

# **The Book of the Revelation**

*Major Themes of Revelation's Six Sections*

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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## **Introduction: The Six Sections of the Revelation**

### *Revelation 1–21*

You have by now a piece of paper, I hope. Don't take it too seriously. Its first idea is to help me, as we survey the contents of this book. It will save a lot of time if I know you have something in your hand to show you what exactly I'm talking about. It might even serve the further point of saving you the difficulty of taking notes that you may care to incorporate in your own further personal studies of this book.<sup>1</sup>

So, let's turn to our book of the Revelation and begin to read in it:

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, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 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. John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. 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. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.' (1:1–8 ESV)

And if that is how the book begins, let's now turn to see how it ends, and read from chapter 22, beginning at verse 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. 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. 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, 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. He who

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<sup>1</sup> See the [Appendix](#) to this transcript, in which are given the collated notes provided for this series of talks.

testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. (22:16–21 ESV)

So, tonight we begin a few studies in the book of the Revelation. Quite obviously from the timetable we've set ourselves, we shall not be proposing to expound every detail of this magnificent and highly detailed book. We must content ourselves with a bird's eye view, and with gathering, if we can, what are the major themes of this book, and how they are interrelated.

## **Approaching Revelation**

Now it's no secret that some believers find the book of the Revelation a very daunting book. Well, there are some good verses in it that we sing in some of our hymns, but the middle bits seem extraordinarily off-putting and difficult—so full of quaint figures, symbols, mystical numbers and suchlike things. Our first job is to get over those fears, for this is in fact a book dictated to the Apostle John, through an angel, by our Lord Jesus Christ himself; and not only dictated for John's benefit and the benefit of the early churches but, I am persuaded, dictated for our benefit too, for every single one of us present. And it stands to reason that the good shepherd, who gave his life for us, his sheep, and lives to pastor us and save us, has not written a book that he knew would be largely unintelligible to us. He must have thought that if we love him and give ourselves to him and to the study of his word, he, by his Spirit, will cause us to understand it in his good time.

### **A book of songs and worship to unite us in a common purpose**

Difficult as it may seem, this is a wonderful book. It will set your heart a-singing if you take it seriously. There are more songs in this book than in any other book of the New Testament. What is more, from time to time, we shall hear deep-throated 'Hallelujahs' arising from individuals and from the masses of the redeemed. We might find it a little bit unusual when we don't often hear 'Hallelujahs' ourselves, but then we're very much more sedate. But anyway, there you will hear 'Hallelujahs' and I warrant that, as you hear them, your heart too will begin to move, and you will want to re-echo the 'Hallelujahs' that rise to God in the course of this book!

Then of course it is a book calculated to draw our attention to the topic of worship. It is the book that speaks most about the matter of worship—more than any other book in the whole of the New Testament, at least if you take the word count. One of the original words for worship, *proskyneō*, occurs in Matthew many times, perhaps a dozen times or more, but it is the book of the Revelation that uses the word most. Twenty-five times at least in the course of this book you will come across the idea of worship. If we put those two simple observations together, my brothers, my sisters, then we can be assured of this: if we read this book aright, and if the Holy Spirit should interpret it to us and to our hearts, it will lead our hearts too, to worship—not the book, but him who gave it, and to prostrate ourselves before him in that worship, and to sing him our hearts affection in songs of deep adoration.

Let's take note of that, shall we? Because if at the end of these studies we don't feel like that, then we can be sure of this: that we haven't quite read the book correctly. And if perchance it should lead any of us to wish to argue strongly and get upset with our fellow believers, to the point where we have difficulty restraining from fisticuffs, well then we have misread it.

We shall not all agree, particularly with the preacher (I don't always agree with him either) but there will be room for discussion and the hard questions and other side sessions if you want them. But the main message of the book, and the intention of the Holy Spirit, shall be clear: it is to lead our hearts in devoted worship to the Lord Jesus, to sing his praise, and to seek his face, that he might direct us in the paths of holiness, and deepen our hope of his coming again.

### **The help an overview can give**

So we shall not begin with the detail of the book first of all, but rather take a bird's eye view of its contents. And there is method in our madness. It is well known that if you were to enter a large wood, a forest of trees stretching over some acres, without map or guide, after a while you might find yourself getting lost. You lose your sense of direction; you can't think where you got in or which is the true way forward, and whether you should turn to the left or the right. You could end up finding yourself going round in circles—as they say: not seeing the wood for the trees.

That happens to some people when they read the book of the Revelation. They start off with great gusto, but when it comes to those difficult middle chapters, sometimes they lose their way a bit and can't make out where they'd got to and how it all fits together. It is better, therefore, if you are entering a wood, to have a map with you, and a bird's eye view of where this wood is, and where the major paths lead, so you can follow the major paths and find your way out to the intended end. That is what we are going to do tonight with the book of the Revelation.

It will mean some hard study on our part, so, if you care to, you may fold this piece of paper up and put it in your pocket and take your Bibles in hand, because these are actually Bible studies, and I shall not be so much preaching sermons to you as joining with you in our united study of this marvellous book of the Bible.

### **The explanatory power of symbols**

Don't be worried by some of the symbols. If we come across them early on, and we can't understand them at once, never mind, we shall later on. But let me say a thing or two about the symbols that we shall meet.

Some people treat these symbols as though they were a kind of secret code that is very difficult to decode in order to find what the symbols really mean. But very few of them, if any, are meant to be like a secret code. In fact, far from making it difficult for us to see what is meant, they are there to help our imaginations grasp more easily what is there. Let's take an example or two.

*Symbols in Revelation drawn from nature*

When we come to chapter 5 we shall hear about the Lord Jesus, as the strong angel proclaims, 'Who is worthy to take the book, and to open its seals?' (v. 2). At first none is found worthy and then, at last, a voice proclaims it. Yes, one has been found worthy: 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to take the book' (v. 5).

Suppose I had never read that before, and I meet you as a Christian, and I say to you, 'Lion of the tribe of Judah: what does that mean? What is this lion thing? Who is that?'

You say, 'Well, that's the Lord Jesus'.

Suppose I reply, 'That's you Christians all over. If it's the Lord Jesus, why didn't you say it was the Lord Jesus; then I would have known who it was? Why cover it up by talking about a lion of Judah?'

Then we'd listen again to the text: 'and I turned and I saw a little Lamb, as though it had been slain . . .' (v. 6).

And I say to you, 'Now, come on, tell me, who is this little lamb thing?'

You say, 'That's the Lord Jesus.'

And I say, 'You funny lot of people. Why on earth don't you say it straight? If it's the Lord Jesus, why didn't you say it's the Lord Jesus? Why use one code of a lion and another code of a lamb? It makes life difficult, doesn't it?'

Of course you would smile at me, and say, 'You poor ignoramus, of course, you haven't got the point. Everybody knows it's the Lord Jesus, and if you don't know it's the Lord Jesus, perhaps you oughtn't to be reading the book. Of course it's him. Who else could it be?'

'Well, why call him a lion then?'

'Well, because, yes, it's the Lord Jesus, but what is the Lord Jesus like? How would you describe him? What is his character?'

Among the many illustrations you could get of our blessed Lord Jesus, one of the ones that is very prominent in this book is that he's like a lion. Can you imagine a lion with his lordly, beautiful mane—the king of the forest? When he roars, all the forest takes notice! He's meant to be king of the beasts.

Oh, what a book this is going to be! We are going to see the Lord Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is inviting us to use our sanctified imagination to consider and see the wonder of the Lord Jesus. May God give us to see him as the conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah.

Of course then you may say, 'What is the Lord Jesus like? Is he just sort of a massive force like a lion?'

No, there's another side to his character; he's like 'a Lamb . . . as it had been slain, having horns and eyes . . .'

'This is an unusual lamb,' you might say.

But then this is a picture, isn't it? The horns speak of power, and the eyes speak of discernment and wisdom.

How do you picture the Lord Jesus? And, tell me, what is the strength of his power? Suppose I asked, what is the strength of the Lord Jesus's power in our lives? You might reply in the terms of that vision where he is the Lamb 'who before his shearers was silent, and opened not his mouth, and the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all' (see Isaiah 53). 'When he was reviled, he reviled not again, when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed

himself to him who judges righteously' (see 1 Pet 2:23). This is the gentle, non-retaliating Lamb of God.

If I say to you, 'Is that a sign of weakness in your Lord Jesus?'

'Oh no,' you say, 'no, the very opposite. There is the very secret of his power. Do you see that Lamb there with its horns which speak of its power? The power of the Lord Jesus over our lives rests in the power of his sacrifice, the power of his cross.'

Yes, for this is the Lamb who, being slain and pouring out his blood, loosed us from our sins and made us a kingdom, priests to our God (see Rev 1:5–6). This is what Paul would describe as the foolishness, the weakness, of the cross and the foolishness, the weakness, of God. The cross of our blessed Lord Jesus is the power of God to salvation; it is the very wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23–25).

Forgive that sermon. I won't go on sermonizing; I'm supposed to be teaching. But don't be afraid of these symbols; they are meant to vivify our regenerated, sanctified imagination, so that we might grasp with our hearts and minds what we learn through our eyes and ears about the wonders of the blessed Lord Jesus.

#### *Symbols in Revelation drawn from the Old Testament*

Tonight particularly, we shall come across a series of symbols that are taken from the Old Testament tabernacle and temple. But then we shall find those moderately easy, if we know what the tabernacle (and temple) was about in the old days. If we can bring our knowledge of that to the book of the Revelation, then we shall find it comparatively easy to understand some of the symbols. We'll consider more of that as we go along in our studies.

## **The major parts of the book**

Now let's take our Bibles in hand and see if we can map out the major parts of this particular book. I'm going to suggest to you that the book of the Revelation (long book though it seems to be) is made up simply of six major sections, and that in each of those major sections there is one or more *major themes*. Of course, there are a lot of details. We shall consider as many of them as we can, but if, by the end of our studies, we have got hold of the idea that there are six major parts to this book and each part has a major theme, and we can really understand that major theme, then we will have put a very good foundation in for the study of the book. We'll be ready then for all the other preachers who come along and explain all its contents more eloquently than I can.

### **Section One (1:1–3:22)—Statement, greeting, vision of the Son of Man**

In chapter 1 our Lord gives John the first vision: a vision of the blessed Lord Jesus, now risen from the dead and glorified (1:12–20). He is seen in his glory, standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands, and we're told that these lampstands represent the seven churches, or assemblies, in Asia Minor. Then, in chapters 2 and 3, he proceeds to dictate a series of letters, one to each of these seven churches.

It is easy to see then that those first three chapters comprise the first major section, and they stand by themselves in that sense. When you come to the seventh and last church, you



have reached the end of this particular part of the book. That is simple enough. What its message is we must begin to consider in our next study.

## **Section Two (4:1–7:17)—A door in heaven opened: before the throne**

If that is Section One, in which Christ is talking to the churches, look how the second section begins:

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.' At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. (4:1–2 ESV)

The topic has changed, hasn't it? You see how different this is from the first three chapters. 'A door standing open in heaven' introduces this section, and John is called up in the Spirit into heaven through that door. Now notice what he sees. He says the first thing he sets eyes on as he enters this door is a throne: 'a throne stood in heaven'.

Is there a throne in heaven? Well, John says so, and he says, 'I saw it!' There is a throne in heaven, at which thought you may be allowed a suppressed 'Hallelujah'.

You believe it, don't you? There are a lot of people who don't, of course, and some people find it very difficult to believe there is a throne in heaven. Look at what is happening in Indonesia just now, with the militia run riot, and about to massacre perhaps thousands of people. 'How can you believe,' some will say, 'that there is a throne in heaven?'

Is there?

'Yes,' you say, 'that is our Christian belief.'

### *What kind of a throne?*

The text says the throne was occupied. As we in our simplicity used to sing with the children: 'God is still on the throne | And he will remember his own'<sup>2</sup> we may, as adults, now be drawn to consider the nature of that throne. That is to say, what kind of a government is it? What kind of a ruler is he who sits upon that throne? Chapter 4 will begin to describe to us that throne because, in symbolic language, it is talking to us about the nature of the government of that throne, and of the God who sits upon it.

That will be an important topic because, from chapter 4 onward, this book is going to tell us that the day will come when the Lord Jesus will begin to set loose on earth the judgments of God that will bring earth back into subjection and obedience to this throne of God in heaven. Those judgments shall be severe, with mounting gravity. Sometimes they will be so severe that they who suffer them will 'gnaw their tongues for pain' (16:10).

You say, 'Then what kind of a government is it that would set loose judgments on people that would cause them to gnaw their very tongues for pain? What kind of a God is he? What kind of a throne is this?'

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<sup>2</sup> Kittie L. Suffield (1884–1972), 'God is Still on the Throne' (1929).

Well, that will be an important question, won't it? What kind of a throne? Anyway, for now, the throne described in detail in chapter 4 is the Creator's throne, of course, and tells of his right as the Creator that all the honour, glory, riches and power shall be his.

#### *The theme continued in chapter 5*

The theme, however, goes on into chapter 5, and we are looking for the major theme, not stopping with the detail as yet. For when the throne has been described, John says,

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. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' (vv. 1-2 ESV)

So the scene is still going on. Can you see it? You will have an advantage in reading the Revelation if you've got a good imagination. John actually saw it, like someone watching a play enacted on a stage. There he could see him through the door. 'Oh, look there,' John says, 'look at that throne! It's like this and that and the other. Oh, what's going to happen now?' He's up there, so you'll forgive him if he gets a bit excited because of the vision he's seeing!

He says, 'Look now. The one who sits on the throne; there's a book in his hand, and an angel is asking who's worthy to take it. I wonder if anybody will.' And in the drama no one is found, and John weeps heavily, for he begins to understand the consequences if no one can open that book. Then he sees the Lamb, the lion of the tribe of Judah, coming to him who sits on the throne and taking the book out of the hand.

That is vivid, isn't it? Can you see him, in your mind's eye?

And John says, as the Lamb takes the book out of the hand, the massed choirs of heaven begin their symphony of praise to the Lamb, until the heaven and the earth, and under the earth—hell itself—are obliged to admit the moral worth of the Lamb to take that book and to set loose those judgments.

So there we have chapters 4 and 5.

#### *The theme continues in chapter 6*

You'll notice now that we've not got to the end of this section yet, for chapter 6 follows. (Chapter 6 normally follows chapter 5, of course, but what I mean is that the events are still following.)

Are you still there with me in the throne room? You have seen the throne and the book, and the Lamb has come to take it, and the choirs are finished. Well, we're still there: 'And I looked, and I saw when the Lamb began to open the seals . . .' (v. 1). It's all one scene. We see what happened when he opened seal numbers one, two, three, four, five and six. And at six it comes to a climax, for the judgments let loose come to this tremendous day of the Lord. Look what the people said:

And I saw when he opened the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the whole moon became as blood; and the stars of the heaven fell unto the earth, as a fig tree casts her unripe figs, when she is shaken by a great wind. And the heaven was removed as a scroll when it is rolled up; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the princes, and the chief captains,

and the rich, and the strong, and every bondman and freeman, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains; and they say to the mountains and to the rocks, 'Fall on us, and hide us from the face of [God] . . .'. (6:12–16)

You don't object? I've misread that last line, haven't I? It doesn't say 'hide us from the face of God'. What does it actually say? In my Bible it says 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of *him that sits on the throne*' (v. 16).

We are supposed to be up there still, in our imagination, and we've seen the Lamb take the book out of the hand of him that sits on the throne. Now we've watched him undo the seals, which results in these judgments proceeding on earth until they get to their great crescendo. And under the fear and pain of it, even the great men of earth go into the holes in the mountains, and they cry, 'Save us, hide us, from the face of him that sits on the throne!' Why? Because the heaven was removed, verse 14 says. The veil that normally veils the unseen world from the seen world is now removed, and guilty men can look straight up direct into the face of him that sits upon the throne. They cry in absolute terror, to the mountains, 'Hide us from the face of him that sits on the throne, and of the Lamb!'

And we are standing there, in the heavenly place, watching all of this, aren't we? Oh my dear friend, do use your imagination. If you believe what we read here, and we can see what it begins to mean, it will turn us into evangelists, won't it? What shall it be for men and women when one day that heaven is removed, and they look up into the very throne of God, unprepared? We need God's Holy Spirit to use these pictures and figures to burn the reality of it into our hearts, so that we might be ready to preach God's gospel to men and women.

#### *The theme continued in chapter 7*

What happens next? Are we now done with this major theme? Oh no, we're not done with it. There comes chapter 7.

'Oh,' say the theologians and commentators, 'but chapter 7 is a parenthesis.'

Well, if you know what that word means, this one isn't a parenthesis. Why not? Because, as we go down chapter 7, you'll see this theme continues. We're still up there in heaven; we've watched on earth as the unconverted, unrepentant see the throne of God and are terrified by it. Now he says, 'I saw these four angels' (v. 1).

And there are two groups of people in 7:1–8. There is a group of 144,000 people—12,000 out of each of the twelve tribes of Israel. They are sealed so that they should not be hurt, 'that no wind should blow upon the earth, or on the sea, or on any tree, until the servants are sealed in their forehead' (see vv. 2–3). This is imagery taken from the book of Ezekiel (ch. 9). This is done so that these people shall suffer no damage under the devastating judgments that will destroy earth, sea and ocean in these days.

Then there comes a second group from verse 9 to the end of the chapter:

After these things I saw, and behold, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation, and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne . . . (v. 9)

Where are they? Standing *before the throne*. You haven't forgotten we're in the throne room at this point, have you? No, of course you haven't.

standing before the throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands; and they cry with a great voice, saying, 'Salvation unto our God [which is in heaven]'. (vv. 9–10)

No? Well, what does it say then?

Salvation unto our God who sits *on the throne*, and unto the Lamb. And all the angels were standing round *about the throne*, and about the elders and the four living creatures; and they fell *before the throne* on their faces, and worshipped God saying, 'Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.' And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, 'These which are arrayed in white robes, who are they and from where have they come?' (vv. 10–13)

And John said, 'I haven't a clue; you tell me!' It must be important that we should know this.

I said unto him, 'My lord, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are they which come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are *before the throne* of God; and they serve him day and night in his temple: and he *that sits on the throne* shall spread his tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat: for the Lamb which is *in the midst of the throne* shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of water of life: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes. (vv. 14–17)

### *Before the throne*

You might say, 'Why on earth are you emphasizing this matter of *throne*?'

Well, I always begin with simplicities myself. What is Scripture actually saying? We find that this portion shows us the great scene that began in chapter 4 with the vision of the throne of God and the dramatic coming of the Lamb—the Lion of the tribe of Judah—to take the book out of the hand of him that sat upon the throne. Then that scene continues as he begins to undo the seals, and the judgments begin on earth until terrified men see the very throne of God as the heaven is rolled away, and they cry in their panic. That theme is not yet finished. It doesn't find its conclusion and great climax until you come to chapter 7.

You'll say, 'But Mr Preacher, you ought to know (by the time you've got to your age) that this is all about the tribulation.'

Well, perhaps I do; it says it there: 'these are they that came out of the great tribulation'. But let's notice the theme of it. What is it saying about those who came out of the tribulation?

'It is talking about their salvation of course.'

But in what terms is it talking about their salvation? Well, let's listen: 'They washed their robes . . . in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are . . .'

What does it say? '*before the throne*'!

Marvellous, isn't it? Now you see the vivid contrast between chapter 6 and 7. When the people in chapter 6, who are unprepared, unrepentant, unsaved and unwashed in the blood of the Lamb, see the throne of God revealed, they cry in their panic to be hidden from that throne and from the face of him who sits on it and from the Lamb. Then these people in chapter 7, this great multitude that none can number, are before the throne. Oh, thank God! But how can they stand there, calm and unafraid? Well, because they have washed their robes white; that is, in the blood of the Lamb.

Now, when we read of that great company, we'll be thinking of ourselves also. Are you able to stand before the throne? 'When I stand before the throne . . .'<sup>3</sup>, what then? This is the wonder of salvation, whether it be of those people in the future, or us now! This is gospel indeed! What is the secret of standing before the throne of God unafraid? They stand on this ground alone: they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. And so the Lamb shall lead them eventually to fountains of living water (vv. 14, 17).

But we'll not follow that now, for I'm starting to preach, and I'm meant to be teaching!

Have I convinced you that Section Two, which begins in chapter 4, and goes through chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, is about this major theme: the throne of God in heaven? This section answers these questions about that throne: What is the nature of its government? What shall the judgments be that will come from it one day? What are the conditions of salvation in the light of that judgment?

### **Section Three (8:1–11:18)—The seventh seal opened: The prayers before the altar**

Then we come to chapter 8, and it starts a different section and a different subject. Look at what it says:

And when he opened the seventh seal, there followed a silence in heaven about the space of half an hour. And I saw the seven angels which stand before God; and there were given unto them seven trumpets. And another angel came and stood over the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should add it unto the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God out of the angel's hand. (vv. 1–4)

So now another section begins. You notice how it begins. The second section in chapter 4 began with a door *opened* in heaven. This one begins with the seventh seal *opened*, and there follows a silence in heaven. In the drama up to this point, there had been much song and praise and therefore noise. Now there comes a silence for half an hour. Then we see that an angel came and stood over the altar, having a golden censer, and he took the coals and added this incense to the prayers of saints, and they came upon the golden altar which was before the throne.

So, there has been a shift in attention. We were looking at the throne before. Now, we're still in the heavens, but our attention shifts to the golden altar of incense.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert M. McCheyne (1813–1843), 'When this Passing World is Done' (1837).

All of you tabernacle experts will know what that means, won't you? For in Moses's tabernacle, just in front of the veil outside the Most Holy Place, there stood this precious vessel called the golden altar of incense. And when the priest came to the lampstand to minister, or came to pray and intercede for his people, he would stand at that golden altar opposite the veil, addressing him who presenced himself on the throne of God in the Most Holy Place, just inside the veil. If you can imagine it: the priest stood there at the altar, then there was the veil, and on the other side was the throne of God. There was a veil acting as a mediator between the two, but the priest stood there and offered his incense at the time of prayer to him who sat upon the throne. Incense refers to prayer and, as you see here, specifically the prayers of the saints.

#### *Comparing sections two and three*

So now let's see where we are. How is this section different from the previous section? Well, in chapter 4, at the start of the second section, we learned why the judgments of God must come on this world. Why must they come? It is because of the claims of the throne. He who sits on it is the Creator; he has a right to be served by everything in the universe. Men have rebelled and gone their own way, and the throne is not going to wait forever. One day, God will rise up; he is going to regenerate and renew the very creation. He is going to redevelop the earth. If men and women will not repent, then one day the judgments will come to clear the ground, so that God can get on with his plan for the renovation of all things. So, the judgments must come for that reason. Now Section Three is telling us another reason why the judgments must come upon our world. What is that? It is because of the prayers of the saints.

#### *The prayers of the saints*

Did you notice the drama with which this section opens? He says, 'When the seventh seal was opened in heaven, there was a silence for half an hour' (8:1). I wonder if you can imagine that. Are you good at imagining things? Have you ever celebrated Armistice Day or something like it, and you were in a big throng and, at the eleventh hour, everything stopped and was silent? That's usually for two minutes. I can remember as a kid when that happened in school, and you had to stand still for two minutes. In the playground, two minutes seemed scarcely a second, but standing still, doing nothing, not saying anything: that seemed an eternity. You stood there fidgeting, and you'd wonder: 'What's going to break the silence?' Then at last, the silence was broken!

It must have been a dramatic moment for John, with all these thousands and thousands of archangels, and the elders and the living creatures and the saints, and they had been singing their 'Hallelujahs' and singing about the worthiness of the Lamb, and the whole thing fell silent—for half an hour! I wonder whether John felt the same. What's going to break the silence? Is nothing going to happen anymore?

What broke the silence? The angel who came with his censer and the coals, and there was given to him much incense to add to the prayers of the saints, and the prayers of the saints came up before God; and God began to listen and to answer them. The judgments came upon the earth as a result of their prayers. That's reason number two. The judgments will one day come, as God gathers up the prayers of generations and centuries of his saints of all ages, and answers them.

Psalm 94 helps us to understand the situation. You will remember it begins its lament: 'O you to whom vengeance belongs, how long, O Lord, how long will you not avenge your people? How long before you rise up and stop the infernal persecution of your people? How long?' (see vv. 1–6). You can imagine the Jews of that time, under persecution and harsh treatment of their enemies.

Perhaps you've been walking along somewhere with a friend and talking, and you've said you believe there is a God, and you believe there's a throne in heaven. And your friend has looked back at you and said, 'You say there's a God in heaven. Then why doesn't he intervene and stop this savagery in Indonesia, in Kosovo, in wherever else you could name? How can you believe there's a God in heaven who cares for justice, if he does nothing about it?'

Of course, to answer that question, we'll have to ask another presently. Why hasn't God done anything yet about the murder of his Son? He will do one day, won't he? But how long? And when?

Do you see the problem? How many dear believers have felt it in Christian times as they've been taken to the stake, or suffered iniquity in the factory, or have been cheated by unscrupulous businessmen? And their hearts have cried out, 'How long, O Lord? Don't you care?'

The answer is, of course, that there is a God, and there is a throne, and he does care for justice; and one day he'll avenge his people. But this section of the book is concerned now largely with the timetable and the whys and the wherefores of God's apparent waiting, and how the time will eventually come. Look at chapter 10:

But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then is finished the mystery of God, according to the good tidings which he declared to his servants the prophets. (v. 7)

Now we come on to chapter 11, towards the end of this section:

And the seventh angel sounded; and there followed great voices in heaven, and they said, 'The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ: and he shall reign for ever and ever.' And the four and twenty elders, which sit before God on their thrones, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God, saying, 'We give you thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, which are and which was; because you have taken your great power and did reign. And the nations raged, and your wrath came, and *the time* of the dead to be judged, and *the time* to give their reward to thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and to them that fear your name, the small and the great; and to destroy them that destroy the earth.' (vv. 15–18)

Do you notice that phrase? It is answering the question that came at the beginning: 'How long, O Lord?' After the long apparent silence of God, the prayers of the saints eventually prevail. At last the judgments begin to come. One day, the supreme day, *the time* will come: the dead shall be judged. It is the time for the prophets to be rewarded, the time for the kingdom of this world to become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ.

It's marvellous, isn't it? We have a gospel message, my brothers and sisters, to preach to a world that is torn in its inward heart at the apparent injustice and irrationality of man's cruelty to man. They themselves have no answer to it, nor any hope.

#### **Section Four (11:19–15:4)—The temple opened: the ark of God's covenant seen**

Then the next section comes. We can't spend the same time tonight on them as the others, but let's just notice, first of all, how the fourth section begins.

And there was opened the temple of God that is in heaven; and there was seen in his temple the ark of his covenant; and there followed lightnings, and voices, and thunders, and an earthquake, and great hail. (11:19)

It's getting a little bit repetitive isn't it? Section Two began with a door *opened* in heaven, and Section Three began with a seventh seal *opened* in heaven and silence in heaven. Now, this section begins with, 'there was *opened* the temple of God that is in heaven'.

In Section Two, when the door was opened, John saw the ark of God. In the third section, when he was in heaven, John saw the incense altar. Now, this time he sees the ark of the covenant, and there followed lightning.

You say, 'What's the point of that bit of furniture? Why the ark of covenant?'

Well, it was called the '*ark of covenant*', because in it were the tables of the law. It held the basis of God's covenant with Israel. Do you remember the first great law in that covenant? It was this: 'You shall have no other God but me. You shall not make an image to bow down to it and worship it' (see Exod 20:3). Cardinal sin number one is to worship anyone or anything other than the living God.

John sees this ark of covenant and sees the judgments begin to come. Why? It's because this is the section of the book that is going to tell us of the rise of the beast, and Satan shall give him his great power and authority and his throne. And the second beast shall do many mighty miracles (apparently) and persuade the fanatical crowds so that they worship the beast and worship his image. And in their fanaticism they cry, 'Who is like the beast?' That is not innocent language. The great rhetorical question in the Old Testament was: 'Who is like Jehovah?' (e.g. Exod 15:11; Ps 113:5). It is really a statement that Jehovah is absolutely unique, and none other is to be worshipped. But the time will come on our earth when men, in their godless infatuation, and driven by Satan's artful ways, having got rid of the idea of God-out-there, and finding they can't get on without anything to believe in, will fall for the suggestion that they should deify the ruler of the world. He shall sit in the temple of God, showing himself to be God, exalting himself above all that is called God, or is worshipped (see 2 Thess 2:3–4).

This is men, in their folly, rejecting the true God, because they don't want to be slaves to God, and finding that that path leads inevitably and irresistibly to a time when man will deify man, and fall down and worship his image, which will be the biggest slavery that the human race has ever experienced before, or ever will experience again. The world is moving towards those times, isn't it?



### **Section Five (15:5–19:10)—The innermost sanctuary opened: seven angels come out**

Then there is the fifth section, which begins in chapter 15:

And after these things I saw, and the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened. (v. 5)

You could almost have guessed how this section was going to start, couldn't you? They've all started that way. This time it's 'the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven', that is, the innermost shrine, was *opened*. And being opened, there came out seven angels, and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God, for in the innermost sanctuary dwelt the presence of God and the Shekhinah glory. When it was opened, the smoke, indicating his presence, streamed out of that holy sanctuary (see vv. 6–8).

What followed? Well, to put it very briefly, in chapters 16, 17 and 18 is the judgment of two women. In Section Four, it was two beasts—bad and evil. In Section Five, it's two women, and equally evil. If the beasts were male, these are female. God is fair, you know.

And you say, 'What's wrong with these two ladies?'

To sum it up briefly, you could find that out by contrasting them with how that section ends. Section Five ends in chapter 19:

Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, and let us give the glory unto him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife has made herself ready. And it was given unto her that she should array herself in fine linen, bright and pure: for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. (vv. 7–8)

There is the true woman; she's the bride of the Lamb, and all down the centuries she has remained faithful to her absent Lord. She'll reign with him and share his throne. By contrast with the faithful, devoted bride and eventual wife of the Lamb, stand these two women: perverse religion and perverse economics. They are a world religion and a world of consumerism that have gone away from God.

Look at that those two women. The one in chapter 17 is not arrayed in pure linen, bright and clean; not her! No, she had a different sense of style. You should see the colour and the couture of the woman on the beast, and the rouge on the face, decked out in all her colours! Instead of being faithful to the absent Lord, she has compromised her loyalty and got on the very beast: the opponent of God and of the Lamb, in her foolish attempt to control it. In her adulterous fashion, she will meet destruction at the hands of the very beast she tried to control. So in this section we see unfaithful women contrasted with the faithful bride of the Lamb.

### **Section Six (19:11–22:21)—Heaven opened: the rider on the white horse comes out**

You probably couldn't even imagine how the final section will begin, could you? It begins, in fact, with, 'And I saw the heaven *opened* . . .' (19:11). But this time John sees no furniture in heaven. This time, when heaven is opened, there comes forth the rider on the white horse,

namely our blessed Lord—the Word of God—to execute the judgments of God now, finally, on this age, to destroy the beast and false prophet, to inaugurate the first resurrection, to institute the millennium and, at its end, the great white throne and the introduction of the new heavens and new earth.

## **Conclusion**

There are six major sections of the book. They're not so difficult, are they, not in outline? One can begin to see the shadows of major messages, and each of them is a great gospel message that will give us not only a view of the future, but will move our hearts in worship of the blessed Lord Jesus. They will give us understanding of the ways of God, and they will give us, not only a sense of need for progress in holiness as we listen to the Lord and his letters to the churches, as we hear of his coming again, and our need to be ready; they will also work in us a tremendous compassion for the lost, as we see the reasons why a holy God must judge our civilisation and bring it to its end. So that, understanding God's ways, with compassion in our hearts, we may go out and preach to the world around us, and answer the problems they have when they think of these gigantic things.

## Christ Amidst the Golden Lampstands

### *Section One—Revelation 1:1–3:22*

Welcome to this second session of hard work, as we seek to think together about some of the basic themes of the book of the Revelation and some of the basic and guiding principles which control its narrative. As we began our studies, we considered that the book of the Revelation has six major portions to it. And if you care to have before you the sheet of notes setting out those six divisions of the Revelation, that will be helpful to refer to in the course of this particular study.

We begin now by reading from the book of the Revelation, chapter 1, beginning at verse 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. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 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.' Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 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. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 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. 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, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Write therefore . . .'  
(vv. 9–19 ESV)

Now, let me pause to say that some of you, if you are reading an older translation, might be reading a verse that has no 'therefore' in it, but that is the true manuscript reading, and we shall find it important later on to notice the 'therefore' of verse 19 that connects with what our Lord has just said. Because he is the living one who became dead, and behold, is alive forevermore, and has the keys of death and of Hades, *therefore* John can and is to write.

Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. 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. (vv. 19–20 ESV)

Then let us read the first of those seven letters that will show us something of the pattern that all of them follow.

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. 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. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 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. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 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.' (2:1–7 ESV)

And may the Lord who dictated these words to John, and to his churches, speak directly to our hearts this evening.

## **What the letters to the churches are for**

Last evening I suggested to you that the book of the Revelation is composed of six major sections. Now we come in our study to survey the first section and, once more, I must warn you that I cannot attempt to cover all of the many and very interesting details of this particular part of the Revelation. All we can hope to do in the time available in this short series is to consider, first the place that this section has in this particular book, and then to notice some of the leading principles that recur throughout these letters.

### **This vision at this point in the book**

Why then, we ask ourselves, is this particular vision given to John to record just here? As you see, it is the vision of the blessed Lord Jesus, like unto a son of man, in all his risen, exalted glory, appearing to his servant amid seven golden lampstands that represented seven churches in the district of Asia Minor at the time. In those letters you will see our Lord addressing the seven churches through John. Why is this particular vision here, in the first of the six sections?

Sections two, three, four and five that follow are full of the judgments of God that, like the plagues on Egypt, will one day descend upon this world. They will then climax, as the plagues of Egypt did in the final plague, in the great day of the Lord—the great day of his wrath and judgment upon a guilty and unrepentant world. But if that theme of God's judgment in the times that are to come upon the world fills the major part of this book, what then are these messages to the churches doing here in the first three chapters?

*Where judgment must begin*

If we are to understand how they connect with what follows, there is, it seems to me, one simple answer. To see what it is, we may refer to the word that the Apostle Peter writes for us in his first Epistle. Speaking to his fellow believers, he says,

For it is time for judgement to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (4:17 ESV)

Here Peter is enunciating a basic principle of God's dealings, and particularly when they are to do with his judgment. Judgment, says Scripture, must first begin at the house of God. So, in this book, the first vision is directed to the churches because, as we shall now see, our Lord appears to them as judge.

