

# **Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies**

## **Revelation**

# Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2011

## The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John

The last book of the Bible, the Revelation of John, has been a source of fascination and confusion for two thousand years. It is a book full of symbolism which has given rise to all sorts of interpretation including predictions of the end of the world, the identity of the Anti-Christ, etc. The fact that these predictions invariably fail doesn't discourage people from offering new ones. Yet Revelation is not an inscrutable book nor is it primarily concerned with the future. The ancient church, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, chose it to be the final word in Scripture. The symbolism in Revelation comes either from the Old Testament or the culture in which John was writing. This book is a guide to living the Christian life in an uncertain and often threatening world. Its focus is primarily pastoral, to help strengthen us as Christians in our daily walk with the Lord. Yet it is also a book which requires us to use our imagination. It is not a simple book of instruction.

The style in which Revelation is written is called "apocalyptic" (from the Greek word for "revelation"). There are several Old Testament books written in this style, Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah. They give us clues to our reading of Revelation. Revelation is also part of what scholars call the "Johannean corpus." This refers to the Gospel and Letters of John as well as Revelation. They are not (as was one time thought) all written by the same author. However they come out of the same early church community, which may have been founded by the apostle John. They also give us clues to our understanding of Revelation. For example, contrary to popular belief, the term "Anti-Christ" nowhere appears in the book. We get the term from the first and second epistles of John.

In this study I am heavily indebted to what certainly will be the definitive commentary on Revelation in this generation, written by John Stam, a missionary who lives in Costa Rica and has preached and taught throughout all of Latin America. The commentary is in Spanish but hopefully will be translated into English.

### **I. John's Praise of the Glorified Christ – 1:1-8**

John begins with the announcement that he is recording "the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him" (1:1). This revelation deals with "what must soon take place." Therefore we should not view this book as giving us a detailed picture of the end of time but rather as something that arose out of the upheavals of the Roman Empire in the first century. The dating of Revelation has been debated. While it is not necessary for us to enter into all the terms of that debate it is sufficient to note that it was written in the latter part of the first century, a period which includes the early persecution of the church, including the presumed deaths of Peter and Paul at the hands of Nero and the growth of the cult of the Emperor, beginning with Caesar Augustus who had been given the ancient title of the Greek god Zeus, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." This period also included

the bloody civil war in Rome following the death of Nero and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D. John then is receiving this revelation in a time of turmoil and conflict.

John has been given this message from an angel. John affirms for us that he is a faithful witness to the “word of God” (1:2). The reading of this book carries with it a special blessing (reading it “aloud” meant to benefit others since copies of these letters were not given to everyone nor could everyone read). We are to hear and to keep what is written in this book. This makes it clear that the purpose of the book is a practical one. It is not written for us to speculate about the future. Rather it deals with present realities “for the time is near” (1:3).

John is writing to seven churches in Asia. This is a *pastoral* communication. These seven churches certainly existed historically yet the fact that there are seven of them, and there were other churches in Asia besides these seven, suggest that the number ‘seven’ is being used with its symbolic significance of “completeness” or “perfection.” These seven churches represent all churches from the time of Jesus’ resurrection until his coming again.

John’s greeting is one of grace and peace (1:4). This is important because John is writing in a time of upheaval, in which these churches’ faithfulness to Jesus Christ is being challenged. John then gives a three part summary of Jesus Christ. First, he is the one who is, was and is to come. John mentions seven spirits before his throne who represent the seven churches he is addressing. Second, he gives another three part summary. Jesus is

1. the faithful witness
2. the first born of the dead
3. the ruler of the kings of the earth

This is an incredible list. First, he reminds us that Jesus is a faithful witness. We can trust whatever he says. John’s Gospel affirms that Jesus speaks the truth (John 8:45-46). In fact Jesus is the truth (John 14:6). Second, Jesus is the “firstborn of the dead.” How can death give birth? Yet Jesus in his resurrection is the affirmation of new life coming from death. Finally, in an uncertain world it is critical to realize that Jesus is “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Jesus is not only the head of the church, he is Lord of all. All the rulers of the earth whether they realize it or not are under his authority (Matt. 28:18). These three statements come from Psalm 89 (vss. 37, 27). For the small, persecuted Christians of the first century these were crucial affirmations of hope and confidence.

John then proceeds to a word of praise to Christ. Christ loves us and has freed us from our sins. We are all his priests (1:6). There is therefore no barrier between us and God. We are free to come into God’s presence. We can never take this assurance for granted. The fact that we are priests gives us our own spiritual authority (Matt. 18:18-19). John then affirms that Jesus is coming “with the clouds.” In the Old Testament the

cloud represents the presence of God (Ex. 13:21; 19:9; 40:38). John then speaks of “those who pierced him.” This also is a quote from the Old Testament (Zech. 12:10) and of course refers to the crucifixion (John 19:37). At the sight of the coming Lord “all the tribes of the earth will wail.” Judgment is the first task of the risen, returning Lord (II Cor. 5:10). However it is not the last word as we will see. The three part formula of the one who is, was and is to come is repeated adding the statement that the Lord God is the “Alpha and the Omega.” These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This is a way of saying the God is the beginning and the end.

## **II. John’s Vision of the Risen Christ – 1:9-20**

John now introduces himself although it is clear that he is known to the seven churches he addresses. He is a brother who shares with the churches. It is clear then that he is not John the apostle or the “beloved disciple” since he would certainly have identified himself as such if that were the case. We don’t know all the details but it is clear that he is being persecuted because of his faithfulness to “the word of God” and he is a prisoner on the island of Patmos (1:9). On the Lord’s day (Sunday) he hears a voice like a trumpet. The sound of the trumpet refers back to Israel encountering the presence of God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:12-19). On Sinai God gave the law to Israel. Here on Patmos God is giving a special word to the churches (1:10-11). We are to understand that this message is no less important than was the giving of the Ten Commandments.

John now turns to see the one who was speaking to him. The first thing he sees is “seven golden lampstands” (1:12). There were lampstands in the Tabernacle in the wilderness (Ex. 25:31-40) and in Solomon’s temple (I Kings 7:48-49). In the rebuilt temple after the captivity in Babylon there is one lampstand with seven lamps (Zech. 4:1-2). The lampstands and their lamps symbolize the holiness of God’s presence. This also makes plain that John is not using his own images but is in fact borrowing images from Scripture.

John now describes the figure he sees in the midst of the lampstands, using imagery from the Book of Daniel. He is one “like the Son of Man,” with a long robe and a golden sash, white as wool with eyes like “a flame of fire” (Dan.7:9-13; 10:5-11). His feet were like “burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace” (1:15). The altar in the Tabernacle was overlaid with bronze (Ex. 27:1-8). Jesus referred to himself in John’s Gospel as the temple (John 2:18-21). Here Jesus is described using terms from the Tabernacle and the Temple. He is the living presence of God. God is no longer to be sought in a place but in a person, the person of Jesus Christ. The “sound of many waters” comes from Ezekiel where the wings of the living creatures make a sound like the rush of many waters (Ezek. 1:24). Later the glory of God is described in the same way (Ezek. 43:1). The image of the seven stars is a reference to the Roman coins which showed the Emperor with a crown of seven stars, probably representing the seven planets known at that time. This reference to Jesus shows his superiority to the Emperor. The sharp, two-edged sword in the mouth of Christ refers to the word of God (Isa. 49:1-3; Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12).

John, confronted with this image, falls at his feet. Jesus speaks with these great words of comfort. He touches John and tells him, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last" (1:17). We need to take this to heart. With Jesus, there is *nothing* to fear. Since he is the first and the last, there is nothing outside his authority. He was dead and now is alive forevermore and he has the keys of Death and Hades. Death refers to the state of being dead while Hades is the place of the dead (this is different from the lake of fire mentioned in Jesus' teaching in Matthew's gospel and later here in Revelation). Yet the decisive implication here is that when *anyone* dies they pass immediately into the presence of Jesus Christ since he has the keys of Death and Hades. This encounter is obviously different for someone who has knowingly rejected Christ than for one who believes in him. Yet there is great comfort in the fact that when any person dies they go into the presence of Jesus Christ, the first and the last and the conqueror of both Death and Hades (Eph. 4:7-10; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14-15).

Jesus now is going to address his message to the seven churches represented by the seven golden lampstands. Each church has an angel who watches over it. That also is a great message of hope and encouragement.

This is the ending of chapter 1.

## Questions for Us –

1. What is the most encouraging image of Christ for you in this first chapter? Why?
2. What hope for our present world can we take from the statement that Jesus is the "ruler of the kings of the earth?"
3. How does the fact that Jesus holds the keys of Death and Hades affect our view of death and dying?

## Chapter 2:1-11 – The First Letters

### I. The Letter to Ephesus – 2:1-7

Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor in this period. It was also one of the most important Christian centers of the first century. We read about the church in the Book of Acts (Acts 19-20), the Letter to the Ephesians of course and also First Timothy (I Tim. 1:3). We know from the Book of Acts that Ephesus was a center of magic and mysticism (Acts 19:19). In the center of the city was the great statue of Artemis of the Ephesians. The worship of Artemis was probably very similar to that of Cybele, the patron goddess of Rome (whom we will meet in chapters 17-18). We also know that certain magicians in Ephesus had tried to imitate the power of the apostle Paul in casting out demons but with disastrous results (Acts 19:13-18).

Ephesus then was a center of spiritual warfare. Its political and economic importance only added to the intensity of the struggle for the soul of the city. Paul warned the Ephesian Christians to turn from the futility of the way of life there which included “every kind of impurity” (Eph. 4:19). Chief among the challenges in Ephesus was a perverted focus on sex and money (Eph. 5:3-5). This quickly led to idolatry, a trap for the people of God that went all the way back to the Exodus (Num. 25:1-5). In response to these challenges Paul offered two strong images as models for the Ephesians. As over against the fertility cults associated with figures like Artemis of the Ephesians, Paul presented the relationship between Christ and his church as that of a committed husband and wife (Eph. 5: 21-33). Paul’s second image was that of taking on “the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:10-17). The Ephesians were to gear themselves up spiritually to “be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:10).

Jesus, in speaking to the church (through its “angel”), commends them for having done exactly that. They did not tolerate evildoers (2:2). They tested the false prophets and exposed them (2:2; I John 4:1). They were enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of Jesus (2:3). They rejected the false position of the Nicolaitans which apparently was an attempt to merge the gospel with the pagan practices which Paul denounced. In many ways then Ephesus appeared to be a strong and faithful church for the sake of Jesus.

However Jesus points out a major flaw. They had lost the love which they had at first (Eph. 1:15). They still had the faith but they had lost the love. Jesus calls them to repent. This matter is so important that the church could lose its witness, its “lampstand” (2:5). Paul had made it clear that without love all the faith and devotion in the world counted as nothing (I Cor. 13). It is important to remember that “God is love” (I John 4:16). Love is God’s greatest gift. The concrete form of this love is Jesus Christ (I John 4:7-12). The first love Jesus speaks about is the love we offer in return to Christ for his love for us. A failure to love, that is, to share the love God has poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5), is ultimately a failure to believe in Christ. Love is our response to him. This is why forgetting that “first love” is such a serious issue.

Jesus here is probably not speaking of their love for him so much as their love for their neighbor, Christian and non-Christian. This is the second half of the law (Matt. 22:39). The failure to love threatens their whole identity as a church. This of course is a threat for all Christians. Jesus calls the Ephesians (and us) to conquer (2:7). This is not a summons to conquer in any kind of power but rather to live out the love the Ephesians had at first. Given the temptations and struggles of the world love can grow cold. Jesus himself warned of this (Matt. 24:12). Jesus promises to those who conquer the permission to eat from the tree of life in the paradise (Eden) of God (Gen. 3:22-23).

## II. The Letter to Smyrna – 2:8-11

Smyrna was a wealthy city in Asia Minor on the Aegean Sea. It was extremely loyal to Rome. It was therefore extremely hostile to Christians who proclaimed that “Jesus is Lord” (I Cor. 12:3) and not Caesar. We need to remember that to believe in Christ is to **disbelieve** in the false gods of this world. The greatest failing of the people of God throughout history has been to proclaim Christ while, at the same time, serving the gods of the present age (Jer. 7:1-7). Jesus therefore repeats his title of being “the first and the last” (Isa. 44:6). He is not only the first as though some other god could follow him. He is first and last. There is no other (Acts 4:12).

Jesus is preparing the Christians in Smyrna for persecution. In fact one of the most famous early martyrs in church history, Polycarp, was put to death in Smyrna in the year 117. Jesus foretells this in alerting the church to the fact that they will be thrown into prison “so that you may be tested.” He tells them to be faithful unto death so that they will receive the crown of life (2:10). The term “ten days” is obviously symbolic of a full unit of time and echoes the ten days of testing of Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1:12-14). We take our Christian freedoms for granted but through most of history faithfulness to Christ has required being “faithful until death.” If we are free from persecution, even in the United States, we have to ask why? Are we serving the false gods of our own time perhaps without knowing it, specifically the gods of sex and wealth which were so prominent also in Ephesus (Eph. 5:3-5).

The reference to Jews in this passage is troubling. It may well be that Jews were denouncing Christians perhaps as a way of avoiding persecution themselves (this would especially be the case after the destruction of the Temple in the year 70). The term “synagogue of Satan” may be more ominous still and possibly refers to the worship of the goddess of Rome, Cybele. Cybele was an Asian goddess who originally came from Pergamum. It was believed that she had delivered the Roman Empire from Hannibal when he invaded Italy in the third century B.C. Later, Caesar Augustus had promoted her worship as the patron goddess of Rome. In Smyrna her face was on all the coins. She was a fertility goddess who represented nature in its most wild form. She was often pictured with lions or leopards. The castration of her lover, Attis, was the occasion of the celebration of the rites of spring which often included sexual promiscuity as a way of supposedly fertilizing the earth and insuring the harvest (famine being the greatest fear of ancient peoples). We see her in her full expression as the “great whore” described later in Revelation. Yet her presence pervades the

whole book. One can imagine that if you called the “patron goddess” or “great Mother” of Rome a “great whore” (Rev. 17:1) that you could well end up in prison.

The church in Smyrna was being tested. Cybele claimed to ensure the cycle of life including both wealth and sexual abandon. More than this, she was an official part of the cult of the Emperor who called her “mother.” We should not be surprised that even believers in the church were drawn to her. We will see this in the cases of the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira. Opposing her was not only unwise. It was dangerous.

Jesus calls the church in Smyrna to be faithful unto death and receive the crown of life. He makes the promise, “Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death” (2:11). In writing to the church in Smyrna Jesus reminds all of us that there is opposition in worshipping him. The false gods are not to be taken for granted. Yet in Christ we are called to conquer them no matter what the cost. There is no more all encompassing command of the risen Christ than “to be faithful unto death.”

## Questions for Us –

1. Why do we so often find it difficult to love, especially “to love our neighbor as ourselves?” What are some ways we can strengthen our love?
2. Are there subtle ways that the world with its constant pressure undermines our commitment to Christ? What are some of the danger signs of this we should be watching for?
3. What would be examples of Artemis of the Ephesians and Cybele in our world today?

## Chapter 2:12-29 – The Letters to Pergamum and Thyatira

### I. The Letter to Pergamum – 2:12-17

Pergamum was an official administrative capital of the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Jesus addresses this church very much in terms of his title as the Word of God (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13). Using the language of Heb. 4:12, Jesus speaks as the one who “has the sharp two-edged sword” (Rev. 2:12). The power of this sword, according to Hebrews, is that “it divides the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). In other words, the Word of God not only reveals the will of God. It exposes the reality of human beings. As John Updike once put it, when God describes human behavior he doesn’t blink. The role of the Living Word, Jesus Christ, as well as that of the written Word, Scripture, is critical in the life of the church in Pergamum. This church is on the front line in the encounter between the Word of God and the idolatry of the world.

Jesus acknowledges that the church is “living where Satan’s throne is” (2:13). This probably refers to the stature of Caesar Augustus which had been set up in the year 29 A.D. proclaiming Augustus to be divine. This was the first such statue and many followed. It was the basis of the cult of the emperor that spread throughout the Roman Empire in the first century. Pergamum was a center of idolatry. It was a center of worship for Zeus, Athena, Dionysus and Asclepius. Zeus as the king of the gods was given the title, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.” Later this title was applied to Augustus as the son of a god. Athena was the goddess of wisdom. Dionysus was literally the god of wine. More to the point, he was the god of excess and frenzy. He was also identified through the imagery of the vine as a symbol of fertility and the life cycle. His worship focused on irrational exuberance often identified with intoxication and sexual indulgence. In fact sexual promiscuity in the service of Dionysus was itself regarded as a source of fertility. This was especially important for ancient cultures where the greatest fear was famine. Asclepius was the son of Apollo and was viewed as the god of medicine and healing. Asclepius actually went so far as to raise someone from the dead. For this defiance of death he himself was struck dead by Zeus.

From the standpoint of the Word of God these gods are false, not in the sense that they are non-existent but in the sense that they are tools of Satan. Hence the church of Pergamum lives where Satan lives (2:13). The four gods who were central in Pergamum are still very much with us today. Zeus represents power. People today easily seek for and often worship the idea of power whether this is military power, economic power or some form of personal power. Athena represents wisdom apart from the Word of God. Most of the early colleges and universities in the United States were founded by churches. Princeton’s theme of being built under the Word of God was typical of most colleges. By the twenty first century this has changed radically. In most centers of higher learning the Word of God has been replaced by Athena, an ideal form of human wisdom. Dionysus is the expression of excess principally in the areas of

drinking and sex. Wine and sex are both gifts of God but taken away from him they become not sources of life but rather sources of destruction. Asclepius represents the authority of medicine which like education can become a god in itself. We thank God for the gift of medicine but that can never be separated from the healing power of Jesus Christ who, unlike the false gods, has the keys of Death and Hades (1:18). The gods of power, wisdom, drinking, sex and medicine flourish in our world similar to the way they did in ancient Pergamum.

The church is commended for holding fast to Jesus' name. One of their congregation, Antipas, had gone to his death for faithfulness to Christ's name. The inference is that he refused to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor and was therefore executed for treason. Yet in spite of this commendation Jesus has "a few things" against them (2:14). Jesus compares them to Israel in the wilderness when they were confronted by Balak, the king of Moab, who sent the false prophet Balaam against Israel (Numbers 22-25; 31:16). These two were symbols of idolatry throughout Scripture (Deut. 23:3-6; Joshua 24:9-10; Judges 11:25; II Peter 2:15-16 ;). The symbol of this idolatry was sexual immorality similar to the cult of Dionysus (I Cor. 10:8). We encounter here again the Nicolaitans (2:15). The problem then appears to be that the church in Pergamum lived with a dual identity. On one side they sought to be faithful to Jesus. Yet on the other there were practices in the church that went back to the ancient heresies of Israel. In effect then this church was living a delusion. Like ancient Israel (Jeremiah 7) they were trying to be both faithful and faithless at the same time. They were caught in a contradiction. It must also be said that the sexual standards of Scripture were totally alien to the world in which they lived, a situation not unlike our own. This is why the role of the Word of God as the two edged sword is so important. It cuts through the illusions. It must also be noted that other churches failed on the other extreme by denying the basic goodness of God's gifts (Col. 2:20-23; I Tim. 4:1-5).

Jesus' word to the church ends with two allusions, one to the Old Testament and the other to Pergamum's history. Jesus promises the hidden manna to those who conquer in his name. This of course was the bread from heaven given to the Israelites in the wilderness (Ex. 16:4-5). Jesus refers to himself as the embodiment of this bread in John 6:30-40. This is to say that Jesus will provide us with all our needs for this life and indeed for eternity. We are to fear neither the famine of food nor the famine of the spirit since Jesus gives us himself as bread (John 6:48-51). Jesus also promises them a white stone. Pergamum was the location of the black stone which was believed to have been the goddess Cybele who came down from heaven (probably an asteroid actually). The people of Pergamum had given this stone to the Romans believing it to be the presence of Cybele who brought Rome victory over Hannibal in the second Punic War (216-202 B.C.). This then led to the establishment of the worship of Cybele, the "great mother" in Rome. Caesar Augustus had promoted her worship to the point of making her Rome's chief deity (cf. Rev. 17-18).

## II. The Letter to Thyatira – 2:18-29

Thyatira was known for its bronze work which was exported all over the empire. Hence Jesus describes himself as having feet “like burnished bronze” (2:18). Bronze was used extensively in both the Tabernacle and the Temple (Ex. 27:2-6; I Kings 7:45). The issue in Thyatira was essentially parallel to the problem in Pergamum. Here was a church that was commended for “love, faith, service and patient endurance” (2:19). They were growing spiritually to the extent that their last works were greater than the first. One would think any church would be proud and pleased to receive this evaluation from the Lord. However this church, like Pergamum, has a dual identity. In the midst of their “love, faith, service and patient endurance,” they are tolerating a false prophetess. She is referred to symbolically as the idolatrous Queen of Israel, Jezebel (I Kings 16:31-33). She was clearly inciting members of the church to idolatry. This was no small issue since most business and commerce in the Roman Empire was carried on in the name of one of the gods. Banquets which were essential meeting places for doing business were also sites where the food was offered to the false god before being eaten. Paul had dealt with this problem extensively in Corinth (I Cor. 8-10). He also referred to it in Rome (Romans 14).

