**Revelation**

**Expository sermons**

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**The Revelation of Jesus Christ** Revelation 1:1-3

*(All Scripture quotes from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)*

When did you last read, or attempt to read, the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ? For many believers it is an enigma and many preachers steer away from it. Yet for others it is their favourite book. Some are obsessed by it. They have their calculators and measuring tapes in hand as they read it, preferably while wandering the land of Palestine. Whenever there is a crisis in the Middle East they race to this book to see if they can tick off another prophecy fulfilled.

On the news recently was a preacher standing on the edge of a valley in Israel declaring that blood would flow down this valley to the depth of the horse’s bridle (Rev 14:20). He did not mention that the text says that blood will flow from a winepress. Years ago a man pointed out to me that the bankcard with its triple ‘b’ was actually the 666 spoken of in Revelation 13. Then there is the infamous 144,000 (Rev 7:4) claimed to be the full number of saints, otherwise called Jehovah Witnesses. The number was reached in 1914 according to them, but the end did not come.

What then are we to make of this book? Do we leave it to fringe groups and Christian sects to dissect, and keep on telling us when the world will end, or do we open it as another book of inspired Scripture and seek to understand it as we do the rest of Scripture? But it is not like the gospels or the NT letters you say, and you are right. It is a different type of literature, but not the only occurrence of it in the Bible as a whole. The clues to understanding Revelation are in the book itself.

**1.Apocalypse/Revelation**

The first word of this book in the original Greek is *apocalypsis*. We have the transliteration as ‘apocalypse’. This will not the first time you have heard this word. You will see it in the title of many popular books these days. People use it write about some future disaster or the end of the world. But what does this word really mean? This book is ‘the apocalypse of Jesus Christ’. This word simply means ‘unveiling’, ‘uncovering’ or ‘revelation’- hence the title **Revelation**. The word has come indicate dire events in the future but it simply means a revealing of things, in this case of things to come, ‘*things which must shortly take place’* (1:1).

If you have read any of the OT you will be familiar with prophecy. This is also a book of prophecy (1:3). Both prophecy and apocalypse tell of things to come. It is just that apocalypse uses images and symbols rather than literal predictions. Was it because these were dangerous times for Christians that God communicated through visions? Was it so that some would hear and heed the message while others were left in the dark? ‘*He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’* (2:7, 17, 29). Sounds like Isaiah, and Jesus himself, does it not? Well, it still is Jesus speaking to those who look to him and hear his voice.

Revelation cannot be read apart from the rest of the NT and the whole of the Bible. It is not at the end of the Bible by accident. ‘The great emphasis of Revelation is the already completed victory of Jesus. The great end-time battle of God does not lie in the future but in the past. The battle has been fought and won: Jesus is the blood stained victor’ (Barnett). Armageddon, mentioned only once (16:16), and the millennium, mentioned only in the penultimate chapter, are not the major themes of this book.

**2. From whom**

*‘The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him’* (1:1). What is this revelation about? It is about Jesus Christ. The genitive is translated ‘of Jesus’ or ‘by Jesus’, but can also be understood as ‘about Jesus’. In fact, the words come from God. God gave this revelation to Jesus to give to his servants or those who believe in Jesus. Although all Scripture is inspired by God, no other NT book claims what this book does- direct divine authorship. No other book promises a blessing as this book does either.

Luke wrote a narrative of what has been accomplished ‘among us’ based on facts obtained from eyewitness. The epistles begin with ‘Paul’ or ‘Simon Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ’. This book also has such words but they come in verse seven- ‘*John, to the seven churches which are in Asia’*. God gave this revelation to Jesus, who sent his angel to John, who passed it on to the churches and to us. This is a clear and solemn claim to divine authorship.

The John who wrote down this revelation was almost certainly John Zebedee, the apostle of Jesus Christ. Because this book differs in style to the gospel and letters of John, some argue that it was written by another John; but the very fact that he does not identify himself more than simply ‘John’ indicates he was well known. John ministered in Ephesus in his later years and would have known these seven churches intimately- as the text indicates (e.g. 3:18). John was exiled on the Island of Patmos when he received this revelation. He was there ‘*for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’* (1:2,9). Christians were under great pressure in those days. They were suffering at the hands of the Romans. Emperor worship was on the increase and Christians had to choose between the Caesar and Christ. Domitian who ruled from 81-96AD took the title ‘Lord and God’. He had a great temple and an 8m high statue built for himself in Ephesus.

The Jews were still causing trouble for the Christians also. Although hated by the Romans, the Jews were prepared to report this sect to the Romans for their own benefit, or out of malice. Did not Jesus say, ‘*if they persecuted me they will persecute you also’* (John 15:20). The Jews in Smyrna and Philadelphia had earned the name ‘synagogues of Satan’ because of this wickedness. Heresy was also on the increase as these churches grew. False teaching was coming from different directions. Compromise with the world comes during times of persecution just as if does in time of prosperity.

It would be wonderful to visit these churches today there in the land of Turkey. But they no longer exist. There are few believers in that region and whatever buildings they used have been destroyed. The very cradle of Christianity, churches which the apostle Paul established and the apostle John nurtured, no longer exist. This is a message in itself to us today, to us in the Western world which 490 years ago brought the Reformation, and the gospel, to most nations of the world.

**3.To whom**

This book is a God-given revelation and a prophecy. It is also a letter. It is a letter written by John and sent ‘*to the seven churches which are in Asia’* (1:4). This letter includes the whole book, not just the first three chapters. ‘A sound interpretation of the Apocalypse must take as its starting point the position that the book was intended for believers living in John’s day and age’ (Hendrikson). Christians in the first century were to read and understand this book and be blessed by its message. The blessing, therefore, cannot be dependent upon understanding specific fulfilment of a prophecy in WW2, or the invasion of Iraq or the like.

The book is also intended to read by us today, 2000 years later. We are also servants of the Lord. We are promised blessing if we read this book and keep the things written in it. The time was near then and it is even nearer now. The blessing comes from heeding this message. If you believe the time is far off then you are not listening to this word of the Lord. ‘*The time is near’* (1:3). We read here of things that ‘*must shortly take place’* (1:1).

What is this time? How could it have been near for John and still near for us today? Are you one of those who say, ‘Oh! Not another message of gloom and doom; we have been hearing this all our life and look nothing has happened’. ‘*Where is this promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep all things continue as they have since the beginning’* (2Peter 3:4). There are three great times we need to remember- the creation, the cross and the consummation.

The Cross of Calvary was when Jesus won the victory over sin and death, victory over the enemy of God, namely Satan. ‘But Satan is still active’ you say. Evil is still present in the world. Revelation acknowledges this evil and attributes it to Satan. Satan is permitted by God to bring destruction. But he is also ‘bound by a chain and kept in a pit’ (20:1-2). When Jesus returns on the clouds (1:7) Satan will be cast into the lake of fire, no more to harass the servants of God.

We are living in the last days, the days between Christ’s first and second coming. Victory was won and declared at Calvary. Sentence was passed on the enemies of Christ. But they are yet to receive final judgment. Followers of Jesus Christ continue to suffer at the hands of Satan and his agents but the time is near when he and his agents will be ‘*cast into the lake of fire and brimstone… to be tormented day and night for ever and ever’* (21:10).

May you find the promised comfort and blessing in reading this book!

**Grace and Peace from the Triune God** Revelation 1: 4-6

Friends of ours from overseas often begin their letters, ‘Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’. It is something they learned from the Bible no doubt. Most letters in the NT, after identifying the writer and the recipient, carry the greeting, ‘grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ’. Here in the book of Revelation, which is also a letter, John sends a similar greeting to ‘*the seven churches which are in Asia’*. ‘*Grace to you and peace’* he writes. He sends this greeting in the name of the Triune God, Father, Spirit and Son, and includes the essence of the gospel in this greeting. ‘This grace and peace is provided by the Father, dispensed by the Holy Spirit and merited for us by the Son’ (Hendrikson).

**1.Grace and Peace**

The apostles Paul and Peter, and now John, all greet the Christians to whom they wrote with these two words. What did they mean? Often, as in this case with John, they were writing to Christians seeking to live as faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ in a hostile world. Their readers were often undergoing persecution for their faith. They did not write ‘may you be healthy and wealthy’ or ‘may you be happy in whatever you are doing’. They wrote ‘*grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*’.

Grace is the unmerited favour of God. Grace is the love God showed towards us in sending his only Son into this our world. He sent him to die even when we were still dead in our sin, even when we were still enemies of God- unmerited favour indeed! We are saved by grace through faith- it is the gift of God. Grace is God forgiving our sin and calling us his children. ‘*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called the children of God!’* (1Jn 3:1). Grace cancels all presumption and pride. ‘*God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’* (Ja 4:6).

The term grace points to the covenant of grace that God made with us in the blood of Jesus Christ. Christians in these seven churches needed to be reminded of this covenant of grace. They were living in a world that was hostile to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This word reminded them that God had called them into this covenant saying, ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’. Under the terms of this covenant God promised to keep them- ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’. ‘Grace to you’ wrote John. Do you know the wonder and the comfort of this covenant of grace?

*‘Grace and peace’*. Peace is the word that partners grace in all these NT greetings. Peace of course flows from the grace of God. Again the focus is upon Jesus Christ. We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through the Cross, Jesus brought us peace with God our Maker. Unbelievers do not have such peace. Their souls are troubled. Their consciences are uneasy because they are still in their sin. They are still enemies of God. Fighting against God does not make for a peaceful life.

*‘My peace I give to you’* said Jesus (Jn 14:27). He was not talking about world peace or a peaceful family life. He was talking about peace in your heart. Jesus gives peace because he offered up himself as a peace offering on the Cross. ‘*The peace of God that passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus’* wrote Paul (Phil 4:7). John was not praying that they would have peace with Rome, or with the Jews who were harassing and persecuting them. He was praying that they would have, and know they have, peace with God, This inner peace would enable them to endure affliction for the sake of Christ. No one could take such peace from them.

**2.The Triune God**

This greeting of grace and peace is not simply a passing comment or platitude. It is actually a prayer. The grace and peace are from God. John could not give grace and peace to anyone. Only God can. John had heard Jesus on the night that he was betrayed say, ‘*my peace I give to you, not as the world gives. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid’* (Jn14:27). Paul usually extended his prayerful greeting from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Here in this letter John extends it to the Triune God, Father, Holy Spirit and Son (in that order). Moreover, he expands on the nature and work of the three persons in the Godhead.

**God the Father** is ‘*him who is, who was and who is to come’* (1:4). In other words he is eternal. God had no beginning and no end. John’s way of referring to God reminds us of how God revealed himself to Moses as the great ‘I AM’ (Ex 3:14). ‘What shall I say to them? What is your name?’ Moses asked at the burning bush. ‘I AM who I am’ was the reply (YHWH in Hebrew). God is eternally existent and consistent. He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Do you find such knowledge comforting? Christians in the churches of Asia in the first century must have found great comfort in this truth. With opposition on every side they did not know what tomorrow would bring. They saw brothers and sisters led off to prison, and being put to death for refusing to deny Christ. To be assured that God is alive and is to come, and to know that he is unchanging, would have enabled them to endure the suffering.

John was in **the Spirit** on the Lord’s Day when he received this revelation. His messages to the seven churches are messages from the Spirit (2: 11, 17). The Holy Spirit therefore is included in the Godhead in whose name this greeting is sent. It is ‘*from the seven Spirits who are before his throne’* (1:4- or some translations have ‘*sevenfold Spirit’*). This is the second mention of the number seven in this book, and there are many more to come. There were seven churches in Asia. While this is a literal reference to seven named churches, this number also carries the meaning of completeness/fullness/perfection. We might say the letter was for all the churches in Asia, and in all the world, and for all time. So here the seven Spirits refers to completeness or fullness. Remember the Holy Spirit is a person, in this instance mentioned second in the holy Trinity. The seven Spirits ‘*are before his throne’*. This is the throne of God in heaven. They are ready to do the bidding of God; in this case carry his message to the seven churches in Asia. John was moved by the Holy Spirit to write and send this letter, this ‘*revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him’*.

This greeting is also **from Jesus Christ**. See the wonderful way in which John describes the person and work of Jesus Christ our Lord. The focus throughout this book is on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as his return. The victory of the Cross underlies this book. In three brief phrases John describes Jesus Christ.

Firstly he is the ‘*faithful witness’*. Jesus is the prophet who brought the word of God to mankind. He is the word of God. He embodies the Truth. Jesus told Pilate ‘*for this cause I came into the world that I should bear witness to the truth’* (Jn 18:37). Jesus witnessed faithfully to the end and gave the good confession before Pontius Pilate (1Tim 6:13). His faithful witness led to his death at the hands of men who hated the truth.

Secondly, Jesus is the ‘*firstborn from the dead’*. This presupposes that Jesus died. His blood was shed for us, as John goes on to explain in this verse. As the great High Priest, Jesus offered himself as the sacrifice for sin. Only the blood of Jesus is able to wash us clean of sin, or free us from our sin (Greek is ‘to loose’).

Having offered up himself, having been crucified and buried, God raised him from the dead for it was not possible that he should be held by death (Acts 2:24). Because Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God, God will also raise us up with him. What a tremendous comfort this must have been to Christians in Asia who were facing death for the name of Christ. And for you today- what does it mean to you that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead? Are you going to follow him in his resurrection?

Thirdly, Jesus is ‘*the ruler over the kings of the earth’*. This would have been news to the Roman Emperor! It would be news to many rulers today. Jesus is ruler over the kings of the earth the Bible tells us (Psalm 2). He is King of kings and Lord of lords. God raised him from the dead and seated him at his own right hand in glory. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah; he is the Lamb upon the throne (Rev 4). This may seem incongruous but this is the picture we are given of Jesus in this revelation.

Prophet, Priest and King. Jesus is everything. He is our life. John goes on to say Jesus loves us (lit ‘loving us and having loosed us’) and has made us a kingdom of priests, ‘*priests to his God and Father’* (1:6). As King, Jesus has a kingdom and we are his kingdom. We are a kingdom of priests, men and women who offer to God a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that confess his name (Heb 13;15). To this Jesus who is our Saviour and Lord, who has given us life and the privilege of praising him and serving, to ‘*him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen’.*

**Christ is coming** Revelation 1: 7-8

‘Within our lifetime sea level could rise up to 10m, unless we do something now to stop climate change’. We have heard many dire predictions like this in recent days. They are not coming from ridiculed religious leaders or doomsday prophets, but from scientists and politicians. ‘The human race has never faced a greater threat to its very survival than climate change’ claimed one politician.

While we are to be good stewards of this earth which the Lord has given us (Ps 115) we must remember two things. Firstly, the present earth and heavens will pass away. They are reserved for fire. The elements will melt in the heat (2Peter 3). Secondly, the greatest event in the history of the human race has already occurred. Our salvation is not in the hands of scientists and politicians but in the hands of Jesus Christ who died on the Cross some 2000 years ago. What we should be concerned about more than anything else today is his coming again. This will not be slow like climate change but sudden and much more catastrophic.

*‘Behold, He is coming on the clouds and every eye will see him’* (1:7). This is the word of God revealed to John. Jesus is coming again. He is coming to judge the world in righteousness- and no man or nation has the power to stop him. But there is a way out. You can escape this disaster that will be unparalleled in the history of the world, even the flood in Noah’s day. ‘*He who hears my words and believes in him who sent me has everlasting life and shall not come into judgment’* said Jesus (Jn 5:24). By all means let us stop polluting the atmosphere, whether or not it is causing climate change. But take heed that those who neglect these words of Jesus are facing a greater peril than rising global temperatures and sea levels.

Some are using the word ‘apocalypse’ to describe what the world faces if we do not halt this climate change. But do these people know what this word means? It comes from the Greek as we see in this book called Revelation. It means unveiling. For some this future is horrific (6:16), but for others it means salvation (Heb 9:28). John was not writing a message of doom to the churches but a message of hope, a message of victory in Jesus Christ.

**1.Come**

John’s greeting to the seven churches in Asia (Turkey) concludes with a reminder that Jesus, who died and rose from the dead, will return. This is not a new revelation. Daniel had a vision of ‘*one like the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’* (Dan 7:13). Jesus spoke of his return in a similar manner- ‘*they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory’* (Mat 24:30). And after his ascension, angels told the disciples ‘*this same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven’* (Acts 1:11).

When the Lord spoke to Moses, and made his presence visible among his people, he came down in a cloud. A cloud came down on Mt Sinai when the Lord spoke, and a cloud came down on the tent of meeting whenever Moses went there to meet with the Lord. A cloud came down on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured and his glory revealed (Luke 9:34).

Clouds can be white and wonderful, or they can be black and fearful. Have you ever been in a cloud? In the Himalayas where we often stayed we used to watch the monsoon clouds. They would build up in the valley then come up the mountains and right in our window if it was open! You may have gone through the clouds while flying. As the plane gets higher and higher suddenly everything goes white. When you have passed through the cloud you can look down and see the fluffy white tops of the clouds. If they are dark storms clouds your experience will be different. In fear you will cling to your seat as the plane is tossed about in the turbulence.

Jesus ascended through the clouds into heaven and he will come again in like manner. As a believer you will be looking forward to that day. Revelation ends with Jesus saying, ‘*surely I am coming quickly’* and with the believers crying, ‘*even so, come Lord Jesus*!’ Those who seek to live holy lives in Jesus Christ look forward to that day and seek to hasten his coming (2Peter 3:12). Is this your perspective on life? It is a very different perspective from that of the world!

**2.See**

As I drove to Newcastle recently I saw a hot air balloon or blimp in the sky. It was advertising some product. Some advertisers even take to writing in the sky to tell us about their product. Thousands, even millions of people can see this writing in the sky. Then of course, there is the sun and the moon that half the world can see at one time- telling us of God our creator!

We do not know how every eye will see Jesus when he comes but that is what this Scripture tells us (1:7). It is not profitable to speculate as some do. One person told me how satellite TV would enable Jesus to be seen by everyone in the world at one time! I told her that Jesus, who created the world, would hardly rely upon human technology to be seen. Let us focus less on technology and more Jesus, who is the only way of salvation.

Jesus is coming once and every eye will see him. There will not be multiple comings, as one college lecturer told his students. Jesus’ coming will not be in secret, as some not-so-secret, self-styled students of the Bible tell us. Jesus will not be coming just for a select group of Christians. Maybe such people get confused about the ‘thief in the night’ simile. The lesson of this simile is that the thief comes when you least expect him so be ready. You will surely know when the thief comes and cleans out your house!

*‘Even they who pierced him’* will see Jesus when he comes. The prophet Zechariah wrote similar words some 600 years beforehand (Zech 12:10). The immediate reference here is to the Jews and the Romans who conspired to crucify Jesus. They pierced his hands and feet, and they pierced his side. The Jews will finally acknowledge that the one whom they crucified is the Messiah or Christ.

*‘They who pierced him’* may have a wider reference to all those who have pierced Christ by their disobedient lives and rejection of him. Millions living today would have done just what the Jews and Pilate did to Jesus. They still, in effect, crucify the Son of Man by rejecting him as their Saviour. All people, all races, all generations will acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord when he comes in power and glory (Phil 2:10). Both the elect and the non-elect will see him on that Day.

**3.Mourn**

*‘All the tribes of the earth will mourn because of him’* (1:7). This truth was also declared by Zechariah, in the very same verse (Zech 12:10). ‘Ordinarily this idiom would mean that the crucified one has become the object of their sorrow i.e. they are grieving because they have crucified him’. But there is no indication of such grieving in this book. Therefore we are to understand that Christ is not the object of their grieving but the occasion of their grief. They will mourn for themselves. They will mourn when they see the consequences of their unbelief. But it will be too late. There will be no repentance, only mourning. Jesus truly is King. ‘Let us hide’ they will say, ‘let us flee the wrath of the Lamb’ (6:16). But there will be no place to hide. All tribes, all people, will weep and wail as they face the Judgment – unless Jesus has taken their punishment for sin.

Those who believe in Jesus, those standing firm in the face of persecution, those eagerly awaiting the return of Jesus will not mourn but rejoice. Their suffering will be over. They will join believers from every age and from every nation around the throne in heaven. They will worship the Lamb on the throne forever and ever.

This greeting ends with the Lord declaring himself to be him ‘*who is, who was and who is to come, the Almighty’* (1:8). Some say that this refers to Jesus but it is God the Father, God the Almighty who is still speaking. The Almighty (Gk. *pantokrator*) means the all- ruler and all- powerful One. He is ‘*the Alpha and the Omega’*. These are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. So he is ‘*the beginning and the end’*. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. In the end the heavens and the earth will pass away. When Jesus returns a new heaven and new earth will appear, the home of righteousness for the covenant people of God (2Peter 3:13).

What does the apocalypse mean to you? Are you looking forward to the day when Jesus returns in power and glory, or will you mourn because of Jesus? Are you living and working to hasten that great day? Are you praying every day- ‘*even so, come, Lord Jesus*!’

**Vision of the Son of Man** Revelation 1: 9-16

Some years ago I was preaching at an Easter dawn service. The gathering was in a park. As I spoke the sun slowly rose and shone into my eyes. It was so bright I could not see the crowd seated before me. I was blinded by the brightness of the rising sun. The apostle John had a vision of the risen Jesus. The face of Jesus was ‘*like the sun shining in its strength’*- not the morning sun but the midday sun! John was stunned and fell at the feet of this ‘*One like the Son of Man’*.

This is the first vision recorded in this book. One day while in exile, John was caught up in the Spirit. He heard a voice and turned to see a figure standing behind him. The voice told him to write what he saw in a book and send it to seven churches, churches in which John had ministered. His fellow believers were suffering intense persecution, probably during the reign of the Emperor Domitian.

**1.Venue**

John was on an island called Patmos when he had this vision. This small island off the coast from Ephesus was a barren outcrop of rocks, an ideal place for a penal settlement. John was not there as a tourist. He was there ‘*for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ’* (1:9). He was there because he had been preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ in Ephesus and these other churches. The authorities must have arrested him and exiled him to this island.

It was the Lord’s Day when he heard the loud voice behind him. Christians began meeting together on the day that Jesus rose from the dead, the day after the Sabbath. This was the day on which John would usually have been gathered with the church in worship. Even though he was not with them in body he was with them in spirit. Maybe he was praying or praising God when he entered this ecstatic or trance-like state, and had visions of the Lord and of heaven.

Isaiah (6:1), Ezekiel (1:1), and Daniel (7:1) all had similar visions of God and of heaven. The apostle Paul was caught up to the third heaven ‘*and heard inexpressible words’* (2Cor 12:4). He did not write these words down. But John was told to write down what he saw and heard. He wrote in a book or scroll which he sent to the seven churches in Asia (1:11). The seven churches mentioned in his greeting are here named.

John had already written a detailed doctrinal greeting to these churches. As he records his visions he again greets them warmly as a brother in Christ, and as a ‘*companion in the tribulation’* (1:9). It was tough being a believer in those days. At their meetings believers did not share about how the Lord had blessed them with a new car or a new house. They reported how their house had been ransacked, and how they had been beaten for going to church. Some were locked up in prison, and others, like Antipas from Pergamos, were put to death for refusing to worship the Emperor (2:13).