*God's judgment of his people*

You say, 'Mr Lecturer, where do you get the idea that our Lord is appearing to his people, to his churches, as judge? Surely, I thought we all believed (and were certain of it) that our Lord has promised us, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him that sent me has everlasting life and comes not into condemnation but is passed from death to life"' (John 5:24).

Well, yes, of course, those are glorious words; shout 'Hallelujah' in your heart! They are marvellous words and absolutely certain, prefaced by the solemn assurance of our Lord: 'Amen, amen, I tell you . . .'. For in that context our Lord is talking about the final judgment, and of the penal consequences of sin that must be meted out to the unrepentant. In that sense, 'there is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1).

That said, the Lord judges us now, doesn't he?

If you call on him as Father, who without respect of persons judges each one according to his works, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear, knowing that you have been redeemed . . . by the precious blood of Christ. (1 Pet 1:17-19)

God gave his Son and that precious blood for our sakes to buy and redeem us. He did not do it only to seek our pardon from sin, but to buy us and our lives—our eternity and our present sojourning here. Of course God is critical! Do we suppose that God would spend the precious blood of Christ on the redemption of our lives and then not care how we spend them? Why, of course not. The Father himself critically judges, and has a right to judge, how we spend our redeemed lives. Once our lives on this planet are finished, they never come again in that same way, do they? And he who has redeemed our lives has a right to survey how we use them, and to let us know what he feels about our conduct and our stewardship.

*The way that he assesses his people's works*

You say, 'Surely, when our Lord Jesus appeared to his apostle, he appeared to him dressed as his people's priest. What else is that long robe that covered him down to the foot, if it is not a priestly robe?'

Well, so it may be. I suppose it is a matter of interpretation, but I draw my conclusions from what the blessed Lord says and does in chapters 2 and 3. For already we have read one

sample, and he does that same thing throughout these letters as he draws near to each church. Having presented some feature of himself for their encouragement, he adds, 'I know your works' (2:2). For he has been silently beholding each church and what the church does as a church, and each individual member of each church, and watching what they do.

He draws near now saying, 'I know your works. And, now, this is good. Yes, this I love!' With what generosity does he describe our feeble efforts, praising everything he can possibly praise, and admiring our persistence in our efforts to please him and live for him. He is generous in his praise and critical assessment. Then he is just as open when he is pointing out the faults of his people, some of them serious, and calling on them to give heed to his criticism, and repent.

It is in that sense, I suggest to you, that our Lord in these letters to the churches is standing to judge his people. There is nothing unorthodox in that theory, I hope. We have no option, do we? 'One day,' says Paul, 'we shall appear before the judgment seat of Christ' (see 2 Cor 5:10). It is better then, that we should open our hearts to God, both tonight and all through life, as his redeemed people, and listen both to his encouragements but also to his assessments and appraisals, and therefore to his criticisms. They are given to us in love, are they not?

Take, for instance, when he comes to dictate the last letter to Laodicea. He says, 'As many as I love, I reprove and chasten: be zealous, therefore, and repent' (3:19). We are not to think of his chastening as coming from some hostile hand; it comes from the loving hand of the blessed Lord who died for us. He calls on us so that, when he exposes our faults, we humbly repent of them.

That is nothing odd either, is it? We will recall what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11, how we are to prepare ourselves to come to celebrate the Lord's Supper, Lord's Day by Lord's Day. We are not to come lightly; we are to 'judge ourselves', to 'discern ourselves' and repent if we find any wrong deed or attitude within. And, thus coming, we are to celebrate the fact that he gave his body and shed his blood for our sakes. 'Now,' says Paul, 'if we judge ourselves, we shall not be judged, but when we are judged (for if we don't judge ourselves, he'll judge us) we are chastened of the Lord' (see 11:31-32).

This is what he is saying, 'As many as I love, I chasten' (see Heb 12:6). And why are we chastened by the Lord? It is so 'that we should not be condemned with the world' (1 Cor 11:32). Christ deals with his people now. The world goes on in its unrepentant sin to the judgment that then shall await them.

We are, therefore, to think tonight of our Lord Jesus drawing near to us, yes, of course as our priest who intercedes and prays for us and is able to help us when we are tempted, but also as the Lord and head of the church, in all of his glory and dignity, as the one who has come to assess us, to praise; but also, where necessary, to criticize. If that is so, it gives great significance to the vision of our blessed Lord Jesus, in all his majesty and official glory.

## **What John's vision tells us about the Lord of the churches**

When John comes under the Holy Spirit's guidance to tell us what that vision was like, he can give us no photograph nor paint any picture. The impression the Lord made on him goes so far from anything we have ever seen that he drains the universe of the elements to find

suitable comparisons and similes and metaphors with which to describe the glory of the risen Lord. First come descriptions of his purity.

I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the midst of the lampstands, one like unto a son of man. (Rev 1:12–13)

That is John saying he was human. This is our blessed Lord Jesus, human still, though now glorified. He was ‘clothed with a garment,’ John says (v. 13).

### **His purity and his power**

We should notice that the order of his description is not starting with the head and working gradually down to the feet and concluding it there. It follows a different order, in which perhaps the first details are grouped to convey to us the *purity* of our Lord Jesus, and then the last details are concerned to indicate his *power*.

#### *The purity in his garments*

‘Clothed with a garment . . .’ Yes, but we should notice the adjective each time with these things. It is not just ‘clothed with a garment’, but ‘clothed with a garment down to the foot’. Oh, what a stately garment and robe that was, be it a priestly garment or the robe of a judge. As we think of the significance of garments, how they denote the office, the work, the position that the garment wearer has, we notice that superb robe, right ‘down to the foot’, and it isn’t lacking a centimetre. This is one who, in his office, is not merely totally glorious, but totally and spotlessly pure; his personal righteousness is complete.

He was ‘girt about at the breasts with a girdle’,<sup>4</sup> which was not unusual in the attire of that day. ‘Girt about the breasts’. The word John uses is feminine, indicating that while this one is holy and majestic yet he is not hard and unfeeling; he has all the tenderness that you might attach to the female of the race. He is one who can be touched with the feelings of our infirmities; he loves us with all the tenderness of a mother’s love. But his love isn’t profligate. It is love, but it isn’t indulgence.

It’s not just any girdle but a *golden* girdle. The discipline of his affections are of the highest and most glorious standard. Alas for our ugly, sinful world in which even between one another, men and women have forgotten how to be restrained, and drag down their affections into the dust, and tarnish the gold that should control them.

#### *The purity in his head and eyes*

Next it says that our Lord’s ‘head and his hair were white as wool, white as snow’ (v. 14), and you may take it, if you like, to indicate his eternal being. When Daniel saw God Almighty seated upon his throne in the vision of Daniel 7, Daniel said that this was the Ancient of Days, the everlasting God from eternity to eternity (vv. 9, 14). His hair, therefore, is white as wool. But in addition to indicating his eternal being, it indicates, of course, his wisdom, for wisdom is attributed to the ancients, is it not? But this is no earthly wisdom, this is ‘the wisdom that comes from above, and is first pure, then peaceable’ (Jas 3:17).

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<sup>4</sup> ESV: ‘a sash’.

'His eyes were as a flame of fire', so that they did not merely perceive but were able to penetrate, like fire does, into the very depths of our being. These are eyes of fire that, when they see evil, leap to remove it. Everything is naked and open to 'the eyes of him to whom we must give account', says the Epistle to the Hebrews (4:13 ESV). Therefore we may seek grace, to come boldly to the throne of grace (v. 16). For we come to the eyes, the penetrating, burning eyes of our blessed Lord.

#### *The power in his voice*

With this we turn to indications of his power. His voice is 'as the voice of many waters' (Rev 1:15). They tell me that when you stand near Niagara Falls, you can hear the thundering boom of those many waters for many miles around. So was his voice in volume and power, like the voice of many waters. It would be marvellous to hear his approval spoken with that voice, wouldn't it? But what must it have meant when they received the letters in some of the churches, to hear that voice 'like the sound of many waters' saying that, 'You have things there which I hate'? It is solemn, is it not?

#### *The power in his hand*

'And in his right hand he had seven stars' (v. 16). At this point, as you'll know, John didn't know what the stars represented, but it must have been an impressive sight to see this lordly figure standing there with stars in his hand. When earthly sovereigns want to impress us, they get hold of a bit of stick. It's ornamental, with gold, and it's got knobs on it, and it's called a sceptre or something, and they expect us to be impressed. This man controls the stars.

#### *The power in his mouth*

'And out of his mouth proceeded a sharp, two-edged sword' (v. 16). He is different now, isn't he? He's different then he was when, in the synagogue of Nazareth he spoke his words, expounding the prophet Isaiah, and all of them marvelled at the words of grace that proceeded out of his mouth (see Luke 4:16-22). This is the same Jesus, but out of his mouth there is now proceeding a double-edged sword. That's not unexpected, surely, for to revert to Hebrews again, it says that the word of God is living, and sharper than any two-edged sword. This is the one to whom we must give account (4:12-13). His word is no mere plaything, nor simply food for academic discipline; it is a sharp sword that divides the intents and the thoughts of the heart.

#### *The power in his face*

'And his countenance was as the sun' (v. 16). Oh, but notice the adjectival phrase: 'was as the sun *shining in its strength*'.

You say, 'This is a very different Jesus from what the Gospels represent.'

And you don't approve? Or you would like him to be different? Make sure of it before you go home to heaven, won't you?

It is not really different from the Jesus that was here, is it? Oh, how he veiled his glory, most of the time, in his mercy, so that we might not be afraid to come near him, and that sinners might seek him, and little children sit on his lap as he blessed them. But there came a time when he ascended the mount with three of his disciples. Against the background of his announcement that one day they would take him and reject him and nail him to the tree of



Calvary, they went with him up the mountain and, all of a sudden, he was transfigured before them (Matt 17:1–8). ‘And his face did shine as the sun’ (v. 2). ‘And we saw his glory’ (John 1:14). ‘We were eyewitnesses of his majesty when there came such a voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him”’ (see 2 Pet 1:16–17). He is the one about whom the whole universe revolves! As the planets revolve about the physical sun in the sky, so the whole universe revolves around Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus is no different from what he was, for he ‘is the same yesterday, today and forever’ (Heb 13:8). But we deal with him now in his official capacity, not merely as my personal friend and guide, but in his official capacity as Lord and head of the church, who is responsible for the churches all down the long, long centuries and is responsible for us now. We should not forget it.

It is one thing to say (and rightly perhaps we should still have the humility to say), ‘Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, | Look upon a little child’<sup>5</sup>, as we kneel by our bedsides and take our rest. He is the shepherd who loves us; but, while we think of those things, let us not forget his official capacity, lest we come to underestimate the person of our Lord. It is particularly as the Lord and head of the churches that he appears to us now, and it is a thing we should not forget when we meet as churches. In public capacity, as lampstands, we are bearing testimony to our absent Lord. The lampstands function to illuminate his glories. Who is this Lord upon whom the lampstands shine? He is not just the leader of a club, nor our friendly daddy or something. He is the glorious Son of God, author of the universe, controller of the rolling spheres, marvellous in his purity, almighty in his strength! The fact that *he* loves us and cares for us is wonderful, is it not?

#### *The power of his presence*

You say, ‘Is it *he* who is about to judge his churches? Is he to commend them and then criticize them? How would we ever dare to stand in front of such a one and listen to what he has to say?’

We might well ask the question, for when our blessed Lord appeared to John on the Isle of Patmos, John tells us that in that split second he fell at his feet as dead.

We were warned just recently in this part of the world, when the sun went into full eclipse, not to look at it. How could anybody, for any length of time, stand and look at the sun when it shines in its strength? And how could John look upon a *face* that shone like the sun in its strength? He said, ‘I fell at his feet as one dead’ (v. 17). So overpowering was the weight of glory.

Oh my brother, my sister, don’t be fainthearted too quickly. You’ll have to get used to it, you know. I don’t think you always believe it or always remember it, but I can tell you that when you get home to heaven, you’re not going to look like you look now! (You’re glad that I won’t, and I’m certainly glad that you won’t!)

Does Paul tell us in 2 Corinthians that ‘our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us . . . a nice little tinsel crown’? No, no! It is working a far more ‘eternal *weight* of glory’ (see 4:17). Glory is a magnificent thing. The Hebrew word for glory means something that is heavy. And to bear the weight of glory in heaven? It makes the spine tingle, doesn’t it?

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Wesley (1707–1788), ‘Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild.’

I confess to you that I don't make a habit of going to Buckingham Palace, nor yet to Windsor Castle, to dine with the Queen. Nor do I take part in that business when she opens parliament. I've got nothing against the Queen (I dare say the cookery is good), but you know, I'm not used to all that paraphernalia: which knife, which fork and spoon you're to use. And anyway, what would you say to Her Majesty? You can't say, 'Where did you go on holiday?' and that kind of thing. What on earth do you talk about? And all that heraldry and those tiaras, it would make you feel uncomfortable. I'd prefer to have a close friend of mine, and go down to Bangor and sit on the beach and eat my sardines.

And are we to sit at *his* table as he promised: 'sit at my table in the coming kingdom' (see Luke 22:30)? Oh yes, and nothing less than that. You are going to be a companion for this glorious Lord for all eternity and share with him in his glory, and bear the weight of glory.

The Apostle Paul tells us that already, being risen with Christ, we are seated with him above all the principalities, powers, might and dominions (Eph 1-2). One day we shall be physically where we are now in spirit, with bodies made like to his body (see Phil 3:21). Oh, how you shall shine in glory, my dear brother and sister. What will you be like?

As C. S. Lewis used to observe, if you were to see some of your fellow Christians right now as they shall one day be when glorified, you'd be tempted to fall down and worship them.<sup>6</sup> And if you were to see an angel in heaven, you could be tempted to worship him, just as we read of in incidents recorded throughout Scripture.

Even John was tempted to worship an angel in this way. But the angel said, 'Not up here you don't; you'll have to learn to behave, my boy; I'm only a fellow servant' (see Rev 19:9-11). Someone could want to reply, 'Oh, but you look so gorgeous; you look so wonderful; you're an angel.' And the angel might say, 'Well, so I am; nothing much in that; I'm only one of your fellow servants.'

The Epistle to the Hebrews dares to tell us that these angels, for all their glory, are sent forth, even now, to be ministering to us who are the heirs of salvation (1:14). And we are going to be like him! As the hymn writer put it:

And is it so—I shall be like thy Son?  
Is this the grace which he for me has won?  
Father of glory (thought beyond all thought!)—  
In glory, to his own blessed likeness brought!<sup>7</sup>

Oh the magnificence of it. You shall be kings and priests; you shall be princes and princesses in the royal family of God! It does us good sometimes to come face to face, as John did, with this vision of our glorious Lord. We are going to be like *him* one day.

### **Standing up before him**

How then shall we stand and listen to his critiques? The answer is given to us here. John says, 'When I saw him, I fell at his feet as one dead' (v. 17). This is the same John who, as many

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<sup>6</sup> See the essay by C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*.

<sup>7</sup> John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), 'And is it so, I shall be like thy Son.'

have pointed out, on the night of the Last Supper lay next to Christ on the dinner couch. Seeing he was next to Christ, he turned over and leaned his head on the bosom of the Saviour to ask him a question. That same John, when he saw the Lord in glory, fell at his feet as one dead. He met the Lord and head of the church, the judge of the churches. But he tells us where he found the strength so that he might stand and listen to the judgments and the criticisms and the assessments and, of course, the encouragements.

John says, 'He laid his right hand upon me'. That's marvellous.

### *His strong right hand*

We read that when our Lord was here on earth, he touched the leper, and the leper was made whole. But now he is risen, glorified in the power of his resurrection. 'And he took that powerful right hand, and he laid it on me,' says John, 'and thus did he strengthen me.' We should not think this is something altogether unusual, should we? This is the power of the risen Lord.

In Ephesians 1, Paul tells us that he prayed for his converts that God would give them 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, that they might know what is the hope of his calling, what is the glory of the riches of their inheritance in the saints, and the exceeding greatness of his power [that is, God's power] that he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead' (see vv. 17–20).

This is the power which God wrought *towards you*, says Paul, 'when he raised Christ from the dead'. That is, there was set loose at the time of the resurrection of Christ, an almighty power of God in the risen Christ. And God had in mind not only the personal resurrection of his Son but the power that should now be made available so we could bear it ourselves. And here is our blessed Lord putting his hand upon John that, in his grace he might strengthen him to bear the sight of the glory of the Lord and get used to standing in his presence.

Yes, that is the number one secret: the strength imparted by the glorious Lord himself. We can learn even now to stand in his presence and face him.

### *'Fear not'*

Then he adds other reasons, saying, 'Fear not, John'. He has not come to rouse us to any panic. They are lovely words, aren't they, in the presence of such divine majesty?

You may be sure that if ever Queen Elizabeth invited me to dinner, as I was being invited in by her servants, my knees would be shaking. I don't know about you. How shall we stand in *his* majestic presence and not fear? Have you noticed in the epistles how they very carefully tell us, 'God has not given us a spirit of slavery again to fear' (Rom 8:15)? Do we find ourselves at times beset with panicky fears, and find that thinking about spiritual things makes them worse, and then we think that this must be the Holy Spirit telling us we're terrible? The Lord in his kindness has said otherwise, hasn't he? The Holy Spirit will *never* produce in us that kind of panicky fear. God has not given us 'a spirit of slavery again to fear'.

It's a lovely thing to remember. You see, that's how slaves proceed in life, or at least, that's how I imagine they do. Slaves work for their masters. What for? Because they jolly well have to! So they do what they're set to do, because if they don't do what they're set, they expect to find the lash of the old taskmaster, or the slave driver, coming down on their backs. They live in fear of it and go to their work driven by that slavish fear and do no more than they have to.

They do a certain amount because they think, 'I'll do enough, so I shan't get whacked.' It's not how we Christians live, is it? 'Fear not,' says the Saviour, 'God has not given you the spirit of slavery again to fear, but he has given us the spirit of adoption, the spirit of his dear Son, whereby we cry, "Abba, Father"' (see Rom 8:15).

It's marvellous, isn't it? If you detect a certain pride in my voice, well you'll have to have mercy because I'm a sinner yet, and bearing the thoughts of these coming glories can sometimes tip me over the edge into a certain pride. But there can be no sense of superiority. It's true of you, sir, if you are a believer, and of you, madam. It's true of all who have this spirit of adoption, the spirit of sons and daughters of the living God. He is engaged in training us not to fear.

### *The first and the last*

'And he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not; I am the first and the last . . ."' (v. 17). Oh, I like that: 'I am the first and the last.' Well, he's the first and the last of a lot of things. He existed before the universe. He'll exist long after it goes to pieces, however it goes to pieces, by heat death or cold death or whatever. When it's long since gone, our Lord will still be there.

This is an indication of his deity. In the Old Testament, Jehovah says, 'I am the first and the last' (Isa 44:6). So does Christ say it here. But I take comfort in this: when it comes to me, he is the first and the last. He is the alpha and omega as far as I am concerned: the first letter of the alphabet and the last letter of the alphabet that makes up the story of me.

I don't think you'd ever think of writing the story of me; you haven't got the time to waste, but, if you were to do it, you'd have to use an alphabet of some kind. Do you know what the first letter will be in my story? Well, it won't be me, but Christ. I'm his idea; he thought me up. You mustn't believe I created myself. Well, whose idea are you then, if you're not Christ's idea? 'In him were all things created . . . and through him' (Col 1:16). And what is the last letter in all the story of my life going to be? Where is its goal? It is Christ, isn't it? In him, through him and to him were all things created. When your life is finished, and the whole story is told of what it's all been about here on earth, if you are one of his redeemed, it will be shown how you and your life have been turned by the redeeming grace of Christ to glorify Christ for all eternity! It will have been part of the eternal programme of the Word of God and part of his glorification. He is the first and the last.

What about the middle bit, while he and I are writing the story? He has used servants like the Apostle Paul as a pen, and used the gracious Holy Spirit as the ink, and wielding a pen has begun to write on our hearts the very laws of God so that we keep them. Oh wonderful story! He's not writing on dead, brute tables of stone but on living, quivering hearts of people now born again and redeemed. He is now in the process of writing the law of God on our hearts that, little by little, is changing us. Or, to change the metaphor, as 2 Corinthians says, 'We all, with open face, beholding as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, are changed from glory into glory into his image' (3:18). Let us not be afraid then to approach the living Lord in all his glory.

### *The living one*

But should one fear remain, look at what is said now: 'I am the living one, and I became dead, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades' (v. 18). It was

comfort well suited to John, for he lay at the Lord's feet as dead, as though this were too much for him to bear and the weight of glory would destroy his quivering human spirit. 'Fear not,' says the blessed Lord, 'I am the living one'.

He is the author of life, the source of life who gets his life from nowhere else, but has life in himself; he is the living one. He said this, according to John's Gospel, when he was here on earth: 'as the Father has life in himself, so has he given to the Son to have life in himself' (5:26). 'The first man, Adam, was made a living soul. The last Adam is a life-giving spirit' (1 Cor 15:45).

Happy are they who have met this risen Lord, met him here in this life, have made contact with him, heard his word and come to him and found that he is the source of life! He is the living one! And the moment a soul comes to him in genuine repentance and faith, he gives them eternal life, his very own life. To know him is life eternal (John 17:3).

He says to John, 'and I became dead'. And what a story lies in that phrase: 'became dead'. It does not mean merely physically dead, but he died for our sins. What that means, who can know? He tasted death's waters—dark, bitter, offensive; and for his lost sheep he went down to the grave. But now he is risen, and his word is, 'I am alive again for evermore'. 'He that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life' (John 8:12).

'You see, I know where I came from,' says Christ, 'and I know where I'm going to' (v. 14). And he says he's on his way: 'He that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. For I shall take them where I came from. He that keeps my word shall not see death' (see v. 51). They will see dying, of course, whether the dying process is painful or sudden. We shall see dying if the Lord doesn't come soon, but we shall not see *death*. We will not know what it means to pass from this world through the article of death out into the next, as, alas, many unrepentant people will, and discover, now too late, what it means to suffer eternal death. You will never suffer it if you have trusted Christ. The guarantee stands there and, because of that guarantee, we can find the courage to come and stand before him and listen to his criticisms. They are not said in any malevolent, hypercritical spirit. They come from one who loves us, oh so well, and is determined to work for our good, and is determined to make us like himself one day.

#### *The one who has the keys*

To add to the final part of the comfort, I think I hear him rattle the keys right at his side. Can you hear them rattling just now? Oh, I like the sound of those keys! 'I have the keys,' he says. 'Do you see them, John, my boy? I have the keys of death and of Hades' (see v. 18). Death is like the door. As we come to this door, we see it as death on our side. When you pass through it you are in the unseen world on the other side. 'I have the keys. I have the authority,' says Christ. 'I control them.' It is not the devil who controls those things. No, no. Hebrews 2 tells us that at one time, Satan, that is the devil, had the power of death. Our Lord came and died 'to deliver them who through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage' (see vv. 14–15). Christ has the keys.

You say, 'To let us in?'

No, to let us out! I think that's more likely. Yes, when we come to die physically, it is he that will control it. He will control our passage into the world beyond that's unseen. We have

his blessed word as he gave it to the dying thief and to many since: 'Today, you shall be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43).

That is how the believers of the New Testament talk. They are not so much concerned with whether their 'soul' or their 'spirit' departs. You can talk like that if you care to. But it is: '*you* will be with me in paradise.'

'I want to depart,' says Paul, 'and be with Christ. If *we* are absent from the body *we* are present with the Lord' (see 2 Cor 5:6–8). I got a letter from a dear lady just the other week, and at the bottom of her letter she said, 'I am ninety-two years old: only a step to Jesus.' That is it, isn't it?

'I have the keys of death and of Hades,' Christ says. We need not fear then. Yes, we should fear, in the reverential sense. But we have no fear or dread as we stand before this glorious, blessed Lord Jesus Christ, Lord and head of the church, in all his official glory. He holds us with his right hand, and thus we shall find courage to listen to what he has to say, as he assesses us and encourages us, and exposes our faults and calls on us to repent and then to overcome.

It is with that very necessary lesson before us that tomorrow, God willing, we will turn to consider the actual judgments that Christ made when he talked to the churches, and, through them, to us.

Shall we pray.

Blessed Lord Jesus, we have tried, by thy Spirit's grace and help, to look upon thee, and though with feeble vision we bless thee for all of thy glory that thou hast shown us, wonderful Lord Jesus Christ. And we thank thee for these assurances of thy love. We thank thee for not compromising thy glory, but rather thou art intent on raising us up to thy side that we might be a fit companion then for Jesus: of him, for him and like him made. And, therefore, even as we praise thee and feel thy strong hand upon us, we pray thy grace, that as presently we shall come to listen to thy voice in these letters, we may understand what thou art saying, and become more to thy pleasure than even we have been before. This we ask for thy greater glory, and for thy name's sake. Amen.

## Christ's Appraisal of His Churches

### *Section One (continued) – Revelation 1:1–3:22*

Let us now begin to read in the book of the Revelation chapter 2, beginning at verse 1:

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, 'These things says he that holds the seven stars in his right hand, he that walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: "I know your works".' (vv. 1-2)

Now verse 8:

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the first and the last, which was dead and lived again: "I know your tribulation and your poverty".' (vv. 8-9)

Verse 12:

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, 'These things says he that has the sharp two-edged sword: "I know where you dwell, even where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast my name and did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells".' (vv. 12-13)

And then verse 18:

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, 'These things says the Son of God, who has his eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like unto burnished brass: "I know your works, and your love, and your faith, and ministry, and patience, and that your last works are more than the first".' (vv. 18-19)

Now chapter 3, verse 1:

To the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says he that has the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars: "I know your works that you have a name that you live, and you are dead".'

Verse 7:

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, 'These things says he that is holy, he that is true, he that has the key of David, he that opens, and none shall shut, and that shuts, and

none opens: "I know your works (behold, I have set before you a door opened, which none can shut), that you have a little power, and did keep my word, and did not deny my name". (vv. 7–8)

And finally, for the moment, in verse 14:

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write, 'These things says the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God: "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot: I would that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth".' (vv. 14–16)

So did our blessed, risen Lord, in all the majesty of his glories, purity and power, speak to his seven churches in Asia Minor some two thousand years ago. And tonight we come to listen to the messages that were dictated by him through John, assured as we listen to those messages to those churches that we are meant to listen in and apply those lessons to ourselves. For towards the end of each letter, the command is given: 'He that has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

## **The similarities among the churches**

Our Lord wrote his letters to no less than seven churches and we must, in some sense, comprehend them this evening. It is obvious that I'll not be able to cover anywhere near the whole detail of each of these seven letters. We are constrained by the necessity of the timetable. Therefore, what I've decided to do is rather to deal with some of the basic principles that are common to all these seven churches, to deal with some of the basic terms that need to be interpreted, and then to dwell on some of the differences between the churches and some of their similarities. And, in all, our aim is to seek to learn practical lessons that we may apply to ourselves, both from the virtues that these churches showed and from their faults.

### **The same symbols for each church**

First of all, we'll notice that all these churches to whom our Lord spoke were in many respects exactly the same. We may begin with the symbols that are used by our blessed Lord Jesus to describe them:

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

Two symbols are used in connection with the seven churches, one of *lampstands*, and the other of *stars*.

#### *The symbol of the lampstands*

Let's take the lampstands first. We're told that these seven lampstands represented seven churches, and I suppose that's the easier one of the two symbols to comprehend. They were



not of course seven branched candlestick lampstands, as stood in the Holy Place in the ancient tabernacle and temple. These were single stemmed lampstands with one lamp up on the top, or perhaps with a number of different spouts around the circle at the top of it, in each of which lay a wick which was soaked with olive oil so that each wick gave its light. But each one of them was one basic lamp on one basic lampstand.

Therefore we think of them as *light holders*. This is not so much standing in the Holy Place shining before the Lord God Almighty. It was there on the Isle of Patmos he saw them, standing in the open—lampstands bearing their witness and their light and their testimony to the risen Lord. What more magnificent task and privilege could be given to any church on earth than the task of standing there, aflame with light, witnessing in a dark world to the blessed glory of the Lord Jesus Christ?

They who are given to symbolism and type will want to suggest that the oil with which those lamps were filled, and by which they emitted their light, was the light of the Holy Spirit. Whether you like typology or not is nevertheless beside the point. For, of course, it is John's gospel that records the Lord's words to us: that unless he went away the Holy Spirit would not come, but when the Lord had gone away, the Holy Spirit would come, and he would be the one responsible to witness of the Lord. 'He shall witness of me,' said the Lord Jesus, and then added by his grace: 'And you also shall witness' (see John 15:26–16:11). We are empowered by that same Holy Spirit then to witness to our glorious resurrected Lord.

#### LAMPSTANDS MADE OF GOLD

Remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that they are all described as *golden* lampstands. Perhaps that didn't surprise you. Do you think that in your church, that would be a suitable metal to describe you and your performance? Well, yes, let's keep up your hopes! Our Lord describes them in this way. That is a bit more remarkable, isn't it?

Mercifully, at this moment, John didn't realize what the lampstands were, or which churches they were, else he might have been inclined to alter the metal. But, no, all seven of them were *golden* lampstands. Isn't our Lord positively generous? When we get round to reading the letters, we'll find that some of them are commended for their witness, but some had to face the most serious and grave criticisms of our Lord. Some of them, you might have supposed, were decidedly off the gold standard. But the blessed Lord pictures them as his ideal and all of them, each one of them equally, are golden lampstands.

As we read these letters, we shall find courage to think that we too hold that same glorious, privileged task from the risen Lord: to be his lampstands, chosen of him that we should go forth and bear fruit and witness to his name. He sees us as his ideal witnesses, each assembly a golden lampstand.

#### *The symbol of the stars*

The other symbol is a little bit more difficult to understand, isn't it? Gracious and learned and devoted servants of God understand it somewhat differently. The seven churches are represented by seven lampstands, but then John saw seven stars in the right hand of our Lord, and he is told that the stars represent 'the angels of the churches'.

Now here is a little problem. Bear with me while I outline it, and you will at once see the answer, I'm sure, but it is a bit difficult.

Put before your mind two categories of things. That's easy enough, isn't it? On the one side there are symbols, and on the other side is the reality. Have you got those two? Like two boxes: one is symbol, and the other is reality.

Let's take the churches themselves. The *symbol* is the lampstand. The *reality* is the church. So, the symbol is not to be taken literally, but the church is.

Now do it with the next symbol: stars. That's the symbol, and now we've got to fill in the box that says 'reality'. What is the reality represented by the stars? Our Lord says it. He says these stars represent the angels of the churches. But there is the beginning of our problem. In what sense 'angels'? Have you got an angel in your church here at Carryduff, or in yours, madam, wherever you come from? What are 'angels of the churches'?

#### A LITTLE LESSON IN GREEK

The word for angel in Greek is mercifully like the English: *angelos*. Basically it has two meanings. It can, in ordinary everyday language mean 'a messenger'. So, we read in the Gospels of the *messengers* who came from John the Baptist to the Lord Jesus conveying a message from John to Jesus. The other meaning of angels, of course, is heavenly *spirit beings* who serve the Lord in various capacities.

Which of those two possible meanings shall we assign here to the stars? If the stars are the 'angels of the churches', in what sense shall we understand 'angels'?

#### MESSENGERS COME FROM THE CHURCHES TO JOHN

You say, 'You could start, sir, by taking them literally as angels, you know, the ordinary Greek word: messengers.'

Well, let's have a go at it. They were messengers. What messengers?

'Oh,' say some, 'that's easy, for John the Apostle, as he was on Patmos having this vision, was surely not there alone. Around him, perhaps, could have been messengers that had been sent from these seven churches in Asia Minor, perhaps to bring him sustenance or food or clothing, or to support him in the privations he suffered in his witness for Christ. Therefore, these were the messengers of the churches that now were to receive the letters from the Lord through John and, as messengers, take them back to their different churches.'

Sounds like a simple answer, doesn't it? Do you vote for that one?

But wait a minute, there's a snag, isn't there? Because, as we read these letters, our Lord addresses himself each time to the angel of the church—to the messenger of the church—and says, 'Now look you here, messenger, I'm holding you personally responsible. *You* have, in *your* church, that woman Jezebel, for instance, and you're guilty of having allowed her to perpetrate and teach these false doctrines to my people. If you don't repent, I'll come and war against you' (see 2:18–23). Quite stern language that is, addressed to the angel of the church of Thyatira. Would our Lord so speak to men who are simply messengers conveying a letter to the churches? How could he hold these mere messengers responsible for the health and the practice of the church? That is why most people have given up the idea that they were literal messengers who conveyed these letters from Patmos to their churches.

#### ANGELIC MESSENGERS FROM GOD

Well, shall we try the other meaning of the term 'angels'—literal angels?

'How could that be?' you ask.

Well, some people have the notion that every single person has a guardian angel. And if individuals have guardian angels, which is a very doubtful concept anyway, but if they do, why don't churches each have a guardian angel? Israel had a special angel that used to fight their battles; his name was Michael (Dan 10). So, should we think that there are angels who each have a different church to control and guard?

Well, I suppose there could be just a little truth in it, couldn't there? Because the Epistle to the Hebrews says that the angels are sent forth to minister to those that shall be heirs of salvation (1:14). And we do thank God for their ministry. Who knows, my brother, when you were crossing the street today, but that some angel kept you, whereas you might have gone under a lorry or something. Even when our Lord was in the garden of Gethsemane, it says, after his prayers and agony there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him (Luke 22:39-43). But then it was not to join in the spiritual battle but to strengthen him physically, perhaps emotionally, but not spiritually. For angels aren't represented in Scripture anywhere as expounding Scripture to us, or teaching us. Nor is it anywhere made plain when the apostles write their letters to the churches, inspired by the Holy Spirit though they are. They don't write 'to the saints who are in Philippi with the bishops, deacons and angels', do they? No, of course not.

There is an added difficulty. If these letters were to be sent to literal angels, where would you post them?

No, surely they can't be literal angels, can they? So, some have said, 'Well, could they be angels in another sense?'

#### THE SPIRIT OF A PERSON

In the Acts of the Apostles when Peter had been let out of prison, he came knocking on the door of the house where the believers were gathered for prayer, and Rhoda was so startled to hear Peter outside that she forgot to open the door and went back and told the dear believers it was Peter! They said that it couldn't be. They thought he'd been executed long since, or was still in prison. They said it must be 'his angel', by which they would have meant his disembodied spirit (12:1-17).

But that can't be what the Lord means here, can it? Surely it's not meant to be a disembodied spirit of some apostle to receive this letter from the church? Of course not; let's dismiss that. Well, what is it then?