The issue here was that Christians were being encouraged to participate in these cults. This could easily be rationalized by saying that to do so was necessary for economic survival. Clearly sexual practices were included (2:22). This was not the first time Jesus had spoken such a warning (2:21). Jezebel then was the female equivalent to Balaam. It is important also to realize that the image of the witch in Greece and Rome was not that of the old hag which we often associate with Halloween. The old witch is essentially a medieval invention (think of Shakespeare’s Macbeth). The witch in Greek culture was often beautiful and alluring (like Circe in The Odyssey). The image of Jezebel here alludes to this idea of the witch. Jesus will show no tolerance. He will strike her children dead (2:23)! Jesus appeals to the faithful remnant in the church, those who do not follow “the deep things of Satan” (2:24), to hold fast to the teaching they have received. Jesus is not about to impose harsh restrictions on them. He will not sacrifice their freedom in him as a reaction to those who have compromised (2:24-25; cf. Gal. 5:1).

In the face of so much temptation and opposition Jesus reminds the church of their ultimate victory in him (2:26-28; John 16:33). We are not to be intimidated or threatened by the world, nor should we fall into the trap of following the world’s agenda because “everyone is doing it” (Rom. 12:2). Jesus ends with the image of the morning star, an image found throughout Scripture of the new hope and life found in him alone (Num. 24:17; II Peter 1:19).

## Questions for Discussion –

1. How can we both identify and resist the false gods that are widespread in our world?
2. We live in a world which stresses the idea of tolerance. At what point, do you think that leads to acceptance of things contrary to Christ?
3. How can we avoid the trap of following both Christ and the false gods of our world (Matt. 6:24)?

## Chapter 3:1-22 – The Letters to Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea

### I. The Letter to Sardis – 3:1- 6

Sardis was a very ancient city in Asia Minor. It was on an important commercial route leading to the Aegean Sea and from there to Greece and Italy. Sardis was known for its textile industry and its production of linen. It was a wealthy and also complacent city. Its complacency had been the cause of its downfall in the past. Guarded by a wall thought to be impenetrable, the inhabitants of Sardis were confident in their defense. However Cyrus the Persian (the unknown servant of God in Isaiah 45:1-13) offered a reward to any one of his soldiers who could scale Sardis' wall. One of his soldiers saw one of the Sardians climb down the allegedly impassible wall to recover a helmet that had fallen. Convinced that the wall could be scaled the Persians climbed it encountering no opposition on the wall because of the overconfidence of Croesus, the ruler of Sardis.

Jesus' word to the church in Sardis echoes this well known past of the city. This was a church that was overconfident. They had a name, a good reputation of being safe and prosperous in an unsettled and conflicted world. Yet Jesus puts the matter bluntly: "but you are dead" (3:1). The members of the church could protest that they were active, they had growing numbers and they were well established economically.

These things don't ultimately matter to Jesus. Jesus does not find their works perfect. We could also ask, who has perfect works? The root word here for "perfect" means fulfilled or complete. The issue for the church in Sardis is that they had an incomplete faith. Jesus calls them to remember the gospel which they heard (3:3). They are to obey and repent. This may have sounded strange to the Christians in Sardis (as it might to us today). After all they clearly believed in Christ as Lord and Savior. They were a prosperous and apparently growing church. What could be wrong? However there is no suggestion that the church was facing persecution or opposition of any kind. They had become content and comfortable. The obvious danger is that they had made peace with their world. Jesus' peace is very different from what is found in the world (John 14:27; 16:33). They had followed the path of least resistance. Their discipleship was fatally compromised.

Jesus uses the example of soiled clothes. This in all probability is a reference to the cult of Cybele, emphasized by Caesar Augustus more than a hundred years earlier. The rites of Cybele dealt both with male ejaculation and open sexual contact between women and men. According to the law of Moses these represented "soiling," "uncleanness" and fornication (cf. Lev. 15:1-18; Num. 25:1-9). This was all part of the ancient world's preoccupation with the cycle of life. For Jews and Christians God alone was the author of life. There was no area of life in which the church differed more from its Roman surroundings than in the area of sexual behavior. This was a major issue in the early church. We see it in the other churches of Revelation as well as in Corinth (I Cor. 6:12-20), Rome (Rom. 1:24-27) and Thessalonica (I Thess. 4:3-8). This is a

serious struggle in the church today where we, often like those in Sardis, follow the non-biblical standards of our culture.

Invoking Sardis' past, Jesus warns that he will come to the church suddenly "like a thief" (3:3). This is like the famous sneak attack that Cyrus used to defeat the city. It is important here to note two critical points. One, Jesus has not abandoned the church in spite of the fact that he sees it as spiritually dead. Second, there are those in the church who have not soiled their clothes and are presented as being dressed in white (3:4). As in the case of the other churches, Jesus calls those in Sardis to conquer in his name (Rom. 8:37). He will confess us before his Father (3:5). The implication is obvious that we need to confess him before our world. We need to confess with our lives as well as our lips. This assures those in Sardis and us of being found in the Book of Life (3:5).

## **II. The Letter to Philadelphia (3:7-13)**

Of the seven churches in these letters Philadelphia is the most notable. Jesus has only praise for this congregation. Philadelphia ("city of brotherly love") was relatively small for the very good reason that it was a city vulnerable to earthquakes. Those who could, had moved out of it. Yet this church, though they had little power in human terms, nonetheless were faithful to the Word of God in both senses of the Scriptures and the person of Jesus Christ (the "word made flesh," John 1:14). Jesus emphasizes here again his role of having the keys, in this case the "key of David." In the ancient world the keeper of the keys was second virtually to the king. Having the keys to open and close gave one enormous authority. Jesus has nothing less than the "keys of Death and of Hades" (1:18). He sets before this church an "open door" which no one can shut. This is the second reference to a "synagogue of Satan" (cf. 2:9). Again he refers to those who claim to be Jews but are not (3:9; 2:9). This is a puzzling reference and I'm not convinced by some of the interpretations put forth. Could this group include those Christians who demanded that believers should follow the law of Moses (as in Galatians)? Were they opponents who tried to use Jewish arguments against the early Christians? Or were they followers of the false gods of the empire as in those who held to "the deep things of Satan" (2:24)? As I read this I don't think (in contrast to many commentators) that this is a reference to actual Jews since Jesus says explicitly that these people are not Jews (2:9; 3:9). I am not persuaded that Jesus can be speaking of the church as the "new Israel" and that somehow only Christians can really be "Jews" in this sense. This is especially the case since Jews are referred to throughout the Gospel of John as an historic people in both a positive and negative sense (John 4:22; 8:39-48).

The key to understanding this reference is, I believe, found in the frequent mention of Satan not only throughout what we call the Johanne literature (the Gospel and Epistles of John and Revelation) but in these specific letters to the seven churches (cf. 2:9, 13, 24; 3:9). In these texts Satan is the prince or ruler of this world yet at the same time he has been "driven out" by Jesus and has no power over him (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; I John 3:8; 5:19; Rev. 20:7-10; Eph. 2:2). Behind all this I find the overly neglected

doctrine of Jesus' descent into hell (or Hades) which begins on the cross (John 12:31; Mark 15:34) and was a major theme of the Reformers. Fortunately this doctrine is coming back into prominence (the current Pope among others has emphasized it) (cf. Eph. 4:8-10; Col. 2:13-15; Heb. 2:14; I Peter 3:18-20).

We can take several things from the example of the church of Philadelphia. While they are being targeted by Satan they rest in the supreme power of Jesus who has driven Satan out (not in the sense that Satan is no longer present in the world but in the sense he no longer has the authority and power he previously held). The followers of Satan will finally bow down before the Christians in Philadelphia. This holds out a promise for their final conversion (John 12:32). They will learn of Christ's love for his church. Jesus then promises the Philadelphians that he will keep them from the "hour of trial that is coming on the whole world." This is not a promise of escape from the world. Nor is it necessarily a word about persecution. Testing or trial in scripture often refers to temptation (Matt. 6:13; I Cor. 10:13; James 1:2-4). Jesus prays not that we be taken out of the world but that we be protected from the evil one (John 17:15). This can refer to spiritual assault but it can also refer to being tempted as seems to have been the case with the other churches.

Jesus gives the church in Philadelphia a whole series of assurances. They like the other churches are called to conquer (3:12). They are also promised the name of God and the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem (3:12). To this day the church in Philadelphia remains a model.

### **III. The Letter to Laodicea – 3:14-22**

The church in Laodicea is the most famous of all the seven churches of Revelation chapters 2-3. They are also the most notorious. The conditions of the church in Sardis exist here in a more extreme form. This church has made its peace with the world to a point. They are following Scripture to a point. They are faithful to Christ to a point. The problem with this church is that they are worse than dead. They are not really alive and not really dead. They are neither cold nor hot. Jesus says he wishes they were either cold or hot, rather than just lukewarm. They are somewhat faithful and somewhat unfaithful. They can abide both Christ and Caesar, Jesus and Cybele. They're in the middle without a firm commitment for or against Christ or the world. They have all the appeal of lukewarm coffee or tea. Simply put, they are complacent. Jesus says dramatically that he will spit them out of his mouth (3:16). This is a church which is prosperous and rich in its own eyes. No doubt like Sardis, they have a reputation of being active and alive. Yet Jesus calls them "pitiable, poor, blind and naked" (3:17). They have been successful rather than faithful.

Yet the most encouraging thing about their situation is that Jesus will not abandon them. He uses the example of the refiner's fire to purge away their imperfections (3:18; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:2). This will not be an easy process but it is a necessary one so that they may receive the gold the Lord has for them. The white robes symbolize purity, not the purity of moral perfection (which no one has), but the purity of faith, a faith

completely focused on Christ. Taking away the “shame of their nakedness” (3:18) again suggests the theme of sexual immorality so common among these churches (Nakedness by itself could refer to vulnerability but the mention of “shame” suggests a sexual dimension). Finally Laodicea was known for its salve which cured eye ailments. Jesus promises them a salve to enable their eyes to see. In all these churches Jesus refers to specific elements that characterize them in a unique way.

Jesus says he reprove and disciplines those he loves. Even though he finds this church to be disgusting he still loves them. This is a great hope for all of us! Jesus calls them to repent, to repent from their indifference. He then expresses this great statement that he stands at the door of the church knocking asking to be let in. This describes the relationship between Jesus and the wavering church. Jesus does not abandon the church no matter how far it has fallen away (This cannot be seen, as is sometimes the case, as Jesus knocking on the door of the unbeliever’s heart. The unbeliever, being dead in sin, is incapable of opening up her heart. In this case God must first make the heart alive through grace (Eph. 2:1-10; Acts 16:14; Ezek. 36:26)).

Jesus then ends with the same admonition he has made to all the other churches. He calls them to conquer in his name. He promises a place alongside himself on his throne. The picture is unmistakable. We are in a great conflict. In this conflict, seduction and temptation may be more deadly than outright persecution. Yet we are never abandoned by the Lord Jesus, “the Amen, the faithful and true witness” (3:14). We are called to conquer in his name (3:21-22).

## Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do you think it is so easy for us to confuse success with faithfulness? What are some of the dangers of success in the world’s terms? Are there any benefits to having this kind of success?
2. Which do you think is the greater challenge for the church, persecution or seduction, opposition or temptation? Why?
3. What hope can we take from the fact that Jesus doesn’t abandon even the most faithless churches? What are some of the ways Jesus knocks at the door of our church?

# Chapter 4-5 – The Lamb Who is a Lion

## I. The Vision of God's Throne – 4:1-11

Revelation is a book of visions. These visions do not function in an exact chronological order. While the book moves toward an ultimate vision of the new creation its scenes take us back and forth from the present to an ultimate future, a vision of eternity. Chapters 2 and 3 gave us a vision of the seven churches in the present. These were actual congregations in defined areas of the Roman Empire at the time the book was written. They can serve as examples of churches throughout the ages but their specific reference is to present historical reality. The visions of chapters 4 and 5 bring us into the final reality of God's throne. Revelation will go back and forth between the present and the future, its theme being that the *future defines the present*. It is because we know God's final plan and purpose for all of creation that we can "conquer" in the present.

John is called up to God's throne. This is a rare experience that occurs several times in Scripture. Jacob's ladder is a vision of the "gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17). The psalmist speaks of God opening the doors of heaven (Ps. 78:23). Jesus gives Nathaniel a picture of the ultimate end of all things described as seeing heaven opened "and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51). This is the vision that John now has. Seeing God's final end and purpose gives us the ability to understand our conflicted and uncertain present.

John before God's throne now stands outside of history. God is timeless and eternal and this is now the framework of John's vision (4:1-6). He sees God upon his throne as Isaiah did earlier (Isa. 6:1-5). God can only be described in terms of jewels and precious stones. Around the throne is the rainbow (4:3) the symbol of the covenant that God made with the whole earth after the flood (Gen. 9:8-17). God will not destroy the world again with a flood. Yet the waters of the flood are a symbol of chaos (Gen. 1:1-2). The sea symbolizes the destructive domain of the Leviathan (Ps. 74:13-17; Isa. 27:1). The rainbow is saying that evil and chaos will not define the creation of God. God will overcome their destructive might as symbolized by the "dragons in the waters" (Ps. 74:13).

There are twenty four elders around the throne. There are various interpretations of the number "twenty four." Among the many that have been offered include the twelve tribes of Israel plus the twelve apostles (Israel and the church), the twenty four letters in the Hebrew alphabet or the twenty four hours in a day. In any respect they are a number of completeness (twelve being the number of a complete unit). We also have the number "seven" (seven flaming torches, seven spirits) which is the number of perfection (4:5). Before the throne is a sea of glass like crystal. Around the throne there are "four living creatures" (4:6). These four figures represent the totality of creation, a lion, an ox, a human and an eagle. They have also been seen as symbols of the four gospels, Matthew (lion), Mark (ox), Luke (human) and John (eagle) because of

the particular emphasis each has on the image of Jesus Christ. The number “four” is often seen as a symbol of creation, the four points of the compass, the four winds or the four seasons. The source of this vision comes from Ezekiel (1:4-14).

The four living creatures unite in a ceaseless voice of praise to “the Lord God, the Almighty” (4:8). The twenty four elders join the note of praise. They cast their crowns before the throne singing praise to “our Lord and God” who is the creator and sustainer of all things. No one in the time this book was written could miss the reference “Lord and God,” since this was the title of the emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.). To deny Domitian this title was to make one vulnerable to the charge of treason (cf. John 20:28). The point here is that God can neither be praised nor served in a neutral context. To praise the one true Lord and God is to reject the false gods of this world (those whom Karl Barth calls “the lordless lords”).

## **II. The One Worthy to Open the Scroll – 5:1-14**

The scroll mentioned here invokes the image of the scroll mentioned by Ezekiel (Ez. 2:9-10). The scroll reveals the purposes of God. It is sealed with seven seals, the number of perfection. The question is asked, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” (5:2). No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it” (5:3). Who indeed has this power or authority to discern the final will of God? No one in heaven, no living figure on earth or even in the dark world under the earth has such authority. This makes it plain that no one is able to interpret or define the will of God, not fortune tellers, radio preachers or anyone else for that matter.

John weeps because the scroll remains sealed. No one is worthy to open it. At this point one of the elders says to him, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and the seven seals” (5:5). Yet this Lion is a Lamb that has been slaughtered (5:6). The Lion of the tribe of Judah harks back to Jacob’s prophecy in Genesis 49:9-12. Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He conquers on the cross (Matt. 12:28-29; John 12:31; 16:33; Col. 2:15; II Tim. 1:10; I John 3:8). Nevertheless he is also the Lamb who has been slain. He is pictured with seven horns, seven eyes, and seven spirits, all emphasizing his perfection. He takes the seal from the one who is seated on the throne, God the Father. The four living creatures and the twenty four elders holding the incense that is “the prayers of the saints” bow down before him (5:8). They sing a new song. Jesus is worthy to open the scroll because by his blood he has ransomed saints “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9). They have been made to be a kingdom and priests serving God (5:10; I Peter 2:9). Through the incense of our prayers we have been given a kingdom and each of us made into a priest of God. This is beyond astounding.

The praise to the Lamb abounds. The hosts of heaven join in, “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” (5:11). The Lamb is worthy to receive “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (5:12). This establishes several

key truths. Jesus through his death has conquered the powers of darkness, death and Satan. Yet this has been through his sacrifice and death. Jesus is both Lion and Lamb. This is our experience of him in this age before all things have been completed. We are between the cross and the resurrection. We have been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:19-20). We look forward to the resurrection (I Cor. 15:50-57; Phil. 3:9-10). Yet already the power of the resurrection is breaking in upon us (Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 2:12). Nevertheless in the present we are in the place of death looking forward to the resurrection (Rom. 6:5). But in the place of death (the Lamb) we see also the Lion conquering the forces of death and Hades (Rev. 1:17-18). This is the paradox of the life of faith underscored throughout the Scriptures and vividly pictured here in Revelation. We walk through the valley of the shadow of death but we fear no evil. Jesus, the Lion/Lamb/Shepherd is with us (Ps. 23:4).

We are not in Paradise (Gen. 3:22-23). We are not yet in the new heaven and the new earth. We have not yet tasted the fruit of the tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2). We are in the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. We are in Hades, the place of the dead. We cannot be surprised by the dark powers and the death we encounter there. But in the midst of this Hades into which Jesus has led us (Matt. 16:18) we see Jesus the powerful Lion of the tribe of Judah destroying death and the devil (Heb. 2:14-15). Satan is still the ruler of this world (I John 5:19) but he has no power over Jesus (John 14:30). As we make our way through the realm of Hades we are still in the dark (I Cor. 13:12) but when we look toward the throne of God we see the Lamb who has all power, wealth, wisdom and might. So with the apostle Paul we can say that we are dying and yet alive, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor and yet rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything (II Cor. 6:1-10).

John's vision of the throne of God ends with an image of God's final future in which "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea and all that is in them" will sing

"To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever  
and ever!" (5:13).

This is the picture of God's final reconciling of all creation (Col. 1:20).

We are to echo the great "Amen!" This literally means "So let it be!" (5:14).

## Questions for Discussion –

1. How does the picture of heaven described in chapter 4 help us understand the present world in which we live?
2. Why do you think we need to see Jesus both as a lion and as a lamb?
3. How does the idea that we are between the cross and the resurrection help us in living out the Christian life where we are called many times to walk through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4)?

# Chapter 6 – Opening the Seals

## I. The Four Horsemen – 6:1-8

At the end of chapter five it was established that the Lamb (who is also the Lion of Judah) was the only one who could open God's scrolls revealing God's plan for the ages. Chapter six begins with the Lamb opening six of the seven seals. The first four reveal four horsemen, each one called out by one of the four living creatures who surround the throne of God (4:6-8). The four horsemen have had a fascinating history in art, drama, literature and even college football (the four horsemen of Notre Dame). They have generally been seen as unified forces of destruction symbolizing conquest, war, famine and death. Yet there is good reason for questioning this traditional interpretation. First, there is nothing in the text that requires us to think of the four as a unity. Each in fact has a separate role.

The first is described as a rider on a white horse. He comes out "conquering and to conquer" (6:2). This description immediately points forward to the picture of Jesus Christ in chapter 19:11-16. In terms then of Revelation's own description it could well be argued that the first rider is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. He has already been described with the color white (1:14) and his title is "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). The crown also suggests Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He has a bow which is used to describe God as an archer in many places in the Old Testament (Zech. 9:13-14; 10:4; Lamentations 2:4; 3:12-13; Isa. 41:2; 49:2). The initial description then of the will of God as found in the first seal is that Jesus Christ will go forth into the world "conquering and to conquer." His gospel will spread throughout the world. He will make disciples of the nations (Matt. 28:19). His kingdom will have no end (Luke 1:33). God's purpose for the world then is that Jesus will reign over all. His death on the cross which the world sees as failure and foolishness is his victory over Death, Hades and the Devil (1:18; I John 3:8). The evidence of this victory is his resurrection. Before we learn of the judgment of God on a rebellious world we need to remember the priority of Jesus Christ in everything (Col. 1:18).

We need to note that we are dealing here with symbolic representations throughout these visions. We really have a double image here of Christ. He is the Lamb who opens the seals and then is also revealed as the content of the first seal in his role as the conqueror. This underscores the double image of Christ that is found throughout the book. As we saw in chapter five, he is both lamb and lion.

