your life. But you don't want to approach the end with no reward; you don't want him to say, "You wicked servant."

That's why, in this Gospel age, let's strip all the nonsense away and

understand things in real terms. There is one thing that's important: there are more than seven billion people on this earth and they need to hear about Jesus Christ. He has given us gifts and talents so that we can make a difference in this Gospel Age. The Book of Revelation was never written to be a sci-fi series to entertain us! It highlights a very real battle that we're in and if the enemy can get you to lose your inheritance (your reward) he has succeeded to some degree.

Live your life deliberately so when you die you die with purpose and then they won't write on your tombstone: "Whatever." For some of us our tombstone will read, "He breathed and then he stopped." Let that not be said of you!

But if you don't know Jesus

If you don't know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, you need to understand that at the end (or at your death) you are going to be separated from God forever in agony, because God judges sin. If you are a believer, Christ has become the wrath of God for you - on the cross He bore the wrath of God and the full judgement of your sin was laid on Christ. That's why, if you're not a believer, you need to take this seriously; accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord, because then when you come to that Great White Throne judgement He will say of you, "Not guilty." But if you reject Jesus He will pronounce you guilty.

Whether you're twelve years old or six years old, or ninety-two years old, you need to put your faith in Jesus now. Have you got hope? Breathe. Did you feel anything? As long as you've got breath you've got hope, because you can accept Jesus.

ARMAGEDDON

Revelation 16:10-21

10 The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish 11 and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.

12 The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. 13 And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. 14 For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. 15 (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”) 16 And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

17 The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” 18 And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. 19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. 20 And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. 21 And great

hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

We've previously discussed how the beast in verse 10 is about pagan government and false religion – a wicked system set up against God. Here we now see that none of these wicked systems last forever, God will bring his judgement on them all. We've seen this in history – the walls of communism collapsed; Nazism collapsed; even the Roman empire collapsed. Whatever else that has opposed God in times past has collapsed. And so it will continue. Nations will rise in their anger and rebellion against God and God will judge them, until the end when the final rebellion happens and God brings everything to account and sorts it out once and for all.

Today, when you look at this world, it looks like it's spun out of control. If we had to listen to the green-peace evangelists we would believe that this world is finished. If you listen to other aspects of what's going on, it seems that there is no chance of improvement and our kids have a dark future. Many countries today have a negative net growth because people don't want to have children and bring them into this evil world. Well, here's a suggestion to those people: change it! This generation ought to lay its life down for the next generation and set them up with hope. That's the Gospel!

The end of verse 10 and verse 11 is the saddest statement of all – “People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.” There comes a time when we're handed over to our sin and repentance isn't possible any more, because that's how hard our

hearts have become. We must realise that evil works itself to a point where you can say what you want and warn with trumpets and preach with everything you have, but a people absolutely refuse to repent. At the Great White Throne Judgement where Jesus will judge there are going to be people who have not accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour and for them it'll be too late, they'll be cast into the lake of fire.

Verse 12 talks about the “great river Euphrates” and this might be a difficult one to understand. We'll delve into it a bit later when we talk about Armageddon and what it means.

Verse 13 talks about three unclean spirits “like frogs.” We see that Satan is throwing out every single weapon he has against God's people – the dragon (Satan), the beast and the false prophet spew out these frogs. Now in those days and that culture, frogs were considered the most ugliest, wicked and despised creatures alive. It's a picture for how ugly these frogs, which are demonic spirits (as verse 14 explains), are. In other words, we've got to see just how ugly and wicked Satan and his demons are. These forces, these spirits, so influence the world that it puts itself up against God and his people. There are times when it seems as if the whole world is caught up in a battle, especially against God's people, and as we get towards the end it'll be like the whole world is against God.

Government and public / popular thought will resist the Church as you get closer to the end. At the time this was written, those in the seven churches it was written to were going through a time where everything was against them. They couldn't even practice their trade and go into the marketplace if they were a Christian. Everywhere they went the entertainment available would be orgies. A soldier could stop you and

ask if you have a certificate to prove that you worship Caesar and if you didn't, you could be killed on the spot. Suddenly one day they could take your mom and dad and put them in the arena and you're made to watch them torn to bits by wild animals. That's what it was like.

What's behind all this kind of wickedness? This scripture is making it clear - Satan and his demons. And that sort of thing will carry on throughout history until the end. The devil wants Christianity wiped out and he has been cast out of his position of authority walking around like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8) seeking to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10). But Jesus has come to give life and life more abundantly!

Regardless of what we face, Jesus has come to give us life and life more abundantly. It doesn't matter how things change - we will have life in Jesus Christ. This was true for the Christians back then and it's true for us. What the book of Revelation was for then it is also for us now.

We see in verse 14 that these demonic forces could perform signs. Not all miracles are from God. God's miracles point to Jesus and bring people to be born again. When it comes to God's miracles, the miracle isn't the focus, Jesus and the Gospel is. But in the case of these demonic spirits the miracles are performed for the sake of those performing them so they can win and influence people.

Verse 15 makes it clear that Jesus is coming like a thief. If you knew when a thief was coming, you would prepare for it and clobber them when they came in! But in this case we don't know - only the Father knows when Jesus will come again. We can't just put things off and do

what we want to do. No, we need to be prepared; we need to keep at it; we cannot give up this Gospel; we must keep working out our salvation; we must keep loving, keep preaching and keep going, no matter how many frogs come at us!

Armageddon

Now for verse 16, which has been totally misunderstood. When we see that word “Armageddon” there's so much confusion around what this means. Most of us think of it as this end-time catastrophe, a big war, and every time we see a country parading its nuclear weapons we get scared. There have been so many count-downs to Armageddon and we use it as a catch-phrase to explain the end of the world and a catastrophe that's going to wipe us all out.

But we need a good Biblical understanding.

A historical geography lesson

So where is Armageddon? To the east of Israel is the Euphrates river (remember, this also links to verse 12). It's a river that always runs, through every season, so you expect it always to be there. The river served as a natural border and deterrent against Israel's enemies, most of which came from its east. So its enemies had to always come through this great river Euphrates to get to Israel and it served as a protection - it wasn't easy for the enemy to come through. If they did get through they would land in the valley of Megiddo - a great plain. So this would be the place of many battles and wars, and there have been wars there throughout history.