#### THE ATTITUDE OF A CHURCH

Some have held seriously (and maybe they are right) that 'the angel of the church' is meant to be the inner attitude or spirit of the church, so that you could say a church has a certain attitude; you can sense it when you go to the church and when you get to know them. There is a personality about the church. They say this is what is meant by the term 'angel of the church'.

Why are they then represented as stars? Well, some suggest because, in that spiritual sense, the believers are already seated in the heavenlies with Christ in glory. And this is how they appear before the throne of God, so to speak. He looks not merely at their external

features, but at their inner spirit, their personality, what they are as realities in the spiritual realm, and they have weight and are known in the presence of God.

Maybe that is true, but then that would mean that these two symbols are two aspects of the same thing. The lampstand is the church in its witness to the world—that is external. The angel is the inner personality of the church as known to God.

I, personally, find a little difficulty with that interpretation as well, and therefore let me give you my humble opinion, for what it's worth. I speak as to wise men and women; you judge what I say.

#### THE ELDERS AND TEACHERS OF THE CHURCHES

Perhaps we are right to take the word as we began: *angelos*, meaning messenger—not the messengers who may have acted as postmen to take the letters from John to the various churches, but they in the churches who were the messengers of God, carrying the message of God and of the risen Lord to the people. In other words: the teachers and the elders. Now, before you say, 'No, that's impossible, sir,' wait just a minute.

The Epistle of Jude happens to talk in one place about the false teachers that have crept into the church teaching false and perverse doctrines, and deceiving the people and leading them into immorality and vice. And Jude, in his vigorous metaphors, describes them amongst other things as *stars*, as 'wandering stars' (v. 13).

He's using a very good metaphor, isn't he? The book of Genesis tells us that when God made the physical stars in the universe, he gave them to mankind for signs and seasons. And stars have been used by mariners galore all down the centuries, as well as by farmers. The mariners have sailed their ships by the guidance of the stars right from the very early ages. The farmers have used the stars and their different risings and settings to determine the time of ploughing, of seed time and then, eventually, of harvest.

So, the idea of stars being guides for us is biblical and is used specifically in the Epistle of Jude of the teachers in the church who are false teachers—'wandering stars'—or what we nowadays would call planets. If you're a seafarer you can't guide yourself by the planets because they seem to twizzle all over the sky. We now know why they do that; but they were unreliable as guides. Jude calls false teachers in the church wandering stars and says that if people follow them in their guidance, they'll be led to disaster.

You'll say, 'Yes, but wait a minute; there's a snag with your viewpoint, Mr Preacher, and that is that the stars are said to be the angels of the churches, and each church is addressed in this term, "and to the angel . . .", singular.'

Well, there have been those that have said that the angel is the diocese and bishop. I don't think there were such things in John's day, so that seems to be ruled out.

Is it any great difficulty that it's singular? I wouldn't have thought so. The lampstand, if you think about it for a moment, represents a church. In other words, it represents a *plurality* of people—each church being made up of many. And I don't see why a star shouldn't be a plurality as well, and represent the body of the elders and teachers of the church. For the fact remains, my brothers, you who are elders and teachers, whether my interpretation be right or not, you will be held accountable by the risen Lord for the state of the church in which you are an elder. That is why we should respect our elders. What an awesome task that is. 'They

look after your souls' says the Epistle to the Hebrews, 'as those that must give account' (13:17). We lesser lights ought to pray for our elders, shouldn't we?

We who are teachers ought to hear the word of James coming with all its power: 'My brothers, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we will receive the greater condemnation' (3:1). To have told others what to do, and then not to do it, to set standards for other people and not to live them out oneself, that is a serious defect, isn't it?

So, then, our Lord will write to the churches each time and talk to the elders and teachers in those churches.

### **The same term for each church**

The churches were all the same in another sense: they were all *churches*. Why do I stress that? Well, let me use another term; they were all *assemblies*, weren't they? Some of them were very bad, as we might think it; Christ still calls them 'assemblies'.

We should be careful in our modern day lest we confuse ourselves with the different terms that are used in English to translate the same Greek word. The Greek word is *ekklēsia*. In some Bibles it is translated 'church', in other Bibles 'assemblies', in other Bibles like Tyndale's: 'congregations'. But all these different translations represent the same Greek word, so you may call all these seven churches 'churches', but equally and rightly you would call all of them 'assemblies'.

There's a little danger sometimes. Perhaps I exaggerate it, but sometimes we tend to use the word 'church' when we are describing groups of believers that we don't approve of, but those we do approve of, we call 'assemblies'. That is to deceive ourselves with the use of terms. They are all churches, all assemblies.

You'll say, 'But wait a moment; are you saying that people like that woman Jezebel in Thyatira was in an assembly?'

Well, according to our Lord's terms, she was.

You say, 'Are you saying that you should countenance such a thing inside an assembly?'

No; our Lord didn't. He told the elders to deal with it, calling on them to repent. And if assemblies did not repent when our Lord Jesus told them to and, supposing the faults were serious, then he had his own way of disciplining them. Sometimes his discipline would be severe. To Ephesus, he warned that if they continued unrepentant, he would remove their lampstand out of its place. And of the last church, the last assembly, he said, 'If you don't repent, I will spew you out of my mouth.' All were assemblies then.

### **The same standing in their relationship to the Lord**

They were all the same in a much happier thing. They all stood in direct relationship to the Lord Jesus.

You noticed, didn't you, in the letters we read, how our Lord addressed himself to each one of those churches directly? Each stood in a direct, personal relationship to the Lord Jesus. Of course, the messages came dictated by the Apostle John but, as many have noticed, no church was told to interfere in the affairs of another church; that wasn't their business. Each

was addressed directly by the Lord Jesus, and each was to make their response directly to the Lord Jesus.

That's a vastly important principle, isn't it? And it's a wonderful thing. As each church gathers, the blessed Lord who walked amidst those lampstands of olden time draws near and speaks to each individual church. And he does more than speak. Did you notice that, whatever their troubles, whatever their virtues, whatever their faults, whatever their struggles, the Lord, when he first addresses them, presents them with something of himself? 'These things says he that holds the seven stars . . . These things says the Amen . . . the beginning of the creation of God', and so forth (2:1; 3:14). As he comes to each church he has something special to say about himself, as he presents himself to each individual church. Oh, what a glorious thing that is! For this isn't symbol, my brothers, my sisters, this is reality! Do we not believe that when we are gathered together in his name, there the Lord Jesus is in the midst, and *comes* to us (see Matt 18:20)? I like the word that he spoke to his apostles before he left, in the Gospel by John: 'I will not leave you as orphans, I will *come* to you' (John 14:18). Yes, one day he will come again in great glory, but multitudes of times in between, the risen Lord comes to us. He comes to us as churches and causes us to hear his voice; he comes to us to present something glorious about himself, which, if we grasp it, will meet the need of our present moment; he comes to us individually, in our personal difficulties, trials, doubts, fears and perplexities (knowing our works) and ministers to us.

### **The same pattern followed in each letter**

The form of the letters was the same for all. As he comes he says, 'I know your works, I commend you for what I can commend,' and how generous his commendations are. Then, just as faithfully, he criticizes what he must criticize. Then he calls upon them to repent, and holds out the wonderful fruits of victory for those that should overcome.

### **The same call to overcome**

That being so, I want now, first, to talk about what it means to *overcome*. For in all these churches, except one, there are difficulties and faults, some of them glaring, and each church is called upon, and each individual in each church is called upon, to overcome. What does it mean then to overcome? We'll need to get that quite straight in our minds, else our expositions could go a little bit astray.

#### *In the absolute sense*

First of all, let us look to the word 'overcome' in its absolute sense. And for that purpose, I read Revelation 21:7:

He that overcomes shall inherit these things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

So the word overcome in the book of the Revelation is used here in the absolute sense. You say, 'What do you mean by "the absolute sense"?'

Well, notice here there are only two categories. 'He that overcomes shall inherit all these things' (that is, God's glorious heaven), 'but for the fearful . . .'. And that is the only other category: the fearful and abominable and murderous and fornicators and sorcerers and such like: 'their part shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death' (v. 8). You are either an overcomer, and inherit the glories of heaven; or you fail to overcome, and the eternal result is perdition.

You say, 'Does Scripture anywhere else indicate that overcoming has this absolute sense?'

Yes, in 1 John 5:

Who is he that overcomes the world but he that believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (v. 5)

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Son of God, therefore, is by that means an overcomer. Look at the previous verses:

For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not burdensome. For whatsoever is begotten of God overcomes the world. (vv. 3-4)

John is saying that what is born of God—what is begotten of God—by definition, overcomes the world. Therefore if we have been born of God and we have the very life of God within us, by definition, that is a life that overcomes the world. John is talking in the absolute sense. Believers in the Lord Jesus are overcomers. What has been begotten of God overcomes the world.

That is overcoming in the absolute sense, therefore.

### *Never failing?*

Does that mean that all believers are always equally successful and never get defeated by any temptation or difficulty? Of course it doesn't. Even the Apostle John would remind us: 'If we say we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves' (1 John 1:8). If we say we have no sin that is foolish. 'In all things we offend' (see Jas 3:2). The mark of a believer is that if we sin, then we confess our sin. Someone who can go on throughout life sinning and not caring about it is not a believer, is he, or she? Yes, it is true we can fall very gravely. Didn't Peter, in the high priest's court? Was he not defeated for the while by his lack of courage, and denied the Lord Jesus three times? God has had it recorded for our encouragement that even the Apostle Peter fell and failed. The good thing is that the Lord Jesus prayed for him and eventually, through his intercessions and ministry, Peter was brought back. Yes, it is the mark of true believers that when we fail and fall, on our side, we'll repent eventually; on our Lord's side, he, by his intercessions and ministry, will bring us back. Of a professed believer who falls, fails, sins and carries on carelessly, what shall we say? They raise a doubt, don't they, whether they are believers, whether they are overcomers?

But I say again, as we think of those solemn things, how blessed is our Lord Jesus. As he comes with his eyes like flames of fire to investigate our hearts and our inner motives, he does not search merely our actions. He says, 'I'd like the churches all to know I am he that searches the kidneys, the reins, the innermost motives' (see Rev 2:23). How contradictory sometimes

are our inner motives from what we actually do. Our blessed Lord knows the outer works, and he knows the inner motives and assesses them. And assessing them he says, 'I know'.

With every church, he offers himself as the cure of their troubles. There is enough in him to meet our need. Why should ransomed hearts be not glad? There is enough in Christ to meet the need. But we do need to repent and listen to him, and learn from him what the issues at stake are. For, on the side of the overcomer, every letter tells us and spells out some glorious fruits of overcoming, of being a true believer and learning to live as such.

If that is some of the basic terminology, let's come now, in our final moments (they are not going to be quite so few final moments tonight, as sometimes they are) and look at what was wrong with the churches.

## **What was wrong with the churches**

You will see now on your notes that I have listed two groups of facts. At the top of the page there is: 'Old Testament Allusions'. Then on the second half of the page you will see 'Features of the Seven Churches'.<sup>8</sup>

### **A question of extremes**

When we look more closely at those seven churches, we find an interesting thing. Take, for instance, Ephesus, as it is listed in our notes. They are commended for their hate. They are blamed for letting go their first love. They hated, but they didn't love (2:1-6).

Now look at the fourth church. They are commended for their love. (In the better manuscripts of the New Testament, this is the only church commended for its love.) The trouble with them was what? They didn't hate (2:18-22).

You say, 'They were unbalanced then.' Yes, they were very unbalanced. And what about the last church? Well, they are blamed for being neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. So, the first church is unbalanced because it has gone to one extreme: it hates but it doesn't love and has become grotesquely unbalanced. The fourth church is the other extreme: it loves—it is commended for its love—but it doesn't hate what it should hate. It allows that false Jezebel to teach doctrines that are blasphemous to the name of the Lord Jesus. So, Ephesus is at one extreme, Thyatira at the other extreme. And Laodicea? What is its trouble? Its trouble is it isn't at any extreme. 'I know you,' says the Lord. 'You are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were one of the two, but you're not one extreme or the other, are you? You're nicely in the middle, and it's so nauseating I could spew you out of my mouth' (see 3:15-16)

Let's think about those things for a moment, shall we? Let's take Ephesus and Thyatira: churches whose troubles were that they'd gone to extremes on the one side or the other. That very often afflicts us, don't you think? We're like pendulums on a clock. Now we go to avoid one error and go to one extreme on that side, and presently the old pendulum swings back, and trying to avoid another error we go to the extreme of the other side. It is difficult, in individual life and in church life, to keep an even balance and not go to one extreme or the other. But balance is important.

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<sup>8</sup> See the Appendix, p. [123](#).



*Ephesus: The problem of hating without loving*

Ephesus was at an extreme: 'You hate the things I hate,' says Christ. There was nothing wrong in their hate. We mustn't put up with sentimental, so-called Christianity that would say we should hate nothing. 'You hate the doctrine of the Nicolaitans which I also hate,' says Christ (2:6). Ten out of ten to the Ephesians for that: they hated what Christ hated! 'You have loved righteousness and hated iniquity,' says God of his Messiah (Ps 45:7; Heb 1:9). And if our Lord hates iniquity, so are we to hate it. We are to hate all doctrines that would disparage and besmirch the blessed reputation and character of our Lord. But they had so got on to this style of hating that, unintentionally maybe, they had let go of their first love. How ever had they come to do that?

Well, I can understand them, if I might be their advocate for a moment. They would have remembered how Paul called them down to meet him by the seaside when he was passing by, thinking to see them for the last time, and commended them to God and to his grace and to his word. He had implored the elders of that church to guard the church of God, to guard it from wolves from the outside: predators, false teachers, that would come in to destroy the flock. And he charged them to guard the flock from men from the inside who would seek to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20).

Perhaps the second are the more dangerous of the two lots. You can recognize wolves from the outside, perhaps, but what about the men inside who have their pet doctrines and their pet schemes, and will push them and push them and push them until they split a church? Their motives very often are questionable. They are drawing away *the disciples after them*. They can do great damage in a church. Paul had pleaded with the elders to protect the church from those two groups. When later he wrote to Timothy, he pleaded with Timothy to fulfil his charge and guard the churches from the kind of evil teaching and evil practice that there was around at the time.<sup>9</sup>

There doubtless were men in Ephesus that had taken it to heart. When they began, they loved the Lord, they loved his people; they therefore sought to discern those who said they were true apostles and were not, those who were spreading false teaching, and they examined them and found them liars, and dealt with them accordingly. But little by little, so concerned to judge what was wrong, and to detect false teaching, and hating what the Lord hated, perhaps even as they went about that arduous task, always looking for something wrong, always criticizing and hating that the wrong, all unintentionally maybe, they let go of their first love. And what is the first love in a believer's life, in the life of a church? Well, it is of course the love that responds to the message of God in the gospel. How that while we were sinners, Christ died for us, while we were enemies, he died for us, while we were ungodly, while we were weak, God commended his love towards us, for God so loved the world (see Rom 5:8–10; John 3:16).

Oh, my brothers, my sisters, seeing we are all sinners and all do constantly come short, we should never forget that first, wonderful joy – the first love of the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. It isn't a joy that is *first* because you have it when you first get converted, and then that should suffice you and you lose it. We should live every day of the week in the

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<sup>9</sup> See 1 Timothy 1, which also notes that Timothy was in Ephesus at the time (v. 3).

joy of our *first* love, shouldn't we? What stands *first*? Our love for Christ. Every single day we bow in the presence of God, and at the end of every day we come into the presence of God. What is your plea to the Lord? Is it: 'Lord, I've done very well today, bless me, please?' No, of course not. Every single day we live, and we bow our knees to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have to say, 'Lord, I've not done what I should have done. And what I have done, thanks for the help, but I didn't do it one hundred percent. I am an unprofitable servant still. And oh blessed Lord, thank you; you love me in spite of it!' Isn't that true? He loves us in spite of it. Oh, the wonder of it!

So, then we must preserve a balance, mustn't we? To hate what the Lord hates, yes, but not to let it so chill our hearts that we let go that first love that is the response to the grace of God.

#### THE PROMISE TO THE OVERCOMER: TO EAT OF THE TREE OF LIFE

'To him that overcomes,' says our Lord, 'I will give to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God. But if you don't repent, I'll remove your lampstand out of its place' (2:5-7). The very allusions remind us of Genesis, don't they? In the Garden of Eden there were two trees. There was the tree of life, and there was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Garden of Eden in Greek is *paradise*, of course.

Isn't it interesting, how Adam and Eve got fascinated? Which tree would you have gone for?

You say, 'I think the one that would have tempted me most would be the tree of life. I would have gorged myself on that until I couldn't eat anymore, I think.'

Yes, well, they got fascinated with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of course, since then we have to face good and evil, and need to be discerning of it. We must be aware; we can't live in innocence; we must be aware of evil and discern it and avoid it and protect God's people from it. But there is a danger that we so concentrate on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that we forget to feed: constantly, daily, ever freshly, on the tree of life, and so become cold and hard and censorious and narrow. Oh, the Lord help us.

To him that overcomes, I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (2:7)

You say, 'Do I have to wait until I get home to heaven before I start eating?'

No, you can eat right now! Because our Lord is not merely the *source* of life, is he? He gives us life when we come to him. But he is also the *means* of life! He is the tree of life who keeps us alive.

You say, 'But do I still have to go on constantly eating? I don't have to, do I? I mean, I came to Christ when I was thirty-four and a half years old, and I trusted him, and I ate the living bread, and I'm going to live forever.'

Yes you will, but are you saying that you don't have to keep on eating? That can't be right, can it? You can't say to the blessed Lord Jesus, 'Lord, you know, when I got converted, I came to you and I fed upon the living bread, and you gave me eternal life. Thank you very much, Lord; I've got eternal life and I shan't need to come to you anymore now. Meet you in heaven when I get there!'

What? And when you get home to heaven, my brother and sister, what do you think you will need to do? You say, 'I shan't need the tree of life then; I'll be in heaven.'

You won't need the tree of life?

You say, 'One bite's enough. Now I'm in heaven, I shan't need the Lord.'

You won't need the Lord anymore? Of course you will. This is life: to know him, constantly to feed on him (see John 17:3). And what abundant fruit there is of that tree of life which is in the paradise of God. Already, here, we have eternal life and may feed ourselves on him. God gives us the wisdom to do so constantly, lest we become unbalanced.

*Thyatira: The problem of loving without hating*

Thyatira was at the other extreme. You notice they had terrible heresies and profanities in that church. They were teaching some to eat things offered to idols and to permit fornication (2:20). And yet, what may surprise us is that the Lord Jesus has seen their heart of love: 'I know your works and your love' (v. 19).

Some personalities differ, and some tend to go to one extreme and some to the other. Some personalities like to be really just and mathematical and exact and emphasize doctrine and so on, and they become hard; you wouldn't think they had much affection left. It can happen to academics. At the other extreme are people with loving, warm hearts. They don't care too much about doctrine; they love the Lord, they love everybody. They are full of love! Then the danger is they don't hold fast to the truth, and they compromise with things that are hurting the very heart of Christ. That can't be right, can it? 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments' (1 John 5:3). They loved in Thyatira, but so uncontrolled was their love, and so undiscerning, that they allowed this woman Jezebel to teach these gross, terrible doctrines in their midst, and our Lord had solemnly to rebuke the elders of the church for allowing it.

What were their difficulties? Well, the scholars seem to agree on this: in their particular city of Thyatira, there were many trade guilds. For in those days if you wanted to be a carpet maker you normally belonged to the guild of the carpet makers. If you were, say, a silversmith, you belonged to the guild of the silversmiths. They all had their trade guilds. If you wanted to pursue a trade but didn't belong to the guild, that could be very difficult. But now, if you belonged to the guild, you were expected to go along to the dinners held by the guilds. And these people, before they got converted, were happy to go. That's part of business, isn't it? I mean, you have to mix socially with the right people if you want business, of course you do. You can't say, 'I'm only going to mix with believers, or else you have to go out of this world', says Paul (see 1 Cor 5:9-13).

Yes, but wait a moment. In these guilds they would have a supper, and there of course, at the beginning and throughout, there would be a sacrifice made to the patron god of the guild. It was a religious as well as a commercial thing. In addition, there would be women there, but they wouldn't be the wives of the businessmen. It would end in debauchery.

Should a believer go? 'Well, if I don't go, it's my business gone down the drain!' Can you take part in religious service that offers sacrifices to false gods? That is the number one prohibition of the Lord, isn't it? 'You shall have no other gods but me' (Exod 20:3).

How far are we prepared to go to stand loyal to Christ in our business affairs? I needn't tell you businessmen that in the West, for many centuries now, there have been secret societies. They are there, so they say, for good works and charitable causes. But in those secret societies, in their ceremonies behind closed doors, they engage in all sorts of rituals that are downright idolatrous and utterly blasphemous against Christ, for they mix the name of Christ with the sun god, and Osiris and Bull and Baal and all the rest of them. It is supposed to be Christian, but it mixes the lovely name of Christ with all sorts of pagan religion.

'You mustn't do it,' says Christ. And there can be no excuse by saying: 'Oh, but this is the loving thing to do,' and, 'you mustn't be critical.' Saying that cannot save us from our Lord's grave criticism. 'You must repent,' he says.

#### THE PROMISE TO THE OVERCOMER: TO RULE WITH A ROD OF IRON

'One day,' says Christ to the overcomer, 'I shall give you authority over the nations, and you shall rule them with a rod of iron, and like a potter's vessel they will be dashed to pieces' (see 2:26–27).

You say, 'That's tough language, isn't it?'

Oh, yes. For that was just what was wrong with that church: they were so on the side of love that they'd gone soft. They needed some steel put into their character! They needed some iron in their backbones so they could stand for the Lord, cost what it may in the daily affairs of life and business.

#### *Laodicea: The problem of being nothing much of anything*

If Ephesus was at one extreme and Thyatira was at the other, what was Laodicea's trouble? Its trouble was that it wasn't at any extreme! 'I know your works: you're neither hot nor cold,' says our Lord.

You see, we shouldn't be extreme in anything, except for one. When it comes to zeal for Christ then nothing but *extreme* will satisfy him. 'I would you were cold—on that extreme— or hot. I cannot stand,' says Christ, 'people that try to take a middle position.'

Some will say, 'Well, I'm not all that keen about the church. I'm not keen about the gospel. But while I'm not keen on it, I'm not against it.'

Says Christ: 'I wish you were cold—ice cold—not pretending to be a believer. Better a believer with a heart as cold as ice, than this tepid, lukewarm stuff. I'd prefer you to be ice cold.' That would be honest, wouldn't it? 'Or else I wish you were burning, boiling hot, not in the middle—neither hot nor cold. I cannot stand it,' says Christ. For the mark of a believer is what? As we've considered already, it is the mark of true believers that when we fail and fall, we'll repent eventually. On our Lord's side, he, by his intercessions and ministry, will bring us back. 'If you don't repent,' says Christ, 'I'll spew you out of my mouth' (see 3:14–22).

### **For further study of the churches**

#### *Other features*

I shall not now comment on the other churches. I have put them there on the paper to prompt you to some study in these lines yourself. You will notice, won't you, how Smyrna is the opposite of Philadelphia. Smyrna is about to be put in prison and suffer persecution, and hear

the prison door clang shut behind them, and to have tribulation ten days (2:10). Whereas Philadelphia is another story completely: 'I have set before you an *open door* and given you courage to go through it and exploit it to the full.' They are given an open door of missionary potential. They wouldn't have tribulation. They are precisely promised that they will be kept out of the hour of temptation that is to come upon all people (see 3:7-10).

So, you may care to study them.

#### *Interpreting the seven churches dispensationally*

Sometimes teachers suggest that when you look at the seven churches you can interpret them dispensationally. If you think of the line of history starting at Pentecost, and you come right down to the time when the Lord Jesus comes again, they say, 'Well, those seven churches will be, so to speak, a foreshadowing of all the different spiritual stages in the life of Christendom from Pentecost until the Lord comes.'

Some hold that view and say, 'Well, you can't take it quite like that because not all churches nowadays are Laodicean. You take the believers that have been persecuted for their faith in our own time: they're surely not Laodiceans. And will there not be some still right to the end who will be persecuted for their faith?'

So they say, 'Yes, but it's the last four that have the phrase, "Carry on until I come".' So, there are the first three, and then there are the four at the end—all four conditions simultaneously going on until the Lord comes. And many find that way of looking at things helpful.

I think I'd have one or two questions. I would want to say, but what about the church of Smyrna? That was only the second church. It had to endure persecution. Are there not many believers enduring grievous persecution still, and will do to the end? So, yes, it is a very helpful and fruitful idea, but we must look at it with caution.

#### *Old Testament allusions*

One thing I can point out that is true has to do with the Old Testament allusions. I am just going to point it out and leave you to consider the implications. I have grouped them at the beginning of page 2.

You will notice that in Ephesus the allusion is: 'I will give you to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God'. Paradise is Greek for 'garden of Eden', and here is a reference, an allusion, to Eden's garden. When Adam and Eve fell, they were removed out of the garden (Gen 3). 'If you don't repent,' says our Lord, 'I'll move your lampstand out of its place. I am not prepared to maintain a church forever that is such a caricature, that has lost its love, and is simply embodied hate.'

Smyrna, you will see then, is a reference to what our Lord prophesied to Abraham, when he prophesied that his kin would go through the afflictions of Egypt, and be afflicted so many years for a precise time and then come out (Gen 15:13). And in relation to church number three, Pergamum, we read of the teaching of Balaam that comes in the days of the wilderness (Num 22-24). In Thyatira, Jezebel, who came in the days of the kings (1 Kgs 16; 2 Kgs 9). And so forth to the end. I needn't trouble you now as we close. I just mention these things to you because might like to care to investigate them in Scripture.

The fact is that these allusions follow the Old Testament from Genesis right to the time of the exile when the land spewed Israel out. So the last church comes to the point when the risen Lord will spew Laodicea out of his mouth. But that isn't the end of the story, is it? Because after the exile Israel returned, and all those glorious promises given through the prophets, that one day they would be restored, began to be fulfilled. And the rest of the book of the Revelation is the story of how God will yet fulfil those promises of restoration until all shall be restored, and there shall dawn the new Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God.

And now, shall we pray.

Now, Lord, we thank thee for thy word. We thank thee for its immense wealth. We thank thee for the clear evidence of thy great understanding. There is not a detail that misses thy holy eye. But with it, we bless thee for thy sympathy and thy encouragement, and Lord, as we have listened to thee this evening, we pray that thou will help us absorb what thou has had to say. Put in us a heart to come back, and again many times, to this part of thy word, to the end that we might live lives of increasing holiness, giving increasing pleasure to thee. And Lord help us, we do pray, who have believed thee as Son of God, and therefore, in that sense, have overcome the world, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, that in a practical sense, we may more constantly overcome the difficulties and failings of this life, and live ever more pleasing to thee until the day dawn when thou shalt come and take us home to thy glory.

So, part us with thy blessing, we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## [A Door Opened in Heaven](#)

### *Section Two—Revelation 4:1–7:17*

We come now in our study to the second major section of the book of the Revelation.<sup>10</sup> As we tried to demonstrate in our first study, the book of the Revelation consists, as a whole, of six major sections. The first section, which we covered in our previous two studies, brought us face to face with our blessed Lord dictating seven letters to seven churches. As we read those letters, we found our Lord Jesus was engaged in assessing his people, in praising their good works, in calling attention to and criticizing their bad works. He encouraged them to repent, holding out before them the glittering prizes and fruits of overcoming.

It was fitting, we thought, that the section on Christ's judgment of the church came first because, as Peter reminds us in 1 Peter: 'the time has come that judgment must first begin at the house of God, and if it first begins with us, what shall be the end of the ungodly?' (see 4:17). Now we come to Section Two of the Revelation.

### **The theme of the throne of God**

In the course of this section we shall see the judgments of God beginning to fall on a world that has gone far in its rebellion against God and will eventually reap his wrath. But this second section has for its dominant theme the throne of God. That throne is vividly presented to us at the beginning of chapter 4. Once our eyes are set upon it, we shall find that theme continues prominently through this section.

Let's let our reading of the text confirm to our eyes and ears that this topic spreads throughout these four chapters. We begin to read in 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.' At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Round 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. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes

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<sup>10</sup> See the notes on [Section Two](#) in the Appendix.

in front and behind: 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. 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!' And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.' (4:1–11 ESV)

So much for the description of the throne; but that simply sets the scene. Now watch the action begin:

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. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 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.' And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing,<sup>11</sup> 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. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. 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. 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, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.' 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, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!' 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 honor and glory and might for ever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshipped. (5:1–14 ESV)

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<sup>11</sup> Older English translations render verse 6: 'And I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing . . .'. That is a Hebraic way of talking. What we would say in English is, 'I saw, between the throne and the four living creatures on the one side, and the elders on the other side, a Lamb standing . . .'. That is, 'I saw, between the two groups, a Lamb standing.'



So much for the activity as the Lamb comes and takes the book out of the hand of him that sits upon the throne, and is shown worthy to open it and its seals. But chapter 6 continues the action, as you see, for he says, 'I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals' (v. 1). John describes, in the following verses, what happened as each seal was broken, and comes at last to the climax with the sixth seal:

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, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 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, 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, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?' (6:12–17 ESV)

So now you see, at the opening of this sixth seal, the throne that hitherto has been invisible to men on earth, now becomes visible as the veil that hides the unseen world from the seen world is drawn aside. And guilty, unrepentant men catch a glimpse of that throne and cry in their terror for the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the face of him whom they can now see sitting on the throne.

Chapter 7 follows the theme. For though the judgments of God fall, chapter 7 describes for us two groups of people. The first group, 144,000, are of the tribes of Israel, and their particular feature is that they are sealed and are thus preserved from the effects of these worldwide judgments (vv. 4–8). Then, after these things, from verse 9 to the end of the chapter, John shows us another company, this time out of every kindred, tribe, people and nation: a number beyond all counting. He tells us they are 'standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands'.

We'll read the verses to show how the theme of the throne continues throughout these final verses of this section:

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, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.' Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' 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. 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. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching

heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' (7:9–17 ESV)

God bless his holy and inspired word to us all.

So then, we come tonight to consider and to contemplate, by God's help, the throne of God's majesty.

## **Before the throne of God**

I suppose the first thing we ought to notice about this throne is that, when John saw it, it was occupied. Oh, thank God there is a throne in the heaven, and thank God that throne is occupied! Let the world's distress and chaos be what it will, God is still on the throne and has not vacated it all these long centuries of the universe's history.

### **What the descriptions are for**

The next question I suppose we ought to ask is: how are we to take the descriptions of these thrones that are given to us in chapter 4? Those flaming torches and that rainbow and the circle of thrones and these living creatures and so on: what do they tell us, if anything?

We ought, I suppose, in respect of some commentators, to ask the question: is this just impressionistic?

You say, 'What do you mean by that?'

Well, you go into some friend's house, and you're ushered into the sitting room. Your eye is caught at once: what a lovely colour scheme it is! Perhaps it's various shades of blue; there might even be a beautiful gold leaf somewhere, setting it off. And you say, 'What a beautiful effect.' It's stunning, isn't it? It is *impressionistic*: it has made an impression on you. But if we were to say, what does this colour scheme symbolize, and what does it teach? No, that's a silly question. It wasn't meant to teach anything. It was just meant to look beautiful and wonderful and elegant, and to impress you with feelings of appreciation for the loveliness of it all.

Is it so with this description of God's throne that it is simply impressionistic? We would have no reason to complain if it were so, would we? For to catch sight of his majestic throne in all its awesomeness and wonder is a very necessary thing for our spiritual and emotional health; but surely it is more than simply impressionistic. These are symbols conveying messages, telling us in a word what that throne is like.

When we say what the throne is like, we are not thinking so much of some great heavenly chair, august as that might appear. We are not thinking of the throne simply as a seat upon which the majesty sits, we are thinking of the throne as the symbol and emblem of the *government* of God. So this description shall not only tell us how majestic it is, but it will also tell us the nature of the government that stems from this throne, and that will bring us to appreciate the very character of the divine King who sits there enthroned.

## Solomon's throne and what it meant

We may take a little example from the Old Testament. When Solomon began to reign, he built himself a throne eventually (1 Kings 10:18–20). This was no ordinary throne: it was made of ivory, and some expense he spent on it. Anyone could tell how rich he was when he could make a throne like that. There were more than riches to it for on the steps that led up to the throne, and held there by stays at the side of the throne, were an abundance of lions! And I daresay they were made to give as big an impression as they could. They weren't Pekingese lap dogs; they were lions, made to look as fierce as they could possibly look, although they were but made of the same stuff as the chair itself. They were meant to impress anybody that came up to that throne, not merely with the wealth of it or the artistry of it; the lions were there to show something of the *power* of that king, so that people might come worthily to him, and in the right frame of mind.

## The description of the throne in heaven

When John was given to see this throne in heaven, he noticed some of the particulars, and they are not just impressionistic details; they are symbols. For instance, there is 'the rainbow' round about the throne, not 'a rainbow', but '*the* rainbow'. All of us will know from our Sunday school days that the rainbow has a message to preach. Then there are those lamps of fire: blazing torches of light in front of the throne. They represent, we are told, 'the seven spirits of God'. All these things are symbols that are meant to convey messages and meaning to us, if only God gives us the grace to understand them.

## The first pair of things: Two circles around the throne (4:2–4)

Would you notice how carefully they are described? This throne is described with geometrical precision. There is, first of all, a pair of things. It says here:

and round the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders . . . (4:3 ESV)

You will notice how carefully this is said if you will allow me to read it to you in the order of the Greek words: 'and there was a rainbow round about the throne and, round about the throne, thrones, twenty-four of them.' That is a very carefully stated sentence. It is what the grammarians call a *chiasm*.

We are told that both these circles went full circle round the throne. The rainbow going full circle round the throne (*kyklothen*, says the Greek) was presumably going in the vertical plane.

Pity my simplicity, but suppose this chunk of plastic I have here represents the throne. How do you imagine the rainbow is going? It's going right round it, all the way round in the vertical sphere. It is a beautiful, a predominantly green rainbow, going full circle round the throne.

And then there are: full circle 'round about the throne, thrones, twenty-four of them' with elders sitting on them. What plane do you suppose they were on? I don't think they were

going in the vertical plane. If they were elders sitting on thrones round the throne, presumably they went in the horizontal plane. So there are two full circles around that throne: one in the vertical plane, and one in the horizontal plane.

As you see them, they, so to speak, (forgive me the word for a moment, don't throw me out for heresy forthwith until you've heard me speak) put a *boundary*, they put a *limit*. This is not against God's will, for he put them there. So here are two limits: one in the vertical and one in the horizontal plane, so that anything coming out of that throne, so to speak, has to pass by those two boundaries and limits.