We might wonder what such persecution would do to the church today. What church you might ask? Indeed, Satan has decimated the church of God in this land, without having to resort to persecution. ‘*The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life*’ (1Jn 2:16) have been very effective in turning people from worshipping Jesus to worshipping Satan. Even within some churches money is the chief object of worship. Behind human history are mighty spiritual powers in conflict with each other- the kingdom of God and the power of Satan. The church stands between the two. We are in a war zone. And as the end approaches the conflict will intensify.

John was also a companion in the ‘*kingdom and patience in Jesus’* (1:9). ‘*Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God’* (Acts 14:22). Current tribulation would pale into insignificance in light of the coming kingdom of God*. ‘For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us’* (Rom 8:18). John saw Jesus in all his glory. He saw him as a royal figure. Jesus is not dead but alive, and he is coming soon.

Life for believers in this present world will not get easier. What we need is patient endurance, patience that is found in Jesus and him alone. Paul often spoke of being ‘in Christ’. He once said, ‘*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’* (Phil 4:13). He was speaking in the context of suffering and distress. We will need the strength of Christ to endure to the coming tribulation. ‘*He who endures to the end will be saved’* said Jesus (Mat 10:22, 24:13).

**2.Voice**

While in the Spirit, John heard a loud voice behind him. It sounded like a trumpet. At Mt Sinai Moses and the people heard the loud sound of a trumpet as the Lord came down and spoke to them (Exod 19). When the Lord speaks his people hear him. He speaks loudly and clearly; he does not mutter in confusion like other gods and false prophets. When the Lord comes, every eye will see him and every ear will hear his words of judgment.

Whose voice did John hear? It was that of the ‘*Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last’* (1:11). Previously this title referred to God the Father (1:4, 8). Now it applies to God the Son, for when John turned around he saw ‘*One like the Son of Man’.* If you believe that Jesus is equal with the Father you will not be surprised at this, but this is a ‘rock of offence’ for those who deny the deity of Christ. The Shorter Catechism Q6 states: ‘There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory’.

What did John hear? He heard words, words he could understand and write down. The words from God were for the edification and strengthening of the churches. These were not beautiful words to tickle the ears, words that made no sense to those who read them. These words were food for the soul, words to strengthen struggling Christians.

**3.Vision**

The voice came from behind, so John turned to see who was speaking to him. What he saw was supernatural and breathtaking. He was dazzled by the brilliance of ‘*One like the Son of Man’*, the risen Jesus, standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands. ‘*The Son is the radiance of the Father’s glory, the exact representation of his being’* (Heb 1:3). Moses saw a bush suddenly burst into flame as he tended sheep on Mt Sinai. As he looked in amazement the Lord spoke to him from the midst of the bush. Truly ‘*God dwells in unapproachable light’* (1Tim 6:16).

*‘One like the Son of Man’* reminds us of the vision which Daniel had of the Ancient of Days (Dan 7). He saw the Ancient of Days in a garment as white as snow, with hair like pure wool, on a throne like a fiery furnace. One like the Son of man came to the Ancient of Days on his throne. John saw One like the Son of man with a long garment and golden sash, with white hair like wool or snow, and eyes like fire. His feet were like fine brass. ‘Son of Man’ was what Jesus called himself during his life on earth. So this title links Daniel with Revelation through Jesus himself. The title also served to hide the identity of Jesus from those not having ears to hear or eyes to see. This letter may well have fallen into hostile hands.

Jesus appeared in heavenly glory and majesty. The golden sash and brass feet gave the appearance of royalty. Out of his mouth went a sharp two edged sword. What does this mean? Swords are not usually seen in the mouth. Out of the mouth come words, so this sword refers to the word of Jesus. ‘*The word of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two edged sword’* (Heb 4:12). The word which Jesus speaks will be like a sword. He will purge his churches and punish those who persecute his chosen. His word will accomplish what he intends.

In the vision Jesus was standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands (1:12). Every Jew was familiar with the seven golden lamps of the candelabrum in the temple. Moses was told to make a lampstand with seven branches. The seven lampstands surrounded Jesus, reflecting the light from his fiery eyes and radiant face. These seven lampstands represented the seven churches to which John was told to write (1:20). His message to Ephesus included a threat to remove their lampstand if they did not repent (2:5). The church only exists if Christ is present. If the truth of Jesus, the truth of his incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, is not upheld, Jesus is not in that ‘church’. The glory of the risen Lord must be clearly reflected in churches that have Christ in their midst.

In his right hand Jesus held seven stars (1:16). What do these represent? Well, he told John that they are the angels of the seven churches (1:20). But who are these angels? The word for ‘angel’ means ‘messenger’, so some people see these as human messengers sent by John to the churches. Others think they represent the leaders of these churches. But angels are heavenly beings, or ‘*ministering spirits’* (Heb 1:14). It is best to see these angels as somehow being heavenly representatives of the churches. Daniel spoke of the angelic prince Michael watching over the people of God (Dan 12:1).

This message from John was actually a message from God sent by an angel (1:1). The churches were to regard this letter as a message from heaven, not just the writing of a man called John. Do you regard the words of the Bible as a message sent from heaven; the words of God himself? These are living and powerful words. They search the deepest recesses of the human heart. They are words that will not fail. As you read them, and as you pray, reflect on the vision of the risen Christ you have seen today.

**I am alive for evermore** Revelation 1: 17-20

When Isaiah saw the Lord, he said ‘*woe is me for I am undone’* (Isa 6:5). When Ezekiel had visions of God he fell on his face and heard a voice telling him to stand on his feet and listen (Ezek 2:1). When Daniel had a vision of one like a man, he also fell on his face in fear (Dan 8:17). John stands in the line of these men of God who had visions of the living God.

**1.Fell at his feet**

Apart from being in exile, life had been going on as usual for John. It was the Lord’s Day, and John may well have been worshipping God; he may have been reading the Scriptures or praying. But on this particular day he was caught up in the Spirit. He heard a loud voice behind him. As he turned to see who was speaking he saw this amazing sight. It was awesome; it was terrifying. Filled with fear, John fell at his feet as though dead (1:17).

How do you think you would respond if the Lord appeared to you in a vision? One day you will see him in all his glory (1Jn 3:2) - how will you respond? These days all sorts of fearful, men-like creatures are portrayed on the screen as men play with their computers and their imagination. You might think that people will be immune to visions of awesome men, but there will be no mistaking the appearance of the Son of Man. Nothing in this world, or on the screen, can compare to what John saw and what you will see. And what you and all people see will not be on a screen. It will be real. His thunderous words will strike fear into every heart. ‘*At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord’* (Phil 2).

**2.Fear not**

As John was prostrate and motionless before the figure of the risen Jesus in all his glory, Jesus reached out and touched him with his right hand, saying, ‘*do not be afraid’* (1:17). As awesome and frightening as the figure was, with eyes like fire and a sword protruding from his mouth, he was kind and gracious. He reached out to John and spoke gently to him.

The emperor Domitian made an 8m high statue of himself at Ephesus, which John may have seen. Kings of men who want to be feared and worshipped often make huge statues of themselves. Remember the giant statue of Saddam Hussein that was toppled when he was overthrown. Proud men envisage themselves in this larger-than-life manner when they want people to worship them. John does not say how tall this figure of the risen Jesus was but it was more awesome than any man could make. Yet he reached out to comfort and encourage a fearful servant of the Lord.

Moreover, unlike the statue of Domitian, the figure John saw was alive. ‘*I am he who lives and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore’* (1:18). The figure John saw identified himself as the ‘First and the Last’ or the ‘Alpha and Omega’. This title variously refers to God the Father (1:8, 21:6) and Jesus (1:17, 22:13). The ‘I am’ is also an allusion to the divine name by which the Lord God made himself known to Moses.

The one who was dead but now ‘*alive for evermore’* is unmistakably Jesus Christ. John was a disciple of Jesus during his time on this earth. He watched him die on the Cross, but also saw him after he was risen from the dead. John had also briefly seen Jesus in his heavenly glory on the mountain where he was transfigured. In this vision he sees Jesus in his heavenly glory and sovereign power.

This vision reminded John that Jesus was not dead but alive. Being in exile and knowing his brothers were suffering intense persecution, he may have asked, ‘where is Jesus’? Many a follower of Jesus has asked this question even before they are persecuted. Maybe you have asked this question during a time of distress or pain. Maybe you have felt intensely lonely and abandoned at some time in your life. Well, keep these words ever before you. Jesus lives. ‘*He ever lives to make intercession for those who are saved’* (Heb 7:25)

Some who call themselves Christians deny the resurrection altogether. For them being a Christian is just an intellectual thing, or a way of life. As we approach the end of the year we will see nativity scenes everywhere and hear many singing Christmas carols. People will make their second or third visit to church for the year. Do they believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that he lives today? Do they believe that he is coming again? They are to be pitied more than anyone, those who think they are Christians when they do not believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and that he lives today.

Jesus is alive and he holds ‘*the keys of Death and Hades’* (1:18). The one who has the keys has the power. Jesus is able to free whom he chooses from this place. He has this power by virtue of his resurrection. On the Cross he satisfied sin’s demands, and by his resurrection he conquered death. What or where is Hades? It is not Hell? The word translated ‘Hell’ in the NT is ‘*gehenna’*. This word ‘*Hades’* is the transliteration of another Greek word. It is the equivalent of the Hebrew ‘*Sheol’*, the place of the dead or departed spirits. In this book we always read of death and Hades together. It is associated with the first death. In Revelation 20:13 we read, ‘*the sea gave up the dead who were in it and death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged’*, before being cast into the lake of fire, the second and eternal death. Those who believe in Jesus ‘*shall not come into judgment for they have passed from death to life’* (Jn 5:24).

The risen Jesus told John he was alive and that he had authority over death. This message would have been of great comfort to him and his brothers in the tribulation. It appeared that the ruthless and violent Emperor in Rome had all the power as he put to death those whom he wished. But they were reminded not to fear him who can kill only the body. Rather, fear God who can destroy both body and soul in hell (*gehenna*) (Mat 10:28).

**3.Fail not**

John was reminded to write down the things which he had seen (1:19). The loud voice which he first heard had told him to write what he saw in a book and send it to the seven churches (1:11). John went on to describe what he saw in this vision. He had further visions (4:1, 17:18, 21:9) which he also wrote down and included in this letter.

The things that he saw was actually Jesus showing him what must shortly take place (1:1). These visions of the future were related to what Jesus had already accomplished. At the Cross he was victorious, conquering the ruler of the world. From his throne in heaven Jesus now rules over heaven and earth. He sees those whom he loves; he sees his covenant children and knows the tribulation they face. He tells them to hold on because he is coming soon. He tells them in these visions what heaven is like, and what is going to happen as the end of the present earth approaches.

Many scholars see verse 19 as an outline of this book, but they do not agree just what this outline is. Are there two or three elements in this outline? If the first ‘and’ is omitted, as in the NIV, you have a twofold division. John saw ‘*things that are and things that will take place after this’*. On this basis chapters 1-3 are separated from chapters 4-22. But the ‘and’ is in the original so there are three divisions. What are these divisions? Not all agree, but most say chapter 1 is what he saw, chapters 2-3 things that are, and chapters 4-22 things yet to take place.

We will look at some divisions in the book another time. What this verse tells us is that John was to write down all that he saw. Most of this related to things yet to take place- 17 chapters out of 22! Yet all of this was in one letter sent to seven churches that John knew well. It was a message to comfort and encourage them in their tribulation, not a merely a mathematical or scientific puzzle.

It is apocalyptic writing. It is a mystery, an uncovering of hidden truth. Jesus uncovers the truth of the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands immediately (1:20). The symbolism has begun and continues throughout the book. Light from the rest of Scripture, and from the Holy Spirit himself, will enable us to understand these symbols, to crack the code as it were, and realise the blessings that flow to those who read the words of this prophecy.

**The Church at Ephesus** Revelation 2:1-7

*‘Husbands, love your wives… let each of you love his own wife as himself’* (Eph 5). The apostle Paul was exhorting married people in the church at Ephesus to love their spouses. Marriage counsellors come across many marriages where love has disappeared. The initial flame has dimmed and is barely flickering. The couple may be doing all their duties, working hard to pay off their house or to pay for their children’s education. They may be going through all the motions of married life, but the love they once shared is hard to find. Few things are more tragic than a loveless marriage. Such a marriage is in great jeopardy. A loveless church also faces great danger.

John wrote down what he saw in the vision. Now in chapters 2 and 3 he writes a message to the angel/messenger of each of the seven churches, a message given to him by the ‘First and the Last’ whom he saw in the vision. These messages address the present situation in these churches, although they are linked to the first vision, and to later visions. The messages were to be read by all the churches because this book of Revelation is a single letter. The messages were also meant to be read by churches down through the ages. ‘*Blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things written in it, for the time is near’* (1:3).

The messages follow a predictable pattern, with most churches being commended before being condemned in some way and exhorted to repent. They begin with a salutation related to the first vision and end with a promise related to subsequent visions. They also appear to be related to features of the particular city.

**1.Salutation**

The message to the church at Ephesus was from the one standing in the midst of the seven lampstands (2:2). He is the one who gives light and life to the people of God. ‘*In him was life and that light was the life of man’* (Jn 1:4). Jesus must be in the centre of the believer’s life and in the centre of the church that meets in his name.

The church at Ephesus was now some forty years old. Paul first visited this city on his second missionary journey, but did not stay long. He left Priscilla and Aquilla there to establish the church; they were later joined by Apollos (Acts 18). On his next journey Paul stayed three years so that ‘*all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jew and Greek’* (Acts 19:10, 20:31). Paul visited the church while returning from his third missionary journey- probably in the year AD 57. He met with the elders and opened his heart to them. He wept and they all wept freely (Acts 20:37). He exhorted them to watch out for false teachers. Later on Timothy was in the leadership of this church (1Tim 1:3). And later still it is thought the apostle John was bishop of the church at Ephesus.

With a deep harbour and roads radiating into Asia Minor and beyond, Ephesus was a thriving commercial centre. Pagan worship also thrived in this city. It boasted the great temple of the goddess Artemis or Diana (Acts 19:35), and later on temples to Roman gods. Ephesus was home to all sorts of superstitions (Acts 19:19). They would have loved ‘mind, body, spirit festivals’! From the earliest times a sacred tree growing close to the temple offered haven for criminals; they were given asylum in this sanctuary. The gospel of Jesus Christ impacted this city; so much so that trade in idols was threatened (Acts 19:27). But a generation later the tables had turned, and the city was impacting the church at Ephesus.

**2.Commendation**

The church at Ephesus heeded the parting words of Paul. They were very diligent in keeping false teachers out of the church. They rigourously tested anyone who claimed to be an apostle and hated those who were evil (2:2). The word ‘apostle’ means ‘sent one’. There were only twelve apostles sent by Jesus, but other ‘apostles’ were sent by the church or were self-proclaimed. This church was acutely aware of any heresy. They diligently maintained the doctrine handed down to them. For this they were commended.

They also hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans (2:6). This must have been some group within the wider church that had compromised with the world. We are not told anything about their teaching but their deeds did not conform to gospel teaching. Their teaching was probably similar to other groups in the region, namely the followers of ‘Balaam’ (2:14) and ‘Jezebel’ (2:20). It appears that they compromised with the world through sexual immorality, and joining with pagans in their worship feasts.

The church at Ephesus worked hard to maintain true doctrine and pure worship. They were also patient and persevering in the face of persecution. It may well have been persecution that led the Nicolaitans to compromise their faith and works. But the true church stood rock solid. With no sign of weariness, they pressed on in the work of the Lord.

**3.Condemnation**

*‘Nevertheless I have this one thing against you’* said the Lord, ‘*you have left your first love’* (2:4). What was this first love they had left or fallen from, and why was it such a terrible indictment? Was it love for Christ or love for one another? Can love be divided in this way? He who does not love his brother walks in darkness- he does not know the love of Christ. ‘*Beloved, if God so loved us we ought also to love one another’* (1Jn 4:11).

Jesus summarised the Law in two commandments, and they were both about love. He gave his disciples a new commandment on the night before his death- ‘*love one another as I have loved you’ (*Jn 13:34). Just as faith without works is dead, so works without love is dead. ‘*Though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have faith so that I could remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing’* (1Cor 13:2). Though the church diligently upholds true doctrine and maintains purity of worship, though the church rejects outright all who deviate from this doctrine but have not love…… then what?

After remembering the death of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper some of the people probably asked the leader, ‘what did you actually mean when you said that the bread was the body of Christ?’ When the leader suggested that a particular book of the Bible may have had a certain human author some would have accused him of heresy and sought to have him excommunicated. When the leader read a different translation of the Bible some probably left. Cold formalism had replaced love in this church. The joy of the Lord was nowhere to be found.

What had happened in this church? In the beginning members of this church loved one another deeply. They wept when farewelling Paul. There were no tears now. They supported the weak and the needy just as the church at Jerusalem did. They prayed together and ate together. They had no time for such things now because they were too busy in meetings examining everyone’s doctrines. The church was faithful to Scripture and was unpolluted by the world. But it had become a loveless church.

**4.Exhortation**

‘Doctrinal purity and loyalty can never be a substitute for love’ (Ladd). Maintaining true doctrine does not have to be at the expense of love, though tragically this is often the case. It was the case at Ephesus and it continues to be so in churches today. But it need not be so and must not be so. The church was warned that its lampstand would be removed, its very life would be snuffed out, if it did not repent and return to that first love (2:5). It may not happen immediately but it would happen surely. There is no church at Ephesus today.

The church had to refocus. It had to focus again on the light that it had been given. It had to focus on Christ who walked in their midst. They were so focussed on orthodoxy and maintaining true doctrine that they had lost sight of the person who gave them life, even the Son of God. They were told to turn back to their first works, to turn back to Christ in adoration and love. They must put Christ first, not doctrine. They must reflect on the love of Christ in their fellowship and into the world. In this way all men would know they were his disciples (Jn 13:35). ‘*Beloved, if God so loved us we ought also to love one another’* (1Jn 4:11).

**5.Promise**

If they heard and heeded this warning Christ would remain in their midst. They would overcome. In fact, Christ has already overcome at his death and resurrection. They would overcome by remaining in him. Defending true doctrine must be done in the strength of the Lord. It must be done in the love of Christ. They were promised they would eat from the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God (2:7). What a beautiful picture! Adam and Eve were put in this garden, but were thrown out when they sinned. In Christ we have a way back into the Paradise of God. Jesus Christ died to forgive us our sin when we repent. In Christ we will enter Paradise and eat of the tree of life for ever.

Some suggest that this promise had special significance for the Ephesians because of the asylum tree that was by the temple in their city. Condemned criminals come here for refuge- they came to live. But as we see in the Bible, it takes us back to the Garden of Eden. It also takes us to the end, for the tree of life is there in the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It is by the river of life flowing from the throne of God, yielding its fruit every month (Rev 22:2).

**The Church at Smyrna** Revelation 2:8-11

Along with Daniel, three young men were carried off as prisoners to the city of Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar was the powerful ruler over the vast Babylonian empire. One day he made an enormous golden statue of himself and decreed that every person in his empire must fall down and worship this image. Anyone who failed to do so would immediately be thrown into a burning, fiery furnace (Dan 3:6). Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were arrested and brought before the king for refusing to worship this gold image. They said, ‘our God, whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace….and he will deliver us from your hand O king, but if not let it be known O king, that we do not serve your gods nor will we worship the gold image you have set up’ (Dan 3:17-18)

**1.Suffering**

Christians in Smyrna in the first century were suffering the same sort of trials as these young men. They were still suffering in the second century. Polycarp was a young man in this church when John wrote. He later became the leader of the church and in the year 155 died as a martyr in Smyrna. When commanded by the Proconsul to worship Caesar, Polycarp refused saying, ‘how can I blaspheme my king who saved me’. A mob consisting of both heathens and Jews railed against him for being an atheist, one who did not worship any idol nor offer sacrifices.

Smyrna was a beautiful port city like Ephesus with temples to numerous gods, including one to the goddess of Rome. This city was a great supporter of Roman power, and in 26BC was given the honour of having a temple to the Emperor Tiberius. The people of Smyrna, except for the Christians (2:9), were very prosperous. Becoming a Christian in this city probably meant losing your job, and having your possessions confiscated. For some it would mean being thrown into prison and even death (2:10).

They were poor in worldly terms, but were rich in heavenly terms. ‘*I know your affliction and poverty- but you are rich’* said the Lord (2:9). Their earthly inheritance may be taken away from them, but their heavenly inheritance could never be taken from them (Mat 6:20). They may be confined to prison but their true freedom, their freedom in Christ, can never be taken from them. In Jesus Christ we are set free from sin and death, a freedom the world does not understand. The message to the church at Smyrna contained only commendation- there is no condemnation in this message. This commendation came from ‘*the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life’* (2:8). Apparently this city was once destroyed and lay in ruins for 300 years before being rebuilt. It rose from the ashes as it were.

Jesus Christ was crucified and was buried. But he rose from the dead. He was dead but came to life. Having conquered death, he now lives – he is alive for evermore (1:18). Such a message brought comfort and hope to the church at Smyrna. It was not a message about avoiding persecution or even death, but about enduring and receiving the crown of life. How many preaches proclaim such a message today? How many people would continue coming to large churches in our city if they were told that life as a Christian will be tough? ‘If you are having a hard time now, if you are struggling financially then rejoice, for things are going to get better? - no worse’! ‘If you feel lonely and that no one loves you rejoice for soon you will have lots of friends? – no, you may be in prison’! How would such a message be received in churches today? *‘Do not fear the things you are about to suffer’* (2:10). This was the message for the church at Smyrna. It is a message some churches in the world today do understand, but not in our city. Let those who have ears to hear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

**2.Synagogue of Satan**

What would be the source of this suffering? Who was going to lead the attack against the church at Smyrna? The pagans despised the Christians as atheists for they did not worship any idol or visible God. They simply celebrated the Lord’s Supper which was a strange practice to the pagans. I remember a new Christian telling me how the Hindus, who are vegetarians, asked her was it meat that she had to eat when she went forward to the table.

But it was the Jews, or so-called Jews, who were leading the attack against Christians. They were slandering and accusing them before the authorities with religious zeal. This was nothing new of course. The Jews kept on accusing Jesus. The Jews hounded the apostle Paul out of almost every city he visited, from Lystra across to Berea (Acts 14, 17). They were still pursuing Christians and having them thrown into prison 40 years later, and 100 years later. Has their attitude to Christians changed after 2000 years?

The church at Smyrna would have started in the synagogue. When some Jews heard that in Jesus of Nazareth all the promises of God were fulfilled, they believed in him. But others refused to believe and threw them out of the synagogue. They pursued them wherever they went seeking to have them thrown into prison. They ‘*say they are Jews but are not, but are a synagogue of Satan’* (2:9). These were not true Jews. They were not true children of Abraham. They were in fact children of the devil, as had Jesus called them previously- ‘liars and murderers just like your father the devil’ (Jn 8:44). These words seem unduly harsh, but they are the words of Jesus. Jews who opposed him and refused to believe in him were not true Jews but agents of Satan.