We can see that God is using this as a picture (and this valley would have been well known at the time) to say that there are going to be times where the protection for God's people will seem like it's has dried up and disappeared (verse 12) and the enemy will come through. It would seem as if evil has dumped itself on God's people and all is lost. Armageddon represents this valley of battle (it's a picture of the valley of Megiddo) but it's a spiritual battle, not a physical war.

Most see it as a physical war because of the interpretation we've been exposed to - something along the lines of the church being raptured with a little remnant staying behind; for seven years the anti-christ rules and then there will be a literal war in the valley of Megiddo against Israel and the remnant of Christians; and in this middle of this great war God will blow his trumpet and Jesus will come back. But this is all based on a misinterpretation of the book of Daniel and bad exegesis of this passage in Revelation. The principle is right but it's applied incorrectly - Armageddon is referring to a spiritual battle that takes place, not a great big world war that will one day take place.

Ephesians 6: 10 - 13

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

We don't interpret this passage literally - we don't physically put on an

armour - so why should we interpret Revelation 16, which is from a book that uses picture-language, literally? The Bible says that there will be wars and rumours of wars, but there is no indication in scripture of a physical war taking place at the end. It's a spiritual battle. All that is going on in the world is about a spiritual battle taking place behind the scenes, and that's what this scripture is showing us.

There's a battle taking place and at some point the Euphrates - the church's supernatural protection - will dry up and evil will spill in and spiritual lives will be in danger. But God will rescue. Scripture cannot mean something different to us for what it meant to its original recipients. If we think it means something different because we live in a modern world, then we start coming up with all sorts of science-fiction theories about what this all means. This letter had to make sense for its original recipients and it's within that context that it makes sense to us.

An example of bad exegesis from current thought and teachings

Let's take an example to show how, if we think the scripture means something different today to what it meant in the days it was written, where that kind of interpretation leads.

There have been many people who claim to be part of a new 'reformational' way forward that say that if Paul was alive today, and he knew what we apparently know about homosexuality today (that apparently it's a genetic thing), he wouldn't have written what he wrote about the topic in Romans 1 and other places. In other words, he would have interpreted the time differently. But do you think God never

knew that, in generations to come, there would be a scientific theory about homosexuality being genetic, when he inspired Paul to write Romans 1? Of course not. Those verses apply today just as much as they did then.

Does that mean we're against homosexuals? Never! We want to see them come in and turn to Christ, just like we want to see adulterers turn to Christ, or gossipers turn to Christ. It's as if, sometimes, adulterers or gossipers are more welcome in the church than homosexuals. God loves all and wants all to be a part of his people!

Principles of interpretation

We have to stick to the premise of scripture. So our first principle of interpretation is that it can't mean something different to us today, it must mean the same thing it meant then. So we can't say that '666' as another example is a barcode or some kind of technology. It didn't mean that to the original recipients! It stood as a code for evil taken to its most wicked extremes. It means the same today.

The second principle of interpretation is to use scripture to interpret scripture. So let's do that here. We know now that Megiddo is where conquerors would land after crossing the Euphrates. Many in history did this - it goes right back to Pharaoh Thutmose. The crusaders of the middle-ages fought many of their battles at Megiddo. Napoleon even called it "the most natural battlefield of the whole earth." Barak defeated the armies of Canaan there. This is where Saul lost his life and where Josiah was fatally wounded in the Old Testament. It's also where the Roman emperor landed to sack Jerusalem.

This is a place of fierce, horrible war, where good and evil clash. That's the principle and it's being used to show us something spiritual. Those in the first century would have understood that it meant a place where you fought and that there is going to be a spiritual Megiddo. There have been many spiritual Megiddos and there will be more, but there will be a final one at the end, where the church's protection seems like it's gone and all the frogs / false spirits and arguments and lies pour out over the church, so that we even question whether Jesus is real.

But the encouragement is this: when that happens, hang in there! Keep your robe of righteousness on (verse 15)! Jesus is going to come like a thief, when no one expects, so don't give up! We're in Megiddo but we will overcome! Jesus has overcome this world!

Conclusions from this sixth bowl

Here is the conclusion of all this: Satan is always wanting to destroy the church. We must settle this in our hearts. When evil comes lurking at your door, he's not there for your good; when the temptation to move the finances from a dead business account into your account comes, or any temptation, it's not going to end well. One day God will allow Satan a time to oppress the church in an unprecedented way and we must know that God is dealing with something here and he knows why people must suffer like this. But it won't last very long and it won't succeed; communism seemed like it was the antichrist system to stay which would wipe out everything and we all thought there would be a nuclear war and we dug shelters. That's gone. But now there are different things to deal with.

The seventh bowl

In all the scenes in the book of Revelation we see six events take place where evil rises and then on the seventh judgement day arrives, where God sorts it all out. In this scene we see that judgement from the point of view of evil and wicked people.

Verse 17 says "It is done!" Let that reverberate around the universe, bounce off every galaxy, and be the cry of every star. Verse 18 and 19 shows how Babylon is judged. Remember, Babylon is a picture in the Bible that represents evil and the seduction of sin. In those days they would even call Rome "Babylon". We see Babylon made to drink the cup of God's wrath - every last drop. He has poured out His wrath until this point but now He finishes it, pouring it out completely, dealing with evil forever.

Verse 20 talks about how every island flees, which is a picture of how even the immovable moves when God brings His judgement. Things you thought could never move will move. Who would have thought, as a believer in East Germany, that communism would crumble? But the immovable was moved and the wall came down and people could serve God once more.

Verse 21 shows how evil refuses to repent and will continue to curse God. From the point of a believer in Jesus, the worst thing that can happen is death. Do you have uncertainty about death today? If you do then on this judgement day you will curse God because it would be too late to turn to him. But the good news is that you're breathing today and that means there is hope - you can receive Jesus today as your Lord and Saviour and then no longer have to fear death.

The seventh bowl shows us that history will run to a climax and there will be an end point, where sin and wickedness is ruined and destroyed forever.