### *The rainbow around the throne*

You say, 'Why do you use that word, "limit"?'

Well, because I can't help remembering what God said when he first put the bow in the cloud, or at least the first time he gave it significance.

'Behold,' he said to Noah, as Noah had come out of the flood, 'when the storm cloud rises again . . .'. And perhaps when he saw such a storm cloud, Noah's knees would begin to shake and tremble. He'd seen enough of storms by now! Then, in his kindness, God says, 'Now, watch the bow in the cloud. It's a covenant I make with you, Noah, and with all flesh, that I will not drown the world completely again with water, and destroy all flesh. No, I won't.' At the flood, of course, he did destroy all flesh. 'The end of man has come before me,' he says. There were only a tiny, tiny few saved (eight people). The rest of the entire human race was blotted out. 'I'll never do it again,' says God; 'I'll not thus destroy the earth with water, and thus destroy all flesh' (see Gen 6–9).

The idea of the rainbow set in the cloud: that's all I mean by 'limit'. It is God himself, the occupant of the throne, setting the limit to his judgments. Oh, my dear friends, shout 'Hallelujah' in your heart to such a God! For we are to read of judgments that are about to come, some of them so awful that when men and women like us—flesh and blood—suffer them, they will gnaw their tongues in pain and blaspheme the God of heaven who has the power over such things (16:10–11). What kind of a God is he that will send such things? Is he a God that delights to judge, some sadist God? Oh no, my brothers and sisters, no! Look at this throne from which those judgments will come, and see him who sits on it, and see the nature of his government! This is a God who has put a limit on his judgments before they start. The rainbow, now predominantly green (a peaceful colour) is going full circle round the throne. As it is said elsewhere: 'In your judgments remember mercy' (Hab 3:2).

Of course, we are now looking forward into the distant future, to another age when God's grace shall be giving place now to his judgments. But we have reason ourselves, personally, to thank God for the limit of his judgment, have we not? For we were once sinners, defiled in his sight. If we had what we deserve, even to this day, we must perish, root and branch; for we have sinned in the past, and the holiest of us at this moment must admit we still do come short. If we stood before God in this moment, simply on the ground of our merit, what should become of us? If we stood simply on the grounds of his righteous law, what must happen? Oh, how we bless God for what he has shown us, that through the sacrifice of our blessed Lord, and the judgment executed on him, our great *ark* of salvation, 'there is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). 'Amen, amen, I tell you,' says Christ,

'he who hears my word and believes on him that sent me, comes not into condemnation' (see John 5:24). Marvellous, isn't it?

So, will it ever be in God's wrath that is to come, when it is poured out on a guilty world, as we shall see in the last part of this section, there will come a vast multitude out of *the* great tribulation, if you please, crying, 'Salvation!' to our God. 'They have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, therefore, are they before the throne', and unafraid (see 7:14–17).

#### *The elders on thrones around the throne*

There is not only a full circle of the rainbow going vertically; there is this other very interesting feature. Have you been able to take it in? I mean, not just the fact but the significance of it: 'around about the throne, thrones'?

That can't be, can it? Is he not the sole God, the 'I am that I am, there is none beside me'? How can there be anything more than just one throne? I thought you were all monotheists? You don't believe in a lot of gods, do you? You say the Almighty is sharing the government? Well, with whom then? What are they?

You say, 'That's right, Mr Preacher. Now, you've been a long while getting round to it, like preachers do. Why don't you come to the point and tell us who these elders are?'

Well, I'll leave that question to you, if you don't mind, but I'll answer the first one and say what they are. It's always a good thing when you're studying in the Revelation, to ask first *what* things are and what people are, rather than demanding first to know *who* they are. I don't know that it tells you who they are, do you? It does tell you what they are, so I'm going to say that. They are *elders*!

You say, 'So what?'

Well, they must be creatures to start with, mustn't they? You don't talk of God as 'an elder'. When Daniel, in his vision, saw him, he called him 'the Ancient of Days' (Dan 7:9). His title is absolute, referring to his endless eternity: *the* Ancient. You don't compare him with others and say, 'He's a bit older than someone else.' That would be absolutely inappropriate. He is *the* Ancient.

These are elders, so they must be creatures. That deepens the mystery, doesn't it? The Almighty God, the one true God, the sole King has got *creatures* on thrones round his? How do you solve that one?

You say, 'Perhaps they're angels then.'

Well, some people have thought so. But then I don't think you'd call angels elders either, would you? How old are angels, if you know? Are some older than others, would you say? Would you say, 'Oh, this is a junior angel, he's not learned his job yet; you can tell by the way he behaves. He'll learn when he gets older.' No, you don't talk like that about angels, do you? They belong to that eternal, timeless realm.

These are elders, a term that speaks of comparative age. It seems to me inescapable that they must be human. Could that be so? Would God Almighty share his throne with humans? Well, yes, of course he would.

Now that I remember, there is one human, he's not a creature, of course, but he is human: 'Verily God yet become truly human'.<sup>12</sup> Oh, this is a heart-ravishing story! The marvel of the

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<sup>12</sup> Henry D'Arcy Champney (1854–1942), 'Jesus, Our Lord, With What Joy We Adore Thee.'

government of the universe is that the supreme ruler says, according to his dear Son, Jesus Christ: 'the Father judges no man, but has given all judgment to the Son' (John 5:22). Why is that?

'He has given him authority to judge also, because he is . . .'

You say, 'because he is the Son of God.'

No, 'because he is the Son of Man' (v. 27). This is a magnificent God, you know. When it comes to the judgment of mankind, it will not be the Father, as such, that does the judging. He has committed all judgment to one who is a *man*. That is what the lawyers call 'judgment by peer'.

Were it not so, you could imagine an impenitent before the throne of divine majesty, being condemned for his sin and, were he allowed to answer, he might well say, 'But how do you know what it feels like to be a human, to be beset with sin and all its temptations and its pressures. You condemn me, but you never knew what it was like to be human.'

It won't happen. Oh, it won't happen! For he who will execute the judgment of God knows exactly what it is like to be human, sin apart, of course. All judgment is committed to him, because he is a son of man.

'Yes, but,' you say, 'you've wandered like you normally do. You've got away from the point that there are *twenty-four* elders. You can't say all twenty-four elders represent Christ, can you?'

Well, no, that wouldn't make sense, would it? I must look further afield. But you know, there is a marvellous secret written in Scripture, there is indeed. It is how that others will be associated with Christ in the government. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is said by the Lord himself that when the Son of Man comes in his glory, 'then he shall sit on the throne of his glory' (25:31). 'You also,' he said to the apostles, 'will sit on thrones as well, judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (see 19:28). Yes, this is talking about shared government then.

And to broaden things out a bit, the second Epistle of Paul to Timothy says that 'if we endure, we shall *reign* with him' (2:12). Indeed, in the very next chapter of the book of the Revelation, it is said explicitly of these that have been redeemed, they shall 'reign'. These elders and all the rest shall reign upon the earth (5:10).

Oh, it would take a big pair of lungs to be able to contain the joy over the sheer wonder of the character of God!

Who raised that wondrous thought,  
Or who did it suggest,  
That we, blood-bought saints to glory brought  
Should with the Son be blessed?<sup>13</sup>

If he had just let us into the back door of heaven and said, 'Sit there,' that would have been marvellous grace, wouldn't it? But where did the idea come from that we should be elevated

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<sup>13</sup> (Ed.) The original text of the hymn is by Samuel Ridout. The more original wording is most likely:

What raiseth the wondrous thought?  
Or who did it suggest?  
That we, the Church, to glory brought  
Should with the Son be blessed!

and share Christ's reign with him, and with the central throne? We say, 'Father, the thought was yours. We didn't suggest it and never would have dreamed of it.'

This is God. Oh what a magnificent God he is!

### *Agreeing with God's judgments*

Let me ask you a question. We are considering these thrones, and these elders. The elders are in white robes, and they've got golden *crowns* (4:4). The Greek word means a wreath—a chaplet around their heads. In the ancient world, people that had conquered in the games, or conquered in the fight, would be given a wreath to wear. Or a magistrate would wear a chaplet, a wreath, around his head in honour of his position. These we read of are made of gold. It looks as if they have overcome.

They have indeed. They have overcome, like their Lord overcame. Did we not hear the promises? 'To him that overcomes, I will give to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and have sat down on his throne. I will give you authority over the nations, you shall dash them in pieces with a rod of iron' (see 2:27; 3:21). Tell me, do you imagine these twenty-four elders are all 'yes-men'?

You say, 'What do you mean?'

Well, you know, in some governments, I'm told (I wouldn't know, but I'm told) some of the present MPs in parliament agree with anything that Tony Blair<sup>14</sup> says because they're so glad they've got there. They never would have got there without him, so it doesn't matter what he suggests, they'll never vote against him; they'll always vote with him. They are a lot of 'yes-men'. Do you suppose these elders are yes-men?

You say, 'Wait a minute. They will all agree with God, of course. It would be wicked not to agree with God.'

Yes, of course it would be. But why do they agree? It's not because God has removed their free will and turned them into machines, is it? They still have free will. And being now human and perfected, having a perfect, personal righteousness (look at their robes) and are themselves victors in the fight, they willingly, with all their heart, mind, soul and strength, agree with God's decisions. So, if the judgments come out from the throne of God, holy humans would agree with them.

Out of that throne come now these voices, and thunders and lightnings. The judgments of God are about to begin. God is now going to talk to the nations, and very solemn language much of it will be (4:5).

### **The second pair of things: The torches and the sea of glass (4:5-6)**

Here comes another pair. It says that there were seven lamps, that is, torches. These are not lamps like the golden lampstand in the tabernacle but torches such as armies, or anyone travelling in the dark, would take, with a blazing flame at the top of it. These seven blazing torches are *before* the throne (not round about it this time). And John also saw before the throne, a sea of glass, like crystal (4:5-6).

Again we have two things, told with the same grammatical way of putting it as with the first pair: 'seven blazing torches before the throne, and before the throne, a sea of glass like

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<sup>14</sup> British Prime Minister, 1997-2007.

crystal' (4:5–6). What does that tell us about the throne? It is not now telling us of its divinely put limits, but its *power*.

#### *The torches of light before the throne*

These seven torches are said to represent 'the seven spirits of God' (4:5). It doesn't mean that there are seven Holy Spirits. This is a biblical way of talking of the plenitude of the Holy Spirit, a phrase that occurs again in the next chapter: 'The seven spirits of God that are sent out into all the earth' (5:6). This is the Holy Spirit in the plenitude of his executive power, as the throne puts forth its power. We needn't say more about it, for herein is the operative power of that throne.

But what is the point of the symbol? You have a torch, blazing with fire, to dispel the gloom and the darkness that are all around, don't you? The Holy Spirit is a spirit of *light*: the very opposite of darkness. That is an important feature about the throne of God. We once, the whole lot of us, were in the power of darkness, weren't we? Not physical darkness but moral darkness and spiritual darkness—deceived and being deceived (see Eph 5:8; 2 Tim 3:13). That is Satan's method of keeping people loyal to him and to his side. He uses darkness, lies and deceptions. Not God; he rules by *enlightening*. He has brought us 'out of darkness into his most marvellous light' (see 1 Pet 2:9).

I love that, you know.

Of course, for us particularly as Christians, he has given us the word of God, a light to our feet, and our blessed Lord who is the light of this world. That's what God is like.

In the medieval times, Christendom's church, and then the governments, tried to keep the people under their control by forbidding them to use the Bible. They were afraid the people might read the Bible and come to the wrong conclusion, so they said. What they were afraid of was that people should read the Bible and find out that they, the church and governments themselves were wrong! So, you ruled them by keeping them *in the dark*! So have totalitarian governments generally acted to keep the people in the dark. Not God; he isn't like that.

We must be careful, of course, lest we become proud in our imaginations, but God never wants to keep you ignorant. Take the intellectual level of life. Some believers are afraid their children will go to school and learn too much science. Why are they afraid? It's God's world, isn't it? Do check the difference between real science and atheistic science when you're at it, but God doesn't mind how much you find out, so long as it's a genuine discovery in nature. God is the God of light. He made it anyway! He wants us to know.

The same is true of morality, and it is true spiritually: God rules by light.

#### *The sea before the throne*

Then look at the other symbol of his power. Look at that sea, like crystal. The ancient psalmists admired God for this: 'You still the roaring of the waves in the sea when they roar against us' (Ps 89:9). Or, again, 'the wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest' (Isa 57:20); its endless motion turns up dirt and filth. In front of God there is a sea, calm and pure as crystal: this is the *power* of purity. Oh, I could preach a sermon! I mustn't do that because the time is running away with me.



## The four living creatures (4:6–11)

There was one other major feature of this throne, the presence of what are called four 'living creatures'. The older translations say 'beasts'. That's a little unfortunate. I'm not sure that the aforesaid beasts would like that term. They are better called 'the living ones'. That is what the word means. These are the living ones: cherubim, if you like. They are called in Ezekiel and elsewhere 'the living ones'. In Scripture, they are constantly associated with the throne of God in one way or the other.

You say, 'That's right, Mr Preacher, you ducked out of it the last time; you're not going to duck out this time. Now, tell us who these living creatures are.'

You are a difficult crowd; you are always asking to be told what Scripture doesn't say, aren't you? Well, I'm not going to tell you. I'll tell you *what* they are! They are living ones; they are the cherubim.

How are they placed in relation to the throne? Well, it sounds funny in English (though it's good Hebrew): 'they are in the midst of and round about the throne' (4:6). I suspect they were like this. Imagine one of them with his hindquarters inwards, and the head sticking out. In that way they were in the midst, and they were all round, on all four sides, carrying the throne, like they are seen to do in Ezekiel 1. They carry the throne.

### *The life of creatures*

They are living creatures. One had the face of an ox, one a lion, one an eagle, and one a man. Just enjoy what they were for a moment, won't you? There are some days when I'd like to be a cherub, well, not just one cherub, but four cherubs in one, really. In some places, they are pictured as having four heads on one lot of shoulders, because of the life they represent. Look at all the forms of life! Oh, there's an eagle! What life the eagles have, don't they? I wish I were like it sometimes. There's me, so pedestrian, clod-hopping along the earth, and there goes an eagle. Oh, marvellous! I wish I could fly like that! But I don't have that kind of life.

Then there's the lion. And here I am, like a mouse getting out of bed in the morning, with arthritis. And I think of a lion roaring! Oh, what power and majestic majesty!

And here's the ox, plodding along, a faithful old workhorse he is. I wish I had the energy to get up instead of lolling on my settee and get to work like him with all that energy.

Then there's a man: here is human power, human life. Well, it's better than all the others, isn't it, even if it doesn't have some of their advantages?

But here are all kinds of *life*. For you see, this is the throne of the *living* God. Says Paul in his first Epistle to Timothy, 'I write this, so you might know how you have to behave in the house of God, which is the church of the *living* God' (3:15). His throne rests on life, in all its various forms.

### *How God rules*

That's of course how God rules, isn't it? Have you pondered that? How does God get the creation around to do his bidding? For instance, how does he get apple trees to grow apples? Do you suppose he sends a letter down from heaven every springtime that says, 'Now, I'd like you this year please to grow apples'? No, he doesn't do that. Well, how then? Well, he's put apple life in the old apple tree, and it has its own laws, and when the time comes, here comes the life! It's marvellous.

How does he get human beings to behave? You say, 'He's given them human life.' What's gone wrong then? Well, human life had its own free will, and choice therefore, and chose to go against the Creator. It has marred humanity seriously, hasn't it?

You say, 'How does God then get these sinners to do his will and get them back going straight as they should?' Well, how about you, how does he get you to do it? Well, he doesn't do it just by trying to get you to keep a law, does he? Have you noticed the way? He gave you new life; you were born again of the seed of God, given a divine nature to develop (see 1 Pet 1:23). That is the secret of our growing ability (we hope it is growing) to see that the righteous demands of the law are fulfilled in us, not simply because we are trying to keep the law, but because we are led by the Spirit of God, the very life of God within (Rom 8:1-4).

### **The right to rule and restore**

This then is the throne of God. Seeing he is the living God and the source of all life, then the heavenly beings worship him, and the elders in particular, and they spell out the worthiness of the central figure of the throne to receive the praise, the honour, the worship, the riches, the glory, the power, the might and the dominion. On what stands his right? They proclaim his right as the Creator: 'by your will they existed and were created' (4:8-11 ESV). The universe wasn't made first and foremost to satisfy us. The universe was made for him: 'of him, through him, to him are all things' (see Rom 11:36). And here is the sad description of what has gone wrong. It isn't that men and women get involved in unnatural vice every hour of the day, though that is bad enough. The root cause is this, that: 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way . . .' (Isa 53:6), and it has made a chaos of our planet. God has waited patiently down the centuries, but God has his plans for the redevelopment of earth, and he is not going to wait forever. One day the judgments must begin that will eventually liberate this world from man's rebellion, and its fruits, and clear the way for the great restoration of all things.

### **Who is worthy to judge?**

Now, the first question is, how shall it be done? And if to do it means now deluging the world with judgments, who can do it? You will notice the claim at the beginning of chapter 5 is not merely who *can* do it, but who is *worthy* to do it (v. 2). And in the hand of him that sits on the throne is a book, and it is the title deeds of earth, because they are his by creatorial right. Who is worthy to take that book and unloose its seals, if unloosing the seals is the only way you can open it and read the title deeds and then enforce them, if the very opening of the seals will set loose the judgments?

The challenge is sent out, and at first no one is able to take the book, or even to look upon it (5:3). It would take a stout heart, wouldn't it, to read what is necessary to release this world from man's chaotic sin and bring justice? Who could even look at it? But the bigger question is, who is worthy to do it? And you notice that the Lamb is not said to be *powerful* enough to do it. He has overcome, truly, but he is a human being. He is the lion of the tribe of Judah. He is more than that; he is the root of David: he had a pre-existent eternity. But he is human, and the glorious thing is that the lion of the tribe of Judah has *overcome!* Oh, blessed man. He said,

just before he went to the cross, 'Be of good cheer; I have overcome . . .' (John 16:33). In the face of the world and the devil and all his works, in unswerving obedience to the Father, he overcame, and he is worthy to open the book. For now it ceases to be a question of who has got the *power* to do it.

You see, sometimes we have an infantile idea of God, that all God has got to do is push a big button and create such an infinitely vast explosion and that will solve the lot. That would be my way of doing it. Why, if a mosquito had the impudence to alight on your forehead, sir, of an evening, you wouldn't think twice, would you?

'Mosquitos don't do that to me!' Bang! Without a thought, that's the end of him.

And if the nations all put together are nothing more than drops in a bucket to the Almighty (Isa 40:15), just imagine the longsuffering of God. Why didn't he just use his power and obliterate us long since, and start again? But you see, God (I say it reverently) couldn't do it. Well, he could do it by his power; but if he did it, Satan, before he was obliterated too, would snarl back: 'That's you defeated, God. You see, you started something, and it all went wrong, and all you could do was to destroy it. Well, that went wrong, didn't it? All-powerful to create, but you weren't all-powerful to attract, and you've lost the human race completely, and all you can do is destroy them. And since you made them, and you didn't consult them before you made them, have you no answer but to destroy them when they go wrong.'

It isn't a question of power, merely; it is worthiness—moral worthiness. They sing with relief the great 'Hallelujahs' of heaven to the Lamb who was slain, who is worthy to take the book and to set loose the judgments (5:9). On what does his worthiness stand? First, it stands on his redemption. For he who one day will set loose the judgments, first of all himself was slain. Notice the word; it is not 'sacrificed'; it's the brutal word for slaughter. He was 'slaughtered' by this world. They'll scarcely accuse him, will they, of bringing judgments when he was slain?

You say, 'There are a lot of unsavoury people around, and we're not as bad.'

Wait a minute, no, you're not like the militia in Indonesia, are you? Of course, you're not. But you who are believers would say what I used to say to my Jewish friend, Otto, when he said we Christians were responsible for teaching the world that the wicked Jews murdered Jesus, and we were behind the Holocaust therefore. I would say, 'Otto, do you know who killed Jesus?'

'No, who did then?'

'I did, Otto.'

'What do you mean, you did?'

'Yes, I did. You see, we Christians believe that we were sinners like everybody else, and when Jesus died, he died for our sins, and bore the wrath of God against our sin. Otto, I would no more accuse you of murdering Jesus than I would do that myself, because it was my sins for which he died. The Jews were but the instruments in God's hand. But, of course, your sins too caused his death, didn't they, Otto?'

Jesus died that we might be forgiven, and we are saved from the wrath of God—wonderful Christ! And all who will (there's no limited atonement here) may benefit from that death; none need perish. 'You were slain and have redeemed us to God by your blood'—bought us to God. Once we were created; now we are redeemed. 'You have bought us to God by your blood' (see 5:9). But it's not that merely; there is something more. 'And you have made us something

for God'. Oh, that's lovely. For Christ is not content to say, 'Well, they deserve hell. I died for them, now they're here. Poor lot, look at them. But okay, that's the best they can have, and they're free from hell anyway.' No, no, no! God is not just going to redeem his lovely creation and put it there like a banged out old car in a museum. He makes something of us. Makes us what? He makes us a kingdom to obey God, makes us priests to learn to live for God and for our fellow men (5:10), and restores us far above what Adam lost when he sinned. He has made us to do the Father's will for: 'for your will they existed and were created' (4:11).

Thus, there shall be a new world. There shall indeed! The restoration of all things shall surely come, and we are in training for it; for one day we shall reign on the earth and share the government with Christ. This is God's mighty triumph over Satan: that human beings redeemed shall rule even over the very angels.

But what about those who disobey and refuse? The Lamb opens the seals, and the judgments descend until they come to their crescendo, and men hide themselves from the face of him that sits upon the throne (or try to) in their terror: unsaved, unprotected (6:12-17).

## Two examples of salvation

How lovely it is to pass them by to chapter 7, where two examples of salvation, of preservation, are given. There are the 144,000 out of Israel: the remnant, sealed from all the physical hurt of the judgments that shall come in that day. The Jewish nation will not be obliterated, not by all the cataclysmic changes that must come. There shall be a remnant; the nation qua nation, as a remnant, shall survive (7:1-8).

We are more interested in the large number of Gentiles.

You say, 'What are you interested in them for? They come out of the great tribulation.'

Well, yes, I can read that. It says they come out of the great tribulation, but what about them? Says the elder to John, 'Do you see them waving their palms: what is it all about?' They stand there in these lovely garments, waving their palms. 'And look where they're standing,' says the elder. 'They're standing before the throne. Do you know how they dare to do that? Because they've washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.'

Firm on the ground of sovereign grace

They stand before Jehovah's throne.<sup>15</sup>

And in that new world to come, he that sits on the throne shall put his canopy over them. The sun shan't hurt them by day, nor the moon by night.

You know, my brothers, my sisters, creation has hurt many of us, hasn't it? Have you noticed that? We are born into a fallen world, some born maimed, disadvantaged, disabled. Some suffer from volcanoes and pestilences and plagues, some from famine and thirst: from all kinds of circumstances. Who of us hasn't been hurt by creation at some time or other? There is coming a day when it shall hurt us no more. He that sits upon the throne shall shed his canopy over us. He shall wipe away all tears from our eyes. And he, the Lamb that is on the throne, who will have the government of the whole universe, will lead us to life's clear fountains of pure, eternal water of satisfaction (7:17).

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<sup>15</sup> Archibald Rutherford, 'The Countless Multitudes on High.'

Shall we pray.

Our Father, we thank thee for these lovely things that thou has written, that we might enjoy them and thus come nearer to beginning to perceive the wonders of thy majesty, thy regal authority and of thy grace. And for all thou has shown us of thy purpose of redemption in Christ, and the glorious future when he comes and we reign with him, for all this we offer thee our profound, and would be unlimited, affection and praise.

Help us, Lord, to live in the light of it. Spur our hearts to go out and tell the world what they need to hear about it, we pray. And train us in life's circumstances, even through its pains and sorrows, for the time to come, that we may be ready, practically, to take part with thy Son in the administration of the new age to be.

So part us with thy blessing, we pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

## The Seventh Seal Opened

### *Section Three—Revelation 8:1–11:18*

We come now to the third major section of the book of the Revelation. We will again be referring to the sheet of notes that was given out on the first study, which will explain what we mean when we talk about the six major sections of the book of the Revelation. Like so many of the sections of this book, Section Three will point us to the time of the end and those tremendous events that shall come upon the earth when God begins to pour out his indignation against the sins of men and nations, preliminary to the coming of his Son in power and great glory to establish his kingdom. But, because the particular problem that we shall be considering tonight will have special reference to those end days, we may take a moment to read some introductory passages from the Old Testament. For the fact that this problem that will come to such prominence then is in fact a problem that has been with the people of God, and with the saints of God, all down the ages from the very beginning. So, let us read an Old Testament example of it, as we turn to Psalm 94, and then to 96.

O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; and they say, 'The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.' (94:1–7 ESV)

But in Psalm 96 the psalmist finds the answer to his anguished plea:

Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth! Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.' Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness. (vv. 9–13 ESV)

Now to our passage in the book of the Revelation that begins in chapter 8, verse 1:

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 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, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 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. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them. (8:1–6 ESV)

Chapter 10, verse 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. 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, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. 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.' And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, 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. (10:1–7 ESV)

And now, in chapter 11:

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, 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. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.' These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. 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. 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. 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, 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. 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, 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. 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. 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. 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. The second woe has passed; behold, the

third woe is soon to come. Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.' And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God, 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. 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.' (11:1-18 ESV)

And may God give us true understanding of his word.

## **The altar of incense**

Like the second section of the book of the Revelation, the third section begins with something opened in heaven. The second section, you may remember, begins with a door opened in heaven, and when John enters through that door into the divine presence, he is given to see the glorious, majestic throne of God the Creator. As we found in our previous study, that throne then not only fills his vision but proves to be the dominant theme that runs through the rest of that section. The same kind of thing happens here in Section Three. It begins with the seventh seal, the last of the series of seals, being opened in heaven.

Then we are told that there is a silence in heaven for half an hour, which must have seemed like a virtual eternity amidst that vast throng peopling that holy place. Had we been there, I don't doubt but that we would have been on edge and wondering, and whispering under our breath (so as not to disturb the angels): 'What is going to break this silence that lasts (apparently) so long?' And when the silence is broken at last, it is broken as an angel comes to the little altar of incense, and with a censer full of coals from the big altar, there is 'given to him much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of the saints' upon this golden altar. And the smoke of the incense came up before God, and the prayers of the saints began to be answered, and the judgments began to fall (8:1-7).

### **Prayers ascending before the throne**

We can readily understand why Section Three would begin with this particular piece of heavenly tabernacle furniture, because of what we know of the ancient tabernacle of Israel. Picture it from the side. There was the holiest of all—the Most Holy Place—in which was the ark of God: the throne and footstool of the Almighty. Then there came the veil. And outside the veil, stationed before the veil, and so just before the ark (and thus before the mercy seat) was the golden altar. This was the altar upon which incense was burned at the time of prayer. So a priest like Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, when his lot was to go in and offer incense at the time of prayer, would have been standing at the golden altar and facing the veil and thus facing the very throne of God (Luke 1:5-12). As he offered the incense upon the altar, he would be offering the prayers of his people that they may come up before God, enshrouded in the sweet smelling incense. Of course, we nowadays don't use incense, or at least we



shouldn't. We have a far better and more grateful fragrance to offer as we offer our prayers before God. We offer them, do we not, in that lovely, fragrant name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

But in this way we can see that the incense altar was closely and functionally related to the throne. On the throne was the presence of God, ruler of the universe, but by his magnificent appointment, his people were allowed to come to that altar and make their suggestions before the very throne of God. And God would listen to their prayers and take notice of what they said. It is a marvel that should not escape our hearts but warm them to their very roots. Just imagine the privilege it is for us as human beings—bits of clay on two legs: through the grace of our blessed Lord we are able to come before the very throne of the universe and make our prayers in the name and fragrance of the Lord Jesus and know that the ruler of the universe listens to our suggestions and, when it seems good to him, is prepared to act upon them. That is astonishing grace, isn't it? God is no totalitarian tyrant. But even so, as we watch this dramatic scene unfold before us, it raises a problem.

### **The problem of silence and the prayers of the saints**

As I say, there was a silence for half an hour as everybody waited and waited and waited. What should break the silence? At last the secret is out: it's the prayers of saints that breaks the silence!

You say, 'That's marvellous!'

It is marvellous, but some of us might have a question.

Why the silence? Why all that long wait? I say it with due reverence: why didn't God hasten to answer them? Why didn't he answer them at once? Why the long silence before the prayers being answered put into operation the judgments of God on this evil world?

We notice the sequence of ideas, expressed to us literally, that it was when the angel took that *censer* and emptied it eventually upon the earth, that the seven angels prepared to blow upon their trumpets, and each trumpet blast signalled another judgment descending from God on this godless world. So if in Section Two we learned that the judgments must come at last because of the rights of the creatorial throne, now in this section we are to learn that the judgments must come upon this world because of, and as a result of, the prayers of the saints.

We are aware of the injustices perpetrated against the saints of God and against his prophets and against his martyrs—the rivers of blood that have been shed all down the ages, the bonfires in which the prophets and the people of God were burned—and the oppressions of the widow by unjust businessmen, and all those other endless injustices of which this world has been full. The prayers of the saints that have cried to God all down the ages shall at last be answered, and the ruler of the universe shall rise up in his justice.

When those prayers are answered it will lead to God's judgments on this evil world. Of that truth this passage of the Revelation affirms very solidly, but we begin with the problem of silence. For something that has haunted the people of God all down the ages, and no more often than when they suffered injustice and persecution, is precisely this: they cried to God to intervene, and nothing happened. God was silent. And many a question has arisen in the distress of God's peoples' hearts: 'Why don't you answer, Lord? Why don't you do something?'

## Unanswered prayers

Of course, all of us know the problem of unanswered prayer. We feel we need a new car, and we pray but we don't get it, or we plead with the Lord to save the life our dear friend who is ill, and the Lord allows the friend to pass away. Unanswered prayer is a big problem, isn't it?

I remember how missionaries I knew years ago told me once how they were in the middle of the backwoods of Angola, far from any medical aid, when their little baby of two years old took ill with violent malaria. And in that remote part, all they had at their disposal was an aspirin, and they ground it up as small as they could grind it, and gave the babe just a little bit of it in their desperation, but the babe choked on it. And as the babe grew progressively bluer in the face, they cried to God in their distress: 'Oh God, do save the child! If there is anything we've done wrong, forgive us!' They cried, they told me, for half an hour, but the silence was unbroken, and the baby died.

Many of God's people have known the bitterness of unanswered prayer for things in general, and have been taught by the grace of our heavenly Father to come to the view that Father, in the end, knows best, and all his ways are done in love. One day, we shall see it was for the best, and we shall praise him in the full knowledge of it, as today we must praise him in faith.

But these passages are not talking so much about those things; they are talking about the injustices of life.

## Unanswered injustice

As you heard the psalmist crying in Psalm 94: 'Oh Lord, to whom vengeance belongs, how long, O Lord? How long are you going to allow the wicked to triumph, and to grind your people into the dust?' Whether it was evil nations slaughtering people, as now in Indonesia at this very moment, or whether it was unjust businessmen grinding down the face of the poor, or whatever it was, saints of all ages have cried to God: 'O Lord, to whom vengeance belongs, how long do you not avenge us?' Please notice the verb, and let us be very careful in our minds to distinguish between *avenging* and *revenging*. This is 'avenge', not 'revenge'. But they have cried, and it is not only people of that ancient world, but people of our Christian era.

Can you hear them now in your imaginations? The young men and young women in the Roman speaking tongues of North Africa as they were taken to the hippodrome or coliseum, and the lions were loosed on them and came and crushed their bones and the very life out of them? And how much did their parents pray to God? No voice came. No deliverance. Or the Waldenses in their mountains, persecuted by France and Italy mercilessly for their faith? Or our fellow believers in the Inquisition? Or in Hitler's camps, or Stalin's? We can think of the endless tale of blood and sorrow, and not only believers whose names are long since forgotten, but the great and famous prophets of old. How many of them were sawn asunder or executed in some way or another, and no deliverance came? Heaven seemed silent.

It raises a big problem, doesn't it? It is not a question of 'revenging' them. The question is simply this: if there is a God in heaven, and he cares for justice, then why doesn't that God intervene, stop evil and see that the righteous are delivered? Isn't that what you Christians

preach, that there is a God in heaven who is a God of justice, whose eyes run to and fro throughout all the world?

### *Christians and injustice*

It raises, therefore, a question about the character of God. But here I must turn aside to deal with a special problem that Christians have. In chapter 6 of this very book of the Revelation, we read at one point:

I saw under the altar the souls of them that had been slain for the word of God, and the testimony which they held, and they cried with a great voice saying, 'How long, O Master, the holy and true, will you not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?' And there was given to them, each one, a white robe; and it was said unto them that they should rest yet for a while, until their fellow servants also and their brethren *which should be killed*, even as they were, should be fulfilled. (see vv. 9–11)

Some Christians, reading those words, say 'Ah, well, these can't be Christian martyrs.' Why not?

'Well, Christians, they don't pray for God to avenge them. These must be Jewish believers or something that haven't quite yet learned the grace of Christian behaviour.'

'Surely,' they say, 'we, as Christians, mustn't pray to be avenged. We have to pray like the Lord Jesus prayed when he was nailed to the tree: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34) or as Stephen prayed, as they hurled the stones at him that crushed the life out of his body, "Lord Jesus, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). So, it would be wrong for us to pray to be avenged, because we are Christians.'

I'm not so sure myself. I hope you're not, because I'm about to quote to you a parable spoken by our Lord Jesus himself. When we have learned its lesson, we shall surely not say that this isn't Christian. I don't think Christ ever taught anything that wasn't Christian, did he?

The parable I refer to, called 'The Widow and the Unjust Judge', is given in the Gospel by Luke in chapter 18. It was a parable spoken by our Lord, according to Luke, 'to the end that they ought always to pray and not to faint' (v. 1).

'You must not give up praying,' said our Lord. 'You must carry on praying. You mustn't faint.'

Pray for what? He illustrated what he was talking about by a parable.

He said there was a certain widow in the city and she had been oppressed, by the local businessmen I suspect. And in that city was a judge; and so the widow went to the judge and pleaded with him to *avenge* her of her enemies.