God promised Abraham, ‘*I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you’* (Gen 12). Abraham is the father of all who believe in Jesus (Rom 4). According to this promise, those who curse Abraham and his children will be cursed by God. They will be called children of Satan. Is this promise still valid, or are Jews to be seen as faithful followers of the true God? Why is it that today Christians (so-called) are joining with Jews (so-called) in seeking the restoration of the earthly Jerusalem and its temple? How can a church of Christ be working with, and worshipping with, the synagogue of Satan? Hendriksen writes, ‘How anyone can say that the Jews of today are still in a very special, and glorious and pre-eminent sense God’s people is more than we can understand. God himself calls those who reject the Saviour and persecute true believers, the *synagogue of Satan*. They are no longer his people’.

**3.Second death**

The Jews were in league with the Romans in persecuting the Christians at Smyrna. Together they were in league with the devil; both were agents of Satan, the adversary and enemy of God and his people. The devil would soon put some of these believers into prison. The Lord would allow them to be tested in this way. The testing of your faith produces patience, leading to maturity and fullness (James 1:3).

Remember how the Lord allowed Job to be tested. All his possessions were destroyed and all his family taken from him. He suffered painful boils all over his body. Did he curse God, or did he remain faithful? The believers at Smyrna were about to be tested. They were exhorted to be faithful to the very end, even unto death.

Their faithfulness would be rewarded. They were promised three things in this message from the Lord. **Firstly,** Satan would not be given unlimited power. The testing would be for a precise period of time. ‘Ten days’ is not to be taken literally. This round number refers to a short period but a full period- a short season. ‘An eleventh day would soon come’ as one commentator put it.

Paul told the Corinthians that God is faithful and they would not be tested beyond what they were able to bear (1Cor 10). God would provide a way out in due time. No testing is pleasant at the time and sometimes we think it will never end. We feel like giving up. To be assured that it is but for a little while, and that the end is near, encourages us to press on.

**Secondly**, those who were faithful until death were promised the ‘*crown of life’* by the risen Jesus (2:10). This crown is promised to all who love the Lord and endure testing (James 1:12). As the apostle Paul finished the race, having kept the faith, he knew that a crown of righteousness awaited him (1Tim 4:8). The crown spoken of here was not a royal crown, not a crown inherited by birth, but the crown of an athlete who was victorious in the games. The crown of life will be given by Jesus, the one who himself ran the race and won the victory for us.

**Thirdly**, the faithful believers at Smyrna were told they would ‘*not be hurt by the second death’* (2:11). The second death refers to being cast into the lake of fire, another name for Hell (20:14). This is the place of everlasting punishment and torment. Those whose names are written in the Book of Life escape the second death (20:15). When the spiritually dead hear the voice of Jesus they live. They are born again. They will die at the end of this present life but not again at the Judgment. Those born again of the Spirit of God have eternal life and enter heaven directly- they will not face the second death.

Members of the church at Smyrna had a choice. They could resist the devil and be faithful to Jesus despite the suffering, or they could compromise their faith and escape the present suffering. You have the same choice. And you will face the same outcome. If you are faithful you will receive the crown of life and avoid the second death. If you compromise with the world, and deny Jesus, you will not escape the second death. This is the word of ‘*the First and the Last, who was dead and came to life’.*

**The Church at Pergamum** Revelation 2:12-17

Who was the man whose donkey spoke to him, restraining him in his madness? Balaam! The background of this man is somewhat shadowy, but his name appears throughout Scripture. He was a soothsayer or prophet from the region of the Euphrates River. When the children of Israel entered the land of Moab on their way to Canaan, Balak the king of Moab hired Balaam to put a curse on Israel. But the Lord restrained him so all he could do was bless them.

Balak offered Balaam money and honour. Although he could not curse Israel he went and gave advice which led to their downfall. At Baal Peor the men of Israel were seduced by Moabite women. They engaged in sexual immorality and idolatry as they joined these women in worshipping their gods. The Lord’s anger was aroused against Israel and some 24,000 died before he withdrew his hand of judgment (Num 25:3, 9). The name of Balaam became associated with people of God being seduced by the pleasures and treasures of the world.

**1.Satan’s throne**

What was it like for Christians living in the city of Pergamum in the first century? Not unlike living in the so-called holy cities of Mecca, Varanasi or the Vatican today! This city was away from the coast so was not a commercial centre like Ephesus. It was more of a political and religious capital. Pliny called it the most famous city of Asia. It was the seat of the Roman Governor and was probably the first city in Asia to erect a temple for Rome. Emperor worship arose in Pergamum and quickly spread throughout the region. It had numerous temples to Greek gods as well. The risen Jesus called it Satan’s throne.

Satan means ‘adversary’. In Smyrna it was the Jews who were attacking the church from the ‘*synagogue of Satan’*. At Pergamum Satan’s throne was probably the imperial throne which had come to demand emperor worship. Pliny, the governor of a nearby region, wrote of how Christian’s were tested in that day. They were made to recite a prayer to the gods, offer incense and wine before the Emperor’s statue and curse Christ.

Christians at Pergamum were dragged before the courts and put through such a test. But they held fast to the name of Christ and did not deny the faith. A man called Antipas, who refused to worship the Emperor and deny Christ, had paid the ultimate price. Antipas ‘*was killed among you where Satan dwells’* (2:13). He was a faithful witness or martyr (the Greek word can mean either). Antipas lost everything in this world, even his life, but he gained his heavenly reward. Antipas was also honoured by having his name recorded in Scripture. His name must have encouraged the church at Pergamum to press on. Does it encourage you to know that Antipas, and many others, have been faithful witnesses for Christ, even unto death? Under the altar in heaven John saw the ‘*souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and the testimony which they held’*…but the number was not yet completed (6:9-11). Are you ready to join them?

**2.Stumbling block**

While some in this church were being faithful unto death, others were stumbling. They were compromising with the pagans in this city, joining them in their idolatry and immorality. While Ephesus was diligent in rejecting false teachers, Pergamum was not. We have here two extremes so often found in churches even today. There are those who are so focussed on doctrine that they show no love. Others are so focussed on love and warm feelings that they have little concern for Biblical truth. It does not have to be this way. We can and must have the truth with love.

Many in the church at Pergamum had converted from worshipping idols to worshipping only Jesus. They had turned from immorality, from frequenting temple prostitutes and the like, to live morally upright lives; sexual laxity was not considered a sin in Greek or Roman religions. But after some time they were being tempted to return to these old ways. Satan was tempting them through their own lusts and pressure from their friends. Moreover, false teachers in the church were condoning such immorality, probably in the name of Christian liberty.

A friend in India threw out all her household gods and worshipped only Jesus when she was saved. One day, during a major Hindu festival, she was walking along and noticed a holy man sitting by the roadside selling trinkets. She stopped and he gave her some holy beads, the sort she used to wear to appease the gods. He gave them free of charge. Later she was filled with fear not knowing what to do with these beads. She came to us, and we got rid of the beads and prayed for her restoration. Christians today are being lured by Satan’s lies. They toy with horoscopes, Yoga, diviners, clairvoyants and the like. Flee from idolatry; run as far and as a fast as you can from any temptation to worship false gods. Yes, such gods abound in our own society.

Feasts held in honour of various gods were common in Pergamum. The food was sumptuous and the festivities fun. But the food had been offered to idols. At the first church council held at Jerusalem, Christians were instructed to abstain from things offered to idols, from blood and from things strangled (Acts 15). The apostle Paul understood that gods are nothing and that things we eat have no intrinsic spiritual effect. But still he knew how brothers could stumble in the matter of food. Moreover, he certainly did not sanction believers attending pagan festivals (1Cor 10:21). Christians cannot join with unbelievers in feasts associated with worship of other gods.

This is exactly what Israel did at Baal Peor at the instigation of Balaam. Beautiful foreign women invited them to their sumptuous pagan feast. The men could not resist the temptation. Christians at Corinth and at Pergamum faced the same temptation. Worship that appeals to the lust of the flesh is still around today. Teaching in the church that appeals to these lusts is always popular. The doctrine of Balaam is not dead. It is still one of Satan’s chief strategies in his war against the church of Jesus Christ.

Nicolas, it appears, was someone who taught this doctrine of Balaam. He gave his name to a group within a number of churches in Asia. Beware of doctrines bearing the names of men. The Nicolaitians sanctioned compromise with the pagans. They twisted the Scriptures to teach that eating at pagan festivals and joining them in their sexual immorality was not wrong. They probably proclaimed their liberty in this way, like the church at Corinth (1Cor 5). They sought to be ‘all inclusive’ and ‘tolerant’ Christians. We still hear such teaching in churches today. They boast of how they accept everyone and tolerate all ‘understandings’ of the Bible. Take the question of homosexuality. They lead the way in accepting this sin in the church. They rush to ordain homosexual men and women. They not only tolerate but promote gross immorality. The church at Pergamum may not have been quite so degenerate.

**3.Sword of the Lord**

The message to the church at Pergamum came, appropriately, from him ‘*who has the sharp two-edged sword’* coming out of his mouth (2:12). This was another feature of the vision John had of the risen Jesus. They were told to repent, to take action against those who hold the doctrine of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans. Such members must be disciplined and removed from the church, as was done at Ephesus. Paul told the church at Corinth not to keep company with sexually immoral people within the church (1Cor 5). If they failed to do this the Lord would come quickly and fight against them with the sword of his mouth (2:16). Jesus himself would judge those who were compromising with the world. ‘*For this reason many are weak and sick among you and many have died. For if we would judge ourselves we would not be judged’*. This is what Paul wrote to the ‘tolerant’ church at Corinth (1Cor 11:30, 31).

Those who heard and obeyed this message were promised ‘*some of the hidden manna to eat’* (2:17). Rather than feasting with pagans they were to feast at the table of the Lord. Just as God satisfied their hunger in the desert with manna from heaven so he would give them the bread of life sent down from heaven (Jn 6:32f). Those who were faithful unto death were promised a place at the marriage supper of the Lamb. ‘*Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb’* (19:9).

They were also promised a white stone with a new name written on it. White stones were like tickets given to attend gladiatorial games in Pergamum. We are supposed to carry ID with us all the time. We need a ticket to get onto public transport and into various venues. We need a card plus a password to get money from the ATM, to buy things ‘on line’, to enter buildings and all manner of things. Only you are supposed to know your password. This is not to suggest that there will be some secret code for Christians one day. But the white stone may represent a ticket to this feast in heaven. Do you know the password? Look in Romans 10:9!

**The Church at Thyatira** Revelation 2:18-29

Down the road from where we lived in India was a large factory. Out the front of this factory was a shrine, housing a colourful idol. Workers would bow to this idol as they came to work each day. Once a year they would celebrate the auspicious day of this god. The managers and employees would make offerings to this god and join in an extravagant feast. Imagine what was like for a Christian friend of ours, the only Christian who worked in this factory.

Until recently we have had compulsory student unions in our universities. All students had to pay fees to this union. What happened to their money? Often it was used to buy a keg of beer for a drunken party. Christian students were pressured to join in – after all, it was their money being spent!

Thyatira was trading city, well known for its trade guilds. These included woollen and linen workers, tanners and potters, and dealers in purple cloth. Lydia, who heard the gospel at Philippi, was from Thyatira (Acts 16:14). If you wanted to live in this city you had to belong to a guild or union. These guilds had their chosen deities and membership implied worship of this deity. All members were expected to attend the feasts held to honour the chosen deity. Food offered to idols would be eaten at such feasts, which usually ended in revelry and gross immorality. What was a Christian to do in this situation? Not to attend, or to walk out, would bring ridicule and even persecution.

**1.Jesus**

The message to the angel of the church at Thyatira came from the Son of God. This is the only occurrence of this title in this book. In his first vision, John saw one like the Son of Man. Psalm 2, which is quoted in this message, refers to the Son of God. The Son of God had ‘*eyes like a flame of fire, and feet like fine brass’* (2:18). His piercing eyes searched the hearts and minds of the people (2:23). Nothing escapes the gaze of the risen Jesus. The all-seeing God not only sees but judges, as we will see shortly. His eyes are like flames of fire, ready to destroy his enemies, and his feet are ready to tread down his enemies and the enemies of his people.

The message to Thyatira, like that to the other churches, begins with a commendation. ‘*I know your works, love, service, faith and your patience’* (2:19). What a superb commendation. This church was strong in the faith and love of Jesus Christ. They were patient and persevering in the face of persecution. They were pressing on in the faith and not growing cold. They had not left their first love. Their last works were even ‘*more than their first’*. But such good works and such growth in the church was no excuse for laxity with regard to false teachers and discipline in the church. Just because a church has a great ministry and is growing rapidly does not mean that it is right before the Lord.

**2.Jezebel**

Jesus had something against the church at Thyatira. He condemned them for tolerating that woman Jezebel, a self-proclaimed prophetess (2:20). Philip had four daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:9). Prophecy was a gift of the Spirit in the early church, as it is today, but maybe in a somewhat different form. This woman was to be rejected not because she was a woman or because she was a prophetess, but because of her teaching. In the grace of Jesus she was given time to repent but did not.

Just as the church at Ephesus tested those who claimed to be apostles, so this church should have tested those who claimed to be prophets. They must be tested by the Scriptures, the inspired Word of God. The NT was not complete at this time, but still the teaching of the twelve apostles was authoritative. This woman was not the first, nor will she be the last, to teach what itching ears want to hear, things that are pleasing to man’s sinful nature.

Who was Jezebel and what did she teach? Jezebel was probably not her real name but one given by Jesus. King Ahab of Israel took a foreign wife called Jezebel. She brought her gods to Israel and set up a temple to Baal in Samaria (1Kings 16:31). She seduced Ahab and the people of God into worshipping Baal and destroyed many true prophets, thereby arousing the anger of the Lord. Through Elijah, the Lord declared drought and famine on the nation because of Jezebel and the people’s adultery.

The Jezebel at Thyatira was seducing members of the church into ‘*sexual immorality and eating things sacrificed to idols’* (2:20). These sins were exactly the same as those in the church at Pergamum (2:14). Jezebel was teaching an old doctrine, the doctrine of Balaam, the doctrine of compromise with the world. She claimed it was deep knowledge (2:24), but in truth it was just an old heresy being recycled.

False teaching is rarely a direct attack upon the Scriptures. False teachers do not usually encourage blatant disobedience to the commands of Jesus. What they proclaim is some new teaching, some secret knowledge or special revelation. The church had not yet passed into the second century when Gnostic heresy spread in the churches, but John was probably countering the beginnings of this heresy in his letters. One aspect of this heresy was that matter, including the body, was evil and the spirit was good. Some Gnostics deliberately indulged in licentious behaviour since the body was evil anyway. Just what the ‘depths’ of Jezebel’s teaching were we are not told, but something aligned to Gnosticism would have allowed Christians at Thyatira to join in the feasting and immorality of the pagans and avoid persecution. Many in the church at Thyatira were caught up in the ‘deep teaching’ of Jezebel, but Jesus calls such teaching by its proper name ‘*the depths of Satan’* (2:24).

The Lord has revealed all that we need to know in the Scriptures. We are blessed when we read and obey what is written (1:3). If someone comes to you claiming ‘deep’ or ‘secret’ knowledge, you can be sure it is not of God but of Satan. They may claim they have had a special revelation. ‘The Lord told me it is right to divorce your wife or husband’ they may say. But in Scripture the Lord says, ‘I hate divorce’ (Mal 2:16). ‘Oh that is old stuff’ they will say, ‘I have been given new knowledge’. We have recently had the ‘new perspective on Paul’ proclaimed by eminent scholars. They have studied extra- Biblical documents and believe that the Reformation got it wrong with the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone.

**3.Judgment**

The message of Jesus was that Jezebel had failed to repent of her sexual immorality in the time he had graciously given her, and that the time for judgment had arrived. Divine judgment is a major theme of Revelation, as is justice for the people of God. Judgment will begin in the house of God. False teachers must be removed by the church- if not, Jesus will remove them and the church will suffer also.

*‘I will cast Jezebel on a sickbed’* (2:22). Jesus promised to afflict her with some physical sickness. She would be stopped from teaching heresy. Those ‘who committed adultery with her’, or who listened to her and sought to adjust their Christian profession to practices involved in being a member of a trade guild, would also come under divine judgment- ‘*unless they repent of their deeds*’. ‘*I will kill her children’*. Who were her children that would be punished by death? It is not clear whether this reference to her children is literal or metaphorical, but in the context is more likely metaphorical. Maybe it refers to her close and committed followers- an inner circle. The disciples of a sect leader can be more wicked than the leader herself. Jezebel’s children are condemned to death.

The death of Ananias and Saphira is another example of such divine judgment. After their death great fear came upon all the church (Acts 5:11). It would be the same at Thyatira. ‘*All the churches will know that I am he who searches the minds and hearts’* (2:23). God will not be mocked. He will be glorified in his church, and in all the earth.

**4.Justice**

What of those who held to true doctrine, or repented and returned to the Lord? **Firstly**, they were promised that they would not be put under any other burden. Maybe this refers to what the Jerusalem Council wrote to the new, predominantly Gentile, churches in Acts 15. The danger a church faces when it seeks to remove false teaching is introducing its own creeds and confessions as a test of orthodoxy. The members become burdened by new rules in an effort to weed out the unorthodox. Such a reaction is not necessary. Jesus simply told them to hold fast to what they had till he came.

**Secondly**, Jesus promised justice in the end. Though they did not get justice in this city they would in the end if they kept his works until the end (2:26). In Jesus they would have power not only over their persecutors in this city but over the nations. Psalm 2 speaks of the Son ruling with a rod of iron and smashing them like a potter’s vessel- an appropriate image for this city of trade’s people. The saints will judge the world (1Cor 6:2).

**Thirdly**, ‘*I will give him the morning star’* (2:28). It is not clear what this means, but the star was a symbol of royalty. A star guided the wise men to Jesus and to worship him as King. ‘*The morning star will rise in your hearts’* wrote Peter, referring to the Last Day (2Peter 1:19). Jesus is the bright and morning star (Rev 22:16). Jesus has gone to prepare a place for you who believe in him. He will come again and receive you unto himself (Jn 14:3). Are you looking forward to that Day? Will it be judgment or justice for you? What do you think about the morning star rising in your heart? Hold fast to the truth you have in Jesus Christ. Do not stumble through false teaching; do not compromise with the world.

**The Church at Sardis** Revelation 3:1-6

Recently I visited a lighthouse up the coast and found two people inside keeping watch over the bay and the coastal waters. They were members of the Volunteer Coast Guard. They were ready to help any small boats that got into trouble. If someone’s engine failed they would send out a rescue team to bring them back to safety.

It reminded me of a story I once heard. The residents of a small village on a rugged coastline often saw boats get wrecked on the jagged rocks. They got together to set up a coast watch, and volunteer rescue team. When they spotted a stricken sailor they went to his rescue. They brought him back to the little cabin they had built. They gave him dry clothes and warm food. The little cabin was quite comfortable and the view was terrific. As time went by they found the village people liked coming to this place. They extended the cabin and put in carpets, a lounge and TV. They added a gaming table and fridge with lots of drinks. They liked it so much and had such fun there that they forget to watch out for sailors. They instituted a strict dress code so that dripping wet sailors were no longer welcome to what had become a club for members only.

The church at Sardis seems to have had a similar history to this coast guard. ‘You *have a reputation for being alive but you are dead’* said Jesus. ‘*Remember how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent’* (3:1,3).

**1.Works**

The city of Sardis was built on the high point of a mountain ridge. From this vantage point it watched over a fertile valley and five roads leading out of the city. The city was virtually impregnable. Only twice in its history had it been invaded; both times when it was not watching for the enemies attack. The people of Sardis were wealthy and secure, even arrogant, about their position and importance in the region. The lived a rather luxurious and loose life.

The message to the church at Sardis was from him who ‘*has the seven Spirits of God and seven stars’* (3:1). Seven remember, stands for completeness or being full. These features speak of light and life, things that the church at Sardis had lost. They had drifted into formalities in life and worship. They were going through the motions but were in fact dead. They had a form of godliness but had lost its power (2Tim 3:5). They had become nominal Christians.

*‘I know your works’* said Jesus. He said this to all the churches but with Sardis he said they were dead works. There is no mention of faith, of love, or of patience in this message. They are not commended for anything. The church was about to die. They had a name or reputation, presumably among the people of this city, but not in the eyes of the Lord. They appeared to be vibrant and alive but were in fact dead, spiritually dead.

What do you notice as being absent in Sardis compared to the other cities? There is no mention of persecution and no mention of false teaching. The church in Sardis had just sunk into spiritual apathy. Most people in this city were rich, comfortable, and secure. The Christians joined in this way of life. The people worshiped their gods, and emperor worship was popular, but they did not seem to be troubling the church. The church was not troubling them either. ‘It was a very peaceful church’ writes Hendriksen, ‘but it was the peace of a cemetery!’

One would be hard pressed to find a better description of many churches in our city, and in the entire Western world, than that of this church at Sardis. Nominalism was rife some fifty years ago. People went to church because it was the ‘right thing to do’. Nowadays, people just call themselves Christians saying, ‘we live in a Christian country’, but rarely attend worship. Many like to be church members but feel no need to attend. One church in the USA is said to have over 10,000 members, an enormous church, but you will only find 40 at worship on any given day. Even those who attend worship are focussed upon their own peace and comfort. They refuse to move out of their comfort zone. If a dishevelled drug addict ventures into their meeting they are horrified. ‘She cannot come to church dressed like that’ they will say. ‘Look at what is written on her dirty shirt’.

Some churches today are renowned for their support of missions and charities, just like the church in Sardis. They give money to the needy but do not welcome them into their meetings. They must keep everything proper and respectable in their church. ‘We are doing good work’ they say, ‘just look at our financial statements’. ‘Look at these thankyou letters from missions and charities. They say we are a wonderful organisation’. But what does the Lord see? What does Jesus say? What did Jesus say to the church at Sardis?

**2.Watch**

Wake up! ‘*Be watchful and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die’* (3:2). The light of the church at Sardis was dim and getting dimmer. It was beginning to flicker. If it was to glow once again and be a light to lost and weary souls they must return to the source of that light, Jesus Christ. Jesus was the reason the church existed. Without Christ they were nothing, they were just another organisation in this pagan city.

How had they received Christ (3:3)? Was it because of their works? ‘Remember what you were before you heard the gospel’. Paul exhorted the Corinthians in this way (1Cor 6). They heard the gospel, and by grace through faith they were saved. They were once without God and without hope in this world. They were lost till Jesus found them.

There is no place for boasting when Christians understand this truth. If we do not understand it then we are not saved. If we forget this then we are in danger of divine discipline. Repent said Jesus. Remember how you were saved and hold fast to him who saved you. Do not start depending on your customs or traditions, or on your own good works. Do not depend on your reputation before men. It is the Lord to whom you will have to give account in the end.