It is important to remember in the uncertain and threatening world of John and the seven churches as well as our own uncertain time that Jesus is Lord (I Cor. 12:3). In him all of history and life has its focus. He is supreme over everything and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:17). This is our confidence and hope. Jesus is not relegated to some spiritual domain nor is he found only in the lives of believers. He is not confined to the church either. He is the centerpiece of all of history and the world only is intelligible in and through him (John 1:3). All authority in heaven and earth has

been given to him (Matt. 28:18). Because of this great truth we can never lose heart. We always rejoice in him.

The second rider is very different. He is “bright red,” the color of blood symbolizing destruction. His role is to take peace from the earth (6:4). He is given a great sword “so that people would slaughter one another.” The second rider represents the first of the fates of a world which rejects Christ. If Revelation is true then the reality of war continues through the last days from Christ’s ascension until his return. Unfortunately this is all too true. As Jesus himself said, “there will be wars and rumors of war” (Matt. 24:6). War remains a constant in human history. At the time of what was up until then the worst war in human history, the First World War, it was said to be “the war to end all wars.” This was perhaps one attempt to encourage people faced with “slaughter” that was unimaginable. Their hope was this would be the final war. That unfortunately is not the message of Revelation. We know all too well that in no way was World War I the war to end all wars. The rider on the red horse is still very much with us.

The third seal reveals the next rider again called out by the next of the living creatures. This rider is on a black horse. He represents economic devastation. A day’s pay is only sufficient for a quart of wheat. This would be like saying that a person has to work a full day just to buy a loaf of bread. The cost of barley is only a little better and the text suggests that olive oil and wine are luxuries that are simply being stored. The high rate of inflation would inevitably lead to famine. The irony of the horse’s color suggests also a “black market” which invariably flourishes in desperate economic times. Jesus calls us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and then “all these other things,” meaning the necessities and privileges of life would then be added (Matt. 6:33). The world of John’s vision is focused only on its own well being. Human history in the “last days” will then include economic hardship and even famine. This of course has been all too evident over the past two thousand years.

The fourth rider is the most fearful. This is the rider on the “pale, green horse.” The rider in fact is Death and Hades follows behind him (6:8). We know from chapter 1 (and other parts of the New Testament) that Jesus is the conqueror of Death and Hades. He then must be the one who gives them authority over “a fourth of the earth.” Death and Hades will then kill with “sword, famine, and pestilence.” It is important to note that the authority of Death and Hades is limited to only one fourth of the earth. They cannot destroy the whole earth. We may assume that the fourth of the earth under their control at any given time could change. That is, they may ravage different sections of the earth at different times but they never have authority over more than a fourth at any given time.

To reject Christ is to embrace Death and Hades. The world’s system from Christ’s death and resurrection until now has focused on values very different from what is proclaimed in the gospel (I John 2:15). The world lies under the power of the evil one (I John 5:19). The resources of the earth are in the hands of a few while many suffer deprivation. The issue of water as a world resource has recently been much in the news. The picture we are confronted with is an example of the judgment of the Lamb.

It is He who sends these dread riders forth. Christians as well as non-Christians have all been guilty of not following the way of Jesus Christ. The Bible reminds us time and again that God is on the side of the poor and not with the rich and powerful (Luke 4:18; 6:24-25; Pss. 10:1-18; 82:1-8; Prov. 22:22-23; Matt. 25:31-46; James 1:27).

The seriousness of this vision is that Jesus Christ is not an option. He is not one possibility among others. He will conquer one way or another. To reject him is to reject the one who is life itself. When we choose the way of the world we are choosing Death and Hades. It is important to remember that these visions are not addressed to the Roman Empire or Caesar. They are addressed to struggling churches whose own commitment wavers in one way or another or, at its worst, simply becomes indifference (Laodicea). The opening of the seals gives us a picture of a world in conflict between its true Lord and the many false lords symbolized by the apostate figures of Balaam, the Nicolaitans and Jezebel who have infiltrated even the church.

The Lamb or the rider on the white horse is not passive. He alone can conquer. He has all power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor and glory (5:12). Finally there is comfort in the fact that the horsemen are not independent forces. They are under the control of the Lamb. He sends them forth. He sets their boundaries and limits and he alone can recall them.

These figures become more understandable when the fifth seal is opened. Here we see the martyrs who have been slaughtered for the word of God (6:9). If history shows the effects of the three deadly horsemen it also shows the sacrifices of those who have testified with their lives to the word of God. Persecution is not only a matter of death. Standing up for God's word may be costly in many ways. Echoing the role of the rider on the white horse, Jesus says, "In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" (John 16:33). Jesus does not call us only to endure, but to conquer (3:21).

## Questions for Discussion –

1. What hope can we take from the fact that the first rider may well be Jesus Christ?
2. The seals that are opened by the Lamb are intended to unfold the passage of history in the "Last Days" (which began at Pentecost, Acts 2:14-17). How does this vision help us make sense of the last two thousand years of history? Why do you think these things have been permitted?
3. Where do we see horsemen today?

## Chapter 6:12 – 7:17 – Opening the Seals, cont'd

### I. The Sixth Seal: The Judgment of the Lamb – 6:12-17

The opening of the sixth seal reveals the judgment of the Lamb on the throne against the injustice and unbelief of the world. The chapter includes multiple symbolic references to times of upheaval and distress, usually as signs of God's judgment (the quotes from Joel on the Day of Pentecost would seem to be an exception because here the upheaval is the coming of the Holy Spirit and the revealing of the full gospel message (Acts 2:16-21).

Two important Biblical truths need to be seen here. First, judgment is described as the "wrath of the Lamb" (6:16). This then is not the same expression of wrath that we saw in the Old Testament both on Gentiles and Israel. The picture of God here does not stress his reality as the sovereign Lord of the universe. The picture in chapter six is in the context of the cross. The one who expresses God's wrath is still the Lamb, the Lamb who was sacrificed and made atonement on the cross (5:9-10) who takes away "the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Does this make a difference? I believe it does. Even in wrath Christ is the savior, the one who gave his life for the sins of the world (I John 2:2). God does not act apart from the Gospel. In judgment there remains the element of mercy (Habakkuk 3:2; Isa. 54:8; James 2:13). God's wrath is never the last word (Ps. 30:5; Hosea 11:9).

The second important Biblical truth though is that God does exercise wrath. God is a God of compassion and mercy but God is not blind to sin. God holds everyone accountable. God has revealed himself to the world but the world by and large has rejected God (I John 5:19). God is patient but his patience is not endless. Still less can God's compassion and mercy be taken for granted. There is no "cheap grace." God is a God of justice. He will not be mocked by those who flaunt his commands (Gal. 6:7). Victims throughout the ages cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Their cries will not go unanswered. The poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan are not abandoned. God will undertake their cause (Ps. 12:5).

God's judgment falls on several classes of people (6:15). These include

1. the kings of the earth
2. the magnates (or judges)
3. the generals
4. the rich
5. the powerful
6. everyone, slave and free

The powerful often are inclined to be unjust (Micah 7:3). It is important to note that while certain groups tend to disregard God's commands, no one is exempt. "Everyone, slave and free" will be held accountable. God acts on behalf of the poor but the poor

are still held accountable to God's standards as well. This is especially the case with Israel and the church who are even held to a higher standard. Judgment begins with the household of faith (I Peter 4:17). Jesus' warnings about hell are not addressed to pagan Romans and unbelievers but to the disciples and religious leaders of Israel (Matt. 5:21-22, 29; 10:28; 23:33).

There is no escape on the Day of Wrath. Those who have rejected Christ both in word and deed (Matt. 25:31-46) cry out for the mountains and rocks to fall on them. But it is too late. Is this a picture of the second coming or is it a picture of an ongoing process of judgment throughout history? Probably both are true. We are in the last days and the spirit of Anti-Christ is already at work (I John 2:18). Yet there will be a final culmination of the age (Matt. 24:15-31). We cannot be deceived by the appearance of the world at any given moment. Throughout history God has judged the tyrants and oppressors. There will also be a final judgment. Yet that is always the judgment of the Lamb. The same kings of the earth facing judgment here will eventually bring their glory into the new Jerusalem in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:24).

## **2. The One Hundred and Forty Four Thousand – 7:1-8**

Next we have a dramatic picture of the believers on earth. The theme of the earth is emphasized by the repetition of the number four, which symbolizes the earth. Even the number 144,000 is divisible by four. We are in a scene of cosmic judgment. This judgment is not falling on everyone on earth. There is a special group that is sealed with a mark on their foreheads. They will not endure the wrath of the Lamb because they belong to him.

The number of those who are sealed are identified with the twelve tribes of Israel (7:4). Yet this is not a conventional list of the twelve tribes. First, in such lists going back to Genesis 49, they begin with Reuben who was the oldest of Jacob's sons. This list however begins with the tribe of Judah, the fourth son. The reason for this would seem to be the priority of the line of the Messiah. The Lamb is also the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (5:5). Jesus is a descendent of the tribe of Judah. There are other differences. The tribe of Dan is not mentioned (Gen. 49:16-17). The tribe of Manasseh is mentioned (7:6). Yet Manasseh was a son of Joseph not of Jacob (Gen. 48:1). This then is a revised list. One interpretation is that this list symbolically refers to the church as the new Israel. Paul says that all those who have faith in Christ are the true descendents of Abraham (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7)). What is suggested here, as is found throughout Revelation, is that the Old Testament is constantly being reinterpreted in terms of Jesus Christ. Instead of the theme of the wrath of God we have the wrath of the Lamb. Instead of a conventional list of the twelve tribes we begin with Judah, the tribe which gives birth to Christ through Joseph, his adopted father (Luke 3:23).

## **3. The Great Multitude – 7:9-17**

John now looks and sees a "great multitude that no one could count from every nation, from all tribes and people and languages" standing before the throne of God and the

Lamb. They are dressed in white, which suggests purity, also the perfection of those whose sins have been washed away in “the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). They carry palm branches which evoke the feast of Tabernacles in ancient Israel (Lev. 23:40). This was a festival of great rejoicing symbolizing God’s provision of “booths” or “tabernacles” in which Israel lived as they made their way through the wilderness to the promise land.

There are several significant things about this group. The first is their immense size. They are so numerous that they cannot be counted. This makes it plain that those who are being saved, being washed in the blood of the Lamb, are not a small group. Indeed it was passages like this and others emphasizing the theme of universal redemption (Rom. 5:12-21; 11:32; Col. 1:19-20) which led the great Princeton theologians of the nineteenth century, Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield, to the conclusion that the great majority of the human race would be saved.

The second point to note is the universal and diverse nature of the group. They are from every nation, tribe, people and language. This also points up the symbolic nature of the 144,000. We are hardly speaking of just Israel here. In fact this is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that in him all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). The redeemed of God are multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-lingual. This should describe the church rather than the often noted observation that congregations tend to be made up of groups that are very similar.

The third point is the great note of praise arising from this group. This is a celebration but it is emphatically also an expression of worship. This worship is enhanced with the praise of “all the angels,” the elders and the four living creatures.” Their praise is the ultimate “amen,” which literally means, “so be it.” God’s great act of salvation leads to God’s praise and worship: “Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!” (7:12).

The fourth point is the identity of this great multitude. It is interesting that one of the elders asks John “Who are these?” (7:13). Obviously John does not know so he turns the question around, asking the elder (7:14). He is told that these have come out of “the great ordeal” (7:14). Some have seen this as a reference to the final tribulation at the end of history. However the more likely reference is to the general reality of suffering in this world, in the same sense in which Jesus experienced suffering (II Cor. 1:5; Col. 1:24). Christian experience invariably involves suffering including the suffering we face in our own sinful nature which constantly seeks to pull us away from Christ (Rom. 7:18-19).

This chapter concludes with a great picture of the final destiny of those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. The worship of God involves the experience of God including the experience of God’s love and care. Over against the suffering of this world we are given a vision of heaven in which there is no more hunger or thirst, and no scorching heat. In another double image we are told that the Lamb will shepherd his people. Echoing the language of the Gospel of John the Lamb will lead them (and us)

to “springs of the water of life” (7:17). The final promise could not be more hopeful: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Sorrow and suffering will finally be over. Forever.

### Questions for Discussion –

1. Can you see how the message of God’s wrath can be hopeful, especially to the person who has been abused or oppressed? Do you think the idea of God’s justice also must include his wrath?
2. What hope and encouragement should we take from the vision of the great multitude which no one can count? Does this mean that we should not continue to emphasize evangelism and missions? How does this picture relate to Jesus’ command to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19)?
3. How can we emphasize more the promise that in God’s presence there will be no more tears or sorrow?

# Chapter 8 – “The Seventh Seal”

## 1. The Power of Prayer – 8:1-5

The eighth chapter begins with what sounds like an odd statement, that “there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (8:1). Actually this opening section probably refers to the daily offerings in the temple in Jerusalem. Before the incense could be offered on the altar the priest had to light the fire to burn it. This whole process could take about a half hour during which time the priests prepared themselves to make the sacrifice by praying in silence.

The theme of silence before God recurs throughout the Scriptures (Habakkuk 2:20; Zechariah 2:13). The Lord says, “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Ps. 46:10). We are certainly called to make a “joyful noise” (Ps. 100:1) but there are also those times when we need to be silent before the Lord, to meditate on who he is and on what he has called us to be.

The silence in heaven with the great multitude that has been described around the throne (7:9-12) is related to the theme of prayer. Just as the priests in Jerusalem offer their incense before the altar in the temple so the angel with the golden censer offers the “prayers of all the saints” before the throne of God. This text demonstrates the tremendous power of prayer. The whole assembly in heaven stops to hear the prayers. The prayers then lead to fire on the earth. Their effect is described symbolically as causing “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (8:5). Needless to say, we often underestimate the power of prayer. Yet we can see that power if we look for it. Even in our own time, examples from the coming down of the Berlin wall to the spiritual revival in Cuba, are signs of the tremendous impact of prayer.

## 2. The Trumpets sound – 8:6-12

We heard almost in passing at the beginning of the chapter of the seven angels who were given trumpets. Now the angels are ready to blow their trumpets. Trumpets recur throughout the Bible often sounding the theme of warning or judgment (I Corinthians 15:52). The second coming of Christ will be preceded by the sound of trumpets (I Thessalonians 4:16). The clearest antecedent to this passage would seem to be the account of Joshua’s conquest of Jericho (Joshua chapter 6). The sound of the trumpets on the seventh day of circling the city leads to the collapse of the wall surrounding the city and the subsequent destruction of all its inhabitants (Joshua 6:21).

The key issue for most people dealing with the Joshua story and the account here in Revelation is the severity of the judgments. How could a loving God order the deaths of everyone, men, women and young and old? Following the first trumpet a third of the earth is burned up (8:7). The second trumpet leads to a third of the sea becoming blood and a third of the living creatures in the sea killed, a third of the ships destroyed. The third trumpet results in the pollution of a third of the water in the world leading to many

deaths (8:11). Following the fourth trumpet a third of the world is darkened (8:12). How are we to make sense of all of this?

The first thing we must keep in mind in interpreting passages like this in Revelation is that these are drawing heavily on other passages of Scripture. For example, hail and fire could hardly co-exist together under natural conditions. Yet they do so in the seventh plague on Egypt (Exodus 9:22-23). There are other references to the plagues. The sea turning to blood recalls the Nile being turned to blood and the darkness is also a plague. The context of the Exodus helps us understand these troubling passages both in Joshua and Revelation (according to the Westminster Confession scripture is its own best interpreter).

What was the context of Egypt in the time of the plagues? First, it was a land of injustice. The Hebrews were held as slaves. The male children had been brutally murdered to keep their numbers low. Second, it was a center for the worship of false gods, gods who themselves were often unjust. Finally, Pharaoh had defied the clear command of the word of God to let the Hebrews go. Apparently the rest of the nation of Egypt sided with him. God's plagues on the land were a call to repentance. Pharaoh himself understood this (Ex. 9:27-28). He repeatedly asks Moses to pray for him (Ex. 8:8, 28). Yet he invariably hardens his heart and defies the word of God (Ex. 9:34-35). Rejecting the opportunity to repent truly, Pharaoh leads Egypt on a downward path finally to the death of the first born (the fate that Egypt had decreed for the children of Israel) and the destruction of his army in the Red Sea, "not one of them remained" (Ex. 14:26-29). For John, Egypt is a symbol of the world in rebellion against God (Rev. 11:8).

God is a God of love (I John 4:8) but God is not indulgent or indifferent to injustice. In the case of Jericho which admittedly seems very brutal to us, the Canaanites had been guilty of abominable practices which included sexual perversion, human sacrifice and child sacrifice as well (Lev. 18:1-28; I Kings 16:2-3). The world of the Roman Empire had its share of injustice and immorality also. God's judgment ultimately is a means to his calling nations and individuals to repentance. As devastating as the judgments of the first four trumpets are, it should be noted, that the destruction is not total. It is always a third that is affected, a third of the earth, sea or the sun. God's judgment is invariably a call to repentance (we will see this explicitly later in Rev. 14:6-7).

It is also important to remember that from the Biblical perspective the world has a moral and spiritual order which is even more important than the physical order. The spiritual breakdown leads then to the imagery of stars falling and darkness descending. All this suggests a return to the original chaos prior to creation (Gen. 1:2). The light that shines in the darkness is the spiritual light of Christ (John 1:5). The entire universe is dependent upon Christ (Col.1:15-17). Rebellion against God is finally rebellion against him.

The final question that emerges about the trumpets is whether this is a picture of the end of history. The second coming of Christ, as noted above, is announced with the

blowing of a trumpet. What is striking about this passage however is the fact that the actions are all described in the past tense. Rather than being a picture of the future this more likely is a description of God's continued judgments, in symbolic form, throughout history beginning with the exodus. One has to only think of the darkness that descends in the midst of battles and bloodshed to appreciate the imagery of stars falling and darkness descending. Karl Barth has also related such imagery to Christ's death on the cross in which darkness descends and even the graves are opened (Matthew 27:45-54).

### **3. The Warning of the Eagle – 8:13**

The Bible is apparently the only ancient text where animals are reported as speaking, beginning with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The eagle is a symbol of judgment, swooping down on its prey (Deuteronomy 48:29; Job 9:26; Jeremiah 48:40). The cry of the eagle then prepares the inhabitants of the earth for the next trumpet blasts. If there is no repentance the judgments continue. There may also be an ironic note here since the eagle was often pictured as a symbol of Rome (for that matter it's also the symbol of the USA!). God will set the limits on earthly power. We can never ignore the reality of God's judgment (Galatians 6:7).

### **Questions for Discussion –**

1. What does this passage teach us about the power of prayer? Given what prayer can accomplish, what can we do to make prayer more of a priority in our lives?
2. What can we say to those who argue that God's judgments are too severe and incompatible with his love and mercy?
3. Do you find anything hopeful in the blowing of the first four trumpets?

# Chapter 9 – “The Trumpets Continue”

## 1. The First Woe – 9:1-12

As the trumpets continue to blow they sound a terrible judgment on the inhabitants of the earth. In this highly symbolic account John begins by describing a fifth angel who blows his trumpet, and in response, a star “that had fallen from heaven to earth” (9:1). This star then is given the key to the “bottomless pit” which certainly is hell, or more properly, Hades, the place of death. A huge amount of smoke arises from the abyss to the point where the sun itself was darkened. Then, out of the pit came locusts, yet not locusts such as mortal eyes have ever seen. These are monsters.

They are like “horses equipped for battle” (9:7). They have human faces with crowns and long flowing hair like that of a woman’s. They have lion’s teeth and scales “like iron breastplates” (9:9). The noise of their wings is tremendous, like that of “many chariots with horses rushing into battle”. Most terrible, these giant locusts have tails like scorpions with stingers and they have the power “to harm people for five months” (9:10). They will actually inflict torture through the deadly sting of their tails. The pain will be great. People will seek death to try and escape it but they will fail, “they will long to die, but death will flee from them” (9:6).

The victims of this terrible fate are highly specific. First of all, they are human. The locusts are not to harm nature itself, not the grass or any tree (9:4). Second, this terrible fate falls only on those “who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” (9:4). The king of these demonic locusts is none other than Satan himself whose name here in both Hebrew and Greek signifies, “Destruction or Destroyer.” How are we to make sense of this terrible picture?

Remembering our basic point of interpretation that nothing in Revelation is new or unique in the Biblical record, we need to ask, to what is John referring in this vision that already exists in Scripture? There are two crucial references to locusts in the Old Testament which we need to consider. The first occurs in the tenth chapter of Exodus which is the eighth plague. Moses sends a deadly plague of locusts on Egypt. However, what is different in this case is that the locusts do not attack human beings, but rather all the vegetation, all the trees and plants, the very things they do not touch in the Revelation account. The result of this plague is that Pharaoh is called to repentance. The tragedy is that it is too late for him and rather than accept his repentance, God hardens his heart (Ex. 10:16-20).