Again I say, she wasn't asking for 'revenge'. It was simply that she was asking for justice to be done. I suspect, like some businessmen (not all of course) they had filched a lot of her money or stolen her land or worried her with the conditions and the little print at the bottom of the form, which she hadn't thought to read very carefully. So, having lost her possessions, she went to the judge and asked him to put matters right that justice would be done. That's all. She didn't want them put in prison.

But the judge was a rascal: 'he cared neither for God nor man' (v. 2), and I suspect he played golf with these businessmen anyway. So, he wouldn't avenge her, and left the case undealt with. But she wasn't taking no for an answer. She kept her finger on the buzzer, and she went to him and kept worrying him and pleading with him, until the man got exasperated. 'She's beating me,' says he, 'I'll have to do something.' Though he cared not for God nor man, for he was an unredeemed rascal and cared nothing for justice (judge though he was) he said, 'I'll have to do something about this woman, or else she'll wear me out in the end.' So, just for his own convenience, he rose up and he avenged the woman and saw that justice was done.

Then Christ drew the analogy: 'And shall not God avenge his elect which cry to him day and night, though he takes a long time to do it?' (vv. 7-8). Yes, of course he'll avenge his elect. Do you suppose God is worse than that unjust judge? And with his people being persecuted and executed and burned alive, as recently our brethren in India have suffered at the hands of fanatical Hindus, do you suppose when his people cry, God doesn't listen and couldn't be bothered? What do you suppose the character of God is? He's not like that unjust judge. He will most certainly avenge them!

Then comes the difficulty for faith. He takes a long while doing it. He doesn't necessarily do it at once, and therefore faith is tested. 'You ought always to pray,' says Christ, 'and not to give up praying over such matters' (18:1). In the case of the judge in the parable, it was worthwhile for the widow to keep coming and praying to him. He gave way in the end. Shall not God avenge his elect? Then keep on praying, in your faith in the character of God, that one day he will rise up and grant the necessary justice. Then our Lord added: 'Though, when the Son of Man comes' (for that's when the avenging will take place), 'shall he find faith on the earth?' (v. 8). Or will his people have given up and be saying, 'It isn't worthwhile praying?'

This is avenging then.

And you see our blessed Lord Jesus, when he went to the cross, yes, as the Romans put the nails through his hands, he prayed: 'Father, forgive them; they don't know what they do.' They were Roman soldiers; they hadn't got a clue who he was or what he stood for. They were just doing their duty and didn't know 'what they did'. He prayed they'd be forgiven. It was a different thing, wasn't it, for those that did know what they were doing? He said to the women that came out to offer him a pain numbing drink, he said, 'Women of Jerusalem, don't you weep for me. It's you that have got the wrong end of this stick. For if they do things in the green tree, what shall be done in the dry? I'm telling you that as a result of what they are now doing, one of these days they shall call to the mountains to fall on them! It's not I that have got the wrong end of the stick,' says he, 'but you' (see 23:27-31). And Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2 what the innermost thoughts of our blessed Lord were when he climbed Calvary's hill. It says, of course, 'when he was threatened, he didn't retaliate'. When he was accused, when he was ill-treated, he didn't retaliate, he didn't even threaten. But he did 'commit himself to him that judges righteously' (see v. 23). God will yet hold this world responsible for the murder of his Son.

There is a God in heaven who cares for justice. So then we must not suppose it is un-Christian to pray, 'Thy kingdom come', to pray that the God of heaven will one day demonstrate his character and the fact that there is a God in heaven who will vindicate his people.

*Non-Christians and injustice*

As you know, this is a matter that concerns some of our unbelieving friends, does it not? First of all, some deny there is a throne in heaven. They don't believe in God whatsoever. If you give them evidence that, yes, there is a God, then their other objection comes into force. 'You say there's a God? Well, if there's a God in heaven who cares for justice, why doesn't he judge this world forthwith? Why does he allow the situations in Cambodia and Vietnam and Indonesia and all the rest of them you can think of nearer home?'

It's an objection the world has to believing there is a God: he doesn't intervene to establish justice. Why doesn't he? Our passage will give us at least some hints. It now directs our attention to a part of history at the end of this age when, at the response to the prayers of his people all down the ages, and then those at that last period, he will rise up, as angels shall blow upon their trumpets, and he will begin that preliminary series of interventions that will lead to the climax of the coming again of Christ.

When God judged Egypt, he first sent the plagues. The plagues were uncomfortable enough, but they were so much evidence to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh had said to Moses, 'Oh Moses, don't talk nonsense.'

Moses had come in and said, 'Pharaoh, God says, "Let my people go that they may worship me."' "

'Your God?' says Pharaoh. 'Who might he be?'

'Jehovah, of course. God, the Creator.'

'I don't happen to believe in him, Moses, so your plea doesn't cut much ice with me. So, you get back.'

And he made the people's plight worse. So, God gave him evidence. Moses cast down a rod, and it became a serpent.

'What's that supposed to be?' said Pharaoh.

'That's a miracle,' said Moses.

'A miracle? Oh, come off it. My scientists can do the very same effect in their laboratories, you know.'

And in they came, at his command (all dressed up in their white overcoats as these scientists do) and they threw down their rods, and they became serpents too.

'There you are,' said Pharaoh, 'my men can do that. That's no miracle; we know how it's done. You'll have to do better than that' (see Exod 7:8-13).

'All right,' says God, 'you want evidence, Pharaoh?' And God began that series of nine plagues. They were, in a sense, in the form of judgments, and yet they were evidence, weren't they? Pharaoh had asked for it. The sad thing is that Pharaoh rejected the evidence in spite of its increasing intensity, and therefore when, at the end of the nine plagues he was unrepentant, then the final big judgment fell.

So shall it be at the end of the age. There will be a set of preliminary judgments, ever more intense. They are a warning that there is a God in the heavens. They are meant to be God's word to a world far gone in its rebellion and sin, that, if so be, they would repent. Why don't the judgments come before? Well, we know the answer to it, don't we, in our heart of hearts? For when the mockers mocked the early Christians, Peter gave the answer, 'God is not slack concerning his promise, but is long suffering, not willing that any should perish' (2 Pet 3:9).

But when the world takes advantage of it, and therefore attacks martyrs, prophets and believers, what they are doing is adding to their sin. The very patience of God, if it doesn't lead men to repentance, adds to their guilt (see Rom 2:1-5).

People say, don't they, 'If only your God that you profess to believe in would intervene and stop the war, we would believe.'

Would they? Would people believe in their multitudes if only God intervened in judgment? We could well hope so, but when these judgments under the trumpet blasts are coming to their end it says, in spite of it all, they did not repent.

And the rest of mankind, which were not killed with these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and the idols of gold, silver, brass, stone and wood; which can neither see, nor hear, nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts (9:20-21).

I don't suppose the word of God is here saying that no one has ever been stopped in his mad career by some signal intervention of God's judgments, and has been made to think. Surely they have been. But, as a general rule, God's judgments don't convert people. Not even the pains of hell will ever convert anybody, will they? Oh, my good friend, if judgments would bring people to repentance and salvation, there'd be a judgment every day of the week. Remember the lost rich man in hell, pleading with Abraham?

'Abraham, send Lazarus to my brothers!'

'There's no need,' said Abraham, 'they've got the Scriptures.'

'Oh, Abraham, you're not with it. I mean, in your generation, yes, perhaps people read the Bible, but people don't read the Bible now. You can't expect them to, not with all the TV there is available and all that. Have mercy, Father Abraham. I know they don't read the Bible. Well, I didn't, myself, really before. I believed it, or said I did, but I never did read it much, and certainly didn't take any notice. But, Abraham, have mercy and be realistic. Send somebody from the dead and they'll believe.'

'No, they won't,' says Abraham, 'neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead' (see Luke 16:19-31).

If seeing ghosts would convert people, there'd be a ghost at every street corner, for God 'is not willing that any should perish'. What is it that leads people to repentance? It is the goodness and mercy of God. What changes the rebel heart? It is the message of the cross, isn't it? And if the love of God can't move them, if his faithful warnings of judgment do not move them, then when the judgments come, they come because hearts are hardened against God's love. Judgment, generally speaking, does not convert people.

## **The two witnesses**

Now see another demonstration that God will stage at the end of this age. We read of it in chapter 11, where John says:

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, 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.' (vv. 1–2 ESV)

Outside of that city, so we are told, shall stand two witnesses:

And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. (vv. 3–4 ESV)

### *The vision of Zechariah*

To understand the vision would take us a lot of time, but one helpful thing we should notice is that the vision is couched in very similar terms to the vision that was given to the prophet Zechariah, which we read in chapter 4 of his prophecy.

The situation then, in those far gone days, was that Israel had gone into exile but had now returned to their land, and they were commanded to build a temple to God and there to carry on its worship. But things were difficult. First, the people were poor; difficulties in making a living left them little time (so they thought) or cash, to build and serve this temple. Secondly, the little nations all around Israel were bucking and biting at their heels and appealing to the big, imperial power to get these pestilential Jews stopped from building their temple and building again their city. So it was tough going, and some of them were losing heart when God gave a vision for Zechariah, Zerubbabel and his fellows.

They were given to see a lampstand and two olive trees, and the olive trees were connected with the big bowl of the lampstand, so they were fed automatically with oil to keep this lampstand burning (vv. 2–3). In other words, 'It is a message,' says the inspiring Spirit. He tells Zerubbabel, 'Not by might, but by my power, says the Lord' (v. 6).

In those far off centuries, God was saying to Zerubbabel he would fill him with divine power, more than human power, so to speak, to stand and witness for the Lord in that temple in Jerusalem, against the nations that were massed against them.

Now, this vision is given to John in similar terms, with the two lampstands of oil that stand before the Lord Almighty and his temple. God shall yet stage an exhibition. For people say, 'Okay, you say there's a God. All right, let him do some indisputable miracle, and we'll believe. We want to believe, but we can't believe. If he's God he can do miracles, can't he? Well, let him do a miracle, and we'll believe.'

'All right,' says God, 'I'll do a miracle.'

And he has these two witnesses empowered by more than human power to exercise a miraculous ministry. Anybody that comes anywhere near to stop them and their ministry, whether captain or lieutenant, or the imperial head—the beast himself—shall be smitten. They shall be unapproachable; it will be too dangerous. The world shall see it and know this exhibition of divine power. They asked for a miracle, didn't they?

For a while, it shall seem to go well. Then we read 'the beast that comes up out of the abyss shall overcome them and kill them, and their dead bodies shall lie in the street' (see 11:7–8).

And the beast is saying, 'QED! I always told you that. There is no God. He's just like the Little Red Riding Hood story your grandmother told you when you went to bed; there's nothing in it. There is no God out there. Grow up! Man runs his own world. There is no God.'

'Well then, what are we to make of this power that was at work in them?'

'Oh,' he'll say, 'we were always going to be able to prove it's not of God, one of these days.' He'll say he's demonstrated the truth of the claim that there is no almighty God when he overcomes these two and slays them.

And what does the world say?

Do the people say, 'What a pity. We thought for a while there might be a God, and now look: the evidence has gone against us. The beast has overcome them. We hoped there was a God because, if there is a God, he at last might have made some sense out of this world. We haven't made a lot of sense out of it up until now. If there was a God, there was hope that some sense should be made of it at last, but now there's no God?'

No, they don't say that.

When the beast appears to prove there is no God, the multitudes do what? They proclaim a bank holiday, or a bigger one, and they go ecstatically mad with joy! 'Hurrah!' they say; 'Proof at last there is no God. Thank . . . well, no, we can't say thank God for that, can we? But praise be, there is no God! Proved at last' (see vv. 9–10).

They are given their three days to show what was always in their hearts: they didn't want to believe. God, to them, was a threat, and when it has been proved (so they think) that he doesn't exist, they are absolutely delighted.

Why will God wait? Because, in the end, the dispute between God and man, between heaven and earth, is the state of man's heart. We have learned enough in modern times to know that even the most objective scientist amongst us, or objective literary man, isn't one hundred percent objective. We all have our presuppositions, our predisposition, and before God finally comes, with the second coming of Christ, to destroy the wicked and bring in the reign of peace, God will have it finally demonstrated what man actually is at heart. He not only is a sinner but, offered salvation, doesn't take it and doesn't want it. When warned with preliminary judgments, he won't repent, until at length, the secret is out before high heaven and hell that man would delight if God didn't exist. Then, and only then, and not until then, will God send his Son to execute the cataclysmic judgments. Why? Because God is no tyrant.

You say, 'But wait a minute! It's all right for God; but what about his people? Is this God asking us to wait? We've got to wait and not retaliate; we have to pray for our enemies? We can pray for justice one day to be done but we've got to wait and put up with it all this long time? Imagine telling the souls that had already been martyred and were under the altar that they'd got to wait until other martyrs were killed! What is God like? Is he going to ask all his people down the ages to wait and wait and wait?'

You ask any Christian you know for the answer to that one. They will likely say, 'Well, there are times when I say, "Lord, Oh, Lord, how long?" But then I know I owe my salvation to this—that "God waits for me" (see Isa 30:18). He gave his Son to die upon a cross, and instead of deluging the earth with his judgments and wiping out the human race, he left it until the year of my birth so that I might be born. He put up with the world's sins that he might have mercy on me.'

Oh, the extravagant patience of God. And if God has had mercy upon us, shall we not think he can honour us if we're asked to follow our Lord, however much it pains us? We in



the West are so pampered, aren't we? But in many countries tonight, as you know, my brothers, my sisters, evil men are slaughtering the dear people of God.

### Strength to stand

What shall God say to his people to encourage them in that grievous time that is yet to come under the beast? What does he say to us now? I think the story is marvellous—that vision that John was given in chapter 10. He said, 'I saw a strong angel come down from heaven with the clouds, and the rainbow around his head. His feet were like fire' (v. 1).

You say, 'Who was that?'

Well, in my simplicity, I think it's the Lord Jesus.

Better commentators and theologians than I am say, 'No, it can't be the Lord Jesus. It is some strong angel.'

Why is that?

'Well,' they say, 'because nowhere else in the whole of the Revelation is our Lord described as an angel, so this won't be the Lord; this will be an angel.'

They're probably right; I don't know. And yet, in my simplicity, I can't help thinking it's the Lord. Look at this angel for just a moment, in your imagination, before we finish. Just look at him, coming with a cloud! When in Daniel 7, the Son of Man came to the Ancient of Days, he came 'with the clouds of heaven' (vv. 13–14). It is an emblem of deity.

Look at his head. He has not *a* rainbow but *the* rainbow. Which rainbow? Well, you saw it last round the throne of God, didn't you? He's got *the* rainbow round his head.

Where did you read in the Revelation of someone whose feet and legs were like burnished brass, as though they'd burned in a furnace?

You say, 'I met a figure like that in Revelation 1.'

And it was?

'Well,' you say, 'it was the Lord Jesus.'

Yes. He's come to steady John who must face the revelation of these great judgments and, through him, to steady the people of that coming day, for the silence of God that they must endure until they are avenged. But he comes with a message to us tonight. Isn't it so? For he came down from heaven, and he had a little book in his left hand. He raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him that lives for ever and ever that there shall be delay no longer, but in a very short while the mystery of God should be finished (10:7).

We may leave them of the coming day, and think of ourselves.

Remember our Hebrew brothers and sisters to whom the letter was written, and the promise in spite of their persecutions: 'For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry' (Heb 10:37).

How can we be sure of it?

He offers us a book. Do you see the stance? What a majestic stance it is, as he puts one foot on sea and one on land. He is the ruler of all, possessor of heaven and earth. He offers us a book in the one hand, and his oath with the other. 'It will be but a little time,' says he, 'then the mystery of God shall be finished.'

Oh, what a lovely thing. We sing it in one of our ancient hymns:

His oath, His covenant, His blood  
Support me in the overwhelming flood;  
When all around my soul gives way  
He then is all my hope and stay.  
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;  
All other ground is sinking sand.<sup>16</sup>

When 'the little while' is done, he shall surely come. 'The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of God and his Christ' (Rev 11:15). The evil shall be destroyed, and the time will come to give his reward to the prophets and to his servants for what they have done and endured for him before his coming.

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<sup>16</sup> Edward Mote (1797-1874), 'My Hope is Built on Nothing Less' (1834).

## The Temple of God in Heaven Opened

### *Section Four – Revelation 11:19–15:4*

In our fifth study, we arrived at the midpoint of the book of the Revelation, and we must now move forward and enter the second half of this glorious book. It seemed to me this might be a suitable time to pause in our studies for the moment and once more take a bird's eye view of the territory that we have covered and that which remains to be covered. In seeing it somewhat as a whole, we may sense where we have arrived and where we still are to go.

### **Looking at the overall picture**

If you will look now at the first page of your notes, which is a conspectus of the major contents of the book of the Revelation, you will see again that this book is in six major sections or parts.<sup>17</sup>

There is the first section in the first column, in which we have the vision of our blessed Lord Jesus, in all his risen glory, and an account of the letters which he dictated to seven of his churches. Then in column two, Section Two begins with something opened in heaven, and so do all the remaining stages of the book. In column two, it's a door opened in heaven; in column three, it is the seventh seal that we are told is opened in heaven; then, in column four that we begin tonight, the pattern recurs. It begins with the temple of God in heaven opened. So, in its way, does column five. There we are told that there was opened 'the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven' (15:5). And, finally, the sixth and last section begins with heaven opened. The pattern isn't difficult to see, is it?

### **What is opened and what is seen**

We have noticed hitherto in column two and column three (sections two and three) that when heaven is opened, John was given to see some part of heavenly tabernacle furniture. In column two, it was the *throne* of God surrounded by twenty-four other thrones. We noticed that once this piece of furniture has been seen, observed and described, it forms what becomes the dominant theme of that particular stage. So it was also in stage three, for there, when the seventh seal was opened, there was silence in heaven (8:1). Presently, attention was drawn to the big altar, and then to the *altar of incense*, and to the opening idea that there was a silence in heaven before the prayers of the saints had incense offered with them and began to be answered. That idea of the timetable of God, for the answering of the prayers of his people,

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<sup>17</sup> See the first page of the charts in the [Appendix](#).

and the completion of God's purposes for this world became the dominant theme of that Section Three. It shall be so again this evening, because now when we are told the temple of God in heaven is opened, we are then told also that *the ark of the covenant* was seen.

#### *The ark of the covenant in Section Four*

It will not take us long to discover what the relevance is of that particular piece of heavenly furniture. The ark of the *covenant* is so called because it contained the two tables of the law of Moses that formed the basis of the covenant that God made between himself and the people of ancient Israel. First and foremost in the demands and conditions of that covenant was this: 'You shall have no other god but me' (Exod 20:3).

That is what prefaces this second half of the book of Revelation in which now, in Section Four, we are to see the scene on earth when there shall arise, at the end of this age, a world ruler with almost universal sway. He and his accomplices shall persuade the people (and in the end demand) that they worship the world ruler himself. In their infatuation, the crowds will be worked upon by the media of that day until they give vent to utter blasphemy as they say, 'Who is like unto the beast, and who can make war against him?' (13:4).

The phrase 'who is like unto' is a phrase that you will find in the Old Testament, where people are challenged with the thought 'who is like unto Jehovah' (e.g. Exod 15:11; Ps 113:5–7). It is a rhetorical question, of course, for it carries the obvious answer: There is none like him and none beside him. But the day shall come when men and women, having cast off the yoke of God and, in their imagined strike for human freedom, deny there is a God in the heavens that can command their ways. So, far from finding freedom, they shall eventually find themselves manipulated and deceived and carried along with international fervour and infatuation, and shall bow down and offer divine honours to the head of state—a mere man. It shall be the biggest slavery of the human spirit and soul that this world has ever seen.

Once that subject is broached, we shall find it proves to be the dominant theme of Section Four that we begin this evening. We needn't go further with the other sections, though, as you perceive, they follow the same pattern: with heaven opened, something visible in heaven, and then that being the prime theme of the section.

### **The comments that crown each section**

Look now, if you will, at what we have put at the bottom of each of the columns. In column two, we have comment by one of the twenty-four elders (7:13–17). In column three, we have comment by all of the twenty-four elders (11:16–18). Then at the end of our passage this evening, we have a song, which is a comment on what has happened, a song by the victors over the beast (15:2–4). Then at the end of column five, we have a response to the great events recorded in that section, a response by the great multitude (19:1–10).

What I'd like us to notice now is that in each of those four sections (sections two, three, four and five) those comments are not simply like the last words of a preacher trying to wind down his sermon and not finding a convenient way to do so (and going on too long). They are great statements of salvation and the triumph of redemption, each one aimed very appropriately and perceptively to crown what has been the theme of the preceding section.

In the end of Section Two, one of the elders comments upon this great multitude that come out of the great tribulation. There they stand with palms in their hands, their robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb, standing before the throne unafraid in the presence of God. And the elder makes his comment, 'How can they then stand before the throne of God with such confidence?' He says, 'they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. *Therefore* they are before the throne of God'. The Holy Spirit then carries on the comment right into the distant and eternal days of what God shall do for those whose robes are washed white in the blood of the Lamb: 'No sun shall strike them anymore, nor heat or cold'; creation shall no longer hurt them. 'And the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne shall eternally lead them to life's fountains of water' (see 7:13–17).

Similarly, last night, when we came to the end of Section Three we had been thinking about the silence in heaven, as you remember, and the big problem that poses, and has posed for the people of God all down the long centuries. They have suffered persecution and the injustices of wicked men and have cried to God that he would intervene, not to get revenge but to *avenge* them, and to see that justice is done and that wickedness does not triumph. And so very often, though they prayed, there came no answer, nothing but apparent silence in heaven. It is the great problem that has perplexed the people of God all down the ages. That problem will grow worse, warns Scripture, as this age comes near its end. But then there will come a moment when the prayers of the saints will prevail before God, and he rises up to judge. And there will come that dramatic moment, noticed by the twenty-four elders in those verses in chapter 11: 'Hallelujah', they say. 'Now the time has come! At last the time has come. God has taken to himself his great power and begun to reign' (vv. 16–17). It is not that he didn't reign before, for 'the Most High rules in the kingdom of men' all the time (Dan 4:17; 5:21) and has never vacated his throne. But there is coming a day when God shall take this world by the scruff of the neck, and he shall establish his authority, and his will shall be 'done on earth, as it is in heaven'. We don't pray that for nothing, you know. The prayer 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt 6:10) isn't just hitching our wagon to an impossible star; it will one day happen. Oh, what a 'Hallelujah' will break out all round the universe when the prophets get their reward and the martyrs are honoured and evil is shown for what it is, not triumphant but defeated, and Christ shall reign from shore to shore! Resist shouting 'Hallelujah' if you can!

But then, so we shall find tonight, we are to talk about those terrible days when there shall arise this world ruler called in Scripture, vividly and appropriately enough, 'the beast', along with his false prophet, the second beast. We shall read of the slaveries they shall impose upon the spirit of men, demanding each to take the mark on forehead or hand, and to bow down and worship the image of the beast.

Ah, but it's not all dark, for when we come to the end of this section, we come to a song. Well, just let's read it together, shall we? It is in Revelation 15:2. This is how this great section will end:

And I saw as it were a glassy sea mingled with fire; and them that come victorious from the beast, and from his image, and from the number of his name, standing by the glassy sea, having harps of God. And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of Lamb,

saying, 'Great and marvellous are your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; righteous and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who shall not fear you, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you only are holy; for all the nations shall come and worship before you; for your righteous acts have been made manifest.' (vv. 2–4)

We should notice the terms of that song and who it is that the song speaks of—those that had come victorious from the beast.

### Why a 'beast'?

We are going to read of this coming world government under the symbol of a *beast*, and that is not an unknown symbol in Scripture. In the Old Testament, in Daniel 7, Daniel gives us his critique of Gentile imperial government, where he too likens the governments of the earth to wild beasts. He's not being rude (well, not unnecessarily so) because that is one side of Gentile imperial government. We deceive ourselves if we think otherwise.

If you ask what a beast is, a lion or other such brute, well, they can be magnificent creatures, can they not? But they have no morals. I never knew a lion that had morals, did you? They are *amoral*, that is, without morals. They are amoral power blocks.

You might meet a lion one sunny morning, as I once did (I didn't get out of the car, of course). He'd just had his breakfast, a kangaroo or something, and felt sleepy and benign. He positively winked at us. I could see he felt gloriously content, and I moved on before he changed his mind. Of course, he was full; he didn't consider attacking me. But, you know, if that lion were hungry, and so decided that Gooding would make a temporary breakfast, *faute de mieux*, do you know what? He would not have had the slightest compunction. 'It's in my national interest,' he'd say! And that would settle it. No morals: just a power block.

The nations nowadays still occasionally talk about developing a 'moral foreign policy', don't they? But you listen to them, and what determines it in the end? 'We must consider first and foremost,' they say, 'our national interest.' Imperial Gentile governments are just like the animals: amoral power blocks.

Daniel describes them, and he comes at length to describe the fourth of these beasts, and a hideously strong beast it is, with power to trample underfoot anything that comes its way. But eventually it is destroyed by God, and the kingdom is handed over to the saints of the Most High (7:7–28). That's very interesting because, as we come to the book of the Revelation, we shall meet a beast, another world ruler, described in very similar terms as Daniel describes him, but in the Revelation there is this marked difference. Instead of occupying just one chapter, as in Daniel 7, the beast recurs in several different chapters, and is here in this particular part of the Revelation. You will notice that here the kingdom is not just given to the saints. It is said of these who stand by the glassy sea, 'they have come victorious over the beast' (15:2). You get the implication, don't you? They have had to fight. At length they come through, having won their contest, their battle, with the forces of darkness. So must we, in our day. Isn't that true?

Must I be carried to the skies  
On flowery beds of ease,

While others fought to win the prize  
 And sailed through bloody seas?  
 Since I must fight if I would reign,  
 Increase my courage, Lord!<sup>18</sup>

So we must pray tonight that God would apply his word to our hearts. We fight on a different battlefield from what they will fight on in that coming day but, ultimately, it is the same enemy we fight.

We listen to the words of the inspired and gracious Apostle John to his fellow believers: 'It's good, you little children,' says he, 'you know the Father, don't you? You know that your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake.'

Why even the toddler in the family of God knows 'Dad', doesn't he? It's a lovely thought: 'Abba Father'. He feels himself hugged to the breast of God in the assurance his sins are forgiven. But we shouldn't, if we can help it, remain babies forever, should we?

What about the young men? That includes, of course, the young women: the young folks. 'I write unto you young men,' says John, 'because you are strong . . . and have overcome the evil one' (1 John 2). As we study this passage, we shall be looking for the secret of that kind of strength that can fight and, having done all, is able to stand and come through victorious at the end over the enemies of God.

## **The beast and the lie**

There is a remarkable emphasis in the New Testament of our Lord, to the effect that, at the end of the age there shall come a period of intense and almost universal deception, so that multitudes of men and women will be carried away by this perpetrated deceit and deception. Our Lord himself spoke of it very clearly. I'll read you his words, found in Matthew 24. Talking of the end of this age, he says,

For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders;  
 so as to lead astray, if possible, the very elect. (v. 24)

No, of course it is not possible to lead astray 'the very elect', but such will be the strength and the persuasiveness of this almost universal propaganda and deceit, that multitudes shall be deceived as a result. So did Christ warn us.

The Apostle Paul says similarly, basing himself upon our Lord's words, and also on the prophecies of the Old Testament. For, writing his second letter to his converts in Thessaloniki,<sup>19</sup> he talks about the coming of the Day of the Lord: the great day of God's judgment. He says that day will not come:

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<sup>18</sup> Isaac Watts (1674-1748), 'Am I a Soldier of the Cross' (1724).

<sup>19</sup> Or, Thessalonica, as the name appears in most English Bibles.

until first of all there come the apostasy, and the man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition, he that opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God . . . (2 Thess 2:3–4)

Now note these words:

Even he, whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceit of unrighteousness for them that are perishing; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause, God sends them a working of error, that they should believe a lie, that all might be judged who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (vv. 9–12)

If that seems excessively hard in our hearing when we first hear it, just let us ponder what it is saying. It is saying that people had the opportunity to receive the truth, and it was given many times, but when at last they rejected the truth (and with their eyes open preferred the lie) God will eventually say, as he honours their free will: 'If you will not have the truth, have your own choice. Believe the lie.' This is solemn, isn't it? But God will in the end give people their choice.

Now the book of the Revelation, in chapters 12 and 13, says the very same thing all over again. There comes this beast, and he is described in the first paragraph of chapter 13. He exalts himself above all that is called God, and crowds in their millions, glued perhaps to their TV sets, are whipped into fervour, and they worship the beast and pay him divine honours. He has his minister of propaganda, described here as another beast. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon (13:11–12). He was the mouthpiece of Satan himself. And it says of him,

And he does great signs, that he should even make fire to come down out of heaven upon the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives them that dwell on the earth by reason of the signs which it was given him to do in the sight of the beast; saying to them that dwell on the earth, that they should make an image to the beast, who has the stroke of the sword and lived. And it was given unto him to give breath to it, even to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as should not worship the image of the beast should be killed. (13:13–15)

There you have this deception, first talked of by our Lord in the New Testament, repeated by the Apostle Paul, and now given to John in his visions. The end of this age is going to see a worldwide propaganda of deceit, and it will deceive millions. The Revelation indicates that the period in which this deceit will be at its zenith will be a short period.

### **A short period of deceit**

The period is variously described. Let's look at 11:2, for instance. Talking of the temple it says,

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. (ESV)



So, it is described as forty-two months, a short time in anybody's calendar. Then, in verse 3:

I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. (ESV)

Taking a 360-day-a-year calendar, as the ancients used, 1,260 days is, of course, the same as forty-two months. It is three and a half years.

Look at chapter 12, if you will, verse 14:

And there were given to the woman the two wings of the great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness unto her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.

You get the figure again, don't you? 'Time' — that's one. 'Times' — that's two. Put together they make three. Then, 'half a time', so the total is three and a half.

And once more in our chapter 13, verse 5:

It was given to this first beast authority to continue forty-two months.

Three and a half years in all, then.

### *Symbolic figures?*

Now, there are some who say, 'But Mr Preacher, you couldn't take those figures as being meant literally; they're symbolic figures.'

Well, that is always a possibility in the book of the Revelation, isn't it? So, symbolic of what?

They say, 'They are symbolic of the whole of the age from Christ: his birth, death, resurrection, ascension to heaven and his coming again in power and great glory.'

Well, if you will ask me to see that those figures — three and a half years — are symbolic of that whole period, I find it a trifle difficult; I do have to confess honestly. Because symbols are meant to match somehow, aren't they? And to say that three and a half years is a very good symbol for what has proved to be nearly two thousand years, strikes me as just a little bit odd, but I must pay my respects to better theologians than I am, of course.

But then our Lord Jesus is on record as talking about this, in that same chapter of Matthew we have quoted. He said that the deceit will be so overwhelming that, if possible, they would deceive the elect. So, 'unless those days had been shortened, no flesh would have been saved: but for the elect's sake, they shall be shortened' (24:22). Here is our Lord saying that that intense period of persecution and deception against the saints of God has, by God's own decree, been *shortened*. It is a short time. I can't see how two thousand years is a short time in anybody's book.

*Nothing to do with the present?*

So, we are to think tonight of that especially short period at the end of the age. But we must not fall into the opposite temptation of saying, 'Well, thank the Lord that's in a period still to come; that's nothing to do with me.'

Oh, but it is, my brother, my good sister. For Satan won't start deceiving men, never having deceived anybody before, will he? It has been his job from the very start. He has set himself to it from the very days of the Garden of Eden when he told his lie to our first parents. As our blessed Lord characterized him, he was a liar from the very beginning and stood not in the truth. 'He was a murderer from the very beginning' (see John 8:44). Lies are his special weapon—cunning lies, beautifully attractive lies, but lies nonetheless. They are often sprinkled and coated with a modicum of truth, because that's the way to get people to swallow lies, isn't it? And while they are swallowing the truth, they swallow the lie that is enwrapped in it. All down the years he's been at it. So are we of this age told of those who are not yet saved, that 'the god of this world has blinded the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine in to them' (2 Cor 4:4). And Satan walks about still, 'seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet 5:8) and will not hesitate to tempt us. For if he tempted our Lord (though ineffectively, of course) he will not stop at tempting us. If he frightened Peter into temporarily denying his Lord, we must seek the grace of God, mustn't we? That when we are tempted, we will stand.

So we fight the same war, even if we fight on a different battlefield. Therefore, it is wise of us to listen to the Lord Jesus as he tells us how this war is going to proceed and what God's counter-strategies are; and how we shall find strength ourselves in our war, as the saints of that day shall find in their war, to overcome Satan and his lies and his threatenings.

**History's warnings**

According to chapter 12, the first great fact to notice is that this universal ruler shall set himself up as God. He shall exalt himself above all that is called God and demand divine honours of all his universal subjects. Does that sound fantastic to you? A sort of unlikely story: wild, overheated prophecy-mongering or something? Well, it shouldn't, with the experience of history behind it, for history has recorded similar things from time to time, though on a lesser scale.

There came against the nation of Judah in times BC, the armies of the great Assyrian emperor. And there was the king, Hezekiah of Judah, in his little pocket-handkerchief sized state, and little Jerusalem perched up there on this rock. The great armies of Assyria had flooded the land, right up to their necks, so to speak. The Assyrian emperor sent his commander-in-chief to Hezekiah and to the people, and he put his loud speaker to his mouth and spoke over the walls of the city and appealed to the people. (They hadn't got the BBC to do it for them in those days.) And he said, 'Look here, you people, don't be stupid! This Hezekiah, he tells you to stand there and resist my advance, and he tells you to trust in this Jehovah. Oh, do come off it! Who is Jehovah anyway, this little tin-pot god of yours? In fact, you've only got one God in your temple. The other nations that I've conquered, they had their glorious thousands of gods! There isn't a nation that I haven't subdued, and I've taken their

gods, like a poacher takes a partridge out of its nest. And do you think your little God, Jehovah, is going to stop me? I shall come and take him, and you too! Don't let this Hezekiah deceive you that this God in heaven that you boast of is real, with supreme and absolute power' (see 2 Kgs 18:17–37; Isa 36).

'Thus says the Lord', through Isaiah the prophet to Hezekiah:

Be not afraid of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him and he shall hear a rumour, and shall return unto his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land. (37:6–7)

That, of course, is precisely what happened, and so the people of God were saved from that ruler who set himself up against the one true God.

A similar thing happened later in Israel's history, didn't it? We recall from the period of the exile when that great king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, set up a great image of gold upon the plain of Dura and called together all of the high and mighty officials in his empire (Dan 3). When he had them gathered together there, from all the provinces—people from different nations and languages and peoples, he said 'when you hear the orchestra play, you are to bow down to my image' (see vv. 4–7).