The scariest of them all

This fifth scene is the scariest and most cataclysmic of them all. So let's get some sanity in our hearts. Here are three things from this fifth scene that we should take note of:

1. It reminds us that our safety is found in the Lord Jesus Christ alone

Hear that. This is our message to the city, the nations, and all we meet. The only place of eternal security is in Jesus Christ alone who says, "I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes through the father except through me." (John 14:6.) Your safety is not in good deeds, in shelters, or a religion; that's a frog that's been spewed out and which misleads. It's a lie. There's only one way and his name is Jesus.

2. It ought to make us feel very sorry for the world

When you see these things and what's going on and see men stand up and make statements, men like Hitler and so on, it should make us feel sorry for them and hope for their salvation.

3. It ought to make us very grateful for our salvation

We should always have something to rejoice about. These mild things we go through that sometimes seem so great, let's sort these out. We have the ability to do that with our salvation.

4. We ought to know that the best thing we can do in the world today is bring the Gospel

Is it true that the best thing we can do for our world today is kiss it goodbye, holding onto our salvation and crying, "Burn, baby burn!" as we fly with Jesus in the sky when we're raptured? No! We're not called to do that! The best thing we can do for our world is preach the Gospel, laying our lives down for this Gospel.

We need to apply this to everything we do - the jobs we choose, who we choose to marry, etc. We need to ask: how can this decision count towards the Gospel? Don't worry about the troubles of our lives, those things that keep us ensnared, get the Gospel out! Nations are waiting. Johannesburg is waiting! Wherever we have the opportunity, we are here for the sake of the Gospel.

Let this weigh heavy on your heart, because it should.

Scene 6: Seven Words of Triumph

THE GREAT PROSTITUTE

As we cover the sixth scene in Revelation we're going to talk about cities. In the book of Genesis we see that everything begins in a garden but in the end – in this book of Revelation – it ends with a city. If you want to impact a nation these days you must impact its cities. We see Paul employ this sort of strategy by reaching the commercial junctions. There are influencing cities around the world – if you reach New York, you reach North America; if you reach Johannesburg, you reach South Africa; and so on.

Business people are able to get into these places through their abilities and be like Priscilla and Aquila from the Bible. We must keep this in mind. All the gifts in the church must be working – not just the gift of preaching. So let's think of Apostolic Christianity as we address this next part of the book of Revelation, Revelation 17:1-19:10 (Scene Six).

Babylon the Harlot

This passage continues to show us what comes against God's people. In the preceding chapters we've been introduced to Satan, then the beast of pagan government, then the beast of false religion, and now we are introduced to the great prostitute, which is a description of the seduction of sin and the systems of sin. Humankind, and even the Church, is seduced into this sin, and we've got to guard our hearts against it.

“Babylon” is the city mentioned here because, in the Bible, this city represents everything that is related to worldly indulgence. This was a city where wickedness was celebrated as good, wholesome and healthy.

The fifth thing that comes against the church are men and women who have the “mark of the beast”. These are people who hate God. These days you can't stand in a city and not feel that, amidst all the hurting and broken people, that there are people who hate God and resist Him. It's not just the dragon (Satan) who resists Christ, or governments or religions, but also people who carry a mark of rebellion against God.

As Revelation continues to build towards a climax the big question is: Who is going to win? The dragon Satan? Or Jesus? This chapter and the rest of the book answers this question. It's not that difficult though - Christ wins and we win.

We need that to settle deep inside of us so that when the book of Revelation shows us a world in turmoil and the antichrist ruling and reigning with the beasts and this great prostitute, we won't be afraid to continue the fight.

Revelation 17:

“1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgement of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.”

This talks of how all people, everywhere, have been seduced into the same things. They are drunk with the wine of the great prostitute's sin. That sin looks like a golden goblet and is very attractive, but as Christians we must remember that as you drink that cup, you will die. And we must tell people about that! Don't be deceived by the nature of this golden cup.

3 And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. 5 And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."

This woman is the mother of all the abominations you find in the world. The enemy has studied human nature very carefully and has created systems for our downfall that are massive and well-thought out.

If you were in one of those seven churches in Asia Minor who this letter was originally written to, you would understand that Satan has put this prostitute in place to affect everything. This prostitute even rides on the back of government. Today we see how everything has been corrupted - all businesses, governments, and so forth. It doesn't matter where you work or what you're involved in, you're pushing against some corruption somewhere.

This great prostitute is not a person but is a picture of a system. It's not that one day we are going to see some woman riding around and

we'll know that's the one! Some interpretations have tried to uncover who this person is but it represents a seductive sinful system that we are all in danger of falling into.

6 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marvelled greatly.

She makes people drunk. And note that she, too, is drunk. Her whole design is to make you stumble and if you don't stumble, she (this system) is going to come at you with everything she has, using government or everything she can. She finds pleasure in doing this.

7 But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. 8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

Here we see the nature of the beast of pagan government - it was, is not, and rises. This shows us how pagan governments rise and fall and throughout history we've seen this. All kinds of evil governments have risen and fallen - Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Rome; and in our modern times, even communism. These things will continue to come and go but there will come a time when they will rise from the pit (they come from hell) and they will attempt one more time to affect everything. Then, afterwards, they will be judged once-for-all.

9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated;

Remember, John is writing to people in the first century and the pagan government of their day - Rome - was built on seven hills. So he is talking about them to show us what's taking place behind the scenes.

10 they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while.

The beast employs kings and the horns here represent power. This is saying that there were kings and they fell, but others will come, and one day an antichrist will come and rule over these. More on this below.

11 As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. 12 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast.

There is going to be a time when everything will climax but the influence of these wicked things is only 'one hour'. It's not long, it's short. This is all running according to God's programme and he allows these things to rise for the purposes of salvation - so that people will come to him and receive the Gospel and be saved. These things function for God's purposes to warn people and bring them to him.

In his sovereignty God does everything to ensure in this Gospel age

that the Gospel spreads to all nations. He doesn't do this to cause confusion. Through persecution the Jerusalem church went out and the church of Antioch was planted. (Acts 11.) God works through everything for the purpose of bringing salvation to all.

13 These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. 14 They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."

