

UNVEILED HOPE

By Scotty Smith

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UNVEILED HOPE

INTRODUCTION: The Fulfillment of Our Great Hope

As I write these words I am sitting at the foot of the Swiss Alps in the little fishing village of Iseltwald, just outside of Interlaken. All of my God given senses are engaged and heightened with an exhilarating intensity. Never have I seen bluer skies with a richness of hue that betrays description. I can feel the fiery warmth of the fall colors in the trees along the ridge of the Alps. And, I can taste the pure vanilla of the fresh white morning snow. Is there something that can be called too beautiful? Am I close to sensory overload? Before me is Lake Brienz whose blue-green waters seem so vast, so inviting, so absolutely calming. No tempest, just a tapestry of peacefulness that resonates with something deep in the core of my soul.

It is so good to be here, right now, drinking in this astonishing vision..... for it has been a hard year, really, a hard season of life. So many changes, so many demands I don't know when spiritual warfare has seemed as intense. Good friends are overwhelmed. Family members are facing loss and the adjustments forced with the advancing years. Maybe that's why this setting is just drawing me in. I feel like I am inhaling something much more vital than oxygen.

The quiet of this place is so pronounced, so obvious, so centering. All I can hear is the rolling movement of a passenger train on the other side of the lake making its way to the wood carving village of Brienz. The aroma of baking bread is wafting up towards me from the kitchen below as I sit on my balcony. I watch as an older Swiss gentleman rhythmically hand sickles grass on the steep hillside just below me. To my left, a family of cows with brown eyes as big as bagels is grazing. The air is so clear I feel like I can see into next week. I want to get up and move about, to run, to laugh, to sing, to share this scene with those I love. But I am reluctant to disrupt the moment, this precious, holy moment. Surely, I was made for this. Everything seems perfect.

"Lord, can I stay here, can this whole experience be frozen in time? What a gift this

day is! Your timing could not be better. I've got an idea! I'll set up three shelters or at least a three bedroom chalet for you and Moses and Elijah, right here, right now!"

You may be saying to yourself that this seems more like a Swiss travelogue than an introduction to a book about Revelation. Yet as I sit here I cannot think of a more appropriate setting for me to begin my writing, a context which brings together and gives expression to the two driving forces which are compelling me to hammer out my heart on this lap top computer: The first is a near obsession to get the Book of Revelation and its liberating visions back into the hands and hearts of God's sons and daughters. The second is a longing to see my family, friends, the congregation I am so privileged to pastor, and God's people in general, filled with the living hope that Jesus has won for us. These two passions and themes are pronounced in each of the following chapters. They are the twin

voices which echo to each other in this entire work. Let me briefly speak to each.

I have had many of my friends say to me, "Scotty, why in the world would you tackle Revelation as the focus of your very first book? Are you crazy or are you presumptuous?" No, but I am somewhat angry. My anger is similar to that of the Apostle Paul in his response to how the Judaizers were corrupting the gospel in the province of Galatia. After Paul had faithfully preached salvation by grace through faith, "certain men" came down from Jerusalem and started distorting the gospel by insisting that the male Gentile converts had to be circumcised in order to be fully recognized as Christians. In effect, these legalists were preaching "another gospel which is no gospel at all." They were attempting to put the Galatian converts back under the very law from which Jesus had set them free. Paul went pastorally and theologically ballistic! He knew, as Martin Luther would say later, on the eve of the Reformation, "bad theology is the worst taskmaster of all". The entire book of Galatians is written to confront and to undo the damage of the Jerusalem legalists.

In a similar way I am stirred up at how the book of Revelation has suffered at the

hands of its many interpreters through the years, and especially by those of recent generations. There are many who simply want to treat the last book of the Bible as though it is a prophetic jigsaw puzzle, written to be solved for the terminal generation of Christians. Others dismiss it as being too veiled, complex and culture bound to be of any benefit for the needs of modern believers. Some so spiritualize the text as to render Revelation little more than a book of parables and allegories.

In the early years of my life in Christ I was exposed to a certain very detailed analysis of Revelation which was presented as the one and only correct handling of the text. I was grilled to believe that anyone who really took God's Word seriously and literally would adopt this interpretation, and all the charts that came with it. I was assured that it was the oldest and, therefore, the most trustworthy. All other attempts at explaining Revelation were labeled as being either from a theologically "liberal" tradition or of too recent a vintage to be taken seriously.

This particular school of interpretation led me and many of my young Christian friends to develop some wrong thinking and habits concerning the Christian life. I found myself as an immature believer spending too much time reading the headlines and listening to the latest news reports in order to interpret Biblical prophecy. (I am still trying to find those Viet Cong helicopters in the text!) What I needed most was to develop a Biblical world-view, that is, to have been grounded in the Scriptures well enough to view all of life from God's perspective. I was too taken up with "end time" sensationalism.

Looking back I can also see where I was influenced to be far more aware of Satan and the pervasiveness of evil than to be preoccupied with our sovereign God, ruling over all things from His throne in heaven; and with the triumphant Lamb of God, who "came to destroy the works of the devil." This led me to withdraw from my culture out of fear into the "safety" of an ingrown Christian subculture. It grieves me to reflect upon how uninvolved and detached I was from the "secular" world. But this "Christian cocoon" living was actually encouraged. We called it

"community".

Lastly, the teaching I was receiving on Revelation prompted me to develop more of a privatized and individualized spirituality. I had very little understanding of the importance of the Church and our corporate life as the people of God. Much of this spirituality was driven by fear and an inadequate view of the gospel. I remember receiving a whole lot more emphasis on being an "overcomer" through discipline and "trying harder" to please God than in being instructed to "trust boldly in Jesus" and in His all sufficient grace. Since I am a proud man who loves to perform, I became a Pharisee among Pharisees. Today, I'm a Pharisee in recovery.

I am not sure which is greater as I recount these things, my anger or my pain. I finally came to the point of giving up on the book of Revelation. It became a closed part of the Scripture to me for several years. I returned to the "safe" haven of the epistles of Paul, like Romans, Ephesians, and Galatians. It wasn't until I was prevailed upon for months (hounded is more like it!) to offer a study of the book of Revelation, that I dared to venture back into the part of God's Word with which I had associated so many bad memories.

However, an unbiased study of the text, along with good resourcing and research, led me, literally, to see Revelation in a whole new light. What a surprise our heavenly Father had in store for me as I sought to read and ponder it as though I were a part of the first community of faith in Asia Minor to receive John's series of visions. I have never enjoyed examining and teaching a portion of the Bible more than the year we spent working through this text. Owning both my previous ignorance and prejudices, it was wonderful to rejoice with childlike wonder at what God was opening to us through His Scriptures. This book and its contents is the fruit of that study. I will share with you, in the following chapters, what we discovered to be both true and freeing.

Now let me say at the outset that I offer nothing new or novel in this volume. An angel has not appeared to me while in the Alps to reveal secrets that no other man has

ever seen. I make no claim to original thoughts or exegesis. Everything that you will read in this study has been said before and with much more precision. But that is both the source of my anger and of my joy. I am thrilled to say and to celebrate that what you are about to read is not simply my, Scott Ward Smith's, private or esoteric interpretation! The way I will be explaining and applying the text of Revelation has many precedents throughout the history of the church! If that were not the case I would, indeed, be both crazy and presumptuous! My anger is born out of the sense of loss that I was not exposed to these great and liberating insights until much later in my Christian life. My joy is simply in creatively restating these things for God's people of my generation.

I HOPE SO!

This brings me to the second reason why I feel compelled to write this book. I am driven by a heartfelt concern for the hurting and Biblically hungry people of God, and by their pronounced need for hope, a real substantive hope. The older I have gotten as a Christian, husband, dad, son, friend and pastor, the more I am constrained to conclude that life is hard, very hard. I also lament how Biblically ill-informed this generation of believers is to understand the Christian life, and all of life, from God's perspective.

My own formula based spirituality of the late 60's and 70's, with all of its principles and promises for "abundant living", has long since faded into a more honest, if painful, understanding of the "normal Christian life". The theologically thin veneer of the "name it and claim it" prosperity teaching, (by which I was also influenced for a season), has been exposed for what it really is: The vain attempt of many Christians to tame, predict and to control the sovereign purposes of Almighty God. I no longer use "Biblical Band-Aids" to cover the gapping wounds of the cancers of the human experience. Has my youthful optimism given way to an adult pessimism? Has Tigger become Eeyore? No, not at all. It's just that a "super-spiritual" idealism has been replaced with a Biblical realism, for which I thank our Father in heaven..

This is where God's good gift of hope comes in. What is "hope"? There is a huge difference between the way we customarily think of this concept and how the Bible defines the term. To the average man on the street, "hope" is a vague sense of well being based on the contingency of certain things working out. Thus, we "hope" that we are going to have a good family vacation, that is, as long as it does not rain and the children cooperate and the fish bite and the mosquitoes don't!

But In the Scriptures, "hope" primarily refers to a present state of confidence and encouragement based on the guarantee of a glorious future. It is, as Biblical theologians say, an "eschatological category", that is, pertaining to the "last things". The incomparable wonders of what is ahead for God's people are brought to bear upon present difficult circumstances. This is why the second coming of Jesus Christ is referred to as "our blessed hope". When our Lord returns, all will be made right!

Such hope is evidenced in the words of the Apostle Paul, who when writing from prison said, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." "...but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait expectantly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved." (Rom.8:18,23,24). Paul's pain was not eradicated, but redefined by "hope". Such confidence frees Christians in every age and place to "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God And hope does not disappoint us..." (Rom.5:2,5)

Another illustrative and inviting example of hope is seen in the words of the Apostle Peter who wrote, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." (1

Pet.1:3-6) As for Peter, so for us, "hope" does not replace grief and trials, it wondrously transforms them. We are led to set our "hope fully on the grace to be given (to us) when Jesus Christ is revealed." (! Pet.1:13)

As we work through the text of Revelation, however, we discover that our present experience of hope is not just tied to our wonderful future as God's people, but also to what has happened in the past and what is going on in the present. We have a sure hope because of what Jesus accomplished in the past upon the cross as the Lamb of God. We have a living hope because of the present occupied throne of God in heaven. Indeed, our hope comes from "him who is, and who was, and who is to come." (Rev.1:4) He is, as Peter called Him, the "God of all grace"; past grace, present grace and future grace!

BACK TO THE ALPS

My two reasons for writing this book, thus, meet and kiss as I drink in the grandeur of Switzerland and immerse my heart in the awesome visions found in Revelation. I am convinced beyond all doubt that the last book in the Bible was written primarily to stimulate the people of God in every generation unto great hope. This book of overwhelming sights, nearly-audible sounds, and rich symbols is meant to bring eternal encouragement and liberating perspective not just to the last century church facing the worst of the final days before the coming of Jesus, nor just to the first century church seeking to deal with the violent persecution of the Roman world.

Rather, I have come to rejoice in the present hope offered to Christians of every generation by this timely and timeless book. Followers of the Lamb everywhere, and in all periods of church history, face struggles, fears and heartaches similar to those of the first readers of Revelation. The setting and the circumstances vary, but spiritual warfare goes on wherever the people of God live. Few of us realize that there have been more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than the combined number of martyrs in the preceding nineteen centuries. It is to the whole people of God that this book of hope is

sent.

I personally have received more concrete and well timed hope from studying Revelation than from any other portion of God's Word in the nearly thirty years I have been a Christian. It has become to me the most heartening and encouraging book in the entire Bible. God never intended Revelation to be a source of fear and confusion. It gave rise to Handel's "Messiah", not Mozart's "Requiem for the Dead"! Why would the last of the 66 books of the sacred canon be written to do anything less than to bring great encouragement and hope? It is not a dark hidden mystery to be decoded by members of the illumined deeper-life club. Rather, it is a heavenly perspective to be seen, embraced and rejoiced in by the hearts of those with vivid imaginations and childlike faith.

The sights, smells, tastes and sounds of this little village in Switzerland stir and intensify within me my longings and anticipation as I ponder the fulfillment of our great hope. If the "new heavens and the new earth" look no different from what I experience sitting here on the balcony of Hotel Garni Edelweiss, then I am a satisfied son of the living God. And yet the Scriptures teach us that no eye has seen, nor ear has heard, nor has the thought even entered into the mind of man what God has in store for His people. (1 Cor.2:9). I meditate upon these words and I cry out with my brothers and sisters in every age the prayer offered in the last paragraph of Revelation, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev.22:20)

HOW THEN SHALL WE READ?

As we begin our study, let's briefly consider some of the important issues salient to the writing and interpreting of Revelation. For a more comprehensive discussion of these and other matters please refer to the bibliography that is included in the appendix. Unveiled Hope is written with far more pastoral concerns than academic ones! But, as I was taught as a young Christian, "Every text without a context becomes a pretext for a

proof-text!" What, then, is the historical context of Revelation? And what are some of the things we need to be aware of in interpreting this unique New Testament book?

Revelation opens with the claim to have been written by the Lord Jesus, himself! As that is the case, I am convinced, with most conservative interpreters, that the Apostle John was the human author. He who wrote the Gospel of John and the three Epistles which bear his name was also given the honor of writing the book with which the Bible closes. This is the same John who was a member of the band of 12 disciples who walked with Jesus His entire itinerate ministry. Within the 12, Peter, James and John formed a trio who were privileged to share some of the most intimate moments with our Lord, such as His Transfiguration and the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane. John, himself, was referred to as "the beloved disciple", who laid his head upon Jesus' breast the night he was betrayed and to whom, from the cross, our Lord entrusted the care of his mother.

IS REVELATION APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE?

John calls his book "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Rev.1:1). The word "revelation" in Greek is *apokalypsis* which means "disclosure" or "unveiling". (Thus, Mike and I call our book and CD "Unveiled Hope"!) The title and the style of John's epistle have led many scholars to conclude that his book is a Christian example of a Jewish genre of literature called "apocalyptic". "Apocalyptic" writings were produced between 200 BC and 100 AD.

In general, these writings claimed to be a message from God given through an angelic mediator to some important figure or hero from the past (like Enoch or Moses). Rich and enigmatic symbolism was used to show how God will break into history to overthrow evil. The second half of the book of Daniel is considered the Old Testament model for this genre. Apocalypses became popular at a time when the people of God were suffering intensely and God seemed to be silent. Israel's prophets were dead,

and there was a need for a word from heaven to bring understanding and hope.

A dualistic world-view is too common to all examples of this literary genre. Jewish apocalyptists, unlike their Persian counterparts, however, did not teach that God and Satan were equals. Rather, Satan was created by God and is always subordinate to him. Two opposing worlds or ages clash and create the setting for the drama of all apocalypses. The present evil age is temporary and is under Satan's control. The future age, under God's direct rule, will be glorious and eternal. It will prevail over all opposition!

Both vague and familiar symbols fill apocalyptic literature. They are similar to our political cartoons in which certain images are readily identifiable. For example, in our day the eagle stands for the United States; in the first century, the sea monster stood as the great enemy of God, Satan. The drama between God and Satan, the evil age and the age to come, are played out in fanciful and spectacular imagery. In the end, God always triumphs. Evil is destroyed.

If you are at all familiar with the book of Revelation then you can readily understand why many suggest that it is at least a byproduct of apocalyptic literature. But there are some major differences. John is not a hero from the past. He is a pastor in the present! He claims to be writing prophecy, not merely expressing good feelings about the future. The voice of God is not silent. John knows himself to be writing the very "word of God" (Rev.1:2). And unlike other apocalypses, John calls for moral action in the culture. He is not as "world-denying" as they are.

While apocalypses look almost exclusively to the future for deliverance, John bids us look to the past in which the Lamb of God has already triumphed! The great battle has been won at Calvary! The mop up operation is well under way. History is the unfolding of God's sovereign plan of grace and mercy for the nations of the world. Prophecy, for John, comes to us as both a foretelling and a forth-telling. Yes, we look to the future for the full manifestation of the triumph of King Jesus. But we also live in the present with

encouragement, hope, power and purpose! Clearly, Revelation bears the marks of apocalyptic literature, but it is primarily written to call us to live to the glory of God, right here and now, with hearts filled with His peace!

THE LANGUAGE AND WRITING STYLE OF REVELATION

Another very important issue that we must consider as we prepare to interpret this unique portion of the Scriptures, full of strange images, beasts and symbols, concerns the genre and writing style used by John. God commissioned him to "show his servants what must soon take place" (Rev.1:1). The Greek word used in this phrase means to "signify" or to set forth in symbols what is to be communicated. As John wrote the Revelation he did so with a particular literary format in mind that was different from both the way he wrote his gospel and his three epistles.

We must be very careful, therefore, not to be overly zealous in creating visual representations and in assigning meaning to every detail in Revelation. As John Stott reminds us, "It is important to remember that the imagery he uses is intended to be symbolical rather than pictorial. The various elements in the vision are significant symbols to be interpreted, rather than actual features to be imagined."

Does this mean that we are not to interpret Revelation "literally"? The answer to this important question depends on what we mean by "literal interpretation". To "literally" interpret any portion of the Scriptures we must be careful to identify the "literary genre" of the text. The Bible contains many rich expressions of language and writing styles. God is an artist with His words! There is poetry, narrative, prophecy, prose, parable, history, proverb, song, didactic theology, pastoral letters, just to name a few!

Within these we also find literary devices such as onomatopoeia, assonance, simile, allegory, metaphor, alliteration, hyperbole, and acrostics. There is nothing bland or

boring about the Bible! To "rightly divide the word of truth" we must learn the appropriate rules for recognizing, reading and interpreting each of these. This requires hard work, but the benefits far out weigh the effort involved. The history of the Church is littered with the consequences of God's people failing to interpret the text of God's Word according to sound principles of Biblical exegesis.

For example, concerning the interpretation of prophecy, we would do well to learn a lesson from the Jews of the First Century and their misinterpreting of Messianic prophecy. Their expectations of a political deliverer completely overshadowed any understanding of a Messiah who would come, first of all, to die for the sins of God's people. We must be very careful not to repeat their mistake in our zeal to predict the nature and timing of our Lord's second coming. I learned a long time ago that prophecy is best interpreted by its own fulfillment! Enough is made patently clear in the Bible to keep us busy until the less clear is made providentially certain.

JOHN'S AUDIENCE AND REVELATION'S DATE

John writes to Christians in seven real churches in Asia Minor, (modern day Turkey). all within a ninety-mile radius of each other. It has been several decades since Jesus was raised from the dead. There is no real consensus, but most scholars agree that Revelation was written either at the end of Nero's reign (AD 54-68), or during Vespasian's (AD 69-79). Still others favor a date in the later years of Domitian's reign of terror (AD 81-96). I am inclined to go with this later date.

Politically, persecution of Christians is clearly spreading. The aging apostle is writing from a Roman penal colony on Patmos, a little island off the coast of Asia where he is in exile against his will.. The Roman emperor is demanding that he be worshipped as a god. To fail to acknowledge "Caesar is Lord", by offering a pinch of incense to the emperor's guardian spirit, would be to imperil not just one's home and job, but one's life. The recipients of John's letter are living under this constant threat.

Spiritually, many churches are beginning to be influenced by the "good life" and by bad theology. Other fellowships are beginning to wonder about the "hope of His coming". From without and from within, the young church is in a time of crisis.

John's circular letter was to be read aloud in each local assembly. He wrote with the heart of a pastor and the heat of a prophet. There is nothing in his visionary epistle that would have been irrelevant to those hearing these words for the first time. I will emphasize this point over and over. Every word, symbol and image was calculated to encourage and to prepare them for life in the hostile Roman world. This is true of the prophetic material John recorded as well. Promises of "future grace" bring present hope and strength. As the writer of Hebrews has said, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (Heb.11:1)

REVELATION "BAGGAGE"

So how are we to interpret this unique book of visions, pastoral instruction, and prophecy? It is very important that we recognize any "baggage" that each of us may be bringing to our study of Revelation. There is no other book in the Bible that has suffered more at the hands of prejudice and presupposition than this one. Martin Luther once wryly commented, "everyone thinks of the book whatever his spirit imparts."

What can we learn from the history of the interpretation of this book? There are four main schools of interpretation of Revelation represented by evangelical Bible scholars. First, there is the preterist school which holds that Revelation is written in veiled language, almost exclusively about events in John's own time. This is also sometimes referred to as the "Roman view", emphasizing that the symbols and situations referred to in the book are to be understood in light of the growing persecution of Christians by Rome. The drama of Revelation is seen as culminating with the overthrow and

destruction of the Roman empire.

The futurist, also known as the "second coming" view, is by far the most popular position, and is held by most contemporary evangelical interpreters. It stresses that Revelation is primarily a book of prophecies of events yet to come, especially of events that immediately precede the second coming of Jesus Christ. The historicist school sees in the text an unfolding, really a charting of the complete history of the Church between the two comings of Christ. Though the specifics vary by those who hold to this schema, each period of church history is relegated to a section of Revelation. Thus, this position is also referred to as the "church history" view.

The idealist school teaches that, between pastoral concerns for first century Christians and prophecies of the distant future, Revelation contains principles applicable for Christians in every generation. It is important to realize that each of these four positions is championed by those with the highest regard for the Scriptures, believers who affirm that the Bible is without error in all that it teaches. It is not necessary to embrace one of these schools of interpretation to the exclusion of the other three. We can gain valuable insights from all of them. Let us seek to maintain teachable and discerning hearts.

I also encourage each of us to be careful of our preconceived notions and stereotypes as we approach the difficult issue of the "millennium", the thousand-year reign of Christ written about in Revelation 20. What would the recipients of John's letter have understood by this image, which is mentioned specifically only once in the entire Bible? Christians have drawn swords with each other in defense of their millennial position. What are we to make of it? Is John writing about a literal reign of Jesus upon the earth? And if so, will the second coming of our Lord occur at the beginning of this period, as our "pre-millennial" friends insist? (The pre-millennial position, so named because Jesus returns bodily to our world before, that is preliminary to the beginning of the 1000 years.) Or

are we to anticipate His return at the end of this wonderful period of gospel advancement among the nations, as our "post-millennial" ("post" meaning after) friends encourage us to believe? Or is this, as many have suggested, a reference to a "spiritual" reign of our Lord, one that is going on right now? This position is known as the "a-millennial" view. The "a" prefix is not meant to imply that there will be no millennium, but rather that there will not be a earthly or materialistic reign of Jesus upon the earth prior to the end of history as we know it. Sound confusing? So who's right? How are we to know?

We will study the issues surrounding this 1000 year reign of Jesus later in the book, but it is important to recognize that each of the historic positions on the millennium (pre-millennial, post-millennial, and a-millennial) has been embraced by men and women who have died in service of the Lamb of God. If nothing else, this should caution each of us to avoid the temptation of being overly simplistic and dogmatic about such matters. One's position on the millennium is not simply a matter of a conservative versus a liberal interpretation of the Bible. Failure to realize this has led to many unnecessary divisions among Christians.

ON OUR FACES AND AS CHILDREN

So how are we to work through the quagmire of opinions surrounding the interpretation of Revelation? Let me suggest, first of all, that the best way to come to the text of the closing book of the Bible is prostrate on our faces before the One it so clearly reveals. We can learn a valuable lesson from John's experience as he received his first vision of several visions, a vision of the exalted Jesus. When he saw our Lord, in all of his glory and grace, he fell at his feet as a dead man. Such reverence, awe and brokenness are becoming those who ponder what is taught in Revelation, or, for that matter, what is taught in any of the Scriptures. Right now we all only "know in part". "Then", (when Jesus returns) "we shall know fully". Until "then", may our textual and theological confidence be adorned with the appropriate humility!

Second, let me offer a suggestion I learned only a few years ago from an evangelical New Testament scholar who teaches at a seminary in the Northeast. Read Revelation with the heart of a child. More than once Jesus held up a child to His disciples as a model of kingdom faith and trust. One of the forfeitures of adulthood is, too often, the imagination. As we get older, the "hardening of the categories" tends to set in and most of us are not as given to the "living and breathing" character of the Bible. But there are some things only a child can discern through their unspoiled senses and awesome capacity to see with their soul. As I have already mentioned, so much of John's prophetic epistle is visual and auditory. Ask your heavenly Father to quicken the imagination with which He endowed you at birth, and try to enter in to the sights and the sounds which John has recorded. Do not get bogged down and agonize over trying to find or to assign a meaning to every detail in the text. There is enough that is patently clear in Revelation to keep us busy until Jesus returns!

THE PURPOSE OF "UNVEILED HOPE"

This leads me to explain the intent and design of this book. Neither Mike Card nor myself purport or presume to offer a detailed exegesis and explanation of every verse in the Book of Revelation. For those of you desiring a more comprehensive treatment of the text, please refer to the already mentioned bibliography provided in the appendix. Our goal, rather, is to offer a thematic exposition, one which traces the theme of hope as it is revealed in each section of John's letter. Sometimes our study will involve meditating on a whole chapter from Revelation. At other times one verse, or even a few chapters will be studied as a unit as we seek to demonstrate the eternal encouragement with which Revelation overflows. Let us come now to the pages of Revelation and behold the Unveiled Hope that comes to us, alone, through the unveiled Jesus!

A VISION OF JESUS - THE FOUNDATION OF ALL HOPE

Revelation 1

As a child the first image of Jesus that filled my heart did not come from the Scriptures, but from the pictures in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School curriculum. One of the main features of those representations I remember is that Jesus was never looking at me. He always seemed to be turned a little bit to the side, looking off into the distance. In fact, He resembled the "Breck Girl" on the shampoo commercials I had seen on T.V. and on the back of my mother's magazines. Beautiful light brown hair, with sheen and waves, adorned his saintly head. There was an air brushed aura to his complexion, which was fair with slightly rosy cheeks. He obviously used a lot of sun screen, as much time as He spent in the Judean desert, and certainly a good moisturizer. Another thing I remember from my childhood image of Jesus is that He never had any wrinkles in His linen garments. Did He always stand up? Maybe the disciples had a portable steamer.

From Jesus, the "Breck Girl" I graduated to Jesus, the "big-screen- mono-dimensional movie character". Why was it that He never laughed or even smiled in films made about His life? That bothered me and it definitely affected my pre-conversion impression of our Lord. Jesus always seemed to be in some drug induced state in those Bible epochs. With eyes glazed over, He lacked passion and always seemed to be reciting a script. At times he even seemed to move about like zombie in a grade B horror flick. And there was nothing natural about the way He conversed with people, even with His own disciples. I couldn't imagine Jesus just "chatting", enjoying a good meal or the beauty of a sunset. Well, in spite of bad art, I became a Christian just before going to college. Oddly, one of the first things that I did before moving into my dorm room was to buy a copy of a painting of Jesus by an artist named Hook. Finally, I had found what I considered to be a great rendering of our Lord! He had a ruddy face

with uncombed hair. His clothes looked like they had been slept in. A wry smile defined his revolutionary expression. He was still looking off into the distance but that didn't matter. I had found a late 60's Jesus, a sanctified hippie! My two freshman roommates saw this painting in our shared room before they even met me. They assumed it was a painting of Che Guiverra or some other radical communist liberator and were only somewhat relieved to hear that it was a picture of Jesus.

Now, after many years of studying the Jesus of the Bible and getting to know Him by grace through faith, I have, at least, developed a compassionate understanding of why some of the Reformers railed against religious art in Western Europe in the sixteenth century. For them, it was a matter of breaking the first two of the ten commandments. For me, it is also a matter of the power of bad art to influence our understanding of the One who is "full of grace and truth". There is nothing more important about any one of us than the image of Jesus we carry around in our hearts. Some fifty years before John wrote Revelation, Jesus asked him, along with the rest of the twelve disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15) This question stays before each of us, Christians and non-Christians alike. When you hear the name, Jesus, what immediately comes to mind and heart?

In our own generation Jesus has gone through many "makeovers". Currently we have Jesus the American Statesman who wears a red, white and blue robe and who is calling Christian America to rise up to defeat all the "feminatzis" and other "perverts" in the culture. We also have Jesus, the successful baby boomer who bids us follow him into a life of luxury, health and hassle-free living. And, as in every generation, there is Jesus disguised as Moses, who is recognized more by a stone tablet of law than a cross of redemptive atoning love. Lastly, there is "Gumby Jesus", who can be shaped into any image I need or want him to be. Will the real Jesus please stand up!

It should not surprise us that the last book of the Bible is primarily a book about Jesus. Jesus, as He really is; Jesus, as He wants to be known; Jesus, who is worthy of

our adoration, affection and our allegiance. As we trace the theme of hope throughout John's apocalypse we will see that Jesus, Himself, is the foundation of all hope. He is the reason for hope. He is the assurance of hope. He is the power for hope.