It's the old trick that emperors have used, wanting to keep together a shaky, old, ramshackle empire, and wanting, not merely to get the people to keep the laws when he's looking, but to instil in their hearts a loyalty to the emperor and to the state. Having that need, emperors have not hesitated, from time to time, to try to take advantage of that loyalty of the human heart that should be given to its Creator and to none else. Politicians and emperors have tried to filch the absolute loyalty that men owe to God, and divert it to the state.

The Roman emperors did it, didn't they? Since the state was so multiethnic, with one thousand and one different religions, customs and fashions, how was Augustus going to weld it together into a peaceful empire with the Pax Romana, and get all these different nationalities living cheek by jowl to live in peace? In the end he devised this means: that you should worship the emperor. He didn't mind what other gods you worshipped; he was a polytheist himself. But you had to offer your pinch of incense on the altar, watched by an official, and have the act authenticated and signed. You worshipped the emperor as god. The educated did it with their tongues in their cheeks, but they did it, and the poor went mad in their infatuation for the emperor that had brought them peace.

It's no new idea, is it? Totalitarian governments in our own century have done it and done it more crudely. Take the great assemblage of nations that was the Soviet Union. They did their best to stamp out God, telling men that if only they got rid of God, they would be free. What a lie that was, wasn't it? There came such a bondage enforced by the state, an obedience contrived by Stalin who eliminated some sixty million people, and people lived in fear of the secret police. The state had taken over that part of the human heart where God alone should dwell.

So it will happen in the future, but it will happen in a way that, for extremeness, is almost unprecedented.

## Reaping what has been sown

Pray notice that this is not silly prophecy-mongering and superstition. This is, and will be, the flowering of a harvest. You sow wheat; one day you will reap wheat. You sow barley; one day you will reap barley. The signs that God offers us are not the superstitious signs of the prophecy monger. You know the kind of thing I mean: nine cats had nine kittens all at once on the ninth day of the ninth month of the year 1999, and that's supposed to be some terrible sign. That's a lot of nonsense. God's prophecies are built on deeper principles. Where you have sown atheism; you will reap the deification of man. And I suppose the last 150 years in our western world have been remarkable for this, haven't they? For we have taught, and had our children taught in our schools, not just evolution as a possible theory, but atheistic evolution. Generations have been given the impression that somehow science has proved that there is no God.

'You can explain everything you see without God,' they say. 'We don't need the theory that there's a God. We can explain the universe without that. And because we can explain it all without any God, therefore, there is no God.'

I invented a little analogy to show what that argument is worth. Suppose you've got a primitive people somewhere, and they found somehow a Cadillac, or better still, a BMW, much favoured by the young, and up and coming yuppies. And here was this engine going, and they didn't know where the thing came from, and they listened to the engine. Then they saw the maker's name, BMW. Well that would be his initials, they supposed, on the bonnet. They said, 'Listen to that; that's BMW in there making that car go. Listen to it.' And when the engine ran nicely and sweetly, they thought, 'BMW is pleased with us,' and they offered a few sacrifices to him. When it backfired, they said, 'He's angry with us now. We must be careful what we do.' They thought that old BMW, whoever he was, was inside the car making it go.

Well, then they grew up, these people, and one day they knew enough to take the thing to pieces to see how it worked, and they looked through the whole engine, and there wasn't any Mr BMW inside it anywhere. They said, 'How foolish we have been to believe that there's a Mr BMW. There's no such maker. We've looked through the whole thing and can't find him anywhere.'

Is that logical? So, that proved there was no car manufacturer?

Or suppose they had got a Ford, and they thought it was Mr Ford inside making it go, and when they took it to bits there wasn't any Mr Ford inside, so they decided there was no Mr Ford anywhere; the thing just evolved. That would be nonsense—absolute logical fallacy. Ah, but our good atheistic evolutionists, they say they can explain everything. They can't, of course, but they say they can, and they're aiming to, and what bits they haven't yet explained, they're going to explain, they tell us, and they won't need God to do it. Therefore there is no God. That is a sheer fallacy of argument. You might as well argue there is no Mr Ford who originally made the car.

Not all people (far from it), but many, are carried along with that kind of tide of attitude to the universe; that by definition science has to assume there is no God, and they come to think that the science that results has proved there is no God. Sometimes the more extreme among them will say what Professor Lewontin has said and written in recent times. He is a

Marxist and a thoroughgoing atheist. His intent in one of his writings is to explain to the public how he and his fellow atheists and materialists go about their scientific endeavour. He says that we arrange our experiments and we come to results that are counterintuitive and seem to be nonsensical, but we do it because we start with atheistic materialism. That's our presupposition, and we so work our experiments because 'we cannot allow a divine foot in the door'.<sup>20</sup>

That's an atheist talking. And then they are pleased to tell generations of schoolchildren that science has proved there is no God. But I tell you, if you sow that in generations of peoples' minds, it will reap its harvest. The day will come when men who have given up the idea of God shall look around for someone to rule earth and save it from the chaos of its threatened military and economic disasters. They shall fall for a man of tremendous brilliance of genius who, unbeknownst to them perhaps, is inspired by Satan himself. He will eventually come out in his true colours and demand divine worship.

Does that sound fantastic? Oh, but do please remember things happening now. I was listening to a recent little piece of news, that a child has just been born. It was an absolute first in all the long history of medical affairs: a child born who was conceived and developed outside the womb in its mother's fallopian tubes, and has survived. The learned were discussing this morning whether it would be possible, perhaps, to have children born that way in the father's body.

We thank God for genetic engineering, for it brings us many, many advantages, doesn't it? But now, as they said this morning, with genetic engineering, man is, so to speak, beginning ever more to be in the position of playing God. And if there is no God out there, who shall take the ultimate decisions about human value? Someone will take them. 'Man shall take God's place,' says Scripture.

That is what philosophers such as Feuerbach have been saying for a long while, haven't they? He's old hat now. I don't know if anybody here ever reads Feuerbach (I hope not) but he, in his day, had a colossal influence on Marx, and what influence Marx has I leave you to sum up. And Feuerbach says, 'You see, we don't need to believe in a God out there. When we talk about God, we're really talking about the human race as a whole. Man himself is too small to save himself' (don't we all know it before he told us) 'but take mankind as a whole, then mankind as a whole is absolute—almighty.' And so, when we talk about God loving us, all we mean is mankind loves us, and when we talk about God saving us, it's mankind that saves us. Says Feuerbach, 'For man, man is God.' And Marx believed it, and acted on it, with what resultant slaveries you know.

Or hear the famous American psychiatrist, Erich Fromm. He lived to well into his nineties. He was the son and grandson of Jewish rabbis, but himself was an atheist and a Marxist. He writes in one of his books entitled *You Shall Be as God*: 'You know that story in Genesis, chapter 3, about how a man was tempted to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the suggestion was made, 'You shall be as God'? Says Fromm, 'That was a marvellously good suggestion!' He maintains that the word 'sin' doesn't occur in all of chapter 3 of Genesis,

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<sup>20</sup> See the original quotation in Richard C. Lewontin, *Billions and Billions of Demons*, The New York Review of Books 44/1 (9 January 1997).

so this idea is meant to be a good thing. So, the old serpent was on God's side, I suppose? It was a good suggestion for the development of mankind. Man was to strive to rise and become God, man himself being God, not bowing down to any god in the sky. So said this famous American atheistic humanist.

It is humanists in America that have turned the constitution upside down, so that in schools run by the state you mustn't mention God. Education has to be completely God-free. If you sow these things, with the inevitable law that 'what you sow you reap', man will reap a world dictator who will eventually require them to give to the state, to the dictator, the loyalty that they would otherwise have given to God. It will lead to the deification of man. Ultimately, there is only a choice between two things: the truth and the lie. And they who refuse the truth that there is a true God shall fall for the lie. I assure you it's not my brain that's got overheated. Let me quote you Sir Julian Huxley. At a conference on evolution in Chicago he spoke of what a relief he found it when he discovered there is no personal God. But then he said that he thought he and his fellow evolutionists would have to be careful. In his view, of course, evolution will one day automatically bring in a perfect paradise, but it could take a long while yet. Evolution has taken a long while according to him—multi-millions of billions of trillions of years—to get us so far. We seem to be a long way off getting to paradise at the moment (on that much all are agreed). So it might take us a long while. The trouble is that some silly fool, without much sense in his or her head, is going to push the wrong button one of these days (the old atomic or hydrogen bomb or something) and the whole thing will go up in smoke before evolution has had the chance to bring in the paradise. That would be a pity, wouldn't it?

'So, what shall we do?' says Sir Julian. 'We must have another religion,' says he. Oh, not religion with God in it: no, no! But we must have some other kind of religion because a lot of people can't really feel very strong emotions and loyalties to test tubes, nor even to computers, once they've got used to them. How could you really love a computer and say, 'I would do anything for you, dear computer'? Of course not. Men and women have to have something to love, to admire, to serve and, if need be, to sacrifice themselves for.

God is that God. We were made for him. But take him away and start another religion, now what will you have to take God's place? Can you think of things? Write in and suggest them. You won't start worshipping frogs, will you, or other animals like the ancient Egyptians? What will you worship then? You've got to worship something pretty high up, mustn't you? But you unfortunately don't even believe in angels, so what will you worship? Think of the highest thing you can think of without God, and that is man, isn't it? This isn't prophecy-mongering. It seems to me nothing but sober truth. This is the God of heaven telling us that what you sow, you will reap.

That is sorry stuff, admittedly, and inspired by Satan. But now I ask you to come to happier things.

## The view from heaven

I have been preaching to you (or commenting upon, really) the portion of your notes covering Section Four of Revelation. This is what I have called in your notes the 'Second Trilogy'.<sup>21</sup> But you will notice that there is a first trilogy that comes before the second one. That is exceedingly important, not only to its content but to its significance, because the second trilogy is painting what shall happen one day on earth, where Satan shall have his man and Satan's man shall seem to achieve absolute and universal success. Before God allows us to think about that, he says, 'Please step aside a moment, will you?' And we're taken up to heaven, to have heaven's view of it.

'And there appeared a great sign in heaven,' says John (12:1-2). In the first place there was the woman standing in pain, ready to be delivered of a man-child, and there was the serpent, (the old dragon). So we have: the woman, the serpent and the dragon. Now it's God asking you to look at it as he looks at it.

### Understanding the three signs in heaven

I'm going to suggest to you that the three parts of this early trilogy are pointing out to us what is necessary if anyone is going to get universal dominion. These are three things that will be necessary to do, like a general in an army who wishes to take a certain terrain. He knows he has to take certain strategic points, and if he can't, whatever ground he gains, he'll never be able to hold it. So here, before the rise of the beast, God is showing us, his people, that the kingdom of Satan will be founded on rotten foundations and, however much success it seems to come at, it will not be tenable, and in the end it must fall.

#### *A woman and child*

This woman is about to give birth to a man-child who is destined to rule the nations, and Satan obviously is aware of what has been said by God's authority, and so he is standing in front of this woman (a great cad he is at best). He is standing in front of this woman in that condition about to be delivered of a child, to gobble up the child in his jaws the moment it is born. And we watch him there. Can you see him, with those fearful jaws, and tongue and talons, waiting for the child to drop from its mother, only to swallow it up? Satan will have won the day. But just in that very moment, when the child is born, before Satan's jaws can close around it, the child is caught away to God and his throne, and Satan goes away gnashing his teeth (see 12:1-6). He's lost it. They can't both rule the nations, can they? It's either this child will, or Satan will; they won't both. Satan must capture and destroy him. If he can't, then he's lost, whatever else he does.

Yes, but I must ask you to pause a moment. Can you see that woman in your mind's eye, clothed, with the sun beneath her feet and the stars and the moon? A heavenly portent, this. And the child? What is this story? Who is that woman? And who is the child? Who is the child that she's carrying in her womb? Say who it is! It is the child who is destined to rule the nations. Oh, my good friend, that woman is carrying God incarnate in her womb. This is the

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<sup>21</sup> See the notes for [Section Four](#) in the Appendix.

promise made to Eve in the garden, and to the serpent: 'the seed of the woman shall crush the serpent's head' (Gen 3:15). This is the promise that was given to Abraham and Sarah: 'your seed shall inherit the gate of his enemies' (Gen 22:17). It is the promise made to Isaiah, to the house of David in his day: 'the virgin shall be with child and bring forth a son, and you will call his name: God with us—Immanuel' (see 7:14). This is the story of how the human race, and eventually the Jewish race, brought forth a virgin, and in her womb was carried God incarnate.

Oh, pray see the significance of it in this context. Here is God answering Satan's tactics! And what are Satan's tactics? He is going to defeat God. He is going to push the Almighty off his throne (for Satan believes in God, even if his minions don't). He is going to push the Almighty off his throne, and he is infatuating men with the idea that men can be God! Man is to climb up and be God. It is the infatuation of human pride. How will God answer that?

You say, 'Come on, God, get out one of your thunderbolts and crunch him hard!'

No, no.

'How shall I overcome Satan when he is persuading man to climb up and be God? Watch,' says God. 'I shall answer that move by God becoming man.'

Oh, the divine subtlety and wisdom. And yet that is the story of how God moves against his arch-enemy. When man in his rebellion is trying to be God, God says, 'I'll answer that. I will become man.' Oh, what a lovely story. But God was manifest in flesh, born into the human race, that one day Satan might come across *the* man, the God-man, impervious to all his temptation, who would triumph. And triumph how? By promoting himself and glorifying himself and putting himself on a pinnacle, and demanding that men worship him at the pain of death? Oh no, no, no! How will he get men to bow at his feet? Oh, here is the story: 'Who, being in the form of God, thought it not a thing to be grasped at to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, wherefore God has highly exalted him' (see Phil 2:6–9). And if I ask you why this very night you bow at the feet of Christ? What has overcome your rebellion as a sinner, an enemy of God? Why do you give him the loyalty of your heart? Is it because he is exalted and a heavenly tyrant and he compelled you? You say, 'No, no. The way that God Almighty has got at me and my heart is by becoming man and dying for me at the place called Calvary. I am the rebel, and the very God whose shins I kicked, died for me.'

Oh, what a mystery! What a gospel! What divine wisdom! This is self-evidently of God. It has already worked, you know. Millions have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son, brought by a power that Satan never knew how to wield. He gave himself to the cross, and God has highly exalted him beyond Satan's ability to capture. Satan's empire is doomed.

### *War in heaven*

It is doomed another way. A war broke out in heaven, we are told in the second part of the trilogy, and Satan, the accuser of the brethren, was cast down. Satan accused them day and night, these people that are called the brethren. Very widely spread, they are: all true believers in Christ, and the believers of that final age too—brethren. Now what is the point of Satan's accusations? Why should he bother? I'm not being insulting, but why should Satan bother to



accuse you, or me either? Satan has a point with God, hasn't he? It is God's intention that Jesus Christ should rule, but not just Jesus Christ: all Christ's people shall rule with him. Ephesians goes so far as to say that God has raised up the Lord Jesus, but not only he but you as well—all believers in him—raised and seated us in the heavenly places, far above principalities, powers, mights and dominions (1:20–21).

Satan says, 'No you don't, God. Well, you can do it if you like. You have the almighty power to take these miserable sinners and put them on the throne of heaven. Do it if you want to, God, but I shall never cease to accuse you. How can you cast out Satan and his hosts and put in place such miserable sinners as these are? Have you no morals, God? Don't you care for justice?'

What shall God say? Shall he say, 'Look who's talking. Please keep quiet, Satan. I'll put you in the abyss. What right have you to talk about morals?'

That's not the point, is it? Satan can be the biggest old moral braggart out. If he could lodge an accusation against the brethren, and it stuck in the presence of God, then the whole scheme of God's salvation is finished.

What is the answer then? For we know our own hearts, don't we? It is said 'they overcame him'. However did they overcome him? It doesn't say God overcame him, it says '*they* overcame him'. How did they overcome him and all his accusations before the throne of God's holiness? They overcame Satan 'by the blood of the Lamb' (12:11). It was not as though it were some horrible, powerful smell or something that the demons don't like and so run away when they smell it. That is superstition. When we talk about the blood of the Lamb, we are thinking of that sacrifice at Calvary that atoned for human sin, and is sufficient to wash away all stain before God.

O precious is the flow  
that makes me white as snow;  
no other [name] I know;  
nothing but the blood of Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

I hear the accuser roar  
Of ills that I have done;  
I know them well, and thousands more;  
Jehovah findeth none.<sup>23</sup>

It is because of the merits of the blood, and the atonement of Christ.

They overcame him 'because of the word of their testimony' (12:11). They refused to shut up. What right have I got to speak? Well, none in myself, for who am I? And yet, I can testify this, that though I was the sinner, I've a right to speak because I'm not priding myself; I'm telling you what God has done with a sinner. If he could save me, he could save anybody. And I refuse to be shut up.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Lowry (1826-1899), 'Nothing but the blood of Jesus' (1876).

<sup>23</sup> Samuel W. Gandy (1780-1851), 'Victory through Jesus' (1838).

And 'they loved not their lives to the death' (v. 11). The fight is going to be severe, not merely in that coming day of great tribulation, but now. Who hasn't heard of our Christian brother and his two sons, a missionary working with lepers in India, set upon by fanatic Hindus, doused with petrol and burned alive in their truck as they slept?

God has not promised any of us that we shall never suffer persecution. We overcome him by God's grace by willing, if need be, to give our lives.

#### *Satan persecutes the woman*

Then Satan tries to overcome this woman—a figure for Israel, of course—to destroy the whole nation of Israel. He has tried it down the centuries; he will try it yet again, but God shall intervene to guarantee that Israel, the nation, shall never be wiped from the earth.

But now, as we go, there is one last thing I call your attention to, and that is what we find in the third trilogy. I only take a moment to deal with one of its paragraphs.

We are told that when Satan came to set up his devilish kingdom, he stood upon the seashore and organized the rise of this universal dictator (13:1). When he has done his worst, then the writer turns our attention and says, 'I looked, and there upon Mount Zion stood the Lamb' (14:1).

You see the change, don't you? Here is Satan down here on the seashore, organizing the world to his advantage (so he thinks), and he has forgotten to look up. Already there on Mount Zion is the Lamb, and with him 144,000 (vv. 1–2).

You say, 'Who are they?'

Oh, I'm not going to tell you. I don't know that I would if I could, but I'm not going to tell you anyway, because the Bible doesn't tell us. Why are we so interested in what the Bible *doesn't* tell us, and forget to look at what the Bible *does* tell us?

What does it tell us about these 144,000? They are virgins. That is, moral and spiritual virgins. They have lived for Christ. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes in utter, unswerving devotion to the Lamb and to his God. They are a kind of a firstfruits of God's creature, 'firstfruits to God and to the Lamb from the earth', it says, the most beautiful (14:4).

I say, do tell me, how did the Lamb get these? How did he get this wonderful bunch of such devoted people, given absolutely one hundred percent to following the Lamb and serving his Father? How did he get them, and where?

Says God, 'You'd like to know how I got them? I bought them.'

You what?

'I bought them.'

Some English versions say he 'redeemed them'. Well that's not bad, but it's the ordinary Greek word for 'buy'. 'I bought them,' says God. 'I bought them out of the earth.'

Really? And then we remember the context. How did the second beast get the world to worship the first beast? 'Well,' you say, 'he demanded that they take the beast's mark on their foreheads and on their hands, and if they didn't take the mark of the beast on their foreheads and hands and bow down and worship the beast, then they could neither buy nor sell' (13:16–17).

Oh, and how did God get these?

'I got them from earth,' he says. 'I went down to the marketplace and bought them.'

You did? Well, how did you manage to buy them?

Now we meet a drama, don't we? It's a contest for the souls and hearts of men. The buyers are Satan and the beast, and on the other side the lovely Lord Jesus Christ. And they bid for the souls of men.

What will Satan pay? Oh, dazzling money he'll pay! 'Bow down, young man, and worship me, and I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. I'll give you position and honour and fame and pleasure. I'll give you anything you like! Bow down and worship me' (see Luke 4:1-7). 'But if you don't, let me tell you straight, you will not buy nor sell. I offer life's necessities and all its pleasures and glories, and material things galore. If you don't bow and worship me, I withdraw them. I'll withdraw your bread and your butter.'

Now, come on, Christ. Do you bid? What will you bid? Come on, God, what will you bid? Promise these people, and outbid Satan! What will you bid them if they follow you? Palaces and all the rest of it?

'No,' says Christ, 'I tell them straight. They may end up having nothing and losing life itself.'

What will you bid then?

Says Christ, 'I bought them with my own very blood. I've given myself.'

That is the struggle of the ages. That is the pivot of time and eternity. He buys us with himself and with his own blood.

And you, I'm persuaded, have made the decision long since, you have decided who the fairest bidder is, and you've said no to Satan. Come what sacrifice, you have said yes to Christ.

Jesus, Thou hast bought us,  
Not with gold or gem,  
But with Thine own life-blood,  
For Thy diadem.<sup>24</sup>

Thank God that he has won our hearts, and one day, when the suffering is over, we shall reign with him.

And now, blessed Lord Jesus, we pause, that, in the quiet of our hearts, we might make our response to thee. Oh Lord, thou hast loved us and loved us unto blood. Thou hast, by thy grace, won our hearts, and we would like to tell thee that we love thee in return, and wish to follow and to serve thee to the end. Only Lord, thou knowest our hearts: how often the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Take thy word, we do beseech thee, loving Lord. So speak it and speak it again in our hearts, and tell us of all thou hast done for us and paid for us, that we shall find strength and grace in return to stand for thee and fight the good fight of faith, and live for thine honour and glory. So, that at thy coming again, we may rejoice with thee in the spoils of thy victory, for thine own name's sake. Amen.

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<sup>24</sup> Francis R. Havergal (1836-1879), 'Jesus Thou hast bought us'.

## The Temple of Tabernacle of Testimony in Heaven Opened

### *Section Five — Revelation 15:5–19:10*

We come now to a study of the fifth section of the book of the Revelation. Let's begin by reading some excerpts from that section, and we begin in chapter 15, verse 5:

After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes round their chests. 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, 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. (vv. 5–8 ESV)

And then some verses from chapter 17, beginning in verse 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, 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.' 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. 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. And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.' 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. (vv. 1–6 ESV)

And then, for the moment, from chapter 19, beginning in verse 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. 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; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure' — for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. 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.' (vv. 6–9 ESV)

May God give us good understanding of these verses this evening.

## Introduction

Now we come to Section Five of this wonderful book of the Revelation, and this section is somewhat notorious. It contains the famous chapter 17, and in that chapter is a multitude of things over which we can all disagree. And many do. Great, noble minds, servants of God, men and women, having pondered this chapter over many centuries, have come up with various interpretations of some of the details. So that I confess to you tonight I have a couple of secret fears assailing my timid breast.

The first of them is that, should you, as is greatly possible, perceive a few moments into this meeting that I hold a different position and interpretation from you over these particular details (and therefore, by definition, the wrong understanding of them) you will get so distressed about my error that you will use up all your energy trying to think what to do about it, and miss all the rest that I've got to say. So, try to contain your frustration if you see that I've gone astray.

The second fear is like unto the first. Convinced, of course as we should be, that these things talk to us first and foremost about future events, and future personages and happenings, we may use so much of our energy trying to be sure that we have understood exactly what is going to happen in the future, and which and when and why, that we haven't got any energy left to remember that these future messages carry implications for us even now. If we were to read them without perceiving their implications for our present behaviour, we should miss a great deal of the benefit that they were meant to convey.

I find it helpful to remember what the dear Apostle John said to his fellow believers in his day. 'You have heard,' he said, 'that antichrist is come, and that is very true, and a good thing to be aware of. But already many antichrists have gone out into the world. These many are not the particular one that shall arise in the future, nor are they the most famous ones. But, being antichrists themselves, they partake of the nature that shall find full expression in the antichrist when he comes' (see 1 John 2:18). John is pointing out that those same principles that shall animate that future dictator, an apostate against all that is called God, are already at work in our own society and times. So we need to be aware of them and, seeing where they will end up, be careful not to compromise with them now.

Paul says similarly, writing to his converts in his second letter to the Thessalonians, in chapter 2. They had got it into their heads that *the* Day of the Lord, the great day of the wrath of God, had already set in. 'No,' says Paul, 'that isn't true. That couldn't possibly be true. That great day of God's wrath will not come until first there come the great apostasy, and the man of sin be revealed, who sits in the temple of God, claiming divine honours' (see 2:1-4).

So, that is all future. But then, of course, it has implications for us now, doesn't it? So, let us come to our passage tonight determined by God's grace to understand as best we can the details of the future events and personages, but even more determined to learn the big, basic principles that underlie these things, so that we are people who understand the times and know what the people of God ought to do.

## Comparing the sections

To help us in that, I suggest we spend five minutes or so trying to put our section of the book in the larger context of all the rest of the book, and that is why I have supplied you with the sheet listing the sections. According to this particular analysis, there are six sections to this particular book.

### Something opened

In our recent sessions we have been looking at sections two, three, four and five, and we observed that they have this in common at the beginning: as they start, something or other is opened in heaven. In Section Two, it was a door opened in heaven. In Section Three, it was that the seventh seal was opened, and there followed silence in heaven for half an hour. In Section Four, it was the temple of God in heaven opened. Now, as we come to Section Five, it is *the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony* in heaven that is opened. That would seem to mean, not merely the holy place, but now there is opened the holiest of all, and the very glory of God immediately fills the temple, so that no one can stand in it or enter into it.

### Something of the tabernacle

Then we look to see in each of those sections that when heaven is opened there appears to John some particular piece of heavenly tabernacle furniture. In Section Two, it was the throne of God and the twenty-four subsidiary thrones. In Section Three, it was at first the big altar and then the golden altar of incense. In Section Four, it was the ark, symbolic throne of God, but here called in addition the ark of God's 'covenant'. And now we come to Section Five. It is not any particular piece of furniture in the heavenly tabernacle we see, but the smoke that comes from the presence and the glory of God. It was so overpowering that none could enter in until these seven plagues of the seven angels were fulfilled. It conjures up in our memories the record of the tabernacle. When it was built and assembled, then the glory of God descended in it, and it was like a fire in and above the tabernacle. So it was at the inauguration of Solomon's temple when all was in order, and the building in all its beauty was there. Then the great purpose for which the building was built became manifest, and the glory of God descended and filled the place, so that the priests were not able to stand.

### The glory of God revealed

This, therefore, is an awesome part of the book of the Revelation. We take the shoes from off our feet as we begin our study, for now we are to be introduced, not to some holy vessel used in the service of God, nor even to the throne, so to speak, upon which God sits, but to his divine majesty himself in all his overwhelming glory! Such that if it would appear like that to us tonight without any veil between, we should be overwhelmed with awesome wonder, because this is the *glory* of God.

You say, 'What do you mean by the glory of God?'

Well, it's not some tinsel crown that he wears to try and make himself look beautiful. This is the very nature of God, the very character of God and all that God stands for! God is, in himself, the sum total of all beauty. He is the sum total of all truth. He is *the* truth behind the universe. He is the sum total of all holiness. He *is* these things; they are not just appurtenances for him.

In this passage we see God now rising personally to express his character and his reaction to a guilty, vile, ugly, perverted, defiled and abominable world. As you may expect, there will be solemn things to watch as the character of Almighty God thus expresses itself in its divine holiness and disgust at earth's perversions.

### What God objects to

Let's look a little bit more closely at what is set out here in the six sections. We noticed that in Section Four, which we studied in an earlier session, it was the ark of God's covenant shown to us, because in that ark was the law: the basis of God's covenant. And the first requirement and prohibition of that law was 'You shall have no other gods but me' (Exod 20:3). That forms the preface to what we are then shown—a future time on earth when Satan will bring to fruition his longstanding lie, planted in the human heart: 'Has God said, "You shall surely die"? You shall not die, for God knows in the day you eat thereof, you shall be as God' (see Gen 3:4–5).

'You shall be as God.' That lie shall come one day to its full harvest. By Satan's initiative there shall come on earth the head of a virtually worldwide empire, who shall not merely copy what ancient emperors did in the ancient world as they deified themselves, and required their subjects to worship them, but shall parade it as none other ever did, and sit in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God, exalting himself above all that is called God (see 2 Thess 2). The infatuated crowds shall shout, led by his minister of propaganda: 'Who is like the beast?' This is the equivalent of the divine: 'Who is like Jehovah?' And they shall add, 'Who is able, who has the power, to war against him?' (Rev 13:4). They will celebrate their ruler as having divine power. It is of course what you may call *the perversion of the male*. The two beasts are male, in the sense of not female. It is the perversion of *power* and man's lust for power.

When we come to Section Five, it is not two beasts that will fill the middle parts of the section; it is two women. As you look at them, there is no denying that they are well dressed, better than any you would ever see in any glossy magazine. With the first one, the colours are rather crude and lurid (see ch. 17). The second one, in chapter 18, has at her command and in her wardrobe the most delightful, expensive setups that ever you could get, either in London or Paris or anywhere else and all the lovely, luxury items that you could get in Harrods or wherever. Oh, what a riot of wealth, colour, beauty and artistry! (You might even want to ask who made her gowns.)

So they are beautiful, then. Yet it will not take us long to see that, beautiful though they may be in some sense or other, they represent the perversion of *beauty*. The beasts stand for the perversion of power—the perversion of the male. The two women are the perversion of beauty—the *perversion of the female*. When we consider the false beauty, the misuse of beauty

on the part of these two women, then we see the point of the final response made in this Section Five.

We have got into the habit of noticing the responses at the end of each section. In Section Two it is the comment by one of the elders. Then in Section Three it is the comment by twenty-four elders. And in Section Four, it is the song by the victors over the beast, which is highly appropriate, for we have just read there about the beast and his antics, his claims and his persecution, so that when it comes to the climax, it is lovely to hear the song of people standing by the sea of glass, singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb, since they have gotten the victory over the beast. So when we come to the response at the end of Section Five, it is no less appropriate, is it? For against the background of these beautiful women, some of it a bit lurid, we read of that lovely virgin, the Lamb's wife (19:7–8). She has made herself ready, for the marriage of the Lamb has come! And it is given to her to be clothed. Oh look at her clothes! It is rather a distinctive style from the two Babylons, and from a different warehouse, of course. Her clothes—pure and spotless—represent the righteous acts of the saints, for while the world had been going its way in its perversions, her nimble fingers have been sewing her wedding trousseau. She has been stitching it with loving stitches and embroidering it where need be. Through long life, sometimes under persecution and difficulty, but in unswerving devotion to her husband-to-be, she has been making her bridal trousseau. Now the marriage of the Lamb has come. It's time, and (thank the Lord) the bride is ready!

You know, I've learned enough about it to see that, at many weddings, the bride isn't ready, and we are all kept waiting, whatever other things we've got to do. We're kept waiting until the bride appears. But not this time: 'The marriage of the Lamb has come, and the bride has made herself ready' (v. 7). You know, we Christians haven't got all the time there is, have we, to get ready for the Lord's coming? God forbid that, when he comes, we should fear we've wasted a lot of time, and we wish we had a few more minutes to stitch a few more stitches in our trousseau. For the fine linen is the 'righteousnesses'—the 'righteous acts' of the saints—the character they have woven. So that on that day they shall not only rise as the redeemed of the Lord, their garments washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, but their garments shall be adorned with a life lived for the Lord Jesus, and the garment adorned with the righteous acts that they have been able to do.

That then is the story, and in that sense the whole section coheres.

### **Key points in Section Five**

Now let's go back and look at the main sheet where I have listed what seem to me the four major parts of Section Five.<sup>25</sup> There are the seven vials of the wrath of God. That is the first part (A). The second part (B) is what I have called 'The judgment of Babylon (A)'. This is the Babylon that 'sits on many waters and on the seven mountains'. Then the third part (C), from chapter 18, is 'The judgment of Babylon (B)'. And we shall have to decide whether we think that's the same thing just repeated or whether these are two different things. Then, finally,

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<sup>25</sup> See the notes on [Section Five](#) in the Appendix.



those responses in the fourth part (D): the 'Hallelujahs' that arise for God's judgments in general, and his judgments in destroying the great Babylon.

## **The beast**

I'll put you out of your misery and mention to you, for what it's worth, my own view on the beast. The woman is seen riding the beast, is she not? When the angel comes to explain certain things about the beast, he says:

The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sits: And they are seven kings. The five have fallen, the one is, the other is not yet come; and when he comes, he must continue a little while. And the beast that was, and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is of the seven, and he goes into perdition. (17:9-11)

I understand them myself as follows. Verse 10 is talking about this final empire. There are seven kings. That is, there have been seven kingdoms, each headed by its head: a king or emperor. 'And five are fallen, the one is, and the other is not yet come'. I take them to be, not successive emperors of the city of Rome, but the big world empires mentioned throughout holy Scripture.

Within holy Scripture, not going outside its bound, you come first to the great empire Egypt, and secondly to the great empire Assyria, then the empire of Babylon (that's three), followed by Medo-Persia (that's four), and five: the empire of Greece—Alexander and his successors. Those five in John's day were past. There was one great empire in existence, and that was imperial Rome. Then he says, 'There comes another, and when that comes, he must continue a little while.' And I take that last one to be the empire of the beast, described here in these chapters. It shall continue, not a long while like Rome did (over one thousand years), but a very short while, as prophesied both in the book of Daniel and in the book of the Revelation.

Then, for verse 11: 'the beast that was, and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is one of the seven, and goes into perdition'. I take that to be a remark referring to what we were earlier told in chapter 13 where John saw 'one of his heads as though it had been smitten unto death; and his death-stroke was healed: and the whole world wondered after the beast' (v. 3). There Satan seems to contrive an extraordinary and apparent miracle. The head of that empire, being perhaps assassinated or appearing to be killed with the sword, Satan eventually brings him up again, after a short time, from the abyss, as is stated in chapter 17: 'The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss' (v. 8). That is referring to the great leader of the coming future empire. And Satan manages to stage what looks like a resurrection, imitating (bogusly, of course) the real resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

But that will not be any great part of my theme this evening, and if I were to discuss the many views we should be here until next Friday. In spite of seeing the disappointment on your faces at such an interpretation, you'll get over it. And now we settle down to hear the real business.

## The wrath of God finished

So what is this section about? First of all, we are explicitly told that in these plagues 'the wrath of God is finished' (15:1). There have been two previous series of judgments: (1) those under the seals; (2) those under the trumpets. Now there are these under the bowls, and they finish and complete the wrath of God. This time, it is God's objection to the implications of his own character and heart that have been carried by the sins hereafter to be described.