We've got to make sure we don't get caught up in the wrong things here. There are many interpretations available which try and guess who this prostitute is and who these horns are etc. But the focus is the Lamb! The Lamb who will overcome!

We must come to the scriptures to understand the times - not the media, because even the media is influenced by all these systems. We are those who understand the times and give people hope. That hope is that there is only one king of Kings, which is Jesus! And those with him are chosen, called and faithful. That's us!

15 And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.

The enemy wants to get to every people group. This prostitute is influencing everyone. But there's only one king and one Lord.

16 And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and

devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, 17 for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. 18 And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.

Here we see that, even though the kings worked together and worked with the beasts and prostitute, now they all turn against each other. Evil eventually just fights with itself. There's no success story from anyone who has drunk from that great prostitute's cup.

But aren't you glad that the end of verse 17 is there? "...until the words of God are fulfilled." Even wickedness fighting with itself like this is according to God's pattern. Remember, the Lamb opened the scroll of history (Revelation 5) and it's God who has it all under control. In the meantime, our job is to overcome by the power of the Blood - the Gospel.

The challenge

On the day that Jesus died, God called every single person to salvation. But if you die without him, that call is over.

The first challenge is that if you don't know God, sonship and daughtership is waiting for you. Accept Jesus today and you will escape the judgement to come.

The second challenge is to Christians. Note that verse 14 calls us 'chosen'. We are **all** chosen - not just the bright sparks. We're all chosen to do good works. We're chosen to bear fruit. We're all chosen

in our vocations to bear fruit. This is how we overcome - not by building shelters and stocking up fresh water, but by taking advantage of salvation and bearing fruit.

The Bible talks about being faithful or faith-filled (Luke 18:8). What are you leaving behind you? A trail of faithfulness to God? He is looking for that in our hearts - not accomplishment or building empires or nest eggs or earthly inheritances. He is looking for us to be men and women of faith. Are we a people who are full of faith in this King?

It's good to keep in mind the contrasting natures of the dragon, Satan and our Lord Jesus. The thief, Satan, comes to kill and destroy; but Jesus has come to give life forevermore (John 10).

As we look at evil don't forget about God. (John 4:8.) God is love. Our motivation is always love; the enemy's is deception, fear and seduction. We're motivated by love and go to the nations with the Gospel for the sake of love. We don't scare people into heaven. We're not motivated by fear either, we fear God.

Only God's Kingdom is eternal. Daniel 2:31 - 45 talks of empires that are crushed into pieces by a rock which grows into a mountain and shall "stand forever". That rock is Christ Jesus and His Kingdom. It will always stand.

If you look across the world you see materialism, or Islam, or humanism, and many other systems. But the rock of Jesus smashes those and in the end he fills the whole earth. We must apply this personally.

THE FALL OF EVIL

In the last few chapters we've seen serious warnings to mankind - if you continue to do evil you're going to be dealt with because God eventually brings evil to an end. We were introduced to the beats of pagan government and false religion, and to a prostitute - the harlot, Babylon - which symbolises the seduction of sin and how the enemy uses this, flaunting sin in an attractive way. Prostitutes don't dress in safari suits, but are dressed to tempt and draw people to themselves. That's the picture being used here.

Don't just think of the harlot in terms of sexual sin. Today too many of us bow our knee to money and materialism or a host of other things. God wants all that out of the church. We see how this harlot rides the beast - pagan government and false religion - and rises up and seduces. Think of how seductive materialism is. That's a pagan system that is ruling over many people today. "Babylon" represents a city and many cities of the world today have set the standard and are like puppet masters who pull the strings. Think carefully about all this symbolism and your own heart.

And remember it's all going to fall. We saw that the great prostitute will be defeated in the last section and we saw that fleshly indulgent people and societies are doomed. If we're caught up with these we will also come under judgement. It doesn't matter how mighty, deceptive or strong and impenetrable Babylon seems - like Jericho, no one thought it could fall, no war machines could defeat it - but God had a way and it fell. So Babylon will fall. When scripture says it, whether you believe it or not, it's going to happen.

God's people must avoid Babylon's sins. There's a system along with Kingdom principles we teach, which goes against the system which we are subjected to on a daily basis through our entertainment, media and so on. What do we do? Build communities and separate ourselves from this evil world? No.

This is all going somewhere. Revelation 19 shows us where - the return of Christ. At his second coming there's a Great White Throne Judgement and rewards handed out to believers, and we see the marriage feast of the Lamb. There will come a day when we can all see him face to face and connect with him personally in a bigger and more real way than today. He will be our light; there won't be a single tear - no pain and heartache but just pure joy in his presence.

Too many times our hope and joy comes from Babylon - a full pocket, debt paid, free car, a winning lotto ticket. But we are to take joy in the Second Coming! That should be our real hope! Even when we have an empty pocket and are up to our ears in debt! Money systems and economy systems and the ownership of things are all nothing in the end, they will fizzle away to nothing. None of those go past the Second Coming. Isn't that wonderful? None of this will last.

But if your hope is in the economy systems and the ownership of things, you will struggle to be glad in the fact that one day it will disappear. Look at your heart closely - no one can serve two masters; you cannot serve both God and money. (Matthew 6:24.) You can substitute anything else there as well - you cannot serve both God and your own selfish ambitions. You cannot serve both God and your iPhone. You cannot serve both God and sex. Make a decision.

We're not called to exterminate Babylon or evil but are called to rejoice at the fact that there's justice in the Kingdom of Heaven. Evil will not prevail. Even today, when it seems as if it does prevail, the reality is it won't. The Psalmist Asaph lamented how evil people just seem to get richer and fatter and have no problems (Psalm 73) but then God shows him that their end is ruin. Asaph saw things in light of eternity and realised that evil comes to nothing. We need to always remember that.

The Fall of Babylon

Revelation 18

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*ⁿ¹
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.”*

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.*

As you can see here, nothing that the enemy has done will be forgotten. It will all be dealt with at the judgement. God is storing up wrath for evil and will be just on that day.