The second notable example of a plague of locusts is described in the first two chapters of the Book of Joel. Here again the locusts are described as a judgment of God, the “day of the Lord” (Joel 1:15). Joel seems to have a double image. On one level he is describing the effects of literal locusts who devour not only the plants and trees but the storehouses of grain (Joel 1:17). Yet on another level they appear to be symbolic of an actual army, not necessarily a human one. They are forces of God’s

judgment but their destruction is terrible. “The sun and the moon are darkened and the stars withdraw their shining” (Joel 2:10). This army leaps on the tops of mountains. They are like “the crackling of a flame of fire” (Joel 2:5). The purpose of this attack of locusts is to call the people of Israel to repentance. In the midst of this devastation they are called to return to the Lord “for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:13).

It is important to remember in the example of Revelation that this destruction is initiated by Christ himself. He alone has the keys of Death and Hades (Rev. 1:18). Whatever this star represents in chapter nine he can only have been given the key to “the bottomless pit,” Hades, by the one who has the key. That is not the king of Hades. It is rather the Lord of all, Jesus Christ.

To understand the full significance of the locusts we will need to look at the next “woe.”

## **2. The Second Woe: The Sixth Angel – 9:13-21**

The sixth angel blows his trumpet and four angels are released from having been bound by the river Euphrates, which is at the eastern border of the Roman Empire, and was also one of the rivers that bordered the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:14). An enormous troop of cavalry appears, some two hundred million, which could even have been more than the population of the earth at that time. The riders, like the locusts, are horrific in appearance. They have breastplates the color of fire, sapphire and sulfur (9:17). The horses have lions’ heads and breathe fire, smoke and sulfur. They have tails like serpents’ heads. They inflict harm and kill a third of humanity. There are several Biblical references here. Fire and sulfur descended on Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins (Gen. 19:24). A similar fate befalls Edom (Isa. 34:9) and it becomes the habitation of goat-demons and vampires (Isa. 34:14). This is also the fate of spiritual Babylon, Gog (Ezekiel 38:22). We will encounter this again in Revelation chapter 20. All of these are examples of the psalmist’s statement that the Lord will “rain coals of fire and sulfur” on the wicked (Ps. 11:6).

To say that this chapter presents disturbing images is to put it mildly. We have scenes of torture and death presided over by monstrous figures which nonetheless can be traced back to Jesus himself who has the keys of Death and Hades. How do we reconcile such images with the view of a loving God who sent Christ not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17)?

The difficulty however lies not in the Biblical text but rather in ourselves. We have a tendency to minimize the reality of sin. We tolerate sin, even excuse it. God has no patience with such attitudes. God’s judgment is not incompatible with his mercy as the text in Joel makes clear (Joel 2:12-13). God’s mercy ultimately triumphs over his judgment (Matt. 9:13; Ps. 30:5; James 2:13). Nevertheless, God’s judgment is real because sin is real.

The chapter concludes with the meaning and purpose of these terrible judgments. The survivors of these judgments continue to worship demons and idols (9:20; I Cor. 10:14-22). They do not repent of their murders, sorceries, fornication and thefts (9:21). The early Christians had witnessed the rise of the cult of the emperor, which proclaimed the emperor as “son of a god” and then finally divine himself. The patron goddess of Rome, Cybele who was known as the Great Mother, was worshipped with mutilation and sexual indulgence. John calls her the Great Whore (chapters 17-18). Earlier, the Emperor Nero had murdered his mother and his wife as well as many Christians. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, Domitian, the presumed emperor at the time of the writing of the Book of Revelation, was not only cruel but cunning. He killed many senators, devised unspeakable tortures for his enemies and banished all philosophers. In addition to this, Suetonius describes him as being “extremely lustful.” He insisted on being addressed as “Lord and God.” We know that some twenty years after the writing of Revelation it was a written policy to torture and kill Christians. Is there any question then about the judgment falling on all those “who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” (this would seem to be a broader group than the earlier martyrs who were specifically washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:14))? As God arose to defend Israel in spite of her sins, would he do any less for Christians and even the “God-fearers” of the first century (Jer. 51:36-37; Acts 10:22)?

John speaks of the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:15-17). It is the Lamb of God with whom we deal. His wrath is limited (five months, one third) but it is still wrath and it is just. On the nights that Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. were murdered, fire spread through the cities of Germany and the United States, respectively. The Lamb who is also the Great Shepherd has said,

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” (John 10:27-28).

The hope of this chapter is that God cannot and will not forget his own (Rev. 6:9-11).

## Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do you think many people today have difficulty with the whole idea of God's judgment?
2. What do you think the “seal of God” represents?
3. What does this passage say about the present day worship of demons and idols? What are examples of those things in our world?

# Chapter 10 – “No More Delay”

## 1. “Another Mighty Angel” – 10:1-7

With the tenth chapter we are moving into the very heart of Revelation’s message. To grasp this chapter and what follows we will need an active imagination. Our imagination however must still be bound by the record of Scripture since so much of what John relates draws on other parts of the Bible.

This chapter opens with John’s vision of “another mighty angel.” Yet this angel is like none we have seen in Scripture up to this point. He comes down from heaven wrapped in a cloud with a rainbow over his head. His face shines like the sun and his legs are like a pillar of fire (10:1). There are multiple Biblical images here. Both the cloud and the pillar of fire remind us of the cloud and fire with which God led Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 13:21-22). The presence of God here can also be described as an angel (Ex. 14:19). The rainbow was God’s promise that he would not destroy the earth again with a flood (Gen. 9:14-15). This is a signal that there will be more destruction on the earth but it will not be by water. The fact that the angel’s face shines like the sun tells us that he has come directly from the presence of God. Moses’ face shone after he had seen God on Mount Sinai (II Cor. 3:7-8). Jesus’ face shines like the sun (Rev. 1:16). All of this is to indicate the importance of the message of this angel.

The angel comes with a “little scroll.” The size of the angel appears to be immense, since his feet can stride both sea and land. He gives a great shout “like a lion” (Amos 1:2). Throughout Scripture we read that God gives a great shout (Isa. 42:13; Ps. 78:65). God also many times expresses himself in thunder (Ps. 29:3). Here we have “seven thunders” (10:3). Seven of course is the number of perfection. What we are about to witness is the culmination of God’s plan for the ages. This is to say that all we have witnessed up to this time has been a prologue. The final act is about to be unveiled. That final act is bound up with the “little scroll” which we can assume to be the written word of God in some form.

Now, however, we have the first of several surprises that relate to the situation of the “no more delay” which the angel announces. John is about to write in response to what “the seven thunders had sounded” (10:4). Presumably their sound is not just thunder but some message has been communicated. Yet John is told by the angel not to write down what he has heard. This is the opposite of the instruction given to most of the prophets in Scripture. They are commissioned to speak, to share, to relate the message that God has. The only similar situation to this occurs in the Book of Daniel. An angel tells Daniel to go his way “for the words are to remain secret and sealed until the time of the end” (Daniel 12:9). While there is “no more delay” we are only told that the mystery “will be fulfilled.” It isn’t fulfilled yet.

This raises two key themes in the New Testament, especially in the letters of the apostle Paul. The first is the whole theme of mystery. Paul invariably speaks of

mystery in referring to God's hidden will which is being manifested often by degrees. The first mystery is that Gentiles are included in God's plan of salvation (Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:1-6; Col. 1:25-27). The second is the unfolding of God's plan of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike (Eph. 1:9-10). There is a mystery about God's final purpose tied up with the return of Christ (I Cor. 15:51-52). This last example would relate closely to what John is describing. The final mystery for Paul is Christ crucified (I Cor. 2:1-2). In Christ's death on the cross we encounter the ultimate victory of God (Col. 2:13-15). The second theme is the tension which exists between the "now" and "not yet" of our salvation. Paul can say that we are or have been saved (Rom. 10:10; Eph. 2:5-8). We are in another sense "being saved" (I Cor. 1:18; II Cor. 2:15). But we are also told that we will be saved (Acts 15:11; 16:31; Rom. 5:9-10; 10:9). We are saved in hope (Rom. 8:24). We are then in a process which has begun but is not yet complete. This also means that we are in the challenging position of walking by faith and not by sight (II Cor. 5:7). We know some things but we don't know everything.

We see this in the next statement of the angel. This immense angel standing on the sea and on the land swears by the one "who lives forever and ever" and created heaven and earth, that there will be no more delay. When the seventh angel blows his trumpet "the mystery of God will be fulfilled." Drawing on what was said above the mystery of God covers a number of themes:

1. the cross of Christ (I Cor. 2:1-2)
2. the salvation of the Gentiles (Eph. 3:1-6)
3. the salvation of all Israel (Rom. 11:25-27)
4. God's plan for the fullness of time (Eph. 1:7-10)
5. The return of Christ (I Cor. 15:51-52)

There will be no more delay but the fulfillment is still in the future – "the mystery of God will be fulfilled" (10:7). We are in this process of fulfillment. The word "announced" is the same word as "gospel."

## **2. "Eating the scroll" – 10:8-11**

We now have a strange scene where John is told to take the scroll from the angel and eat it. This is a reference to the call of Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapter three. There, the prophet is told to eat a scroll which tastes like honey (Ezek. 3:1-3). Here, the prophet is instructed to eat the scroll and is told that it will be bitter in his stomach but sweet as honey in his mouth. What is the significance of this strange instruction? If we think of the scroll as Scripture the answer might be that an initial encounter with the word of God is "sweet as honey." This is like those in the parable of the sower who receive the word of God with great joy but don't hold up once trials and tribulations manifest themselves (Matt. 13:20-21). An initial response to the word of God sees only the promise and hope of the gospel. It lays hold of the promise of God's love (John 3:16-17). Yet such a view doesn't yet comprehend the message of the cross. The life of discipleship is a matter of taking up the cross and following Jesus (Matt. 10:37-39). Following Christ may lead to losing our life in his service. This is the bitter taste in the

stomach. The Christian life is no guarantee against the tragedies and frustrations of life. James says, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

Coming to maturity in faith may mean living with the bitter aftertaste of scripture. This goes beyond the first impression of “sweet as honey.” Having eaten the scroll, John is then told to prepare himself to prophesy “about many people and nations and languages and kings” (10:11). This echoes God’s commission to Jeremiah who, having received God’s word in his mouth, is appointed over nation and kingdoms, “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jer. 1:9-10).

Up to this point John has largely been a spectator or witness to the events he has seen and heard. Now he becomes an actor in the drama. He will prophesy, which is another way of saying, he will proclaim God’s word. There will be no more delay. But the end is not yet.

## Questions for Discussion –

1. We hear people speak of believing the Bible “literally.” What do you think they mean given the obvious symbolism of passages such as this? How would you answer the question, “Do you believe the Bible is literally true?”
2. What does it mean for us to live in a “mystery”, to live in the tension between the “now” and the “not yet” of faith (cf. 10:6-7).
3. Have you experienced the reality of the Scriptures being initially “sweet” but then becoming “sour” as we face the trials and struggles of faith? How can this experience lead to maturity in Christ (James 1:2-4)?

# Chapter 11 – “The Two Witnesses: Peter and Paul?”

## 1. “My Two Witnesses”

This is an especially challenging and difficult chapter. It is therefore, important to review the context of the vision, which John now has both in terms of biblical symbolism and the historical reality of the seven churches to whom he is writing. At the end of chapter 10 John was given the calling to prophesy about the Lord to “many peoples and nations and languages and kings” (10:11).

John is told to measure the temple, the altar and those who worship there (11:1). John however, is not to measure the court outside the temple, because that has been given over to the nation who will trample the holy city for forty two months (11:2). This is followed by a word of the angel (giving, of course, the message of the Lord) that he will give authority to two witnesses for the same amount of time listed in days (1,260). In both cases we are talking about three and a half years. What is this all about?

At the time of the writing of Revelation, somewhere around 90 A.D., the temple in Jerusalem was no more and the city was in ruins as a result of the Roman assault on it some twenty years earlier (70 A.D.). The holy city truly had been trampled by the nations (the Gentiles). Jesus himself had foretold this (Luke 21:20-24; 23:26-31). The theme of measuring the temple shows up in two Old Testament passages. The first is in Ezekiel chapter 40. The other is Zechariah 2:1-5. In both of these cases the measuring follows the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. The forty two months is symbolic of an incomplete period of time. Three and a half is literally half of seven, the number of perfection. This is also a reference to a vision of Daniel’s in which “a time, two times and a half” would seem to be three and a half years, the “time” designating a year. Daniel also gives the times in almost the same number of days as found in Revelation (Dan. 7:25; 12:7, 11).

John’s vision then seems to be recalling the exile of Israel under Babylon which came to an end after seventy years, a point also made in the Book of Daniel (Dan. 9:2). The image then would seem to be a time of exile followed by the promise of renewal. In John’s framework this could apply both to Israel and the church. Devastated Jerusalem will be rebuilt at some point following the symbolic imagery of “seventy years,” a cycle of perfection or completion. Yet what significance does this have for John’s audience, the seven churches? It would seem to be that just as Jerusalem has been persecuted by Rome, the modern Babylon, the same can also apply to the new Israel, the church. Yet this time of persecution or exile will not be indefinite. There will be a rebuilding just as there was in Israel’s history. To assure this God will anoint two witnesses to testify for the symbol of half this time, a period which may well be the church age followed by the end of the age. John’s vision then is one of warning and encouragement. The persecution of Israel is now falling on the church. However, just as Israel has a “future with hope,” (Jeremiah 29:11), so does the church.

The two witnesses appear to be Moses and Elijah who appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3). Like Elijah, they have the power to call down fire on their opponents (11:5; II Kings 1:5-12). Elijah also was able to “shut the sky” so there was no rain (11:6; I Kings 17:1). Moses turned the Nile to blood and struck Egypt with plagues (11:6; Ex. 7:17; I Samuel 4:8). The term “two olive trees,” along with the imagery of lampstands, comes from Zechariah again (Zech. 4:1-5) referring to Zerubbabel, the governor of the returning exiles to Israel, and to Joshua, the priest (Zech 3:1-5). It is here that we have the great promise, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts (Zech. 4:6).

The two witnesses appear to be unconquerable. However when they have finished their testimony the beast from the bottomless pit (hell in the sense of Hades, the place of death and torment, Luke 16:19-31) makes war on the witnesses, conquers them and kills them (11:7). This is the first reference in Revelation to “the beast,” although we will hear more of him later (chapter 13). Daniel’s prophesy also referred to a number of beasts (Dan. 7:1-8). The dead bodies of the two witnesses lie unburied in the street of the “great city,” a sacrilege in the ancient world (11:8-9; the ancient Greeks believed that if a body remained unburied its soul could find no rest, a key point in Sophocles’ classic drama, *Antigone*). The great city for John’s hearers would certainly be Rome but it is also spiritually Sodom, Egypt and even Jerusalem (“where also their Lord was crucified”). In other words places in opposition to God and to Christ.

Once the two witnesses are killed the world rejoices. This idea makes more sense to us in the age of electronic communication than it would to people in the first century. The inhabitants of the earth not only gloat over the two witnesses but they celebrate what we would call a perverse form of Christmas, partying and exchanging presents (11:10). Then suddenly the two witnesses are resurrected and brought up to heaven. As they go up to heaven there is a great earthquake. A tenth of the great city falls and seven thousand people were killed (again, note the symbolism of “seven”). The rest are terrified and give glory to God. Their worship would seem to be more the result of fear than faith.

## **2. “Who are the two witnesses?”**

As I mentioned this is not an easy passage. The fact that John can so easily refer to “the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit” without offering an explanation would suggest that these images were already known to his audience. This may apply to other parts of the passage. We need to ask, what benefit does this passage offer to us?

John’s vision may really be one of the mission of the church in the ongoing pattern of history. From the time of the exodus we have seen two prophets (Moses and Aaron) proclaiming a powerful, prophetic word to the world and its rulers (Pharaoh and Egypt). The two prophets then symbolize the ministry of God’s Word. One can also think of Elijah and Elisha, Ezra and Nehemiah, Joshua and Zerubbabel. There is the pattern of Jesus sending out the disciples in pairs of two (Luke 10:1). One can perhaps think of

examples in history, Martin Luther and John Calvin in the time of the Reformation, Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany or even Martin Luther King and Billy Graham in twentieth century America.

The number two is not the major point however. It is the testimony that is offered. It is the proclamation of the Word of God. The symbolism of the two witnesses points up several critical points on the nature of the church and its mission:

- a. The message is powerful. It has the force of consuming fire. It devastates sin like the plagues on Egypt.
- b. Purely human opposition to the message is ultimately ineffective because of its spiritual power.
- c. Demonic forces exist which can kill (or silence) the witnesses.
- d. The witnesses are nevertheless assured of eternal life.
- e. Resistance to God's Word brings judgment on the earth (It is perhaps significant to recall that Sodom, Rome, Berlin in Nazi Germany and even many cities of America (including Newark) in the 1960's were essentially destroyed by fire).

John is preparing his churches for an onslaught of persecution that could well rival that of Nero (who could be referred to as a "beast"). In that regard his witnesses could evoke the memory of Peter and Paul. Their testimony could not be stopped by ordinary opposition. Certainly those in Jerusalem were not capable of doing so in spite of their strong efforts to do just that. Yet their message was incredibly powerful as the gospel continued to spread. We believe they were killed by the depraved Nero who considered himself a god and thereby was a model for the Antichrist (I John 4:3).

How then can John be prepared to guide the seven wavering and uncertain churches to whom he writes (and is called to prophesy)? The answer is by a symbolic invoking of the ministries of Peter and Paul in the light of God's ongoing mission going all the way back to the Exodus. He is preparing them for years of persecution in which failure to acknowledge the deity of the emperor and his Roman gods will mean torture, imprisonment and even death (as we soon see in a letter to the Emperor Trajan some twenty years after Revelation is written).

What then is the message for us? As was the case with the seven churches we face opposition and resistance though this is much more severe in other parts of the world. Yet the seductive power of contemporary pagan America should not be minimized (Did anyone see the new TV show, GCB (don't ask what it stand for) this past Sunday night?). The encouragement of this passage is that nothing can hinder the power of the Word of God which will never return empty (Isaiah 55:11).

## Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do you think the example of two witnesses is so important throughout Scripture? What implications does that have for us in sharing the gospel today?
2. What do we learn from this passage about the faithful testimony of God's Word?
3. Why do you think the inhabitants of the earth gloat over the death of the two witnesses? What would be an example of that today?

# Chapter 11:15 - 12:18 – “Voices From Heaven”

## 1. The Trumpet of the Seventh Angel – 11:15-19

Throughout the Book of Revelation we have seen groups of seven, seven churches (1:4), seven spirits (1:4), seven golden lamp stands (1:12), seven stars (1:16), seven seals (5:1) and seven trumpets (8:2). Later we will encounter seven plagues (15:6) and seven golden bowls of wrath (15:7). All this underscores the symbolism of the number seven which stands for perfection or completeness. John is presenting us with a complete picture of God's plan for history. If we are to remain hopeful in an uncertain present we need to know the outcome. John gives us multiple pictures of the end of history. They don't all agree in the details, which shows that John, is not intending to give us an exact blueprint. Rather his various pictures pick up aspects of the final outcome. They all agree however in affirming the ultimate victory of God over all aspects of sin, death and Satan.

The seventh angel's trumpet announces one picture of this victory. We hear “loud voices in heaven” (11:15). Are these the voices of all we have encountered in heaven including the “great multitude that no one could count” (7:9)? We don't know exactly since John is clearly speaking in symbolic terms. However we should certainly imagine a great chorus proclaiming,

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (11:15).

We have an approximation of this in Handel's great “Hallelujah Chorus.” This could also be translated that the kingdom of the world is becoming the “kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah (Christ).” This is an astonishing statement considering that when John is writing this, the kingdom of the world is clearly Rome. The church of Jesus Christ appears tiny and insignificant. Yet John is affirming to his churches (and to us) that the kingdom of the world does not belong to Caesar (or any world power) but to God and to his Christ. This is the inevitable march of history.

The next several verses make clear that this is not happening instantly as the song of the twenty four elders affirms. God has begun to reign in history (11:17). The nations rage against this (11:18). Yet God's wrath is being poured out on all opposition. The dead themselves will be judged (11:18). God's servants will be rewarded. However, those who have sought to destroy the earth will themselves be destroyed. In Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid* written in 19 B.C. the founding of Rome is celebrated. According to Virgil the destiny of Rome will be “the rulership of nations.” Rome will teach the ways of peace to those whom they conquer (Book VI 1133-1135). Rome then is to rule and conquer. This will lead a bloody path throughout the world including even the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Rome's empire however will fade before “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah.” To churches facing persecution it is hard to imagine a greater encouragement. How much more should we be encouraged? At

any moment the church appears weak and fragmented. Yet we must remember that Rome's empire ended in flames fifteen hundred years ago and the church of Jesus Christ continues to expand throughout the world.