You see, in Section Four, we read of Satan who gave the beast his throne. The moment we hear the words 'and the dragon gave him his throne', we sense the insult and the rebellious competition attempted with the throne of God. Satan, too, gave us a vision of the throne of God. Section Four comes along and says, 'Look at this imitation, will you, this fantastic opposition to the very rule and government of God' (see ch. 13). Satan gave the beast his throne. And you don't wonder at the judgments that will fall upon that kingdom and that beast. Now when we come to Section Five it isn't so much an attack upon the throne; it's an attack upon God himself, personally: on his heart, on his values, on his love.

Imagine a king, in the ancient world, and he has a throne, and presently the armies of his enemies come against him, and they try to topple him off his throne and put their own throne in his place. That would be cause enough for indignation on the part of the true king. But suppose, in that very situation, the king's own wife were to play false to him and, abandoning him and his affections, take her beauty and her charms and bestow them on his very enemies. That would be a far more serious thing to the king personally than enemies attacking his throne, wouldn't it? To have someone that's supposed to be his, enmeshed in the very affections of the king, now to take her beauty and compromise her loyalty and play the adulteress, and go off, not with just any other man, but with the king's direst enemy! How do you suppose the king would feel? This is the final insult, the very tip-top of profanity. God doesn't hesitate to use ugly words to describe it: fornication, adultery, filthiness, prostitution. She is yielding her services to the beast, so as to have influence with him and to be carried and supported by him and paraded before the nations in her imagined beauty and glory.

### *The beauty of God's wrath*

It is no wonder that, at this stage, the holiest of all is filled with smoke—an expression of the feelings of God, of the character of God. And when the angels who have the vials full of these plagues come out, do notice how they're clothed.

Did you notice that? This section has a lot to say about clothing. How would you expect angels to be clothed, who come out with these dire judgments, to inflict pain and dishonour and eventual destruction upon men and women? How would you expect them to be clothed?

You say, 'I expect them to come out there dressed in funereal black, solemn looking, almost hideous hags dripping and oozing blood.'

No, that's a pagan conception. The angels that come out to execute the wrath of God at this stage, oh, look at their clothing! It is fantastically beautiful! It is white, of course, but not a dull old white that you put on the walls of your sitting room. This is brilliant white and marvellously attractive! Oh, the purity of it! Yes, they are beautiful. I tell you, my brothers and sisters, the wrath of God is something exceedingly beautiful.

Check yourself if ever you find yourself apologizing for the wrath of God, as though it were something to be ashamed of. As if we had to say, 'Well, you know, God does get wroth sometimes. Well, that's like him, but it doesn't last, and he's altogether nice and good really, on the whole. It's just sometimes he loses his temper . . .'

No, he doesn't; he doesn't lose his temper.

The wrath of God is like God himself: it is a beautiful thing, for it is the expression of the character of God. It isn't a question of losing his temper. He stands for all that is true, and therefore his whole being vibrates against what is false and unreal and insincere. He is the sum total of all holiness, and when he meets unholiness the whole of his character is moved against it. In him are located all true values, and when God meets perversions then it is a part of the beauty of his character that his beauty reacts against perversion of beauty, and demands its destruction.

Not to confuse small things with bigger things, but, madam, if someone put something ugly on the mantelshelf in your lounge, your sense of beauty wouldn't tolerate it, would it? You'd say, 'I wouldn't give it houseroom! Take it out and give it to the bin man!' You're not going to put up with ugliness, are you? Why not? Because you have a marvellously beautiful sense of beauty! That's God. Jerusalem will be such a marvellous expression of beauty, truth and holiness because it is created by a God like that. Now at last, after his patience has been tried to its end, he must deal with perversion. The judgments that now follow are precisely that.

#### *The value of human life*

These judgments are initiated as one of the living creatures takes bowls full of the wrath of God and hands it to the angels to pour out. The living creature, he is the one who hands the bowls to the angels (15:7). He is a *living* thing, a *living* creature. This is *life!* This is agreeing with God, that God should deal with everything that leads to death. And as another angel pours out his bowl, and the rivers and the seas are turned to blood until they become absolutely putrid, the response is, 'You are worthy, because they shed the blood of your saints' (see 16:4–6). It's a question of the value of life, isn't it? If men get to a stage when the life of their fellow human counts for nothing, there is something radically gone wrong with their system of values. When men, for power lust or religious position, can take holy believers in God and torture them and slit their throats and burn them at the stake, what kind of a perversion of value is that? Is this a suitable punishment to say, 'Well, they shed blood, let them drink it'? Let them be so full of blood, so to speak, by turning the waters to blood, that it confounds all the basic values of life.

At that point the altar speaks its protest, for there, in symbol, the sacrifice was offered and the blood shed that atoned for sin. Consider the value of humans in themselves. Though we are fallen, the value of an ordinary human life in the eyes of God is marvellous. For men to take human life is bad enough, but the altar expresses even higher value. It reminds us of the value of redemption, the price God has paid for every individual soul that trusts the saviour. These are God's values. And what of false religion that has taken people redeemed with the blood of Christ, and in the name of God put them to the stake, tortured, butchered, persecuted, imprisoned and destroyed them? And so God says, 'If you will confound values like that, then

the very character of God insists that such perversions shall meet their appropriate punishment.'

We have no time to go through all the judgments.<sup>26</sup>

### **The woman Babylon**

What then of this first woman, or at least the Babylon as described in chapter 17, who is found sitting upon a beast?

You say, 'Who and what is she?'

I am going to suggest she is a certain system of religion: religion that has turned from the true God and turned to idolatry of various kinds. It is called Babylon here, for Babylon is a name hoary with age, and goes back to Genesis. When after the flood God commanded men to disperse all over the world, according to their tribes and families, then Nimrod and company determined to defy God. They weren't to be scattered. They were going to make themselves a name. They built their city, and they built their tower. They would be master of their surroundings and make themselves a name independent and defiant of God (see Gen 10–11).

You say, 'They all became atheists.'

No, no. It's a very difficult thing to be an atheist. (I nearly said, 'Try it', but don't, of course. Don't try it!) It is a mighty difficult thing to be, because when you give up believing in God, you can't believe in nothing. Even the most advanced atheist has the common sense to see he didn't invent himself and that there are bigger powers than he, so he makes gods of the powers of nature, and luck, and goodness knows what else. So in the ancient world there was built up a phenomenal system of religion.

By common consent, in the Middle East, Babylon was the most famous city as a centre of pagan idolatrous religion. In the Old Testament, Babylon City itself is frequently compared and contrasted with Jerusalem City for that very reason. Those two cities stand in the ancient world for two diametrically opposed views. Here is Jerusalem standing for faith in the one true God, with its covenant with God: 'You shall have no other god but me'. That is true religion. It is a belief in God that is accompanied by strictly holy, moral commandments expressing God's values for a wholesome society. And over here is Babylon: beautiful in its artistry, magnificent in its architecture. It would outshine Jerusalem any day of the week, but it is standing for the opposite interpretation of the universe: the idolatrous interpretation of the universe. Religion, yes—the worship of the moon god, the sun god and ten thousand other gods.

So we have the two opposite sides: true religion and idolatrous religion; belief in the one God and belief in a multitude of gods, that is, the pagan interpretation of the universe. The sad thing is that Israel, in the Old Testament days, having been chosen by God to represent him in the earth and having known the true God, compromised his unique glory many times in the course of history, and played with idolatry and set up their charms and their little idols in their gardens and in their drawing rooms. In spite of the warning of the prophets they went at last, head over heels, into pagan idolatry. And God, through the prophets many a time,

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<sup>26</sup> See them listed in the notes for [Section Five](#).

called that what he now here calls Babylon: spiritual, religious adultery, fornication, and prostitution. For people who were supposed to be the people of God to compromise with pagan religion, God counted it unfaithfulness: spiritual fornication and idolatry.

So now, here is this woman. How else would you describe her? How else would you get a handle on what she stands for? Why, look once more at the climax to which this section comes, as the 'Hallelujahs!' are sounding.

And you say, 'What about?'

It is the marriage of the Lamb that has come, and his wife has made herself ready. She is the real thing, as distinct from idolatrous, unfaithful Babylon.

### *Babylon, Rome and world religion*

You say, 'Mr Preacher, excuse us, but that's too vague. You see, we want you to tell us. Now, what is Babylon? Isn't it after all what the Reformers said it was: Roman Catholicism, based on Rome?'

Well there is no denying, even if anybody wanted to, that, historically, Rome as a system of religion has been full of idolatry and superstition from one end to the other. That is very perfectly true. But as I would understand this figure, this stands not merely for Rome. This is, as John was told, 'the mother of harlots', not one particular one. It stands for worldwide religion that shall be in the coming day.

You see, things have moved, haven't they? It is well that we know about them. I remember being in Roscommon just after Vatican Council II and calling in on a certain monastery. I was well received by the monks there; they were highly polished people and belonged to a missionary order. And as I talked with one of their priests, he told me that they no longer were required to try to convert people to Catholicism. They were now being instructed that it did not matter what religion a person was but what their intentions were. It didn't matter, they said, even if it was a completely different religion. If they were Muslims or Hindus or Shintoists or Buddhists, so long as they're sincere in their religion, we can now count it as baptism by desire. 'We don't have to convert them,' said he. And the Jesuits have withdrawn all their missionaries from India to retrain them in this new approach to the other religions. That was startling news to me.

I remember very vividly when Bishop Lesslie Newbigin came to Queens University Belfast, perhaps now fifteen or twenty years ago. He was a bishop of the Church of South India<sup>27</sup> and had spent many years in conversation with intellectual Hindus. Broadminded though he was, he stated in his books the fact that even Hindus and all those others need to be saved, and they can only be saved by Christ.

He came to Queens to give a lecture, and the theme of his lecture was the modern attitude of the Roman Catholic Church to other world religions. His analogy was that they liken it to a series of concentric circles (the Pope, of course, being the centre point, by definition). The first circle would be the Roman Catholic Church, the second circle the Protestant churches, the third would be Judaism, the fourth would be Islam, the fifth would be Hinduism, the sixth Buddhism, the seventh Animism, and if there be any other things of this sort. So, he said, the

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<sup>27</sup> The Church of South India is a denomination formed in India, in large part because of Lesslie Newbigin's efforts.

modern attitude was that there need be no attempt to convert anybody, so long as they all agree to be concentric circles round one centre.

I remember listening to the archbishop of the Anglican Church in Britain (the one before this present one) as he came back from a tour of India and was giving us all his impressions and reactions. He said, 'You know, I was immensely impressed by the spirituality of Hinduism, and what we ought now to do is to stop talking about our differences and join together, they and us, in seeking the truth.' Apparently he hadn't got the truth, according to him.

I remember myself, twenty years ago or more, receiving an invitation to attend the world congress of faiths. The invitation included pictures of world leaders of various religions on the stage, and the young people at a previous conference getting silken threads and winding them round the leaders of all these different religions to show that all religions are one. And I was invited to go along and lecture. (How they got my name, I've never understood from that time until now.) When I replied, I said I already had a previous engagement, and that was utterly true. I said, 'But suppose on another occasion I were prepared to come. Of course, I don't ram my religion down people's throats, but would I be free (because I should want to be free) to say to the conference what the apostles said: "There is no other name under heaven given amongst men whereby we must be saved . . ." (Acts 4:12). As Jesus Christ said, "I am *the way, the truth and the life*. No one comes to the Father but by me"' (John 14:6). I didn't get a reply, nor have I had an invitation since.

Oh, my brothers and sisters, we must think about a big world. We must be prepared for *world* religion, where it has become illegal by a law of parliament to get up and say that Jesus is the only Saviour because it would upset Muslims in the United Kingdom, and we must have harmony amongst the different groups in society. The present currents of opinion are leading to a world religion. Be assured of this, that when it comes it will prove to be a persecuting thing. In her will be found 'the blood of the martyrs' (17:6).

### *The woman judged*

What is her judgment from God? I can't altogether suppress a smile when I read it. I sometimes think God has a certain sense of humour. How will God judge this woman for her utter errant disloyalty, compromise and filthiness? How will he judge her? Says an angel, 'John, would you like to see that? Well, come and I'll show you the judgment of this great whore' (see 17:1). And her judgment was what?

To start with, she got on the beast. Well, she must have been a little bit infatuated, for the description that is given of the beast is that he comes up out of the abyss and goes into destruction (17:8). Fancy getting onto a beast! If I were walking down the street and looking for a bus, and a bus came up that had on the front 'To: Perdition', I shouldn't be inclined to get on, would you? This infatuated woman gets on the beast whose destination board says plainly 'Destruction'. But more than that, she used her supposed beauty, her influence, her hypnotic charm over the nations and peoples, feeding them with wonderful rituals, marvellous music, and all the paraphernalia of idolatrous religion, and has tremendous influence. For a while the great Gentile imperial government was pleased to support her because it aided them in their attempt to get hold of the hearts and minds of people, and

imbue people with the religious sense that makes them feel they are part of one great community. It's the 'Five hundred million people can't be wrong' kind of thing; and that helps the state. But for those who name the name of Christ to join up with Gentile political powers, what a disaster history has proved that to be.

The early churches took Caesar as their lord, and promoted him to be head of the church; what a disaster that was. 'In this sign,' says he, 'I conquer', holding up a cross. And the cross now, instead of being a symbol of how men can be reconciled to God and saved became, with Constantine, a signal on his shields of how he would destroy the enemies with the sword and subdue them by force, and subject them to the so-called Christian religion! What a ghastly thing that was. It remains altogether inappropriate for a Christian church to be allied to any political government, or to have a political monarch as its head. That is unfaithfulness. That is compromise with the world. But in the end the judgments of God are seen in this, that eventually this imperial power has no time for the woman, and the ten kings join together and tear her to pieces and eat her flesh (17:16).

One can understand atheistic systems despising idolatrous religion and idolatrous, so-called, Christianity. But this imperial beast, when he comes to the point, will want to get rid of all religion, for he is going to sit himself in the temple of God and claim to be God and have the world's devotion to himself.

#### *The bride*

What lesson do we draw from it? Against that horrible corruption and unfaithfulness, we read in this climax: 'the marriage of the Lamb is come, and the bride has made herself ready' (19:7). Lovely, isn't it? Here she'd been stitching. I think I'll stand by her side, if I'm permitted, with the angel. And I say, 'Yes, my dear, marvellous. Let me look at that embroidery. Oh, isn't that marvellous! What kind of a stitch do you call that? Isn't that delightful! I think the King, when he sees you like this, so shall the King greatly desire your beauty.' And we remember the word of the apostle: 'I have espoused you as a chaste virgin to Christ, but I fear lest by any means that old serpent that deceived and corrupted Eve will corrupt your thoughts from the simplicity that is towards Christ' (see 2 Cor 11:2-3).

You say, 'What does that mean?'

Well, when a girl was not yet engaged or betrothed in the ancient world, she was free to keep her mind open, wasn't she?

'Shall it be Tom? There seems a lot to be said for Tom, I mean, as a prospective husband. Or on the other hand, perhaps not. Perhaps James; he at least has got a BMW. Yes . . . but Philip now, well, he hasn't got much money, but he's a charming fellow.'

Now, which one shall she have? She's free to keep an open mind, isn't she, and why not? But once she has given her 'plight', in the ancient world, among Jews particularly, it was as good as getting married. Once she is betrothed, then to keep an open mind is not a sign of intelligence; it is a sign of moral perversity. 'And I have espoused you to Christ . . . Watch your thoughts, for Christ will expect intellectual loyalty.' Oh you young folks in school, in university, at work, if you are believers, do listen to this. We have to think, don't we? We don't shut our minds. But we must ever remember in our thinking that, first and foremost, we remain loyal to Christ. We must not accept theories that call into question the veracity and

truthfulness of Christ, for we are to be intellectually *loyal* to him. Spiritually, we are to be loyal to him and not compromise the gospel with forms of religion, even though they be in Christendom, that deny the veracity of Scripture and hold only very lightly, if at all, to the deity of the Lord Jesus.

### *The woman in Revelation 18*

I said I believed that the other woman in chapter 18 was, so to speak, another woman, or at least a different side to the same thing. I can briefly tell you what I mean. I think that, whereas in Revelation 17 Babylon represents (that is, she is a figure of) idolatrous religion, I think that the woman in Revelation 18 stands as a figure and symbol for godless commerce.

Personally I'm inclined to take literally the description that is given of her and her wealth. It is done in terms that in the Old Testament are applied to the king of Tyre, whose great trading nation sailed the seas and brought wealth, business and commerce to the nations all around (Ezek 28). He brought them the beautiful things of life, and persuaded Africans they really needed Greek red figure vases and all that kind of thing, when they were content with clay pots. The Tyrians came along and advertised their wares, and all the finery and the clothes and the cinnamon and the sandalwood. It was marvellous (an early Marks & Spencer, if not Harrods) and persuaded everybody they needed these luxuries.

You say, 'Well, what's wrong with that, then? Isn't that nice?'

Yes, and I love it. I love the colours! I love art and all of the marvellous things! I love how beautiful our homes look compared with what they looked when I was a boy in my toddler stage.

'Well, what's wrong with it then?'

Well, in itself nothing, but it has a tremendous danger, doesn't it? There will be more people in hell because of lovely things than because of nasty things. When Satan first tempted our forebears to fall, it was not by something crude and ugly.

He said, 'Look at that tree; isn't it lovely to look at? It's aesthetically beautiful. And it's good for food: physically satisfying. And it's desirable to make you wise: intellectually stimulating. Go on, woman. That's life, my dear!'

She said, 'But what about the word of God?'

'Oh, God's word, people don't believe that nowadays! That's old-fashioned stuff. You've got to move with the times! Look at these beautiful things. Take them!'

And instead of those beautiful things bringing her heart nearer to God, they resulted in the disaster that the human heart was taken from God.

It's a danger still, my brothers, my sisters. It's easier to have lived under Communism in an impoverished state and have nothing but Scripture, and scarce enough to eat. That isn't such a big danger as having a surplus of things. If we're not careful, that takes our heart from the Lord and devours so much of our time that we have little time for his word or his work.

We need to listen to our dear brother John: 'My little children,' he says, 'love not the world, neither the things that are in the world, for the lust of the eye, and the lust of the flesh . . .'. The love of these things has grown to be inordinate now. In themselves they are beautiful but now love of them has got out of hand and become like a cancerous growth.



‘and the pride of life . . .’ It’s keeping up with the Jones, beating the next door neighbours, with all the luxuries we have that are little by little taking our hearts and energies and time from the Lord. If that should ever happen to us, then we should need to listen to John. ‘Love not the world’ like that, in spite of its attractiveness, ‘for if any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him’ (see 1 John 2:15–17).

We are to love him, and if our hearts are right with him then he will give us all things richly to enjoy. But if we make life’s first love to be things, wealth, beauty, and do it at the cost of developing fellowship with God, what a disaster it could eventually be.

We are waiting for the Lord to come, aren’t we? We are longing to see him. Oh, thank him for every good and perfect gift he gives—more than we need—and he gives abundantly, and they are good and perfect gifts! But God keep our hearts from being taken from him and showing him disloyalty, so that our love may burn ever the more brightly, and we may follow the Lamb with all the energy and time that we can give.

So shall the King greatly desire our beauty and, when he comes, we shall rise to meet him, not only with joy, but with a character, a garment, cleansed by the blood of Christ, yes, but into which, by his grace, by our patient work, we have put in the embroidery of the righteous acts of the saints for his eternal pleasure.

## Heaven Opened

### *Section Six—Revelation 19:11–22:21*

#### **Introduction**

It has been for me nothing but a pleasure and a stimulus to be with you here on these occasions. And I thank you of this local church, and all who have come, for the joy it has been to share with one another the wonderful and the true sayings of God. Thank you all for the way you have worked so hard and so long on each occasion.

One little word of explanation. If you have found the seat very hard, that is because of the law of gravity that pulls people down upon their seats if they keep sitting too long. I am not to be held responsible for the law of gravity, but thank you for the way you have worked hard and given me the impression that you have been caught up, as I have been, with the wonderful words of God. The Lord will certainly reward you for the time and the energy that you have invested in the study of his word. It is an invariable law of the kingdom of God that whatever we sow, we reap. If we sow to the flesh, of course, we of the flesh reap corruption, but if we sow to the Spirit, then we shall of the Spirit reap everlasting life (Gal 6:7–8).

And now, let us speak to God in prayer.

And now, Father, we come to thee in the name of the Lord Jesus, with happy expectation in our hearts, for tonight, through thy word, the blessed Lord will talk to us of the glorious consummation, and the hope that we have set before us—when thou shalt bring all thy wonderful plans for this earth, and for the whole of creation, and all the great projects of thy redemption in Christ Jesus, to their great fulfilment.

This present world has been marvellous in our eyes—broken, scarred, cursed by sin, and yet in it we have seen the wonders of thy handiwork, and have often perceived what it might be, had it never been spoiled by human waywardness and rebellion. But Lord, thy word shall tell us tonight of things far more wonderful still, when this sorry world is done, and there dawns the new heaven, and the new earth. As we hear it, we bless thee for all the lovely, bright, brilliant metaphors that the Lord Jesus shall use to convey to our hearts, minds and imaginations the glories that then we shall experience.

Only, we pray once more, that thou wilt give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of thee, that tonight we may catch a deeper

understanding and a fuller glimpse of the hope of thy calling, and what is the glory of the riches of thine inheritance in the saints. And what it shall be to participate in that inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.

Help us, Lord, we do beseech thee now, for this present world is so much with us in the busyness of each day, and we come with tired minds, physically, at the day's end. We pray the strengthening of thy Holy Spirit. And above all, Lord, let it not appear to us as mere escapism. Impress upon our hearts that these are the true sayings of God, guaranteed by thy dear Son, and given us by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit. Cause our hearts to understand, we pray, and to thee we shall give the praise, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

So, let us begin our study this evening by reading some passages from the end chapters of the book of the Revelation. And we shall begin in chapter 19 and verse 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. 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. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 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 wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. (vv. 11–16 ESV)

And then, in chapter 21, let's read the first eight verses:

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. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.' 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.' 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. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 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 sulfur, which is the second death. (vv. 1–8 ESV)

And finally, from chapter 22, beginning at verse 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. 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. 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, 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. He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen. (vv. 16–21 ESV)

## **The major theme of Section Six**

Our topic tonight is the sixth and final major section of the book of the Revelation. As with all the other sections of this book, so now this evening, we shall not be able to attend to all the many details that are presented to us in this particular part of the Revelation. We must do what we have elsewhere done; we must consider the major themes of this particular part of the book. And there is no doubt what the major theme is going to be. One could tell it from the number of verses that are devoted to that major theme, compared with the number of verses that are given to other topics. The major theme of this part of the book is, appropriately enough, the end of this present world and the dawning of the new heavens and the new earth, and the vision of the holy city—the new Jerusalem—coming down from God from heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, to function eternally in its two capacities. It will function as a tabernacle for God Almighty, in which he may dwell inside his creation, and amongst his redeemed creatures, but also, so we shall find presently, as the bride and wife of the Lamb.

### **New heavens and new earth**

When we read of the holy city being the wife and bride of the Lamb, it sounds at first perhaps a little bit odd. How can a city be a bride? That is a mystery we shall have to contemplate presently. But the major point is to notice that while this great company of the redeemed is likened to a bride, the wife of the Lamb, it is not so much the romance of that great story that we shall be considering. Though what a colossal romance that is! And with what marvellous condescension to our earthly experience does God come, when he spells out the great story of salvation and redemption as the love of a bridegroom seeking his bride, and eventually the joy of his nuptials, when he turns the bride into his wife and reigns with her for ever and ever! But that said, when we read of the city and the people who form it as the bride and wife of the Lamb, we shall be thinking of the great eternal city as the administrative headquarters of the universe that is to be. And we shall be thinking of it as the bride and wife of the Lamb—the queen to the Lamb who shall be the everlasting king—seated with him on his throne and reigning with him and administering the glorious new heavens and earth for all eternity.

## The lake of fire

As we concentrate on those things, we cannot altogether forget that according to this part of Scripture there is an alternative eternity. For the redeemed there is this glorious tabernacle of God; there is this city and people described as the wife of the Lamb. Not all shall be there. Scripture is plain everywhere that there is an alternative for those who, in carelessness or deliberateness, choose it. You may care to look at the sheet that has been given you, that forms a small summary of the contents of this section, and you will see the repeated theme throughout.<sup>28</sup> There is an alternative to heaven.

Look at the First Trilogy, if you will, and the item 3: *the beast and the false prophet are cast into the lake of fire* (19:11–21). And look at the Second Trilogy and part 3: after the thousand years of our Lord's millennial reign will come the final rebellion, the result of which is that fire comes down from heaven and destroys them. And *Satan*, who led the rebellion, *is cast into the lake of fire* (20:1–10). The Third Trilogy begins with the new heavens and earth, and tells how they come to be. First comes the great assize, as the Saviour, now become judge, mounts the great white throne, and before the face of that throne heaven and earth flee away (1.a.). At that judgment, *if any is not found written in the Book of Life, he or she is cast into the lake of fire* (20:11–15).

Look at what is numbered 2.c. God pronounces he who overcomes shall inherit all these wonderful things. But all the unbelieving and the fearful and the murderers and all liars, their part, 'their portion is . . .' for they shall have a portion, they shall have an experience, but *their portion is in the lake of fire* (21:5–8).

And 3.d. reminds us that there shall not enter into the glorious eternal city of the redeemed anyone who makes a lie, nothing that defiles shall enter there (21:9–22:5). Recurring to that same thought, at point 3.g. it says, 'blessed are they who enter the eternal city, for outside is sorry and sad company, and all the perversions that earth has ever known, and everyone who loves and makes a lie' (22:10–15).

### *The fruit of the lie*

You see, dear friends, to live in sin and rebellion is to live a lie. The truth about life, the reality about life, is that it comes from God. The truth of a daisy, if you want it, is not ultimately in its chemical constituents, nor in its atomic structure. The truth of a daisy, ultimately, is this: that God made it, and God made it for his pleasure and for our enjoyment. Though the daisy is but a passing thing, it is one of those many luxuries that God has heaped and heaped and heaped upon us—telling out his heart of love, his joy in his creation, his desire to fill us with good things and delight! That is the truth about it. In its humble way, that lowly flower is pointing us beyond itself to its designer and creator. The hand that made it is the hand outstretched to us, leading us, if we will, through his creation, through his redemption, to those glorious eternal realities and an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that does not fade away (1 Pet 1:3–4). But to live without that truth, to live as if there were no God, is to live an unreality. It isn't true. It is to live a lie. What shall their portion be who choose so to live, and do so unrepentantly, neglecting God their Creator, and Christ, their would-be Redeemer?

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<sup>28</sup> See the notes on [Section Six](#) in the Appendix.

It shall be to find the final results, the final harvest, of what it means to have lived a lie. Their portion shall be in the lake of fire. That is no temporary thing. It will be existence still.

### *Degrees of punishment*

Not all who shall be there shall suffer the same sentence. For we are told that as the dead appear at the great white throne to be judged, they are judged according to their works. All who reject the Saviour shall be there, but not all shall suffer the same *sentence* (20:11–15). Our Lord himself says it shall be ‘more tolerable’ for some than for others (e.g. Matt 10:14–15).

The refined lady who yet would not repent or humble herself to confess herself to be a sinner deserving God’s wrath, and therefore would not receive the Saviour, shall certainly not suffer the same rigour as Adolf Hitler and others. But while all in the lake of fire shall not suffer exactly the same amount or rigour, all whose names are not found written in the Book of Life shall be cast into the lake of fire.

These are the solemn but true words of God. We would gladly shut our eyes to them and wish it were not so, but in the end, God has to talk to us bluntly and straightly. We need to be saved! That cross, staked into our planet Earth, carrying God’s incarnate Son, was not a game, and not unnecessary. Such a costly redemption was given by God because the alternative is beyond all measurement of suffering. Let us therefore take these things seriously and make sure that when that day comes, our name is found written in the book of life.

## **The order of final events**

For a while now we must notice what are those events, those steps in the chain of ultimate history, that shall lead to the coming from heaven of that glorious New Jerusalem, which is both the tabernacle for God and also the bride and wife of the Lamb.

### **The King rides out**

We begin Section Six at chapter 19, verse 11. Like the four preceding sections of the book, this too begins with heaven opened: ‘And I saw the heaven opened . . .’. But now the time for the initial and preparatory judgments is over. Now comes the great day of God. And as heaven opens, John sees a white horse: ‘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’ (v. 11). Here in the vision and in symbolic language John sees what we commonly call ‘the second coming of Christ’, in power and great glory, to execute the judgment and the wrath of God upon a sinful and unrepentant world.

In the vision he comes on a horse. When he came to Jerusalem in the days of his flesh to claim kingship, he came, as it is said, ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, lowly and meek, and riding on the colt, the foal of a donkey’ (see Zech 9:9; John 12:15). Thus did he come in the days of his humility and his humiliation. But one day he shall come *again*. It shall be no little donkey he rides on. John sees him coming on a great white horse—the imperial vehicle! He comes as the King of kings! It is written on his thigh. He comes with the armies of heaven following. He comes to execute the wrath of almighty God. He ‘treads the wine press’, it says, ‘of the wrath of almighty God’ (vv. 14–16). That is not a reference to Calvary, though

sometimes one hears the verse so cited. It is based on the prophecy of Isaiah 63, where it is explicitly said that the treading of the wine press of the wrath of God is not our Lord's experience at Calvary; it is his action when he comes to execute the wrath of God (v. 3), and thus it is on this occasion.

The judgment is especially directed, so we are told in verse 19, against the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies who are confederate with the beast, and all the beast's followers. You will remember from the former studies exactly who that is. For the Bible predicts that this age, when it comes to its end, will see the rise of a world imperial dictator, whose dominions shall be virtually, but not completely, universal. Then the harvest of atheism will be reaped. This imperial ruler shall at first compromise with religion, so long as it is seen to him that religion is helpful to him to get his control over the masses. But once he has got that control, he shall destroy religion, root and branch, and come out in his true colours and deny there is a God out there in heaven. He will defy any supernatural power, and claim divine worship for man: the supreme pinnacle, calling on all his fellow men that are his subjects to bow down and worship him as though he were God, and to take his mark on their hand. What a terrible thing it will be. The inspired writer tells us what the shame of it is. 'This is the number of his name: 666' (see 13:18). Whatever name you take that to be, the inspired seer says, 'It is the name of a man—a human being!' What colossal disgrace, what denigration, what humiliation of mankind! Mankind shall bow to a mere man, and take his mark and follow him and obey him as though he were God. That is such a perversion of things that it is understandable that when our blessed Lord comes again, the wrath of God shall be particularly directed to that great world leader, and his minister of propaganda, and all those infatuated political leaders that have followed him and joined up with his scheme, and all his followers.

This vision agrees with the plain, straightforward words of 2 Thessalonians 2 that talks about the great apostasy that is going to happen. This is apostasy in the sense that one day this world, as a whole, will turn away from any belief in God, and at that time the man of sin shall be revealed. Paul says, this is:

he that opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits in the temple of God, setting himself forth as God. Do you not remember when I was yet with you, I told you these things? . . . For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, only there is one that restrains now until he be taken out of the way. And then shall be revealed that lawless one whom the Lord Jesus shall slay with the breath of his mouth, and bring to naught by the manifestation of his coming; even he, whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceit of unrighteousness for them that are perishing; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God sends them a working of error, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (vv. 4–12)

You will notice how carefully it is phrased when it describes how the wrath of God descends upon this imposter, the one that the Revelation calls the beast, and all his confederates. It is said that, as he is spreading his lie, God shall give certain people 'a strong

delusion that they believe the lie'. Which people are those? They are carefully delineated. It is those who would not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. Of course, that implies that they had heard the truth, and knew what it was, but refused to accept it, and would not receive the love of the truth.

And you say, 'God's punishment is terribly severe, isn't it? These are awful words.'

Well, yes, severe, but note what it means. They would not receive 'the truth'. What would you have God do to people who won't have the truth? The Bible says, he shall say, 'Well, have it your way then. If you won't have the truth, there is only one alternative: have the lie.' How could one find fault with God for doing that? In the end he gives people their own choice.

## The Millennium

With that, therefore, we are told that the beast and the false prophet are taken and consigned to the lake of fire, and that's the end of their deception. Then we learn, in 20:1-6, that what will follow the coming of our Lord Jesus in judgment is what is known as the millennial reign of our Lord Jesus. Verses 1-3 tell us that, at that time, Satan shall be taken and put into the abyss and bound there, so that he can no longer deceive the nations. He will be cast into this prison for a thousand years, and then after that, he shall be released for a little time.

We are thinking then of a thousand years, after the second coming of Christ. And during that period of a thousand years, we read in verse 4:

I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgement was given unto them. And I saw the souls of them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, and for the word of God, and such as worshipped not the beast, neither his image, and received not the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand. And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead lived not until the thousand years should be finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he that has part in the first resurrection: over these the second death has no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years. (vv. 4-6)

### *Amillennialism*

You might have thought that the words are so explicit and so clear that there could not possibly be any doubt as to their interpretation. It is said that Satan is bound for a thousand years in the abyss, so that he should no longer go on deceiving. But after the thousand years, he should be set loose, and once more shall deceive the nations for a little time. That sounds clear enough. But no, many good and godly Christian men and women have found themselves unable to accept what these verses appear to say literally. They feel that when the Lord Jesus comes, then he shall execute the judgments of God. That will be the end of the world, and straightaway the heavens and the earth will flee away, and people shall be stood before the great white throne. Eternity will have begun. They cannot bring themselves to believe that when the Lord Jesus comes, he shall execute the judgments of God on those that are living, and then he shall set up his kingdom and reign for a thousand years.

Those who hold this view are given the label *amillennialists*: they hold there will be no literal millennium to come. We must not treat them as enemies; many of them are lovely



people of God who have honestly come to these conclusions. On the other hand, their view involves them in some things that are very difficult to explain.

It is said here that Satan is bound so that he shouldn't deceive the nations for this thousand years. Our dear friends, the amillennialists, say that these thousand years began, at least, with the cross of Christ and his resurrection, and somehow the cross of Christ bound Satan so that he shouldn't deceive people.

That's difficult, isn't it? I don't know what your experience is; I could tell you what mine is. But then, Scripture is more clear and authoritative. For the apostles certainly didn't believe that Satan was bound. They talk about Satan 'walking around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour' (1 Pet 5:8). They say openly that 'the god of this world blinds the minds of them that believe not, lest the light of the gospel should shine in to them' (2 Cor 4:4). It's very difficult to think that the millennium is now. And there is the sequence of the narrative. The beast and the false prophet were inspired by Satan—that unholy trinity—and they deceived the people. And here comes the Lord Jesus, and he takes the beast, and he takes the false prophet, and puts them in the lake of fire. Now they don't deceive anymore. And he takes Satan, who was behind the beast and the false prophet in their deception, and he gets hold of him and puts him in the abyss so that he should no longer deceive (Rev 20:1–3). How can those verses mean that really he is still able to deceive? That is to empty words of their meaning.