*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.'*

Can you see the smug attitude here? "I sit as a queen... and mourning I shall never see." You can even see that kind of attitude in some people. Sometimes we even feel that way about evil and its systems. In the Bible you can see it in King Agrippa (Acts 26: 1 - 29) - he gets an opportunity to accept Christ but mocks Paul for thinking that he could be converted so soon. History shows us that he went on to be the governor of Pompey and there a volcano exploded, killing him. Let's hope that he remembered Paul's message in those final moments.

*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.*

Evil will be thrown into this lake of fire. The judge will judge! Evil will be dealt with! Are you ready for this day?

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 judgement has come.”*

On many occasions people have looked with horror at cities that seemed as though they could never fall. But they fell. In a single hour judgement. Babylon. Rome. And many others. We think the systems of this world can never fail? No, it can fall in a single hour. Some of us today might have our hope in some of the great cities around the world but they will all fall and bow their knee to the King of Kings.

11 And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, 12 cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.

Today we could add iPads, Ferraris, Mazaratis, Aston Martins, clean cut suits, etc. to this list. But note the mention of slaves. Isn't that interesting? Today humans are still commodities that we trade with. We have human trafficking but we also have corporate slavery. This is very real. People are manipulated at the office to serve the machine. And also, how many men and women give up their lives to the materialistic god that is out there? They are now successful and treat other people like nothing more than a commodity. They sacrifice their family and their future for *stuff*. Statistics show that when a man reaches the peak of his career he usually divorces his wife. We trade in human beings and the enemy takes delight in that.

*14 "The fruit for which your soul longed
has gone from you,
and all your delicacies and your splendours
are lost to you,
never to be found again!"*

*15 The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will
stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud*

There are times when this has happened through history but there will be a defining moment when Babylon and its systems will be dealt with once-for-all. But while that should fill us with joy we should always remember the people involved and how they can turn to Christ and not be a part of the judgement that will fall on Babylon. We are motivated by love for them. We want to see the Gospel go out to all the world.

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.*

Again, it all came down in a single hour. In a moment and God can bring down any system.

20 *Rejoice over her, O heaven,
and you saints and apostles and prophets,
for God has given judgement for you against her!"*

All these centuries of persecution will finally come to an end. We are valuable and precious to God. We are the apple of his eye. At last God will bring the suffering to an end.

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*

Babylon will be found no more! Never again will it rise up! There's nothing wrong with harpists and musicians (verse 22) – this refers to both seduction and blindness. While the world lives under the oppression of Babylon, Babylon is having a party. That will come to an end. And the sound of the mill will be heard there no more. Its ways of seducing and keeping captive – its sorcery – will collapse utterly and completely.

*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.”*

As you can see the end of verse 23 speaks of 'sorcery'. All of its sorcery, its manipulation, its seduction, will come to an end. And the merchants, the “great ones of the earth” who used this system for their own ends, they will be judged along with it. God will not overlook the part they played.

We are called to be holy

There's a challenge here to believers and that is our call to be holy.

Revelation 18:4

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;*

2 Corinthians 7:1

1 Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

1 Peter 13:16

13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your

conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

Holiness does not mean that in our own strength we try and stop swearing or look angry. The grace of God we received at salvation is the strength we have to keep committing to Christ through everything that happens, and through that inward mechanism we see our behaviour change. Our hearts change first, then our behaviour changes. We have been given new desires where we want to be holy and that means we belong to only one, which is Christ. We don't belong to materialism or hedonism or astrology or anything else.

Babylon and the beasts will always exist until the end, but we must not allow ourselves to be polluted by them. We carry the name of God not the mark of the Beast. Whenever evil desires have crept in we need to take control of them, repent, ask for forgiveness, and live in the light of Christ, not in the darkness of these things.

So the challenge is that we must come out of this world and live in Christ's light. Much more can be said about holiness but space does not allow for detail here. Come out lest you share in Babylon's sins and in her plagues.

Evil has now come to an end and the final part of this sixth scene opens to rejoicing and praise to the King.

Rejoicing in Heaven

Revelation 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 judgements 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.”*

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 worshipped 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.”*

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 reigns.*

*7 Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;*

*8 it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure”–
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*

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.

Look at the description of worship - it sounded like the roar of many waters, like mighty peals of thunder. Worship and praise should define us. We need to be far more spontaneous in our worship and less focused on ourselves or how we look. We ought to be the most joyful people on the planet because we are safe and secure in Jesus.

Look at verse 6 - 9: who is invited to this? Everyone. But who accepts the invitation? Those who accept Jesus - that's how you accept the invitation. You can't RSVP in any other way. And how many people do accept? A great multitude! That's exciting!

Scene 7: Seven Visions of Victory

THE TRIUMPHANT CHRIST

The second last scene of Revelation shows us seven visions of victory. Let's delve into it:

Revelation 19:11- 21:8

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. 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. 14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down 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.

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." 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 worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. 21 And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

This scene starts with Christ as triumphant. He has conquered, is conquering, and will conquer (verse 16). The whole message of Revelation is how we conquer in him. Isn't the rider on a white horse a beautiful picture of Christ? He came as a lamb to be slaughtered but now we see him full of victory, with victory coming out of his mouth - his Word being preached, bringing victory wherever he goes.

Believers are seated with Christ in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6). 1 Thessalonians 5 says a trumpet will sound and the heavens will be split, and he will come with a train behind him of those who have gone before us and died in Christ, and we'll be caught up in the sky to meet him. The point here is the clear victory of Jesus and that one day he will wrap everything up.

The visions of victory come quickly here. Verse 17 gives us the second vision of victory and verse 19 brings us the third. Jesus is dealing with evil quickly and decisively - there's no big battle or drawn-out war. The beast and the false prophet - pagan government and false religion - directed by the dragon, Satan, try and make war against Christ but fail quickly. They get together and give authority to kings of the earth (that would include rulers of business and so on) but they are dealt with and thrown into the lake of fire. All of them.

Revelation 20:

1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

The fourth vision starts at 20:1 and that dragon, Satan, is bound for “a thousand years”. There's a lot of confusion around this. Theologians call this the “Millennium”.