To know Jesus is to understand why the writer of Hebrews refers to hope as "an anchor for the soul, firm and secure ...". "God is faithful", he says. "It is impossible for him to lie!" Therefore, we flee to Jesus to take hold of this hope so freely offered us. (Heb.6:13-20) We come to a "throne of grace" where we find our "faithful and merciful high priest", Jesus, giving us the mercy and grace we need at just the right time (Heb.4:14-16). We "fix our eyes on Jesus", the pioneer and perfecter of our faith so that we "will not grow weary and lose heart" (Heb.12:2-3).

Can it really be that our hearts can rest "firm and secure" in the middle of the unpredictable and troubled streams, rivers and oceans of life? Are these promises more than the stuff needlepoint pillows and calligraphied plaques are made of? The book of Revelation answers with a resounding "Yes!". There is such an anchor.

One of the scariest moments of my life occurred when I was about six years old. Our family was vacationing in an old Victorian home on the Potomac River, just south of Washington D.C. We were with good friends from North Carolina who introduced us to the Villa San Sussi and the sweet crab meat harvested from the surrounding waters. One afternoon we decided to cross the big river in a small wooden ski boat to feast upon a mountain of these delectable clawed crustaceans at a favorite restaurant not far from Mt. Vernon. After eating ourselves way beyond full we started back under the threat of a sky that suddenly became blacker than any I have ever seen, before or since.

The placid waters upon which I had learned to water ski that week became pitching waves, big enough to surf. As a six year old I remember those ominous swells seeming to be about thirty feet high! What took my fears to an all time high were the words spoken by the "captain" of our overcrowded and undersized craft, "We have little gas

and no anchor". Now I don't know what good an anchor would have done us in the middle of the Potomac River! Never-the-less, the thought of being "anchorless" caused raw terror. Adrift, out of control, helpless hopeless. Even now the remembrance of being in that tiny vessel, tossed about by huge waves, conjures up images of sheer panic. That is the oldest memory I have of the kind of fear which makes you wonder if you are going to survive. I wish I could say it was the only time such powerful feelings of angst gripped my soul, but there have been many different seasons in the calendar of my life, many difficult experiences which, at times, have caused me to question the mercy and might of God. What is a Christian to do when circumstances seem to contradict what one holds dear about the character and promises of God? It was on such a turbulent sea of confusion, fear, and uncertainty that the book of Revelation was written. John, the aged apostle, is in an involuntary exile "because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus". He is on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, about thirty seven miles West-Southwest of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Sixty square miles of rocks and mountains become the pulpit from which he shares the words and visions which God gave him for the Church. The people of God and the world are now involved in a deadly conflict. Intense spiritual warfare is escalating. Persecution is no longer occasional and local, but regular and widespread. The Satanically empowered attacks by Rome are not, however, the only peril which the Church is facing.

Within her gates heresy, immorality, and worldliness are being insidiously and effectively introduced. Distortions of the gospel, powerful false teachers, sexual enticement, the lure of cultural acceptance and financial success all of these are affecting the Church, even before the dawn of the second century. At such a time and to such a people John writes of a Sovereign Lord and a Savior Lamb. There is no trace of panic, fear or defeatism. Instead, there is encouragement, insight, worship and hope!

(Rev.1:1-3)

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw - that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near."

John is very clear about the source of this "prophecy". It is a revelation which "God gave". He writes neither as a social commentator, nor merely as an inspired pastor, nor as an ecstatic seer. He is conscious of writing the very words and pictures which God gives him. One of the greatest joys and one of the most sobering realities in the Christian life is to realize we serve a God who has chosen to reveal Himself and His will. As J.I. Packer puts it , "God has spoken and he has not stuttered." Because God has spoken, and continues to speak to us through his Word, we have hope. We aren't those who "hope against all hope". We are not limited by the resources of our own knowledge, experience and perspective. Our cry for understanding has been over-answered! We can be "sure of what we hope for" (Heb.11:1).

John identifies his audience for us. He is writing for God's people, "his servants". In particular his words are directed to seven historical churches in the Roman province of Asia, (Rev.2-3). This context and setting must be understood if we are to guard against unhinged and fanciful futuristic interpretations of the book. There is nothing in Revelation irrelevant to the First Century Church. Every vision, prophecy, exhortation, promise and warning was written with them in mind. At the same time, the whole book is for the whole Church in every period of her history. Unfortunately, many commentaries and expositions of John's words and visions do not make this point central to their interpretation. Some actually teach that after chapter five the Church is not even mentioned until the end of the book! The net result has been that Christians

in every generation have been robbed of much of Revelation's relevancy and power to encourage.

Part of this problem can be traced back to wrong assumptions about the genre and writing style used by John. As mentioned previously, Revelation is quite similar to the "apocalyptic literature" popular at the time of the Apostle's writing. God commissioned him to "show his servants what must soon take place" (Rev.1:1). The Greek word used in this phrase means to "signify" or to set forth in symbols what is to be communicated. John is consciously using a particular and unique means of communicating eternal and trustworthy truths, a style that would have been quite understandable to his audience. We must be very careful, therefore, not to be overly dogmatic or graphic in assigning meaning and visual representation to every detail in Revelation. As John Stott reminds us, "It is important to remember that the imagery he uses is intended to be symbolical rather than pictorial. The various elements in the vision are significant symbols to be interpreted, rather than actual features to be imagined."

Does this mean that we are not to interpret Revelation "literally"? That all depends on what one means by "literal interpretation". To "literally" interpret any portion of the Scriptures we must be careful to identify the literary genre of the text under consideration. The Bible contains many rich expressions of language and writing styles. God is the first and best artist with His words and with everything that He does! There is poetry, narrative, prophecy, prose, parable, apocalyptic literature, proverb, song, didactic theology, occasional letters, just to name a few! Within these we also find literary devices such as onomatopoeia, assonance, simile, allegory, metaphor, alliteration, hyperbole, and acrostics. There is nothing bland or boring about the Bible! To "rightly divide the word of truth" we must learn the appropriate rules for recognizing, reading and interpreting each of these. This requires hard work, but the benefits far outweigh the effort involved. The history of the Church is littered with the consequences of God's people failing to faithfully interpret the text of God's Word.

Concerning the interpretation of prophecy we would do well to learn a lesson from the Jews of the First Century and their misinterpretation of the Messianic prophecies of Jesus' first coming. Their expectations of a political deliverer completely overshadowed any understanding of a Messiah who would come, first of all, to die for the sins of God's people. We must be very careful not to repeat their mistake in our zeal to predict the nature and timing of our Lord's second coming. I learned a long time ago that prophecy is best interpreted by its own fulfillment! Enough is made patently clear in the Bible to keep us busy until the less clear is made providentially certain.

WE WOULD SEE JESUS.

As we continue in the opening chapter of the book of Revelation John begins to direct our attention to both the author and the subject of his writing. This is a "revelation of Jesus Christ", from Him and of Him! What does John need as he is exiled, cut off from the rich fellowship of God's people? He is a pastor whose heart can easily be weighed down and broken in light of the current events. What do our brothers and sisters in Asia Minor need, more than anything else, as they are feeling the heat and hatred of the Roman world? What have all Christians needed during the past twenty centuries as they have confronted the confusion, the pain, the evil, the conflicts, the allurements all of the difficult moments and movements that are a part of our journey of faith? What do you and I most need at this and in every season of life? We need to see Jesus! He is our anchor!

As John Stott put it so brilliantly, we do not need "a detailed forecast of future events which has to be laboriously deciphered, but (rather) a vision of Jesus Christ, to cheer the faint and encourage the weary. John's desire is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to stimulate our faithfulness in the present." He is writing to encourage, not to confound! "Grace and peace", not "perplexity and puzzle" should come from studying the last book of the Bible. "Blessed", not "left scratching their heads", are the ones who read and hear and take to heart these words (Rev.1:3). Again, let us remember, this is

a revealing not a concealing!

To see Jesus is to have hope, for as the Apostle Paul stated, Jesus, Himself, is our hope (1 Tim.1:1). It is as Peter looks upon Jesus, instead of the tossing waves, that he is not swallowed by the stormy sea. From chapter one through chapter twenty-two our Lord is set forth in such a way as to promote worship and confidence. He is the central figure and His complete triumph over sin and all evil is the dominant theme of the entire book. Jesus is set forth as everything that we need in life and in death, in prosperity and in adversity, in joy and in tribulation. It as though John is making the point that the main issue in life is "How big and how good is your Jesus?"

Consider what God wants us to know about our Savior in chapter one, alone!

Jesus is the "faithful witness" (vs.5). He can be unequivocally trusted, for he is the Word of God, Truth incarnate. (cf.Rev.19:11; Jn.1:1; 14:6). All the knowledge, wisdom and perspective that we need and long for is found in Him. By the truth of His word we are set free (Jn.8:32) He is "the firstborn from the dead" (vs.5). Jesus' victory over sin and death is celebrated early in Revelation. By his atoning death and resurrection from the grave He has "freed us from our sins" (vs.5). Because He was raised, we too will rise!

Jesus is revealed next as "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (vs.5). Caesar is not Lord, Jesus is! Can you imagine the high praise that probably broke out as this statement was read and heard for the first time in the churches in Asia Minor? Jesus is to be worshipped, not Emperor Domitian. Every generation of Christians needs to be reminded that our God reigns! He has no rivals. All of His enemies will be overthrown. He who sits in heaven enthroned laughs and mocks at the futile attempts of the little kings to contend with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Psalm 2)! The First Century Church does not need to fear, even as they face martyrdom in the Coliseum of Rome.

Arguably, the most well known Christian chorus goes like this, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so..." Though this great truth is implicit in the whole of the

Scriptures it is made explicit here in John's opening word of praise. "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (vs.5). At this point John's theology becomes his doxology! He bids his audience of persecuted Christians (and us as well!) to join him in a sacrifice of praise, for we have been constituted a "kingdom of priests" (vs.6). Jesus loves us! Present tense, actively, passionately, perfectly, completely forever! What more do we need to know? What greater comfort can be found than to know that the Lord of the universe has set His affection of us, even us!

As John ponders such love, he cannot help but think of the time when this outpouring of grace will be perfected in us. He who loves us is coming back for us! "Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him," (vs.7) This time, however, He will come not on the back of a colt, but, instead, on clouds of glory. All "peoples of the earth" will be affected. For those who have received His grace, which flows so freely from the cross, there will be joy unspeakable. For our sins, which no less than nails fixed Jesus to His tree of death, have been forgiven, all of them! For those who have rejected his amazing love, there will be unparalleled mourning.

ON PATMOS AND IN THE SPIRIT

The Apostle continues to bid us to rivet our gaze on Jesus as he records the first of many visions that God gave him. In simple humility he refers to himself only as John, "your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus" (vs.9). We are in union with our Lord and with each other. This is the essence of community. As members of God's kingdom we are not shielded from hardship. Rather, it is "through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God " (Acts 14:22). The good news is that He is with us, therefore, we patiently endure. How our generation of American Christians needs to rediscover a Biblical theology of

suffering. Instead of counting it all joy when we enter into times of testing, trial and hardship we tend to angrily whine and complain about the unfaithfulness and unfairness of God. As Sam Shoemaker once said of the Church in the 20th Century, "We have pampered ourselves into mediocrity when we could have forgotten ourselves into immortality." We give the appearance of being spoiled and "soft".

As John wrote he was "on Patmos" but, "in the Spirit". God seems to be more committed to giving Himself to us rather than getting us out of difficult situations. His agenda seems to have more to do with changing us rather than changing our circumstances. This theme can be seen not only throughout the book of Revelation but also throughout Church History.

Jesus spoke to John with trumpet-like clarity and authority and instructed him to write "what you see". John both hears words and sees visions, and faithfully, he has recorded these things for us. As he turns to see the one speaking to him, John is overwhelmed with the sights and sounds of the event. Here is the description of what he saw and heard.

(Rev.1:12-16)

"I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. his head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes ere like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. in his right hand he had seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."

It is important and comforting to notice that the first thing John sees is Jesus in the midst of his people, the Church, the "seven golden lampstands" (Rev.1:20). As Bruce Metzger has said, "Christ is not an absentee landlord." He is with us and He is for us.

He is our Immanuel. John goes on to describe Jesus in rich imagery and symbolism that is not meant to be painted, but rather to be pondered. Even at this early point in Revelation we begin to see how full the beloved Apostle's heart was with Old Testament revelation and with an understanding of the whole Messianic tradition. John was immersed in the Scriptures. In fact, of the 404 verses which constitute the twenty-two chapters of Revelation, 278 of them contain at least one allusion to an Old Testament passage! We dare not miss this point. The only "code language" that John is using is that of God's Word!

The "son of man" in John's vision is none other than the glorious persona described by the same name in Daniel 7:13. This is the title that Jesus chose more than any other when referring to Himself during His itinerant ministry. Deliverance from the Babylonian captivity was just a foreshadowing of the deliverance from sin that Jesus would win for us in fulfilling Daniel's prophecies.

John sees Him clothed with a robe, perhaps representative of both a king and a high priest. Jesus, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Jesus, the great, faithful and merciful high priest presiding over a throne of grace for the people of God! The "golden sash" speaks of his royal authority (see Ex.28:8; 39:5). The "white hair" adorning his head is not an expression of age but of wisdom and the respect due him (Dan.7:9; Isa.1:18; Prov.16:31). This is none other than Daniel's "Ancient of Days"! The penetrating scrutiny of our Lord is symbolized by his "eyes of blazing fire". His stability and strength are emphasized by his "feet like glowing brass". John describes the voice he hears as having the might and authority of "rushing waters", the very expression Ezekiel used to describe the voice of God (Ezek.1:24; 43:2). In Jesus' right hand are the "seven stars" which John tells us represent the angels or messengers of the seven churches. Once again we are given a picture of the involvement and care that our Lord gives to his people (1:20). The "doubled-edged sword" that issues from his mouth is certainly metaphorical and not metaphysical! Jesus' words are true and powerful. He

speaks grace for his people and destruction for his enemies (Isa.11:4; Heb.4:12).

Lastly, the face of Jesus is seen in all of its overwhelming brilliance. "Like the sun", His glory shines forth.

John had encountered this glory previously, on the Mount of Transfiguration, (Matt.17:2). He had also been with Jesus in His resurrection state. But now he is given an even fuller revelation of the glorified Son and, appropriately, John is undone. He falls down as a dead man at the feet of Jesus. This is a true "slaying in the Spirit". Contrary to the contemporary phenomenon of the same name, though, this is no "neat experience to be sought". Rather, it is a transforming encounter with the majesty of our Lord. Like John, we too would be overwhelmed in the presence of our glorified Lord. But the purpose of this vision is not to leave John as a dead man, but to bring fresh life to his whole being, to give him assurance and hope as he confronts the crisis of his day.

The hand of grace touches him as these great words of encouragement are spoken, "Do not be afraid." That is all we need to hear from Jesus. "Do not be afraid." This loving exhortation is heard throughout the book of Revelation. John had heard Jesus utter these same comforting words late one stormy night on the sea of Galilee. The result was peace and a worship service in a little boat (Matt.14:25-33). Jesus can release us from our fears and effect such a calm because of who He is. He bears the same title as the Lord Almighty in verse eight. The Book of Revelation clearly teaches and celebrates the deity of Jesus Christ. He is the "First and the Last". He has conquered death through his resurrection and He is forever the "Living One", for He is also the source of all created life (John 1:1-3).

Jesus, and no one else, "holds the keys of Death and Hades". He has dominion over all things. We do not need to fear death and those who would take our lives any more than our First Century brothers and sisters needed to fear the threats and violence of Rome. It is not as though the threats were idle or groundless, for many die as martyrs in Revelation. Rather, in Jesus we find "the death of death"! There is no

place where He is not Lord. The final manifestation of this authority will be seen when He casts Death and Hades, themselves, into the lake of fire (Rev.20:11-15).

John is instructed, once again (Rev.1:19), by Jesus to write what he has "seen", in all of its visual reality and detail. He is also instructed to record "what is now and what will take place later." The knowledge and insight that God gives John is sufficient but partial. It will only be when Jesus returns that we will "know fully even as we are fully known". But our confidence and our hope is bound up with the promise that these things "must soon take place" (Rev.1:1).

History is moving inexorably towards God's determined end. The word "must" is gigantic in its implications. There are no contingency plans in heaven, no mere probabilities, no plan B, no bail out clauses. Everything is assured. This is neither fate nor karma. This is King Jesus who not only holds the "stars" and walks among the "lampstands", but also before Whom one day every knee is going to bow and every tongue is going to confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God. All we need is to see Jesus, the Biblical Jesus, the real Jesus. He is the foundation of our hope. He is our anchor. The unveiling of Jesus that begins in chapter one gathers momentum as the apocalypse continues through chapter twenty-two. His mercy, might and majesty only get clearer as we progress towards the final longing cry of the book, "Maranatha!", "Even so, Lord Jesus, come!"

JESUS AND HIS BRIDE: HOPE FOR THE CHURCH

Revelation 2-3

The genesis of the loving and persistent prodding which led me to write this book actually goes back ten years, to the Summer of 1986. It was during those three months that a foundation was laid for the the "birthing" of a new church which would be centered in the beautiful community of Franklin, some ten miles south of Nashville. And like most "births", this one was not without surprise, labor and travail! In the Fall of 1985 my wife and I were involved with five other couples who met once a week for the purposes of Bible study, encouragement and prayer. Mike and Sue Card were a part of this little group which realized the importance of our walking together in community, as brothers and sisters in Christ, with a commitment to "provoke one another unto love and good deeds." Little did we realize the plans our Father had for our little group.

At that time I was serving as pastor of adult discipleship on a church staff in Nashville and had been approached by the elders there to consider being sent out as a planting pastor for a new daughter church. When approached I responded with great ambivalence. There was a part of me that was thrilled at the prospect of being involved in birthing a brand new church, but on the other hand, there was a part of my heart that felt insecure and suspect. It was this small group of couples which proved to be the perfect setting in which to deal with my dreams and my fears.

After months of wrestling and prayer, talking with my mentors, examining my heart, ad nauseum Mike Card made one physical gesture that sealed the calling for me. He simply struck the posture of a carpenter with a saw in hand and began rocking that imaginary saw back and forth, back and forth. There was no angel balancing on the bow of that unseen saw, nor did I hear a heavenly chorus break out in triumphant shouting and singing. But I did experience the peace of God, a peace that I have not

doubted ever since we entered the whole painfully joyous process of planting a new church. It is interesting to note that out of those five original couples, there is Mike Card, who is a principle teacher in our church; Scott Roley, who is now one of our pastors; and, Buddy Green, who is both an elder and a worship leader. When our small group began meeting none of us would have ever thought..... Chalk one up for the sovereignty of God!

So how does one birth a church? There are several ways; redemptive ones and disastrous ones! We decided, with the counsel of our "mother church", to invite any interested families to begin meeting with me in a Sunday School class format in the summer of 1986 for the purpose of hearing, learning and praying about our vision for Franklin. To free us from our own agendas and to focus us on the heart of the Father for this new church in embryo, I took our 100 member core group through a study of Revelation 2-3. That study not only proved to be a wonderful way of starting a church but it also led to my teaching through the entire book of Revelation some seven years later. That's how long it took me to get over my own "Revelation baggage"!

In this chapter I want to share what we learned in that vision casting summer of '86. We continue to come back to these central truths of what life as the Body of Christ is to look like for the people of God. God did a major work in our hearts in those formative days as most of us were coming from a variety of painful backgrounds and church experiences of all sorts. Any time a new church is being formed you will find men and women coming out of the woods to "finally have the church of their dreams". Those initial weeks of gestation for a young church are so critical. This is why we started C.C.C. with the foundational questions, "What does Jesus want for His church? If a local church wanted to surrender to His revealed will in the Bible, what would be their purpose, passion and priorities?. What would such a church look like?"

What we learned through our study of Revelation 2-3, to this day still represents the

vision and philosophy of ministry for Christ Community Church. These are truths to which we often return as a church family, for it is here that we see so clearly that Jesus is passionately in love with His people, the Church. Every chapter and every verse in Revelation resonates with this love. Our Lord is preparing a Bride to marry and love forever. To miss this central theme in Revelation is to do great injustice to the whole book and to deny our hearts profound joy, peace and comfort.

There is no people more loved, right now, than the Church of Jesus Christ! Because our Divine Bridegroom has triumphed over sin and death, grace abounds to us. We are clothed in His righteousness and are completely forgiven of all of our sins; past, present and future. There is nothing that we can do to cause Jesus to love us more than He already does and there is nothing that we can do to cause Him to love us less. We are the perfectly loved "wife of the Lamb." Astonishment and profound gratitude should follow as these truths grip our hearts.

As we ponder our future as the people of God what should thrill us the most is not simply leaving this world, with all of its evil and brokenness, but, rather, the living hope of the coming "wedding supper of the Lamb". A celebration, the likes of which we can barely imagine, awaits us. "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has thought even entered into the mind of man the things that are prepared for those who love Him." Forever in His presence Perfect love savored throughout eternity. "What wondrous love is this. O my soul, O my soul!"

The anticipation and excitement of every bridegroom must certainly fill the heart of Jesus. Dare we believe that He is looking forward to His second coming more than we are? As a pastor I have had the privilege of officiating at many weddings, but one in particular stands out to me. We were at the anxiously awaited, sweaty-palms, lump-in-the-throat moment in the service when the bride was to enter. Loud and majestic strains of "Joyful, joyful, We Adore Thee" filled the sanctuary. The doors to the back of the worship center were promptly pulled opened, and there she was, the bride, as ready

and as beautiful as any I have ever seen, (except for my wife, of course!).

None of us were prepared for what happened next. All of a sudden the bridegroom let out a spontaneous, "Wow!", and took off up the isle to receive his bride! He was simply overwhelmed at the impact of the moment. I had to go after him and physically pull him back into place. Needless to say, we were all deeply touched by the demonstration of his unabated love for his beloved. What stirs me even more is to realize this is the way Jesus loves us, His Beloved! Anticipation fills His heart as Jesus awaits the opening of the doors of heaven that He might receive His Bride. The more I read, study and reflect on Revelation the more I realize I am just beginning to perceive the infectious, intense and involved love of Jesus for His Church. Such knowledge has been slow in coming.

HERE COMES THE BRIDE

The resurrected Jesus now addresses His Bride. The seven churches were all located within a ninety mile radius of one another, the average distance between them being from twenty-five to fifty miles. They are listed in the text in the order that a carrier would deliver a circular letter after arriving from Patmos near Ephesus, which was a distance of approximately 60 miles across the Aegean Sea. Each of the seven letters follows a similar form and pattern in construction:

1. The particular church is addressed through her resident "angel". The "angel" seems to represent either the main leader in the local congregation, a presbyter or bishop, or else a "spiritual guardian angel of that church".
2. Jesus is identified by one of the names or images found in John's first vision in Rev.1:12-18.
3. Jesus reveals His intimate knowledge of the church and expresses his loving concern. He offers encouragement and commendation, as warranted.
4. Rebuke and correction are given next as needed. "Those the Lord loves, He

disciplines."

5. Instruction concerning specific repentance is then given.
6. A general exhortation and invitation follows. "He who has an ear, let him hear..."
7. Lastly, there is a promise of reward described in terms having to do with titles and images of Jesus found in the last two chapters of Revelation.

Let's take a look, now, at each of the seven churches, drawing attention, in particular, to that which Jesus commends and what He corrects in these fellowships. This is our first encounter with a "seven" in Revelation. We know that there were at least ten cities in Asia Minor which had established churches, but these seven seem to be chosen for the purpose of giving us a composite picture of what the Bride of Jesus should look like as she "makes herself ready" for the coming of the Bridegroom.

TO THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS: Rev. 2:1-7

Love Me and those around you as you did at first, with passion and joy.

Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, teeming with a population of a quarter million citizens. Known as the "Vanity Fair of the Ancient World", she was a wealthy and cosmopolitan trade city, enhanced by sea ports and the convergence of three main highways. Ephesus was a center of the worship of "Artemis", the fertility "bee goddess", (known by her Latin name, "Diana", in Acts 19). A great temple was built to her honor in this city which became one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

As John writes, the church in Ephesus is about thirty years old. The Apostle Paul had invested three years of his life there preaching the gospel, planting and maturing churches. He concluded his great Ephesian epistle with this benediction, "Grace to all

who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love" (Eph.6:24). Did Paul realize just how appropriate and prophetic these parting words would be? Unfortunately, "undying love" gave way to "forsaken love" in Ephesus. Here is a church which is commended for her hard work, perseverance and defense of the faith in the face of heresy. And yet, here is a church which has lost the heart of a Bride. She is no longer the Bride in love. She is Martha, being busy for Jesus, instead of Mary, treasuring communion with her Lord more than anything else.

The correction that Jesus brings to the Ephesian church is as much of a compliment as it is a rebuke! Do we realize what it means for our Lord to be zealous and jealous for our love? What dignity! What delight! He who loves us with an everlasting love is calling forth the response of affectionate and pronounced love, from us, His Bride. This love must be at the heart of what we call worship. It is to define what we call fellowship or community. Love is to be the aroma that makes the gospel of Jesus attractive in all of our evangelism, missions and outreach ministries. It must be present, or everything else we do as the people of God is incomplete, if not negated. As Paul says, without this love "we are nothing." (1 Cor.13)

John was well acquainted with Jesus' emphasis on love. As he received these words for believers in Ephesus, he remembered the time when our Lord restored Peter to the fellowship of the disciples with this threefold question, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:15ff.) To have witnessed the intensity of Jesus' compassion as He affirmed the one who had denied Him must have been one of the greatest expressions of love ever seen! To have heard Jesus' emphasis on His longing for our affection no doubt made an indelible impression on John as well. And certainly, he recalled our Lord's summation of the Law and Prophets, when Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matt.22:37-38)

John, himself, was given the privilege of recording for us the "New Commandment"

that Jesus gave His disciples on the evening of His betrayal. "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

(John 13:34-35) Love for our Bridegroom must always be our highest priority, and love for one another will be one of the purest and surest demonstrations of this love. It is also John who reminds us, "We love because He first loved us." (Jn.4:19)

TO THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA: Rev.2:8-11

***You have suffered much for me, you will suffer more. Fear not,
for I am in control, and I love you.***

Smyrna was about 35 miles due north of Ephesus and is known as Izmir in modern day Turkey. This proud people minted their own coins which bore the phrase "first in Asia in beauty and size". Known as a "politically correct" city, Smyrna had a long history of Emperor worship. In 195 B.C. a temple was built to Dea Roma, to the goddess of Rome, and in 23 A.D. she was chosen above ten other Roman cities for the honor of building a temple to honor Emperor Tiberius. During Domitian's reign (81-96 A.D.) Emperor worship became compulsory and once a year citizens were required to burn incense on the altar to the godhead of Caesar, or face the threat of death.

One can easily imagine, therefore, that Christians in Smyrna lived under intense pressure and in the presence of unrelenting persecution. Rome, however, was not the only source of suffering for the Bride. There was a group of Jews hostile to the Christian faith in Smyrna who Jesus refers to as "a synagogue of Satan." Together they orchestrated a symphony of evil for Jesus' Beloved that included poverty, slander, prison and death. The church's love for Jesus was refined in the fire of suffering.

As you read Jesus' letter to Smyrna what do you see, what do you feel? I am struck

by His tenderness, compassion, and involved love. To the Bride who is suffering He reveals Himself as "the First and the Last, who died and came to life again". Our Bridegroom is eternal and He is victorious! We need not fear death, even death by martyrdom. Jesus has come to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb.2:15).

One of the early Church's best known martyrs was Polycarp, a native of Smyrna. He was put to death in 156 A.D. because of his unwillingness to sacrifice to the Emperor. When asked to recant of his faith he responded, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and He has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" There are things that we will endure only by the compelling power of the love of Jesus. Few of us realize that there have been more martyrs in the 20th Century Church than the number in the preceding 19 centuries combined!

I am also deeply encouraged by the fact that Jesus both acknowledges our suffering and reveals Himself to be the Lord over our pain. "I know your afflictions and your poverty...I know the slander" There is nothing "Pollyanna" about our Bridegroom. He does not disregard or play down the reality of our hurts. He who has been made "perfect through suffering" is not "unable to sympathize with our weaknesses". (Heb.2:10:4:15). He knows our limit even as He knows His purposes for our suffering. "Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer... you will suffer persecution for ten days." The "ten-day-ness" of this statement is a source of deep comfort. Our Bridegroom, not the devil, is in control of the season of our suffering! He promises us that one day we will fully understand the things that are now the source of great fear, hurt, confusion, and even anger. Every tear will be wiped away and all pain redeemed. Therefore, we can learn to say with Paul, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." As we love Him because He first love us, let us suffer for Him for the very same reason. What will it mean for us to be so captured by the grace and glory of Jesus that we too will not

"love our lives unto death"?

TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM: Rev.2:12-17

***You have loved me to the point of death and have been faithful
to defend the gospel. I call you, now, to even greater faithfulness.***

Pergamum was located approximately 50 miles up the coast from Smyrna and about 10 miles inland. It was a "city set on a hill", in fact on top of a one thousand foot hill! Our word "parchment" is derived from "Pergamum", and for good reasons. Not only was this important writing material invented here but the city was also famous for its library of 200,000 volumns. Pergamum was a very religious city with temples and altars doting and defining the landscape. Four major pagan cults were centered here in honor of *Zeus* (upon whose huge elevated altar animal sacrifices were offered 24 hours a day), *Athena* (the patron goddess), *Dionysos* and *Asklepios* (the "savior god of healing"). Pergamum was also the official center in Asia for the imperial cult and the first city with a temple built to honor a living Emperor (to Augustus in 29 B.C.).

With all of the philosophy and religion in Pergamum it is not hard to understand why this was a persecuted church. To be a Christian is to commit to a monogamous relationship with the lover of our souls. Jesus tells us, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This truth is offensive to a world which champions "many ways to the same god". The "sharp, double-edged sword" of the gospel cuts at the heart of a pluralistic culture that esteems religious "tolerance" over absolute truth. The cost of living out a compassionate demonstration and defense of the truth of the gospel can be great. In this letter Jesus mentions a certain Antipas, a member of the church, who lost his life for the sake of "true truth" in Pergamum.

If Satan is not successful in destroying the message of the gospel from without then he resorts to perverting and subverting the gospel from within the church. Jesus rebukes His Bride for being inconsistent in her very strength, love for the truth. Apparently, two strains of false teaching were beginning to infiltrate the church in Pergamum, that of the "Balamites" and the "Nicolaitans". Compromise with pagan idolatry and immorality was being introduced to the fellowship, perhaps by those who thought Christians were being a little too narrow minded, a little too legalistic when it comes to the exclusiveness of the Christian faith. The majority were being too nonchalant about a minority who were teaching error. Jesus reminds us, however, that we must not tolerate error under the guise of being open minded and fair. We can be gracious and tenacious for the truth at the same time.

The Bride in love must also be the Bride in truth. I remember with embarrassment one of the first things uttered from my lips after I became a Christian in 1968, "Don't give me theology, give me Jesus!" My stereotype and assumption was that theology was essentially the same thing as dead orthodoxy. "People who go to seminary are really going to the cemetery.", so I mused with the shallowness of all such clichés. Little did I realize as a young Christian that every time we say the name "Jesus" we are doing theology! *Live heterodoxy is no answer for dead orthodoxy!*

Christianity is Person to be trusted and a truth to be believed. We can only offer a true doxology when it is grounded in a Biblical theology. George Barna recently presented statistics that demonstrate that while over 80% of American evangelicals still profess belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, over 50% also affirm their belief that "absolute truth does not exist". Go figure! Maybe we are in need of a "back to truth movement" so we can have a real "back to the Bible movement".

TO THE CHURCH IN THYATIRA: Rev.2:18-29

Your love for me is demonstrated for me in many ways.

Now set your heart on being my holy Bride.

Thyatira was 45 miles southeast of Pergamum on the way to Sardis. Of the seven cities addressed it was the least impressive in terms of political, religious and cultural importance. The city was mainly known for its numerous "trade guilds". Included were woolworkers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers, and bronze-smiths. These trade guilds were integrated into the religious life of the community so that economics and worship practices went hand in hand. Lydia, the Apostle Paul's first convert to Christianity in Macedonia and "a seller of purple goods", was from Thyatira (Acts 16:14ff.).

The One who sees everything, with His "eyes of blazing fire", looks into heart of the church in Thyatira and finds much to affirm. The Bride of Jesus there had made steady progress in her "deeds, love, faith, service and perseverance", quite a picture of health and maturity. What more could Jesus long for in His people? Apparently the challenge of buying and selling in an economy in which business was tied to false worship was taking its toll on a part of the church. Economic pressure led to moral compromise. As John Stott has said, "If the devil cannot conquer the church by the application of political pressure or the propagation of intellectual heresy he will try by the insinuation of moral evil."

A certain "Jezebel", either an individual or group, had infiltrated the church and, like her Old Testament counterpart, she was a powerful seductress. A part of the church in Thyatira was being led into idolatry and immorality through the false teaching of this "Jezebel party". Perhaps some Christians thought that it would be possible to cooperate with certain trade guilds without being influenced by their world-view and lifestyle. They were naive. In confronting this evil Jesus calls His Bride to a more

consistent and consuming holiness.

"Holiness" is one of those concepts that has fallen on hard times in the contemporary church. Before I became a Christian this "church word" was synonymous with dourness, dowdiness, the color black, religious rules, the interjection "NO!", and mean spirited people who did anything but make the gospel attractive to me. But now, as God has given me grace, I realize that holiness is an attitude of the heart before it is compliance with an external code or list of "do's and don'ts". To be "holy" is simply to be "set apart" for the purposes for which God has designed us.

We who have been declared holy through the gospel in justification are being made progressively holy in sanctification, as God conforms us more and more unto the image of Jesus. This process will only be completed and perfected in the day of our glorification. And thanks be to God! He promises to bring to completion the good work He has begun in us. (Phil.1:6)

In the context of the Bridegroom-Bride metaphor, holiness is our radical commitment to live out the implications of what it means to be the tenderly loved Bride of Jesus. We are to live for the pleasure and praise of Jesus, not that He might accept us, but because He already has, fully and eternally! Any other motivation turns our obedience into legalism and self-righteousness.

Let us avoid both extremes, then, as we confront the immorality and idolatry of our own day. On one hand, naivete and compromise must be rejected. Let us guard against being absorbed into our culture for the sake of economic or social wherewithal. But let us also guard against confusing holiness with moralism, leading to asceticism, withdrawal or alienation from the culture. Neither laxity nor legalism is the answer. We are to be "in the world and yet, not of it". Holiness is best manifest not in spatial "set-apart-ness" but in character "set-a-part-ness". We are to demonstrate to the "watching world" what it means to be captured by the love of Jesus in the gospel. As a Betrothed Bride, let us keep ourselves pure and holy for our true love.

TO THE CHURCH IN SARDIS: Rev.3:1-6

***My heart breaks when I think of you, for you are in name only,
my Bride. I call you to life, I call you to reality.***

Sardis was located about 30 miles south of Thyartira. Its history had been marked with times of commercial and military notoriety. Three main landmarks stood out in the city: The acropolis, which rose 800 feet above the north section of Sardis; the temple to Artemis; and the necropolis, or cemetery of "a thousand hills". These burial mounds could be seen on the skyline up to seven miles from the city. In the Sixth Century B.C. Sardis was one of the most powerful cities of the ancient world. King Croesus lived here with all of his pomp and wealth. Through negligence and a lack of vigilance, however, Sardis was attacked and defeated several times in her history.

An earthquake also devastated the city in A.D.17. and only through the generosity of Emperor Tiberius was she able to recover and become a successful center for the woolen and dying industry. As a city, it had been known for "luxury and laxity" and came to represent "the peace of the man whose dreams are dead and whose mind is asleep, the peace of lethargy and evasion" (Wm. Barclay).

There is no church addressed among the seven which incurs a more severe rebuke from Jesus than Sardis. Here is an example of a Bride in name only. She had a reputation without reality, a creed without Christ, religion without relationship. The church in Sardis became "a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity" (Caird), the first example of nominal Christianity in a whole church that we have recorded in the New Testament. "The Sardian church was for the most part a duped church" (A.F. Johnson).

The One "who holds the seven spirits", John's description of the Holy Spirit in Revelation, confronts the deadness in the church. For without the Spirit of God there is

no life. The Bride of Jesus is not to be a lifeless mannequin in the window of the religious marketplace nor an old fading image in the scrapbook of ecclesiastical memory. We are called to life, life in the Spirit, life which is generated and sustained by Jesus, Himself. Through the gospel we are actually regenerated and brought into the most intimate of all relationships with the one who is the "Resurrection and the Life."

Is it possible for whole congregations to be "in church" but not "in Christ"? History would seem to dictate as much. "You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead." These are very sobering words. How can a church fall into such a lamentable condition? As a young Christian in the "Jesus Movement" I used to think that this rebuke was primarily addressed to Christians who simply needed to be revived! Although the letter to Sardis can be appropriately applied in this way, I think there is something more fundamental and critical for us to see in this letter.

Now, having been a pastor, for nearly 20 years, I realize that the religious and social enculturation process in a society can be so strong and deceptive that it is quite possible for large groups of professing Christians to go through the motions of religious life and neither understand the gospel nor experience its saving power. Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount that many will come to Him on the day of judgment assuming membership in His kingdom based on participation in spiritual activity and even supernatural manifestations of God's Spirit. But He will say to them, "Depart from Me. I never knew you."

It is one thing to know that you are not a Christian and quite another to assume that you are joined to Christ, when in reality, you are only joined to a church. This truth is a part of my own testimony. I assumed I was a Christian up till the very night I was converted!

But as it is the case in most "dead churches", so it was in Sardis, there were some genuine Christians in the fellowship. The Bride of Jesus was represented there, if only by a minority of church members "who walk with me, dressed in white". This is not an example of "the deeper life club" or a "spiritual elite" in the church. Rather, it is the

language used of all who have been saved by grace through faith. They, alone, are the Bride in reality. From this letter we should appreciate the importance of constantly preaching the gospel in the church. We dare not equate being in the pews with being in Christ.

TO THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA: Rev.3:7-13

I write you only to encourage you and to strengthen you hearts.

You are placed in a key position to impact your culture and the nations.

Trust me. I am using you for my glory.

Philadelphia was situated 35 miles southeast from Sardis. It was located at the eastern end of a broad valley near the river Cogamis. The city was in a strategic location at the juncture of trade routes leading to Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia. In fact, Philadelphia earned the title, "the gateway to the East." Her economic prowess was based on agriculture and industry. Strabo, the historian, called Philadelphia "a city full of earthquakes". The great earthquake of A.D. 17, which hit Sardis, almost completely destroyed Philadelphia. But by the time of John's writing the city had been rebuilt and became known as "little Athens", brimming with temples and religious festivals. The persecution that Christians experienced did not come from the pagans, however, but primarily at the hands of hostile Jews.

Jesus reveals Himself to the Beloved of Philadelphia as the Lord of opportunity. He has the "key of David" and control over the opening and closing of all doors. "What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open". In this church we find a thrilling example of the strength of weakness. This small, seemingly insignificant body of believers, is called to go through a great door of opportunity into a life of substantive impact. What irony. What a paradox! The gospel is full of such glorious paradoxes. The way to live is to die. The first shall be last. The way up is down. We find ourselves

by losing ourselves. As Paul wrote, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (2 Cor.4:7) Jesus is calling His Bride to a life of meaningful ministry and impact.

As I read Jesus' words to His Bride in Philadelphia I am both encouraged and rebuked. First of all, I am encouraged to be reminded that He is the One through whom and by whom all ministry is realized. Jesus call us, gifts us and empowers us to be involved in His eternal purposes. For example, the Great Commission is not a "job to get done" but, rather, a reality in which we participate. God is actively filling up heaven with men and women from every race, tribe, tongue and people group. He, alone, can raise the dead, spiritually and otherwise! We need to see that ministry is simply the overflow of hearts filled with the grace of the gospel. Jesus uses His people to do things we cannot do in our own power. He uses the "foolish things of the world to shame the wise; the weak things of the world to shame the strong; the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are not" (1 Cor.1:27-28). The church in Philadelphia was to see itself like Gideon's army, a little people with a big and faithful God.

This letter also rebukes me, and perhaps many of us in the contemporary "fortress church". Believers in Philadelphia were placed in a strategic location in a pagan culture. All they had to do was walk through the door of opportunity and ministry. Their calling was not to build "camp God" and be a community of ingrown navel-gazers merely holding on "till the rapture". Their calling, and ours, is to be "salt and light", in and to the culture. We are not selfishly and sheepishly (no pun intended!) to surround ourselves only with Christians. Neither are we to fill up our "Daytimers" with endless "fellowship" opportunities. The gospel frees us and empowers us to live "other-centeredly".

This is our Father's world! Non-Christians are not our ultimate enemy, Satan is. How can we justify the fear and intimidation that tends to encourage the contemporary American church to either retreat from the culture or to be overly strident and mean

spirited as we seek to have a redemptive impact reflect in world? Why does such a strident "us verses them" dichotomy persist ? We are to build bridges, not burn them.

Ministry is the costly expression of the love of Jesus being communicated to and through the Bride of Christ. It can get very messy, exhausting and painful. Persecution is the predictable consequence of a commitment to witness faithfully and to love well. But Jesus promises us that "I will make them (those who persecute us) come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have love you." What an image! What a promise! Ministry is following our Lord through any and every door that He opens. We dare not privatize our faith and isolate ourselves from the very world into which we have been sent by Jesus. Ministry also involves the wisdom of not trying to open doors that He has closed, for He "opens doors that no man can shut and shuts doors that no man can open"! The bottom line is this: Jesus is the "friend of sinners". Are we?

TO THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA: Rev.3:14-22

***Wake up my Bride! Your heart has become tepid
divided, and proud. I call you to Myself.***

Laodicea was about 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia and was considered the chief city of the southern region of Phrygia. It was situated in the Lycus valley near the cities of Hierapolis and Colossae. Laodicea was a very wealthy town known for its banking industry and for its medical school in which "Phrygian powder" was produced, a popular eye-salve. After being severely debilitated by an earthquake in 61 A.D. the city refused financial assistance from Rome, choosing to rebuild from her own treasury. A prized species sheep were raised there whose black glossy wool was in great demand. The city's major weakness was its lack of a convenient source of water. City planners built the city because of trade routes, not because of its natural resources.

Here we have a picture of an immature, and spoiled Bride, who is blind to her own condition. Jesus confronts His Beloved in Laodicea with her spiritual self-satisfaction, complacency and indifference. John Stott says of this church, "Perhaps none of the 7 letters is more appropriate to the 20th century church than this. It describes vividly the respectable, sentimental, nominal, skin-deep religiosity which is so widespread today. Our Christianity is flabby and anemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion. Zeal, heat, fire, passion - these are the qualities we lack today and desperately need."

Involved love often leads to painful love. These "life giving rebukes" which Jesus delivers are actually a manifestation of the depth of His compassion and concern for His people, for "those whom I love I rebuke and discipline". "Faithful are the wounds of a friend", the Scriptures tell us and Jesus is "the friend that sticks closer than a brother", even as a Bridegroom.

Laodicea is an example of a Christian or church which fails to realize the power of the "good life" to dilute our wholehearted affection for Jesus. I remember Michael Card telling me of a visit he had with a couple of national pastors he met while on a mission to China. These men had been imprisoned for nearly 20 years by communist revolutionaries for no other reason than because they preached the gospel. He recounted their commitment "to pray about the poverty of the wealth of the American church". Riches and comforts, they feared were too much of a burden for Christians to carry. "How can we be free to love and to worship and to serve Jesus when weighed down with the things of this world?", they lovingly asked. Ouch!

Here the cry of the Lover of our souls in these words as He calls out to us, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." This is not the appeal of an evangelist to non-Christians. This is Jesus showing us the tragedy of living the Christian life apart from intimacy with Him, the evil of having the comforts of this world replacing

communion with Him. He longs to "eat with us", to once again enjoy the rich fellowship of the table as a foreshadowing of the greatest fellowship we will ever know, at the "wedding supper of the Lamb". Every time we partake of the Lord's Supper we should have our longing for that Day accentuated.

As we are broken afresh by His love in the gospel we receive "true gold" in the place of our world's "fool's gold"; the white garments of imputed righteousness in the place of garments which don't cover but only reveal our real nakedness; and the salve of His grace that we might truly see. Jesus calls us to love Him with an undivided heart and to love Him with passion, and to love Him above all else.

THE BRIDE BEAUTIFUL

Here, then, are features that will be observable in the Bride beautiful.

1. A passionate "first love" relationship with the Lord Jesus which spills over into all other relationships.
2. A glad willingness and preparedness to suffer for our Bridegroom
3. A growing knowledge of the truth of the gospel and a commitment to defend the faith "once and for all delivered unto the saints".
4. Purity of heart and holiness of lifestyle driven by love and empowered by grace.
5. An aliveness in Jesus generated by His real presence in our midst and hearts.
6. A commitment to follow Jesus into a life of other-centered living through evangelism, missions and cultural impact.
7. An undivided and wholehearted allegiance to Jesus which treasures communion with Him more than the comforts of the world, more than anything else.

How we, in the contemporary American church, need to ponder these things in the

waning moments of the 20th century. Francis Schaeffer warned us in the 70's of his fear that we were headed for a day when the consuming interest and demand among American evangelicals would be for "personal peace and affluence". To what extent can we say that his concern was more prophetic than merely suggestive? The self-absorbing narcissism of our culture has given birth to a generation of consumer driven churches which compete with each other like fast food restaurants. "McChurch" has replaced "a people belonging to God" as the defining reality of much of what we now call "church". Instead of the Bridegroom and Bride metaphor defining our life as the Body of Christ, perhaps Butler and the Served is more appropriate in our day. Something is tragically wrong when a prominent church leader in our day will suggest that the only reformation that we need is one of "self-affirmation". God have mercy on us. No matter what our denomination, theological heritage, or liturgical preference, we need revival in the American church.

As we continue our

THE HOPE OF AN OCCUPIED THRONE

Revelation 4

A couple of summers ago I took my wife and two kids to Western Europe to visit some of the missionaries that our church family is privileged to support. We traveled through France, Italy, and Switzerland before ending up in England. That one trip generated enough stories of "rapture and rupture" to justify a book all to itself. Before you plan any "exciting and romantic" overnight train voyages on Eurail, get in touch with me! Talk about making family memories. Why did the summer of 1994 have to be the hottest in 100 years in those wonderful European countries? I really sound like missionary material, don't I.

All things considered, it really was a great trip and certainly one of the most enjoyable highlights of the whole expedition was the city of London. While visiting with our missionaries who are seeking to love and preach the gospel among the huge Asian and Indian population, we were fortunate to be able to visit many of the historic landmarks of the great English capital. One such foray into the annals of the important found me and my two kids, Kristin and Scott, indulging ourselves with the "Beatle-walk". Our little tour group strolled through the highways and byways of the streets of London stopping at all of the points of interest where the 60's mega-band, the Beatles, were known to have done something or another. Our well informed leader for the afternoon adventure was the current champion of the annual "Beatle-off", the Beatle trivia tournament held on a yearly basis to determine who gets to lead Beatlemaniacs-in-recovery, like me, to places such as Abbey Road and the train station where the Beatle's movie, "A Hard Day's Night", was filmed.

As fun as that was, my favorite "typical tourist" experience actually took place not on Abbey Road but in Westminster Abbey. I am not sure what I was expecting to find on the inside of this majestic Anglican cathedral as I waited in line, or as the English say,

"in que". Overwhelming, is an overused word, but that's what it felt like as I walked into what seemed more like a museum in honor of the dead than a house of worship for the living. What a cram course in history this place is! Poets, musicians, statesmen, politicians, all kinds of great people from Great Britain are remembered by plaques, parquets, or by sarcophagi. (There goes the alliteration!)

As we made our way towards the back of the stately and crowded cathedral I had no idea what I was going to find placed directly behind the chancel area. Strategically located and welcoming every visitor's touch was the coronation throne used for Kings since the 12th century! Suddenly I was very aware of just how young American is. We're toddlers in a world of grownups! "I am touching something real old and real important!", I thought rather simplistically to myself. Men and women of renown who influenced the course of history sat upon this ancient piece of furniture which gave me new meaning for the word "antique".

Close by were the remains of several of the Kings and Queens who have graced and sometimes disgraced the history of the English commonwealth. That moment quickened within me an understanding and appreciation of the Biblical themes of "kingship" and "kingdom" I previously embraced only in theological categories. Seeing and touching these rubrics of power and authority brought to life that which is just not a part of the daily fabric of my democratic world. But they are things with which the world of the Scriptures is replete.

John's readers most definitely thought in terms of kings and crowns and thrones. These royal tokens represented life and death to the citizens dwelling in the Roman world, and sometimes, life or death. Christians first tasted the political insanity of Emperor Nero as he sought to blame the burning of Rome on this ragtag bunch of religious fanatics who worship a dead man. He was even known occasionally to dip believers in pitch and light them as lamps at his parties. And let's remember that, as John writes from Patmos, Emperor Domitian is on the throne of the Roman world, and

as already mentioned, he is demanding to be addressed as "lord and god". Under his reign, those who call Jesus Lord and God are being severely persecuted and put to death. The Roman "throne" was a source of fear and anxiety for John's readers and a means of unparalleled suffering. What, then will Jesus want His Church, His Bride, to see and to know now that He has addressed her, as represented in the seven churches?

How profoundly comforting it is to meditate upon the significance of the next vision that Jesus reveals to John against this political backdrop. Revelation 4 begins with the image of a door "standing open in heaven" (4:1). No doubt this door was opened from the heavenward side. The same Lord who opens a door of opportunity for believers in Philadelphia (3:8) now opens a door for John, (and us!) to peer into heaven. The trumpet-like voice of authority which the apostle has already heard continues with an invitation to "come up here" . Our Lord loves to reveal Himself! John is promised insight into "what must take place...". Here is that awesome word "must" appearing once again in the text. God's will is going to be accomplished on earth, even as it is in heaven! We have His promise. John provides us with a graphic basis for our assurance as Jesus now show him what is going on behind the scenes, right now.

Through the person of the Holy Spirit John is given a vision of heaven, with all of its glorious persona and perfections. It is of mammoth significance that we notice the very first thing upon which his gaze is fixed as the panorama of eternity is presented. Amid all of the sights, sounds, and pleroma of symbols, images and beings, that which captures John's attention and focus is "a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it" (4:2). This symbol of power and authority occurs 40 times in the text of Revelation. However, he doesn't just see a throne, but an occupied throne. Someone is sitting on it! It is our heavenly Father! God is in session! Our God reigns! The real throne is in heaven, not in Rome. God rules, not Domitian! In the light of this throne, and the dominion of the One sitting upon it, all other claims to kingly rule become vain and

empty. All of the kings of the earth are exposed to be like the Wizard of Oz, little men who make a lot of noise behind big curtains.

This includes the emperors of Rome.

What makes this throne magnificent is not the grain of the wood, a finely detailed carving or a jewel encrusted headboard. In fact, John does not describe the royal chair at all. What he is most zealous for us to see, however, is the One who occupies this seat of sovereignty and His central place in the whole of eternity and time. Consistent with Jewish tradition, John does not attempt to tell us what God looks like, for fear of even the slightest misrepresentation. All he can say of God is that He "had the appearance of jasper and carnelian" (4:3). These two precious or semiprecious stones probably are meant to represent God's brilliance and majesty. Our God is altogether glorious.

Around the throne was "a rainbow, resembling an emerald" (4:4). In the history of redemption the rainbow was given special covenantal meaning when God promised Noah that he would never again destroy the world by water (Genesis 9:16-17). To see a rainbow in the sky is to be reminded, therefore, of God's mercy and covenantal faithfulness. But the rainbow which John sees in heaven has even more glorious features. First of all, it "encircled the throne" (4:3). This is not the typical half-circle arch that we are used to seeing after it rains. It is a whole circle. Perhaps we are encouraged to think of the all encompassing mercies of God manifest in everything that He does. From His throne flows the reign of mercy and faithfulness. The monochromatic emerald color of this rainbow conveys the multi-dimensional peace of lush green "meadows and distant forests".

Underneath such a canopy of glory and around the throne John counts "twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads" (4:4). This is the first of many circles of beings emanating from the throne which John describes for us. The significance of the

placement of God's enthronement in John's vision should be obvious. All things center on Him! He is ancillary to nothing. All things are concentric in relation to Him.

Who then are these twenty-four elders? Probably, they represent the totality of redeemed mankind from both the Old and New Covenant communities, symbolized by the twelve patriarchs of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus. In keeping with this interpretation their white garments represent the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus given to all who receive the grace of God in the gospel (3:4f; 18; 7:9; 19:8,14). The gold crowns signify both our calling to reign with Him as a kingdom of priests and the rewards for faithful service which Jesus promises to His people (3:21; 22:5). What an encouraging picture is painted for us: The whole people of God represented by our faithful leaders from throughout the history of redemption in perfect relationship to God and to one another.

The atmosphere of heaven in John's vision is decorated with elements calculated to help us think of the awesome power and majesty of God. "From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder" (4:5) Should this remind us of Mt. Sinai and other times when God spoke and acted in nature?

(Ex.19:16; Psa.18:13-15; 1 Sam.2:10). Please do not think of heaven as having the controlled and muted climate of a library! The third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit ("the seven spirits of God", cf. Rev.1:4), is presented in close proximity to the throne in all of His fullness and fiery presence (Matt.3:11; Acts 2:3f; 1 Pet.1:7; 1 Cor.3:12ff). He is so faithful to accomplish the purposes of God the Father will blazing effectiveness throughout the universe and in all of history.

How inviting it is for John next to see and describe "what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal" (4:6) This immense and serene body of water before our enthroned heavenly Father conveys the absence of panic in heaven and the presence of a peace which passes all understanding. There are no troubled waters in the dwelling place of God, no consternation or doubt. He is never informed nor surprised. He never has

sweaty palms nor anxious moments. God loses sleep about nothing. In fact, He never "sleeps nor slumbers." He is not pacing around heaven hoping things are going to work out. Neither is He our glorified cheerleader, merely rooting and pulling for us in the "game of life". He is God, He is our God, "working all things together after the counsel of His will", and "working in all things for the good of those who love him". We need to lay hold of this glorious and freeing truth as much as our brothers and sisters in the First Century Church.

Within the circle of elders John sees "four living creatures and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back" (4:6). As we continue in the text of Revelation we are going to find more complex symbols and images that require of us suggestive rather than dogmatic interpretation. However, even when we disagree about things inconclusive in the text, many clear and abiding principles can be drawn from these Scriptures without our having absolute confidence about the meaning of each detail.

Such is the case with the four eye-encrusted living creatures, who are mentioned fourteen times in Revelation. As we consider the whole of Scriptures, it would seem that this quartet is meant to represent either all of animate creation: the lion is the king of wild beasts, the ox is the king of domesticated beasts, the eagle is the king of the birds of the air, and man is king of animate creation. Or, perhaps, as others have suggested, they represent the angelic order of angels known in the Bible as "cherubim" (Ezek.10:20; Gen.3:24; Ex.25:20). Both Ezekiel and Isaiah describe visions of angels which include their having six wings (Isa.6; Ezek.1), even as John so describes the four living creatures.

The number "four" should make us think of the four quarters of the earth (20:8), the four winds (7:1); or the four compass points (Lk.13:29; Psalms 107:3). The multitudinous eyes seem to imply constant awareness and vigilance. What both of these interpretations have in common is the reference to creation and God's involvement and watchfulness over all that He has made. "This is my Father's world...", as the hymn

writer has well said. There is no place where He is not Lord. All of creation reflects His glory. In all of creation His angels do His bidding. Be encouraged, small persecuted church. Be warned, haughty Roman empire. Tremble with fear, Satan and your host of darkness. God is on the throne and He is in the center of all things!

This is not a static 16th century classic oil painting hanging in the Louve that John is telling us about. This is the dynamic of heaven. These things are going on even as John is "in the Spirit". The four living creatures are, as their name implies, alive! The apostle sees and hears their persistent activity. "Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty, who was, and is, and is to come' (4:8). With this act of praise we begin to understand that the main business of heaven is worship. Worship is not the sole activity but it is the constant disposition of the residents of heaven. In the next chapter we will study the thrilling worship of heaven in more detail.

In this first hymn of heaven John reminds us that God is altogether "other" in His essential being. He is "holy". He is absolutely pure even as He is absolutely sovereign. The "trisagion", "Holy, holy, holy", is important for us to ponder for this is the only attribute of God that is trebled in the entire Bible. And as God is augustly holy, so He is also praised for His timelessness. He is the One "who was, and is, and is to come" (4:8). He has no parameters, boundaries or limitations. Neither does He have any lack or any need. He is complete, within His own Triune existence, thoroughly content and incredibly joyous. Theologians in the past referred to this perfection of God as His "asaiety".