*‘If you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you’* (3:3). Jesus spoke in this way about his second coming (1Thes 5:2), but the context here points to a more particular judgment on the church itself. The city of Sardis knew the consequences of failing to keep watch- their city was attacked and destroyed. The church was in the same position. They felt comfortable and at peace but were they watching. Were they examining their own lives, and the life of their church? Jesus warned them to repent or he would come upon them in judgment when they were least expecting. Believers should be watching and expecting the return of Jesus at any time. They should be preparing for his return, and hastening that day. It should only be unbelievers who are taken by surprise (1Thes 5:4). Are you watching? Are you ready?

**3.White garments**

There were a faithful few in the church at Sardis. There was a remnant that had not soiled/defiled their garments (3:4). Defilement not only comes from idolatry and immorality. Pride, arrogance and complacency are just as abhorrent to the Lord. God resists the proud (Prov 3:34). ‘Cleanse your hands you sinners; lament, mourn and weep’ said James (Jam 4:7,8). He was writing to brethren who were lusting after the things of the world, to those judging others and exploiting the weak in order to build up their investment portfolio. Sin of all types makes us dirty in the eyes of the Lord.

The few who repented and hated sin were promised a white garment by Jesus. White stands for cleanliness and purity, as we might expect. Jesus would clothe them in his righteousness and would confess their name before his Father and the angels (3:5). ‘*Whoever confesses me before men, him I will confess before my Father who is in heaven’* (Mat 10:32). Clothed in the righteousness of Christ we can enter into the presence of our Holy Father in heaven and dwell there eternally. Without this garment we will be refused entry.

Similarly, without our names written in the Book of Life we will not enter into eternal life. The promise of Jesus to Christians in Sardis was in negative terms. There is no mention of the kingdom, the power and the glory found in other letters. It was simply that if they did not repent their name would be blotted out from the Book of Life (3:5).

To have ones name written in the Book of Life is everything. Do not worry about getting your name in the record books, or the history books, as so many do. Having your name in this Book that Jesus has is what matters in eternity. If you repent and believe in Jesus your name will be written in the Book of Life. ‘*Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire’* (20:15).

**The Church at Philadelphia** Revelation 3:7-13

Growing up on a farm we rarely had holidays- I remember just two. On one of those occasions we were all packed to go but the key to lock the front door could not be found. No one had seen it since our last holiday. We never locked our doors on the farm. Day and night, every day, the house was open.

**1.Open door**

As the Jewish leaders dragged Stephen out of Jerusalem and began stoning him to death he said, ‘Look, I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’ (Acts 7:56). John was exiled on the island of Patmos for the testimony of Jesus Christ when he had these visions. In his second vision he saw a door standing open in heaven (4:1). The church at Philadelphia was told by Jesus, ‘*see, I have set before you an open door and no one can shut it’* (3:8).

Keys are used to open doors. This message to the church at Philadelphia came from him ‘*who has the key of David, he who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens’* (3:7). Moreover, in John’s first vision Jesus said, ‘I have the keys of death and Hades’ (1:18). The one with the key is the one in authority. He is the one who says who will enter and who will not enter. The question is, who has the keys and what are the keys for?

Isaiah prophesied that Shebna would be sacked and the keys to the house of David would be given to Eliakim (Isa 22:22,23). David was the king of Israel and the keys were to the house of the king. Isaiah went on to speak of him being a peg, and of the glories of his throne ‘in that day’. The house of David is no more. It is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Son of David ‘*according to the flesh* but *the Son of God with power’* (Rom 1). Jesus is now the one who holds the keys, not to an earthly palace but to the heavenly house of the King of kings. He has in fact delegated such authority to his church, for Jesus said to the apostle Peter, ‘*I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven’* (Mat 16:19).

Some see the open door set before the church at Philadelphia as a door of opportunity to preach the gospel. Such metaphorical use is seen in other passages of Scripture (e.g. 2Cor 2:12, Col 4:3). But the context of this church suggests the main focus is upon the open door in heaven. This church was suffering persecution. They were encouraged to hold on to what they had until Jesus returned. The door was open for them as it was for Stephen, and no one could shut it on them. Nothing in this world, not even death, can take away the inheritance we have in Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 8:38,39).

**2.Opposition**

Philadelphia (the name means ‘brotherly love’) was a city on the frontier of Greek civilization. It may have had a ‘missionary’ role in spreading Greek culture. It was a relatively new city and was a cultural centre. It had its temples, as well as a synagogue and this small church. Like the church at Smyrna, it was the Jews who were troubling them most. Jesus called it the synagogue of Satan as he did in Smyrna.

If many of the believers were formerly Jews we can imagine how they were pressured to turn back to the old ways. ‘Look at all the privileges we have as Jews’ the Jews would say as they ridiculed this small gathering of Christians. ‘Why do you persist in following Jesus Christ; he is dead. Besides he is not the true Messiah’ they would say. This happens a lot in India. Converts from Hinduism are told that they are traitors to their family and their nation. They are pressured, and even threatened with dire consequences, to return to the fold as it were. It can be the same with Roman Catholicism. Trying to leave a sect can be very difficult.

The Jews were merciless. It seems that the Christians begged them not to accuse them before the authorities. They had fallen down at their feet pleading with them- but one day Jesus promised the tables would be turned. ‘*I will make them come and worship before your feet’* (3:9). One day the Jews would know that God loves those who believe in his Son, and not those who hold to the works of the Law, those who killed his Son and persecute his followers (3:9). All those sacrifices, all that fasting and prayer, all that obedience to the Law, all of no use before the true God - whom they thought they were worshipping. They belonged to the synagogue of Satan.

*‘At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, of those on the earth, and of those under the earth’* (Phil 2:10). There will be no exceptions, not for any person born on this earth- nor for angels or those who are dead. There is no exception here for Jews. They will have to bow before Jesus like everyone else. With Jesus, in his glory on that day, will be the church from Philadelphia, as well as all faithful followers of Jesus. So these Jews will be in effect bowing before these Christians they persecuted. They will not be worshipping Christians directly.

**3.Overcome**

Jesus had only commendation and promises for the little church at Philadelphia. As with the church at Smyrna, there is no word of condemnation; no ‘but I have this against you’. This message is full of promises to those who overcome. We find here the great promise and central theme of the whole book- ‘*Behold I come quickly’* (3:11, 20:20). It is accompanied by the central exhortation of the book – ‘*hold fast to what you have’* (3:11).

Jesus knew the works of the Christians at Philadelphia. They had kept his word and not denied his name. They kept his word/command to persevere, a command based on Jesus’ own perseverance unto death. Remember this when you suffer; Jesus suffered just the same, and in fact died for you. He was tempted in every way as you are, but did not sin. Jesus persevered. He did not give up, and in Jesus you can do the same.

Jesus gave promises to the church to help them persevere. We have already seen the first of these- those who persecuted them now, would one day be bowing before them. The second promise is that Jesus would keep them from the hour of trial (3:10). ‘Here is distinct eschatological reference to the ‘messianic woes’ which are to precede the return of the Lord’. The reference is not to local judgment but a universal judgment, a time of great tribulation for the whole world (cf. Mat 24:21). The church will be persecuted as it is now, and as it has been since the beginning, but this tribulation will come on the entire world. All will be tested and will perish, except those who belong to Jesus. He will keep us safe through this time and bring us into his kingdom. The crown of life will not be taken from us.

Thirdly, Jesus promised, ‘*I will write on him (the believer) the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem’* (3:12). Not only are believer’s names written in the Book of Life, but Jesus will write on our foreheads the name of God. Slaves were often branded with the name of their owner. This sealed them as belonging to that owner.

I recently saw a documentary about ancient China in which slaves were branded on the forehead. There is no hiding such a mark. Christians will be sealed with the name of the Father on their foreheads (14:1, 22:4) and the people of Satan will be sealed with the name of their owner (13:17). There will be no mistaking who belongs to whom on that Day. Only those who belong to Jesus, and bear his name, will enter the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

The final promise to those who overcome is that they will be made pillars in the temple of God. This symbol speaks of permanence. Pillars in a building are strong and immovable. David wanted to dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Ps 27:4). He did not want to go out from this holy place. Believers at Philadelphia were promised they would have just what David desired- you ‘*shall go out no more’* (3:12).

The church at Philadelphia had little strength. They were few in number, poor, hated and persecuted, especially by the Jews. Some would despise our little congregation. We have but little strength. One day a businessman up the road shared out plight, saying, ‘you have a big job attracting people to any sort of meeting these days’. But our job is not like his. We are not about ‘attracting’ people as such. The message we preach is hardly attractive to sinners. But it is the message of life. It is the only way for people to be saved from death. We cannot promise riches and a trouble free life to those who come and believe in Jesus. But we do share these great and precious promises that Jesus has revealed unto us in his word.

**The Church at Laodicea** Revelation 3:14-22

When we lived out west, the town water came from a bore. It took some time to get used to drinking the slightly brackish water. Further west at Bourke, the bore water was warm when it came out of the ground. It was great for the swimming pool but horrible to drink. It would make you nauseous and vomit. Yet when cooled with ice, or boiled for tea, it was drinkable.

We come to the last of the seven churches to which John sent this letter of Revelation; the church at Laodicea. The most severe condemnation is reserved for this church- *you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked* (3:17). They made Jesus sick; he said *I will vomit you out of my mouth* (3:16). At the same time the most wonderful of promises is reserved for this church- if they repent and welcome Jesus back into their life and fellowship. They are promised not only a seat at the table with Jesus, but a seat on his throne in heaven. To dine with someone signalled a quite intimate relationship in those days. To sit on a throne means to rule, to rule as co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17).

The church at Laodicea must be the best known of these seven churches- it is the lukewarm church, neither hot nor cold. It is well known because of verse 20- *behold I stand at the door and knock*- although this verse is often used without reference to the church to which it was directed. This verse is a favourite with many evangelists, but as we will see it is actually a warning to a severely backslidden church, not a call to the heathen to believe in Jesus.

**1.No Need**

The city of Laodicea was directly east of Ephesus and just a little west of Colossae. When Paul wrote to the Colossians he also wrote to the Laodiceans, but we do not have this letter today (Col 4:16). Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae and may have brought it to Laodicea also. Laodicea comes within the circle of churches to which John ministered when he was at Ephesus. Laodicea was situated at the confluence of the Maeander and Lycus rivers. Nearby hot springs supplied warm mineral water to this city. Laodicea was a trading city, full of wealthy business people. It was the home of millionaires, ‘self-made men who worship their creator’ as they say. In AD 40 the city was flattened by an earthquake, but the people refused help from the government to rebuild. Such was their pride and spirit of independence. The Christians in this city reflected the same spirit- as is so often the case.

Jesus introduced himself as *the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God* (3:14). In his lengthy introduction to this book John referred to Jesus as *the faithful witness* (1:5). Here Jesus refers to himself as the faithful and true witness. He is faithful to the unchanging truth declared by God through him. He is the Amen, which means ‘so let it be!’ Nothing can change the Amen, or the word that he speaks. Jesus spoke in the beginning –‘let there be light’ and there was light. In Colossians Jesus is called the firstborn over all creation. *All things were created through him and for him- he is before all things and in him all things consist* (Col 1:16). The church at Laodicea would have read these words some forty years previously, but did they remember them now. Let them know that Jesus still speaks with the same power and authority; let us all know this even today.

‘Like its counterpart in Sardis, the church at Laodicea does not appear to have been troubled either by the external pressure of the emperor-cult nor by the distractions caused internally by false teachers. The problem at Laodicea was that the quality of church life did not match the churches own high opinion of itself’. They said of themselves we are *rich, have become wealthy and have need of nothing* (3:17). ‘We are all good, respectable people’ here they said of themselves. ‘Just look at our beautiful church and the good order we maintain. We don’t want anyone coming in here changing things’. Tragically not even Jesus or his word was welcome if he was going to change anything in their church.

Imagine what it would have been like for a new minister going to this congregation. What trouble he would have had if he did not go along with their traditions. If they had been cold, if they were new believers or even unbelievers, they would have been ready to listen and learn. If they had been hot they would have been ready to join in the proclamation of the gospel, reaching out to the lost of the city. But they were just warm and comfortable, ready for nothing but to reject any interference in their church.

Some years ago a lady colleague fell down the stairs in front of me. A group of female students also saw her fall. She lay there bruised and bleeding. I went up and offered to help her up and bandage her wounds. ‘I am alright, I don’t need your help’ she shouted. The students came over and saying ‘madam can we help you’. She shouted at them ‘I am alright; I don’t need your help either’. Some churches, and some individual Christians, take a similar attitude towards any offer of help or any word of criticism, even when it is Jesus offering to help. When they are counselled from the word of God itself they still refuse to listen. Pride is a very dangerous thing.

**2.Naked**

The Laodicea church said we need nothing. They were proud and fiercely independent people, qualities admired by the world but not by Christ. Jesus saw them differently. He saw them as wretched, poor, blind and naked. Imagine how these words would go down if told to some churches in our city. How do they go down with you? Jesus was of course referring to their spiritual condition. The trouble with the Christians at Laodicea, and with many today, is that they equate their spiritual status with their material status. If they are rich they assume that the Lord is pleased with them. What a terrible mistake! Nothing could be further from the truth. The Laodiceans were rich and had need of nothing, but they were poor wretched and naked according to Jesus.

James counselled the churches to which he wrote telling them not to be deceived by those who wore gold rings and fine clothed to church (James 2). They were not to be treated differently to the poor man who came. The man driving his BMW to church must be treated the same as the man driving his Hyundai. Is this what happens in our church? How did Jesus counsel these rich and respectable Christians at Laodicea? Firstly he said *buy from me gold refined in the fire* (3:18). What they were boasting of was fool’s gold. It would not stand the fire test. Remember there is no mention of persecution in this city. What they needed was true gold, spiritual gold, gold that does not perish. Jesus is the only one who can give such gold. *Buy from me* does not mean they can buy it with their earthly riches. He means come to me for I am the only source of this gold. Isaiah reminds us that is free- without money and without price (Isa 55:1).

Secondly, Jesus counsels them to get white garments to cover their nakedness. Laodicea was famous for expensive black wool. It had an industry based on this product. The rich probably paraded around in black garments. Jesus said they needed white garments. White is the symbol of purity and righteousness. Such garments were of course spiritual. The only source of true righteousness is Jesus Christ. Only when we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ is our nakedness and our sin covered in the eyes of the Lord.

Thirdly they needed ointment for their eyes for they were blind. Whether the ointment that Laodicea was famous for was medicinal or cosmetic we do not know- maybe it was both. Indian women layer black ointment around the eyes of their babies in the belief that it will improve their beauty and their sight. Jesus told the Pharisees they were blind because they did not believe he was sent from God the Father (Jn 9:39). Only Jesus can open the eyes of the blind. These Christians were very short sighted and in danger of total blindness. ‘Get eye ointment from me’ said Jesus ‘before it is too late’. ‘Anoint your eyes that you may see again’.

**3.Knock**

The church at Laodicea had fine buildings, a great team of elders and hard working women. They all came to church well dressed. But it was a totally inward looking and self-assured church. They did not welcome outsiders, especially any who did not conform. They were not interested in mission. What would they do with anyone who was converted? It was not easy to get into this church. Not even Jesus was welcome anymore! *Behold I stand at the door and knock* said Jesus.

As mentioned earlier, this verse is often taken out of context. Jesus does not stand at the door of the heart of unbelievers wanted to be invited in. In his sermon on the mount (Mat 7:7) Jesus said ‘seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open to you’. He told outsiders to seek him while he may be found. It was church members to whom he was speaking in this passage.

*As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. Therefore be zealous and repent* (3:19). Jesus calls upon this lukewarm church, this church he was ready to spew out his mouth, to repent. He is gracious and ready to bless when they repent. He will come in and be the centre of their fellowship once again. Any fellowship must be centred on Christ if it is to be a true fellowship of Christians. Meeting to play housie or to have a fete does not count. Meeting to have a BBQ or picnic does not count if that is the focus of a fellowship.

Not only will Jesus come in and eat with his people- even these blind and stumbling folk at Laodicea- but he will grant them to sit with him on his throne (3:21). What an amazing promise. How great is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has overcome this world, he has overcome death, and is now seated on the heavenly throne with his Father.

In Jesus you also will overcome. This is the promise of the Risen Jesus- if you submit to his discipline and repent. As many as I love I discipline says the Lord. Therefore be earnest and repent. If you think that church at Laodicea represents some other era in the history of the church and does not apply to you today, you of all people need to hear this message and repent.

**Throne in Heaven** Revelation 4

In 1961 Yuri Gagarin went into space and orbited the earth, the first man to do so. When he land back in communist Russia he said, ‘I did not see God up there’. His blasphemous words created quite a stir at that time, but today few would blink an eye. Such words reflect what many think- I see no God so there is no God. Such is our accommodation to humanistic and materialistic thinking that even Christians are confused, and some have abandoned belief in heaven and hell. But remember what the apostle Paul said to the pagans in Athens: ‘God is not far from each one of us’ (Acts 17:27). Paul could see beyond the seen to the unseen world through eyes of faith. He did not have to go searching for God in outer space. The trouble with man is that he puts himself at the centre of the world. This is the very nature of sin. We see it in the child and we see it in ourselves; everything in the world revolves around me.

The picture we see here in Revelation 4 is very different. What we see is that God is at the centre of the universe. He is on the throne in heaven. He is surrounded by heavenly beings, elders, angels and all creatures in heaven, on earth and under the earth (5:13). God is at the centre and he is in control. The picture related to us in this chapter is a vision which the Lord gave to John; John the apostle. It is a vision of true reality; a paradox maybe, but what we see on earth is not true reality, it is not all of reality. What we see with these eyes is passing away. What is not seen is eternal (2Cor 4:18).

‘The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave’- so begins the last book of the Bible. The word ‘revelation’ translates the Greek word ‘*apocalypsis*’. In books and movies we see the transliteration of this in the word ‘Apocalypse’. This vision then, is part of the revelation of Jesus Christ given in a vison to John, for him to send to the seven churches in Asia- what today is western Turkey. The Christians there were like you and me except they were facing severe persecution. Domitian (81-96AD) was on the throne in Rome, ruling over the vast Roman Empire. He was so powerful and so pagan he even made claims to divinity. History books tell us that he took the titles ‘lord’ and ‘god’. So Christians worshipping only Jesus as Lord and God were not tolerated. Already the faithful witness, Antipas, had been martyred in Pergamos. Others were told they would have tribulation, and to be ‘faithful unto death- and I will give you the crown of life’ (2:10).

Is such a situation difficult for you to imagine today, a king claiming divinity persecuting Christians? Maybe we forget too quickly men like Hitler in Germany, and Emperor Hirohito in Japan who, until January 1946, claimed to be divine. Christians suffered terribly under his rule. How would you live under such persecution? How do you live under the pressure of materialism and moral depravity around you today? The pressure to conform to the world and to compromise in your exclusive worship of Jesus is increasing.

In this vision the Lord opened John’s spiritual eyes to see wonders in the spiritual realm, just like Ezekiel and even Paul (though Paul could not relate his vision in 2Cor 12). Jesus called to John from above saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you things that must take place after this’ (4:1).

**1. Throne**

John saw into the throne room of heaven. The door was standing open. He saw the one sitting on the throne in indescribable glory. He saw the one who rules in heaven and on earth; who lives and rules for ever and ever, from eternity to eternity. The one sitting on the throne could not be described. This accords with the second commandment; God cannot be represented by anything in heaven above, or the earth beneath or anything under the earth (Exod 20:4). Paul speaks of the King as ‘dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see’ (1Tim 6:16). All John could see was the dazzling radiance surrounding the throne, like the radiance of precious stones like jasper and carnelian (4:3).

We once visited the palace of a raja or king in India. Even the doors to the throne room were covered in gold and studded with diamonds and precious stones. Well, they were there once! The raja had long since died and the precious stones had all be taken by a conquering king. Such is the future for thrones of men.

All around the throne in heaven like a halo was a rainbow- in appearance like an emerald (4:3, Ezek 1:28). This reminds us of the rainbow sign that God gave Noah, a sign of his mercy and faithfulness towards creation. ‘Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life’ (Gen 9). And then we note the glassy sea in verse 6. What brilliance reflected from the peaceful, glassy sea, this expanse beneath the throne! This majestic throne of the triune God is at the centre of the universe. In the next chapter we see Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb, in the midst of the throne. The one who is on the throne is in complete control over all things in heaven and on earth. This is the world view that we as believers must adopt. We are to see everything from this heavenly perspective. Nothing in this world happens outside the rule of this transcendent throne in heaven. No emperor, no king, no president on earth has power or authority above what is allowed from this throne in heaven.

In the vision we see lightning, thunder and rumblings coming from the throne. This is reminiscent of when the Israelites gathered at Mt Sinai, and God came down upon that mountain to speak to them (Exod 19). We see seven lamps of fire before the throne. Judgement comes from this throne. The following chapters of this book tell about seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls of God’s wrath being poured out – seven being symbolic of completeness. In fact, the very picture of lightning, thunder, earthquakes and hail re-occurs in the vision after the seventh seal (8:5), the seventh trumpet (11:19), and the seventh bowl (16:18). You see, therefore, that there is a structure to this book; we just have to spend some time searching.

God is already judging the world in these ‘last days’, but times of tribulation lie ahead. At the end of the age Jesus will return victorious, and all will be called to give account before this heavenly throne. His victory was secured at the cross but the full ramifications of this victory are yet to be seen in the world.

**2. Worship**

The vision goes on to reveal worship being given around the throne in heaven. The one upon the throne is worthy of all worship; he alone is worthy. He is worthy to receive all the glory, all the honour and all the power (4:11). Closest to throne, ‘in the midst of the throne and around the throne’, are four living ones. These resemble the ‘cherubim’ seen in Ezekiel’s’ vision. In that vision they support the throne of God. Here in Revelation they are stationed on the four sides of the throne ready to go to the four corners of the earth to serve God. They have eyes all over, watching with vigilance like guardians of the throne. Eyes symbolise knowledge. They have faces like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. These are usually interpreted as representing animate creation in the aspects of nobility, strength, wisdom and speed respectively. The living ones give glory, honour and thanks to the one sitting on the throne. They are seen worshipping, in words similar to the seraphim of Isaiah 6:2: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’

In a circle further out from the throne are twenty four thrones occupied by twenty four elders (4:4). They are robed in white, having been cleansed in the blood of Christ, and they have gold crowns of victory on their heads. Why twenty four? This number probably represents the twelve tribes of Israel plus the twelve apostles of the NT. They represent the redeemed, triumphant people of God.

Like the living ones, they also were engaged in worship day and night; they were fully occupied in worship. They took their cue from the living ones. When the living ones joined in praise the elders fell down before the one sitting on the throne, took off their crowns and praised God saying, ‘You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they exist and were created’ (4:11). They worshipped God because he created all things. His is the mind and hand behind all that exists. How worthy of praise- of continuous praise day and night!

Do you look forward to joining in this heavenly praise and worship? If you think God is worthy of such worship, why should it be different now? Is it the greatest desire of your heart to give all glory and honour and thanks to God- now? Our worship here on earth is but an extension of this worship in heaven. We are, in effect, part of that heavenly throng worshiping God. In Christ Jesus you are seated with God in the heavenly realms (Eph2:6). Yes now, yes you, you who have been saved by grace through faith. Look at Hebrews 12:22: ‘You have come to the city of the living God, to a great company of angels, to the general assembly of the firstborn, to God the judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus’.