We need to remember the context here. Revelation 12 showed us that Satan was bound, which referred to the first coming of Jesus. Since each scene in this book shows us the same thing again, in a spiral, we are seeing the same thing here again. Throughout the Gospel Age Satan is being bound, continually. It doesn't matter what system of this world is dominating, the Gospel brings these systems down sooner or later. This means that the Millennium here isn't a literal thousand years but refers to the Gospel Age. It's symbolic of a long period of time where the Gospel goes out.

We know this because, at the time this was written, a “thousand years” signified a time with an unknown end. It was what the number meant in apocalyptic literature then and so it has the same meaning today.

During this Gospel Age - the time we're living in now - the enemy can't do whatever he likes. He is like a dog on a leash - if you come close to him and give in, he will devour you; but he only has a sphere of

influence, he can't roam free. The devil does not operate with full power and authority. He was bound at the first coming – put on a leash – and only has power and authority if you give in. And if you give in, his power and authority will dominate you! But it's in the Gospel that we have freedom!

Pre-millennialism / dispensational pre-millennialism

In the second chapter of this book (“Interpretive views of Revelation”) we covered the different ways of looking at this scripture, in an effort to provide an overall interpretative method for the book. This chapter is a key chapter in deciding which view best fits the Biblical picture.

Some views of this scripture revolve around Christ returning before the Millennium, which will be a golden age of peace and prosperity in the world. After this golden age the devil will be set loose and then Christ will defeat him. Others say that there is a tribulation after a rapture, or a rapture in the middle of a seven-year tribulation where there is no Holy Spirit in the world; and some feel the rapture is only after the tribulation and then there are a thousand years of bliss before Satan comes again for one final showdown and then there is a second coming. All these views separate the rapture from the second coming and fit under the 'pre-millennial' label. Pre-millennialism is very popular today and is probably the dominant view, especially in the form of dispensational pre-millennialism. “Dispensationalism” just means that God has dealt with man in different ways in different time periods. It makes a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church and is very concerned with how Israel will come to believe in Jesus and how Israel fits into the last things.

Separating the rapture and second coming makes things very confusing as it can lead you to see two, three, or even four times where Jesus comes back. It's not easy to fit all the pieces together under pre-millennialism, which makes the book of Revelation too mysterious and muddled. But the book is for our encouragement and understanding - it shouldn't be difficult to understand, otherwise it wouldn't have been relevant for the original recipients or for us.

But when you look at the Millennium as a symbol for the Gospel Age it fits in much more correctly with the whole narrative of scripture, and the book of Revelation becomes as relevant for us today as it was in the day it was written.

Non-Literal 1000 Years: Amillennialism

FIRST
COMING

SATAN
BOUND
AT THE
CROSS



SATAN BOUND THROUGH THE PREACHING
OF THE GOSPEL TO THE NATIONS (MT 28)

"1000 YEARS" / THE GOSPEL AGE

SECOND
COMING

NEXT
RESURRECTION

GREAT
WHITE
THRONE

REWARDS

LAKE OF
FIRE

NEW
HEAVEN
NEW
EARTH

TRIBULATION

FIRST RESURRECTION

REVELATION

As explained in the second chapter of this study on Revelation (Interpretive views of Revelation) we have taken an Amillennial view in this study. The thousand years is not a literal thousand years but a figurative number for the Gospel Age. At the end of the Gospel Age there will be a tribulation and then the second coming, the Great White Throne Judgement, rewards for believers and the Lake of Fire for those who rejected Christ. Then the New Heaven and New Earth.

Note that certain Post-millennial views are similar except post-millennialists generally believe there will be no tribulation at the end (they believe the tribulation occurred in the first century). There are plenty of resources available online or at the book store if you wish to study Post-millennialism in detail.

The visions continue

4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

The fifth vision opens up at verse 4. Notice that there is a resurrection.

It can be tempting to put this into some kind of timeline but that will confuse you. The point is this: we who are in Christ will rise with Him and will live with him and in the wonderful future he has for us. But the opposite applies to those who don't serve him - they will have a resurrection too, but to judgement.

In this Gospel Age when we die we are resurrected to reign with Christ - not bodily but spiritually. This is an immediate resurrection - you go to heaven and wait for God to decide when the second coming will be. You don't go to a bus stop or sit in purgatory, you go to be with Christ - if you are a Christian. If you're not a Christian then you wait in a purgatory for judgement. This all the first resurrection.

The second resurrection is a general resurrection. We will (if we have died beforehand) return with Christ when He comes again and this time (you can read this in John 5:28, 29) it will be a bodily resurrection.

Then we will have final judgement. We're not sure exactly when this happens but the point is to know which side of the judgement you're going to be on. If you accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour you know which side you're going to be on. You have already passed through that judgement ahead of time and will only be judged for your rewards. Those who are outside of Christ, however, will be resurrected for a second death - the Lake of Fire. But those in Christ are called out with the book of life and then get rewards and enter into the new heavens and new earth.

You can't swap around the first and second coming, the new heaven and earth, and the judgement. These will take place. The important thing, however, is are you ready for that judgement? As a believer you

want to hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” You don't want to get there as a believer and get no rewards from God - God has called every church in every church age everywhere to conquer evil with the Gospel. That means every believer is called to conquer. Not to tolerate or get involved with the world; not to slip back or have one foot here and one foot there, seeing how much you can get away with and still get to heaven. Sure, you can do that, but you will get there with no reward.

The Defeat of Satan

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, 10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

The dragon, Satan, is now finally dealt with, along with all his weapons and systems. But first there is an end-time tribulation (vs 7 - 8) . Satan throws everything he can at Christ, the Gospel, and the Church. It's the final rising up of evil but it is squashed once-for-all.

Note that this rebellion and surrounding of the camp of the saints (the Church) doesn't have much exhaustive detail. There's not much of a battle - they surround the Church and then are consumed by fire from

Jesus. The devil throws everything he can at the Church but Jesus easily sorts him out and rebellious mankind. Don't let this part scare you – Satan is let loose for a while to deceive the nations, but his efforts amount to nothing in the end.

For us now we must realise that this world is about trouble. You are guaranteed to get trouble here. The more you preach the Gospel the more you get into trouble. The more you get to the centre of what God wants the more trouble comes your way. But nothing can stand against Jesus.