As God is adored by the four living creatures "the twenty four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever" (4:10). This act of prostration is the appropriate and repeated sign of affectionate reverence given by the elders to the One who alone is "worthy, our Lord and God" (4:11). Again, let it be known that God, not Domitian or any other earthly ruler deserves such honor and

adoration. As the elders lay down their bodies they also lay down their crowns "before the throne". This symbol of submission is also an acknowledgment that their reign is derivative and their rewards are really tokens of God's operative grace. We will not preen around heaven like proud Boy Scouts with sashes full of merit badges. God will get full glory for everything that He was pleased to accomplish through His people.

The elders proclaim God's worth as they cry out "you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (4:11). The Father is worshipped as creator and sustainer of all things. He is regaled in this hymn as the origin, source, architect, designer, builder, essence, reason and end of all things. To see Him upon His throne is to be humbled and to be gladdened for our God has no equals or rivals. He will never be threatened, overthrown or impeached. Who can ultimately resist His will? "Of Him and through Him and to Him are all things." "In Him we live and move and have our being."

This knowledge is central and critical to everything that now follows in Revelation. The order of John's visions is important. Before the apostle is given a vision of the unfolding of history through the breaking of the seven seals his eyes and heart must be captured by a sight of the Lord of history. Difficult things do and will happen to the people of God. But who is in control? This is the critical issue in all of life.

To know that there is a throne in heaven and to realize that it is occupied and to see Who is sitting on the throne is foundational to building a Biblical world-view. Nothing is, nothing exists in the past, present or in the future, apart from God's intention and will. What happens on earth has its inseparable heavenly counterpart. Everything in Revelation 6-22 flows out of the throne room vision in Revelation 4-5.

How desperately our generation of Christians needs a fresh vision and understanding of the sovereignty of God. We are not fatalists. Patty Page is not our patron theological saint as she sang, "Que sera, sear, whatever will be, will be". Neither

are we stoics, who brace ourselves against the storms of life and accept all things with passive resignation. Far less must we allow ourselves to become superficial evangelicals, full of denial about the reality of pain and suffering, groping for one more Biblical Band-Aid and spiritual anesthetic to deal with huge and troubling issues which are an inevitable part of the Christian life.

It is without this vision of the occupied throne that many come to the symbols and images in Revelation (like the antichrist, great tribulation, beasts, dragons, Babylon, 666, famines and wars), and end up feeding their fears rather than their faith. How sad. Why an utter shame! It angers me when I consider the countless number of Christians who have been deprived of the implications of this great throne room vision through poor, inadequate and wrong teaching. Martin Luther was right when he stated that "bad theology is the worst taskmaster of all." God is robbed of the glory due His name and believers are bereft of peace, joy, and hope won for them by Jesus. This should not be the case. It just does not have to be!

There are no accidents or coincidences for the people of God, just God's loving, if sometimes hard to accept, providences. Coming to accept and rejoice in the sovereignty of God has been a lifelong struggle of mine, beginning with the death of my Mom in a car wreck when I was only 11 years old. It just made no sense to me that God would leave me motherless just as I was beginning those precarious adolescent years. I lamented it then. I lament it now. But God has, indeed, proven to me that His name is Redeemer. I have to learn this lesson over and over.

Even in recent seasons of life this glorious truth has been put to the test. Just last year one of the pastors on our staff was brutally murdered by his jealous son-in-law. Last month a perfectly healthy 45 year old dad and husband in our church dropped dead for no apparent reason. Last week my son was in a car wreck that totaled a Jeep Cherokee and could easily have been fatal for him and for his friend who was driving. And in the last few hour's I have received the heart wrenching news that my mentor and

discipler of twenty-one years has been taken to heaven. Dr. Jack Miller, the man who taught me and showed me more of the grace of the gospel than anyone has gone home, to the real home. I would never begrudge Jack one day in heaven, but right now my heart breaks. Tears drip from my face onto the keyboard as I force myself to accept that which I would never have scripted for this day after Easter Sunday.

And yet, how appropriate for Jack to die today, the day after we celebrated the greatest and most loving demonstration of the sovereign mercy and might of the One upon the throne, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:55-57)

O the despair that would fill my soul if I did not believe with every fiber of my being that God loves and that He is in control. Thank God, there is an occupied throne in heaven.

THE HOPE OF THE PERFECTED WORSHIP OF HEAVEN

Revelation 5

It is hard to believe that I have been a Christian for almost three decades. That's over a quarter of a century's worth of learning how much I need the grace of God every single day. During that time I have had the privilege of experiencing, first hand, the enormity and the diversity of the Body of Christ. Travel, through various missions and ministry opportunities, has been just as important to my theological education and spiritual formation as my seminary training. Both have been needed, but in recent years it seems that my cross cultural excursions have been critical to the deepening of my repentance from privatizing and Americanizing the gospel. I've come to celebrate that God has all kinds of sons and daughters, through redemption and adoption in Christ, who love Him equally, but who also love Him differently. The Body of Christ is the real "rainbow coalition".

Through my travels and from studying church history it has become redundantly obvious to me that we Christians don't tend to handle our rich diversity very well at all. Among the great scandals of the contemporary church none is more pronounced than the multiplicity of denominations which defines the Christian topography of the world. As our Lord has prayed for our unity, mutual esteem and love, so we have won gold medals in the Olympics of majoring on the theological minor, ecclesiastical turf protection, and straining out gnats while swallowing camels. Oh, that this would grieve our hearts the way it must certainly grieve our Lord's.

One who lamented our divided state of affairs wrote this parody of a familiar hymn:

Like a mighty tortoise
Moves the Church of God;
Brothers we are treading
Where we've always trod;
We are all divided,

Many bodies we,
Very strong on doctrine,
Weak on charity.

Painfully, and oddly enough, our disunity is nowhere more clearly pronounced than when the topic of "worship" emerges for discussion and planning among Christians. That which is meant to be an expression of Spirit wrought humility and the other-centered adoration of God too often becomes a battle ground on which proud combatants vie for the right to define the liturgy and control the elements and music of the worship service. More often than not, this is usually only according to one's own preferred aesthetic sensibilities and preferences. Even in individual church families, I have observed more suspicion, anger, manipulation and hostility surrounding the control of the worship service than of the predictable "war zones" in a local church. What an ugly circumstance and utter contradiction of the nature and purpose of the worship of God! How can this be? It should also grieve us that the most segregated and provincial hour of the week, for Christians around the world, occurs on the Lord's Day when we gather to worship the Head of the whole Church. Talk about *non sequiturs*! The Book of Revelation confronts these sins and invites us to something far more glorious.

As we turn our attention now to Revelation 5, we are still in the great throne room vision that began in chapter 4. What becomes obvious, as we look at this whole section within the apocalypse, is that John is given much more than a vision of the sovereignty of God with his glimpse into the control center of the universe. He is given a vision of the glorious worship of heaven. John sees and hears that for which we have been made, that which will be our sumptuous feast throughout eternity, the perfected worship of our Triune God. As Karl Barth has said, "Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life." John's

visions of heavenly worship bear this out.

From this point on in Revelation we will see that the worship of the Lamb and the One upon the throne is the defining reality of the people of God. It is that which distinguishes us from all others who worship the Beast (Rev.13), demons, idols, or anything else; It is the love song of the Bride for the Bridegroom; It is the means by which we are to wage war against Satan in the world, not against one another in the Body of Christ; It is the eschatological cry of the beloved of the Lord who worship now as a foretaste of how we will worship then.

In Revelation, worship is presented as a way of life and not just that which is celebrated one day a week in a special room called the "worship center". The whole of God's creation is the "worship center" and God, Himself, is the center and end of all worship. Several hymns and doxologies are intentionally and strategically placed throughout Revelation leading me to believe that the apocalypse is to the New Testament what the Book of Psalms is to the Old Testament. Here is our worship manual and hymnal, and it is as instructive as it is encouraging.

As God is worshipped as Creator in Revelation 4, so He is worshipped as Redeemer in chapter 5. Our focus moves from the One upon the throne to the One who hung upon the cross. The vision continues with John's gaze being riveted on a scroll in God's right hand, "with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals" (5:1). This "book of destiny" is in the firm grasp of the One upon the throne. The decrees of God are comprehensive and extensive, as the double-sided writing indicates. History is the unfolding of God's predetermined plan for all things. Chance and fate do not reign. God does!

John is further drawn into the drama of this worship as he sees and hears "a mighty angel (perhaps Gabriel?) proclaiming in a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?'" (5:2) That is, who could possibly be qualified "to perform the supreme service of bringing history to its foreordained consummation?" (Mounce) But

none could be found worthy of such a task from among the angels, creation, or even the redeemed of the Lord. At this, John wept tears of pain as he confronted his and the whole people of God's unworthiness to even look inside the scroll, much less to open it. "Nothing is more lamentable than the fact that by our own ungodliness we have deprived ourselves of all worthiness" (Hughes).

An elder, representing redeemed mankind, responds, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals" (5:5). "All weeping ceases when we look away from our defeated and unworthy selves and put our trust in him through whom all tears are wiped away, (Rev.7:17; 21:4; Heb.2:14; 4:15)" (Hughes). As the Lion, Jesus is the true King who is paramount over all. His human lineage is traced through Judah (Heb.7:14; 2 Sam.7:13,16; Isa.9:6ff; Luke 1:32f.; Gen.49:9).

But He who came after King David is also before him. (Isa.11:1, 10; John 8:57f.; Mic.5:2; Rev.22:16) In the birth of Jesus, the "shoot of Jesse" is also revealed as the "root of Jesse". He alone is worthy to open the scroll and its 7 seals! "Apart from the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, history is an enigma." (Stott)

John looks for a Lion and, instead, sees a Lamb. What a glorious paradox! This Lamb, "looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne" (5:6), becomes the central figure on whom all attention is focused. Even in heaven we will be eternally reminded of the fact that it is only by virtue of Jesus' substitutionary atonement that we are there and that history has been brought to its fulfillment. He is the Messianic King because He has been faithful to His calling as the Lamb of God.

This is no ordinary lamb that John sees, but one with "seven horns" and "seven eyes". The "seven horns" in the vision do not need to be drawn or painted onto the image of a lamb. They should make us think of the fullness of Jesus' power, as "horns" are a symbol of strength in the Scriptures (Deut.33:17; Psalms 18:2; 1 Kings 22:11; Matt.28:18).. This Lamb is the omnipotent Son of God! His "seven eyes" symbolize

both His omniscience and the pervasiveness of His Spirit's work throughout creation. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus (Rev.1:4; Act 16:7; Rom.8:9). Jesus is presented as being omniscient and omnipresent. There is nothing which Jesus does not know and there is no place where He is not! This Lamb is not lame.

In one of the most dramatic and glorious events in all of history, Jesus, as the Lamb, comes and takes the scroll from the Father's right hand. Immediately worship broke out as "the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb" (5:7). Each elder "had a harp" and they also were holding "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (5:8). What a tender picture reminding us that our supplications and our praises actually matter to God. The worship and prayers of the "church militant" connect us with the "church triumphant" like nothing else (Ex.30:1-8; Deut.33:10; Psa.141:2; Luke 1:10).

Try to imagine experiencing what John was next privileged to witness. As the Lamb took the scroll from our Father's hand the elders began singing a "new song". This song of redemption is "new" in the sense that it is fresh and special. It is "a song that will never grow old because the wonder and joy of this salvation will never pall"

(Hughes). The threefold worth of the

Lamb to open the scroll is proclaimed as He is praised. (1) "You were slain.." (5:9).

Jesus' sacrificial death is the zenith and purest expression of His costly and unconditional love for sinners. (2) "You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). Jesus did not merely make redemption

possible. He has actually secured the salvation of many from every people group. (3)

"You have made them to be a kingdom of priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (5:10). Through Jesus our lives have meaning, not just in eternity, but also in Asia Minor, Tennessee and throughout the world and throughout history.

What is the only appropriate response to such a glorious vision? As the Lamb is clearly beheld and His work as Redeemer proclaimed, John "looked and heard the

voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise' (5:11-12) Once again we see the concentric nature of worship as circles of life and beings all center on the One upon the throne and the Lamb. The domino effect of God's glory and grace emanates outward capturing one and all alike. What a dynamic and dramatic scene. When is the last time you participated in a worship service that approached this kind of inviting reality?

But this celebration of God's mercy and might grows even grander in John's vision. True worship has a way of gathering momentum and a crowd! "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!' The four living creatures said, 'Amen', and the elders fell down and worshipped" (5:13-14). Has a more awesome worship gathering ever been described? Everyone and everything gives God and the Lamb their worthy due. Oh, to be reduced to such other-centered adoration of the Lord of Creation and Redemption.....

What effect do you think this vision would have had on the seven churches in Asia Minor? This question must be asked and pondered for it is they who are being principally addressed. The persecuted are deeply encouraged to endure all things on behalf of Him who bore all things for their redemption. The cold hearted are invited to be renewed in their affections for Him Whose love is their own rebuke. Jewish Christians are secured in this New Covenant faith as they are reassured that Jesus, is indeed, God's Messiah, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. The fearful are given strength, confidence and hope as they see who really controls history and their destiny. The outnumbered Christians in the Roman world are made aware that they are far from

being a minority for they are a part of an uncountable community. Those deceived by false teaching are confronted with worship that is "in truth" and, therefore, pure. The dead and enculturated are confronted with worship that is "in Spirit" and, therefore, alive. The small house churches in Asia Minor realize that when they gather to worship God they are a part of something far more majestic and immense than they could ever dream or imagine. The whole Church is called to affirm afresh, with confidence, passion and joy, that Jesus, not Domitian, is "dominus et deus", Lord and God.

What about us? How are we to be affected by the vision of heavenly worship given in Revelation? For those who claim great interest, passionate concern, and/or personal responsibility for the worship of God in our day, this portion of Scripture is critical and compelling. Doesn't it stand to reason that the perfected worship of heaven should be the paradigm from which we work as we seek to faithfully adore, praise and honor the One Who alone is worthy of everything that we have and are? How should our understanding and experience of worship in our church families be shaped by what we see of God's worship in eternity?

As we give serious attention to the details of John's description in Revelation 4 and 5 certain "continuums or worship" emerge which are instructive and helpful as we seek to mature a generation of Christians who accept the worship of God as our most glorious, important and eternal of all callings. As Christians we are to accept what the Reformers called the "regulative principle", which means that we believe that the Bible alone has the authority to regulate all things for us as the people of God, including what we do in worship. Perhaps, in recent years, we have unwittingly done a better job of worshipping worship rather than worshipping God. For as long as the discussion about worship centers on what we "like" or "dislike", we have missed the heart of worship. The questions we should be faithfully wrestling with are; "What does God desire in His worship? What is acceptable worship, according to the instruction we find in the Bible?

How can we more faithfully represent, honor, and serve God in His worship? " That we enjoy worshipping our Triune Lord is great, appropriate and awesome! We should. But that is neither the point nor the goal of true worship. All that should ultimately matter to us is His glory and honor.

What then can we learn about God's worship from the book of Revelation? As we conclude this chapter consider some of the important continuums that come into focus from our brief examination of the worship of heaven found in the Apocalypse.

CONTINUUMS OF WORSHIP IN REVELATION

SPIRIT.....TRUTH

There are many Christians who tend to set up an unbiblical dichotomy based on the difference between what they call "dead worship" and "alive worship". "Dead worship" is usually stereotyped as being too cerebral, "liturgical", theological weighty, musically "out of touch" and boring. "Alive worship" is described in terms of being "Spirit led", emotionally real and affective, musically relevant and "powerful". But in the visions of worship given in Revelation we find rich theology leading to impassioned doxology; sound doctrine effecting spiritual delight; the clearer vision of God segueing into a deeper experience of His glory and grace.

This same John who recorded Jesus' revelation of heavenly worship also recorded some of the most important teaching our Lord gave on the topic of worship. In chapter 4 of John's gospel Jesus had an amazing encounter with a Samaritan woman in which He made known to her "a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John4:23). It is important for us to hear in Jesus' words that, first of all, our Father is seeking worshipers. It should humble us to realize that our God actually longs

for and delights in the worship of His people.

Secondly, however, notice that not just any kind of worship will do. True worship, as opposed to unacceptable worship, must be "in spirit and in truth". Neither "dead orthodoxy" nor "live heterodoxy" is acceptable to God.

God's worship must be grounded in His truth and enlivened by His Spirit. This balanced continuum must be celebrated in every liturgical setting in the Christian church, no matter if our ecclesiastical heritage is Episcopal, Charismatic, Baptist, Non-denominational, Presbyterian, Vineyard, House Church, or whatever. As I was once instructed, "All truth and no Spirit, we dry up. All Spirit and no truth, we blow up. Spirit and truth, we grow up."

TRANSCENDENCE.....IMMANENCE

God's "holy otherness" is celebrated in John's visions just as His "Abba", Father's heart is fully enjoyed. We see the people of God crying out "Holy, holy, holy" and we see God coming off the throne and wiping every tear out of their eyes! What a glorious admixture of images! What a juxtaposition of reverence and intimacy. Every generation of Christians tends to negate one of these aspects of God's Being in preference for the other, but we are not to treat the attributes of God like ice cream from which we pick our "flavor of choice".

Such an attitude is what the Bible calls idolatry, the remaking of God after our own image. We dare not trivialize the worship of God by reducing it to some kind of a syrupy sentimental familiarity. But neither are we worshipping faithfully, and in keeping with His own self revelation, when we keep God in the rafters of the cathedral under the pretense of "mystery" and respect. In heaven, we will fully and eternally enjoy an affectionate reverence for God. May the same become increasingly manifest in the way we worship Him today.

NOETIC (Mind).....(Body) SOMATIC

Whole person worship is very obvious in heaven. Those who ponder the richness of theology with their eyes, ears, and minds are falling off their thrones in bodily response. They stand, wave palm branches, and sing loudly of God's glory and grace. In the late sixties and early seventies I was right in the middle of many of the "worship wars" that ensued as the Jesus Movement began to impact main line evangelical churches. I look back now with some embarrassment at how petty and immature many of us were as we debated such "weighty" issues as whether pipe organs or guitars were more pleasing to God in corporate worship.

Another topic of great interest which generated considerable concern was whether or not it was appropriate to "lift hands" in public worship. Whole churches were divided over this issue! How sad. I remember a question and answer session I attended in seminary in which Dr. J.I. Packer was asked, "Dr. Packer, what do you think about all of these emotional people coming into our churches and lifting their hands, and falling to their knees and drawing attention to themselves?" I will never forget his response. "My dear brother", he said with pastoral sensitivity and yet with fatherly authority, "the question is not whether we should kneel in our worship services today. The question is, shall we who will kneel one Day kneel now as well?" Bingo! That settled the issue for me. Though not mandated, it is quite appropriate for us to lift our hands, to kneel, to prostrate ourselves, to respond with our whole person to the whole gospel. Let us think and let us present our bodies as living sacrifices. May raised hands in worship be a sign of raised theological understanding. The two complement one another.

VERTICAL.....HORIZONTAL

In the visions of heaven in Revelation we also find the perfect balance between the vertical God-centeredness of worship and the horizontal celebration by the great sea of

redeemed humanity. God is in the center of all things. He is the focus. Worship is perfectly in the round. But the emanating concentric circles are meant to remind us that worship is not about you and its not about me. It's about us, the twice reconciled people of God. Our Father has reconciled us to Himself and to each other. Both of these relationships are to be demonstrated and celebrated as we worship.

We dare not privatize or provincialize that which is meant to free us from all forms of self-preoccupation and self-interest. Indeed, there is nothing more personal and intimate than worship, but the worship of heaven reminds us that we are a part of the growing orchestra of praise that God is building from every race, tribe, tongue and nation.

DIVERSITY.....UNITY

That this great community of the redeemed maintains their "every people" identity in heaven is instructive as we ponder the importance of both diversity and unity. It is tragic, indeed, for us to seek to be overly homogeneous in our worship experience. Diversity should be intentional and not accidental. Unity must not be confused with uniformity.

I don't believe that the Scriptures mandate every local expression of the Body of Christ to look just alike, for we need a diversity of churches in any given community for the purpose of evangelism. However, I do believe that the gospel mandates that every church be very careful to draw a liturgical circle big enough to celebrate all the distinctive elements within that particular community of the redeemed; young and old, male and female, rich and poor, the washed and the unwashed, "old guard" and new transplants, the traditional and the contemporary. We must work very hard at being far more inclusive rather than exclusive as we worship God. In every church the welcoming heart of God the Father must be extended if true worship is intended. Let us

learn to respect and celebrate one another's gifts within the perimeters that God establishes. He purposes to stretch all of us.

HEART.....ART

As you look very carefully at the worship of heaven you will realize that it includes many elements that are spatial, visual, auditory, musical, participatory, dialogical, just to name a few. These represent the art of heavenly worship, and should be seen as the creative expression of the heart of worship.

God revealed Himself as Creator before He revealed Himself as Redeemer. He bids us surrender our most creative energies, gifts and artistic sensibilities to the most noble and grand of all events and realities, the worship of God. No, we are not called to worship art nor artists, for this is nothing more than idolatry. Tragically, the church has proven itself quite capable of this and many other idolatries in our worship services. But neither are we to congratulate ourselves for giving artless expression to the riches of our theology and experience of the living God.

As it is in heaven, so it should be on earth, we are called to cultivate both the art and the heart of true worship. There is no more defense for "artless" worship than there is for "heartless" worship. Shall we offer to the Lord that which cost us nothing?

LITURGY.....LIFE

Lastly, let us be profoundly stirred by the implications of God being worshipped in Revelation 4 as Creator before He is worshipped in chapter 5 as Redeemer. The whole of life is to be seen as the "worship center" for the people of God. His praise is to be demonstrated and celebrated in all of life, in all of His world, in every sphere of His creation. Let us work hard at our weekly celebrations in terms of liturgy, art,

preachment, prayers, and music. But let us not reduce worship to mean only that which occurs in the sanctuary one hour a week. All of life, for Christians, is to be lived as an act of worship. The chief end of man is "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever". We do this best when we seek to worship Him with everything that we have and are.

William Temple, the founder and president of Temple University, once offered this comprehensive definition of worship: "Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose - and all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin."

As it is in heaven, so may it be incrementally and demonstrably so here!

THE HOPE OF A COMPLETED "GREAT COMMISSION"

Revelation 6

Call me strange, weird or worse, but ever since I became a Christian I have had little if any zeal for taking a trip to Israel. I have always preferred the idea of tracing the roots of the Reformation through Western Europe or even sailing among the Greek Isles to relive the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. I guess that which has fueled my "holy land aversion" more than anything else is the fear of the commercialization of the sacred. The thought of having someone offering to sell me a splinter of the "original" Noah's ark or one of the pebbles David may have used to kill Goliath or one of the anointed handkerchiefs Paul used to heal someone or a little piece of the large stone which sealed Jesus' tomb..... I think you get the picture. This kind of stuff makes my flesh crawl!

Another reason I have been slow to respond to the many opportunities afforded me to tour the "land of Moses and Jesus" is because of a conviction which I developed while in graduate school. I remember one of my professors of Biblical theology asking the class why we evangelicals customarily refer to Israel as "the holy land". At first, I was somewhat taken aback by his query. I thought to myself, "Any dummy knows the answer to that question. It's the holy land because that's what God calls it in the Bible." But then I had a hard time, no, an impossible time coming up with a chapter and verse in the Scriptures where Israel is so named. The point this outstanding teacher was making has registered deep in my soul. As Christians we are to see the whole earth as the "holy land", not just the "land of the Bible" which has been made alive to us through the Cecil B. DeMille epoch films. Every square inch of terra firma, even the parts of creation that we cannot see, are made by Jesus and for Jesus. One day the knowledge of the glory of the Lord is going to fill the whole earth as the waters cover the sea!

Indeed, many of the great acts of God in the history of redemption have occurred in Israel. Most definitely, it is an important piece of real estate for anyone who takes the

Bible seriously. But in the Scriptures, especially in the Book of Revelation, the concept of "the land" gives way to the ultimate theme of "a new heavens and a new earth", the final reality which Jesus will usher in at His second coming. We will ponder this glorious state of affairs later in this book as we consider the last three chapters of Revelation. Until our Lord returns, however, we are to be excited about the expanding work of the Kingdom of God which is being effected throughout the world, in every sphere of life. "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. (Isa.9:7)

But, these concerns and convictions notwithstanding, I finally did make my first trip to Israel in the Spring of 1995. And yes, some of my stereotypes were confirmed, (including a chapel built over the rock which Jesus "obviously" used to step up onto the back of the donkey which He rode into Jerusalem to make His triumphant entry!) All things considered, however, I am glad I went and I will go again. Among the many memories and images etched into my heart from that first trip, none is more endearing and enduring than the visit our group took to the Garden Tomb at the Hill of the Skull. This is one of the two main locations which archaeologists believe to be the place where Jesus was crucified, buried and raised from the dead. The tomb of Jesus is nestled in a beautifully manicured garden park which is preserved as a ministry directed and overseen by a group of Christians from Great Britain.

Even though we will not know for sure until heaven which was the real site of the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus, the main point is that these things actually happened in time and space. To visit Israel is to get the sense of the historicity of our faith. As the Apostle Paul said, "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." (I Cor.15:14, 17-20) I know

that we "walk by faith and not by sight" and yet our faith does not despise the physical world.

As we walked through the beautifully cultivated and cared for garden my heart began to rejoice. Perhaps with the doubting heart of Thomas I found myself saying, "It's true, it's really true. I can see it. I can touch it. Jesus did die on the cross for my sins. He was buried and raised from the dead, for me! This may very well be the place where it all happened."

Our informed and gracious guide, a retiree from London, led us to the location where our Nashville family was to celebrate the Lord's Supper before leaving this beautiful spot. Every Christian group is given the privilege of having a worship service and communion before leaving the beloved grounds of the garden. It was during our time of feasting upon the bread and cup of our Lord that the Holy Spirit literally brought alive to my heart John's vision of a full and multinational heaven. There is nothing that had a greater impact on me during our entire travels throughout the land of Israel.

As we gathered in our little open air chapel area and sang hymns of praise and several Scripture choruses, many of those which come to us from the text of Revelation, we realized that we were far from alone. All around us were groups, perhaps ten or more, who were doing exactly the same thing, feasting upon the love and grace of the One who gave Himself for the forgiveness of all of our sins, Jesus, the Lamb of God. It became a foretaste, better still, the firstfruits of heaven to my soul. What captured my heart was the international flavor of it all. No two groups around us were from the same nation! There were Filipinos, Australians, Koreans, Germans, Dutch, and Irish just to name a few. Everyone was worshipping Jesus in their own language, with hands and hearts raised in glad adoration of our One Savior.

Immediately I thought of John's vision of heaven and especially his recording of the "new song" that he heard filling up the sanctuary of eternity, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your

blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." (Rev.5:9-10)

As I heard the many "tribes, languages and peoples and nations" in the Garden Tomb that day singing unto the Lamb I couldn't help but ponder what effect this vision would have had on the First Century Church. I am alive after twenty centuries of the advance of the gospel throughout so much of the world and world history, but what about the persecuted church in Asia Minor, how would they have interpreted such a vision, such a hope? Is John daydreaming? Has he lost his mind? Is he exercising apostolic hyperbole? Maybe he's just being a glorified cheerleader bringing a little encouragement before Rome wipes out Christians and the young Church from the face of the earth.

Nonsense! John's vision of heaven being full of men and women from every people group is to be understood in light of the covenant that God made with his son, his servant, Abram, recorded for us in the Book of Genesis. "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'" (Gen.12:1-3) God sovereignly took a pagan from Ur of the Chaldeans, reconciled him to Himself through an act of sheer grace, and then gave him exceeding great and glorious promises which can only be fulfilled by God, Himself.

How fitting it is then for the Bible to end with a vision of the fulfillment of this awesome promise made to the one who would be renamed, Abraham, "father of nations". Abraham's descendants will be as numerous and diverse as the stars in the sky. The entire Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, is the unfolding and recording of the history of redemption, God's sovereign promise and plan to redeem for Himself a

people from every people group from every period in the history of mankind. It has always been God's intent to use Israel as a means of accomplishing His larger redemptive purposes among all the nations of the world. Israel was to be a light to the nations, not a lamp unto itself.