The chapter closes with a powerful picture of God's temple in heaven. This is where the ark of the covenant resides (11:19). There is lightning, rumblings, thunder and heavy hail (11:19). All of this is reminiscent of the picture of Mount Sinai in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 19:16). As God was present on that mountain so John is telling us that God is present in history. As John Calvin said, "let the princes hear and be afraid."

## **2. The Third Christmas Story – War in Heaven – 12:1-18**

Many people think there are only two Christmas stories in the New Testament, the ones found in Matthew and Luke. Yet here we have a third highly symbolic version. This version draws heavily on many of the mythical stories of the ancient world adding a strong Christian interpretation. These ancient stories were certainly known to John's readers. John is drawing on two key mythical symbols here. The first is that of the devouring sea serpent or dragon. In the Babylonian creation story the sea serpent Tiamat plans to destroy her own children. This figure was also known to the Canaanites as Yam. In Hebrew the name is Leviathan or Rahab. This "dragon of the sea" is finally destroyed by a great hero. For the Babylonians this was Marduk, for the Canaanites, Baal. Its influence can clearly be seen in Greek mythology where Cronos swallows his own children and various heroes such as Zeus, Apollo and Jason must destroy monstrous dragon figures. Another key aspect of these myths is that the hero almost dies in infancy and, often as part of his journey or mission, he must descend into the realm of death itself. Hercules actually engages in a hand to hand combat with Hades, the Lord of the dead, at one point. Scripture refers to these stories in numerous places (Gen. 6:1-4; Pss. 74:12-17; 89:10; Isa. 27:1; 51:9). The emphasis is always that the true hero is the Lord God and that these other figures, while real even in some symbolic sense, are nonetheless not God, and cannot be worshipped. In fact they fail in their effort to be God (Ps. 82; Isa. 46:1; Jer. 50:2, "Bel" is another name for Marduk, the god of the Babylonians).

The woman in this passage is more of a celestial figure than a human one. This is hardly Mary the young girl of Nazareth. This figure is "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (12:1). There has been much debate about the identity of this figure. In all probability she represents not only Israel but the people of God throughout the ages. The twelve stars are suggestive of the twelve tribes of Israel. Yet Jesus' "mothers" include a number who were outside Israel. Matthew signals out two Canaanites (Tamar and Rahab), a Moabite (Ruth) and a Hittite (Bathsheba) (Matt. 1:3, 5, 6).

The woman is threatened by "a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns" (12:3). The leviathan, according to Canaanite sources, had seven heads. The ten horns refers to the beast described in the Book of Daniel (Dan. 7:19-22). This fourth beast in Daniel probably refers to Greece the empire at the time. The ten horns in

Revelation could by extension refer to Rome as the succeeding world empire following Greece. According to this symbolism these empires have satanic roots.

The dragon wants to devour the woman's child. Her male child clearly seems to be Christ "who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron" (12:5). This then is a cosmic picture which corresponds to the historical reality of Herod attempting to kill Jesus at his birth. The child is "taken to God and to his throne." We have here an encapsulated picture of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. The woman, the people of God, flees into the wilderness, the place of both deliverance and testing. The time of "one thousand two hundred sixty days" is another image of the three and a half years which symbolizes incomplete time. In other words this is a reference to the church age, the period between the ascension of Christ and his return, our present time.

If Luke's theme of the Christmas story is the announcement of "peace on earth" (Luke 2:14) John's is war in heaven (12:7). Up to this point Satan had access to heaven where he could accuse God's people (12:10; Job chapters 1-2). The archangel Michael leads a war against Satan, whose other names here include "that ancient serpent," the Devil and the "deceiver of the whole world" (12:9). These references include then both the ancient myths and the Genesis account of the serpent in the garden (Gen. 3).

Once again we hear the voices from heaven who proclaim the triumph of Satan's defeat (12:10-12; Rom. 8:33-34). We hear again of the kingdom of God and his Messiah which have brought salvation and power. Michael and his angels' cosmic victory parallels the conquering of Satan on earth due to the testimony of Christ's followers who have conquered by "the blood of the Lamb." This testimony was given at the cost of their own lives (12:11). John is reminding his readers of the witness of Stephen, James, Peter and Paul and also preparing them for the coming persecution.

There is rejoicing in heaven but a warning for the earth. The devil has come down "with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!" (12:12). This explains how Satan is both defeated (no longer able to accuse us in heaven) but still very active on earth ("he knows his time is short").

The dragon goes after the woman, the people of God (12:13). She is delivered by two wings of "the great eagle" (12:14). The symbolism of God delivering us like an eagle, is referred to several times in Scripture (Ex. 19:4; Deut. 32:11-12). The three and a half year (incomplete) time in the wilderness is repeated. The wilderness is a powerful symbol of the world in which we live. This symbol includes the fact that we need to depend daily on God's care of us (the manna). God meets us in the wilderness (Mount Sinai). He gives us his word (The Law). We are also tested in the wilderness to see what is in our hearts (Deut. 8:2). Finally the wilderness reminds us that we are on a pilgrimage. We have not arrived at our destination. This means we are still not fully formed, not completely mature, not perfect (Phil. 3:12-14). We are still looking for the city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10).

This symbolic account makes several things clear. First, we need to draw on myth and symbolism to be able to grasp spiritual realities. By themselves these can lead to the worship of false gods (II Peter 1:6). Yet rightly understood they can provide us with important truths. Second, we have nothing to fear from the forces of evil since in Christ they have been defeated. Third, however, we must be prepared for spiritual opposition which can also take many human forms (Dragon = Herod = Pilate = Rome). The dragon makes war on us. Yet we are in God's hands and he alone has the victory. Thanks be to Him!

## Questions for Discussion –

1. What hope and confidence do we take from the fact that “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah?” What does this mean for us?
2. Why do you think the wilderness is such an important theme in Scripture?
3. What are examples of the dragon's war on those who hold the testimony of Jesus in today's world?

# Chapter 13 – “The Coming of the Beast”

## 1. The Beast Out of the Sea – 12:18-13:10

The Book of Revelation alternates back and forth between scenes of heaven and scenes of earth. We begin the book with a heavenly vision of the Risen, Glorified Christ. We then turn to the seven churches of Asia Minor. After that we have a scene of the throne of heaven and so on. Here we have just witnessed the symbolic scene of the birth of Christ before the dragon that is Satan which leads to war in heaven (12:7). The devil and his followers are thrown down to earth (12:13). Exiled from heaven the dragon, Satan, pursues his desperate plans on earth “because he knows his time is short!” (12:12).

A beast rises out of the sea. All ancient literature, including the Bible, speaks of sea monsters. They are specifically mentioned in the opening chapter of Genesis (Gen. 1:21). Some who try to interpret the Bible in a completely literal manner seem embarrassed by these references. They try to change the “monsters” into recognizable animals. This won’t work for several reasons.

1. The text of Scripture won’t support it. Interpreting the Bible is one thing. Rewriting it is altogether different. There is not one line in Scripture that says that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. The Hebrew is open-ended, “a great fish.” Jesus is more specific. It’s a sea monster (Matthew 12:40). To call it anything less is to ignore the clear Greek text. The same word describes the fate of the young woman Andromeda, who is being sacrificed to a sea monster until she is rescued by the great hero, Perseus.
2. The actual description of sea monsters like the leviathan does not conform to any known animal. Some have tried to say that the leviathan is a crocodile. But has anyone ever seen a many headed, fire breathing crocodile (cf. Job 41:19-21; Psalm 74:13-14)?

Consider the beast here in Revelation 13. Drawing on Daniel chapter 7, it is a combination of a leopard, a bear and a lion. It has ten horns and seven heads. Clearly we are dealing with symbols here rather than literal reality. Satan had to have been a creation of God but his description as “a great red dragon” (Rev. 12:3) is clearly symbolic.

We have to conclude that these beasts or more accurately, monsters, are symbolic descriptions. They are no less real for being symbolic but to try and understand them literally misses the point.

The beast has the power of the dragon (Satan). It has great authority. Most commentators see the beast as a description of the Roman emperor. By the time John is writing the empire had witnessed the horrific acts of emperors like Caligula and Nero.

Roman historians referred to them as beasts. Domitian, the emperor at the time Revelation was written wanted to be addressed as “Lord and God.”

There was also a widespread belief that Nero would one day return from the dead and reassert his rule in Rome. This may be the reference to the head whose “mortal wound had been healed” (13:3).

The beast’s “blasphemous words” would conform to the emperor’s claims to divinity (13:5). The beast exercises power for the forty two months which represent half of seven years. This again is not literal but refers back to Daniel’s theme of the imperfect half of seven. Nero had begun the “war on the saints” (13:7) which would continue for several hundred years in Rome. At the same time Rome’s domination extends to the whole earth (13:8). As the prophecy given to Aeneas in Virgil’s Aeneid states, Rome would have the “rulership of nations.”

Those not belonging to Christ will be deceived and will fall into the trap of worshipping the beast whose authority comes from the dragon, Satan ((13:8-10).

## **2. The Beast Out from the Earth – 13:11-18**

This beast has been referred to as the “false prophet.” It promotes the worship of the beast. This beast quite frankly can perform miracles, including making fire come down from heaven (13:13). The calling of fire down from heaven was among the signs of the great prophets Moses and Elijah. Yet here this demonic figure can imitate the same sign. This is analogous to the magicians of Egypt being able to imitate the miracles of Moses (Exodus 7:20-22). This beast can give life to the image of the other beast. These images no doubt refer to the many statues of the deified emperors beginning with Caesar Augustus. Those who do not worship these images face death which was the fate of the early Christians (13:15).

This second beast also has great economic power. No one can buy or sell who is not marked with the sign of the beast (13:16-17). The costs of defying these beasts then are multiple. Not only life but economic viability is dependent on this second beast. The beast has a number which is the number of a person (13:18). The number is the notorious 666. The symbolism of this number is many faceted. Six is the number of human beings since they were created on the sixth day. The beast then is a human figure claiming to be divine. Also six is one short of seven. Six can be repeated several times but that does not make it a seven. The point of this is that the beast’s claims of divinity are false.

## **3. The message for us**

What are we to make of all this? Revelation here is warning of the power which the dragon in his “short” time can accomplish. Here we see basic structures of society taken over by his beasts. These structures include the religious, the political and the economic. This chapter is clearly a warning to be aware of what is going on in the

world: “Let anyone who has an ear listen” (13:9). We in the United States need to also be aware of the fact that many Christians throughout history, including many believers today, face serious persecution. There are places in the world where to take a stand for Jesus Christ may cost one their life.

Even without this threat we need to be aware of several dangers:

1. The world system can easily become demonic. Wherever any human authority becomes abusive it runs the risk of serving the dragon. This can happen in families, in businesses, in schools and churches as well as in centers of government.
2. We are not to be deceived by superficial signs. Great achievements, even miracles, can be done by the beast. Such things are no guarantee of the presence or power of God, especially if Jesus Christ does not receive the praise and glory.
3. Finally we need to remember that Jesus called us to take up our cross in following him (Matt. 10:38). Wherever we are as Christians we are in a spiritual battle (Ephesians 6: 10-17; I John 3:8). We need to take this fact seriously. We need to be prepared. We can't fight the battle alone.

## Questions for Discussion –

1. How can we recognize the reality of the beasts in our present world? How is the image of these beasts an example of power itself being a corrupting force (13:4)?
2. How can we distinguish true signs of the Holy Spirit from the imitations of the beasts? How do we test the spirits (I John 4:1)?
3. How seriously do we take the reality of the spiritual battle in which we are engaged? What more can we do to fortify ourselves against the “wiles of the devil?” (Ephesians 6:11)?

# Chapter 14 – “Judgment on the Beast”

## 1. The 144,000 – 14:1-5

Chapter 13 paints a frightful picture. We see the two beasts raised up by Satan and unleashed upon the world. The beasts are described in highly imaginative, mythical terms but clearly they represent the emperor and the empire of Rome. The beast which seems to represent the emperors (13:1-3) is described as being allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them (13:7). This phrase is well attested in the Greek documents we have but is missing from some of them. It may be that some objected to such a negative image. Yet in terms of the history that John’s readers had lived through, both that of the early church and Israel, this description of being conquered would be quite appropriate.

In the previous twenty five years the key leaders of the church, Peter and Paul, as well as many others had been martyred by Nero and others. Jerusalem had been destroyed, the Temple left in ruins and many Jews massacred, all at the hands of the Romans in 70 A.D. The power of the beast appeared to be unstoppable. The empire itself seemed to be able to perform “miracles” with its awesome victories and its ability to deceive the inhabitants of the earth (13:13-14). Virtually everyone wore the mark of the beast (13:16-18). In this context what hope could John offer to the seven churches? By extension, we could look at a world where the dragon (Satan), the beast and the false prophet (the unholy trinity) seem to have all the power and the control. All around us we see churches declining and closing. The fastest growing religious group in the United States is “no religion.” Christians are mocked, marginalized and, in many parts of the world, persecuted. This persecution is increasing and becoming more violent. More subtle forms of persecution exist in our culture. What encourages and strengthens us?

In times of distress and conflict people need an image of hope, even if it is a hope that cannot at present be fully realized. This year marks the seventieth anniversary of Casablanca, my favorite film and one that I have written about a number of times. When Casablanca was being filmed in the early days of World War II there was virtually no good news for America and its allies, especially in Europe. In 1942 England was hanging by a thread. Nazi troops were penetrating deeply into Russia. France and virtually all of continental Europe was under Nazi control. Plans were being made for the “Final Solution” which would lead to the death of millions of Jews and others in concentration camps. The film Casablanca offered an image of people willing to defy the seemingly invincible power of the Third Reich. Using the French national anthem, the Marseille, as a call to arms, the film presented an image of hope when really there was no hope.

This is essentially what John is giving here. He presents an image of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. The Lamb is seen on Mount Zion, the abiding symbol of Jerusalem (Ps. 48). Yet when John writes nothing is left of Mount Zion but ruins. Nonetheless here is the

image of the Lamb who was slain and rose victorious (Rev. 5:6-14). With him are 144,000 who have his name and the name of his Father on their foreheads (not the mark of the beast). This symbolic number represents those who have been redeemed by the Lamb. As is the case with all the numbers in Revelation, it is symbolic. It breaks down to 12x12x1000. Twelve is both the number of the twelve tribes of Israel and the original disciples. The number ten signifies completeness (ten plagues, Ten Commandments, ten coins (Luke 15:8), ten slaves, ten pounds (Luke 19:13). The number ten here is compounded three times, 10x10x10=1000. The number three symbolizes both God (the Trinity) and God's mighty acts which take place throughout Scripture "on the third day" (Ex. 19:11; Hosea 6:2; Jonah 1:17) and, of course, Jesus' resurrection.

John then presents a picture of radical hope after the fearful vision of the dragon (whose wrath is great because his time is short, Rev. 12:12), the beast and the false prophet. We have here echoes of earlier chapters affirming the power of the Lamb that was slaughtered and a picture of a near infinite redemption (the great multitude which no one could count which is linked with the 144,000, Rev. 7:4-10). This is to affirm that the power of the unholy trinity is limited. In fact their doom is certain.

Commentators throughout history have struggled with verse 4. What is the meaning of "not defiled themselves with women?" The best sense one can make of this is the idea that in times of battle, soldiers refrained from all sexual activity (I Sam. 21:4-5; II Sam. 11:9-13). This idea perhaps lies behind Paul's recommendation for believers not to marry in the face of the "impending crisis" (I Cor. 7:25-28). There is of course nothing wrong with marriage but in extreme situations it is best to refrain from marital relations. Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided not to marry his fiancé because of the imminent danger he was in from the Nazis. This doesn't totally explain this difficult verse but it does point us in a possible direction for interpreting it.

## **2. The Three Angels – 14:6-13**

John next gives us a vision of three angels. The first proclaims the "eternal gospel" to those who live on the earth, "to every nation and tribe and language and people" (Rev. 14:6). Here is a call to universal missions. We know already from the earlier image in chapter 7 that this call will be heeded by an uncountable multitude (7:9). The great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge believed based on the numerous texts in Paul speaking of a universal salvation (Romans 5:12-21; 11:25-32; I Cor. 15:22; Eph. 1:7-10; Col. 1:19-20; Titus 2:11) that the majority of the human race would be saved. This angel symbolizes the universal call to Christ. We should never be discouraged knowing that God's Word will never return empty (Isa. 55:11).

The second angel pronounces the doom on "Babylon the great," which is certainly the symbol for the Roman Empire (seven mountains, "the seven hills of Rome," and seven kings beginning with Caesar Augustus, Rev. 17:9). The destruction of the empire will be described in greater detail in chapters 17-18. Here it is presented as an encouragement for the persecuted Christians. Historically, Rome did not fall until four

hundred years later but John gives the vision of this certain fact as an encouragement to believers.

The third angel goes even further showing the doom of the beast and its image (the second beast). This is a picture of torment of the beast and all those who follow him. It is important to note that this is not a picture of hell or the lake of fire. It is defined by the context of the destruction of "Babylon the great." At the time that Revelation was written there were a number of texts both Jewish and pagan that contained lurid pictures of the torments of hell. These are not found in the New Testament. On this sobering subject the New Testament uses the language of sorrow and regret ("weeping and gnashing of teeth," (Matt. 8:12; 13:42; Luke 13:28). The image of torment is confined to the devil, the beast and the false prophet, not to humans (Rev. 20:10). The spiritual realities of Death and Hades will also be thrown into the lake of fire along with all those whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life, presumably those who followed the beast and the false prophet as in 14:9-10. Even this apparently is not the final judgment (cf. Rev. 22:14-15; I Cor. 15:20-28). The theme of wine as a symbol of wrath will also occur later in the chapter. This image comes from the Old Testament (Isa. 51:17; 63:1-6). The description of smoke going up "forever and forever" is also an image, not to be taken literally (see the fate of Edom in Isaiah 34:9-10). The word translated "forever" is literally, "ages of ages." It can mean "eternal" but that is not necessarily the case as in the example of the long past kingdom of Edom (whose smoke is not still ascending). The thrust of the "ages to ages" language usually focuses on something that is permanent. Edom and Babylon (Rome) will never rise again.

Without going into extensive detail, suffice it to say that the issue of hell has become a controversial one in contemporary evangelical writings. Unfortunately too much of our view of hell has come from non-biblical sources from Plato to II Esdras (at most found only in the appendix of some Bibles) to Dante and has often done great harm to the proclamation of the "eternal gospel." Rob Bell in his book, *Love Wins*, points out that Jesus spends more time warning believers, not non-believers, about the dangers of hell. This is not to undermine our confidence in our salvation but rather to remind us of the high calling of Christian living. Christians themselves can be a source of hell by the way they speak, as James warns us (James 3:1-6).

These pictures are to be an encouragement to us, "a call for the endurance of the saints" (14:12). The beast and the false prophet, much less Satan the dragon, will not prevail. Therefore we are admonished to "hold fast to the faith of Jesus" (14:12). Even those who will face death are "blessed." The Lamb remains triumphant (5:11-12). We are not to be disheartened. We are always in the Lord's hands. We are reminded that our deeds follow us. We are saved by faith but we are saved to "work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). The importance of our deeds as part of our salvation is stressed throughout the New Testament (John 5:28-29; Romans 2:6; II Cor. 5:10; Gal. 5:6).

### 3. The Vision of the Son of Man – 14:14-20

The final vision of this chapter is both powerful and disturbing. This is another picture of Christ, the Lamb. Here he is described in the language of Daniel as the Son of Man (Daniel 7:13-14). He is pictured with a sharp sickle and he is reaping the earth. In the next scene another angel comes with the message to use the sickle to “gather the clusters of the vine of the earth” (14:18). The grapes are thrown into the “great wine press of the wrath of God” (14:19). This image comes from the prophet Joel as an expression of God’s judgment on an evil world (Joel 3:13).

We then have the image of blood flowing from the wine press (14:20). Wine and blood are linked together in the Last Supper. That is a symbol of salvation. Here we have a symbol of judgment. Blood will pour out upon the earth “for a distance of two hundred miles.” The message here is that the blood Rome has shed will come back many times over on the city itself. These images present both warning and comfort. The warning is to those who would be tempted to follow the beast (just because everyone else does). The Lamb is meek but powerful. Those who follow the beast will share in its destruction. The encouragement is for “the endurance of the saints” (14:12). We need to think of Jesus as he is not as he was. The historical Jesus of Nazareth no longer exists. He is the resurrected and glorified Son of Man, the Lamb that was slain for our sins. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth, the Alpha (beginning) and the Omega (end). He has the keys of Death and Hades (Rev. 1:5, 17-18). Therefore Christians should never be weak, timid or afraid. Amen!

### Questions for Discussion –

1. What images of faith sustain us in a world where the dragon and the two beasts seem all too real?
2. Believers are not shown the final destruction of the beasts (this occurs only in the presence of the Lamb and the holy angels). Why do you think this is? What does this say about the church’s sometimes unhealthy focus on hell and judgment?
3. Why do you think the theme of endurance and holding fast to the faith of Jesus is so important (14:12)? How do we discern both the temptation and the threat of the beast and the false prophet (I John 4:1)?