People say, 'That thousand years is only figurative.'

Well, suppose it is. It is a figure for a very long time, and the time has a beginning and an end. It has a before and an after. What happened before? Well, the beast and Satan deceived people. That's what happened before. But in the middle, they won't deceive. And at the end of it? Satan will again be allowed to deceive.

So, I shall take it as read, for time's sake, that the arguments for amillennialism are not cogent. If I speak to any of you here who are amillennialists, count me still a brother in Christ and not a heretic. And if you would like to enquire further what my reasons are, and why I don't accept what to you seem to take to be cogent proofs, well then we can have a helpful conversation together. For I hasten on.

## **The final judgment**

At the end of the millennium there shall come the final rebellion. That shall be put an end to, not by the coming of Christ (there is not another coming), but by fire coming down from heaven and destroying the enemies of God who then shall come up at the final judgment. And with that, says John, 'I saw a great white throne.' This is the final judgment. The present heavens and earth flee away, and there is no place found for them, and the dead, small and great, stand before that throne of judgment to hear the verdict and to hear the sentence (20:11–15).

## The eternal city

With that, we come to the main topic. John says, 'I saw the new heavens and the new earth, for the former ones are passed away . . . And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice saying, "The tabernacle of God is with men"' (21:1–3). He subsequently was taken to see the city, which is said to be the bride and wife of the Lamb. So we think now of the New Jerusalem that shall be. It is the pride and joy of God, the great goal for which he made the heavens and the earth, the great goal of redemption, and it shall come one day.

### What the city is

What shall it be? A number of questions come to people's minds, do they not? Some people say, 'This glorious city that is here described with streets of gold and gates of pearls, is it a place, or is it a people?' Can we imagine it as a real place with enormous dimensions in miles as to its height and circumference, and streets of gold and pearly gates and all those things? Is it really a place, or are these only symbols for spiritual realities?'

Being greedy, my answer to that is: it's neither one nor the other, but both! Why shouldn't it be both? It's going to be a place, of course it is.

You say, 'How do you know that?'

Well, because of this basic fact. When our Lord Jesus rose from the dead, he had a body, didn't he? The disciples at first thought he was a spirit, and they were afraid. They thought he was a disembodied spirit. 'No,' said the Lord Jesus, 'handle me and see. It is I, myself' (Luke 24:39). He had a body of flesh and bone, a real body. It is a spiritual body. That is, its energy is spiritual, but it is certainly real material. He ascended to heaven with a real body, and we are told that when our full redemption comes, we shall have bodies like the Lord Jesus, in all things, conformed to him (Phil 3:21). Real bodies! We know that if this earthly tabernacle, this tent—this collapsible affair that encloses the real me, and is obviously but temporary, and is getting a bit shaky now—if this *tent* were dissolved, we have a *building*: a real, eternal, body. The implication of that is the fact that bodies have what the philosophers call 'extension': bodies take up space. I don't know that spirits take up any space. Who knows what spirits need? We will need a *place*. This is going to be real.

### *The meaning in metaphors*

Of course, the city is described to us in metaphors. Now, we must be careful how we interpret all these metaphors of golden streets and other things. The danger is that perceiving that they are metaphors, we shall decide that these metaphors don't represent *real* things. We say we shall not take them 'literally', and then confuse ourselves. Because we don't take them literally, we think they're not real. I beg of you to make a distinction between things that are *not literal* but are *real*.

You say, 'What do you mean?'

Well, here's a mother and she's got a four-year-old, and he's given to gulping down his food and getting a stomach ache, and mother is in process of telling the infant why he shouldn't gobble the food down. And she says, 'When you begin to eat, there are little

messengers in your mouth, and they go running down your throat, right down to your tummy. And they say to the tummy, 'Get ready, there's some beautiful food coming!' And the tummy gets ready to digest the food that's coming down. But if you eat it too quickly, these little messengers don't have the time, and the tummy doesn't have the time, to get ready. And so, the food arrives, and you get a stomach ache.'

Now, that's mum talking to a four-year-old.

You say, 'What is all this she's talking about, these messengers? Are they real messengers?'

Well, perhaps the boy thinks they are. He knows messengers. There's the postman that comes to the door, and he thinks of him as a messenger. So he thinks there's somehow a little postman going down his gullet, down to his tummy, and making things ready for the food coming!

You say, 'No, my boy, you mustn't take it literally. They're not . . .'

Well now it's difficult, isn't it? They are not messengers like the postman, for instance, no.

So, you say, 'They're not real, then.'

They are real! Ask any chemist you like! They are bits and pieces of chemistry that the body starts producing when we see food. Automatically the chemical messengers, as the chemists would call them, go down to the tummy to prepare it. They are real enough, and mum has used a metaphor to describe them because it's no good talking to a four-year-old using chemical terms as long as a yard. So she uses a metaphor; but it's real. If the boy does believe that there are messengers, then he's not believing something fanciful; they're real. And if God talks to us of the heavenly city in metaphors, that doesn't mean it's not real. We may not have to take them all *literally*, but they are *real*, and the reality will exceed the metaphor in its wonder!

## The inhabitants of the city

*Who will be in it?*

You say, 'This city that is the tabernacle of God and the bride of the Lamb, who is in it?'

Some would say to us that the city is the Lamb's wife and bride and therefore is simply the church. But that can't be so, can it? Let's think about how its main features are talked about. Says John, 'The city had twelve foundations, and on the foundations were the names of the apostles of the Lamb' (21:14). So it had foundations. All right, now listen to what the Bible says about Abraham in Hebrews chapter 11. He was content to remain a pilgrim on earth and not to go back to where he came from. He was a pilgrim all his life, not having a settled home, 'for he looked for the city that has *the* foundations, whose builder and maker is God' (v. 10). Abraham will be there, won't he?

You say, 'Yes, but his will be an earthly portion.'

Who told you *that*? Hebrews 11 says that Abraham could have gone back to the city where he came out from, but he wouldn't. It wasn't that he couldn't, he could have gone back to Ur of Chaldees. He chose to live as a nomad in tents and didn't possess scarce an inch in the land of promise on earth.

'Why not?'

Well, ‘those who say such things’, says Hebrews 11, ‘confess that they are pilgrims and strangers on earth. They are looking for a fatherland—a heavenly fatherland’ (vv. 13–14).

Ah, yes, but the English isn’t quite enough there. The Greek means ‘a fatherland in heaven’. Abraham was looking for ‘a fatherland in heaven’, and we mustn’t demean him to say that he simply was looking for a portion on earth.

Then Paul comes to talking about these things in Galatians 4, doesn’t he? He says, ‘You know, there were these two women. There was Sarah, and there was Hagar. And Sarah was a princess and a free woman, but Hagar was a slave. They each had a child. Sarah had Isaac, and Hagar had Ishmael.’

‘And,’ he says, ‘as you think of the principles on which they lived their lives, you could draw an analogy. Hagar could represent the Jerusalem that now is, because her manner of life and attitude was like the present Jerusalemites who reject the Saviour. And Sarah, what does she represent? Well, she represents the Jerusalem that is above, and is the mother of us all’ (see 4:21–31).

Shall we then say that Sarah shan’t be there? How could you possibly say it? That heavenly city, of which she is a picture, is the mother of all who have trusted the Saviour—of all dispensations. Yes, so all the saints of all the ages will be in that city and, in a sense, form it.

*What will they be like?*

You say, ‘Will all the occupants of that city be exactly alike?’

Not necessarily, because here is a wonderful thing. Hebrews 12 tells us that that city is already in existence. What John saw was a city coming down from heaven; so it was already in existence. And Hebrews 12 tells us we have come, not like Moses to Mount Sinai: to a mountain full of darkness and thunderstorms and lightnings until Moses said, ‘I exceedingly fear and quake . . .’;

But you have come unto Mount Zion, unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the innumerable host of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks of better things than that of Abel’s. (12:18–24)

Oh yes, if we are believers, we have *already* come.

You say, ‘I’m not there yet. I’m in Belfast’

No, you’re not there yet. One day you will be but, by God’s great redemption, we are already members of the city. Do you not remember how the Lord Jesus said to his apostles, ‘Do not rejoice that demons are subject to you but rejoice in this, that your names are enrolled in the citizen lists of heaven’ (Luke 10:20)? And Paul says to his converts, ‘Our citizenship is in heaven’ (Phil 3:20). We belong to the heavenly city already! And we have come to it.

What a delightful group of companies form that great city: angels, the general assembly of the first born, and so forth and so on, and ‘the spirits of just men made perfect’. Oh yes, as the hymn says,

Saviour, if of Zion’s city

I through grace a member am,  
 Let the world deride or pity,  
 I will glory in Thy name.<sup>29</sup>

How could your heart not leap for joy, and you be tempted to say a 'Hallelujah' or two, when we know that, even while we are here on earth we have, in one sense, come already to that city?

*Shall we know each other there?*

Some people ask, 'But when we get to heaven, shall we know each other?'

When people ask me this question I reply: Shall we know ourselves? Will you know you? Do you suppose, when you get to heaven, all memory of earth will be gone and you won't even know who you are?

You say, 'Now, that's not possible, is it?'

You'll know you've been redeemed, won't you? And when the choirs of heaven sing 'unto him that loved us and loosed us from our sins in his blood' (see 1:5), and 'Thou art worthy for thou was slain' (5:9), what will you be a thinking?

Will you be saying, 'I don't know what they're talking about, I don't know what all this slaying is and being redeemed'? No, you won't. You'll say, 'I know exactly what they're talking about!'

And won't your praise be the deeper because you remember that you 'once were a sinner defiled in his sight | Yet arrayed in pure garments in praise you unite'?<sup>30</sup> Oh, you'll know yourself, of course you will! And you'll know the blessed Saviour.

Martha and Mary, who had the Lord Jesus dining at their table in their little home shall know him, the same Jesus, though now glorified. We shall know one another as well.

### **What is said about this city**

Here I must make a little distinction. When the Bible talks about Jerusalem as the city, some people say, 'Now look here, be careful. It is just that. It is a city; it's a place. Don't you go expounding it as though it were symbols and types and shadows and other such things; it's a real thing. There is going to be a real heavenly city.'

Yes, I agree with that. Like C. S. Lewis used to say, 'Heaven will be more real than earth is.' It's earth that's a shadow, you know. The tabernacle that Moses built in the old days was only a shadow of things in the heavens. The *real* thing is heaven. It will be more real than earth. Lewis used to say that, when we walk up the river of heaven, the grass will hurt our feet. That's his way of saying it will be so real and hard.<sup>31</sup>

So, it's a place. But it isn't just a place, is it?

I don't know if it still flutters in the breeze, but for some months or years there used to be a big banner right across the city hall down in the city centre that said, 'BELFAST SAYS NO'. Now, Belfast is a city, so what if I now insist, 'Ah, it's just a city; It's the city that says no.'

<sup>29</sup> John Newton (1725-1807), 'Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken' (1779).

<sup>30</sup> Adapted from Arthur T. Pierson (1837-1911), 'With harps and with viols, there stand a great throng.'

<sup>31</sup> See Lewis' *The Great Divorce*.

What do you mean by city? Is it the bricks and mortar and stones?

'Well, of course not, you say. Now, the word 'city' is being used as the people who live in the city.'

So it is, of course, with this. This will be a place, but it will house a community of the redeemed. And that's very important.

### *The foundations of the city*

We are told two things particularly about the wall of this city. It had foundations, twelve of them, and on them the names of the apostles of the Lamb (v. 14). Then it had twelve gates, and on them the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (v. 12).

Now, I can't forget the dear expositors that tell me not to be fanciful.

'You must take it literally as foundations.'

Well, I do. But I observe this business of writing names on things. You know, you can see that in Belfast; it's the 'Craigavon Bridge' or something like it. And we give names to buildings, and names to houses, and we add names to streets: Longfellow Street, Shakespeare Street, Shelley Street (it's all the poets). And this city we read of has foundations, but why do you think they put the names of the apostles of the Lamb on the foundations? Foundations are rather low, aren't they?

Well, you say, 'Don't be silly. Listen to what the Scripture says. The dwelling place of God is built upon "the foundations of the apostles and prophets"' (see Eph 2:19–20).

Yes, you've got it. They record that fact on the literal foundations because the whole community, in the sense of people, is built on the foundation of the apostles of the Lamb. The Old Testament looked forward to the coming of the Lamb of God (listen to John the Baptist). The apostles were the authorized representatives of the Lamb, and they preached. They are the foundation, not only of the literal city, but also of the foundation of the community that lives there.

I don't wonder that Abraham looked for 'the city that has the foundations'. Do you? He had come from wonderful, brilliant cities of the early civilisations in the Middle East: Ur of Chaldees, Nineveh and all those places. He left it all. They were very big and brilliant cities — as buildings, but the people that lived there lived life upon inadequate foundations.

What is the foundation of the community of God that shall inhabit the New Jerusalem? The foundation is the same as Abraham was given to see, and the Apostle Paul reiterates it in the New Testament; it is justification by faith. Ask Sarah and Abraham. They'll tell you a lesson or two about that, which Paul repeats as a Christian apostle: justification by faith, followed eventually by justification by works.<sup>32</sup> It is on that great foundation that a community shall be built. We have to ask ourselves at this moment: if that is the foundation, are we standing on it?

### *The gates of the city*

Then there were twelve gates round the city. You say, 'They are the way in, and the way out.'

And what else? And why do they have the names of the children of Israel on the gates? Well, we can begin to think about that. Gates in the ancient world were places you went in

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<sup>32</sup> See Gen 15, Rom 4, Jas 2. For a fuller treatment of the doctrine of justification see Ch. 5 in *Key Bible Concepts*.

and you came out of a city, but they were also the place where the administration of the city happened. The elders sat in the gate. There were great towers with seats all the way round the inside of the gate.

It was Jacob that had a vision of the gate of heaven, when he lay down to sleep and he saw a staircase from earth to heaven, and he saw the angels going up and coming down, and God was standing by the side of the ladder, leaning over Jacob. When he woke up out of sleep, he said, 'How awesome is this place, God is in this place, and I didn't realize it. This is the house of God. This is the very gate of heaven' (Gen 28:10-16). He wasn't at that moment thinking of entering heaven; he was observing that this was the gate of heaven, in a sense, the centre of God's administration. Look at all those angels going out from God's presence and coming back again. This was a heavenly civil service, of course, going to do God's will and running the place. 'A very gate of heaven!' says Jacob.

Then he got married. He had two wives, and two others, and they had children. It was their names that one day will be on the gates of the heavenly city. And if the gates represent the administration of heaven, it's interesting that the names of those boys will be on the gates, isn't it? For those names are not meaningless. Read Genesis and discover where those names came from, as these good women were living their lives. That would have been tough I should think, living with Jacob (I'll ask them when I get home to heaven if I get the chance: what was it like living with Jacob?). In their life with Jacob, and when it came to their children, bearing them and bringing them up with all the rivalries in the family, they made it a matter of prayer and knew what it was for God to answer their prayers. When God answered their prayers, they recorded the fact in the names they gave their boys. Experience of God is built into those very names! And the names shall stand on the gates, witness to God's people's experience of God that has fitted them to be part of the eternal administration of the city.

Marvellous, isn't it? It conveys a lesson for us too. We are saved because we have been justified by faith, and are built on the foundation of the great heavenly community, as citizens of that great and glorious place. It is more than that. We are called upon to reign with Christ. 'They shall reign eternally,' says the detail of the description (22:5). And now is the time in which we prepare, is it not? Believing in that eternal city, and that eternal occupation, we seek to bring the details of life to God, and to submit our lives that he may put us through his education and, by life's day to day experience, bring us into fellowship with him and teach us our lessons and form our characters. So that, when the day dawns, we may find that we are not merely saved, but ready to share the government with Christ.

It is marvellous. And oh, how I would like to talk about all those other things, but I mustn't, else perhaps it would require eternity, and we are meant still to be in time. But, you see, the gates are made of one solid pearl. And there is a street of gold. Then John says, 'I didn't see any temple in it, for the Lord God is the temple' (21:22). The whole city is a tabernacle; it doesn't require any temple. It won't have any inner place, shut off by a veil. The whole thing is the dwelling place of God. Step inside that gate and you are in the immediate presence of the Lord! 'What will it be to dwell above | And with the Lord of glory reign?'<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Joseph Swain (1761-1796), 'What Will It Be To Dwell Above.'

What shall it be when the Lord comes and takes us to the Father's home, and we step inside the city and know ourselves to be in the immediate presence of God? There is no curse, no crying, no night, no death, but everlasting delight; and supremely this: 'They shall see his face,' says Scripture, 'and they shall serve him without pause' (22:3-5).



## The Structure of the Book of the Revelation

1. 1:1–3:22	2. 4:1–7:17	3. 8:1–11:18	4. 11:19–15:4	5. 15:5–19:10	6. 19:11–22:21
Title: Authorship: Blessing on reader and hearer (1:1–3)	Opened: Door in heaven	Opened: Seventh seal: Silence in heaven	Opened: Temple of God in heaven	Opened: Temple of tabernacle of testimony in heaven	Opened: Heaven
	THE THRONE and THE TWENTY-FOUR THRONES	BIG ALTAR and GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE	ARK OF GOD'S COVENANT	SEVEN ANGELS and SEVEN BOWLS: SMOKE FROM GLORY OF GOD	WHITE HORSE RIDDEN BY THE FAITHFUL AND TRUE
<u>Chapter 1</u> <i>Vision of the Son of Man</i> His face as the sun; seven stars in his hand; in the midst of SEVEN GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS	<u>Chapter 4</u> The Creator's throne described  <u>Chapter 5</u> The Lamb takes a book from the hand of him who sits on the throne  <u>Chapter 6</u> The Lamb opens six of the seals of the book  <u>Chapter 7</u> A. SEALING OF 144,000 of SONS OF ISRAEL B. UNCOUNTABLE NUMBER OF THE SAVED OF ALL NATIONS	<u>Chapters 8 and 9</u> Much incense is added to the prayers of the saints Six trumpets  <u>Chapter 10:1–11:14</u> A. A STRONG ANGEL PLANTS ONE FOOT ON SEA AND ONE ON THE EARTH AND SWEARS OATH B. PROPHECYING OF THE TWO WITNESSES  <u>Chapter 11:15</u> Seventh trumpet THE KINGDOM OF THE WORLD BECOMES THE KINGDOM OF OUR LORD AND OF HIS CHRIST	<u>Chapter 12</u> <i>Vision of a woman</i> Arrayed with sun, moon under her feet, crown of twelve stars THE SERPENT AND THE MAN CHILD  <u>Chapter 13</u> A. RISE OF FIRST BEAST B. RISE OF SECOND BEAST  <u>Chapter 14:1–15:1</u> 1. THE LAMB ON MOUNT ZION with 144,000 of REDEEMED: the FIRSTFRUITS OF EARTH 2. THE HARVESTS OF THE EARTH	<u>Chapter 16</u> Seven angels pour out their bowls  <u>Chapter 17</u> THE JUDGMENT OF BABYLON Destroyed by the beast on which she rides  <u>Chapter 18</u> THE FALL OF BABYLON THE GREAT CITY	<u>Chapter 19:11–20:15</u> 1. The defeat of the beast and false prophet 2. The imprisonments of Satan 3. The 1000 years' reign 4. The final revolt 5. The great white throne and the final judgment  <u>Chapter 21:1–22:7</u> NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH: NEW JUDGMENT: THE BRIDE AND WIFE OF THE LAMB  Final Comment: 22:8–17: by the angel and by Jesus
	<u>Comment:</u> (7:13–17) —by one of the twenty-four elders	<u>Comment:</u> (11:16–18) —by the twenty-four elders	<u>Song:</u> (15:2–4) —by the victors over the beast	<u>Response:</u> (19:1–10) —by the great multitude	Epilogue: 22:18–21: Warning against tampering with the book

## Section One

Judgment begins at the house of God. Christ visits, praises, criticizes, admonishes  
and if need be chastises, rallies and encourages his churches.

### **A. The Nature and Contents of the Book** **1:1–3**

1. A revelation of which Christ is both author and central theme, about things that must soon take place.
2. Conveyed by Christ's angel to John who testifies to everything he saw, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.
3. To reap its blessing the prophecy must not only be read and heard, but kept.

### **B. Greetings, and Grace from the Holy Trinity** **1:4–8**

1.
  - a. From him who is and was and is to come.
  - b. From the seven spirits before his throne.
  - c. From Jesus Christ (1) the faithful witness, (2) firstborn of the dead, (3) ruler of the kings of the earth.
2. Ascription of glory and dominion to Christ in light of:
  - a. His love and redemption.
  - b. What he has made of us.
  - c. His coming manifestation.
3. Declaration by the Lord God:
  - a. The Alpha and the Omega.
  - b. Who is, and who was and who is to come.
  - c. The Almighty.

### **C. The Son of Man Amidst the Golden Lampstands** **1:9–20**

1. Christ as judge: his official robe; the sword coming out of his mouth.
2. His purity and his power.
3. Christ strengthens John to write: 'I am the living one, became dead, am alive, have the keys of Death and Hades'.
4. The scope of the writing: the things you saw, the things that are, the things that shall be after these.
5. The nature and significance of the lampstands and stars.

### **D. Christ's Appraisal of His Churches** **2:1–3:22**

- |                 |   |                          |
|-----------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1. Ephesus      | I know your works . . . BUT . . . overcome . . . tree of life   | cf. 22:2                 |
| 2. Smyrna       | I know your tribulation . . . FEAR NOT . . . overcome . . . crown of life . . .<br>not hurt by the second death   | cf. 20:14                |
| 3. Pergamum     | I know your dwelling-place . . . BUT . . . overcome . . . hidden manna . . .<br>white stone . . . secret name     |                          |
| 4. Thyatira     | I know your works . . . BUT . . . overcome . . . authority over nations . . .<br>rule with rod of iron            | cf. 12:5;<br>19:15; 20:6 |
| 5. Sardis       | I know your works . . . AND . . . overcome . . . will not blot name out of<br>Book of Life                        | cf. 20:15;<br>21:27      |
| 6. Philadelphia | I know your works . . . BEHOLD . . . overcome . . . will write on him name<br>of God, name of city, new Jerusalem | cf. 22:4                 |
| 7. Laodicea     | I know your works . . . BECAUSE . . . overcome . . . sit down with me on<br>my throne . . . my Father's throne    | cf. 22:1, 3              |

**For the idea of 'overcoming' see 21:7**

## Old Testament Allusions and Features of the Seven Churches

### Old Testament Allusions

1. Ephesus	<i>I will remove your lampstand out of its place . . . To him who overcomes I will give to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God (cf. Gen 3).</i>
2. Smyrna	<i>Fear not what you are about to suffer. Behold the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested, and you shall have affliction ten days (cf. the prophecy of Israel's enslavement in Egypt: Your seed will be strangers in a country not their own and be enslaved; and they shall afflict them four hundred years. Gen 15:13).</i>
3. Pergamum	<i>You have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel (cf. Num 22–24).</i>
4. Thyatira	<i>You allow that woman Jezebel, who says that she is a prophetess, and teaches and seduces my servants (cf. 1 Kgs 16:29–31; 2 Kgs 9).</i>
5. Sardis	<i>I will not blot his name out of the Book of Life; cf. And the Lord had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, but he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam (II) (2 Kgs 14:27).</i>
6. Philadelphia	<i>He who has the key of David, who opens and none shall shut, and shuts and none shall open; cf. a prophecy originally spoken of Eliakim, royal steward in the reign of Hezekiah (Isa 22:22).</i>
7. Laodicea	<i>I will spew you out of my mouth; cf. the prophecy of the exile . . . lest the land spew you out also . . . as it spewed out the nation that was before you (Lev 18:28).</i>

### Features of the Seven Churches

1. Ephesus	Commended for their hate: blamed for letting go ( <i>aphekes</i> ) of their first love.
2. Smyrna	<i>Them that say they are Jews and they are not but are a synagogue of Satan . . . behold the devil is about to cast some of you into prison . . .</i>
3. Pergamum	<i>You hold fast my name and did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas . . . who was killed among you . . .</i>
4. Thyatira	Commended for their love: blamed for letting ( <i>apheis</i> ) the woman Jezebel teach and seduce my servants to commit fornication.
5. Sardis	<i>You have a name that you live, and you are dead.</i>
6. Philadelphia	<i>I have set before you a door opened, which none can shut . . . Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and they are not . . . to come and fall before your feet . . .</i>
7. Laodicea	Blamed for being neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. <i>As many as I love I reprove and chasten.</i>

## Section Two

The throne of God and the worthiness of God and of the Lamb to receive the worship  
and service of God's whole creation.

### **A. Description of the Throne**

**4:1-11**

1. Its occupant.
2. The rainbow *round* the throne: and *round* the throne twenty-four thrones: also occupied.
3. *Out of* the throne lightnings, voices, thunders.
4. Seven burning torches *before* the throne: and *before* the throne a sea of glass.
5. *In the midst and round* the throne four living creatures.
6. The grounds of God's worthiness to be worshipped: he is the Creator: his creatorial purpose.

### **B. The Worthiness of the Lamb to Execute Judgment**

**5:1-14**

1. The LION has overcome: by being The SLAIN LAMB with seven horns and seven eyes.
2. The new song: the prayers of the saints offered by the elders: the Lamb is worthy because:
  - a. He has purchased men for God with his blood;
  - b. He has made them a kingdom and priests to God;
  - c. They shall reign over the earth.
3. The angels' worship.
4. The whole universe's acknowledgement of the Lamb's worthiness.

### **C. The Opening of the Seals**

**6:1-17**

1. White horse: conquest.
2. Red horse: war.
3. Black horse: famine.
4. Pale horse: Death and Hades.
5. Martyred souls must wait to be avenged.
6. Climax: the great day of wrath
7. The half hour of silence (8:1)

### **D. Two Groups Saved**

**7:1-17**

1. One hundred and forty-four thousand out of the tribes of Israel: sealed, so as to suffer no hurt.
2. An uncountable multitude: they come out of the great tribulation.
3. The grounds of their salvation: they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.
4. Their blessings and consolations.

## Section Three

The problem of the silence of God in the face of evil and his apparent delay in avenging his saints, apostles and prophets.

### A. The Blowing of the Seven Trumpets

**8:1-9:21; 11:15**

1. Smoke from the incense and the prayers of the saints leads to the breaking of the half hour of silence: thunders, lightnings, earthquake, trumpets, as censer is emptied out on the earth.
2. The seven trumpets:
  - a. Hail and fire and blood: one-third earth burnt up.
  - b. One-third sea turned to blood: one-third sea-life and shipping destroyed.
  - c. One-third rivers, fountains, waters become bitter.
  - d. One-third sun, moon, stars smitten: one-third reduction of light.
  - e. Locusts from abyss torment men. Their king, Apollyon.
  - f. Angels at Euphrates loosed. Invasion by vast army of horses.
  - g. See\* below.

### B. The Strong Angel Sets Right Foot on Sea and Left on Earth

**10:1-11**

1. Clothed with a cloud: rainbow on head: face as sun . . .
2. In his hand a little book, sweet in mouth, bitter in belly.
3. Swears by Creator: *delay no longer*, but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel (see\* below).
4. *The mystery of God*, according to the good news which he declared to his servants the prophets, SHALL BE FINISHED.

### C. The Two Witnesses

**11:1-14**

1. The holy city trodden underfoot by Gentiles *forty-two months*.
2. After 1,260 days the two LAMPSTANDS are extinguished by the beast. The dead bodies of the two prophets lie in city called Sodom and Egypt where the Lord was crucified. The world rejoices.
3. *After three-and-a-half days* the prophets are resurrected, taken to heaven, their testimony vindicated.

### D. Thanksgiving That the Time for Judgment Has Come\*

**11:15-18**

1. At the seventh trumpet *mystery of God finished*.
2. Great voices in heaven: kingdom of world has become God's and Christ's.
3. Twenty-four elders who sit on thrones: fall on faces: give thanks that
  - a. God has at last taken his great power and begun to reign.
  - b. In response to wrath of nations, God's WRATH has come.
  - c. *The time* has come for dead to be judged: to reward prophets and saints and those who fear God's name: to destroy those who destroy the earth.

## Section Four

The throne of the beast and the grounds of his demand to receive universal worship.  
God's answer to the beast and Satan.

### **A. First Trilogy: 11:19–13:1**

#### **Signs in Heaven—Satan Frustrated**

1. A woman and child: the dragon stands *before the woman* to devour child: but the child is caught up to God's throne.
2. War in heaven: accuser of brethren cast down: *they overcome him*: NOW has come salvation, power, kingdom of God and authority of his Christ.
3. Satan persecutes woman: fails: *stands on sea-shore*.

### **B. Second Trilogy: 13:1–14:5**

#### **Situation Resulting on Earth—Satan Apparently Victorious**

1. I saw—the beast's throne: his 'resurrection' and irresistible power: his claim to divine worship: *he overcomes the saints*.
2. I saw—the second beast's deceptive signs: image: no purchasing without the mark of the beast.
3. I saw—the Lamb *standing on Mount Zion* with one hundred and forty-four thousand purchased (!) out of the earth: A NEW SONG. In their mouth no lie.

### **C. Third Trilogy: 14:6–15:1**

#### **Warnings and Judgments—Earth's Inhabitants Warned Against the Beast**

1. I saw—
  - a. First angel: worship Creator: hour of judgment come.
  - b. Second angel: Babylon has fallen.
  - c. Third angel: warning: mark of beast leads to eternal torment.
  - d. Voice from heaven: those who die in the Lord are blessed.
2. I saw—
  - e. *Son of Man sitting on cloud*: corn-harvest.
  - f. Another angel: grape-harvest: wrath of God.
3. I saw—
  - g. Seven Angels: announcement of seven plagues which will complete THE WRATH OF GOD.

### **D. Victory Over the Beast 15:2–4**

1. I saw—the victors *stand by the sea of glass and fire*.
2. They sing the new song of Moses and the Lamb.
3. The grounds on which all nations will worship God and acknowledge his unique name and holiness: his righteous acts have been made manifest.

## Section Five

God's eventual and swift avenging of his saints, apostles and prophets on Babylon who compromised with the beast in order to gain power and wealth and murdered God's true people and preachers.

### **A. The Pouring out of the Vials in Which God's Wrath Is Finished**

**15:5-16:21**

1. Smoke from the glory and power of God fill the temple: None can enter till the seven plagues *are finished*.
2. The seven vials:
  - a. Ugly and painful sores on people who have mark of beast.
  - b. Sea turned to blood as of dead man: everything in it dies.
  - c. Rivers and fountains of waters become blood.
  - d. Sun scorches men with fire.
  - e. Throne and kingdom of beast darkened.
  - f. Euphrates dried up. Kings of earth deceived by demons to come to the war of the great day of God Almighty.
  - g. Great voice out of temple, from the throne: IT IS DONE. Great earthquake. Great *city* divided. *Cities* of the nations fall. *Babylon the great* remembered and given cup of God's WRATH. Every island and mountain flees. Great hail.

### **B. Judgment of Babylon (A)**

**17:1-18**

SHE SITS ON MANY WATERS AND ON SEVEN MOUNTAINS

1. Clothed in purple and scarlet: gold, jewels, pearls.
2. In her hand a golden cup of wine of unclean things.
3. The historical succession of empires: five fallen, one is, one is yet to come and must continue a little while: then the eighth . . . and he goes into perdition, overcome by the Lamb.
4. *A mystery*: Babylon . . . mother of harlots, drunk with blood of saints and martyrs of Jesus . . . she is herself destroyed by the beast and ten kings: 'God put into their hearts to do his mind . . . until the words of God *should be finished*'.

### **C. Judgment of Babylon (B)**

**18:1-24**

1. The unholy city: 'I sit as a queen': *In one day* her plagues come.
2. In her was found the blood of prophets, saints and of all slain: 'God has judged your judgment on her'.
3. The city never to rise again: NO LAMP TO SHINE in her again.

### **D. 'Hallelujahs' for God's Judgment**

**19:1-10**

1. By a great voice of a great multitude in heaven: salvation, glory, power are God's *for* he has judged the harlot and avenged his servants.
2. By the twenty-four elders.
3. By a voice from the throne.
4. By the voice of a great multitude: God reigns: Rejoice! Give him the glory: the marriage supper of Lamb has come, and his wife has made herself ready.
5. *It was given her* that she should clothe herself in fine linen.

## Section Six

The coming of Christ in power and great glory to execute the wrath of God; the millennial reign of Christ with a rod of iron; the great white throne and the new heavens and the new earth; and all of this to prepare for the coming of the new Jerusalem, the tabernacle of God and the bride of the Lamb.

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### A. The Rider on the White Horse

#### *First Trilogy: 19:11–21*

1. In justice he judges and makes war: a sharp sword out of mouth.
2. Invitation to birds to the great supper.
3. The battle: *beast and false prophet into lake of fire*: the rest killed with the sharp sword: birds filled with flesh.

#### *Second Trilogy: 20:1–10*

1. Angel with keys of abyss: binds Satan and imprisons in abyss for one thousand years.
  2. One thousand years' reign of resurrected martyrs and those who refused mark of beast.
  3. After the one thousand years: final rebellion: *Satan into lake of fire*.
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### B. The New Heaven and Earth

#### *Third Trilogy: 20:11–22:15*

1. *a.* The great white throne: heaven and earth flee: *if any not found written . . . cast into lake of fire* (20:11–15).
  2. *b.* New heaven and new earth: new Jerusalem coming down: tabernacle of God with men (21:1–4).
  3. *c.* God's pronouncement: he who overcomes shall inherit: but . . . *all liars, their part shall be in lake of fire* (21:5–8).
  3. *d.* Angel shows John bride of Lamb: *and there shall not enter . . . anyone who makes a lie*: and he showed me (21:9–22:5).
  - e.* Veracity of the prophecy (22:6–7).
  - f.* Proper reaction to the prophecy (22:8–9).
  - g.* Direction for publication of the prophecy: *outside are dogs . . . and everyone who loves and makes a lie* (22:10–15).
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### C. The Three-Fold Testifying of Jesus

**22:16–20**

1. *I, Jesus have sent my angel to testify*; and the response of the Spirit, bride, hearers and thirsty ones (22:16–17).
  2. *I testify unto you . . . warning against altering the words of the book* (22:18–19).
  3. *He who testifies says: surely I come quickly*; and the response: *Amen: come Lord Jesus* (22:20).
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### D. THE GRACE of the Lord Jesus Be With the Saints

**22:21**



## About the Author

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