Persecuted Christians in Asia Minor must have been stunned and encouraged as they had this vision read to them for the first time, for by it they were reminded that God has not forgotten His covenant. He will not forsake His people. The Church is not going to die a quick death with a meager membership of converted Jews and a small smattering of Gentiles. Rome and all of the hoards of evil will not prevail. Not only will the church survive the First Century persecutions, she will thrive until the very day that Jesus comes back to receive His completed Bride unto Himself. Let's say it again, heaven will be full of men and women from every tribe, language, people and nation. Such a notion caused "ten thousand times ten thousand" angels to join the living creatures and the elders in singing in a "loud voice", "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise." (Rev.5:12)

Let us understand that this glorious end of history is no mere possibility or probability. It is guaranteed, for Jesus, as the sacrificial Lamb of God, has actually "purchased men for God" by the atonement He accomplished through His death on the cross. A legal transaction has been effected between Jesus and God the Father. Redemption has been accomplished and now it is being sovereignly applied to the nations of the world! The death of Jesus Christ upon the cross did not only make salvation possible for any who would receive it. Rather, it is the surety, the guarantee of the salvation of "the many" for whom He gave His life. His death was not in vain! If the salvation of sinners is only a possibility then it is equally possible that no one would ever receive this salvation. But the Book of Revelation is not a book of mere possibilities. It is the triumphant shout, the glad declaration that the Lamb has triumphed over sin and

death! He will not be denied. Jesus has come not just to offer salvation to the interested but "to seek and to save the lost".

How our generation of Christians needs to have renewed vision and confidence in the cross of Jesus. To "survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died" is to realize that the Great Commission which Jesus gave us before ascending into heaven is not so much a job to get done as it is an assured reality into which we, the people of God, invest our passion and time with Kingdom joy and faith. The Great Commission is the restating of God's promise to redeem His people from among the nations of the world throughout history. It is our privilege, as the Church, to enter in to the prepared harvest.

All of history is bound up with God's commitment to gather His people from among the nations. Jesus has been given all authority "in heaven and on earth". He is with us till the end of the age and He is going to have disciples from among "all nations". We see this great expectation celebrated as we read through the Book of Acts. The gospel spreads from Jerusalem, through Judea, to Samaria and to the utter most parts of the earth.

The implications of this hope should be obvious for the Church of Jesus Christ. Evangelism and missions should be central and not tangential to everything that we do. We are not just to have a missions program. We are to see ourselves, the whole church, as a part of a missionary movement! God is quintessentially The Missionary! As Rhienhold Neibhur said, "As fire exists by burning so the Church exists by missions." The main reason that our Lord Jesus has yet to return to this world is because God is a merciful God. He is not through redeeming His people from among the nations.

Until the return of Jesus we are to exist as a missionary people for, as the apostle Peter refers to the Church, "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the

people of God; once you

had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Pet.2:9-10) As we declare the praises of God among the nations of the world He effectually calls His people to life in Christ.

The more I meditate upon the missionary promises found throughout the Bible the more I see the relationship between worship and missions. As we lift up the name of Jesus our Father draws those who are being saved unto Himself. It pleases our God to use the foolishness of our preaching and the weakness of our humanity to raise the dead to newness of life in Christ. We are like Gideon's army going against the Midianites, David against Goliath, or Elijah against the 400 prophets of Baal. The odds seem overwhelming, the challenge too huge. We dare not go forth into world evangelization in our own strength. Rather, we are those who, like the Apostle Paul, acknowledge that "we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor.4:7). "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? ... our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant - not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Cor.2:15-16; 3:5-6).

Try to imagine John's joy while in exile on Patmos as he saw and heard these things. Consider the renewed perspective and encouragement brought to the Church in Asia Minor. Know that this vision of a full heaven has proven to be the driving force and power behind the history of the contemporary missions movement. May our own hearts be deeply encouraged to enter into the prepared harvest as we anticipate the day when we will gather around the throne of grace with our brothers and sisters from every tribe, language, people and nation to worship Him who paid the full price for our salvation, Jesus, the Lamb of God.

THE HOPE OF PURPOSEFUL SUFFERING

Revelation 6:1-8:1

Okay, let's pretend like you are reading the Book of Revelation for the very first time. You have read through the first three chapters and say to yourself, "So far, so good. What's the big fuss? This isn't so confusing. It's about Jesus and His loving concern for His Bride, the Church." Then you read chapters 4 and 5, and even though much of the imagery seems rather strange, there is still a sense of Revelation not being such a formidable and unfriendly part of the Bible. In fact, your heart is actually encouraged and stirred as you ponder the inviting sights and sounds of the throne room vision. "Maybe it doesn't take a seminary education to "crack the code" to the Apocalypse, after all", you conclude with much relish and relief.

But then you resume your reading at chapter six and before long, you hit the "Revelation wall". Lost in the mire of "seals", "trumpets" and "woes" you are tempted to run back to the safe and predictable harbors of the Gospel of John or to the Book of Psalms. What makes such a retreat into the more familiar parts of the Bible all the more inviting is the myriad of experts who seem to speak with such prophetic authority concerning the "obvious" meaning of each number, image, sound, animal and weather change that we meet from chapter six through chapter twenty-two. The problem is, there is so little consensus among the interpreters about what each detail actually means. That is why so many Christians just give up on trying to understand this most encouraging book.

It took me quite a while in reading through Revelation to realize that maybe I was starting with some wrong assumptions as I came to the text. When I first studied this book I assumed that it followed a simple chronological order. That is, I figured that Revelation was written along a historical time line from chapter to chapter. This was, I thought, especially the case when it came to chapters six through twenty two. For

example: the breaking of the seven seals would precede the blowing of the seven trumpets which would precede the pouring forth of the seven bowls of God's wrath. These three cycles of seven would naturally lead up to the second coming of Christ and the end of the world as we know it. This seemed to logical, so reasonable.

The problem came, however, when I began to notice that the second coming of Jesus, and events relegated in the Scriptures to the end of all things, occurred in all three of these cycles! In fact, the second coming seems to occur six or seven times after the breaking of the first seal. Maybe the structure of Revelation is not strictly chronological after all! Perhaps what we have here is similar to what we see in the four gospels. As we read Matthew, Mark, Luke and John it becomes obvious that the life, ministry and work of our Lord Jesus are told from four different perspectives. There are no contradictions among the four, just different emphases, given the burden, personality and calling of each author. When we study all four of the gospel writers we get a much fuller understanding of the one true gospel.

Could it be that this is the way God has written the last book of the Bible? Perhaps the structure of Revelation is similar, as one author put it, to that of a great wall paper with a distinctive and repetitive pattern. Or better yet, a great drama told in several vignettes each telling the same story with a specific emphasis, the story of the "last days". But when are the "last days"? When I became a Christian in 1968 this question was front and center. In fact, it was actually a rhetorical question. It was assumed that we were living in the "last days". But it was also assumed that the "last days" only began rather recently, as in the beginning of the 60's.

According to the Scriptures, however, the "last days" have been going on for quite a while. The Apostle Peter stood up on the Day of Pentecost and announced in one of the most important sermons ever preached, "These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.."(Acts 2:15-17). Peter, under

the direction of the Holy Spirit, interpreted the events of the day as indicative of that period that the Old Testament prophets referred to as the "last days".

Likewise, the writer of the book of Hebrews gives us important insight into this final period in the history of redemption. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." (Heb.1:1-2) According to these two inspired authors of Scripture the "last days" actually began with the first coming of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. This would mean that the entire period between the first and second coming of Jesus should be viewed as the "last days".

Before writing Revelation the Apostle John had already affirmed his belief that the first century church was living in the "last days" when he wrote, "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour." (1 Jn.2:18). So are we living in the "last days"? Absolutely! Are we living in the last of the "last days"? Let no man presume to know so!

This leads me to assert that Revelation is a "last days" manual for the whole people of God. Each of the several scenes which are presented in Revelation 6-22 are recapitulative vignettes, gracious gifts of God to His people informing, warning, encouraging us about things that have been, things that are, and things that are to come. The same events and time line are viewed from different perspectives. Here we see the Christian life as it will be until Jesus returns. Life between the comings of Christ is full of rapture and rupture and Jesus is thoroughly in control of all things, including the suffering of His people.

A reading of Revelation 6:1-11:19 in one sitting is one of the best ways to observe this repetitive pattern and structure of the Apocalypse. This section covers the breaking of the "seven seals" and the blowing of the "seven trumpets". The similarities

between these two groups of seven are telling. The first four seals are opened at once, likewise, the first four trumpets are sounded together. Then the fifth and sixth seals are opened as a unit, just as the fifth and six trumpets are heralded as a unit. In similar fashion, before the breaking of the seventh seal and the blowing of the seventh trumpet there is intermediate material and vision which preserves the unity in the structure in John's writing.

Revered New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger concludes from observing this pattern, "Thus, the seven seals and the seven trumpets essentially tell the same thing, each time emphasizing one or another aspect of the whole."

What, then, are we to learn from the breaking of the seven seals? What does this vignette tell us will be indicative of life between the comings of Christ for the people of God? And how would this vision of John have impacted our First Century counterparts in Asia Minor? First of all we must focus on the fact that it is the Lamb, Jesus Christ, who alone has the authority and power to break the seals. He is already the "King of kings and the Lord of lords"! It is Jesus who opens the book that God has written. Much and deep encouragement should fill our hearts as we ponder the significance of this sight. History is, indeed, His story. This is especially heartening as we consider the contents of what is revealed as the seals are broken. Life between the comings of Christ will be difficult for the people of God. John learned this lesson much earlier in his discipleship when Jesus told him, "A time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. but hate heart! I have overcome the world."

(Jn.16:32-33)

In Revelation 6:1-8 we have the breaking of the first four seals, each having a rider upon a different colored horse. They depict destruction and catastrophic developments for the inhabitants of the earth under the sovereign hand of God.

They also "demonstrate the self-defeating power of sin" (Morris).

The First Seal - Rev.6:1-2 - Here we are given a picture of international warfare .. nation against nation. As the white horse rides for we see that tyranny, violence, the abuse of power and a lust for world dominion will characterize the whole period of life between the first and second comings of Christ. Christians will be caught in the cross fire, and in fact, will be in the middle of the battle, for we are God's army even as we are Christ's bride.

The Second Seal - Rev.6:3-4 - The tragedy of Cain and Abel will continue until Jesus returns. This is a picture of bloodshed among men, the tragic taking of one another's lives. Notice that this rider upon the red horse "was given power to take peace from the earth..." God sets the perimeters on the extent of the violence. Let not the First Century church despair, or the church of any century. Our God reigns even over the manifestations of evil from the hearts of men.

The Third Seal - Rev.6:5-6 - With the black horse come economic chaos, the uneven distribution of wealth and famine. Yet again, notice the limitations put on the gross injustice among mankind. "Do not damage the oil and the wine.." These necessities of life are not totally given over to the inequities created and perpetuated by a world in rebellion to the ways of God. He, not they, are in ultimate control of all things, including the realm of food and money. How sad it is to see this great injustice lived out among the peoples of the world, ever since sin entered into the hearts of man through the Fall of Adam and Eve.

The Fourth Seal - Rev.6:7-8 - As the fourth seal is broken a pale horse comes forth with an ominous rider, "Death and Hades" is his name. Yet, as we have already seen, Jesus is the master over "death and Hades" (Rev.1:18) Let us be warned, but let us not fear. Death by unexpected causes for "a fourth", that is a significant minority of those upon the earth is symbolized in this seal. There is nothing to indicate that this number is relegated to a period just before the return of Jesus. Rather, tragic death by all sorts

of means will be experienced in the world until the "grave robber", Jesus, returns for His people.

With the breaking of the Fifth Seal we come to understand the place God's people play in redemptive drama of life between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ. If the first four seals symbolize life in a fallen world for all the citizens of the earth then the fifth seal focuses on life for Christians during this same time frame. Suffering is very much a part of the "abundant life" which Jesus has won for His people, including the suffering of martyrdom. The apostle Paul wrote to believers in Philippi, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him... (Phil.1:29). The Greek of this text literally says, "For it has been grace gifted unto you.... not only to believe... but also to suffer."

How many of us consider suffering a blessing, an actual expression of the grace of God? We live in a day in which the gospel has been so corrupted that there are those who literally teach that the only reason that Christians suffer is because of a lack of faith. What an affront this is to the thousands of Christians who die every year only because of the faith! There have been more Christian martyrs in the twentieth century than the combined total in the previous nineteen centuries. The fifth seal brings encouragement not just to those Christians among John's readership who were facing great suffering and martyrdom "because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained", but also to Christians of every generation and place in the world.

In John's vision he saw a large group of Christians who had already suffered martyrdom and their cry went forth, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev.6:10) This longing for justice is born not from a vindictive attitude or from a heart of hateful vengeance. Rather, the saints are zealous for the Lord's glory. The world mocks and hates the servants of God and, in so doing, God, himself, is held in derision and contempt. Those captured by the love of God in Christ want nothing more than for His name to be

revered and His honor to be upheld. This doxological dénouement will occur in full at the second coming of Jesus, and not until then.

God answers His people's cry by calling them to "wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed" (Rev.6:11). What a profoundly encouraging word from our Father! Once again, we see His sovereign grace in action. God is not only in control of the seasons but also of our sufferings, even over the specific number of martyrs!

As the Sixth Seal is broken (Rev.6:12-17), we are given a picture of events that accompany the close of the age and the terror of God's wrath and judgment. History is heading inexorably towards this great "day of the Lord" when the nations of the world will be judged. Notice the inclusiveness of God's judgment. Kings, princes, generals, the rich, the mighty, every slave and every free man "hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains" (Rev.6:15). There is no class of people excluded from the implications of God's holiness and glory. He is the judge of all men. God is not a respecter of persons. The most important question on that day and this day and any day is "Who can stand?" (Rev.6:17) Who will be able to stand up to God's judgment? Each of us will either receive the love of the Lamb or the wrath of the Lamb. We can humble ourselves and receive the full and free benefits of Jesus' death on the cross for our sins or we will despise His love and suffer the eternal implications and just consequences of our sins.

Before the breaking of the Seventh Seal John is given a vision, (Rev.7:1-17), which expands the meaning and encouragement of the entire unit of the seven seals. In this magnificent scene we see the hand of God withholding judgment from His people and pouring forth the riches of His grace. God's angels, who minister on behalf of the "heirs of salvation" (Heb.1:14), are instructed not to "harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God" (Rev.7:3). As the Bride of Jesus we are kept secure until and through the day of His judgment. We are "sealed"

as a sign of identification, security, ownership and preciousness to God. This sealing takes place the very moment someone becomes a Christian. (Eph.1:13f.; Eph.4:30; 2 Cor.1:22). John's readers would have been deeply encouraged to know that even as the whole world is in the midst of upheaval, even as they are suffering greatly as God's people, many to the point of martyrdom, nevertheless, their journey to heaven is secure. Nothing will ever be able to separate the lambs of Christ from the love of the Lamb. Nothing! Our God reigns supremely!

So just who are these sealed ones? Some have tried to limit the glories of this section just to those who have literally died as martyrs. But consider next what John hears, "the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel " (Rev. 7:4). In verses 4-8 we are given a glimpse of the totality of redeemed humanity, a number that no man can count symbolized by a number whose multiples are 12 times 12 times

1000. Perhaps this is meant to suggest the twelve patriarchs of Israel times the twelve Apostles of Jesus times one thousand (a number representing magnitude)! Once again we are exposed to this major theme of Revelation, God is indeed faithful to the covenant that He made with Abraham. God has secured the salvation of His people not just from ethnic Israel but also from all the tribes of "spiritual Israel" (Gal.6:16; Heb.11:39; 12:22; Gal.3:29).

In verses 9-10 John goes from hearing of this multitude to actually seeing them! What an international group. Talk about diversity. Talk about amazing grace! If you are a Christian you are a part of this assembly. These are the true seed of Abraham (Gal.3:6-9, 16, 28f.) It is this great company which is able to stand in the very presence of God, now and on the day of judgment. Such confidence comes because "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb" (Rev.7:10) and because "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev.7:14). God's sovereign grace is the only explanation for such a wonderful

redemption! Our God redeems abundantly!

Once again all of heaven joins in the glad and passionate adoration of our Lord who has effected such a salvation (Rev.7:11-14). God is worshipped as the One who has loved His people well through the entirety of "tribulation". In Revelation tribulation is not viewed simply as the final outburst of suffering of the people of God just previous to the return of Jesus. Rather, it is the totality of pain, suffering, persecution and sorrow that we know living in this fallen God hating world. There was great tribulation for first century Christians just as there has been in every century since. (Rev.1:9; Heb.11:35-38; John 15:18-21; 2 Cor.4:17; Matt.5:12)

Just before the opening of the seventh seal John is given one of the most awe inspiring and inviting pictures of life in heaven for the people of God. Ponder this scene and let it remove from your heart the incomplete and unworthy notions of what heaven is going to be like. With our brothers and sisters from throughout the history of redemption we will be "before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple" (Rev.7:15). But consider what is revealed to John next concerning how we will be loved and cared for in our eternal abode. "Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev.7:16-17)

This is the fulfillment of everything promised in the name, Emmanuel. All hunger and thirst are over, forever! What a paradox, our Lamb has become our Shepherd. Even in heaven Jesus will be ministering to us, loving us, leading us. Eternal refreshment and the redeeming of all of our tears will be our great joy and satisfaction. Glory to God for such tender love and eternal joy. All pain, sadness, and sorrow will be gone. We will no longer merely know in part. We will know fully even as we are fully known. All of God's providences and sovereign dealings will become clear to us. Even the things which we have despised most, the

things that have caused us to question the mercy and might of God will be resolved. I firmly believe, but don't quote me on this, that for the first thousand years in heaven we are going to hear echoing throughout our Father's house, "Oh, so that's what You were doing! Now I see it. Now I understand. Father, your ways were not always easy but now I see your glory in all that You did and I praise You for being so incalculably good and wise."

The Seventh and last seal is now opened by Jesus and "there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." (Rev.8:1) What could be more appropriate in response to the revelation of the six seals than for there to be a season of stunned silence. "The silence is the silence of awesome expectation." (Philip Hughes) It is silence before the great "day of the Lord". (Zeph. 1:7, 15, 17-18) On the day of judgment God's wrath will silence all who have rejected His grace, for they are without excuse.

THE HOPE OF COMING JUSTICE

Revelation 8:2-10:11; 11:15-19

Some of the hardest realities for Christians to emotionally understand and accept are those seasons and situations in which God, who reveals Himself as being both mighty and merciful, appears to be neither. My wife recently shared with me a conversation that she had with a woman from another state whose struggle to maintain any confidence in prayer was painfully birthed out of the perceived unwillingness of a good God to intervene on behalf of one of His helpless young children. This woman read the account of a little boy who was a victim of Jeffrey Dahmer's insidious and insane savagery. This little fellow pleaded for a chance to pray before he was to be murdered. He prayed and he died. Where was God? Where was the God who spoke this whole world into existence? Where was the God who upholds all things by the power of His word? Where was God who will one day bring history as we know it to completion by simply willing it? Where was God in this child's hour of greatest terror and need? Where was God?

This is just one of countless stories that I could tell and you could tell of the apparent injustice of life in a world over which we are told that God absolutely and sovereignly reigns. Yet, we are not alone. One of God's great gifts to us is the reality and honesty of His written Word. He has not edited out the many, many stories of how His people have been agonizingly vexed and angered at the inequities of life and at the silence and perceived impotence of God in the face of those who despise His name and reject His authority. How can evil prevail and even seem to prosper?

Jonah struggles with the call to preach to the barbaric Ninevites. Death would be better than life than for God to show mercy to the ruthless and arrogant Assyrians. Job and Jeremiah cry out with near curses wishing they had never been born as they try to figure out and accept God's ways. Asaph angrily laments the prosperity of those who

have no regard for God and His counsel while he, the man of God, has a painful hunch that the life of faith doesn't really "work". Habakkuk can't understand how God could use the more godless nation of Babylon to bring His people in Judah to repentance. The lamentation, "How long, O Lord?", is chronicled throughout the Scriptures along side of the often times demanding cry, "Why, God?" Our Lord has not hidden the struggle of His people even if He, Himself, seems to be hiding in the dark recesses of His providence.

To such an ongoing theological conundrum our next section in Revelation, the "Seven Trumpets", speaks. If the meaning of the seven seals (Rev.6:1-8:1), can be summarized as: Difficult times mark the "last days" for the people of God in the world, the "church militant", but they are sealed and protected and have a glorious future, the "church triumphant", then the meaning of the seven trumpets (Rev.8:2-11:18) can be summarized as: Difficult times mark the "last days" for the "inhabitants of the earth" (non-believers). They had better come to their senses and repent during this time of partial judgment and continuing mercy. For justice is coming, both for the people of God and for those who despise the mercy and grace of God. The blast of the seven trumpets should encourage the hearts of God's people who painfully wonder at God's timetable. Perhaps we would be right to call this season of the Christian life the wait of grace. God promises us sufficient grace as we long for justice even as He extends grace to those who have reviled Him and caused great suffering for His people.

As we begin this section it would be helpful to consider the Apostle Paul's teaching on this same topic. To the church of Rome he wrote, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although

they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles." (Rom.1:18-23)

"Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed." (Rom.2:4-5)

Paul argues that even as judgment is coming with the full fury of the holiness and wrath of God so judgment is already being "revealed from heaven". All around us God is demonstrating that He is not winking at sin. Judgment now is partial but judgment is sure. In this present age God's judgment is a part of His redemptive plan to demonstrate His mercy. We Christians are tempted to believe that God is slow to hear our prayers and slow to avenge His glory. Non-believers are tempted to be presumptuous about God's promise to bring judgment against them. They, "show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience" which are meant to lead them "toward repentance". Consider how both of these groups are spoken to by the "seven trumpets".

Revelation 8 begins with a vision of "seven angels" standing before God and who are given seven trumpets, an instrumental of warning. These angels are likely "archangels", members of the highest order of angels. Another angel appears with a "golden censer". He is given "much incense", which many interpreters see as a symbol of Jesus' prayers for His people. This angel is meant to represent both the importance of our prayers in the outworking of His purposes and also the glory of the intercession of Jesus (Heb.7:25; 9:24; Rom.8:34; John 17:9, 20ff.). In response to the prayers of the saints we see the censer now filled with elements of judgment and destruction. God hears the cries of our hearts and the longing of our souls for justice to prevail in this

world. God's judgment is sure, present, and to come. Justice is coming!

As with the seven seals, so with the seven trumpets, we see a natural division between the first four and the last three. The first four trumpets largely show the effects of God's present judgment on the inanimate world. The last three trumpets demonstrate His judgment against mankind, in particular. As we read through this section noticeable parallels can be seen between these judgments and those which God visited on the Egyptians during the time of the Exodus. (Exodus 7-11). The greater exodus from sin and death effected by King Jesus is being accompanied by God's judgments now in history as well.

THE FIRST TRUMPET BLAST: The Earth Is Stricken - The Environment is Affected

As the first angel sounded his trumpet, "hail and fire mixed with blood" was "hurled down upon the earth." (Rev.8:7) A third of the earth, trees and green grass were burned up by this incendiary judgment. "Hail and fire" remind us of Exodus 7:14ff; 9:22ff. "A third" is meant to convey the idea that these judgments are severe but not total. It is still the hour of mercy. This trumpet represents any kind of destruction which at any time damages the earth. What we call natural or environmental disasters or tragedies are to be seen as God getting our attention. He whispers in our pleasures and shouts in our suffering.

THE SECOND TRUMPET BLAST: The Sea Is Stricken - Commerce Is Affected

The second trumpet heralds the throwing into the sea of "something like a huge mountain, all ablaze" (Rev.8:8-9). Once again we find this judgment affecting thirds; of

the sea, of living creatures in the sea, and of a third of the ships. The original recipients of this letter would have naturally thought of the Mediterranean Sea as the body of water spoken of in this vision. And in their own time they had witnessed both the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius (AD 79) and the sacking of Jerusalem in AD 70. Did the prayers of God's people figure into the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum? We cannot say for sure but let us realize that this section of Scripture does teach us that God uses the prayers of His people to accomplish His sovereign purposes. Such a fact is staggering to ponder. Through this trumpet God also affects the commerce of the world as there was great dependence upon maritime welfare for economic welfare. Sometimes the only thing that seemingly is capable of redirecting the minds and hearts of non-believers towards heaven is for the money supply to be shaken and threatened.

THE THIRD TRUMPET BLAST: The Rivers Are Stricken - Natural Resources Are Affected

With the blowing of the third trumpet a third of the rivers and springs of water turned bitter as a "great star, blazing like a torch fell from the sky" (Rev.8:10-11). The star was named "Wormwood". That which is meant to give life actually brings sickness and death "to many". John's Jewish readers would have remembered a similar account of God's judgment brought to bear in Jeremiah's day. "What man is wise enough to understand this? Who has been instructed by the Lord and can explain it? Why has the land been ruined and laid waste like a desert that no one can cross? The Lord said, 'It is because they have forsaken my law, which I set before them; they have not obeyed me or followed my law. Instead, they have followed the stubbornness of their hearts; they have followed the Baals, as their fathers taught them.' Therefore, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'See, I will make this people eat bitter food and drink poisoned water.'" (Jeremiah 9:12-15) God can wrest from natural water its power

to slake our thirst that a deeper thirst might be quickened, one which can only be slaked by the living water of the gospel.

THE FOURTH TRUMPET BLAST: The Sky Is Stricken - Man's Vision is Affected

As the fourth angel blows his horn of warning the means by which men see are substantively affected. A "third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night." (Rev.8:12) How is this judgment being realized in our world? Eclipses, smog, sandstorms, nuclear cloud-cover? We cannot say for sure. "The supernatural events of the Bible are concerned not with 'How?'; but with 'Who?' and 'Why?' Trumpet four again points us back to the book of Exodus, where the importance of the plagues which struck Egypt was precisely that men could not understand how they happened and had to admit that God was at work. (Exodus 8:7, 18f.)" (Michael Wilcock) John opens his own gospel with the tragic editorial comment on the hearts of mankind when he says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." (Jn.1:4-5) God will intensify the darkness so as to create a longing for the light, for the true Light.

After the blowing of the forth trumpet an eagle appears in John's vision calling out three woes which prepare us for the intensification of judgment of the next three trumpets. (Rev.8:13) In the Scriptures an eagle is often a symbol of judgment as he feeds on the carnage and remains of those under God's discipline. (Matt.24:28; Luke 17:37; Job 39:27-30; Ezek.39:17ff.) The remaining three trumpet blasts are directed against the stubborn and rebellious who continue to refuse to listen to the warnings and wooings of the living God.

THE FIFTH TRUMPET: The Locusts from the Pit - TORMENT (Rev.9:1-11)

Whereas the first four trumpets speak of God's judgment in the world in which men live, the next three speak of judgment on the men of the world. Satan emerges on the scene as an instrument of God's judgment. He is the "star" which fell from heaven (Luke 10:18). His power is "given" to him. God is sovereign over all things, including over the delegated authority and power of all demonic forces and their captain, Satan.

From the "Abyss" emerge an ugly army of locusts (cf. Exodus 10:12-15). these locusts are used to torment all of those on the earth who persist in refusing the grace and mercy of God, that is those who have not already been sealed by the Spirit of God. This army of hell is given a commission to do their destructive work for "five months", perhaps either an illusion to the normal life span of certain locusts or a reference to the 150 days the water stayed upon the earth at the time of the Flood (Gen.7:24). In any case, what is important to see is that their time and terror are in the hand of God.

Their appearance is probably derived from Joel 1-2, in which we find clear reference to locusts as a symbol of God's judgment. The "king" of these warlike insects is Satan, himself, the "destroyer", who is also heading for his own destruction. I agree with Michael Wilcock who believes the symbol of the locusts to represent "whenever unbelievers suffer in this way, all the many-shaped ills which torment them, and which even kindly death will not come to relieve - chronic hardships, diseases, enmities, insecurities - these ills are the locusts of Trumpet Five, marshaled and led by the angel of the Abyss.."

THE SIXTH TRUMPET: Angels at the Euphrates - DESTRUCTION (Rev.9:12-21)

With the blowing of this trumpet the judgment of God gets even more intense. Angels are released to kill "one third of mankind", a significant minority. Along with them an incredible army of horsemen ride forth, perhaps a great "demonic army", who

along with the angels, are tools of God's sovereign and deserved judgment in the world. In the ancient world, the Euphrates was believed to be the boundary between the East and the West, the eastern boundary established by God for the descendants of Abraham (Gen.15:18) Through much of biblical history the main threat of destruction came from the region of the Euphrates and the Tigris - Assyria and Babylon, for example.