The Great White Throne Judgement

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. 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. 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. 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.

Verse 11 opens up with the sixth vision. We then see that every single person stands before this throne. There is no door on the side which you can use to escape! Does that fill you with fear? Make sure it's a

godly fear, not a hopeless fear. Pause and consider. If you don't know Jesus then verse 15 is going to happen to you. But you can know Jesus right now and avoid that. In a moment things can change - just make a decision.

As a believer in Christ you should read verse 15 and be filled with motivation to *be* the Church, not just come to church. You should be filled with motivation to be hope, to be love, to be whatever we celebrate in church in the neighbourhoods and nations where God will send us.

The New Heaven and the New Earth

Revelation 21:

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling 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. 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."

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." 6 And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without

payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death."

We now see the seventh vision. The new Jerusalem is the Bride of Christ - the Church. His dwelling place will be with us. This is why he created us! And we will have a personal, intimate relationship with God like never before.

Are you thirsty (verse 6)? We need to be thirsty. Our thirst cannot be satisfied outside of the King. Nothing in this world or ourselves or even the supernatural in the world today will satisfy. Here you've got to ask yourself: what are you going to in an effort to satisfy your thirst? Stuff? A philosophy? A good spouse? Doing good deeds? None of that is going to satisfy. Only Jesus quenches your thirst.

Believe it or not, if you're not experiencing a thirst, the enemy is messing with your mind. Remember the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32)? He was reduced to enjoying supper with pigs - that's where he found himself. It was then that he realised that he had an unquenchable thirst in him and that the women, the bank, the drugs, and nothing else was going to quench it. So he went straight back to his father. Did the father beat him with the heavenly, righteous shambok? No, everyone who thirsts he will satisfy. He told everyone to bring the robe and put it on the prodigal son. When God looked at that son he saw righteousness because of Christ; He put a ring on his finger, which symbolises authority and sonship, and said he was not a slave. He

commanded that there should be a celebration!

To those who thirst and conquer He gives a heritage; a reward. God hasn't called us to be Christians to just bide our time, but He has called us to conquer in every sphere of life. Are we always victorious? Maybe not, but we get up again and we fight another round. We can't sit week by week to stay in the same place.

But as for the cowardly (verse 8) they see a different end. But in Christ we are free! Don't die without Christ! Come back to him!

These key events are all end time concepts that God wants us to be familiar with and they're foundational to our faith. As a result, they shouldn't be an issue for us. We can be clear about them and don't need to be confused with all the theories out there. The scriptures are trustworthy and true, not the commentators.

The encouragement to preach

The final picture God wants us to be left with here is that Christ is conquering the nations on his white horse and we are with Him doing this. That's very exciting. That's part of our mandate for now - to go into all the world and preach this victorious Gospel and bring freedom to all. Because this Gospel is able to defeat every kind of wickedness that puts itself up against God.

Scene 8: Seven Glimpses of Glory

COME

Revelation is a revelation from Jesus and of Jesus. It's Him that is working all the way through to the end. He is the beginning, the middle and the end of everything.

The book of Revelation is about encouraging us in this present age called the Gospel Age. It does this by giving us big picture realities - who Jesus is; who holds history in His hands (Jesus); who is working against us (the devil); what the future looks like (we win); the promise of a new heavens and new earth.

In this present age there will be tribulation as there has always been, and there will be a great day of tribulation in the future. We, God's people, are looking forward to the resurrection. At that resurrection Jesus will finally bring wickedness to an end. There will be a Great White Throne judgement and then the new heavens and new earth.

The final scene of the book of Revelation is the eighth scene. Why eight scenes? Because there are seven days in the week and the new week starts again on the eighth day. It's using picture language - you could also say that this eighth scene is the first scene of the new future God has for us.

It's important to know that history is in the hands of Jesus. There's no event in this world that catches God by surprise. Scene eight shows us seven glimpses of glory; of what's coming. We're all hoping that one day this world will finally be set in order and there will be peace, and

that hope and longing of every human person has been built into us to point to our needed relationship with God.

But that hope and longing has also led to so many theories and philosophies about the afterlife as people avoid God. For example, Hinduism's Nirvana (heaven) has you go through several reincarnations until you reach the highest caste (Brahma). The one caste below that lives for 32 billion years before moving into eternity (Brahma). Religions are all fascinated with that future. Our Muslim friends are fascinated with a future with three rivers, treasures and virgins and all kinds of pleasures.

We need to sweep all those philosophies and ideas aside and allow scripture to impress our hearts. In this final passage of Revelation it says we should never add to or take away from this revelation. This shows us how important what's written here is. Don't add fanciful thoughts and imagination to this. Don't bring in sci-fi theories or all sorts of other things. Let the word of God be the ultimate authority. Let the scriptures influence you around pictures of heaven and not the leagues of books out there that try to interpret scriptures. Let the scriptures paint the picture for you, don't paint a picture over the scriptures.

With all respect to sincere people who claim to have gone to heaven and have written a book about it, we've got to sweep that aside because that often becomes our bible. As much as the Bible contains is as much as God wants us to know. Even when Paul says he got caught up to the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2) he says he was not permitted to speak about details. Yet today there's too much of this sort of thing, because we're curious and don't find satisfaction in what

we read in the scriptures. But that's actually because we don't read the scriptures properly and have a revelation of hell and heaven by another person who claims to have gone there. Let the Bible be your revelation, not the latest person who claims to have gone to heaven or hell!

The scriptures are sufficient to give us hope and a desire for what's coming.

1 Corinthians 2:9

*"No eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him"*

Let that excite your heart - we can't even imagine what God has for us! Let's lay the books aside and look at the scriptures, letting God reveal what He chooses to reveal by His Spirit. At times God enlarges aspects of these things - for example, heaven is all about God, not about personal benefits and freedoms. Some people talk about how you can sit in heaven and eat and never get full or tired, but imagine if heaven was just about food? How disappointing. Some of us think that heaven is just the absence of things we don't like. No. Heaven is the presence of God and in that there's a complete absence of evil.