Do you sometimes get discouraged when you see so few worshipping Jesus? You see friends going off to the movies, to the beach, to the football, while you come to church. That is exactly what was happening to the first readers of this letter there in Asia. Friends were going the way of the world, worshipping worldly things like the rich and powerful people of the day. This letter was a call to them to persevere in the faith. This picture of the throne in heaven is a picture of true reality. It was given to encourage them to be faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ to the very end. Long after the movie is over and the full time whistle has blown at the match, will you be still worshipping Almighty God and your Redeemer, Jesus Christ our Lord. ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing!’ Amen.

**Lion or Lamb**  Revelation 5:1-7

Do you have any rich relatives? Are you expecting them to leave you something in their will? Are you waiting for the day when that will will be opened? What a wonderful future you can look forward to if this relative leaves you lots of money or property in their will. The lawyer will take out that will and ask the executor to declare its contents. You and the rest of the family will be so excited. ‘Mr Charles, could you please come and open this will’. Where is Mr. Charles? He is not to be found. He is listed as a missing person. The lawyer insists that Mr. Charles is the only person legally allowed to open the will. You and your relatives will be very disappointed.

**1.Scroll**

John wept much *‘because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll’* (5:4*).* The voice of a mighty angel echoed throughout the entire universe: ‘*who* *is worthy to open the scroll’*? No one was found. John wept. Why? What was so important about this scroll? The scroll was in the right hand of him who sat on the throne in heaven. The scroll was in the hand of the eternal and almighty God, the creator of the universe. The scroll was written on both sides; it was filled with the words of God. What was this writing about? John earnestly wanted to know. They were the words of God regarding the future of this world, of all mankind and of the entire universe. What if no one was found worthy to open the scroll? God’s eternal plan and purposes would not be revealed or executed. The one who opens the scroll is the one at the centre of this very plan revealed in the scroll. If no one was found worthy, the scroll remained sealed and the future of universe would remain hidden.

The people in the seven churches would continue to suffer for their faith in Jesus. There would be no message of comfort and hope for them. There would be no prospect of justice for those who died because they refused to worship idols or the emperor of Rome. The people of Athens would continue worshipping the unknown god. In the darkness, people will continue to consult their horoscopes and look to politicians to bring them peace and prosperity.

The people to whom John was sending this letter, like John himself, were eager to know the future, not just for interest but because they faced death. Already Antipas had been martyred and others could expect the same if they refused to worship the Roman emperor and his idols. ‘Worship only God’ they were told. Some were compromising and worshipping the idols, but Jesus said, ‘be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life’ (2:10). What was going on? What was happening? The scroll would reveal all- if someone qualified was found to open it. Who would be worthy?

**2.Lion**

An elder, one of the twenty four around the throne in heaven, told John not to weep. ‘*See’ he said ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David has prevailed/triumphed/conquered to open the scroll and its seven seals’* (5:5). We have to go back to Genesis 49 to find a reference to Judah and a lion. When Jacob was blessing his twelve sons he said to Judah, ‘*you are a lion’s cub, and the sceptre will not depart from Judah’*. Judah would rule over his brothers, and his enemies. This reference is clearly Messianic. Moreover, a lion is a symbol of power, royal power. Britain, among other nations, had the lion as its national symbol.

The root of David is another Messianic reference, as Paul makes clear in Romans 1- ‘*Jesus Christ our Lord was born of the seed of David according to the flesh’*. David was Israel’s greatest king but one even greater would come according to the covenant the Lord made with David. The prophet Isaiah spoke of a branch that would come from the root of Jesse (David’s father- Isa 11). This one would judge righteously, slaying the wicked and gathering the people of God unto himself.

‘See the mighty ruler; see the king who defeated all his enemies’, the elder told John. See the Lion, see the Son of David. The Jews longed for another David to restore their kingdom. Some Christian’s long for mighty armies to deliver them from their enemies. ‘Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war’ they sing with gusto! They trust in their own strength, or in human rulers, rather than the Lord (Psalm 118:8-9). Did John see a mighty warrior when he looked up?

Before we answer this question look carefully at what Messiah has done. He has prevailed! Note that there is not object for this verb. Prevailed over what or who? We might take the answer to be the absolute. He had prevailed or triumphed over everything, over whatever exists in heaven, earth or under the earth. Secondly notice the tense of the verb. It is aorist, indicating a completed action. The great battle of God is not in the future but in the past; it has been fought and won. Right here in Revelation 5 we find that the battle against the powers of darkness that the church was experiencing, had actually been won. The focus is not upon Armageddon but upon the Cross of Jesus Christ.

**3.Lamb**

When John looked, what he see? Not a lion but a lamb! In the middle of the heavenly throne scene stood a lamb, as though it had been slain. Here is the great mystery, the great paradox of divine salvation and judgment. Not with the mighty roar of a lion, the clang of steel upon steel, or the boom of a great bomb, will evil be defeated; it has happened by the sacrifice of a lamb. John saw a slain lamb upon the heavenly throne. *‘Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit says the Lord’* (Zech. 4:6). The lamb is the same figure of the preceding verse- the Messiah or Christ. This lamb is none other than Jesus Christ of Nazareth; Jesus, who died on the Cross some two thousand years ago outside Jerusalem. He died bearing our sin. ‘*He himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not only ours but the sins of the whole world’* (1Jn 2:2).

Jesus rose from the grave and ascended into heaven where John now sees him. He defeated death. Death was the immediate prospect for many in the church at that time. The slain Lamb on the throne opened their eyes to the reality about death. Jesus had won the victory over death. Hence he could call upon them to be faithful unto death (2:10). The question for them was not life or death but whom they worshipped.

Which question is more important to you? Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 7:21- ‘*not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of my Father in heaven’*. And then in Matthew 10:33- ‘*whoever denies me before men him I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven’*. Are you ready to face the choice that the Christians in Smyrna and Pergamum faced?

By his death and resurrection Jesus cast out the ruler of this world (Jn 12:31). He triumphed over sin, death and the devil. Jesus became a man, ‘*that through his death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil’* (Heb 2:14). Is this what you believe? Jesus reigns because of the Cross and resurrection. Even though Satan is allowed to deceive many in this fallen world, even though he is allowed to harass and persecute the people of God, he is actually the defeated foe.

The lamb had seven horns symbolising complete power. He had seven eyes which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the world (5:6). Nothing in all the world will escape the perfect gaze of this all-seeing Lamb. He sees into the darkest places, he sees into the depths of your heart. All is seen by the Lamb who reigns in heaven. He is on the throne ready to return at any moment to judge the secrets of men according to this glorious gospel (Rom 2:16, Mat 25:31). Are you ready for his return? ‘*He came and took the scroll out of the hand of him who sat on the throne’.* True reality is about to be revealed in a world oppressed by lies. Judgment is about to begin in a world filled with injustice.

**Worthy is the Lamb** Revelation 5:8-14

John ‘*wept much because no one was found worthy to open the scroll’* that was in the right hand of the One sitting on the throne in heaven (5:4). Then he looked and saw ‘*a Lamb as though it had been slain’* (5:6). The Lamb came and took the scroll from the hand of Him who sat on the throne. When he did so, the whole host of heaven erupted in spontaneous praise and worship. Before we look at this worship, and the truth of the Trinity revealed in this passage, we will first ask the question, ‘why was the Lion of the tribe of Judah worthy to open the scroll?’

**1.Worthy**

Initially no one in all the universe was found to open the scroll. No human being who has ever lived or ever will live on any part of this planet or in the universe was found worthy to open the scroll. Why? Because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. No sinner can even approach the throne of God. Jesus is the only man to have ever lived and not sinned.

Does being without sin make Jesus worthy to open the scroll? Well, not directly. Does being the Son of God make him worthy to open the scroll? Well, not directly. Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah; he rules with a rod of iron over all men and even the demons. Does this make him worthy? Well not directly. What then is it about Jesus that makes him worthy? See what the elders sang. ‘*You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals because… because you were slain and have redeemed to God by your blood from every tribe, tongue, people and nation’ (*5:9). Jesus is worthy because he was slain, because he gave himself as a sacrifice for sin. By his blood he purchased people for God, the elect from all the nations.

The Cross is what made Jesus worthy to open the scroll. At the Cross he defeated him who had the power of death, the devil (Heb 2:14); at the Cross he cast out Satan (Jn 12:31). At the Cross he won the victory, the victory that stands behind all the judgments revealed in the visions of this book. Jesus has prevailed/triumphed we read in Revelation 5:5. He has prevailed by his blood. He has conquered death that entered the world when Adam and Eve sinned against God. The prophets of old told of such a victory. Isaiah spoke of the suffering servant, and of him who was led like a lamb to the slaughter (Isa 53:7). The word for ‘slaughter’ and that for ‘slain’ come from the same root.

By his blood Jesus purchased/bought people for God (5:9). In its intensified form, found in Galatians 3:13, 4:5, this word means redeemed/ransomed. This word was used with regard to slaves. By payment of a certain amount of money a slave could be set free. A slave rarely had the capacity to free himself, but a kind person may come along, pay the price on his head, and set him free. This is just what Jesus has done for you who believe. In love he gave his own blood, his own life, to set you free from bondage to death. He bought your freedom; he bought you with his own blood. He gave his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), a ransom for you.

Set free from bondage- for what purpose you might ask? What does a slave do when he is set free? He will always be indebted to the one who set him free, the one who paid his ransom. Are you thankful to the one who set you free, free from the bondage to sin and to death? But there is more than this. Great blessings and great honour are spoken of here in this passage with regard to those who are redeemed. The Lamb has ‘*made them to be a kingdom of priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth’* (5:10). Not just saved but saved unto good works, and saved to reign with Christ.

*‘To him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and has made us to be kings and priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever*’ (1:6-7). So wrote John in the introduction of his letter to the churches. He heard the elders around the throne in heaven singing the same wonderful truth. We have been made priests by Jesus- we do not need any other earthly priest. ‘*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood’* (1Peter 2:9). We have been made rulers by Jesus. We are a royal people, joint heirs with Christ. We have been raised up ‘*to sit* *together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus’* (Eph 2:6).

Imagine how the poor Christians in Asia must have read these words. Roman kings and Jewish priests were persecuting them unto death. The picture in heaven is totally different. Jesus has made us kings and priests. How well do you see your life from this heavenly perspective? Do you realise who you are in Christ?

**2.Worship**

Our passage begins with four living creatures (not beasts! KJV) and twenty four elders (not angels, for angels join them in 5:11) falling down to worship the Lamb on the throne. They symbolise creation, and the redeemed human community (the church) respectively. John previously saw them worshipping the One who sits on the throne, who we understand to be Almighty God (4:10). These worshippers each had a ‘*golden saucer full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints’* (5:8). Worship in the temple involved the priest carrying a saucer of burning incense into the holy place. The altar of incense stood before the Ark of the Covenant in the most holy place (Heb 9:3). It was by this altar that the angel of the Lord appeared to Zacharias announcing that his prayer had been heard (Luke 1:11-13). There is no reference to the burning of incense in the NT church, but clearly this symbolism was understood by the Christians. The symbol is found again in Revelation 8:4. The prayers are those of the saints, prayers which come up as a sweet smelling aroma to the One on the throne. Note that Dispensationalists who hold that the church was raptured in 4:1 have to say that ‘saints’ here means converted Jews.

The worshippers had harps, which presumably they played as they sang. These musical instruments are familiar to us from the OT. David played a harp, and refers to them in the Psalms (Ps 98:5, 147:7). They sang a new song or a special song, praising the Lamb, the blessed Redeemer, who was worthy to open the scroll. A great multitude of angels join the living creatures and the elders in worshipping the Lamb (5:12). Then every creature in the universe joins in worshipping the Lamb and the Creator upon the throne in heaven (5:13). The four living creatures shout a triumphant ‘Amen!’ affirming the truth of all that was being sung, but the worship goes on.

**3.One**

Looking at the words being sung, we note some parallels. The first two songs in chapter 4 were sung to the Creator God.

*You are worthy O Lord,*

*to receive glory and honour and power* (4:11)

The next two songs are sung to the Lamb.

*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain*

*To receive* ***power*** *and riches and wisdom,*

*and strength and* ***honour*** *and* ***glory*** *and blessing!* (5:12)

These seven attributes leave nothing wanting in praise of the Lamb. All that belongs to God the Father also belongs to the Lamb because of his great work of redemption. The final song, as we noted, is sung in praise to the God **and** the Lamb, to the Creator **and** the Redeemer. ‘*Blessing and honour and glory and power’* (5:13) are repeated in praise of both Father and Son, the first and second person of the glorious Trinity.

John, as a Jew, was a strict monotheist. Each day he would have declared the *Shema*: ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one!’(Deut 6:4). Yet here he sees the Father and the Son being worshipped in heaven. John does not stop to explain but simply reports what he saw; he reports what is consistent with the glorious doctrine of the Trinity as we know it- one God existing in three persons, equal in power and glory.

Worship is a key theme of the book of Revelation. John is actually rebuked for worshipping an angel later in the book. He is told to worship God (19:10, 22:9), worship only God. The Christians in Asia were being forced to worship idols and men. This was the test, the trial, which they were facing- who to worship! It was the same trial faced by people of old. ‘*You shall have no other gods besides me’,* God declared through Moses. Then they were tempted into making a golden calf and worship it, and later to worship the gods of the Canaanites.

These NT Christians were tempted to worship the Emperor who claimed to be ‘lord and god’. It was certainly in their immediate interest to do so! Are we not tempted today to worship men or things other than God? Is it not in our immediate interest? How many people are ‘masters of their own destiny’ worshipping themselves, taking the glory upon themselves that is due to God?

**Four horsemen of the apocalypse** Revelation 6:1-8

On the throne in heaven God held a scroll in his right hand, the blueprint for the future of this world and the entire universe. A slain Lamb, who is Jesus Christ the Son of God, was found worthy to open this scroll. John, who was exiled on Patmos for preaching the word of God, was very pleased. He felt like praising God just like the whole host that he saw in heaven praising the Creator and the Redeemer, God the Father and God the Son. Before we see what happened as the seals were opened by Jesus, remember what John saw coming from the throne when he first saw it. ‘*From the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings and voices’* (4:5). These herald the judgments of God, which are repeated with intensification throughout the book of Revelation (8:5, 11:19, 16:18). The voice John heard from the first living creature was ‘*like thunder’* (6:1).

If the seals were down the edge of a rolled up scroll then all the seals must be broken before the scroll can be opened. However, it does not follow, as some claim, that these ‘seal judgments’ are not therefore part of the contents of the scroll. This is a vision which John is recording, a vision full of pictures and numbers which are not literal but symbolic. These symbols are fluid and can change from one vision to another. Many of the symbols seem to come from the OT. In Zechariah we read of four groups of horses of different colours, colours that are almost the same as those found in the passage before us (Zech 6). They are commissioned by God to patrol the earth and punish nations that are oppressing the people of God.

There is a NT background to this vision also (Mat 24). One day, as Jesus was leaving the temple in Jerusalem, his disciples commented on the architectural wonder of this temple. Jesus told them that this temple would soon be destroyed. ‘When’ they asked, and ‘what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?’ Jesus warned them of deceivers coming in his name, of wars and rumours of wars, of famines and earthquakes, and of tribulation and martyrdom. The opening of the seals reveals events very similar to what Jesus told his disciples. The judgments that occur when the seals are opened involve not only the world of unbelievers but also believers being persecuted.

**1.White horse- conquest**.

When the Lamb opened the first seal on the scroll, John heard one of the four living creatures say ‘Come!’ When John looked he saw a white horse with a rider. As he opened these first four seals, the four living creatures before the throne in heaven in turn called the horses to come. When the third seal was opened John also heard a voice speak from the midst of the four living creatures.

The white horse, like the others, went forth upon the earth. The rider had a bow and a crown, a crown that was given to him. The bow is a weapon of war (famous with the Parthians), and the crown a symbol of kingship. He went out conquering. Is this Christ himself going forth? Some claim that it is. ‘Who else goes forth to conquer’ they say. Moreover, white is symbolic of purity and holiness, and is always associated with Christ or the saints. They claim that the vision of Christ on a white horse in Revelation 19:11-16 proves this is Christ. But can we be so sure? Others, comparing these seal with Matthew 24, claim that this white horse represents the preaching of the gospel of Christ in all the world (Mat 24:14). But how does this white horse fit in with the other three. Can the first be holy and the rest evil? John sees the rest taking peace from the earth, and killing 25% of all mankind. Is it not possible that this horse is actually a parody of Christ- that it is the antichrist? The first rider then represents Satan attempting to defeat and oppress believers through deception and persecution. Human rulers often ride forth in victory on a white horse. In the first century horses were the epitome of warfare. They were the tanks or attack helicopters of today. This is what horses symbolise in this vision. The white horse went forth, bent on conquest.

**2.Red horse- strife**.

This horse and rider took peace from the earth, so that people started killing one another. The colour red symbolises blood which flows on the earth when this horse goes forth. The rider himself had a great sword which presumably he used as swords usually are- to kill. It is true that the word for ‘kill’ should be translated ‘slay’ or ‘slaughter’, but this is insufficient reason to hold that this killing is only of Christians in ‘religious persecution’ (Hendriksen). In fact, with the fifth trumpet it is clearly told that Christians escape that particular judgment. No such discrimination is indicated here.

**3.Black horse- scarcity**

When the third seal was open by Jesus a living creature called forth a black horse. Black symbolises death also but a particular kind of death- death from starvation or disease. Bubonic plague is often called the ‘black death’. The rider on this horse had a pair of scales symbolising rationing of food. During times of scarcity every grain is carefully measured. Poor people in India still receive their daily wage in grain. If they are harvesting rice it is rice, or if wheat then wheat. They are given ‘*ek pao’* or 250gms for a day’s wage- which is not a lot. In this passage we read that ‘*a quart of wheat’*, the equivalent of about 1 litre, is given, again barely sufficient for one person. Barley is a much coarser grain because the husk does not come off in threshing. Poor people often mix barley with wheat to make coarse flour for flat bread or porridge.

*Do not harm the oil and the wine*. These food items are much more expensive. In time of famine the price of these will skyrocket. Poor people cannot afford such food items. Persecuted Christians will certainly be among the poor who are deprived of such foods. But the command from the throne is, ‘*do not harm’* or ‘do not cheat’ on these items.

**4.Pale horse-death**

The fourth and last horse which John saw was the colour of a corpse. The word is ‘*chloros’* from which we get ‘chlorine’ and ‘chlorotic’- a green/grey colour. The rider of this horse is named as Death. Following death is the place of the dead called Hades (*Sheol* in Hebrew). This horse goes forth bringing death by the sword, by famine, by pestilence/disease, or by ‘beasts of the earth’. Ezekiel speaks of the Lord bringing similar judgments on unfaithful Jerusalem (Ezek 14:21). We may not be familiar with death in all these ways, although wars do rage around the world. But John’s first readers not only faced famine and the sword; they also faced wild beasts in Roman arenas.

The Jewish historian, Josephus, wrote of the tyranny that came upon the Christians when, in AD66, Nero made them the scapegoat for his own evil. Houses, crops and vineyards were destroyed. As a sport the Romans watched Christians being fed to wild animals. John and his first readers had good reason think of Imperial Rome in all it savagery as they viewed these four horse and their riders.

**5.Sovereign God**

As we see these horses going forth to kill and destroy we might ask, ‘is God behind this war and hunger and death. Do these horses and their riders belong to God?’ We have seen that Jesus open the seals, releasing these horses, as it were. We also hear of these horses being granted or given permission to do their evil (6:4, 8). Even the rider on the white horse is ‘given’ his crown. The rider on the black horse is told not to harm the oil and the wine. The rider on the pale horse is given limited power to kill (only 25% of the earth).

This reminds us of the heavenly council in the first chapter of Job. Satan attacked Job, but only as God allowed him. From the throne in heaven God and the Lamb exercise sovereign control over all this suffering and death. In one sense it is the outworking of sin; it is what happens when God removes his peace from the earth, but still God remains sovereign. These are divine judgments. In this tyranny of evil, Christians will suffer and even be targeted, as seen in the fifth seal. Many poor and innocent will suffer also. But ultimately the tyrants, who act as agents of Satan, will be destroyed, as we see in the sixth seal.

In John’s time the Roman emperors Nero and Domitian were allowed to bring tyranny to the earth. Many tyrants have followed them. In our own era Adolf Hitler brought tyranny to Europe and beyond, as did the emperor of Japan. Stalin brought tyranny to Russia and beyond. We thank God that this tyranny was limited in space and time. These evil horsemen of the apocalypse were given power over only 25% of the earth. But the time is coming when this devastation and death will consume the whole earth. Then Satan and all his evil agents will be cast into the lake of fire and there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

This is what you pray for is it not? You pray, ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. God’s kingdom will not be set up alongside the kingdom of evil. The kingdom of evil must be destroyed and then God’s kingdom will come in all its fullness. Even so come Lord Jesus!

**Cry of the martyrs** Revelation 6: 9-11

Who was the first martyr in the Bible? Who was the first martyr in the NT? Abel was killed by his brother because God had accepted Abel’s offering but not Cain’s. In the NT Stephen was stoned by the Jews because he spoke the truth about Jesus Christ, whom they had just crucified. After Abel’s murder the Lord said, ‘*the voice of your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground’* (Gen 4:10). Even though Stephen prayed for his killers to be forgiven, ultimately the Lord will judge such wickedness because he is a holy and just God. Stephen would have been among the martyrs whom John saw under the altar. He saw these martyrs when Jesus opened the fifth seal. These souls who had been slain for the word of God were crying out, ‘*how long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth’* (6:10).

**1.The martyrs**

John saw these souls under the altar when the fifth seal was opened. They were the souls of martyrs. What was this altar and who were these martyrs? And what does this part of the vision mean? In the temple for which Moses was given the plans and which Solomon built, and also in the rebuilt temple which had recently been destroyed, there were two altars- the altar for burnt offerings and the altar of incense. This earthly temple was built as a copy of the heavenly temple. The altar that John sees is in heaven. It is before the throne of God (8:3); in 8:3 it is the altar of incense that is seen. This altar stood just in front of the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat, which represented the throne of God. The blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled at the base of this altar on the Day of Atonement (Lev 4:7).

The souls John sees had been faithful unto death. They had given themselves as a sacrifice, just as they were called to do by Jesus. ‘*If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me’* (Mat 16:24). Jesus did not say, ‘if you are a super-Christian, or if you are a Christian living in the first century, or if you are Christian living in China’; he tells every Christian to be ready to die for his sake. This must be a core commitment of every believer; it is not an optional extra. John wrote to the churches telling them to be faithful unto death. Worship **only** Jesus or you are not really worshipping him at all. This reference to those slain for the word of God may well have a wider reference to all believers who suffer for their faith. A parallel passage in Revelation 20:4-5 seems to indicate all believers are in this category of the slain dead.