This sixth trumpet, like the rest, announces a strong warning of God's wrath against sin in response to the prayers of God's people that evil should not go on forever and that it should not be unpunished. How is such judgment being revealed in our world? In every way imaginable. Through bad health, terrorist acts, war, "accidents" of all varieties. Tragically, as after trumpet five, so with trumpet six, we see pain but no repentance. What an indictment against the foolish hearts of men. Nothing is left but final judgment which is signified in the blowing of the seventh trumpet.

AN INTERVENING VISION: The Magnificent Angel and the Little Opened Scroll (Rev.10:1-11:14)

Before the last trumpet is blown an incredibly large and splendid angel appears with legs that straddle the earth and the sea. Many believe him to represent the worldwide spread of the gospel and the scroll to be the Word of God, "with the message of salvation in Christ on every page". (Coclosure) The only escape on judgment day is to have believed the gospel. As the gigantic angel shouted John heard "the voices of seven thunders". But even as the Apostle Paul was not permitted to write down or reveal what he saw and learned having been transported in the "third heaven", so John is instructed to "seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down." (Rev.10:4) There are some things that we simply cannot know, some things that we will only understand later.

Next, the angel announces that God will delay His judgment no longer. The day of

mercy is about to give way to the day of justice. John is told to eat the scroll in the angel's hand, a reminder of the prophet Ezekiel's experience of eating the bittersweet Word of God. (Ezek. 3:1-3). The gospel and the Christian life contain things pleasant and things difficult. Both are a part of God's good and glorious plan.

THE SEVENTH TRUMPET: The Glory of the Church - (Rev.11:15-19)

With the blowing of the seventh trumpet we are introduced to the end of the ages as we know them. this is the eschaton, the final day, the Day of the Lord! This vision is the fulfillment of the great promise made to the prophet Isaiah concerning the expansion of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom whose increase and whose peace will know no end! And King Jesus, the greater David, will reign for ever and ever. Every time I sing this great passage set to music in Handel's Messiah I am simply overwrought. Every longing in my soul is ignited at the anticipation of this awesome and glorious day. Once again John sees the 24 elders, representing the whole redeemed people of God, falling down in selfless and glad adoration of God

THE HOPE OF MEANINGFUL WITNESS AND IMPACT

Revelation 11:1-14

Charles Crissman was one of my good buddies growing up from elementary through high school years. He lived on a big farm with horses only a ten minute's walk from my home on Oakwood Lane. It was one of those places where I really felt the welcoming heart of God even before I came to know Him as my true shelter. We all loved to hang out there, play backyard football and just do "stuff" that guys like to do. His mom made the best turkey breast and homemade bread sandwiches in the universe which I coveted any day Charles brought one to school for his lunch. There always seemed to be a smile for me at the Crissman's home and table.

But one of the most profound memories that I have of the Crissman farm and family was the time when they installed the first "bomb shelter" that I had ever seen. It was during the time of the Cuba Missile crisis when President Kennedy took such a strong stand against the threat of Premier Krushchev's (sp.?) maddening quest to have Russia swallow the world. How can I ever forget his threats, theatrics and tirades at the United Nations, banging the heel of his shoe on the desk top as he arrogantly longed and planned for the day in which Communism would consume the whole world? Never has a cold war seemed so ready to thaw out and lead us to the first all out nuclear war, maybe that dreaded World War III that we little guys heard so much about from our dads and other veterans.

In the atmosphere of real fear and great concern the "bomb shelter" business thrived! I remember a certain amount of ambivalence that I felt when the Crissman's installed their little underground steel house. "Will there be room for me in here? I've always been invited over to spend the night. Can I still spend the night if Russia invades North Carolina?" These real concerns of "wars and rumors of war" were never very far from our hearts in those days, and for good reasons. This was no idle threat. Communism was laying waste to much of my then known world. Gradually, however,

this season gave way to another less ominous one, and my friends whose families had bought into the "bomb shelter" mentality began to convert their shelters into musty storage units or underground attics.

This was not the last time that I experienced the "bomb shelter" mentality, however. While the first one was political and generated by the threat of communism, the second one was spiritual and generated by the threat of the "antichrist". Unfortunately, this was my first introduction to the book of Revelation. A lot more fear than faith was generated in my heart, and in many of my late 60's Christian counterparts, by those who were constantly searching the newspapers and newsreels in order to interpret the last book of the Bible. Oh the bad exegesis and sensationalism that was being fostered on us by those apocalyptic prophecy mongers whose popularity was only exceeded by the growth of their seminars and book sales.

The net effect of those who made their living by feeding and growing our phobias and suspicions about everything was the retreating of Christians from the culture into little ecclesiastical bomb shelters. Christian communes were being planned and established in many parts of America. The buying of common properties, stockpiling of food stuffs and multiple warnings against owning or receiving anything with the number 666 on it were replete. Guessing the identity of the antichrist became a growing and popular sport among those who were becoming less and less engaged with the world, the world into which we have been commissioned as witnesses and kingdom representatives until King Jesus returns. It really makes me both mad and sad as I look back over those days.

for this is just the opposite effect that the book of Revelation is meant to have.

As we turn our attention to Revelation 11:1-14 we are introduced to the section which John records for us just before the blowing of the seventh trumpet. It is similar to the intervening vision which he received just before the breaking of the seventh seal in its intent to bring great encouragement, hope and courage. In Revelation 7:1-17 we

saw the sealing of the 144,000 and the white-robed multitude emerging triumphant after a lifestyle of great persecution, suffering and tribulation during the whole interadvent period. In Revelation 11:1-14 we are given a vision of the Lord's two witnesses who emerge triumphant after a life of faithful witness, and yet who suffer a brief and apparent defeat.

After John has the vision of the great angel straddling the whole earth with the "bittersweet" gospel in his hand, he is next told to "measure the temple of God, and count the worshipers there. (Rev.11:1). This measuring is similar to that which the prophet Ezekiel was commissioned to do in Ezekiel 40-42, but with a very significant difference. In the New Testament we find that the temple of God actually becomes the people of God (1 Cor.3:16-17; 1 Pet.2:5; Eph.2:20-22). John's vision does not concern the temple in Jerusalem made of stone and which was destroyed in AD 70. Rather, his focus is on the temple made of "living stones", the people of God from every race, tribe, tongue and people group, who are becoming a dwelling place for the Lord by His Spirit. As Philip Hughes has commented, "the measuring commanded here is an indication to us of the ordered perfection of all that God purposes and performs, as the Creator and Restorer of the universe. Its measuring may be taken to mean that God is in control of all that happens to his servants, they are well known in number and name to God."

John is next told, "but exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months" (Rev.11:2). This brings us to one of the most debated details in the whole book of Revelation. We will be wise to apply the "lean is better than luxurious" rule of interpretation here. What are we to make of this 42-month period of time? It occurs several times in Revelation also referred to as "1260 days" and "time and times and a half a time". The background to this numeric symbol is found in Daniel 7:25; 9:24-27; 12:7. The most popular interpretations of this three and a half year period have been these: (1) The second half of the 7 year Great Tribulation in which antichrist rules; (2) A conventional

symbol for a limited

period of unrestrained wickedness; and, (3) The whole interadvent period, i.e., the whole church age. During this period the Gentiles "trample the holy city", that is, the people of God are persecuted. When John received this vision Jerusalem had already been destroyed. We must look to the following verses for a more complete understanding of the meaning of this part of the vision.

In Revelation 11:3-14 we meet the "two witnesses" who are raised up and empowered by God for faithful and effective ministry during this whole persecution filled 1260 day period. They are identified by means of Old Testament imagery. Perhaps we are to be reminded of Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:4) and who had "power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want." (Rev.11:6)

Perhaps the "two-ness" is not a limited number but rather a symbol of the trustworthiness of their witness, (John 8:17f. ; Deut.19:15; Juke 10:1; Acts 1:8). Certainly, these two "olive trees" and "two lampstands" should remind of us the Spirit-filled church called and empowered to preach the gospel in light of all kinds of opposition and persecution, including that of martyrdom (Psalm 52:8; Zech. 4; Rom.11; Rev. 1-2). For in the Old Testament the olive tree was often used as a symbol of Israel just, as we have already seen in Revelation, the lampstand signifies the church.

As the two witnesses continue their effective ministry among the nations John records a fatal attack from "the beast that comes up from the Abyss" (Rev.11:7), but only after "they have finished their testimony". Satan's attack does not and cannot alter that which our Father has purposed. The gospel is running through the nations. There will be men and women from every people group populating heaven. The kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever!

The attack of the beast on the witnesses leads to their death and a brief three and a half day period of gloating, celebrating and gift giving among the peoples of the "great city", here referred to as "Sodom and Egypt". Sodom stands for gross immorality and Egypt for hardened idolatry and rebellion. In the following chapters in Revelation, Rome, also referred to as "Babylon", is identified as the world in rebellion against God and His people. (2 Cor.4:7-9; Jer.1:9, 12, 19; 5:11,14; John 15:18-21; Matt.10:28).

What seemed to be the death of the witness of the church actually gives rise to her resurrection and glory! "But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them" (Rev. 11:11) Should we not think of this three and a half day apparent triumph as a type of the three days that Jesus spent in apparent defeat after His crucifixion? The beast's victory is hollow! (Ezek.37:10; Acts 7:54-56; 1 Cor.15:20ff; 1 Thess.4:16,17; 2 Cor.4:4). God's enemies are startled, humbled and overwhelmed when and where He vindicates His servants. How much more so will this be the case at the second coming of Jesus when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father! (Phil.2:1-11)

Let us now try to imagine how this vision of the two witnesses would have affected the hearts of John's original audience. Of what practical and timely importance would this image have been to persecuted Christians in the first century if the 42 months or 1260 days were a reference to something that would happen only thousands of years after their death? On the other hand if the three and a half year period is indeed a reference to the whole interadvent period, the whole age between the two comings of Christ, then we can see great relevance and encouragement not only for Christians of the first century, but also for Christians of every century.

As the people of God we are known, numbered, loved and protected against all ultimate harm and loss. We are not to develop a "bomb shelter" mentality in the face of great opposition and persecution. Our calling is not, and never has been, to retreat into

little Christian cocoons, communes or communities of navel gazing fear, self-protection and survival. For John's readers in Asia Minor there is great encouragement. They are not to fear Rome's worst assaults. Even though there will be times and places in which it seems that the church has been silenced and defeated, if not destroyed, the demise is only brief and apparent. For the blood of the martyrs has always proven to be the seed of the church. Our God is the God of resurrection. Even though the enemies of God have a seasonal laugh at the temporary demise of the witness of the gospel it is He who sits on His throne in heaven who has installed His Son as King in Zion who laughs eternally and the loudest (Psalm 2).

What about the church of every age? What about us? What hope, comfort and courage do we derive from this vision? Our calling is not to waste time trying to run from visa cards with 666 on them. We aren't to debate among ourselves if the birth mark on Gorbachev's head means he's the antichrist. We are, by proclamation and by presence, to preach and demonstrate the gospel of Jesus Christ among the nations until Jesus comes back. We, the church, are the two witnesses. We are empowered by God Himself. He is the Lord of both miracle and persecution, of both gospel advancements and apparent gospel setbacks. Our calling is not to be successful, but faithful.

Perhaps we American Christians need this life giving rebuke more than any other segment of the Body of Christ in the world. Am I guilty of exaggerating or being unfair to suggest that we have done more to perpetuate the "bomb shelter" mentality of Christianity than any other people group represented in the Body of Christ today? Is it true that our American Christian spirituality, as one gracious theologian from Great Britain described it, is about "three thousand miles wide and two inches deep"?

What are we afraid of? This is our Father's world. His eternal counsel and purposes will stand. None will ultimately thwart His ways. No, we are not to be naive about life in "Sodom and Egypt". In fact, the next chapters of Revelation, to which we are coming,

have much to teach us about living wisely in the world. And yet, we are given insight about the "real world" so that we can live with confidence and hope as we seek to live out the radical implications of the gospel in the context of Babylon. We must live with the perspective of our Father. We dare not lean on our own understanding.

As witnesses we are to go into every nation of the world and every sphere of life. We are all missionaries! A part of our repentance is going to require that we recognize and discard some of our non-biblical thoughts and paradigms about what it means to be a witness and to be involved in ministry. First of all, let's repent of our pragmatism. The driving question of ministry is not, "What works?"

The missionary to Afghanistan who may see one convert in ten years is not to be considered either a failure or ineffective. God alone is the One who faithfully applies the saving benefits of Jesus Christ to the lost. The gospel goes forth both in blessing and judgment. It is up to the Lord of the harvest how this mystery is played out.

On the other hand we must be careful not to label some missionary or pastor or gifted layperson a "superstar" in the Kingdom in terms of great observable fruit. As the Apostle Paul asked the Corinthians rather rhetorically, "What do you have that you have not received? And if you received it, why do you boast as though you did not?" (1 Cor.4) God gives talents, gifts, calling and fruit as He sees fit. One plants, another waters, another harvests, but it is God who causes the increase. As Francis Schaeffer has said, "there are no little places and no little people." Each of us needs to be far more taken up with the glory and grace of our Sovereign God and surrendered to His purposes in His world. We are not the point. He is.

Secondly, we need to repent of bifurcating proclamation and presence witnessing. Saint Francis once charged his followers to "go and preach the gospel, and use words if you must." Now I readily realize the ease with which such a statement can be both misunderstood and misapplied. But I am equally aware of

THE HOPE OF GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Revelation 12-14

There is no book in the Old Testament that has meant more to me, theologically and practically, than the Book of Job. It's not that I would dare to compare my experience of suffering with that of Job. For even though I have known some great pain and heartache in my 46 years of life, when I ponder God's providential orderings for Job, my whining and complaining stop real fast. Well, they should anyway. No, it is not primarily as a sufferer that I have found great import and impact from this part of the Old Testament canon relegated to the books called "wisdom literature".

Why then is Job so important to me? In many ways it represents the slow but steady work God has been effecting in my heart as His Spirit and Word have brought me to a more mature understanding of the nature and mystery of the Christian life. In essence, God has used and continues to use Job to show me the huge difference between my perspective and His perspective on all things. And in so doing He has utterly convinced me of the necessity, freedom and joy of an ongoing search for and surrender to His vantage point and purposes. He has also taught me, (I wish I could say once and for all), the tragedy and misery that come from "lighting my own fire" in an attempt to comprehend the drama of life. Leaning on my own understanding has proven to be both foolish and futile.

It's just at this point where the Book of Job and the Book of Revelation converge. Both are books of crisis and conflict and the ensuing struggle to make sense of what it means to be God's people in the crucible and vortex of history and hard providence. And both represent many voices asserting the right to be the interpreter of all things. God, man, misguided "friends", one's painful heart, Satan, the state, culture, false prophets who has the ear of our inner man? To what voice are we most inclined to listen? To whom have we given the sacred right to interpret the circumstances and exigencies of our pilgrimage towards the New Jerusalem? Perspective isn't quite

everything, but its close. Perspective is often the only difference between paralyzing fear and liberating faith in the lives of the people of God. Both Job and John gained perspective and were reduced to soul staggering silence and worship of Him who does all things well.

In Revelation 12-14 we are invited to view what few earth dwellers could ever hope to see. It is as though God pushes back the curtains of human history and let's us peer backstage to know what is really going on behind the scenes, behind all the flurry and fury of the human drama that has been underway ever since Adam and Eve sinned against our Father in the Garden of Eden and which was intensified with the birth of Jesus, the only Savior of the world. We are not only introduced to the main characters but are also given a copy of the whole story line including the wondrous climax of a script that God alone could write and produce! Insight into these things is not meant to "ruin a night at the theater" by our knowing the end of the play before the first curtain rises. Rather, God gives us this holy privilege and gift that we might be filled with hope as we assume our role in His sovereign plans and purposes.

It's important at this point to highlight what John saw after the seventh trumpet of warning and judgment was blown. After the saints are rewarded and the destroyers are destroyed (Rev.11:18), John writes, "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, an earthquake and a great hailstorm" (Rev.11:19). This living snap shot of the "ark of the covenant" bridges us from one of John's several recorded vignettes of the end of history into a whole new section of his letter. Let's remember that John's visions are recorded for us in the order he saw and heard these things, not necessarily in the order in which things happen. The significance of this transitional image is pointed out by Michael Wilcock, "Of the ark, no more need be said here than that it is the symbol of God's covenant, or agreement, to rescue his people from their enemies; and the

lightnings, voices, thunders, earthquake, and hail are often used in Scripture as signs that he is present and active." (Wilcock pg.116) At every point in the letter God reminds us of His mercy and His might. What follows in Revelation 12:1-15:4 is the telling of the story God's active covenantal faithfulness to His people in delivering His people safely to heaven after much intense conflict.

THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE DRAMA OF HISTORY (Rev.12:1-6)

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of 12 stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth" (Rev.12:1-2) This woman clearly represents the people of God, "the human stock from whom Jesus came", represented at the time of Jesus' birth by Mary, the mother of our Lord. Our lives matter to God and our place in history is no small place.

"Then another sign appeared in heaven; an enormous red dragon with 7 heads and 10 horns and 7 crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born" (Rev.12:3-4). Here John introduces us to the devil, Satan, our chief adversary. His 7 heads represent his authority, the crowns his "royalty" and the 10 horns his very great strength. "The dragon positions himself to seize and destroy the woman's child. Nothing, indeed, is more urgent for him than to devour the Son who is coming in the world to destroy the devil and his works (1 Jn.3:8; Heb.2:14)." (Hughes) The dragon hates the Son. This hatred was behind Herod's cowardly act of murdering so many young male children at the time of Jesus birth. (Matt.2:16ff.)

"She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for

1,260 days" (Rev.12:5-6). This "male child" is none other than the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, who was taken up to heaven after His death and resurrection and who will one day return to "rule the nations". (Psa.2; Isa.9:6ff.; Phil. 2:6-11). These three are the main players in the drama of history and with great precision and shorthand efficiency, John sets the scenario for the unfolding of the whole inter-advent drama. Just as Israel was in the wilderness for 42 years en route to the promised land, so the church will be in the desert for 42 months, (1,260 days). The entire period between the two comings of Christ will be full of conflict in an evil world. But God will protect and provide for His people and safeguard them against all ultimate harm.

WAR IN HEAVEN: THE DRAGON IS CAST OUT

In Revelation 12:7-16 we are next given priceless insight into the nature of spiritual warfare. This vision would have been timely and invaluable to John's readers in their time of crisis just as it has proven to be both enlightening and encouraging for God's people of every generation. Satan's hatred of God and His purposes is set forth in terms of a "war in heaven". His defeat by the Lord Jesus, the "son", the "male child" is presented in graphic apocalyptic language. The "dragon" and his allies are simply "not strong enough" to prevail against the host of heaven. Satan, who seeks to "lead the whole world astray" was "hurled down" by King Jesus and he, along with his "angels" (demons), is en route to "eternal fire" (Luke 10:17f.; John 12:31; 16:11,33; Matt.25:42; Rev.20:10).

There is already "much rejoicing in heaven" over the defeat dealt to Satan by the "son". Through the triumph of the Lamb, Satan is the accuser of the no longer condemned! (Job.1:9-11; 2:5; rom.8:1; 1 Jn.2:1-2) There is loud rejoicing in heaven. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil and He succeeded! God's people in the first century and in every century overcome "by the word of the Lamb and by the word of

their testimony". (Phil.4:13; 2 Cor.12:9f.; Rom.8:31-37) The gospel of God's all consuming grace frees them and us not to love our lives "so much as to shrink from death." Let us, therefore, "rejoice", but let us also be wise. For Satan, knowing he is defeated and knowing "that his time is short" is going down swinging, literally. His massive dragon tail is swinging wildly and destructively for he is "filled with fury".

THE DRAGON PERSECUTES THE WOMAN AND HER OFFSPRING

Having failed to destroy the Son, Satan spends the rest of his days seeking to destroy the sons and daughters of the living God. How predictable it is to see that Satan's hatred of Jesus is now turned towards those whom Jesus loves and cherished, His bride. He knows that his time is limited and our destiny is most glorious, therefore, he will do anything in his power to make life miserable for us now. Having lost us for eternity Satan will resort to anything and everything in an attempt to "rob, kill and destroy" us. This is the essence of spiritual warfare: The hatred of Jesus by our vanquished adversary marshaled against us, the followers of the Lamb

. Jesus told us to expect trouble in this world, great trouble. But as we "wait upon the Lord" we are born up and along as on "eagles' wings" (Isa.40:31; Ex.19:4). Until the end Satan will spew a river of evil at us, but God will protect and provide for us. He will never fail us. He will never leave or forsake us. How different this perspective on spiritual warfare is from much of what I see among Christians in our American evangelical culture. On one hand I see a lot of doubt, fear, suspicion, sensationalism, and uncertainty. The way many Christians live their lives one would wonder if the news ever reached them that Jesus has already won the victory over Satan. The dragon's head has already been crushed! That first great promise of the gospel in Genesis 3:15 has been realized. Satan is a real but a defeated foe. We overcome him now by the blood of the Lamb, by the once and for all finished work of the Lord Jesus upon His cross. We overcome him by the word of our testimony, that is as the gospel is

received, believed and lived out every day until we are in heaven. There is no doubt about the outcome of history for the people of God. We prevail because Jesus has prevailed. This truth is meant to sink deep into our soul's.

But as there are many Christians who err on the side of unbelief and fear so there are also many who err on the opposite side of naiveté and presumption.

To affirm that Satan is our defeated foe is not to say that he is no longer a mighty adversary. He has been dethroned, not annihilated; conquered, not eradicated.

A helpful way of thinking of Satan's defeat and the limitations of his authority over believers is to envision him on death row held now on an unbreakable chain. The life of grace and wisdom requires that we do not venture within the length of the chain which binds our enemy and that we learn to accept God's sovereign purposes in giving the forces of evil certain limited power to serve His ultimate purposes in the world.

In the words of the apostle Paul we need to be wise "in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes." (2 Cor.2:11) Much of the remainder of Revelation is written unto this very end, that we know the schemes and end of Satan and his host of allies. In Revelation 13 we are introduced to the dragon's two great allies, "the beast from the sea" and "the beast from the earth". Together they form a counterfeit trinity, a "trinity of evil".

THE BEAST FROM THE SEA

This ghastly beast with multiple horns, heads and crowns has its corollary in the four great beasts that Daniel saw coming up out of the sea (Daniel 7). Four successive world powers living in great hostility to the people of God proved to be the fulfillment of Daniel's vision. In a similar way many scholars have suggested that John's vision of the sea beast is to be understood also as political and societal persecution for the church in every generation. Certainly for John's original readers the Roman Empire would be the embodiment of this evil, this Antichrist. Philip Hughes comments, "This beast should be

taken as denoting the activity of the devil throughout the history of this age by the instrumentality of human movements and organizations rather than a single individual". It is "the spirit of antichristianity manifested, as we have said, through human agencies during the whole course of the Christian era, though perhaps achieving its final and fiercest force under the leadership of a malevolent personage in the ultimate climax of history, (1 Jn.2:18; 1 Jn.4:3)". Michael Wilcock adds, "so when we are shown a beast whose power is not that of wealth or of influence, but that of government ('diadems' and a 'throne'), who combines all the powers of Daniel 7, we see in him the principles of power politics: in a word, the state" (Wilcock).

The goal of this beast is obvious: to seize the adoration, attention, and allegiance that alone belong to the Lord Jesus. "He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven." (Rev.13:6) Beginning with Julius Caesar, Roman emperors had been deified, mostly after they had died. But, as already mentioned, Emperor Domitian required that people address him as "our lord and god". The beast's deceit is such as to even counterfeit the death and resurrection of Jesus through "a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed" (Rev.13:3). His persecution of Christians serves the purpose of seeking to gain the worship of "all those whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." (Rev.13:8) Therefore as followers of the Lamb we are called to "patient endurance and faithfulness".

THE BEAST FROM THE EARTH

The next member of the trinity of evil to be introduced is the beast from the earth. His lamb-like facade is a superficial cover for his dragon-like reality. His intent is to promote the worship of the sea beast through "great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men." (Rev.13:13) "The

first beast come up out of the sea. The second arises from the land. The first is Satan's hand. The second is the devil's mind. The first represents the persecuting power of Satan operating in and through the nations of this world and their governments. The second symbolizes false religions and philosophies of the world." (Hendriksen) John will later identify this second beast as the "false prophet" (Rev.16:13; 19:20). "It symbolizes false philosophy in whichever form these appear throughout the entire dispensation. It symbolizes all false prophets in every era of this dispensation. They come to you disguised as sheep, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves, (Matt.7:15)." (Hendriksen)

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

Now we come to one of the most sensational and hotly debated details in the entire book of Revelation. "He, (the earth beast), forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast of the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666." (Rev.13:16-18)

Who is this personification of evil symbolized by the number 666? Through the years there have been many attempts to identify "the person" believed to be referred to in this enigmatic passage by this symbolic number. By using the practice of "gematria", assigning a numeric significance to letters of either the Greek or Hebrew alphabet, these are among the many who have qualified for this great dishonor: Caesar, Nero, Martin Luther, Caligula, Domitian, various Popes, Protestant reformers, Oliver Cromwell, and John Wesley. Take your pick!

But perhaps we have been asking the wrong question. Maybe we should ask, "What does this number signify?", rather than only "Who?", for John simply says that the

number stands for the beast. Philip Hughes helps us here, "The one clue that St. John gives is that the number of the beast, 666, is the 'number of man'. The number six has understandably been regarded as a symbol of man, in that it falls short of seven, which is the divine number. On this basis the threefold six may be understood as indicative of a human or humanistic trinity, that is to say a counterfeit of the divine Trinity, with all the pretensions to supreme power and authority that such a counterfeit implies. It may perhaps be inferred from the context that this pseudo-trinity is that of Satan (the dragon), plus antichrist (the first beast), plus the false prophet (the second beast), who are united in the one diabolical objective, namely, to dethrone the Creator and to enthrone the creature and to substitute the image of the beast for the image of God in man."

Therefore, 666 shows up in every generation and every place throughout the whole interadvent period. What then of the "mark" this beast gives? What is it and when does the marking take place? Do we need to be concerned about Visa cards, driver's licenses, social security numbers and the like which contain this number? Does it not make more sense to see that John is presenting the counterfeit trinity's equivalent "seal" to that of God's? As God has sealed His people as a sign of ownership, so the beast of the earth seals those who are his. Those who bear the mark of the beast belong to him and live according to his values, standards and principles.

The consequences for the people of God are obvious. To confess that Jesus is Lord and that Caesar is not is to find it oftentimes very difficult to "buy and sell", that is, to carry on an interrupted life in the midst and as a part a corrupt and antichristain world and culture. Manifestations of this kind of persecution were happening in first century Rome for believers who refused to burn incense to Caesar. And in every generation since, the cost of following Jesus rather than the dragon and his minions, has been documented by tears, blood, loss, privation and even death.

During my entire Christian life, 99% of the discussions that I have heard about the

"mark of the beast" have given rise to speculation, doubt, and fear. But consider what next fills John's vision and heart after God has given him insight into the diabolical trinity.

THE LAMB AND THE 144,000

"Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads." (Rev.14:1) Rather than being left to dread Satan and to fear his ways John is led to worship God and delight in His ways! In Rev.14:1-5 we are given a vision of Jesus standing as victor on Mt. Zion, the place of redemption, not on Mt. Sinai, the place of law. He is the victor over the dragon, the sea beast and the earth beast. With him are all of his people sharing in His victory. Let us remember that this 144,000 represents the totality of the people of God. They are signed, sealed and delivered safely to the Father by the triumphant Lamb.

Worship breaks out in heaven which sounded to John like "the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder." (Rev.14:2) This loud, passionate and joyful worship is the people of God singing the new song accompanied by the string players of heaven. They are described as those who follow the Lamb and who "were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb." (Rev.14:4) Only in heaven will we fully understand and believe that "salvation is of the Lord". God bought us, He redeemed us by the blood of the Lamb, plus nothing!

THE THREE ANGELS

John is next given a vision of three angels "flying in midair" (Rev.14:6-13). These angels represent a very God-centered view of the main issues of life between the comings of Christ. Spiritual warfare is not the story of the cosmic conflict between two equal adversaries battling it out in the heavenlies and on the earth. Spiritual warfare is

about the advancement of the gospel among the nations of the world in the midst of real but, ultimately, futile, opposition. Thus, the first angel (vs.6-7) speaks of grace and impending judgment. Until the last hour the gospel will be preached among the nations, but God's patience is not without limits. Those who despise His mercy will know His wrath.