Revelation 21:9 - 22:21

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11

having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare; its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. 18 The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates

*will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26
They will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. 27
But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what
is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the
Lamb's book of life.*

We can see that, in the end, there's an amazing marriage that takes place between Jesus and the Church. The bride is also a city (the New Jerusalem). So we can see the use of symbolism here and this picture of a city and the description of it is to help us understand that heaven is a place where we experience God forever and we live in His beauty, glory, and love.

There are hints at perfection. "Foursquare" points to a perfect cube. Transparent glass is a symbolic picture of the redeemed - both those in the Old Testament and New Testament are here, together, and Jesus Christ is our light. In scientific terms, can you imagine that? How can you think of a person being your light? So this is symbolic language - light is Revelation, truth, pure righteousness and holiness. In other words, He is our everything. If there is no light there is no life. The energy of this earth comes from the sun. He is our sustenance; he fills us.

The book of life

We need to pause here for a moment. God is showing that this is the conclusion of everything - of this Gospel Age. Christ will come and set everything right and those who in this age who accept Jesus are those who will end up in this beautiful city (the Church). Is your name written in the Lamb's Book of Life? It's not difficult to get it there - accept

Christ into your heart as Lord and Saviour. Forget about good deeds and gifts and bribery and good thoughts. Wipe that all aside because there's only one way - Jesus. Otherwise your name will not be in this Book of Life and this final day will be a day of terror, not beauty and hope fulfilled, because you will be cast into a lake of fire and spend eternity in suffering. God is judge - He wrote the book; He understands human nature; He loves us and wants us to spend eternity with Him - that's why He sent his son who did everything to ensure that our names could be in that Book of Life. The choice is yours.

We often lead double lives - one face for church and another for back home. One life here and another there. God knows. Today, the purpose of this Gospel Age and the reason why the Church exists is so that people can make Christ Lord and Saviour and accept Him into their hearts.

Revelation 22

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Here we can see that from His presence all of life flows. We're going to live in a place of healing, life and holiness - that's a promise from God!

3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship

him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Verse 4 says we will see his face. Let that sink in. If your name is in the Lamb's Book of Life, the day will come when you will finally see Him. In the Old Testament, if you saw His face, you would die. Now through the Blood of Christ, having received this great salvation, we're able to stand in God's presence and see His face.

What does His face look like? You know that feeling of exhilaration when you haven't seen someone in a long time and then you see their face in the crowd? This is the one whom by faith we've served all our lives and now we're going to see Him face to face and His name will be on our foreheads - which signifies that we belong to Him. Isn't that awesome? Can you imagine what that's going to be like?

And it's "forever and ever." We will reign with Christ forever. What will we reign? We have no clue what reigning over cities or angels really means, but we know that we will reign with Him. If this boggles your mind that's good - it should. It should also put a longing in your heart so that you say, "Come Lord Jesus, come." This is better than a house with your name on it with a popcorn machine and pizza oven. God has much more in store for us than we can really imagine!

Jesus Is Coming

6 And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel

to show his servants what must soon take place.”

So this is the last part of history. It began with the first coming, it ends with the second coming, and now there's a new heaven and a new earth. New means "new". It's not that it's another heaven and another earth, but it's the earth and heaven made perfect. What of the things on this earth that bug you? Every curse is going to be removed from this earth. No evil influences and harshness of weather or curses of nature will be there. Lions will be our friends and you will be able to swim with sharks. It's a perfect earth and universe - totally renewed. And that's going to be our home, forever.

Whatever Adam saw, it's going to be better than that. He needed the sun and moon and stars, but in this one Jesus Himself is our light. He is our fulfillment for everything. Can you imagine a perfect earth? Why was the earth cursed? Because of us. Even it is groaning and waiting for the soon coming Lord Jesus (Romans 8:22).

It's important to get this right. God created the earth and heavens. The promise isn't that we would live in some ethereal spiritual place floating on clouds, but that we will get to enjoy the beauty and wonder of this present creation, renewed. Too many people think the material world is evil but this scripture is showing us not to think of things in this way. It means we don't think of the future as some kind of fairytale - we are going to live in a renewed heaven and earth with resurrected bodies! It's God's beautiful, material, creation all made new!

7 “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

So these words must be kept in our hearts because this is the truth.

8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, 9 but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."

The last instruction we see from the angel here is that we must worship God. That's what we do and that's what we teach people to do. Mission exists because worship doesn't. Why do we go to the uttermost parts of the earth? Because they don't worship there. We don't go across the earth to convert people to our brand of church! We do it to bring people to Christ!

10 And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

What does this mean? There will come a day when the opportunity to be holy will be gone and you will be stuck in whatever you chose - either evil or holiness. In Jesus we are made holy. But if you don't accept Jesus before the final day comes, you can never be made holy but will remain in your wickedness. You will never be able to enjoy goodness ever again.

12 "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and

the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

Jesus will reward all for what they have done. In Christ you are rewarded for works of faith – you not only receive heaven but you also receive heaven with personal rewards, given to you.

14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.

“By the gates” is a reference to being born again. Inside there is an amazing harmony. Outside there is nothing.

15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. 16 “I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” 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 desires take the water of life without price.

This is the invitation to us and to the world – “Come.” We are God’s invitation to a wedding and He’s saying ‘come’. It’s not exclusive – the gates are open for *all* to come. But one day the gates will close.

Are we thirsty enough to come and receive this amazing message? We cannot afford to die without Christ. Even those who have received Christ, our way forward is to be continually coming ever closer.

18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

We can't take any part of this book out. We can't say there won't be a tribulation and maybe a resurrection. We can't say that this Gospel Age counts for nothing. The scriptures are our authority.

20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! 21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

What we saw in Genesis we now see is brought to an end. The river of life is flowing – past, present and future. You can come drink from it today. In Christ you were saved, are saved now, and one day will be saved. We see how the book of Revelation always point to realities past, present, and future.

God's final triumph

So we've now come to God's final triumph - a new heaven, new earth, a new Jerusalem, where we live in this heavenly holy of holies totally renewed. We have complete communion with God in complete intimacy.

And the good news is: You can start having all that now. One day it will come in fullness, but you can have a taste of it all now. You can know,

right now, the outcome of the final judgement. The question is this:

Will you come?