## Chapter 15 – “The Song of the Lamb”

### 1. A Vision of Victory – 15:1-4

After the tumult of chapters 13 and 14 we now have a picture of the victory of the saints of God. In 13:7 we read that the beast had the authority not only to make war on the saints but also to conquer them (13:7). This would seem to be a reference to the persecution under Nero in which many Christians perished including Peter and Paul. Chapter 15 opens with a new vision of seven angels with seven plagues which will end the wrath of God. There are a number of themes with which we have to wrestle in this passage.

First, the wrath of God is always a disturbing topic. Yet we must remember the dominant metaphor of the Christian life in the New Testament is one of conflict, a conflict that is often deadly. It begins with Herod's slaughter of the infants at the time of Jesus' birth and continues with the various temptations and actions of Satan on up to the apparent triumph of evil in the trial and death of Jesus (Luke 22:53). It continues with the opposition faced by the apostles in the Book of Acts and the epistles. The Gospel message is a direct attack on the power of the empire represented by Rome and symbolized by Babylon (14:8). Paul, the great apostle of grace, warns of the coming judgment on those who have attacked the Christians and rejected the Gospel (II Thess. 1:7-10).

The number “seven” is repeated several times here signifying the perfection or completion which ends the wrath of God (15:1). Needless to say, this is not the exact end of God's wrath. We should probably understand this as the end of a cycle as was the case in God's judgment on Egypt at the time of the Exodus. This is cited in the reference to the song of Moses (15:3-4). The actual song of Moses is found in Exodus 15:1-18. The great affirmation here is the conquering of the beast by those who were faithful to God. The beast's victory over the saints was then only limited. Yet the threat of the beast was real. This was the reality that the churches of Asia were expecting from the current emperor, Domitian. The assurance of this vision is that the beast itself will be conquered. The image of a sea of glass mixed with fire evokes images of the seventh plague in Egypt of thunder, hail and fire (Ex. 9:23-24). We live in a society in which the image of the triumph of evil too often predominates. In the face of evil and injustice we need to remember that the beast as well as the false prophet and Satan himself will all eventually be consigned to the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10).

The followers of the Lamb sing the song of Moses which is also the song of the Lamb. It is a song of victory which is echoed throughout the Old Testament (Is. 51:9-11; Jer. 10:6-10). God is just and true. He is King of the nations. He alone is holy (15:3-4). The song includes the promise that “All nations will come and worship before you” (15:4). This promise is found in the Old Testament (Jer. 3:17-18; Zech 2:11-12). The nations will be judged (Micah 7:16-17). There is nonetheless an ultimate picture also in Revelation of the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2). This goes back to the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 66:18-23). The theme of all nations worshipping picks up the theme of a universal, ultimate salvation. This salvation is not all inclusive however (Isa. 66:24).

There is the tension also in Paul between the “all” who receive mercy (Rom. 11:32) and those “who suffer the punishment of eternal destruction” (II Thess. 1:9).

## **2. The Wrath of God – 15:5-8**

This chapter ends with echoes of chapter 14 in which we see the wrath of God about to be poured out. To the seven angels with seven plagues we now have the “seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God” (15:7). God’s wrath is part of God’s glory (15:8). The temple in heaven will be filled with smoke from both God’s glory and God’s power. As we noted above, this is not a popular topic and admittedly it has been over emphasized at times in the history of the church.

We need to remember that for John’s readers, the seven churches of Asia, it was a message of hope. These are texts that must be handled carefully because they deal with the ultimate confrontation between God and the forces of evil. When we look at the beast and the false prophet we are not seeing examples of ordinary sin. The beast is often interpreted as the anti-Christ whose spirit is already present among us (I John 2:18). Yet not every spirit is anti-Christ. There are many who do not know Christ who, nonetheless, are not the embodiments of evil. Such evil does exist but we must be discerning (I John 4:1). We dare not overstate the reality of the demonic. Our prayer needs to be the hopeful petition that all will be saved (I Tim. 2:1-4).

At the time John is writing this, the church had lived through a precarious and very threatening period. The expectation that Jesus would return in the lifetime of the original disciples did not occur. The memory of Nero and the crisis of the empire following his death was still fresh in people’s minds. The Roman historian, Tacitus, describes Nero’s treatment of Christians:

“Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.”

He further describes the chaos after Nero’s death, “But now, both the Emperor and the army, as if they had no rival to fear, indulging in cruelty, lust and rapine, plunged into all the license of foreign manners.”

The images of Revelation are to remind believers in such times that God, “who lives forever and ever” (15:7) does not sit passively in the heavens. The word is now about to go forth that the seven bowls of wrath are to be poured out. The beast will be conquered.

## **Questions for Discussion –**

1. How can we understand the theme of the wrath of God as a message of hope?
2. What encouragement do we take from the promise that “All nations will come and worship before you” (15:4). How does this relate to the ongoing task of missions?
3. What would you say to the person who insists that the image of God’s wrath is incompatible with the idea of a loving God?

## Chapter 16 – “It Is What They Deserve”

### 1. Preface: A Setting of Judgment – Seven angels with seven bowls of wrath

This is one of the most challenging chapters in the book of Revelation. We see an outpouring of wrath on the Dragon (Satan), the Beast and the False Prophet all culminating in a judgment on “the great city,” “great Babylon” (16:13, 19). Before looking at the specific judgments we need to ask ourselves what is this a picture of? Is this the coming end of the world? Are we to await a terrible battle of “Harmagedon” (16:16) as a climax to world history?

Several things must be noted as we look at this chapter in its totality. First, nothing is said about this being a picture of the end of the world or the end of history. We have references to “the great day of God the almighty” (16:14) and to the coming of, presumably, the Lamb, Jesus Christ. Yet none of these constitute a definite reference to the end of history. The Day of the Lord recurs throughout the Old Testament referring to various moments of judgment against Israel (Isa. 7:18-25; 13:6-9; Joel 2:1-2; Amos 5:19-20; Zeph. 1:14-16) as well as nations like Egypt (Ezek. 30:1-4)). Jesus himself refers to various “comings” to the different churches in chapters 2 and 3 (2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11, 20). Each of these seems to represent not the final second coming of Christ but rather individual visits to the particular churches. Jesus is present with us until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). He may come into the life of a congregation or an individual (Acts 9) at any time.

Therefore it seems most reasonable to interpret Revelation 16 not as a picture of a final, future event but rather as God acting out judgment in history. The passage is prophetic but focused on history, not the end of time, just as the Old Testament prophets predicted first, the fall of Israel to the Assyrians and then years later the fall of Judah to the Babylonians, and finally Israel’s return to the land, events which occurred in specific historical contexts.

It would appear that the images of this chapter were fulfilled several hundred years after the writing of Revelation in the third century, in events which occurred shortly before Christianity was first tolerated and then made the official religion of the empire. To quote from an historical source speaking of the barbarian invasions of the middle of the third century,

“Scarcely a province escaped the havoc wrought by invasion: the widespread destruction of property, the sacking and burning of cities, and the massacre and enslavement of citizens.

Pirates infested the seas as in the days before Pompey; bands of robbers and thieves raided the countryside; earthquakes rocked both Italy and Asia Minor. At the height of the barbarian invasions a plague broke out in Egypt and infected the entire empire where it raged for more than fifteen years. The death toll was staggering: two thirds of the population of Alexandria died and as many as 5,000 a day in Rome alone. It

created a shortage of farm and factory labor and production fell sharply. Worse still, it severely depleted the ranks of the army. The impact of all these blows occurring simultaneously or in rapid succession broke the resistance and shattered the unity of the empire” (A History of the Roman People by Fritz M. Heichelheim and Cedric A. Yeo Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs N. J. 1962, p. 397).

It is my contention that Revelation chapter 16 is a prophetic picture of these events in “the great city,” Rome, fulfilled in the third century A.D.

## **2. The Seven Bowls of Wrath – 16:1-21**

### **A. Blood to drink – 16:1-12**

This whole section is heavily symbolic, drawing on imagery from the plagues of Egypt. Yet as I have stated it can be seen as a prophetic picture of the turmoil of Rome at the end of the persecution of Christians which concludes with the emperor Diocletian (284-305 A.D.). Its theme is the wrath of God which is a subject we tend to avoid. Yet it is clearly a Biblical theme. If God is not only holy and merciful but also just (Gen. 18:25) then wrath is an inevitable response to injustice.

A key theme of Revelation is that God is not passive in history. God is sovereign and he is active. Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5). Everywhere Scripture reminds us that actions have consequences (Gen. 2:16-17; Gal. 6:7). It is important to note that God’s wrath is not being poured out on the followers of the beast, those who have received its mark and worship its image (the false prophet) (16:2).

We have first the example of “foul and painful” sores (16:2) and then the horrific image of all the water in the world being turned into blood, the sea, rivers and streams (16:3-4). These are intensified reproductions of two of the plagues of Egypt, the boils (Ex. 9:8ff) and the turning of the Nile into blood (Ex. 7:14ff.). The complete loss of water is one of the effects of the plague of blood in which “every living thing in the sea died” (16:3).

The angel of the waters proclaims the justice of God (16:5-7). Since Rome has shed the blood of “saints and prophets” (16:6) God has, as a consequence, given them “blood to drink” (16:6). This is what they deserve. The next two angels give out scorching heat (16:8-9). This is followed by complete darkness, again another of the plagues of Egypt (Ex. 10:21ff.). Yet rather than repent the followers of the beast curse God (16:11). We need to remember the brutality of the Roman Empire to appreciate the force of these judgments. Nero had initiated a devastating persecution against Christians. In the year 70 A.D. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and many Jews were massacred. Early in the second century torture was being used against those believed to be Christians.

We next read of the great river Euphrates being dried up. This was the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire. Rome had a fear of the Eastern power, Parthia and waged several wars against the Parthians. Another major Eastern power was Persia.

These would be “the kings from the east” (16:12). There was also a legend that Nero would return leading an army from Parthia.

#### B. The Demonic Spirits – 16:13-21

We next read of “foul spirits like frogs” coming from the mouth of the dragon (Satan), the beast (the Antichrist) and the false prophet. The image of the frogs again comes from the plagues of Egypt (Ex. 8:1ff). These demonic spirits which are able to perform signs and to entice “the kings of the whole earth” are examples of the persuasive power that evil can invoke. They are like voices of propaganda presenting the “reasonableness” of Satan’s temptations (Gen. 3; Matt. 4). They summon the kings of the world for a great battle at the place in Hebrew called Harmagedon or Armagedon. This is probably a symbolic reference to the plain of Megiddo which was the setting for a number of key battles in Israel’s history (Judges 5:19; II Kings 9:27; 23:28-29; Zech. 12:10-11).

Yet here we get no literal account of a battle. The seventh angel pours his bowl into the air (!?) and then a voice comes from the throne of God saying “It is done!” (cf. “It is finished,” John 19:30). Next, we read a highly symbolic account of God giving great Babylon, “the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath” (16:19). Babylon with its “seven mountains” is clearly Rome but is also symbolically the world system opposed to God (17:9). Then we read of huge “hailstones” dropping from heaven, again a reference to the plagues of Egypt (Ex. 9:13ff.). Yet all of this can be seen as a prophetic picture of the waves of invasions of the “kings of the whole world” which took place in the third century when various German tribes attacked from the north and Persians invaded from the east. This marked what was to be the final assault on Christianity. In less than forty years (a Biblical generation) Constantine would emerge both as emperor and a champion of Christianity. He did not usher in a perfect Christian world any more than Israel’s entry into the promise land brought an end to all their problems. Yet under Constantine it was clear that Christianity would be free to grow and develop (we still recite the Nicene Creed).

We have here a picture of God’s reign in history drawing heavily on symbolism and Biblical references. It is one picture among many. One more will be repeated in chapters 17-18 before we in fact have a picture of the end of history.

#### C. What lessons can we learn?

What are we to make of all this? We can look back and see how these images foretell future events. However the readers of the seven churches had no way of knowing how this would be fulfilled. There are several lessons for them and us here as well:

1. God rules history, whatever upheavals and injustices we see.
2. The ultimate issues in life and history are not political, economic or social. They are spiritual. The unholy trinity of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet continue to confuse and entice the world (John says “so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour” I John 2:18). We live in the last hour not necessarily chronologically but in the sense that the ultimate

issues of life are before us, the reign of Christ versus the frantic campaigns of the devil (12:12; I John 3:8).

3. God's judgments are always "true and just" (16:7). Therefore we are not to fear (Rev. 2:10) and we have the freedom to remain faithful and confident.

## Questions for Discussion –

1. What benefit do we receive from reading about the wrath of God?
2. What hope can we take from the early history of the church foretold here? For the seven churches of Asia Minor it appeared that Rome had all the power and they had none. How does the image of the destruction of Rome (the world power) encourage us?
3. God uses the "foul spirits" to nonetheless carry out his judgment as he does throughout the Old Testament. What does that say to us as we encounter the foul spirits of our time?

## Chapter 17 – “Seduction of the Empire”

The further we get into the Book of Revelation the more intense and forceful is the imagery we encounter. In this chapter we have the description of “a great whore” (17:1) and a “beast with seven heads and ten horns” (17:7). This woman is described as being in the wilderness. More than that, she is “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18). We are also told that the seven heads symbolize both the seven hills of Rome and seven kings (17:9). What is going on here and what is this all about?

### 1. Babylon, the great, mother of whores – 17:1-6

This chapter abounds with references that would have made sense to John’s original readers but need some background to be intelligible to us. One prior question we may ask is why is history so important in the Bible? We encounter not only the history of Israel and the church in Scripture but we are confronted with accounts of ancient civilizations, empires and rulers. Pontius Pilate, a Roman governor, is mentioned in our oldest statement of faith, the Apostles’ Creed. Why?

The first point we have to emphasize is that the God of the Bible is fully sovereign, that is to say that he is active in history. Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). He is not some mythical figure in a fantasy world but a real flesh and blood historical figure. The Bible’s revelation comes in history and through history. Therefore historical context is important.

Second, the great whore in Revelation symbolizes Rome under Domitian. It is an empire that has grown wealthy by conquering others. The image of the “great whore” is actually a parody on the goddess of Rome, Cybele, who was referred to as “the great mother” by the Romans. She too comes out of a historical context. At the end of the third century BC in the Second Punic War, Italy had been invaded by the great general Hannibal who was threatening Rome itself. One of Rome’s oracles told of a black stone which had descended from the sky and was believed to be the Asian goddess Cybele. This stone was placed in a temple in Pergamum. Arrangements were made to bring it to Rome and, for many, Rome’s ultimate victory over Hannibal was credited to the goddess. In an attempt to unify his empire Caesar Augustus later promoted her worship as the “Great Mother” of Rome. She has this standing in Virgil’s epic, *The Aeneid* (19 BC) where she is pictured as the mother of Jupiter, king of the gods.

Yet Cybele was not a domestic, nurturing figure. She symbolized nature and fertility in a violent form. She was often pictured with lions or leopards. The castration of her lover, Attis, became the basis for orgies and wild celebrations celebrating the coming of spring. John presents this mocking image of her as a “great whore” (instead of “mother”). John presents her as the symbol of Rome itself, which for many, she indeed was. While his image of her uses sexual terms, these are intended as a symbol of idolatry as was the case in the Old Testament. This idolatry leads to oppression and social injustice (Isaiah 1:21-23; Jeremiah 3:1-5; Ezekiel 23:1-21; Hosea 1:2; Micah 2:1-2; Nahum 3:1-4).

The reference to the kings of the earth committing fornication with her (17:2) as well as her fancy clothes and jewels (17:4) signify the riches gained from her conquering other lands and nations to build up her empire. In spite of her wealth she is in the wilderness, the symbolic place of wild beasts and the demonic (Isaiah 34:11-15; Mark 1:13).

The final and most disturbing picture of this woman is that she was drunk with the "blood of the witnesses to Jesus" (17:6). Everything the Roman Empire stands for opposes the gospel of Jesus Christ. It represents conquest, slavery, indulgence and oppression. Its roots are the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21). The woman represents an enticing and powerful world system that seeks to undermine Jesus Christ. Clearly Rome, like Babylon, was symbolic of such systems throughout history.

## 2. The beast that carrier her – 17:6b-18

The woman is pictured as riding on a beast, the beast that was introduced in chapter 13. John himself is amazed at the woman. The unbelieving world will be amazed at the beast (17:8). What does it mean to say that the beast "was and is not and is to come" (17:8). There have been significant debates about what follows in this passage. Truly it calls for 'a mind that has wisdom" (17:9). The best explanation calls us to review the history of Rome in the first century AD. The seven kings would seem to be the Roman emperors from Caesar Augustus (27 BC-14 AD, cf. Luke 2:1, to Titus (79-81 AD). The five "kings" who have fallen then would be Augustus, Tiberius (cf. Luke 3:1), Caligula, Claudius and Nero, the other two being Vespasian (69-79 AD) and Titus (79-81), the one who "must remain only a little while." This list discounts the chaotic year of 69 AD when there were four different leaders claiming to be the emperor. That exclusion would certainly make sense to John's initial readers.

In verse 11 John identifies the beast who was, and is not as an eighth, which nonetheless belongs to the seven. The eighth would be Domitian, the reigning emperor as John is writing. What John seems to be saying here, that is of enormous importance (beyond a simple history lesson), is that in a symbolic, or perhaps even a more realistic sense, Domitian is the revived Nero. ***The danger then that John is signaling is that Domitian, following the goddess Cybele, will continue Nero's persecution of Christians.*** There was a widespread belief that Nero had not actually died but had fled to Parthia from where he would lead an army against Rome. We don't have to go into all that to appreciate the idea that in Nero the spirit of Antichrist existed (I John 4:1-3). It may be argued that this spirit of Antichrist has continued throughout history including figures like Adolf Hitler. Does this mean there will be a final Antichrist figure? John seems to suggest that the beast is such a figure. Some have wondered if the beast would be a re-born Nero in some form.

The ten horns would seem to be an echo from Daniel 7:7. These are less precise and probably represent the various client kings of the Roman Empire. Their authority is short lived, only an hour symbolically. They join forces with the beast and make war upon the Lamb (17:14). This could be a reference to the empire wide persecution of

Christians which was beginning to emerge and we know was state policy early in the second century. Yet the Lamb conquers them because “he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (17:14). This was a title of the emperor going back to Caesar Augustus (hence the irony of the birth announcement that Jesus is “Christ, the Lord” (Luke 2:11), not Caesar Augustus). The opposition to the Lamb is futile. He alone wins the victory (5:11-13).

The concluding section makes clear that the woman is Rome, “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18). She is distinguished from the beast which is John’s version of the Antichrist. Rome then is not the “eternal city.” The beast at some point will no longer need her. He will inspire her followers, “the ten kings,” to rise up and destroy her (17:16). Behind all these events is God himself who puts it into their hearts to carry out his purpose (17:17). God is in control of history and he shapes his purpose even as individuals, kings and empires make whatever plans they choose. Not every world government is an expression of the great whore and the beast. Yet the woman and the beast can be found throughout history.

In conclusion then, we are presented with a cosmic struggle between the Lamb and the beast. The woman, Rome, is one phase of that struggle. Long after her destruction (which we will see in detail in the next chapter) the conflict between the beast, the false prophet and the Dragon (Satan) and Jesus Christ, the Lamb, the Word of God, the second member of the Trinity will continue until history comes to a conclusion. This is a sober warning. More than that, however, it is a tremendous hope. Christ and Christ alone will win the final victory.

## Questions for Discussion

1. The image of the woman depicts the role of empires throughout history. Empires build their wealth and power by robbing others. God inevitably judges them. What might this say about our own country, the United States of America, which, despite being a beacon of liberty, was in many cases built on land stolen from the Native Americans and cultivated with slave labor?
2. The beast may be more a system, then a single individual, the “spirit of Antichrist” (I John 24:3). What are some examples of this spirit or “system” in our world today?
3. What lessons can we take from this chapter for faithful Christian living in our own time?

## Chapter 18 – “The End of the Empire”

This chapter is one of the most forceful in all of Scripture. It pulls together a central theme which we often overlook. That theme is ***the demonic character of world empire***. Throughout the Biblical record we encounter one empire after another. These empires are world powers which exercise their force and influence through both seduction and domination. They promise great benefits to their followers but are also capable of brutally enforcing their will. These empires invariably become idols because they demand total allegiance. In chapter 18 we see God’s final destruction of the Roman Empire. Rome is the last in a long line that goes all the way back to Egypt in the Book of Exodus.