The second angel (vs.8), forewarns of "Babylon's fall". All godless systems and philosophies and ideologies of the "world" and the antichrist are doomed. God's truth and Kingdom will prevail over all things, over everything the dragon and all of his allies can muster. Lastly, the third angel (vs.9-13) highlights the eternal consequences of one's worship. To worship the beast is to be guaranteed eternal torment. To "die in the Lord" is to be guaranteed eternal rest. This is the main issue in life and in death: to whom or what have you given your worship? True or false worship is at the heart of what we call spiritual warfare. Let God's people be encouraged, deeply encouraged. Our God reigns over all things, including the works of the devil! But let those who have spurned His mercy be warned!

As Professor Bruce Metzger has put it, "Men and women are so constituted as to worship some absolute power, and if they do not worship the true and real Power behind the universe, they will construct a god for themselves and give allegiance to that. In the last analysis, it is always a choice between the power that operates through inflicting suffering, that is, the power of the beast, and the power that operates through accepting suffering, namely, the power of the Lamb."

GRAPES OF WRATH: THE FINAL REAPING

After the third angel flies on John is given a vision, (Rev.14:14-20), similar to that which Daniel received in Daniel 7:13f. The "Son of Man" of Daniel's vision is Jesus,

coming in glory as the judge of all men. (Matt.13:24-30, 36-40). Where is the entire history of the world heading? Towards this day when King Jesus will bring forth the harvest of His judgment on the living and the dead when the "time to reap is come". God alone knows the hour of this appointed day. In John's vision there are two aspects of Jesus' reaping. There is the reaping of the wheat, which represents Christians, and the reaping of the tares, those who have rejected Jesus and His atoning death (Matt.9:37; Luke 10:2; John 4:26-29; Mark 4:26-29).

What a tragic scene this is for those who refuse the free grace of our God through Jesus. Rather than be taken to the bosom of God by His love they will be under His feet in His judgment. Such is the insanity of sin and such is the judgment of God upon all who do not love His Son. We will either cleave to the One who was trampled under God's judgment "outside the city" for us (Heb.13:2), or we, ourselves, will be trampled under His feet "outside the city", justly, because of our sin (Isa.63:1-6; Joel 3:13). Which will you have?

THE HOPE OF VICTORY OVER EVIL

Revelation 15-18

The very first cliché that I remember hearing associated with the Book of Revelation was, "I read the end of the book and we win!" To a competition minded, sports loving young Christian of the late 60's, that sounded great. It reminded me of the feeling I got when it was time to play neighborhood baseball or football and I knew that Sammy Bowland was on my team. Sammy was the kid among the guys that I grew up with whose collision with puberty took place way before any of us. Not only did we envy his first fruits of mustache hair but his testosterone level enabled him to excel in any sport he played. He was "the man". If Sammy was on your team you could be assured of winning, period.

As a young believer I guess I thought of Jesus as a big Sammy Bowland and the Christian life as the "mother of all Super Bowls". Because Jesus was on my team, I knew I was destined to win! Spiking footballs in the end zone of life and passing out confident high fives of victory to teammates in the presence of vanquished opponents pretty well defined the spiritual attitude for which I strove. Such was the triumphalistic enthusiasm and rather me-centered view of the life of faith I had in those early years of knowing Christ. I thank our heavenly Father for His unlimited patience and forbearance towards such a naive and self-centered son, like me!

But as I have continued to study God's Word my perspective on my place in the economy of eternity has changed radically. A theological Copernican revolution of great proportion and implications has occurred. I have discovered that the Son does not revolve around me, I revolve around the Son! He is the center of all things. I have come to realize that the Christian life is not primarily about me. Jesus is not to be the window dressings of my life. I am simply not the ultimate point of it all. God and His glory are the point!

Joshua learned this lesson as he was leading the people of God into the Promised

Land. After their covenant with God was reaffirmed at Gilgal, through the young men being circumcised and the whole nation celebrating the Passover, Joshua prepared to take God's people towards Jericho (Joshua 5:9-15). As he came close to the city "he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand." Joshua asked this imposing figure, "'Are you for us or for our enemies?'" In essence, "Whose team are you on?" His answer to Joshua's inquiry is classic, "'Neither', he replied, 'but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.'" Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, 'What message does my Lord have for his servant?' The commander of the Lord's army replied, 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.' And Joshua did so."

The angel of the Lord, who many Old Testament scholars identify as the Lord Jesus in His pre-incarnate form, makes it real clear that He is not merely the star player on a team. He is the Lord! The battles ahead for the people of God, as they move into Canaan, are His battles. The Promised Land is to be the light house and the launching pad for His glory to be revealed among the nations. God is not building a little privatized retreat center for His people to become an ingrown community of nationalists. As we have seen throughout the book of Revelation, God loves his people with a passion and delight that most of us have only begun to realize the depths thereof. But His love is meant to be the means by which we are freed from a life of self preoccupation unto a life of being preoccupied with His grace being extended to sinners and His glory being revealed among the nations of the world.

Perhaps a better way of summarizing the later chapters of Revelation would be, "I read the end of the book and Jesus wins! He triumphs over all things!" Such a heart is reflected in John the Baptist when he said of Jesus, "He must increase and I must decrease." So also we see this Spirit given attitude in the Apostle Paul when he affirmed, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Phil.1:21) And again, "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and

complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." (Acts 20:24) Already in Revelation we have seen this glorious freedom in the spirit of the martyrs who "loved not their lives unto death." Jesus isn't merely on our team to help us win in life. We are engrafted into His heart and made partakers of His very inheritance!

This is the perspective that is both reflected in and meant to be cultivated by the sobering section of Revelation to which we now come. Chapters 15 through 18 record the pouring forth of the wrath of God on those who choose to worship the beast rather than the Lamb. This vision of John also includes the final defeat of all the forces of evil allied and arrayed against the people of God personified by the great harlot, Babylon. Let God's people of the first century be deeply encouraged. Rome will not prevail. Let God's people of every generation be filled with hope. No nation, no power, no evil will ultimately prevail against the Lord and His people. Jesus has won. Jesus will win!

SEVEN ANGELS WITH SEVEN PLAGUES - THE SAINTS REJOICE

Revelation 15 begins with John seeing "another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues - last, because with them God's wrath is completed." This vision is preparation for the final outpouring of God's judgment upon a world which has rejected His Son. Whereas the seven trumpets represent God's painful warnings for those who refuse His grace, the seven plagues, or "bowls of wrath" as they are referred to the most, represent God's punishment which intensifies and culminates in the final battle between Jesus and the dragon, between the world and the Church.

Realizing that the time is near for God to finally and fully vindicate His honor, the redeemed people of God rejoice. The coming wrath of God holds no fear for them for they have already passed from judgment to life in Christ. They "sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb." (Exodus 15:1ff; Deut. 18:15, 18; John

6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:22)

"Great and marvelous are your deeds,

Lord God Almighty.

Just and true are you ways,

King of the ages.

Who will not fear you, O Lord

and bring glory to your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come and worship before you,

for your righteous acts have been revealed."

On this song Bruce Metzger comments, "One of the most striking features of this song of the triumphant martyrs is the absence of any mention of their own victory and their own achievement. From beginning to end the whole song is a lyrical outburst celebrating the greatness of God." The greatest satisfaction, the deepest worship, and the highest praise is enjoyed by those whose main interest and joy, in life and in death, is the glory of God.

As John's vision continues he sees further preparation for the revelation of the God's righteous judgment. "Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed." (Rev.15:7-8) The prayers of the people of God are answered as the bowls full of the incense of intercession (Rev.5:8: 8:3) now give way to the bowls full of God's wrath. Believers full enjoyment of heaven awaits this final revelation of His wrath upon the world.

The concept of the wrath of God is, understandably, a very difficult one for many of us to accept, both intellectually and emotionally. This is especially the case in a man-

centered culture in which utilitarian views of God prevail. In the absence of a revelation of God's absolute holiness and glory we have developed woefully wrong thinking both about God and man. Without a vision of God's holiness we tend to think of Him as a benign grandfather who is somewhat under obligation to do us good. After all, He is love. On the other hand, we tend to think of ourselves, and mankind in general, not as sinners who desperately fall short of the glory of God and whose only appropriate cry to God is for mercy, but as victims, who primarily need to be understood and who have an inalienable right to be cared for. Unfortunately, this attitude is seen in the church just about as much as it is seen in the culture.

We, like John, and Isaiah before him (Isa.6:1ff.), need to see God's holiness and glory afresh. For only then will His grace and mercy move us to great humility and gratitude for so great a salvation. And only then will we be able to understand and accept the revelation of His wrath that is to come in full upon the world. God's wrath is not the irrational rage of an irritated pagan deity. Rather, it is His righteous indignation towards all evil and His resolute action in punishing sin. A. W. Pink gave us wisdom on these matters when he wrote:

"The wrath of God is a perfection of the Divine character on which we need to meditate frequently. First, that our hearts may be duly impressed by God's detestation of sin. We are ever prone to regard sin lightly, to gloss over its hideousness, to make excuses for it. But the more we study and ponder God's abhorrence of sin and His frightful vengeance upon it, the more likely are we to realize its heinousness. Second, to beget a true fear in our souls for God. 'Let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire' (Heb.12:28,29). We cannot serve him 'acceptably' unless there is due 'reverence' for His awful Majesty and 'godly fear' of His righteous anger, and these are best promoted by frequently calling to mind that 'our God is a consuming fire'. Third, to draw out our soul in fervent praise (to Jesus Christ) for having delivered us from 'the wrath to come'

(1 Thess. 1:10). Our readiness or our reluctance to meditate upon the wrath of God becomes a sure test of how our hearts really stand affected towards Him."

THE OUTPOURING OF THE SEVEN LAST BOWLS OF WRATH

THE FIRST BOWL: THE EARTH IS STRICKEN Rev. 16:1-2

"The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image."

(Rev.16:2; Ex.9:9-11)) It is important to notice the direct parallels between the judgments of the 7 Trumpets and the 7 Bowls of Wrath. The bowls represent an intensification of the judgment revealed in the trumpets. No longer is judgment seen in terms of "thirds". Warning is giving way to fulfillment. It is also important to realize that even though these 7 Bowls represent movement towards and culminating in final judgment, there are also manifestation of them throughout the interadvent period. God sovereignly retains the right to bring judgment and to withhold it according to His purposes.

THE SECOND BOWL: THE SEA IS STRICKEN Rev.16:3

"The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died." Now it is not just the sea, but life in the sea that is affected. God is judging man's commerce, livelihood and supply, (Exodus 7:20-21)

THE THIRD BOWL: THE RIVERS ARE STRICKEN Rev.16:4-7

With the outpouring of this bowl the "rivers and springs of water... became blood". Every aspect of God's creation is affected by His judgment. there is no place to hide. The only way to run from God is to run to God! This bowl represents the vindication of

God's name on behalf of His people in a similar way to what happened when the 5th seal was broken. (Rev.6:9f) The angel cries out, "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve." And the people of God at altar in heaven respond: "Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments." Let us always leave room for God to take His own vengeance. Repaying, He shall repay! (Rom.12:17,19. It is not at all wrong for us to look forward to this day.

THE FOURTH BOWL: THE SKY IS STRICKEN Rev.16:8-9

Greater judgment is now shown on the sun, beyond that which was revealed in by the 4th Trumpet. Now men are affected directly. The darkness of the sun will not bring them to repentance, neither will its heat. What a tragic picture of the hardened heart. How foolish! The scorching power of the sun simply causes the impenitent to "curse the name of God, who had control over these plagues". "...they refused to repent and glorify him." Giving us a helpful summary of the relationship between the seals, the trumpets and the bowls, Michael Wilcock says, "Again and again trouble will sweep the world (the Seals); whenever suffering is caused, God warns that it cannot be caused with impunity (the Trumpets); whenever His warnings go unheeded, He will in the end punish the wrongdoers (the Bowls)."

THE FIFTH BOWL: TORMENT - THE BEAST'S KINGDOM IS DARKENED

Rev.16:10-11

"The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done." Now John sees the entire human system thrown into confusion and anarchy, (Daniel 4:17, 25, 32; 7:12). God's throne, not that of the beast is in ultimate

control. As this bowl is emptied on the world we also see the absolute insanity of sin in the unwillingness those who worship the beast to receive the love of the Lamb.

THE SIXTH BOWL: DESTRUCTION - THE FINAL BATTLE Rev.16:12-16

With the pouring forth of the sixth bowl we are led to the brink of the final battle of the war which has been fought between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent ever since God put enmity between the two. (Gen.3:15) John refers to this final conflict as "the battle on the great day of God Almighty" (Rev.16:14). It is fought in "the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon" (Rev.16:16). No one knows for certain what "Armageddon" means and this is the only place known where the name even occurs. There is not even a consensus among biblical scholars concerning its correct spelling. Many suggest that it is a reference to Megiddo, a place where battles were fought from time to time in Israel's history.

In any event, John's vision of this last chapter in the war of the ages depicts each member of the trinity of evil spewing out of an evil spirit that looked like a frog. These spirits have power to perform "miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle" (Rev.16:14) Jesus prepared his disciples for this demonic

subterfuge with these words, "False christs and false prophets will arise and will show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect". Likewise the apostle Paul warned that the "lawless one" would come "according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with every deception of unrighteousness for those who are perishing because they refused to love the truth and so be saved" (2 Thess.2:9f.)

These foul lying spirits mobilize "the kings of the whole world" in a final mutiny against God, His purposes, and His people. The whole war and this final battle were written about in Psalm 2 in which David muses:

"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.' The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.' I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter, you will dash them to pieces like pottery.' Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him."

Such is the perspective and attitude that we should take towards Armageddon, and even towards the whole of spiritual warfare. The outcome of this battle and the total war is certain. Because Jesus has triumphed, Jesus will triumph! It is a real battle with real casualties. But even in dying we live! Jesus has conquered death for us. He has robbed the grave of its victory. The last enemy to be defeated is death, itself. Nations and kings of the earth be warned. You are no threat to the living God. God has already installed His King. He is Jesus. "Kiss the Son" while there is still time." Repent of your insolence and arrogance. May all of us take refuge in Him.

THE SEVENTH BOWL: THE END OF THE WORLD Rev.16:17-21

When the seventh angel "poured out his bowl into the air" a loud voice was heard from the temple saying, "It is done!" (Rev. 16:17). History as we know it is brought to a

conclusion with this announcement. The outpouring of God's wrath upon the earth and upon the enemies of God is graphically described. Such is the inevitable and horrific fate of all who have rejected eternal life in the Lord Jesus. This is the terrible "Day of the Lord." (Heb.12:26f. Jn.12:1; Matt.24:21, 29; Hag.2:6) "As always, however, God is the refuge and strength of His people, who therefore are without fear, 'though the earth should change and the mountains should shake in the heart of the sea' (Psa.46:1; Joel 3:16). They are assured, indeed, that they will receive a 'kingdom that cannot be shaken' (Heb.12:28) - the kingdom that will break in pieces and bring to an end all enemy kingdoms, while it itself is indestructible and stands forever (Dan.2:44)." (Philip Hughes). May we never forget that the wrath which falls upon non-believers in the final judgment is the wrath that fell upon Jesus on His cross. He died in our place. He has suffered in full that which we fully deserve. Let our hearts be sobered. Let our hearts be glad.

JUDGMENT UPON THE ALLIES OF THE DRAGON Revelation 17-18

In Revelation 15-16 we witnessed the coming judgment upon those who have tried to make life work apart from God's saving grace and without bowing the knee to the true King. In Revelation 17-18 we are given a vision of the judgment and end of the characters and contexts of evil which have perpetuated Satan's fatal but foolish attempt to usurp God's glory. "So certain is he (John) that God will judge the persecutors of the church that he now devotes two chapters to an account of the crashing down of the fabulous 'grandeur that was Rome.'" (Metzger).

In an age of "computer-speak" its as though God now clicks on to the icon of "Babylon", which to the Israelites was a representation of wickedness and persecution and to John and his readers, a symbol of Rome with all of her "seductive luxury and vice" and antichristian bias. In so doing He gives us in full what He has already given us in part: the promise and hope of the final and complete victory over Satan's kingdom

won by Jesus upon His cross. The destruction of Babylon does not follow the events of the seventh bowl of wrath, but rather is a central aspect of the cataclysmic end of history, here highlighted to bring both wisdom and encouragement to the hearts of God's people in every age who live in the midst of the tyranny, evil and power of the dragon and his allies.

BABYLON: THE SEDUCTIVE WHORE DESTINED FOR DISASTER Rev.17:1-6

Says one of the seven angels to John, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." Judgment has already been pronounced on "Babylon" in Rev.16:19, but Christians are warned by this Scripture not to take her allurements and temptations lightly. Though this whore's end is most definitely assured she will seek to seduce and destroy until the last day. Babylon represents what the New Testament more often refers to as "the world". Not the physical creation, but the fallen ideology and world view of those who continually seek to live in open antagonism and indifference to the Triune God of the Bible. "She is the symbol of all that corrupts and degrades human society, all its lust and lechery, its graft and deceit, its violence and tyranny, its hatred and squalor and injustice." (Hughes).

THE BEAST AND THE WHORE: COLLABORATION OF EVIL Rev.17:7-14

The angel gives John invaluable insight into the nature of the dragon's network of evil. The "unhappy hooker" rides upon the back of the beast "drunk with the blood of the saints". Though they are indeed enjoying a season of apparent victory their defeat and doom are certain. In these verses we are given a description of the rise, demise and rejuvenation of evil in our world. One of the great mysteries of providence is the way our sovereign heavenly Father even uses evil to serve His ultimate purposes. He

controls the ebb and flow of all things. The cooperation of all evil forces, civil and supernatural, will make a final and furious stand against the Lamb, "but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings - and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." (Rev.17:14) What a glorious paradox: the beast is overcome by the Lamb!

THE SELF-DESTRUCTION OF EVIL - Rev.17:15-18

"The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose....." What a surprise. Satan's kingdom will ultimately be divided against itself and fall! (Matt.12:26) Evil will finally collapse beneath the tonnage of its own rancor and rebellion. Once again let us notice and rejoice in the great theme of the sovereignty of God over all things, including the boundaries He has placed on evil and Satan's dominion. God's words will be fulfilled, every last one of them.

What comfort this must have been to Christians living under the persecution of mad Roman emperors like Nero, who according to the pagan historian Tacitus of the first century wrote, "a vast multitude of Christians were not only put to death, but put to death with insult. They were either clothed in the skins of wild beasts and then exposed in the arena to the attacks of half-famished dogs, or else dipped in tar and put on crosses to be set on fire, and when the daylight failed, to be burned as lights by night." (Annals XV, 44). Even though the "woman", this insidious whore, is given a season to rule "over the kings of earth", her reign of evil is about to come to an end.

THE GREAT FALL OF BABYLON THE GREAT Rev.18:1-24

A most glorious angel whose splendor illumines the whole earth arrives in John's

vision to announce with a shout: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" The day of God's vengeance has come for "God has remembered her crimes." She will be payed back double for all the destruction wrought by her abominations. "Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself." God promises His church "in one day her plagues will overtake her; death mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her." John Stott reflects, "The old funeral dirge which Isaiah sang at the first Babylon's overthrow (Isa.13) is sung again at the fall of Rome and of all ungodly empires."

Once again we are confronted with the insanity of sin in this passage. Among those who have profited from the whore's prostitution and adulteries there will be great lament and weeping, but these are not tears of repentance. These are selfish tears of depression over the prospect of the forfeiture of worldly position, power and possessions. Jesus told a parable of just such a man in Luke 12. He is referred to as the "rich fool". Such is the man or woman, who deluded by Babylon's false promises, "stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God." (Lk.12:21) To such a person God says, "You fool! This very night you life will be demanded from you." With the prosecution of the prostitute also comes the judgment of all who have loved her ways.

Let us also hear the voice John heard Who in addressing the people of God says, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins....." (Rev.18:4) In light of the good hope of the ultimate victory over the dragon's allies let us be wise. Our calling, until the day Jesus comes back to overthrow all of His adversaries, is "to be in the world, but not of it". Let us be careful no to let the world "squeeze us into its own mold", rather, "let us be transformed by the renewing of our minds."

THE HOPE OF OUR COMING WEDDING TO THE LAMB

Revelation 19

One of the earliest and most naive prayers to which I gave petition as a young Christian was, "Heavenly Father, please do not send Jesus back to the earth before I have a chance to get married." The thought of going to heaven without ever experiencing "spousehood" was not really all that exciting. In fact, I had an underlying fear or suspicion that heaven might not quite be as heavenly if I entered as a single man. Where such a notion came from I cannot tell you!

Well, God answered that prayer. In fact He over-answered it! He brought an amazing woman into my life, named Darlene. For a quarter of a century she has loved me well and has been a primary means of God's grace in my life. There have been moments with her in which I have actually pondered, "How could heaven possibly be any better than this?" Those "moments", however, have segued into "seasons" of God's providence and plan for my heart for which I have no remembrance of ever asking Him. It did not take a long journey within the boundaries of the state of "marital bliss" for me to realize that marriage is a whole lot more than I bargained for! I was totally unprepared for the depth of soul exposure that this relationship brings with it.

To discover how clueless and powerless I was (and still am to a large measure) about really loving another human being, (especially a wife!), has been overwhelming. To see that one's orientation towards self-preoccupation and self-protection is a root system like crab grass is quite discouraging. What was I thinking when I promised with such confidence to love Darlene, "as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her"? Looking back through two and a half decades to the evening of May 5, 1972, it seems to me now that what was laying just below the surface of my sincere words of covenant vow was another, altogether different orientation. I believe a good part of my unglorified heart was saying to itself that night, "Finally, I have someone who is going to 'fill me up'! I can crawl back into the womb, plug in my umbilical cord, and enjoy the

ride! This is going to be great!" I am so glad our Father is "rich in mercy". I am also thankful for a merciful wife!

To say that my perspective and expectations of marriage have changed through the years is the mother of all understatements. Among the many lessons which God has taught me through marriage to a wonderful woman none is more important than the call to constantly ponder Jesus' love for His bride, the church, of which, (I must consistently remind myself), I am a part. The apostle Paul prayed that believers in Ephesus would "have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge....." (Eph.3:18-19) Only the love of Jesus can "fill us up". There is no spouse, (or human being), in the world that can possibly meet the deepest longings of our soul. Jesus, our perfect and passionate Bridegroom, alone can satisfy the craving for ultimate intimacy that rages within us. To place this burden upon marriage, or any relationship, is either to make an idol or destroy a friendship. In most cases, it becomes both. I have found that the more I am preoccupied with the inexhaustible love of Christ the more I move towards my wife to give, rather than to demand.

Another eternally important lesson that the Father has been teaching me as a married man is the joy and freedom that are realized from meditating on the coming "wedding of the Lamb". This brings us to chapter nineteen in Revelation and to a vision calculated to thrill and encourage all Christians who live between the comings of Christ. It is important to note that just as the theme of spiritual warfare and impending judgment intensifies as John receives more visions of the final phase of history, so also the theme of Jesus' love for His Bride intensifies in its glory and grandeur! Unfortunately, many Christians get so dogmatically heated in their attempt to set forth the time and details of the second coming of Jesus that they tend to lose sight of the purpose and beauty of His coming.

Jesus is coming for His Bride: His wife to whom He is betrothed, His beloved whom He will forever "have and hold". Let this vision go deep into your heart, for there is no aspect of the gospel that I have discovered which has greater power to bring forth hope, focus and persevering love in the midst of the worst assaults that the dragon and his allies afflict us with on our journey towards our true and lasting home. We are not just going to heaven, we're heading for our wedding celebration and marriage to the Lamb of God, Jesus.

DELIGHTING IN THE DEMISE OF THE MOTHER OF ADULTERIES

Rev.19:1-5

How fitting it is that Revelation 19 opens with an awesome worship celebration in response to the destruction of "the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries". Before the "wedding of the Lamb" is announced we find great rejoicing over God's judgment upon this false lover. Throughout the Scriptures we find God speaking of His people's love for sin and compromise with "gods" of the surrounding cultures as adultery. When we sin, we do so not just against His law, but more emphatically, against His love. God has a holy jealousy for our hearts and for our affection, a jealousy that Abraham Kuyper, former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, referred to as the greatest compliment God could ever give us. The destruction of Babylon says as much about the love God has for His people as it does about His hatred of evil.

"Hallelujah!", roars "a great multitude in heaven". "Salvation, glory and power belong to God", not to the whore, who vied for the affection of the nations of the world. This is the only chapter in the New Testament in which we find the praise word, "Hallelujah". How appropriate that it would be reserved for a chapter so full of marital metaphors chosen to underscore God's intimate and involved love for the Bride. As the smoke rises from Babylon's fiery demise so the praise rises from the "twenty- four elders and the four living creatures", who all "fell down and worshipped God". Then all of the

servants of God, "both small and great", are invited to join in the shouting celebration of heaven. This worship service is not just for those who have been martyred. It is for the whole people of God.

It is for us!

THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB: THE BRIDE IS READY Rev.19:6-10

A great "Hallelujah chorus" erupts from the entirety of God's servants, angelic and human. Once again the Revelation whets our appetite for the quality of worship we are going to enjoy throughout eternity. John heard "what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters, and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!' Again and again and again in Revelation we find the sovereignty of God as a major theme of the worship of heaven. But the great joy of this vision quickly shifts to the good news that a wedding is about to take place. "For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready." The Bride and the Bridegroom are ready. Jesus is getting ready to receive his Bride, His beloved for whom He died. Nothing is left for Him to do except to return for His heart's desire. (Eph.5:25,32; Matt.25:1ff; Mark 2:19; John 3:29; 2 Cor.11:2).

The Bride has made herself ready, as well. "Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints,)." Don't let this picture confuse you, as though it were meant to imply that we earn our salvation. Philip Hughes helps us here, "The righteous deeds of the saints ... do not constitute or contribute to their justification before God, which would be self-justification; as the deeds of the saints they are performed by those who are already redeemed and justified in Christ. They are evidence of the Bride's sanctification and at the same time of her serious concern to prepare herself for the marriage of the Lamb. This preparedness is

effected through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit transforming her progressively into the likeness of her Bridegroom (2 Cor.3:18; 1 Jn.3:2f.; 2 Cor.5:15; Tit.2:11-14)."

The angel cries out with joy, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" Indeed! What a marriage banquet this is going to be! (Matt.26:29; Luke 22:28-30). To fully appreciate the meaning of this exquisite passage it would be helpful to have a basic understanding of the marriage customs of the Jewish culture in which Jesus was raised. First, there is the betrothal. During this period of the relationship the bride and the groom are considered legally to be husband and wife. Far more binding than what we know as "engagement" between fiancées, nothing less than a divorce could dissolve the marriage at this point. The Apostle Paul uses this image to describe the relationship that we have with the Lord Jesus this side of His second coming. To the Corinthians he wrote with pastoral concern, "I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him." His fear was that the believers in Corinth might be "led astray" from their "sincere and pure devotion to Christ." (2 Cor.11:2,3).

Between the betrothal and the wedding feast came the *interval*. During this period the groom would pay an agreed upon dowry to the father of the bride, if this had not already been taken care of. The dowry could be money, animals, goods or some form of service rendered, as in the case of Jacob working for Rachel. (Gen.29:20). As the interval drew to a close preparation for the procession would begin. The bride would adorn herself in anticipation of the great celebration and the groom would get dressed in his best attire. With his good friends singing and carrying torches, he would make his way to the home of his beloved, his betrothed.

After receiving his bride the procession would return to his home or to the home of his parents. At this point the party began! A great feast, including the wedding supper, would last from between seven to fourteen days. Very few celebrations could compare

with the joy and happiness known at a wedding feast in Jewish culture. Just think of it, our wedding feast with Jesus, our Bridegroom, is not going to last a mere seven or fourteen days. It is going to last throughout eternity! Rejoicing with the Love of our life and with the whole Bride redeemed from every people group in every period of history! What could possibly compare with such a glorious reality? At this point I am reminded of Paul's words when he wrote, "Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it even entered into the mind of man the things that God has prepared for those who love Him." Surely he must have been thinking about our marriage to the Lamb.

As John sees and considers what the angel has to reveal about these matters, he "fell at his feet to worship him." The aged Apostle is so overwhelmed by the glory of it all that he simply has to worship! Such a vision is just too much to take in. He is in sensory overload! The problem is he starts to worship the angel, who responds, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus.". Oh, that such awe would overtake us, as well, as the hope of our wonderful future captures our imaginations and our hearts. We are the Bride of Jesus, His betrothed. He cannot love us more! He will not love us less! We are in the wonderful interval period. There is no dowry left to be paid. The procession is not far away.