The altar is associated with sacrifice and blood. It is also associated with prayer, which has already been seen in relation to the throne (5:8). The altar is before the throne and the martyrs are under the altar. This probably symbolises the protection that is accorded these saints- not protection from death for they are slain- but protection unto eternal life. God allows them to suffer, even unto death, in order to test their faith and to bring them to himself purified. Abraham’s faith was tested, as was that of Job. The sovereign God is in control, and his divine purpose is not thwarted by the death of his saints. Far from it! In death they have the victory, just as Jesus did.

**2.Cry**

These martyrs suffered unto death but John sees them alive before the throne in heaven. He hears them crying out to the Lord for justice. These persecuted and glorified Christians call upon God to demonstrate his justice by judging their persecutors. Do you find their cry somewhat ‘unchristian’? Many do. The world today has a distorted view of justice. Hundreds of Christians are in prison around the world because of their faith in Jesus. Many are being tortured or killed for their faith in Jesus. We rarely read about such people in the press. But every day we read of someone from another religion who is being denied justice. Every day we read of homosexuals being denied justice. We should, of course, stand up for justice for all people, but we do not see this in society.

Leaving aside the worldly view of justice, such as it is, we need to look at this cry of the martyrs in the light of the rest of Scripture. How do we reconcile this cry with the teaching of Jesus about forgiving our enemies and even the cry of Stephen as he was being stoned- ‘*Lord do not charge them with this sin’* (Acts 7:60)? The prayer of Stephen does not preclude ultimate justice. In fact, it is because of this ultimate justice that he prays for the Lord to forgive those who sinned in killing him. He knew their destiny as sinners.

These martyrs are in heaven. They are awaiting Judgment Day, the day when all people will have to give account before the throne in heaven. The martyrs died because they refused to worship the emperor or some idol. They died believing that God is holy and true, they died believing that God is ‘*just and the justifier of the one who has faith in* Jesus’ (Rom 3:26). ‘*Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?’* said Abraham. The Lord had come down to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. These cities were full of wicked people who refused to worship God. They thought God was a joke. Homosexuality was rife in these cities. Righteous Lot was saved before fire and brimstone rained down upon these cities.

David cried out to the Lord in much the same way as these martyrs. He cried out for justice. He prayed for God to destroy the wicked who accused him falsely (e.g. Ps 69), and mocked and hated God (e.g. Ps 139). It was not a cry for personal vengeance but for the honour of God to be vindicated. The more you love God, the more you will hate the blasphemy and violence of those who hate God. In the parable told by Jesus, did the owner of the vineyard come to forgive those who killed his son? ‘*He will come and destroy those vinedressers’* said Jesus(Luke 20:16).

*‘Judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth’* (6:10). ‘Those who dwell on the earth’ refers to worldly people; in this case those who have conspired in killing Christians simply because they refused to worship idols. The martyrs understood from Scripture that the Lord would avenge their innocent blood. Their cry is, ‘how long until God does this’. Do you believe that God is just? Do you believe that he will judge those who do not repent and believe in Jesus Christ? Or do you believe that God will forgive everybody, and that all will be saved in the end? Whilst these martyrs are in heaven those who killed them are still dwelling on the earth. Will they all end up in heaven with the martyrs even if they do not repent? Was dying for Jesus sake a big mistake? We must be clear on these things.

**3.A little while**

What was the Lord’s answer to the martyrs cry? Did he reject their cry? Had they got it all wrong? Certainly not! He told them to, ‘*rest a little while’*. In fact, with the opening of the next seal on the scroll we see the great day of God’s wrath ‘*has come, and who is able to stand’* (6:17). The martyrs are safe under the altar while the wrath of God is poured out on the earth.

These martyrs were given a white robe. What does this symbolise? In chapter seven John sees a great multitude around the throne, all wearing white robes. These are those who have ‘*come out of the great tribulation he was told, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’* (7:14). These white robes point to their victory, a victory that was won by Christ on the Cross. Although they died in apparent weakness, they live and reign with Christ. They reign through the entire period between the first resurrection and the second death – the period referred to symbolically as a thousand years (20:1-6)

How long? Until the number of fellow servants is complete (6:11). Times and numbers are in God’s hand. God is patient, wanting even persecutors of his saints to repent, but the countdown is on- or rather the count up! A certain number of faithful believers, a number known only to God, is the target- not 144,000 of course.

These martyrs can rest, knowing that God is holy and true. He heard their cry and he will avenge their blood. It is just a matter of time. The persecuted Christians to whom John sent this letter would have been comforted by this truth. It appeared that they were the losers in the battle against the world but the message given to John assured them that God not only saw their suffering but would, in his time, bring about justice.

**God shakes the universe** Revelation 6:12-17

When returning to Sydney it is always great to catch a glimpse of the harbour bridge out of the plane window. It makes you feel like your home. Not only is the bridge a familiar structure, it is a magnificent structure. The Sydney Harbour Bridge straddles our city as a symbol of strength and greatness. It is a symbol of our glorious past, and a sign of an even more glorious future- so many think. But will it stand forever?

One day as Jesus was leaving the temple in Jerusalem his disciples commented on the architectural wonder behind them. It had taken King Herod 46 years to build the second temple. This temple stood as a symbol to the past greatness of the Jews, and a sign of their glorious future- when got free from the Romans! This temple, they thought, would stand for ever. But Jesus said that this temple would soon be in ruins (Mat 24:2). He knew that within 35 years the Romans would destroy this temple and the Jews would be without a home. They would be scattered all over the world. He warned his disciples not to trust in earthly things, even seemingly indestructible ‘bricks and mortar’ or ‘concrete and steel’.

We still find people living as if this earth is going to go on for ever. We have a new generation that are determined this will be so. Not only are they going to mitigate floods and droughts, they are going to stop such things altogether by changing the climate. Moreover, if any meteorite veers off course and threatens to destroy our earth they are ready to shoot it down. It is amazing that Christians get caught up in such arrogance and blindness. How easily we adopt the thinking of the world as we enjoy the things of the world. How often do we remind ourselves, let alone tell others, that Jesus is coming again, and that when Jesus comes again heaven and earth will be shaken and everything will disappear!

**1.Cosmic upheaval**

What Jesus told his disciples was not new. The prophets of old spoke the same language. Isaiah in particular, warned the people of God of impending judgment and destruction of the earth – ‘*the foundations of the earth are shaken’* (Isa 24:18), ‘*the host of heaven shall be dissolved and the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll, all their host will fall down as the leaf falls from the vine’* (Isa 34:4). Another OT prophet wrote, ‘*the earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble, the sun and the moon grow dark, and the stars diminish in brightness’* (Joel 2:10). As John saw into the heavenly throne room, and watched Jesus open the seals on the scroll, he uses similar language to the prophets to describe the end of the world. Yes, here in the opening of the sixth seal we read of the final judgment. ‘*The great day of his wrath has come’* (6:17).

This Book of Revelation is not chronological. It is not a progressive revelation of events leading up to the end of the world. It is a series of visions, each of which leads to the final judgment. The seals, trumpets and bowls actually run in parallel, albeit with some intensification of judgment from one series to the next.

In vivid pictures Jesus showed John things that must shortly take place. In this book we see things from a heavenly perspective. God is in the centre of the universe, not man. God created the sun, the moon and the stars and set them in the heavens. The sun is the source of light, heat, and physical life for us. The crops grow and we have food to eat because of the sun. If the sun goes, so do we - unless we know the Son of God, the light of the world!

When the sixth seal is opened there was a great earthquake, the sun became black and the moon became like blood (6:12). Many people worship the sun or the moon. In all public schools in a state of India, children and teachers were told to worship the sun at a particular time. Millions worship the sun, the moon and the stars. But one day these will disappear, according to this prophecy. What then will happen to those who worship these things?

God has shaken the earth in the past, and even the heavens, for a time. As the people of God gathered around Mt Sinai there was lightning and thunder, and a thick, dark cloud. The Lord spoke and the people trembled. “*They said to Moses, ‘let not God speak to us lest we die’”* (Exod 20:19). Although the catastrophic eruption of Mt Vesuvius in AD 79 was more recent as far as John’s readers were concerned, all Jews would have been aware of the great day when the Lord shook Mt Sinai. The OT prophets also spoke of the Lord shaking the earth and the heavens. Haggai (2:6) said, ‘*God will shake heaven and earth once more’*, a prophecy which the writer to the Hebrews interprets for us. ‘*Yet once more indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made’* (Heb 12:27). Things made by man, along with the very creation of God, will disappear.

Such shaking was signalled at the death of Jesus. ‘*The earth quaked and the rocks split and there was darkness over the entire land’* (Mat 27:51). At the moment of Jesus’ return, the earth will be shaken again, this time universally and terminally. This is what John saw as the sixth seal was opened. The old, corrupted earth must give way for the new heavens and the new earth, and the holy city of God and the Lamb.

**2.Earth dwellers hide**

The martyrs cried out to the Lord to judge and avenge their blood on those who dwell on the earth (6:10). They were told to rest a little while. Their cry, it seems, was answered when the next seal was opened. When the earth was shaken, homes and idols crumbled. When the stars in heaven began to fall, the ‘earth dwellers’ headed for the hills. They fled to hide in caves, and under rocks. See how the mighty have fallen. The tyrant of Bagdad, Saddam Hussain, was once feared by millions. He had power to kill whoever he liked. One day a mighty army came, and he fled. He was found hiding in a hole in the ground. He was judged and put to death. How quickly the tables can turn, as we say.

The tables will indeed turn upon the tyrants who persecute God’s people. ‘*The kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men’* (6:15). This is quite a list. The persecuted Christians in Asia Minor would have understood who was included in this list. It was kings and rulers; it was the rich and famous that were persecuting them unto death. It was the state government in India that made the rule that all children had to worship the sun. Most religious persecution is government sponsored. But the end of such persecutors is near.

These very same people are defeated by the victorious Jesus in a later vision. The birds of the air are told to feast upon the flesh of these earthly kings and captains (19: 18). It is not only mighty men but all people who reject Christ, slave or free, who will try to flee from the face of Jesus when he comes. They will cry to the rocks to fall on them in order to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. But there will be no place to hide on that great day.

The OT prophets, the Apostles, and Jesus himself, both incarnate and risen, all tell us of the coming wrath of God, the great Day of Judgment. Hundreds of people fled from the beaches when the tsunami warning was given. Only a fool would think he could stop the mighty wave that was coming. How much more must we heed the warning of the coming judgment of God? This is not a false alarm. This is not fairy tale. We have been told. All have been told to humble themselves before God and worship him. There is no excuse. The gospel has gone out into all the earth. All will hear and then the end will come (Mat 24:14). God is just and the justifier. Those who reject the gospel and his offer of justification will face divine justice. They will try to hide from God, just like Adam, but is no place to hide. They will even seek to hide in death, but death will not hide them from the wrath of the Lamb.

**3.Great day of wrath**.

Clearly what John sees here is the end of the world. It is the Day of Judgment, the day of the Lord. The next seal, the seventh, sees silence in heaven before the next series of divine judgments- a parallel series. The one who conquered through the sacrifice of himself is seen seated on a throne. The Lamb rules in this divine paradox. Let no one be deceived. This Lamb has all power and authority, and comes to judge all human beings. ‘*The Father has committed all judgment to the Son, that all should honour the Son’* (John 5:22,23). Those who reject Jesus, those who despise the Lamb, will not be able to stand before him when he comes in power and glory.

*‘Who is able to stand?’* (6:17). This is a rhetorical question. Clearly no one will be able to defend themselves before Him. Not with power, not with riches, not with intellect, not with the legal representation of the world best lawyers. All stand condemned - unless the Lamb himself chooses to acquit. And who will be acquitted. Who will live while the rest die? Those who names are written in his Book of Life. Books will be opened revealing all the works, all the secrets of every person who has ever been born. Nothing is hidden from his sight. ‘*Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire’* (20:15). Is your name in this Book of Life? How can you know, you ask? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and you will have life in his name.

**Sealing of the servants of God** Revelation 7:1-3

Six of the seven seals on the scroll have been opened. Only Jesus, the slain Lamb, was found worthy to open these seals and reveal the purposes of God. As he opened the first four seals, four horsemen went forth to conquer and kill, to bring famine and pestilence on the earth. The sixth seal brought darkness and death to those who exalt themselves against God and persecute his servants. The sixth chapter ends with the declaration, ‘*the great day of God’s wrath has come, and who can stand?’*

We come to seventh chapter expecting an answer to this question. It is of course, a rhetorical question. No one can stand against the wrath of the Lamb. It is paradoxical having a Lamb that is mighty and powerful striking fear into the heart of men. But this is the Lamb of God who was victorious, even over the power of death. The ultimate power of evil is death, but the Lamb of God has conquered death itself. He has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Mat 28:18), and been granted to sit on the throne in heaven. All his enemies flee from his face, and indeed, will be crushed when he comes in all his glory.

The other question before us is what about the people of God. The cry of the martyrs under the altar has gone up. They are told to rest a little while. What happens to the saints on earth during this outpouring of the wrath of God (assuming you do not think they have all been raptured)?

**1.Standing**

This chapter is an interlude between the ‘seal judgments’ and the coming ‘trumpet judgments’. It begins with the words, ‘*after these things’*, and we might think that we are moving on in a chronological manner through history. But this is not the case. Read again the opening words: ‘*After these things* ***I saw’***. After seeing what he recorded in chapter 6, John sees something else. What he sees in this chapter actually parallels, rather than follows on from, what he saw in chapter 6. He saw the outpouring of God’s wrath from a different perspective. He saw what happens to the saints in the Judgment

John saw four angels holding the four winds of the earth (7:1). These were ready to blow on the earth, the sea and the trees, and bring harm. Is this not what we saw the four horsemen doing? These four winds of the earth parallel the four horsemen, or may even represent the same thing. We do not see four living creatures saying, ‘come’, to evil horsemen, but four angels holding back the forces of evil- at least until saints are sealed.

These four angels are **standing** (7:1), and later in this chapter we see the saints **standing** before the throne in heaven. What was the question- who can **stand**? John saw angels and saints standing as the wrath of God was poured put. Such a vision would have been comforting to the persecuted Christians in the first century- and even today. ‘*Take up the armour of God that you may be able to stand in the evil day, and having done all to stand’* (Eph 6:13). Is this what you seek to do- to stand firm in the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that he is able to keep you standing?

John saw another angel coming up out of the east. It was this angel who told the other four to hold back the destructive winds. He was obviously an angel with authority. He was an angel sent to seal the servants of God. He was carrying the seal of the living God (7:3).

**2.Seal**

Seals are not unknown to us today. The other day I bought something which was sealed with a label saying, ‘do not accept this product if seal is broken’. The maker put this seal on his product as a guarantee to the buyer. In the old days -and still today in India- documents sent by post were sealed with wax. Only the addressee was allowed to open this mail. If the wax seal was broken the person knew that his documents, his personal property, had been tampered with.

John saw the scroll with seven seals in his heavenly vision. Only the Lamb of God was qualified to open these seals. In this vision he saw the angel with the seal of the living God (7:2). We might have expected this angel to be coming down from heaven- but he is a coming up from the east, in what may be another parody. What was the nature and purpose of this seal? In Ezekiel we read of a man clothed in linen who went through Jerusalem putting a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over the detestable things done it (Ezek 9:4). This is the OT background to what John saw. He saw an angel coming to seal the servants of God on their foreheads. We are not told what the nature of this seal was until chapter 14:1 which reads, ‘*having his Father’s name written on their foreheads’*. Overcomers in the church at Philadelphia were told, ‘*I will write on him the name of my God and of the city of my God’* (3:12).The seal of the beast was a mark, name or number (13:17).

The servants of God were to be sealed on their foreheads (7:3). I remember times on the farm when we mustered and branded all the cows. Long branding irons, with the initials JM, were heated in the fire and jabbed onto the animal’s rump. This was done to slaves years ago. It is just 200 years since slavery was outlawed in western nations. But slaves were very much part of society in NT times. We have one whole book of the Bible written about a slave and his master.

A mark on the forehead could not easily be hidden. A brand was very effective as a seal because it could not be removed. It was like circumcision, the sign and seal God gave to the Jews. It could not be removed. Hitler could distinguish the Jews because of this mark. The seal on a slave was a mark of ownership. He was the property of the one who bought him. The owner could claim the one with his mark as his slave, just as God can claim the one he seals as his own. Most slave owners treated their slaves well. They wanted them to work, so fed them and looked after them. Some slaves did not want to leave when given their freedom. The seal of their owner was a comfort, a security to them. So the seal of God means protection for his servants. They can claim they belong to God because they bear his seal.

Does all this mean anything to us today? Do we have anything to mark us as believers? Do we have any seal from God? It does not, of course, mean that a Christian should wear certain jewelry or special clothing to distinguish themselves! That may be what other religions do, but it is not what we learn from the Bible. Jesus told his disciples, ‘*by this shall all men now that you are my disciples- if you have love, one for another’* (Jn 12:35). Love for one another should mark out Christians from other people. Is this how people know that you are a Christian? Are you a forgiving and loving person?

**3.Sacraments**

What about a seal from God? Does God seal his servants today? Do you have a seal on your forehead that says you belong to God? No! But you do have a seal in your heart that tells you that you belong to God. And if you are walking in the Spirit, that seal will be evident to all. Yes, all believers are given the Holy Spirit as a seal from God.

*‘Now he who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee’* (2Cor 1:21,22). And again in Ephesians we read- ‘*in whom also having believed you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possessio*n’ (Eph 1:13). The Holy Spirit is given by God, not bought and not earned (cf. Acts 8), just as the servants are sealed by the angel of God.

The Bible speaks of two sacraments which are ‘holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace’ as our confession tells us (Westminster Confession of Faith XXVII). Baptism is the first of these sacraments. Let us be clear about baptism. It is not the same as christening or giving a name, if that is what is meant by that term. There are those who foolishly think that they have power to make Christians by pouring water on them, or dunking them in water. ‘Baptism is a sacrament of the NT ordained by Christ, not only for solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church, but also to be unto them a sign and seal of the covenant of grace’. Unbelievers have no right to be baptized, nor do the children of unbelievers.

The second, and only other sacrament is that of the Lord’s Supper. The Westminster Confession of Faith says the Lord’s Supper is to be ‘observed by the church until the end of the world for perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death; the sealing of all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him’. The Lord’s Supper reminds us of sealing by ‘the seal of the living God’, of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Again it is only for believers. Dire consequences are promised to unbelievers who partake of this sacrament. But this should not discourage believers from partaking of, and enjoying the benefits of, this sacrament. Those who neglect this sacrament are liable to neglect the death of Christ for their own salvation. They become spiritually anorexic, weak and ineffective Christians.

All believers are servants/slaves of God and should not be ashamed of being sealed by God. John wrote to encourage persecuted Christians. Do you find these words encouraging? The seal of God will lead to suffering (13:16 denied the right to buy and sell), and even death, but it means that such people will always stand before the throne of God in heaven.

Sealed servants of God will escape the wrath of the Lamb of God that is coming soon upon this earth. Do not fear global warming. Do not fear terrorism and war. ‘*Do not fear those who kill the body, but fear him who after he has killed has the power to cast into hell. Yes I say to you, fear him’* (Luke 12:5). This is the word of the Lord.

**Who are the ones sealed?** Revelation 7:4-12

Even before he died and rose again, Jesus spoke about his return from heaven. ‘*When the Son of man comes in his glory and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory’* (Mat 25:31). In the book of Revelation, John saw Jesus sitting on the throne in heaven ready to return in judgment. When he returns he will gather all the nations, he will gather all the living and the dead, and separate them from one another.

How will Jesus separate the people? How many groups will there be- one, two, three, or more. Many people are not sure. Some think there will be just one group because all will be saved in the end. Others think there will be three groups or more. Some teach that there will be the Jews, Gentile believers, and unbelievers. Others teach that there will one group of super-Christians (like ‘us’- Mark 9:38f), another group of not-so-good Christians, and then the non-Christians.

Jesus said he will separate people ‘*as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats’*. There will just two groups, those who believe, and those who do not believe. There will be the children of God and the children of Satan; and many who call themselves Jews will be among the latter group according to Jesus (John 8). The book of Revelation does not teach anything different, despite the effort of some to interpret it in such a manner.

**1.I heard the number-144,000**

It seems strange to focus our attention upon a number, but this number has led to many weird and wonderful ideas and prophecies. Charles Russell, of Jehovah Witnesses fame, declared that Christ would return in 1914 because the number of JW’s had reached this magic number. Nowadays they say that it is the number of an elite spiritual class. JW’s are not the only ones to take this number literally. Let us remember that this is a vision, an apocalypse, and that the numbers in this vision are symbolic. We naturally tend to read them literally, and some say we should do so unless impossible to do so; but as Barnett writes, ‘to ignore the symbolism of the Revelation is to destroy its message and invite weird interpretations’.

So we do not take the number 144,000 literally, but what about the people who make up this number. They are said to be ‘*of all the tribes of the children of Israel’,* and then the tribes are listed with 12,000 coming from each tribe. Are ethnic Jews the only ones who are sealed? If the church has been raptured then only Jews and pagans are on the earth anyway- and this is what some understand. But note that this is not a proper list of the sons of Israel. Dan is missing. Manasseh is in, but where is Ephraim. This list differs from that found in Genesis 49 and Ezekiel 48.

Barnett says of this list; ‘the point John is making is that godly Hebrews under the Old Covenant enjoy the eternal protection of God and are at no disadvantage compared to believers under the NC’. This is an interesting twist because many read these verses as pointing to a distinct advantage for the Jews. After all, they are the ones who are sealed, and the only ones sealed if we take this literally- although there is a great multitude from all nations before the throne, as we will see shortly.

In the OT a census was taken of Israel at various times, especially when setting out in battle. The Lord told Moses to number every male twenty and over- all who are able to go to war (Num 1:3). This may well be the OT background to the census we find here in Revelation 7. Revelation goes on to picture war between Christ and Satan (Rev 19). In fact, John saw the 144,000 standing with Christ as if ready for battle in Revelation 14.

The number 144,000 is a very large number which is complete or fixed. The martyrs were told to rest a little while till the number of servants was completed (6:11). One thousand symbolises a large number, while 144 is the product of 12 and 12. What does the number 12 symbolise? We have already come across this in the vision of heaven where 24 elders surrounded the throne. We concluded that they represented the 12 tribes of the Old Covenant and the 12 apostles of the NC.

Looking forward to Revelation 21 we see a clear picture of both the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles symbolising the gates and foundations of the holy city, the New Jerusalem. In Ephesians 2:19 the apostles are spoken of as the foundation of the church which comprises *the saints and members of God’s household*. Consequently the 144,000 can be understood as representing a certain number, a large number known only to God, drawn for the Old Covenant and New Covenant who are sealed by God as his people and protected from the coming wrath of the Lamb.

**2.I looked and saw great multitude**

To summarise thus far- John saw an angel telling the four other angels to hold back the destructive winds (or horsemen) until he had sealed the servants of God on their foreheads. He then **heard** the number of those sealed- 144,000 (7:4). When he **looked** he saw a great multitude from all nations, tribes, people and tongues standing before the throne and before the Lamb (7:9).