### 1. “Fallen is Babylon, the great!” – Revelation 18:1-8

It is clear that the great city “Babylon” in Revelation is a symbolic name for Rome, the empire of the first century AD (the “seven mountains.” Revelation 17:9, “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth,” Revelation 17:18). In this chapter we see the judgment of God falling on her. The angel who comes down from heaven clearly has divine authority and he pronounces the sentence on this example of Babylon (Revelation 18:1-3). Rome will become desolate. It will be “a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit” (Revelation 18:2). What this means is that God is abandoning her. In the words of Romans chapter 1, he is giving her up. In the absence of God the demonic takes over. This has been the fate of unjust kingdoms and empires throughout history. It applies to the Phoenician seaport, Tyre (Ezekiel 26:19-21), Nineveh, the capital of Assyria (Zephaniah 2:13-15), Babylon itself (Isaiah 13:19-22) and Edom which was supposedly settled by Esau who sold his birthright (Isaiah 34:8-17).

The destruction of this Babylon, Rome, mirrors the destruction of these other empires. Behind all these is God’s judgment on the Egyptian empire which began with the gods of Egypt and extended to Pharaoh’s army (Exodus 12:12; Exodus 15:4-12). The power of Rome, like Egypt, Nineveh, Babylon and all the rest was based on its power to provide pleasure and wealth to all who supported and followed her. God’s indictment against Nineveh describes her in terms of “the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries and peoples through her sorcery” (Nahum 3:4). According to Scripture, empires are not only cruel and unjust, they are ultimately demonic (hence the presence of the beast with the woman in Revelation). Even Israel can take on the characteristics of a ruthless empire:

“Its princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows within it” (Ezekiel 22:25).

These are the distinguishing marks of an empire. Empires are giant robbers who destroy anything in their path for the purpose of enriching themselves, their leaders and their citizens. Micah describes them this way:

“Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice.”  
(Micah 7:3)

There are three groups caught up in the seductive power of the empire. The first are the nations. Presumably the nations can be both victims and allies of the empire. The enormous cargo of goods and indeed luxury items amassed by the empire comes inevitably from the nations they invade or rule. In the case of Tyre that city imposed its terror on all the mainland (Ezekiel 26:17). Tyre took the fir trees from Senir, cedar from Lebanon, oaks of Bashan, pines from Cyprus and embroidered linen from Egypt to build its empire. The second group are the “kings of the earth.” They have allied themselves with the empire and profited accordingly. This is the symbolic character of their “fornication.” There is nothing legitimate about their relationship with the empire. The third group are the merchants who “have grown rich from the power of her luxury” (Revelation 18:3). These three represent the deadly trio of drunkenness (“wine of the wrath of her fornication”) leading to sexual indulgence (“fornication”) and wealth. Wine, sex and wealth are all gifts of God and inherently good (I Timothy 4:4). Yet scripture warns against the misuse of all three (Proverbs 20:1; I Corinthians 6:12-20; Matthew 19:24; Luke 6:24).

Another voice from heaven calls out to the followers of Christ to separate themselves from the empire and its inherent idolatry since its power as well as its indulgences lead inevitably to that end. This was clearly a problem in several of the churches which John was overseeing. References to “Jezebel” as well as the “Nicolaitans” indicate this (Revelation 2:16, 20). The real problem with Laodicea would appear to be the fact that it allied itself with the values of the empire and boasted in its wealth (Revelation 3:17). This had sapped the church’s spiritual energy with the result that it was neither hot nor cold (Revelation 3:16).

God’s judgment now is falling on the empire, “the great whore.” God will repay her double for her deeds (18:6). This echoes an Old Testament standard of God’s justice (Isaiah 40:2; Jeremiah 17:18). By the same token God’s grace gives a double portion of his goodness (II Kings 2:9; Isaiah 61:7; Zechariah 9:12; II Corinthians 1:15). The empire had boasted, “I rule as a queen” (Revelation 18:7). She had inflicted the world with “torment and grief.” The poet Virgil, a hundred years earlier, had written that Rome’s destiny was to be the ruler of nations. As a result of this rule, the empire had “glorified herself and lived luxuriously” (Revelation 18:7). This now is coming to an end. God sent plagues over time on Egypt. For this Babylon, the plagues will come in a single day. Like Sodom and Gomorrah she will be burned with fire (Revelation 18:8). God is calling her to account. As we mentioned in a previous study this prophetic picture would seem to have been fulfilled in the third century AD.

## 2. “Alas, alas, the great city” – Revelation 18:9-24

The three main groups who profited from the “great city” now mourn over her. The kings of the earth mourn her. Her judgment has been sudden: “For in one hour your judgment has come” (Revelation 18:10). God’s judgment is not gradual. It can occur in a moment, “in the twinkling of an eye,” I Corinthians 15:52. An example is the wise fool in Jesus’ parable who thinks he is perfectly content because of his great wealth. The Lord says to him, “Tonight your soul will be required of you,” Luke 12:20. The second group who mourns the city are the “merchants of the earth” (Revelation 18:11). We are given a somewhat lengthy list of all the commodities they were able to sell. The list includes jewels, linen, building materials, spices, food and then ominously, “slaves-and human lives.” Human trafficking certainly existed in the first century as it does today. The third group are the ‘shipmasters and seafarers,” those who shipped all the commodities and goods from the empire built by the great city.

The lament over the city has one key focus: wealth. The kings cry over the loss of their luxury (Revelation 18:9). The merchants mourn over all the wealth that “has been laid waste” (Revelation 18:17). The shipmasters and seafarers weep over the loss of riches that they had been accustomed to (Revelation 18:19). The empire had created riches for all these groups but at a terribly high cost which included human lives (Revelation 18:13).

The scene now shifts dramatically. There is a call for rejoicing on the part of the saints, apostles and prophets (Revelation 18:20). God’s judgment on the city has been for their benefit. In 90 AD people still remembered the persecution of the Christians by Nero (64-68 AD), as well as, the brutal destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. As God rescued Israel from Egypt and Babylon “by a mighty arm,” he will now rescue the early church from both the seductive and forceful power of the Roman Empire (Exodus 15:16; Psalm 77:15; Psalm 89:10; Isaiah 62:8; Luke 1:51). A mighty angel throws a stone “like a great millstone” into the sea as symbolic of the destruction coming upon the empire (Revelation 18:21).

Music will disappear from the empire in that time (the period of 250-260 AD under the reign of Emperor Gallienus). The artisans will disappear (Revelation 18:22). The light of lamps will go out. The voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard no more. Rome’s merchants had ruled the world. Her power is here described as deceptive sorcery (Revelation 18:23). The final verdict is the most terrible:

“And in you was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth.” (Revelation 18:24)

The emperor before Gallienus was Decius (249-251 AD) who would initiate the first systematic persecution of Christians all over the empire. God’s judgment fell quickly thereafter “in one hour.”

To sum up, there are three critical lessons to be learned from this chapter:

1. God will not abandon his people. The gates of hell will not prevail against the church (Matthew 16:18). We should not be surprised but I confess I find it sobering to see how exactly Revelation predicts events that took place hundreds of years later. Parts of the book still have not been fulfilled. We can be sure they will come to pass as well.
2. Allegiance to the empire is always a temptation and a threat. It is easy to wear the mark of the beast when the earthly benefits seem so obvious. From this perspective we can understand the dire warnings Jesus gave to the churches that had fallen under the empire's spell.
3. Social justice is an essential part of the Gospel (Luke 4:16-19; Mark 12:40). We are not saved by our works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Yet there is a judgment of works. Grace needs to lead to a concern for the poor (Galatians 2:1; Matthew 16:27; Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; Romans 2:6-8; II Corinthians 5:10; James 1:27).

## Questions for Discussion –

1. What is your reaction to the fact that this chapter is a prophetic picture of events which arguably were to take place almost two hundred years later?
2. American Christians are, by global standards, wealthy. We take things for granted like i-phones, flat TV screens, cars, not to mention jewelry, wine and many other amenities. How do we avoid the seduction of the empire?
3. How should this chapter lead us to rejoice (Revelation 18:20)?

## Chapter 19 – “The Rider on the White Horse”

### I. The Cry of Hallelujah – Revelation 19:1-10

Chapter 19 gives us a climactic, but very symbolic, picture of the final victory of God in the second coming of Jesus Christ. In the opening verse we hear of “the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven” (Revelation 19:1). We don’t know if this is the same multitude which no one could count in 7:9. It may be. They are singing a hymn of victory of our God. Such hymns go all the way back to the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 15:1-21). The theme of God’s victory often occurs in very symbolic forms such as God’s victory over the mythical leviathan (Psalm 74:12-17; Isaiah 27:1). God’s victories are ultimately symbolic with implications for physical life and history. The present song celebrates the destruction of “the great whore.” The “whore” represents the Roman Empire (Revelation 17:18) but cannot be completely identified with it.

We are witnessing an apocalyptic (unfolding, revealing) picture of the final destruction of this figure. As was the case with Sodom and Gomorrah and ancient Edom this destruction will be permanent (Isaiah 14:19-22). Its smoke will go up from her “forever and ever” (Revelation 19:3; Isaiah 34:10). Now we hear from the twenty four and the four living creatures saying “Hallelujah!” A voice from the throne (an angel?) calls out the praise of God (Revelation 17:5) and then finally we hear again from the great multitude crying again “Hallelujah” and proclaiming the marriage of the Lamb. His bride is adorned in white linen which is “the righteous deeds of the saints” (Revelation 17:6-8). And angel instructs John to write, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). John bows down to worship the angel. The angel however protests sharply because the angel identifies with John (“I am a fellow servant”) rather than with God Almighty.

How are we to understand this intense picture? Several questions emerge:

1. If the “great whore” is Rome, how do we account for the fact that it was never fully destroyed in the sense of her smoke going up forever and ever (Revelation 19:3)? As we have noted, Rome faced great disasters in the third century A.D. but it was never destroyed. There is also no suggestion of Rome’s eventual conversion to Christianity under Constantine.
2. How does the destruction of the “great whore” relate to the “marriage of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:7)?
3. How do we understand the role of the angel who speaks to John and identifies himself as “a fellow servant with you and your comrades?” Are all servants of Christ angels? How?

The problem that has bedeviled interpreters of Revelation throughout the ages is the temptation to take it literally. Even when we allow for its symbolic character we must be

careful not to relate its symbolism to specific realities. Yes, there is clearly a sense in which the great whore is Rome. It is however also Babylon. It is the world system which has crucified Jesus which includes Sodom and Egypt (Revelation 11:8). Probably the best interpretation is to see the great whore as Cybele, the “great mother” of Rome. We should always look to a spiritual interpretation of Scripture first without denying its historical and, at times, political character (II Corinthians 3:4-6). Cybele, the great idol, the false god is here clearly condemned. The Vatican is built over her tomb. Does anyone worship her today? Not that I know of. This goes back to the spiritual principle by which God judges the gods of Egypt in order to judge Egypt itself (Exodus 12:12).

The marriage feast of the Lamb is referred to throughout Scripture as God’s celebrating Christ’s union with his people. The marriage feast is also a victory feast. The imagery here is of the conquering hero who returns home to take his bride. We have a picture of God’s great victory feast in Isaiah where God has destroyed death (Isaiah 25:6-9). This is a picture of the end of history where the evildoers have been rejected and not only the leaders of Israel (Abraham and Isaac and Jacob) but people from all over the world will come to the feast of the Messiah (Luke 13:29; Luke 22:28-30). The victory over the great whore sets the stage for the great marriage feast of the Lamb. The Bible begins with a marriage (Adam and Eve). God marries Israel (Ezekiel 16:1-14). The church is the Bride of Christ (II Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:21-33).

The word “angel” literally means messenger. The reason the angel reacts so strongly to John’s bowing before him is that this is the symbol of idolatry, in fact the idolatry of the great whore who was worshipped and who was a false god. The symbol of fornication with the great whore by the kings of the earth (Revelation 18:3, 9) is symbolic of their worship just as Israel’s worship of false gods was a form of fornication (Numbers 25:1-3; Jeremiah 3:20-23; Hosea 1:2). Having just spoken of the judgment on the “great whore,” the angel strongly warns against anything that might suggest idolatry, hence his response, “You must not do that!” (Revelation 19:10). Angels are closer to us than they are to God in that they are created beings. God alone is to be worshipped (Matthew 4:10).

## II. King of Kings and Lord of Lords – 19:11-21

We now come to the dramatic scene of the rider on the white horse. The imagery here is of a conquering military hero which would have been familiar to anyone in the Roman Empire. The rider is called Faithful and True. He judges and makes war (Revelation 19:11). His appearance conjures up images of the risen Christ in chapter 1 (vs. Revelation 14-15). There is something startling, even frightening, about this figure. He has a robe dripped in blood. God is a warrior. This is the ultimate character of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ who is “The Word of God” (Revelation 19:13, John 1:1). The essence of salvation is not the forgiveness of sins as important as that is. It is the victory of God in Christ over all the forces of sin, Satan, death and hell (Isaiah 58:14-20; John 12:31; I Corinthians 15:50-57; Ephesians 4:8-10; I John 3:8).

Jesus comes to earth preparing for victory. He is followed by the armies of heaven also on white horses (Revelation 19:14). Like the saints they are dressed in fine linen which presumably symbolizes their "righteous deeds" as it did those of the saints (Revelation 19:8). As in the picture in the first chapter (Revelation 1:16), a sharp sword comes out of his mouth. Paul mentions the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. Therefore the sword coming out of the mouth of Jesus reinforces the symbolism of the word of God. He will rule the nations with a rod of iron (Revelation 19:15). Echoing throughout this passage are the words of Psalm 2, "You shall break them with a rod of iron" (Psalm 2:9). The entire Psalm sets up the conflict between the Lord's anointed and the kings and rulers of earth (Psalm 2:1-2). In addition to the name of The Word of God Christ takes upon himself the ancient name of Zeus, which the caesars had appropriated for themselves, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Revelation 19:16).

Next we have a description of a massive battle. Some think this is the so-called Battle of Armageddon prophesied earlier in Revelation 16:14-16. The battle is essentially spiritual and we must interpret this vivid imagery that way. This is the battle against the beast and the false prophet. There will be two later battles, one against Satan himself and the other against Death and Hades. All will meet their fate in the "lake of fire," a phrase only found in Revelation. The theme of fire as a judgment however is found throughout the Bible beginning with Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24) and included the valley of Hinnom where children were sacrificed to the false god Moloch (Jeremiah 7:31-33). As the destruction of idolatrous Israel would lead to the corpses of the people being food for the birds of the air, so those who follow the beast will meet the same fate (Revelation 19:17-18). The beast who might otherwise be identified as the final expression of Antichrist. The beast leads the kings of the earth, the same kings who committed fornication with the great whore, into a final battle with the returning Son of God. The outcome is never in doubt.

We should note that the lake of fire is principally the fate of the spiritual beings allied against the Lord and his Christ. The beast and the false prophet are thrown into it. The rest are killed by the sword of the rider on the white horse, that is to say, they are destroyed by the word of God (There is a classic distinction between "word of God" meaning scripture and "Word of God" meaning Christ himself). The kings of the earth are then destroyed by the judgment of scripture being carried out by the living Word, Jesus Christ. We end with the gruesome and somewhat shocking image of the birds being gorged with the flesh of the enemies of God.

It is important to remember that this warfare is primarily spiritual. It can certainly have its carry over to historical figures like "the kings of the earth." However, the imagery of Christ as the rider on the white horse combined with the warfare against the beast and the false prophet, not to mention Satan, Death and Hades, has to be seen as essentially spiritual. As Paul says, "For our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). These spiritual forces however can certainly impact historical events as John's readers knew from their memories of Nero and the destruction of Jerusalem. They are also being

prepared for further persecution by being given the assurance of this picture. Christ will return! Christ will be victorious over the beast and the false prophet and Satan himself and all who follow them. We will certainly see later pictures of judgment in the next chapter. Satan, Death and Hades will be thrown into the lake of fire along with the beast and the false prophet. We will also encounter the sobering word that those whose names are not written in the book of life will also be thrown into it. Yet the reference to eternal torment, here at least, seems reserved for the spiritual powers (The worshippers of the beast are spoken of as being tormented in the presence of the Lamb. The suggestion here is of earthly torment with the judgmental reference to the smoke of their torment going up forever and ever like the historical references to Sodom and Gomorrah and Edom (Revelation 14:9-11)). Greek mythology delighted in images of eternal torment and this influence came over into many of what we call the books of the apocrypha. That is not the case in the Bible itself. Jesus' own references to fiery judgment refer to "weeping and gnashing of teeth," images which suggest sorrow and regret rather than physical torment (Matthew 13:40-42).

### **Questions for Us –**

1. How does this picture of God's victory encourage us in our faith?
2. Why do you think the theme of The Word of God is so important?
3. What hope do we take from the images of the destruction of the great whore, the beast and the false prophet?

## Chapter 20– “The Destruction of Evil”

### I. “Apocalyptic:” Is this the Epilogue to John’s Vision?

Up to chapter 19 of Revelation we have been dealing with visions of John’s own time. The beast, the false prophet, the great whore, Satan himself have all been figures that related to the present context in which John is writing to the seven churches. In chapter 19 we have the highly symbolic picture of Christ’s return as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Revelation 19:16). This is the hope of the church. Christ’s return is expected throughout the New Testament and described in many different symbolic forms. The angels at Jesus’ ascension say that he will return “in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Jesus himself describes it as the owner of a house returning suddenly and unexpectedly (Mark 13:32-37). Paul describes Christ’s return as being initiated by the cry of an archangel and the sound of a trumpet (I Thessalonians 4:16; I Cor. 15:52). John’s picture of Christ on a white horse with a sword coming out of his mouth evokes the image of the conquering Roman general. This will be the destruction of not only the Roman Empire but all empires and all false messiahs or anti-Christ (Matthew 24:5; I John 2:18). Jesus Christ is triumphant and all the forces against him are destroyed. The human adversaries perish and the beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation. 19:17-21).

What happens next? What we appear to have in the final three chapters is a series of images of the ultimate victory of Christ and the total defeat of evil. These chapters which present such vivid images as the millennium, the final judgment, the defeat of Satan, Death and Hades and the new heaven and the new earth have inspired debates, discussions and predictions for the past two thousand years, many of them highly speculative. Whatever we have seen up to this point, these final chapters certainly fit the description of “apocalyptic,” which literally means unfolding or revealing. There is a danger in taking these passages literally or trying to see them as a chronological description of the end of history. In reality they are neither of these. They are symbolic descriptions of the ultimate cosmic conflict between God and Satan, between Christ and the beast and the false prophet. They are pictures of hope in the midst of conflict, of joy in the face of despair. They assure us that goodness and justice will prevail over evil and deceit. They remind us of the importance of remaining faithful to Christ and living responsibly for him.

We these points in mind let us begin looking at chapter 20.

### I. Satan Bound – 20:1-6

We may well ask what is this section describing? Again if we are looking for a literal interpretation of any kind we will be disappointed. What we have from this point onward to the end of the book is a series of pictures each of which need to be interpreted for their special message. This is consistent with the many scenes we have witnessed up to this point including the very symbolic picture of the birth of Jesus in chapter 12. Let us now look at the imagery of this section.

## II. Sealed in the Pit –

An angel is described as coming down from heaven holding the key to the bottomless pit and chaining Satan and throwing him into the pit for a thousand years. There are numerous symbols in this scene alone. First of all, Satan's power is obviously limited. One angel overcomes him. Second, he is described as "that ancient serpent" who was known throughout ancient mythology often referred to as the leviathan (Isaiah 27:1). He is also the Devil and Satan. Third, his primary role was deceiving the nations. He will be presented from doing so for the obviously symbolic period of a thousand years (Revelation 20:3).

What is this picture about? It does not follow chronologically on chapter 19 since the returned Lord ruling the nations and destroying all his enemies is not mentioned. The image here refers to the fact that there are times when Satan is bound, when his power is limited, even absent. The importance of this image is that Satan is far from all powerful. There are times when his power (or presence) is altogether absent. It is in these moments that the church is free to grow and prosper. An example of such a time could be when Constantine ended the persecution of the church in the Roman Empire and the church was free to expand and develop. During this period the canon of the New Testament was finalized and the Nicene Creed, defining basic Christian doctrine, was composed.

## III. The First Resurrection –

Who are these who have been "beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God?" These are reigning with Christ (Revelation 20:4). Over them the second death has no power. They reign with Christ for the thousand years. Where do they reign? We are not told. They do not seem to have earthly authority but rather a spiritual one which they share with Christ. Could this not be an initial picture of heaven, or at least the first stage of eternity? These may be the "great cloud of witnesses" mentioned in Hebrews 12:1? This group specifically seems to be martyrs, not just in the sense of witnesses (the actual meaning of the Greek term), but those who gave their lives in service to Christ, who were "beheaded for their testimony," literally or figuratively. We may be referring here to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Archbishop Romero in El Salvador in 1980, the five missionaries murdered in Ecuador in the 1950's and all the many martyrs throughout Christian history going back to Stephen in Acts 7. None of these worshipped the beast whether in the form of Caesar, Hitler or terrorist groups in the service of some ideology or fanatical dictator or oligarchy. Is it any wonder that they would reign with Christ in some special status? As the author of Hebrews describes them, they look down on us in this earthly context and call us, following their example, to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus . . . (Hebrews 12:2)." In this sense they are very much alive.