THIS BRIDEGROOM IS A MIGHTY WARRIOR Rev.19:11-21

Before Jesus takes His Bride into eternity He thoroughly destroys all of her adversaries. As the overthrow of Babylon was highlighted in Revelation 18 for the church's encouragement, so now the overthrow of the "beast" and the "false prophet" are brought into focus. Every bride thrives in the security of the involved love of a husband who will pay any price to protect and care for her. As the Lamb has paid the supreme price by laying down His own life to purchase His Bride, so now He ever lives

to care for her. He spares no expense.

Once again heaven is opened to John. Before him was "a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True." As Jesus came into the world the first time as the suffering Savior, despised and rejected, so the second time He returns as a warrior-judge, "with eyes of blazing fire". As the "Word of God" He executes the will of God and leads the armies of heaven in conquest. How instructive this vision is not just for our doctrine of the second coming of Christ, but also for our understanding of spiritual warfare. Any concept of spiritual warfare which does not begin with a vision of Jesus as the divine warrior is simply insufficient. He is the One who leads us against His own enemies. We are not fighting for Him, but with Him!

From His mouth now comes not the gospel of saving grace but the pronouncement of final judgment. Remember, this Lamb is also a lion! He is covered with the blood that comes from the execution of justice, recalling Isaiah's prophecy of one who comes"announcing vindication, mighty to save... I have trodden the wine press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my raiment. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of redemption has come." (Isa.63:1-4) Our Bridegroom is none other than "THE KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS!"

In stark contrast with the "wedding supper of the Lamb", John is now given a vision of the "banquet of the beasts". Birds of prey are summoned together for the "great supper of God", which becomes a hideous feeding frenzy upon the carcasses of the enemies of God overthrown by the Lamb and His armies. The flesh of the "small and the great", the whole world of unbelief, becomes the meal upon which "all the birds gorged themselves". What a sobering picture this is of the judgment that is awaiting those who have "received the mark of the beast and worshipped his image." Most

encouraging, however, for the betrothed of the Lamb, is the capture and casting into "the fiery lake of burning sulfur" of the "beast" and the "false prophet." The promised doom of the supernatural powers of evil can only feed the hope of those who now feel their fury.

THE HOPE OF THE ALREADY AND NOT YET

Revelation 20

All of my life I have heard the phrase, "It's all Greek to me", to express bewilderment or utter consternation. The clear impression given was that "Greek" is a very difficult language since it has become a metaphor for the impossible. Therefore, it was with much fear and trepidation that I enrolled in my first course of this ancient and "dead" language during the final semester of my senior year at North Carolina. I struggled to get through Spanish! How was I going to learn the dialect of Aristotle and Plato? Images of academic failure danced around in my head even as I walked into the Classics Department for my very first class. My anxieties were only heightened by the fact that this was going to be a course in Koine Greek, the "street" form of the language used by the authors of the New Testament. Therefore, I concluded, if I failed this course any hopes of ever really understanding the Scriptures would be forever forfeited and I would be labeled a shamed Biblical illiterate, disqualified for ministry. Oh, the power of an unbridled imagination fed by clichés from the past!

Well, much to my surprise and joy, I made an "A" in the class. No doubt, in part, because there was no lab in Greek! I wasn't learning how to order supper at a cafe in Athens, I was learning to read and study God's Word. But I also give much credit to an outstanding professor whose love for the Scriptures, the Lord and his students was quite pronounced.

I not only learned more Greek than anticipated from a three hour introductory course, I also learned a little Latin to boot! Along side of a new syntax, grammar and vocabulary, we were given some basic skills in New Testament hermeneutics and exegesis. This included being introduced to different phenomena in the text of the New Testament such as "hapax legomena". Basically, this phrase refers to a word or group of words that occurs only one time in the New Testament. Occasionally an author of a book in the N.T. may have used a particular Greek word or phrase that can be found no

where else in the other books. The importance of details like this for interpreting the Scriptures should be obvious. Why would an author only use this particular word or phrase just once? Why isn't it used by other writers of the N.T.? What special care should we take in interpreting this part of God's Word?

These questions are relevant as we come now to a concept specifically mentioned in only one chapter, not just in the New Testament, but in the whole Bible. In Revelation 20 we are told of a "thousand year" reign of Jesus, known best by its Latin name, the "millennium". Historically, there have been very few, if any, issues born out of a study of the book of Revelation that has caused more strife, division and separation between Christians than that born out of debates about this "thousand year" period.

Now some of you way more gifted and trained than me in textual criticism and knowledge of Greek will argue that the "one thousand years" in Revelation 20 is technically not a *hapax legomena* at all, for John uses the phrase six times in the chapter and the Apostle Peter tells us that "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." (2 Pet.3:8) Picky, picky, picky! My concern is not to argue that point at all. What I am most zealous for us to ponder is the importance of being very careful about being overly dogmatic about such a huge concept that we are given so little information about in the text of God's Word. Once again wisdom would seem to encourage us towards the "lean rather and luxurious" school of interpretation over a concept like the millennium. Let us look at this wonderful thousand year period in the context of the whole book of Revelation and let us seek to understand how John's original audience would have been deeply encouraged from this grand vision.

THE THOUSAND YEARS: Satan is Bound Rev.20:1-6

As John has already been given graphic insight into the destruction of the dragon's allies and emissaries of evil, so next he is shown the present and future state of the lord

of evil, Satan himself. An angel comes down from heaven, "having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain." Authority over the place of the dead, the "Abyss", is centered in heaven, not in hell. Let us never forget this. This mighty angel takes his chain and he "seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." Once again we are reminded that Satan is not autonomous. It doesn't take a thousand angels to do this binding, only one! But immediately the questions that should be formulated in our hearts as we read this text are, "What is meant by this 'thousand year period'? When does this "binding" of Satan take place and in what sense is he "bound"? How does the millennium relate to the second coming of Jesus?" These questions, and others generated by Revelation 20, bring us to the place of presenting a basic overview and the highlights of the three main schools of millennial thought that have been developed by thinking Christians in church history. It is important to note that each of these three schools of interpretation is represented by men and women who affirm the absolute inspiration and authority of the Bible, our brothers and sisters who have lived and died for the glory of Jesus Christ.

PREMILLENNIALISM

This position is born out of a belief that the book of Revelation is to be interpreted as "literally" as possible. Numbers and images are to be taken at face value unless a symbolic intent is clearly obvious. Premillennialists also stress the importance of accepting the sequence in which John received his visions as the sequence in which these events will happen in history. Thus, this school of interpretation maintains that the "one thousand years" of John's vision is to be taken as an actual measurable period in history. Central to premillennialism is the conviction that Jesus Christ will return to earth in order to inaugurate this long season of peace and righteousness, thus, the name Premillennialism.

The millenium is a period in which Jesus will literally reign upon the earth with His

people. At the beginning of this era of triumph Satan is bound, the first resurrection of Christians occurs and the kingdom rule of the Lamb is manifest throughout the earth. After 1000 years Satan will be set free and he will make a final attempt to deceive the nations and attack the saints. This rebellion leads to the final showdown between his kingdom and the Kingdom of God during which Satan and his allies will be utterly defeated and thrown into the lake of fire. The second resurrection will take place along with the final judgment. This will mark the beginning of the final state: the ushering in of the new heavens and the new earth for God's children and eternal perdition for those who have refused His grace. These are the basic elements of premillennialism although, it should be noted, that there are a variety of different schools within this one system.

POSTMILLENNIALISM

This view maintains that John's vision of a 1000 year period refers to an exponentially growing state of peace, prosperity and victory which the gospel will effect throughout the world before Jesus returns to the earth. Those who hold to this school of interpretation emphasize the prophecies of the Old Testament which speak of the advancement of the gospel throughout the world, not just with respect to the conversion of many from every nation, but also with reference to the "healing of the nations". Postmillennialists believe that we should work, pray, hope and expect a near "Christianizing" of the world prior to the return of Christ. They emphasize our calling as Christians to be involved in all areas of life and culture and to repent of the defeatism and "ingrownness" of much contemporary Christianity.

Many who have historically held to this position on the millennium lived through great revivals and reformations in their lifetime, leading them to believe that God will accomplish the same universally as a testimony to the power of the gospel and the glory of Jesus Christ.

AMILLENNIALISM

Amillennialism maintains that the 1000 years are to be taken symbolically or metaphorically, consistent with the use of numbers found throughout the Book of Revelation. Therefore, there is no calendar calculated millennium, *per se*, thus, the name "a-millennium", is given to this school. Rather, this period is understood to represent the entire period of time between the comings of Christ, which we have been referring to as the "interadvent" period. It is seen as describing the present reign of Christ from heaven with His saints, both in heaven and on the earth. Jesus is acknowledged to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords now, the title which he fully enjoys having ascended to the right hand of the Father after His resurrection.

Amillennialists emphasize the great defeat of Satan won by Jesus upon His cross. The "binding" of the arch enemy, therefore, refers to his no longer being able to keep the nations of the world deceived relative to the great and gracious salvation of our God. Thus, during this period of history heaven is being filled up with men and women, not just from among the Jewish nation, but also from every nation and people group upon the face of the earth.

The "first resurrection", in this school of interpretation, refers to the resurrection of Jesus Christ in which all Christians share by virtue of their union with Him. At the end of history Satan will be "loosed", that is, again he will be given power briefly to deceive and blind the nations setting the stage for a final conflict and spiritual war which will precipitate his absolute defeat by the return of Jesus Christ. Then comes the "second resurrection", at which time all men will be raised from the dead to face the final judgment. For those whose names are not "written in the book of life", there will be the "second death", the eternal state of misery defined by the absolute absence of the presence of God.

How then are we to choose from among these options? To which do the Scriptures give the clearest witness? Once again let me acknowledge that each of these positions

has been held and is currently championed by Christians who hold the Scriptures to be the inspired Word of God, inerrant and fully authoritative as the only rule of faith and life that God has given His people. Our decision is not a matter of choosing between conservative and liberal theological schools of Biblical interpretation.

In my own journey in the land of millennial options and confusion here are some of the conclusions that I have reached:

1. Because my heroes, mentors and teachers in print and in life have come from each of these schools of interpretation I feel no pressure to reach a dogmatic conclusion on "my position". The very fact that men and women whom I love and respect so much in the Lord have settled into different millennial camps has actually brought freedom rather than confusion to my heart.

2. Our participation and enjoyment of the millennium is not tied to our particular interpretation and position. No Christian is going to be left out or disappointed! No amillennialist is going to pout if the postmillennialist is right. No postmillennialist is going to have his feelings hurt if amillennialism proves to be more consistent with the unfolding of the history of redemption. Premillennialists are not going to high five one another for 1000 years in the face of dejected post-mils and a-mils, should their view on these matters be realized in history. Brothers and sisters, we are all going to fully enjoy everything won for us by our blessed Lord and Savior, Jesus, no matter what our position on the millennium is!

3. There is much to be learned and appreciated about each of the three main millennial positions:

- a. Let us respect how committed the premillennialist is to the "plain sense of the text." The words of the Bible are to be taken seriously. This position is held by those

who share a common concern not to let Revelation become overly spiritualized or simply be treated as a recording of John's mystical experiences. Let us also appreciate the future orientation of this view. The premillennialist takes eschatology, or the study of last things, very seriously. They celebrate a linear understanding of history that can get lost in the other positions.

b. The postmillennialist encourages us to ponder the power of the gospel to have a great affect in all spheres of life: politics, education, economics, the arts, and society. Believing that the good news of Jesus Christ is much more than the means by which we can go to heaven one day, the postmil bids us take very seriously our calling to be salt and light in a world over which our God reigns with absolute sovereignty. The optimism of the postmil is a helpful corrective to those Christians who have allowed their hearts to be filled with more fear than faith as they ponder the future. Our postmil brethren invite us to study the Reformation and some of the great revivals which God has brought upon His world, such as the Great Awakening, that our hearts might be stirred with confident faith and expectancy.

c. Amillennialism avoids the extremes of faithless pessimism and exaggerated optimism by acknowledging that the Scriptures teach that the wheat and the tares are going to grow together until Jesus returns. The amil invites us to consider the significance of the ascension and current reign of the Lord Jesus over all things. We are not waiting for Him to become the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings. He already is. Amillennialism is driven by a vision of the work of Jesus upon the cross by which Satan has been defeated and through which men and women from every people group in history are being redeemed. We can benefit tremendously from the amil's Biblical world-view which honors God as Creator and not just as Redeemer and which calls the church to be involved in the culture with a redemptive presence.

THE HOPE OF THE NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH

Revelation 21-22

What a day! It's about seventy refreshing degrees with none of our late summer middle Tennessee humidity. There is a steady breeze blowing that is causing the forest of blue-green spruce trees on the hills in front of me to hum a most relaxing melody. I'm just this side of chilly. The leaves of the Aspen trees are dancing in time with every variation of the tempo of the early morning wind. Huge mountains, capped with the residue of winter snow, are straining, reaching up towards one of the most beautiful skies I have ever seen.

White, richly textured clouds, fat with substance, hang heavy against a clear, deep blue backdrop. A brilliantly intense sun is ducking in and out from behind the clouds painting the mountains with an ever changing array of shadows and hues. I can distinguish the songs of about four different birds whose combined warbling sounds amazingly symphonic. Ground squirrels are running from burrow to burrow only stopping long enough to forage for a little breakfast. It's good to be here.

No, I didn't fly to Switzerland to write the last chapter of this book. Rather, I'm in the Colorado Rockies, to be specific in Estes Park, just a little way from the Rocky Mountain National Park, one of the most incredible pieces of real estate lovingly preserved and meticulously cared for by our federal government's parks system. How fitting it is that I would be here, with the Rockies in full view, to write about our forever home. For John is taken up to a high mountain that he might view the wonders of what eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has the mind of man even imagined. God purposes too engage every faculty that He has given us as He makes His heart and our heavenly hope known to us. Indeed, as we have witnessed throughout John's pastoral prophecy,

it is a revelation in sight and sound and not just in word. This is nowhere more obvious than in the way God describes heaven for us. He wants us to see, hear, understand and feel our awesome destiny. This is our inheritance. This is our future. This is our glory. This is home.

That our Lord finishes the entire of His written Word, (not just the book of Revelation), with this magnificent vision of heaven is worth noting and pondering. Last words are lasting words. Final images are powerful images. God wants our hearts to be consumed with a vision of our forever. It is simply not true that we can be so "heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good". I decry that trite maxim as much as I hate the bumper sticker that says, "God is my co-pilot". The more I study the Scriptures and church history the more I am convinced that it is those who are captured by this vision of heaven who are most significantly and sacrificially committed to living redemptively in the world. It is also they who live like God is God, and not merely a co-pilot.

The Apostle Paul was thrilled and empowered by just such a vision. He wrote with joy to the Roman Christians, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Rom.8:18) It was a vision of heaven that transformed Paul's whole experience of pain and suffering. To the Philippians he penned these words from prison, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet, what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Phil.1:21-23). Because Paul's heart was filled with heaven his spirit could never be imprisoned. Though he preferred heaven, heaven preferred that Paul stay and minister to the saints in Philippi. With joy, he agreed.

It was the Puritan clergyman, Richard Baxter, who recommended in his classic, "The Saints' Everlasting Rest", that Christians meditate on heaven thirty minutes every day!

What began as his own funeral sermon, written as he felt very near to his own death, went on to become a volume which has brought great encouragement for the last 350 years.

But it's not merely the thought of heaven that matters. It is heaven, itself, that matters. "Heaven" must be much more than a metaphor. As important as it is to think about our eternal dwelling with God, what we think of this glorious state of existence is even more important. Having been a pastor for the last 20 years has led me to draw the conclusion that most American Christians are noticeably uninformed concerning the Biblical account of heaven. Oh, how our hearts and lives are the poorer for it.

Where do we typically learn about the afterlife? Much of my own early imaging of the eternal state came from Saturday morning cartoons, bad hymns, T.V., movies and paper goods commercials. I remember thinking that everybody who goes to there must become an angel, because that's who was always depicted as inhabiting the afterlife. Cherub-like little children, floating on white clouds were mingled in with older, wiser, slow moving slow talking angels. The atmosphere of heaven always seemed misty and surreal. The music was an annoying blend of soprano choirs accompanied by harpists who sounded like a bad orchestra. God, if represented at all, spoke with a deep synthesized voice, more robotic than inviting. His Being was never personalized, only presented as a bright light on a distant throne. Why I ever wanted to go to such a place, I do not know. Maybe, just because it seemed better than the alternative!

At age eleven, however, thinking about life after death took on a new importance. I came home from school one day in the Fall of my sixth grade year to the tragic news that my mother had been killed in an automobile accident. All of a sudden angels, harps and clouds meant nothing to me. Not being a Christian at the time, I had no spiritual resources to draw upon, no real assurance about anything. Older well meaning friends tried to comfort me with statements like, "Your mom is in a better place." Such words served more as a panacea for my stunned, broken and confused little heart, than

they reflected any meaningful belief in heaven. Silly, sentimental images of my mother "having fun" were used in an attempt to deaden the pain of her being ripped from my every day life. It wasn't until seven years later, when I became a Christian, that I began to understand the substantive reality and living hope of that which our Father has in store for

His children. My joy was intensified to realize that though I wasn't a Christian when my mom died, she was.

What, then, does God want us to know about the life after this one for His people? In the last two chapters of Revelation we are not given an exhaustive picture of our existence in eternity, but we are given a sufficient one, indeed, a most inviting one. As our imagination is captured by this vision of heaven we too will say with Paul "to depart would be better by far." Consider what our Father emphasizes of our life after the return of Jesus as He brings His written Word to a conclusion.

THE NEW HEAVENS AND THE NEW EARTH

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea." (Rev.21:1) As the first book of the Bible, Genesis, begins with the story of God's first creation, the last book finishes with the hope of God's new creation. All of my childhood and, I must confess, a good part of my adult Christian life, I always assumed that heaven existed somewhere "up there", in some remotely beautiful place beyond the Milky Way.. I figured that if you "go to heaven" of course you have to leave the environs of our terra firmae. And most certainly, in a very real and blessed sense, Christians who have died before the return of Jesus Christ "go to be with the Lord". For the Scriptures teach us that "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

Those who have died "in the Lord" are not in a soul sleep awaiting the day of

resurrection. They are enjoying rich communion with the living and loving Triune God and with all members of the "church triumphant". Yet as wonderful as their experience is now, it is not complete. They have yet to enter in to the full inheritance that will be the eternal portion of the people of God after Jesus Christ returns to the earth to consummate history as we know it and to precipitate the final estate of all things eternal. There is a deep longing in our hearts for this day that no other set of circumstances can satisfy..

And it is not just us, God's people, both living and dead, who await the full harvest. Paul wrote to the Romans, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Rom. 8:20-21) The scope of the salvation that filled Paul's heart is much broader and more comprehensive than the one that fills our horizons. It's not just people for whom Jesus has won redemption. It is also for creation itself! The atoning death of the Lamb of God, Jesus, is so powerful and magnificent that it not "merely" effects the liberation of God's people from every people group in history, it will also bring about the ushering in of the "new heaven and the new earth"! Such a notion flies in the face of the prevailing world view surrounding the First Century church. The Greeks exalted "spirit" to the deprecation of "matter". But the Bible bids us celebrate and honor God who is Creator even before He reveals Himself as Redeemer. How instructive it is for us to realize that heaven, as God has decreed, includes not just the world of spirit but also the material world that He has created to reflect His glory.

Putting these Scriptures together it is more accurate to say that heaven is going to come to us rather than to say that we are going to heaven! According to Scriptures, our eternal celebration is not going to take place somewhere up in the clouds, but, rather,

right here in God's world, which will be totally remade and renewed. As I began writing this book I commented that if the new creation is no more beautiful than my beloved Switzerland, then I would be a satisfied man. But I have a deep sense and full expectation that when the present creation is "liberated from its bondage" I am going to have to repent of being far too easily satisfied. There is no way that our pre-glorified senses can begin to take in the full glory of the "new creation" to be revealed. The Swiss Alps are but a dull shadow of what is ahead!

One more thing needs to be mentioned about the incomparable new world that is coming. John's words, "and there was no longer any sea", used to deeply trouble me. I thought, "How will the new heaven and new earth be that awesome without oceans and great beaches?" And then I realized that for John the "sea" is a metaphor for chaos and evil. The "seven-headed beast" of chapter 13 came "out of the sea" and the great prostitute of chapter 17 "sits on many waters". Its not the absence of crashing waves upon sugary white shorelines that is being envisioned, rather the eradication of everything that is indicative of turmoil and tumult. It will not surprise me to find the beauty of the beaches of the new earth far surpassing anything that we have known before, even in Hawaii!

THE IMMANUEL PRINCIPLE: RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD PERFECTED

The next aspect of our eternal blessedness that John sees in his vision concerns God's perfected relationship with us, His beloved. In fact the majority of what God makes known about heaven in these two final chapter of Revelation is its relational beauty. A loud voice from "the throne" announces, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (Rev.21:3) As awesome and completely satisfying as the beauty of the new heavens and the new earth is going to be, that which is going to make heaven most heavenly will be the way our Father relates to us. Even as He has

already perfectly reconciled Himself to us, and us to Him, through the death of Jesus, nevertheless, there awaits the fulfillment of the promises that He have stood ever since Adam and Eve rebelled against His love in the garden of Eden. The "Immanuel theme", by which God pledges to be with and for His people, runs throughout the Old Testament (Lev.26:11-12; Jer.31:33; Ezek.37:27; Zech. 8:8). John is given a tantalizing glimpse of Father's affection for His children. It will take eternity for us to fully enjoy the implications of such incomprehensible love and tenderness.

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'" (Rev.21:4-5). The Greek literally means that God will "wipe out of" our eyes every tear. He who renews all things redeems all things. Such a picture of involved caring speaks of much more than God just blotting the heart water from our eyes.

Perhaps the first 1000 years in this timeless state will find each of us learning the reasons behind the pain, mourning, and crying we experienced in this life. I can hear the sound of understanding, joy and relief swelling up from the multinational people of God, "Oh, so that is what you were doing Father! That which I despised and could never harmonize with a belief in your mercy and might I now know to have been a means by which You brought glory to Yourself. Now I understand! Now I see and I praise the mystery of Your providence and ways! Thank you, my God, thank You!" It will be at that time when we will enjoy the full the meaning of Paul's words when he spoke, "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (1 Cor.13:12)

Less these images be interpreted as the hyperbolic projections of a depressed and wistful apostle in exile on Patmos, God puts His own pledge and stamp of authority on such promises of paradise. He instructs John to "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the

End." (Rev.21:4-6) It is impossible for our God to lie. There is nothing more to be done to secure this blessed state for God's people. Therefore the great invitation once again goes out, "To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life." (Rev.21:6) The price has been paid. All we have to do is to drink!

HERE COMES THE BRIDE: THE NEW JERUSALEM

I relish the way the Bible mixes metaphors. It gives me a certain satisfaction if not revenge on all of my high school English teachers who used to mark my papers down for resorting to such "confusing imagery". John has already identified the "Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven" as the "bride beautifully dressed for her husband". (Rev.21:2) This picture is now highlighted and developed as one of the seven angels "who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues" carries the apostle "in the Spirit to a mountain great and high". This is probably the same angel who had taken John into the wilderness to behold the destruction of the great whore, Babylon (Rev.17). Now the seer from Patmos is given a mountain high vantage point so as to behold the brilliance and beauty of the wife of the Lamb.

Another of my cherished but wrong notions of heaven is challenged by this section of Scripture. All my life I thought that we Christians would be spending eternity walking on streets of gold having gone through the pearly white gates into the eternal city whose cubical walls are made of all kinds of precious jewels. And if we were really fortunate our "mansion" would be "next door to Jesus". Now I find out that we, the wife of Jesus, are the city! How are we to understand the meaning of such a vision? Once again we need to realize that John's numbers and images are best understood as well chosen symbols to be meditated upon rather than as literal statistics to be mechanically drawn and painted.

It seems that through this picture of the "wife who is the new Jerusalem" God is most zealous for us to celebrate at least two great truths. First, we are given a promise and

picture of the perfected Bride of Christ, the glorified Church. How stunning and encouraging such an image must have been for the seven fledgling churches spread around Asia Minor. She who is so small and despised will one day glow not just with the beauty of Cinderella but with the very glory of God! Our Father wants us to live with the assured hope of our coming glorification. He who began a good work in us will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus' return. Such knowledge and assurance empowers us to thrive and not just survive until our Lord returns for His Bride.

This description of the new Jerusalem (Rev.21:10-21), is replete with precise measurements, numbers, jewels, precious metals, splendor and details that are rich in symbolic meaning. The bride-city is 1500 miles in length, breadth and in height. But how can a city be a cube? Bruce Metzger comments, "The description is architecturally preposterous, and must not be taken with flat-footed literalism. In ancient time the cube was held to be the most perfect of all geometric forms. By this symbolism, therefore, John wants us to understand that the heavenly Jerusalem is absolutely splendid, with a harmony and symmetry of perfect proportions." (Metzger pg.101)

Second, our Lord once again emphasizes fulfilled relationship with His people in this magnificent description of the Jerusalem from above. John notes, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." (Rev.21:22) According to 1 Kings, which contains a detailed description of the temple Solomon built in Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies measured 20 cubits by 20 cubits by 20 cubits. The Holy of Holies was the place where the presence of God among His covenant people was most profoundly manifest. Surely John's readers would have caught the significance of this image. The life of heaven can best be understood as intensely intimate and joyous relationship with God. The whole city becomes the Holy of Holies. The Bride is perfected in righteousness and God's shekinah radiates the whole realm through the Lamb! The gates are never closed because fellowship and communion with God will never cease. Everyone whose name is written in the Lamb's

book of life is welcome.

THE CITY WITH THE HEART OF A GARDEN

The angel next showed John "the river of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city."

Straddling the river on both sides is a massive tree, "the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month." The foliage of the tree is "for the healing of the nations" (Rev.22:1-2) It takes no Biblical giant to recognize the intended correlation here between this garden and the Garden of Eden. That which was forfeited by sin in the first garden is now restored beyond measure in the garden of the new Jerusalem. Israel's prophets longed for the day when living waters would flow from Jerusalem in the Messianic age (Ezek.47:1-12; Zech.14:8). Philip Hughes comments, "The river with its water of life symbolizes the inexhaustible grace of God." Hughes pg.232) This is the joy producing water for the city of God of which the Psalmist wrote. (Psalm 46:4) And, as we have already seen, it is the very stream of refreshment to which the Lamb leads His loved ones throughout eternity. (Rev.7:17)

The "tree of life", whose fruit Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat after the Fall, now becomes the "year-round" symbol of the welcoming and nourishing heart of "the throne of God and of the Lamb", which are centered in the garden-city. The leaves of the great tree remind us that even now as the gospel is the greatest healing force in the history of mankind, so in heaven will the "healing of the nations" come to completion. The substantive healing that we can know in this life through God's grace will give way to the fullness of His shalom in eternity. The individual and corporate implications of such restorative love should be pondered by one and all.

"No longer will there be any curse." (Rev.22:3) In this one promise we realize that John is envisioning paradise regained. The curse that our federal parents, Adam and Eve, brought upon themselves and the whole creation is now lifted. Never will we forget

that such a blessing is due entirely to the work of the Lamb, who upon His cross, "redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us." (Gal.3:13) "They will see his face,....." (Rev.22:4) John's readers may have cupped their hands over their mouths with longing wonderment at the thought of such a possibility. For Moses to have seen the face of God would have meant death, for us in heaven, it will mean a level of intimacy, joy and fellowship with our Lord that we can only imagine from afar. "..... and his name will be on their foreheads." There will be none unknown or unloved in our eternal state of blessedness. For just as "the ground is level at the foot of the cross" so in heaven there will be no pecking order or hierarchy of importance. In the economy of eternity every one of us is precious in the sight and embrace of our Father. It will take heaven to finally convince us of this!

How shall we be occupied in this perfected state of relationship with God and one another? Floating on clouds, strumming harps? How boring! According to the Scriptures, we will "serve him" and "reign for ever and ever". The entirety of eternity can simply be called "worship service". In heaven we will be fully and finally freed to obey the greatest of all commandments: to love the Lord our God with everything that we have and are. Free at last, free at last, thank God, Almighty, we will be free at last!