Remember how John was told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah had prevailed, and then when he looked he saw a Lamb (5:5-6)? We have a similar pattern here. He heard something, then he saw something else, but they pointed to the same thing. The great multitude he saw standing before the throne are clothed in white robes so must be servants of God, and if servants then sealed, and if sealed then the same as the 144,000. Such a conclusion maintains the clear truth of the Bible, that there are only two groups of people- 'those who are with me and those who are against me' as Jesus said. In Revelation there are only two categories- those sealed by God, and those with the seal of Satan. This is also consistent with Biblical teaching regarding the church. There is only one true church (not to be confused with denominations). Christians are seen as true Jews (Rom 2:26) and the church as ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal 6:16, James 1:1). ‘*They are not all Israel who are of Israel’* (Rom 9:6). Some Jews in the cities where John ministered were of the synagogue of Satan (3:9).

John looked and saw this great multitude. He saw people clothed in white robes, presumably the same white robes given to the martyrs (6:11), the robe of victory. They were also carrying palm branches. These were carried by the people of God as they rejoiced before the Lord in the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:40). We see them doing this when Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey on so-called Palm Sunday. Rejoicing, rejoicing in the Lord for his victory, was celebrated by waving palm branches.

The white-robed multitude are rejoicing because ‘*salvation belongs to our God …and to the Lamb’* (7:10). They recognise the Lamb as the author and perfector of their faith. They are saved by the grace of God alone. They join in the heavenly worship with the elders and the four living creatures. We are taken back to the throne room of chapters 4 and 5. The song they are singing is the same as it was before, a song giving praise and glory to God alone.

This scene is vastly different to what is happening on the earth. As death and destruction come upon the inhabitants of the earth, the sealed of God are safe and sound in the presence of God. God is their refuge. He will keep his servants through the time of tribulation. The Christians in the seven churches of Asia were going through great tribulation, but as the sealed servants of God they could be assured that God would keep them safe. Death is victory not defeat for God’s people.

The churches to which John wrote were small and insignificant. With so much pressure from the world many were compromising their faith. The rulers and the ‘earth dwellers’ thought the church would end soon. It has been the same down through history. Many have sought to destroy the church of God. Persecution, false teaching, divisions and every other means has been tried, but the church continues. It continues because it is the church of God. It continues because the people of God are not isolated individuals but belong to a great multitude which no one can number.

Do you walk in fear of men? Do you walk in fear of the things of this world? Many are predicting widespread environmental destruction with dire consequences for mankind. Is this what you fear? Or do you fear some cosmic catastrophe? Do you fear poverty? Do you fear death? ‘Fear not’ said Jesus, ‘I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

‘Safe in the arms of Jesus’ is what I read on a tombstone the other day. It is not a Bible verse but it is a Bible truth. And it is a truth not just for the dead but for the living. It is a truth for you today. If you are sealed you belong to that great multitude which no one can number.

**Triumph through Tribulation** Revelation 7:13-17

On the farm where I grew up was a big shed built by my grandfather. We called it the barn. On the end of this was a lean-to with a bench, an anvil, and a set of bellows. A blacksmith would come and make horseshoes and plow shares here. He would heat the metal in the coal fire till it was red hot. Then he would take a hammer and beat this metal until it was in the shape that he wanted, a shape that was useful for the farmer’s business. The Lord does much the same thing with his people. He takes some raw material; sinners like you and me, and makes us into the people he wants, people that will be useful to him. He wants people who will worship him and serve him with utter faithfulness. How does God make us like this? He will put us through the fire as it were. He will allow us to suffer, to go through times of testing in order to mold us into the people he wants.

**1.The great tribulation**

John looked and saw the great multitude standing before the throne in heaven (7:9). He wrote down what he saw. The next thing John knew was one of the elders asking him a question. The elder said to him, ‘who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?’ (7: 13). This is a continuation of the vision that began in chapter 4. John was taken aback. He thought he was just a spectator but suddenly he became part of the vision. There are no spectators in heaven and there should be no spectators in the church on earth. We come to worship God not to watch what others are doing. We come to join in the ministry of the church, to encourage and support one another, that God might be glorified in us.

The elder asked John a question but John knew that this elder knew more than he did. John was still alive on this earth. This elder had gone ahead and was living in heaven. He understood much more than any Christian living in this world. ‘Sir, you know’ said John. And the elder graciously proceed to tell John who these white-robed ones around the throne and where they had come from. These are the ones who have come out of the great tribulation he said- or literally, ‘The tribulation, great’ (7:14). Opinions differ as to what this great tribulation means. Do all Christians share is this or not? Dispensationalists say no, that this is a period (of seven years) just before the end in which the restored Jewish nation will be suffer unprecedented attack by anti-Christian forces. Others say this passage refers only to martyrs. But note that it is not their own blood in which they have washed their robes and made them white- it is the blood of the Lamb.

In chapter 1 John was writing a personal note to the churches of Asia. He wrote, by way of introduction, ‘To him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood’ (1:5). He was referring to the atonement, and the elder was referring to the atonement here also. Only the blood of Christ can wash us clean from sin. Only the blood of Jesus can make our hearts whiter than the snow (Ps 51), or in the symbolism here, clothe us in white robes. Those who have come out of the great tribulation are the same ones whom John saw before the throne- those in white robes. They came from all nations not just one nation. If all believers are included in the great multitude around the throne, as we previously suggested, then all believers have come through the great tribulation.

What might be the OT background to this tribulation? Daniel spoke of a time of great trouble/tribulation (Dan 12:1). But we have NT teaching about tribulation also. Jesus told his disciples that tribulation and death lay head of them (Mat 24:9). His last words to them were, ‘*in this world you will have tribulation’* (Jn 16:33) - but note he also said, ‘*be of good cheer for I have overcome the world’*. Paul taught that we must go through many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

Neither Jesus nor Paul taught that only a few, or only a certain group, would go through the tribulation. This does not mean that suffering will not be more intense for some than others, or that it will not intensify as the end approaches. But tribulation for Christians is the norm, not the exception. Job was just going about his business when he came under attack. All true believers will be targeted by Satan, who opposes everything godly and good.

The Christians in Asia were simply worshipping Jesus when they were targeted. False teachers told them to compromise- ‘it does not matter if you join with the pagans in their feasts and their worship’. The Jews from the synagogue of Satan reported them to the authorities. And the Emperor, who claimed to be Lord and god, violently repressed any who refused to worship him as such. These were just ordinary believers like us who found themselves in the midst of great tribulation.

Remember the parable of the sower- or more correctly, parable of the soils. What happened to the seed that fell among the rocks? It grew up and flourished for a while but then what happened? Drought came, so the plant withered and produced no fruit. In the same way you will come upon hard times, times of testing. Will you come through? What is the secret to producing fruit? Deep soil, soil that has been plowed deep and often. The farmer plows with deep rippers to break up the hard soil in order that the crop will give a harvest. Even so, the Lord allows your heart to be deeply ripped at times, to be pummeled and trampled on, that you might be fruitful in the end.

Listen to this amazing statement I found in one commentary. ‘From the point of view of the mighty spiritual struggles between God and Satan, whether a man lives or dies is not of ultimate importance. The all-important issue is whether he worships Christ, or antichrist’ (Ladd). This is what it is all about. It is not about life and death but about faithfulness to Jesus. This is the message of this book. It was for Christians being persecuted in the first century, and it is for us today.

‘As for me and my house we will serve the Lord’ said Joshua. ‘For me to live in Christ and to die is gain’ said the apostle Paul. They faced grace challenges in life. They faced opposition and suffering. Can you from your heart echo their philosophy of life? We don’t hear much about tribulation these days. You don’t find many books entitled, ‘How to suffer’, or ‘Victory through death’. But this is the message of this book and indeed the whole Bible. Jesus was victorious through suffering and death.

‘I can’t do it’, you might be saying to yourself. And you would be right. You can’t do it on your own. You can only do it in Christ. ‘Be of good cheer because I have overcome the world’ said Jesus (Jn 16:33). ‘This is the victory that has overcome the world -your faith’ (1Jn 5:5). Nothing can separate you from the love of Christ, not even death, because Christ lives in you. You are his and no one can pluck you out of his hand.

**2.Serve**

Having come out of the great tribulation then what? In his introduction John went on to tell the seven churches that Jesus has made us kings and priests to his God and Father (1:6). We find the same words again in Revelation 5:10. Priests stand at the altar, serving God. These white-robed ones do so day and night. They have been saved to serve. God is with them; he tabernacles or dwells with them. They are gathered around his throne as priests ready to serve him at any time- like children who always want to please their father.

Some people ask about what we will do in heaven. Some think it will be a great long holiday. But would that not get boring? People who have nothing to do get bored- they do not feel happy. The picture of heaven that we have is not one of idleness but of serving God- around the clock, as it were. What a joy it will be for those who know Jesus as their Saviour, and love the Lord their God with all their heart, all their soul, and all their mind, to serve him unceasingly. If this is how it will be in heaven should you not be preparing yourself even now?

**3.Bliss**

For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the Cross and its shame (Heb 12:2). Jesus knew that beyond death, as agonising and terrible as his death was, that beyond death lay the joy and the glory of being with his heavenly Father. Paul similarly knew that glory awaited him beyond the suffering of this world (Rom 8:18, Phil 1:21). According to Hendriksen, the Dutch have a term for dying which literally means ‘to get over/beyond suffering’.

As this part of his vision comes to an end, John describes the bliss of heaven. He describes life as it was meant to be in the beginning, and as it now is in the kingdom of Heaven. Hunger and thirst are no more. While we might be struggling with obesity, millions in this world go to bed hungry every night. Millions have a struggle to get sufficient water. We may not be far behind. Drought and famine are part of the tribulation, as is the scorching heat of the sun. In heaven such things will be no more. Imagine not hearing about climate change ever again!

*‘For the Lamb… will shepherd them and lead them to fountains of living water’* (7:17). Here is another paradox- the Lamb being the shepherd. A shepherd usually leads the lambs. But this lamb sacrificed himself and rose again to be the mighty Lamb upon the throne. He ever lives to protect and provide for his flock, for you and me into eternity. Even as he lived, Jesus offered such freedom and bliss to the woman at the well (John 4). He who believes in Jesus will never thirst. Even now you can drink from this fountain of living water.

No more death, nor sorrow, nor crying nor pain (21:4). In heaven there is no death and no crying. ‘*God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’ (7:17)*. There would have been a lot of weeping in the church at Pergamum when Antipas was killed. We all know what tears are- some more than others. Who will wipe away our tears? We look here and there for someone to comfort us. Some even pay for a shoulder to cry on. God will remove every reason we might have for crying. He has already removed death through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Silence in Heaven** Revelation 8:1-5

‘We will now have a minutes silence to remember those who gave their life defending our nation’ said the man leading the dawn service. And so the radio went silent. All noise ceased. No one spoke. I wondered if some listening thought their radio had broken. It was so strange to have silence for one minute. Just 60 seconds of silence seems so long to us today. People have noise all the time- TV and radios blaring, or things stuck in their ears all the time- on the train, on the bus and even as they walk down the street.

What is so terrible about silence? When we are silent we have to think. We might think about our life, about where we have come from and where we are going. Such thoughts are painful for many, so they dread silence. But to be silent before the Lord; to meditate on his holy word is not painful. Take time to be silent before the Lord and you will be blessed.

*The Lord is in his holy temple*

*Let all, the earth keep silence before him* (Hab 2:20)

**1.Silence**

We come today to the last of the seven seals. Jesus the Lamb was opening these seals on the scroll that was in the hand of Almighty God on his throne in heaven. With the opening of the sixth seal we saw cosmic upheaval and men running to hide. They knew that Judgment Day had come and they tried in vain to hide from the wrath of the Lamb. No one could stand; apart from those having the seal of God. We then had an interlude in chapter 7 looking at the sealed saints who came out of the great tribulation and into the bliss of heaven.

*‘When Jesus opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour’* (8:1). What does this silence mean? Is it the silence of reflection? Is it the calm before the storm? Is it that holding-the-breath silence before the winner in announced? The compere of the show takes the envelope with the winner’s name. He says, ‘and the winner is’, and then silence. Slowly he breaks the seal, and after more silence announces the winner. Just one team wins – the rest are losers.

Have you ever been in such a situation? Maybe not too many celebrities here! But one day you will be standing before the throne of God as books are opened. All the things you have ever done and said are recorded by God in his book – God’s book of works (Rev 20:12). If you are honest (God hates liars) you will know that this record will not look good. In fact, all will be condemned on the basis of this personal record. Your only hope is in another book, a book which overrides the book of works, the Book of Life. If your name is in this book you will escape the wrath of God.

*‘Silence in heaven for about half an hour’*. The significance of this time interval is not clear, apart from it being a short time in the context of this book. This is not an empty silence, for John saw things happening when this last seal was open. What did he see? He saw the seven angels being given the seven trumpets. The opening of the seventh seal gives rise to the blowing of the seven trumpets, the next cycle, as it were, of divine judgments. There is a sort of cluster bomb effect here- as the last of seven bombs explodes, seven more burst forth to explode with deadly effect. But before we come to this, John saw another angel offering up the prayers of the saints. He also saw that angel cast fire upon the earth with catastrophic effect.

**2.Prayer of the saints**

Divine judgments in Revelation are closely associated with prayer. Prior to the opening of the seven seals John saw the elders around the throne with golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints (5:8). With the opening of the fifth seal he heard the prayers of the martyrs coming before the Lord. And now, as the trumpet judgments are about to be sounded, we see once again the prayers of the saints ascending before God.

In Egypt the children of Israel groaned because of their bondage; they cried out and their cry came up to God (Exodus 2:24). God heard their cry and through Moses brought the plagues upon Egypt and saved his people. The Exodus from Egypt is in many ways the background to the coming trumpet judgments. For now let us understand the power of prayer. God hears the prayer of his people and is powerful to save. Much prayer would have been going up to the Lord from the seven churches in Asia as they faced severe persecution. This vision would assure them that their prayers were reaching the ears of God. In fact, not only were the prayers of the saints coming to the ears of God but they were as sweet incense in his nostrils. God loves to hear his people praying. Your prayers are as sweet incense in the nostrils of God.

In the temple of the Jews the altar of incense was just before the Holy of Holies. As the people came to the temple to offer their sacrifice they watched the priest take incense before this altar. This incense symbolised their prayers. In this vision John saw the angel offering up incense with the prayers of the saints in the heavenly temple. The symbolism is the same. Just as the smoke and sweet smell of the incense rises, in the same way prayer goes up before God. It is a ‘sweet aroma’ in the nostrils of God, as Paul would say (Phil 4:18).

Satan hates prayer and so do his servants. We see people wanting to remove prayer from our parliaments and from our schools. Families today do not even pause to thank God for their daily bread. Even Christians say it is difficult to find time to pray. We have become a prayerless people. No wonder we do not see God working in our midst. No wonder we get stressed and find ourselves under great pressure.

In many ways we are in bondage, like the people in Egypt, slaves not to a tyrant ruler but to our own selfish and foolish ways. What if the people of God had not cried out to the Lord when they were slaves in Egypt? Would they still be in Egypt? The Bible says God heard their cry and remembered his covenant with Abraham. He looked upon them and acknowledged them. Is God looking upon us? Is he looking upon you? Why should he if you do not cry out to him.

God loves to see his children on their knees in prayer. Prayer is like sweet smelling incense before him. And, having heard the cry of his people, God always acts. The power of prayer is beyond measure. Too often we put our trust in things of the world- in might, in money, in intellect, in politicians or people in high places. It is your God who has all power and authority; he is the one who can, and will, deliver you from all your trouble. He is the one who will judge your enemies. The power of prayer is truly great. Following the prayers of the saints, John saw divine judgment poured out upon the earth (8:5).

**3.Judgment**

Ezekiel had a vision in which he saw an angelic figure take burning coals from the fire under the cherubim/altar and scatter them over the city/tabernacle (Ezek 10). This came immediately after angels were commanded to slay all the unfaithful in Jerusalem, the ones who did not have the protective seal of God on their foreheads (Ezek 9). Similarly, John saw the angel take fire from the altar and hurl it onto the earth. What happened on the earth? ‘*Noises, thunder, lightning, and an earthquake’* (8:5). The silence in heaven, the lifting up of the prayers of the saints, gives way to crash, boom, bang on the earth.

Worldly people proudly tell about the Big Bang which, according to them, brought the earth into existence. But if they were wise they would turn their focus to the Big Bang that is going to bring the earth to an end. They would turn from their pride and humble themselves before Almighty God, the one who created this world, who sustains this world, and will soon destroy this world. He will destroy it because of sin, just he did in the days of Noah, except fully and finally.

Many love to watch horror movies on the TV. They watch movies about the apocalypse, about the end of the world. One day that TV scene will jump right out and engulf the whole world. Maybe there is some sort of divine irony coming upon us here. Satan is numbing our minds through all this violence and horror. People watch a movie about some deranged gunman shooting up a school. They yawn and go to bed. But when it happens in real life they are stunned. They weep and wail at what has happened.

When the flood came in the days of Noah people were enjoying themselves; they were having a great party, and living life to the full. Like one of the rich men in our city, they probably said, ‘I will be a long time dead so I must party now’. Hundreds were enjoying the party on the Titanic when it suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth.

*‘So it will be at the coming of the Son of man’* said Jesus (Mat 24:39). Are you ready? ‘Just wait a while, I am too busy now’- is that what you will say to Jesus when he comes in all his glory. We can no more stop the end coming than we can stop death. The end is nearer now than it has ever been. Are you ready? Are you praying, 'even so, come Lord Jesus'?

**Trumpet judgments** Revelation 8:6-13

For seven days Joshua and the army of Israel marched around the city of Jericho. Seven priests with trumpets led the march each day. On the seventh day they marched around Jericho seven times. And it happened on the seventh time around that, when the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they shouted a great shout and the walls of the city fell down (Josh 6:20). The wicked inhabitants of the city were utterly destroyed.

In the OT the sound of the trumpet was a call for the people to assemble, sometimes for worship (Lev 25:8-9) and sometimes for battle and holy war. In the NT Jesus said his second coming would be announced with the great sound of a trumpet. ‘*He will send his angels with the great sound of a trumpet and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other’* (Mat 24:31).

Seven angels with seven trumpets stood ready to signal divine judgments on the earth, the sea and the sky. These judgments in many ways parallel those that followed the opening of the seven seals- only this time the saints have been sealed, as we saw in chapter 7, and so are protected from these judgments (9:4). The first four trumpet judgments affect one third of the earth, sea and sky, so may be seen as more intense than the seal judgments which were limited to one fourth of the earth (6:8). However, both the seal and trumpet judgments end with the full and final outpouring of the wrath of the Lamb (6:17, 11:18).

The churches to which John sent this letter of Revelation would have been very familiar with the story of the Exodus. They would have noticed a similarity between these trumpet judgments and the plagues which the Lord sent upon Egypt through Moses. The plagues were sent because the Pharaoh, an idolater, exalted himself against the Lord. The Lord not only demonstrated his power over idols and man-made gods through the plagues, but finally destroyed Pharaoh whose heart he had hardened. We will also remind ourselves of this OT background as we seek to understand divine judgment, and salvation, inherent in this vision.

**1.First trumpet**

The seventh plague the Lord sent upon Egypt was a terrible hail storm which destroyed the crops and led to a famine. The land of Goshen escaped this hail (Exod 9:22f). When the first trumpet sounded, hail and fire mixed with blood were hurled upon the earth. This might seem a strange mix but the effect on the earth is the same. Hail decimates tree crops as well as grain crops. At great cost many orchardists today erect hail netting over their fields. Fire, which may come from lightning in the midst of a storm, can also destroy the vegetation.

Only one third of the vegetation was destroyed by the hail and fire. Similarly in Egypt, the barley was destroyed but the later wheat crop was okay. Was this a sign of God’s mercy? Was this a case of severe mercy, the Lord warning inhabitants of the earth to repent of their idolatry and worship the only true God? If this was the case it did not have that effect, for the ‘earth dwellers’ did not repent (9:20). The plague of hail in Egypt led to Pharaoh confessing his sin, but only outwardly. When the hail stopped he went back to his sin and his heart was hardened- ‘*he and his servants’*.

People want signs from heaven that God exists, that God is alive, and that he is able to save. Jesus was not prepared to give such signs for he knew the evil and adulterous hearts that ask for such signs (Mat 12:39). God has revealed his majesty and power in the creation, and continues to do so, but what do men say. They may pray to God in the midst of a disaster but then return to their idols, their hearts undergoing no change.

There will be famines and earthquakes in the last days*- ‘the beginning of sorrows’* said Jesus (Mat 24:8). Natural disasters will continue and will intensify as the end of this world gets nearer; not because of human activity, as foolish as that may be, but because the Lord has so ordained. The earth will be affected, as will the sea and the sky. But you, who by faith belong to Jesus, need not fear for you are safe for eternity in him.

**2.Second and Third Trumpet**

John saw something like a great mountain burning with fire thrown into the sea when the second trumpet sounded, and a third of the sea became blood. One third of the fish died and one third of the ships were destroyed (8:8-9). When the third trumpet sounded the water in the rivers became wormwood/ bitter and many people died from drinking it (8:11). In the first plague to strike Egypt all the water was turned to blood and the fish died (Exod 7:20). In desperation the people began to dig holes to find water to drink.

It is sometimes said that the future wars will be fought over water. In many countries the water situation has already become desperate. We are concerned about the water supply for our own city. We are vulnerable not only to water scarcity, but to water pollution. Some years ago there was an outbreak of giardia and many got sick. I was reading that just one gram of the isotope polonium in the water supply could kill a million people.

When will such chaos occur? Will it be only at the end of the world? How would the first readers have understood this vision? Would they not have reflected on the plagues of Egypt as suggested, and also been looking at natural disasters in the light of this divine revelation. The city of Laodicea had a water supply problem (3:16). Would not these first readers have been saying, ‘the end is near’ each time they witnessed such disasters? Should we not humble ourselves before the mighty God whom we serve, and warn idolaters of the imminent coming of Jesus to judge the world?

In the days of Noah, God judged the wicked through the devastation of a flood. He has done it in the past and he will do it again, not through a flood but by total destruction of this world that many call home. The disasters which John saw were but a foretaste of the total destruction coming from the throne of God in heaven. What about the great mountain thrown into the sea, and the great burning star falling from heaven upon the rivers? Are we to understand these literally? Note that John says, ‘*like a great mountain’* (8:8). Is the great star a meteorite that will plunge to earth? Such a thing could happen, but let us remember this is a vision open to symbolic interpretation. After all, these disasters have theological significance.

Jeremiah speaks of Babylon as a destroying mountain that will be hurled down and burnt (Jer 51:25). Other evil kingdoms are also spoken of as mountains. These evil kingdoms were judged by God and destroyed. Jericho was razed by the army of God. The end of evil regimes in Eastern Europe are symbolised in the fall of the Berlin wall. New Orleans, a city full of evil practices, could not stand against the mighty Creator of the sea.