#### IV. The Return of Satan –

Satan's return does not fit other descriptions of the "end times" in Scripture where after Christ returns we immediately have the final judgment (Matthew 13:36-43) and the last enemy to be destroyed is death (I Corinthians 15:23-26). In this scene Satan does not escape. He is allowed to go free in order to deceive the nations. We are then again in an historical, not eternal, context. Just as the Lord restrains Satan so at other times he is allowed to act freely. We see this in the testing of such diverse figures as King Saul (I Samuel 16:14) and Job (Job 2:5). We see it in Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1). Satan's actions express not only his freedom, relative as it is, but also the spiritual testing involved in his ability to deceive (Revelation. 20:7; James 1:2-4).

Gog and Magog are ancient enemies of Israel mentioned in Ezekiel chapters 38-39. Their precise origin is unknown. They are part of a great battle, a final assault against "the camp of the saints and the beloved city" (Revelation 20:9). This is not a clear reference but it would seem to suggest symbolically, the people of God, the church, the "saints" and those in the "beloved city," suggesting Jerusalem. Gog and Magog under Satan's influence unite a vast army that is "as numerous as the sands of the sea" (Revelation 20:8). Is this a picture of the final battle of Armageddon? We are not told so explicitly but that is the name usually given to the final battle of history. Yet this assault goes nowhere. Fire comes down from heaven and consumes them. This evokes images of judgment going back to Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24). This image culminates with the final destruction of Satan who is thrown into the lake of fire along with the beast and the false prophet "and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10).

This then does seem to be a prophetic picture of the final defeat of Satan and indeed of evil itself. These cosmic figures suffer eternal torment, something that is not used to describe the fate of human beings in the final judgment. However, even here the picture may not be completely final. The words "forever" and "eternal" are translations from the Greek, literally meaning "from ages to ages," like the Hebrew equivalent, "length of days." These Greek and Hebrew terms essentially mean an undetermined time or period. Sodom and Gomorrah undergo a punishment of "eternal fire" (Jude 1:7). The people of Edom, like the followers of the beast, see the smoke of their torment ascending "forever" (Isaiah 34:10; Revelation 14:11). Clearly these texts do not mean forever in a literal sense. What is affirmed here beyond any doubt is the complete and final destruction of Satan. His long and painful attack on humanity, the world and even God ends in complete failure. For Christians struggling against the "cosmic powers of this present darkness" (Ephesians 6:12) in any age, this is a picture of final and ultimate hope.

#### V. The Books are Opened (Revelation 20:11-15)

John now describes the judgment of the "great white throne." While this appears to be the final judgment, that may not be the case. First of all, this is a judgment of works ("And the dead were judged according to their works," (Revelation 20:12)). We know

that no one will be justified by works. So this may be a provisional judgment. Second, the critical issue of the fate of those judged is whether or not their names are written in the “book of life” (Revelation 20:15). This would seem to be more a question of their relation to Christ.

There are passages in scripture which speak of persons receiving eternal life seemingly because they have done good works or good deeds (Matthew 25:31-46; John 3:21; 5:28-29; Romans 2:6-11; II Corinthians 5:10). Paul insists that salvation does not come through works (Romans 4:4-5; Ephesians 2:8-9). James, in what seems at first glance to be a counterpoint to Paul, talks about works being necessary (James 2:14-26). The classic understanding of these texts going back to Martin Luther is that we are not saved by works as some kind of merit or achievement on our part. Yet works are a sign of faith. James’ statement “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26) summarizes this understanding. The judgment of the great white throne is finally not a matter of works but rather of having your name written in the “book of life.” This suggests the element of faith.

Again we have a picture of cosmic spiritual judgment. Satan, Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire. Those whose names are not written in the book of life are likewise thrown into the same lake. This suggests those who throughout the Book of Revelation have defied God and have worshipped the beast and the false prophet. Unlike Greek and Roman mythology, and other apocalyptic writings (which Luther rejected because they weren’t in the oldest texts of the Old Testament), there is no description of torment of human beings. They perish (John 3:16, 36).

Scripture actually speaks of three kinds of final judgment:

1. The books are opened and “what has been done in the body” is reviewed (II Corinthians 5:10).
2. Salvation is received by faith in Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 16:30-31). Those who reject Christ are condemned (John 3:18).
3. “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (I Corinthians 15:22; John 1:4; 12:32; Romans 5:12-21; 11:32; Colossians 1:20; I Timothy 2:3-4; Titus 2:11). The Bible in these passages speaks of a universal reconciliation and salvation.

How these three themes relate has been the subject of much debate throughout the past two thousand years. The great Princeton theologian of the nineteenth century, Charles Hodge, believed that only those of whom it is explicitly said that they cannot be saved will be condemned. He believed that the vast majority of the human race will ultimately be saved.

The great hope of this passage is that justice will be upheld, evil in all its forms will be defeated and that Christ will reign not only for a “thousand years” but for all time

because he is the final victor over Satan, Death and Hades. Those in Christ have nothing to fear in life or death (Romans 8:38-39).

## Questions for Discussion –

1. How do we see Satan deceiving the nations in our time?
2. If evil and injustice are ultimately doomed, how active then should we be in opposing them? How should we be opposing Death knowing that it too is doomed?
3. How do we draw on the examples of the martyrs for our encouragement and support in the Christian life? Do you think that these examples are really the strongest “witness (the literal meaning of “martyr”) for the Christian faith?

## Chapter 21– “Every Tear Wiped Away”

### John’s Vision of the New Creation

John in this chapter presents a highly evocative image of God’s new creation. In this picture he draws heavily on a number of Old Testament sources. It is extremely important that as we look at this chapter we remember two fundamental principles of interpreting the Book of Revelation as we come to its conclusion. The first is that the intention of this book is to provide pastoral guidance to the seven churches in Asia Minor to which it is addressed. It is not a blueprint, much less a time schedule, for the end of the world. Second, Revelation forces us to recognize how essentially symbolic it is. This is in no way a literal account. The symbolism here, as in the rest of the Scriptures, is intended to teach us important lessons. These lessons draw heavily on imaginative imagery and hyperbole. The church’s attempt to take such passages in some literal sense, partially or completely, has led to many unfortunate circumstances. When Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that it is better to tear out your right eye than to be thrown into hell with your whole body (Matt. 5:29) he is not to be understood in any literal sense. He is not talking about physical mutilation or saying that the disciples are in danger of going to hell. He’s making the point that lust (not sexual desire) can undermine our whole life. David’s looking at Bathsheba led him symbolically into a very real hell.

With that clarification let us now look at chapter 21:

#### I. God’s Bride – 21:1-4

This is one of the most comforting and hopeful passages in all of the Bible. The first point that has to be noted is that the heaven we see here is not somewhere “out there” beyond the sky (like the Greek mythical Olympus). The new Jerusalem *descends*. The image we have here is of a recreated universe, this world transformed. The basis of this symbolism comes from the Old Testament prophecies of Israel’s return to Jerusalem after their seventy year exile in Babylon. In Isaiah God speaks of creating “new things” (Isa. 42:9), rebuilding Jerusalem (Isa. 62:6-12), and creating “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17-25). This is a picture of a perfect age, without weeping or distress. This was only partially fulfilled in the historic return from Babylon. Isaiah’s imagery points forward to a completely new creation. This is the imagery that John draws upon in chapter 21. For the apostle Paul this new creation has already begun in Christ (II Cor. 5:17). It awaits a final fulfillment (Rom. 8:19-23).

In this new creation “the new Jerusalem” is pictured as a bride. This imagery has also run throughout Scripture. Israel is the beautiful bride of Jehovah (Ezekiel 16:8-14). The church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:21-33). John hears a loud voice from heaven promising that

1. God will dwell with mortals (21:3)
2. He will wipe every tear from their eyes (21:4), a promise repeated several times in Isaiah (25:8; 65:19)
3. Death will be no more (21:4). This echoes another promise from Isaiah (25:7).
4. mourning and crying and pain will be no more (Isa. 65:19)
5. God will make all things new, again from Isaiah (42:9)

In Isaiah this is a picture, building on the promise of the return from exile, of universal salvation. God is doing this “for all peoples,” not just Israel (Isa. 25:6). Even Egypt and Assyria, Israel’s ancient enemies, will be a blessing of the Lord (Isa. 19:23-25). The dead will come back to life (Isa. 25:19). In the new heaven and the new earth “all flesh” shall come and worship God (Isa. 66:22-23). All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God (Isa. 52:10). God will destroy the Leviathan, the mythical symbol of chaos and destruction (Isa. 27:1).

John in writing these great words of comfort to the seven churches may also be using this as a way of introducing these Gentile believers to some of the great promises of the Old Testament. Faced with the threat of the beast and the false prophet, as well as Satan the dragon or “Leviathan,” these verses give tremendous hope and assurance. These texts play the same role for us in our times of distress.

It is important to note that Isaiah, the same as other Biblical writers, balances out the universal promises with the warning of personal responsibility. He ends his prophecy with a picture of the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against God. This is an image of hell repeated in the Gospel of Mark (Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:47-48). We will see that John in these final two chapters follows a similar pattern of a picture of universal salvation with a warning for those who reject it.

## II. God’s Promise – 21:5-8

The “one seated on the throne” can only be God himself (21:5). The reference “It is done!” echoes Jesus’ “It is finished” in the Gospel of John (John 19:30). The title of “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end” also appeared at the beginning of the book (21:6; 1:8). God gives this great promise, “to the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life” (21:6). This echoes Jesus’ teaching in John chapter 4:13-14. God repeats the promise Jesus made to the churches regarding “those who conquer” (21:7; 2:7, 17, 26; 3:5, 21). Jesus ultimately is the one who conquers, he conquers on the cross defeating the

powers of sin. Death, hell and Satan (John 12:31; I Cor. 15:25-26; Col. 2:13-15; Heb. 2:14-15; I John 3:8; Rev. 17:14). The reference to conquering has nothing to do with the idea of imposing one's will on another (as Rome imposed its will on other nations teaching the way of peace to those they conquered, as Virgil states in *The Aeneid*). We are called to conquer in the ongoing spiritual war of which the seven churches as well as ourselves are part (Rom. 8:37; Eph. 6:10-17). The opposition is real. The stakes are high. Our conflict may be spiritual but it has a direct impact on such economic issues as the worship of wealth (Rev. 18; Eph. 5:5).

We now have a warning about the "second death." It is notable that the first sin mentioned is being "cowardly." Nowhere else in the New Testament lists of deadly sin is cowardice mentioned (Matt. 15:19; Gal. 5:19-21). What is its significance here? Again we have to remember the audience to whom this is written. These seven churches will face persecution if they remain faithful to Christ. There will be tremendous pressure placed on them to acknowledge the emperor as "Lord and God." We know that Roman policy dictated a death sentence for those who would not recant of their faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore there is the danger of being cowardly in the face of such opposition. The references to hell in the New Testament are not predictions of the fates of individuals (or nations as in Matt. 25:31-46). Rather they function as warnings for the present as we see in chapters 2 and 3. While specific reference is made to those who will enjoy heaven such as the seventy disciples (Luke 10:17-20) we are never told who exactly is going to hell (Who are those whose names are not written in the book of life, Rev. 20:15?). The closest we come is Jesus' denunciation of the religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt. 23:15). But even here he says that the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of them, not that they will not enter (Matt. 21:31). The church has suffered greatly from essentially borrowing the Greek view of the torments of hell which was the case in many of the non-biblical apocalyptic writings. Again we need to remember that we are dealing with truth in symbolic form in these passages.

### III. The Heavenly City – 21:9-27

If we needed to be reminded of the symbolic nature of these passages this description of the new Jerusalem makes that point abundantly clear. The number "twelve" has its significant meaning here of the twelve apostles (21:14; Eph. 2:20). One could do an exhaustive analysis of the symbolic values of all the jewels and precious stones mentioned but the point is already clear. All this symbolizes the richness of God's presence. We encounter comparable lists in the descriptions of the vestments of the priests of Israel (Ex. 28; 39). This passage also draws on Ezekiel's description of the new temple in the rebuilt Jerusalem (Ezekiel chapters 40-44). It's significant that we are then told there is no temple in the city. The city itself is the temple because God is directly present there.

There is no need for sun or moon in the city because God will be its light and the Lamb will be its lamp. The nations and the kings of the earth (the same kings of the earth who committed fornication with the great whore? Rev. 18:3) will bring their glory into it. It will receive the “honor of the nations,” 21:26). The symbolism is not completely coherent. The gates of the city will never be shut by day and there will be no night (21:25). What then is the point of having gates at all? Again the point must be to complete the symbolism of the twelve apostles (21:12-14).

We are assured that nothing unclean, abominable or false will be brought into the city. Clearly that is the intended meaning here rather than an emphasis on any particular group who would be excluded. Only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life will be allowed to enter. That however must then include the nations, the kings of the earth and people in general (21:24-26). Once again we have, not universalism, but a picture of a universal salvation (cf. Rev. 7:9-10).

Yes, the picture of the heavenly Jerusalem is a symbolic one. It is also clearly a picture of great hope, encouragement and comfort.

## Questions for Discussion –

1. How can we use this passage to comfort those going through death, sickness and suffering?
2. What does it mean for us “to conquer” in Christ? How does Christ’s victory become our victory?
3. How can we help negate the judgmental attitude that has so often accompanied the biblical teaching on hell? Why do you think hell is not mentioned in our two oldest confessions of faith, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed?

## Chapter 22 – “The Water of Life”

Revelation chapter 22 is not only the last chapter of the Book of Revelation. It is the last chapter in the Bible. It is striking to note how many parallels that are in this chapter with the beginning chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The vision of John here however is not simply that of a new Eden or a Paradise restored. It is the picture of God’s holy city here in the new creation in which God is present with his servants and the nations. It is the ultimate statement of the hope that we have in Jesus Christ.

### I. “These words are trustworthy and true” – Revelation 22:1-7

There are striking parallels between John’s description of the holy city and the picture of Eden in Genesis chapter two. There is a river that flows through the city just as a river flows through the Garden of Eden (Revelation 22:1; Genesis 2:10). The tree of life is present in both accounts (Revelation 22:2; Genesis 2:9). However the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil no longer exists with its temptation to sin. The theme of the water of life is found in the Gospel of John chapter four in Jesus’ discussion with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-15). In John 7:38 Jesus says, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’.” In this passage Jesus seems to be alluding to various references in Isaiah that deal with the theme of living water (Isaiah 55:1; Isaiah 58:11). The invitation to come and take of the living water is echoed again at the end of the chapter (Revelation 22:17). This flowing water is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (John 7:39). The imagery here is of “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). We need to appreciate how important water was in the Middle East with its heat and dust. I am always reminded here of the third film in Terence Fisher’s Dracula trilogy (Dracula, Prince of Darkness) where Dracula as a Satanic symbol is literally destroyed by flowing water which gushes up from under an icy moat bringing him to his doom.

Once again we deal here with rich imagery. Remember the basic interpretative rule that much of the Scriptures is not to be taken literally but symbolically. The symbols convey to us God’s revelation of things that our eyes and ears could not comprehend (I Corinthians 2:9-10). To say that something is symbolic does not mean that it is neither real nor historical. Jesus’ death on the cross is clearly historical but the meaning of his death both as an atonement for sin and a victory over death needs to be understood symbolically. The scribes and Pharisees who witnessed his death literally did not comprehend what was really happening. So here we read that the tree of life is on both sides of the river of life (!). Its twelve kinds of fruit “are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2). This contrasts with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil whose fruit brought death (Genesis 2:16-17). We need to remember the cosmic nature of God’s ultimate plan of salvation. It is not only Israel and the Church who are in the holy city but

the nations as well as “the kings of the earth” (Revelation 21:24). In ways that we do not know they have come to faith.

Evil no longer exists. That is the essential truth of the symbolism of the destruction of Satan, Death, Hades and their followers. Jesus says to the proud Pharisees in John 8:44, “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires.” More terrible words could not be spoken. The theme of Revelation 22 is the total absence of anything that is accursed. As it says later in the chapter, “everyone who loves and practices falsehood” is outside the city (Revelation 22:15). More to the point the throne of God and the Lamb are in the city. The servants of God will finally see him face to face (cf. John 1:18; I Corinthians 13:12). The Lamb’s name will be on their foreheads in contrast to the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:16). Then follows the great promise that “there will be no more night” (Revelation 22:5). The darkness and the night, symbolic of evil, are gone forever. The Lord God’s presence is the light of the city. God will no longer dwell in unapproachable light (I Timothy 6:16).

We are told that God’s servants “will reign forever and ever.” Over whom will we reign? It is clear that eternity is not to be spent in some nether world in the clouds (where everyone plays harps and wears halos). This is based on Greek mythology not Biblical revelation. In God’s holy city there will be activity and indeed excitement (think of C.S. Lewis’ great space trilogy). Will we reign over worlds to come, new worlds to be created? We don’t know. There is much that we will learn. We are told that these words are “trustworthy and true.” We are also told that these things “must soon take place” (Revelation 22:6). God’s new world is unfolding even now. The new creation has begun in the midst of the world which still cries out for deliverance from its bondage to decay (II Corinthians 5:17; Romans 8:19-21).

Jesus is coming soon (but we don’t know when, Acts 1:6-7). This book of Revelation, so often abused or neglected, carries with it a blessing. We are to keep “the words of the prophecy of this book.” Revelation does give us a picture of the future but most of it deals with a present that is as real for us as it was for the seven churches to which it is addressed. Its symbols are keys to important truths that we dare not neglect. We are called to be servants of the all conquering Lamb in a world in which the dragon, the beast and the false prophet are alive and active.

## II. The Final Promise - Revelation 22:8-21

The greatest spiritual danger we face is idolatry. Abraham fled the idols of Ur of the Chaldeans but the people of God from the golden calf forward have time and again turned to idols. We can make idols out of things that are good and beneficial in themselves. In this scene John bows before the angel who is showing him these things. The angel responds dramatically, saying to him, “You

must not do that!" John, like us, is to worship God alone. We can make idols out of church traditions, Christian leaders or spiritual experiences. All these things are good and valid in their proper context. Yet we can never let them take the place of the one true God. We don't go to church because of the minister, the choir or the fact that the service makes us feel good. We go to worship God. We can never forget the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me," Exodus 20:3).

In contrast to Daniel who was told to seal up his prophecy (Daniel 12:9), John is told not to seal his book. It is for the churches now. The contrast between the evildoers and the righteous will continue in this interim period. We are to be neither distressed nor complacent. In the uncertainty of the present we are sustained by the promise that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:5). Jesus is coming soon. This is the hope of the church throughout the ages and it remains our hope as well. If in the midst of trials and struggles we could repeat this promise, Jesus is coming soon, we could experience the hope it provides even in the darkest moments. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We have been washed in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14). These two statements that he is the Alpha and the Omega as well as the sacrificial lamb testify to the twin realities of his power and grace. The Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world is also the victor over Satan and all his followers (Revelation 13:8; Revelation 17:13-14). We must hold on to this double truth. We can never separate the power and the grace of the Lamb of God "who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

We are sustained by this picture of hope. Those who love and practice falsehood have no part in the holy city. This is not so much a statement about the destiny of those who are sorcerers, fornicators and murderers as it is a word of assurance about the nature of the city. The invitation remains open. All who are thirsty are invited to "take the water of life as a gift" (Revelation 22:17). Will even those outside the city hear this invitation and respond? We can only pray they will (Romans 11:32; I Timothy 2:1-4).

There is a final warning here which most commentators believe applies not only to the Book of Revelation but to the Bible as a whole. We are to add nothing nor take away anything. This is a challenge since even Jesus overturns parts of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:31-42). Yet we interpret all of Scripture as a testimony to Jesus Christ (John 5:39). This is a sober warning. We do not get to pick and choose what we like either from Revelation or the Bible as a whole (as Thomas Jefferson famously did). For example, most people today, even Christians, disregard much of what the Bible says about sex and marriage. This is hardly new. However the warnings of this passage confront anyone who disregards the "words of this book." We don't evaluate the Bible. The Bible evaluates us.

The book ends again with the great promise that Jesus is coming soon. The world's future is in his hands. Our future is in his hands. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints. Amen. (Revelation 22:21). Amen, indeed.

## Questions for Discussion –

1. How does the hope of the holy city contrast with the popular image of heaven? Why do you think the symbolism of a city where God is present is so important?
2. Why do you think idolatry is such a temptation for us? How can we recognize this tendency in ourselves?
3. What impact should the statements that these things "must soon take place" have on our lives as Christians? Do we really believe that Jesus is coming soon (Revelation 22:20)?