Isaiah depicts the fall of Satan as the morning star being cast down to the earth (Isa 14:12-15). Jesus ‘*saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven’* (Luke 10:18). John gives the name of the star, ‘Wormwood’. It brings bitterness to the waters, and death to those who drink the water. Is this not a fitting description of the work of Satan? What is so dangerous about ‘bitter’ water is that the pollution cannot be seen. Whether it is giardia or polonium or some other poison, people will drink it without knowing. Just so is the deceptive work of Satan, who paints himself as an angel of light. And just so is the deception of many so-called stars in this world; movies stars, sports stars and other self-styled stars.

**3.Fourth trumpet**

The sun, moon and stars were struck as the angel sounded the fourth trumpet. One third of each was darkened so that they gave no light for a third of the day and a third of the night. The penultimate plague in Egypt was a plague of darkness (Exod 10:21f). The idolaters groped about in the dark for three days. This was ironic because one of the gods of Egypt was ‘Ra’ the sun god. Pharaoh’s heart was again hardened as he threatened Moses with death. But it was Pharaoh who died under the mighty hand of God. It is hard for us to imagine three days of darkness. We complain if the electricity goes out for an hour. Some people like the darkness for their deeds are evil, but they will not like it all the time. Yet this is what they will get when the end comes.

The prophet Joel spoke of the sun and moon growing dark (Joel 2:10). Jesus also spoke of total darkness in the end. ‘*Immediately after the tribulation the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light’* (Mat 24:29). With the opening of the sixth seal, the sun became black. With the fifth bowl the kingdom of the beast became full of darkness (16:10).

In the beginning the earth was without form and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep. The first thing the Lord God said was, ‘let there be light’, and there was light. God is the God of light. God is light. Darkness symbolises separation from God. One day God will ‘un-create’ this world. Darkness will return to all who do not know the light of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, ‘*I am the light of the world’* (Jn 9:5).

Are you walking in this true light, the light that will never fade or fail? If so, you have nothing to fear when the sun is darkened fully and finally. The new heaven and new earth need no sun or moon for the Lamb is its light (Rev 21:23).

**Trumpet of torment** Revelation 8:13-9:12

What a tragic story appeared in the press recently. A 61 year old woman was attacked and killed by her own dogs in her own house. She took in these stray dogs. She fed them and cared for them. The other day they turned on her, and now she is dead. ‘Sin is crouching at your door’ the Lord told Cain (Gen 4:7). ‘He is ready to devour you’. ‘*Your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour’* (1 Peter 5:8). Too many people think he is a cute and cuddly cub, but then find he turns into this devouring lion. When he does his evil work the outcome for those who were seduced by him will be much worse than for the lady mauled to death by her dogs. Abaddon, Apollyon, and Destroyer are the names given to him in this passage.

**1.Woe, woe, woe**

With the sounding of the first four trumpets, John saw environmental disasters. One third of the earth, the sea, and the sky were destroyed or polluted. With the following trumpets human beings are targeted. These three woes are ‘*to the inhabitants of the earth’*. The text is the same as that in Revelation 6:10; those who dwell on the earth or ‘earth dwellers’ as we are calling them. These are the people who reject Jesus, and actually persecute the people of God.

The three woes refer to the last three trumpets. What do these woes mean for the earth dwellers? What is the source of these woes? As the fifth angel sounded his trumpet John saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth. He was given the key to the abyss/ ‘bottomless pit’. He opened the shaft and out billowed smoke like that out of a great furnace. The smoke blocked out the sun and everything went dark.

I remember a bushfire on the farm many years ago. I got home from school to find thick smoke blanketing the whole farm. My father was out fighting the fire, so I and my brother had to do the milking. Where were the cows? We could not find them, and they could not find their way to the dairy. We had a terrible time getting the milking done that day.

As if the smoke was not bad enough, out of it came swarms of locusts, locusts that were like scorpions (9:3). Do you know about scorpions? They are horrible looking creatures when they raise their large, stinging tail. We would often see them in our bathroom in India because they like dark, wet places. Thankfully our children did not get stung. Locusts like scorpions. We only ever saw the odd scorpion. To see them in swarms like locusts would be terrifying. That, of course, is what this judgment is all about. The Lord had brought swarms of locusts in judgment upon Pharaoh in Egypt. The land became dark as they covered the face of the whole earth (Exod 10). The Lord also brought a dreaded locust plague upon Israel in the days of King Joash. ‘*Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain; let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming’* (Joel 2:1). A great army of men on horses was coming to destroy the land. The Lord was judging them for their sin.

**2.Given the key**

What does this star, fallen from heaven, represent in this vision? Most likely Satan- as we suggested with the third trumpet. Jesus said, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven’ when the disciples reported how they cast out demons in the name of Jesus. Jesus went on to say, ‘*I give you authority to trample on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy and nothing shall by any means hurt you’* (Luke 10:19). It is only the unsealed who will be hurt by the plague of locust-like scorpions.

The fallen star was given the key to the abyss (9:1). He was not in absolute control. Someone gave him the key? Who? Presumably, it was the risen Jesus, the Lamb upon the throne, the same one who gave power to the apocalyptic horsemen. He unlocked the abyss and out came smoke and these horrible locusts. These were not normal locusts. They did not eat vegetation. They were very strange looking locusts. Normal locusts look weird enough but the apocalyptic locusts John saw were very weird looking. They were huge like horses prepared for battle. They had faces like men but with women’s hair. They had teeth like lions, and tails like scorpions. It was the tail that was scary and which they used to torment earth dwellers.

Who was king of these weird creatures? The same angel that released them, the angel that fell from heaven, the evil angel called the Destroyer (Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek). He is none other than Satan, the prince of demons. These locusts symbolise Satan and his agents inflicting pain and suffering on his own followers on the earth. Their rejection of God, their evil deeds will come back to bite them, not by some law of nature but because Jesus gives Satan the power to afflict his own followers.

**3.Given power**

The locusts were ‘*given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power’* (9:3). Notice they are not literally scorpions but ‘like’ scorpions. Yet we are to understand the dreaded nature of this judgment. The sting from the tail of a scorpion is excruciating. Notice again this word ‘given’. The angel was **given** the key to the abyss. The locusts were released and were **given** power. The power they were given is limited in three ways.

**Firstly**, as we have seen, the elect of God, the sealed saints, were not to be harmed (9:4). Clearly these saints are still on the earth- otherwise this limitation would be redundant. But they are protected because they have the seal of God on their foreheads (cf.7:3). There is no indication that any earth dwellers repented and so escaped this judgment. On the contrary, they did not repent (9:20). The sealed people were sealed by God long beforehand. There will not be any last minute rush into the kingdom of heaven!

God, who had sealed his servants, is powerful to protect them against all attacks of the evil one. Satan appears to be the ruler of the world. He does wield great power over mankind. But all his power is given to him. There is a greater power. Jesus won the victory at the cross. In this world you, his disciple, will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, Jesus has overcome the world (Jn 16:33).

**Secondly** these locusts were given limited power over the earth dwellers- they were not permitted to kill them (9:5). They were only allowed to torment or torture them. This torture will be excruciating; so much so that ‘*men will seek death but will not find it’* (9:6). What will this torment be like? Will it be physical pain or mental pain? It will be like the torment of a scorpion when it strikes a man- so will be physical. But there will also be fear, and mental and spiritual anguish. The very sight of these weird creatures will strike fear into the hearts of men! One of the curses the Lord announced upon those broke his holy covenant was madness, blindness and confusion of heart (Deut 28:28). King Nebuchadnezzar was struck with madness when he refused to turn from his sin; he went out to eat grass like a cow (Dan 4:33).

People might seek death in order to escape from this torment, but there will be no such escape. This is the great deception of the devil. Death is no escape. Once they are dead they are eternally his and he will torment them for eternity. Remember the story about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man was not living happily in hell; he was in torment and crying out to God; but it was too late.

We might reflect on the place of pain and death in our society today. Physical pain can be relieved with powerful drugs administered to the body; but what about mental pain and anguish? Most suicides are not because of physical pain but mental pain. Tragically, suicide is on the increase in our society. Why? And then there is the call for assisted suicide or euthanasia.

*‘In those days men will seek death’* said John. But what does he then say; ‘*death will flee from them’* (9:6). Most suicide attempts are unsuccessful. Death is not the solution to the problems of pain and suffering in this wicked world. There were those protected from the torment of Satan- those sealed by God, those whom God calls his own. God does not desire the death of the wicked but that they should come to repentance (2Peter 3:9).

**Thirdly**, the locusts are given power for a limited time. They were allowed to torment the unsealed for five months (9:5,10). The life span of an adult locust is up to five months, but this number, like others in Revelation, is symbolic. Five months is a short time in the context of Revelation. A short time it may be, but it is a terrible time that will come upon the ‘unsealed’ or unbelievers, when Satan is allowed to do his dirty work in the last days.

Many want to play with this prince of demons, this king of the abyss. They are just like Toto the monkey playing with the vultures- if you have read the Jungle Doctor stories of Paul White. They are just like that woman keeping her cute and cuddly dogs. Satan tempts them, he deceives them, and he lures them into his lair. Titillation will turn to torment. Satan’s luxuries will lead to lament. Who will warn them of this terrible torment to come when the trumpet sounds?

**Trumpet of death** Revelation 9:13-21

‘What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age’ the disciples asked Jesus. ‘You will hear of wars and rumors of wars’ replied Jesus, ‘but do not be troubled for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet’ (Mat 24:6). When will wars cease? When Jesus comes again in power and glory! In these last days, in these days approaching the end, there will be wars. In a vision John saw a mighty cavalry advancing to kill one third of the human race. What was this war about? It was about divine judgment. The enemy is the enemy of God and his people, the ‘unsealed’ ones. Paradoxically the destroying army is also one of evil horses and horsemen, a demonic host released at the command of God.

**1.Heavenly horns**

With the sounding of the sixth trumpet John again saw the golden altar which is before God (9:13). What does this altar represent? John saw an angel offering incense upon this altar when the seventh seal was opened. This incense was associated with the prayers of the saints going up before God (8:4). And prior to this he had seen the souls of the martyrs under this altar (6:9, 10). These martyrs were crying out for divine vindication upon those who dwell on the earth. We are reminded yet again that these divine judgments are a response to the prayers of the saints. God hears the prayers of his people and comes to deliver them. God comes to vindicate his people, to bring divine justice to a world that makes a mockery of justice and truth. God delights in the prayers of his people and he is powerful to answer their prayers. This book of Revelation ends with the cry, ‘even so come Lord Jesus’. Is this your prayer? Are you hastening the day of his return with your witness and your prayers? (2 Peter 3:12).

While the Scriptures speak of hastening the coming of the Lord, they also speak of this day being divinely predetermined (Mat 24:36). John heard a voice from the altar telling the sixth angel to release four killing angels. He says that these angels had been prepared for this very day; with divine precision to the very hour, the very moment when they were released (9:15). God has a sovereign timetable for all things. Nothing happens apart from his will, his eternal purpose and permission (Eph 1:9,10). *‘All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose’* (Rom 8:25). These judgments may not seem to be good, but remember God has graciously sealed his servants- only the wicked are killed in this demonic onslaught.

**2.Hellish horses**

*‘Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates’* (9: 14). Who are these four angels, and what is the significance of the Euphrates? There may be some kind of relationship between these angels and the four angels holding back the four winds of the earth that John saw earlier (7:1), although those angels were not as directly related to the harm coming upon the earth as with these four killing angels.

The Euphrates is one of the four rivers in the Garden of Eden. It is the river which bordered the holy land to the north. The city of Babylon was on this river. Beyond this river were hordes of heathen kingdoms, symbolic of the enemies of Israel and of God. Ezekiel prophesied of a mighty army of horsemen coming from the north in the latter days (Ezekiel 38:15). John’s first readers would have been familiar with this symbolism of evil kingdoms beyond the Euphrates. In fact, at that time even the Romans feared the Parthian hordes beyond the great river. These long-haired horsemen were skilled fighters with the bow and arrow.

With the four angels came a horde of horsemen on hellish horses. They came in their millions to kill in the millions. One third of the world’s population was wiped out. John heard the number of these horsemen- two hundred million. Some point to the red army of China as the fulfillment of this prophecy, but is this number meant to be taken literally? The Greek original is similar to that in Revelation 5:11 where the worshippers around the throne in heaven numbered ‘myriads of myriads’. Here it is ‘two myriads of myriads’. This is a mighty horde of hellish horses!

John goes on to describe these horses. Everything about them is symbolic of evil and death. They had ‘*heads like lions and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and brimstone/ sulphur’* (9:17). They were like the proverbial dragon. Moreover, they had tails like serpents or snakes (9:19). The Jews would remember the plague of snakes the Lord sent among them when they spoke against God and Moses (Numbers 21). These horses were not unlike the tormenting locusts- like- scorpions of the previous trumpet. But they did more than torment the heathen, they killed one third of them!

Out of the mouth of these apocalyptic horses came fire, smoke and brimstone. Fire and brimstone remind us of a previous judgment of God, his judgment on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Sodom, Egypt and Babylon are all evil cities mentioned in Revelation. The Lord overthrew Sodom, raining fire and brimstone upon it to kill all the wicked inhabitants (Gen 19). Abraham looked down and saw the smoke rising like the smoke of a furnace. God remembered the prayer of Abraham when he destroyed those cities.

**3.Hardened hearts**

Fire, smoke and brimstone- ‘*by these three plagues a third of mankind was killed’* (9:18). What about the rest? What about the two thirds that survived? Did seeing these hellish horses and watching them slaughter people all around them have any effect on them? Did the survivors ask ‘why’? Did they search for a reason for this death? Why is there war, and why do people die? The rest of mankind did not repent. They did not turn from worshipping their idols, nor did they turn from immorality (9:20,21). They went on breaking all the commands that God gave to us through Moses. They went on denying that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, denying that he is the way, the truth, and the life.

The whole challenge confronting the Christians in John’s day was that of worship. Is it not the same today! ‘Who do you worship?’ they were asked. Do you worship only Jesus, or do you worship other gods. Will you bow the knee to the idol of Caesar? Those who refused faced suffering and even death. ‘Let us go along with the heathens’ many were saying; ‘God does not see, God does not care’.

John saw the tables being turned upon the persecutors of God’s people. The time for divine justice had come. The opportunity to repent was given, but they kept on with their idolatry and immorality despite the destruction and death around them. Their hearts were hardened. What will their future be? Pharaoh hardened his heart after each plague God sent upon Egypt. Most people do the same thing. The sad truth is that few repent of their wicked ways despite the signs and wonders the Lord does in their midst. In desperation farmers pray for rain, men pray for jobs, women pray for healthy children. When their prayers are answered, do they acknowledge God and worship him? Their hearts become as hard and cold as their empty pew in the church. The Bible clearly tells where death came from, and where life can be found. But many choose not see or to listen. ‘*Although they knew God they did not glorify him as God nor were thankful... but changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man’* (Rom 1).

The remaining two thirds of the world’s population went on worshipping demons and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see, nor hear, nor walk. The OT prophets laughed at idolaters and the gods which they made. Elijah laughed at the prophets of Baal, for their god was powerless to send fire. But millions around us today still worship metal, wooden or plastic gods- all having a use by date!

‘Those who make them will be like them’, said the prophets. Idol worshippers are immoral for they do not obey the commands of the holy God. The rest of mankind did not repent of their violence and murder, their stealing, sorcery or sexual immorality (9:21). Their hearts were hardened and they continued in their sinful ways. Beware ‘*lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin’* (Heb 3:13).

*‘O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death’* (Rom 7:24). This was the cry of the apostle Paul as he acknowledged the sinfulness of his own heart. We can either harden our hearts when we see evil around us, and in our own hearts, or we can confess and cry out as Paul did. We can be like the ‘earth dwellers’, the ‘unsealed’, and refuse to repent, or we can be like Paul who repented and was saved.

*‘Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord’* was the answer Paul received (Rom 7:25). He was delivered from death by the only one who can give life, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. ‘*Having been justified by the blood of Jesus, we shall be saved from wrath through him’* (Rom 5:9). The wrath of God is being revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness, as Paul said (Rom 1:18), and as John saw in this vision of the sixth trumpet.

**Delay no longer** Revelation 10:1-7

Four angels of death led forth a horde of hellish horses to kill one third of the human race. This is what John saw as the sixth trumpet was sounded. Divine judgment had begun. God limited this judgment and there was still time to repent- ‘*but the rest of mankind did not repent’* (9:20). Men and women were so set in their idolatry and immorality; their hearts were so hardened, they did not see the grace of God. They did not see the end approaching. They did not realise that ‘now is the day of salvation’; tomorrow it will be too late.

In chapters 10 and 11 we come to another interlude in Revelation. Remember there was an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal. So it is here between the sixth and seventh trumpet. This interlude does not fit chronologically; rather it focuses on a different scene. In chapter 7 the saints were sealed and we saw the great multitude in heaven. Here the focus is again upon the saints, and upon the proclamation of the gospel in the church age. John himself is re-commissioned as a prophet and two witnesses preach the gospel with great power. As Jesus said, ‘the *gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come’* (Mat 24:14).

**1.Another strong angel**

John saw another strong/mighty angel coming down from heaven (10:1). The first time he saw a strong angel was when he was taken up to see the heavenly throne. That angel was shouting, ‘who is worthy to open the scroll’ (5:1). Jesus was found worthy for he was slain and had redeemed people to God from ‘*every tribe and tongue and people and nation’* (5:9). Note the parallels in this chapter before us- another strong angel, a book and prophecy to many peoples, nations and tongues and kings- not to mention the mystery of God that was finished.

This second strong angel was coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud. Who is the mighty angel? In Daniel 7, the ‘Son of Man’ came to the Ancient of Days with the clouds of heaven. Jesus said that Son of Man will return with the clouds of heaven, with great power and glory (Mat 24:30). Could this angel be Christ? See the further description of this angel. A rainbow was on his head, much like in the vision which Ezekiel saw of the one upon the chariot throne. ‘*This was the appearance of the glory of the Lord’* (Ezek 1:28). The rainbow was closely associated with the throne of God (4:3). The rainbow was a sign of God’s glory and his covenant faithfulness. ‘*His face was like the sun and his feet like pillars of fire’* (10:1). Such features applied to the risen Jesus who John saw in his first vision (1:16).

For these reasons many understand this angel to be Christ, even though the word ‘angel’ is not otherwise used with reference to Christ. Maybe he is like the Angel of the Lord, or a Christophany in the OT. Christ indeed came from heaven with divine glory. He came with the gospel of salvation and also declared the just judgment of God (Jn 1:14, 5:22).

The cloud, the rainbow, and the sun and pillar of fire all have symbolic significance. We have already mentioned the rainbow covenant associated with the flood. Jews would be aware of the significance of the pillar of cloud and of fire. God led them out of Egypt with a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. This was divine providence, and also divine protection. As their enemy, the army of Pharaoh, threatened to attack they cried out to the Lord. ‘*Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord’* said Moses (Exod 14:13). The pillar of cloud and fire went behind and protected them from Pharaoh. This interlude in Revelation is about divine judgment and salvation.

This strong angel stood with one foot on the land and one on the sea (10: 2). He straddled the whole world as the one who has dominion over the creation. Jesus was faithful unto death and God raised him with great power. God exalted him above all dominions and ‘*put all things under his feet’* (Eph 1:22). This angel cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roars (10: 3). The voice of God is described as a lion roaring both in Hosea 11:10 and Amos 3:8.

**2.Seven thunders**

Seven seals were followed by seven trumpets. Now John hears seven thunders. But the strange thing is that this time he is told not to write what he hears- so we are not told the content of these seven thunders. Some say that because there was no repentance (9: 20) further judgments were not declared. But sealing up does not mean revoking or canceling; it simply means not revealing.

‘The seven thunders may be based on Psalm 29 where God’s thunders of punishment are equated with the voice of the Lord, which is mentioned seven times’. No doubt these thunders are related to judgments, and with God shaking the earth. They may also be related to the exaltation of Christ as King forever (Psalm 29:10).

Daniel was told of things relating to the end time but was instructed to ‘shut up the words’. ‘*Go your way Daniel for the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end’* (Dan 12:9). Daniel’s vision was before the time of Christ, before the cross and the resurrection and the inauguration of the Last Days. John, however, was living in the Last Days, as we are. Christ can return at any moment. The end is near. You should fear the judgment of God if you are without faith in him!

**3.A little book**

The strong angel had a little book open in his hand. How is this book related to the scroll in chapter 5- if at all? ‘Scroll’ is the same word as ‘book’ in the Greek, but this is the diminutive form of the word. This is a **little** book. Some suggest that it is the same as the scroll in chapter 5- others that it is part of that scroll, or that it develops one aspect of that scroll. Note that this little book is open. The earlier scroll contained the purposes of God in judgment and redemption.

Maybe this little book is the Bible, the Word of God. The strong angel brings this little book with him from heaven. Maybe it is this book of Revelation itself. In the next section we see that John is told to eat this little book and then prophesy to the nations in much the same way as Ezekiel (Ezek 3:1).

**4.No more delay**

The strong angel raised his hand to heaven and took an oath in the name of the Creator- the one who created the heaven, the earth and the sea. This is a deliberately comprehensive and specific description of the Almighty and Eternal God. The mighty angel takes an oath in the name of the Almighty God. Nothing can be more certain in the universe than the declaration that is about to be made.

Some question whether this angel could be Jesus because of this oath. Yet the writer to the Hebrews refers to God swearing by himself since there is no one greater, when he made his promise to Abraham (Heb 6:13). By solemn, divine oath the thunderous voice of this angel declares ‘*that there should be delay no longer’* (10: 6- the AV translation ‘there should be time no longer’ is somewhat misleading).

*“For I raise my hand to heaven and say ‘as I live forever’, if I sharpen my sword and my hand takes hold on judgment, I will render vengeance to my enemies and repay those who hate me”*. This is what Moses spoke from the Lord in his final message (Deut 32:40, 41). The message given to John in this revelation is the same. God has declared on oath that he will judge his enemies and the enemies of his people. The martyrs under the altar cried out for divine vengeance; they were told to wait a little while longer (6:10). The strong angel now says there will be no more delay. The full number will be brought into the kingdom of God and then the end will come.

The seventh trumpet was about to sound the last judgment. All God’s enemies, all idolaters and persecutors of God’s people will be destroyed. The Cross was meant to be Satan’s victory over the Son of God. But it was, in fact, God’s victory over Satan. Jesus death was meant to be his defeat, but it was victory. ‘You put him to death, but with great power God raised him from the dead’- this was the message preached by the apostles. Christians appear to be weak in the eyes of the world but in the end they will be victorious.

This is the mystery of God declared through the prophets (10:7) - the mystery of the gospel. Mystery does not mean something secret; it means God’s purposes revealed to men (Eph 1:9). ‘The mystery of God is his total redemptive purpose which includes the judgment of evil and the salvation of his people’. Paul wrote of the gospel of Jesus Christ as the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began, but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations. The message has gone out to all nations. The glorious good news has been preached to all nations. But this same gospel is bad news to those who do not believe. Jesus who saves eternally is also Jesus who judges eternally.

**Prophetic commission renewed** Revelation 10: 8-11

As Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time he wept over the city. He cried out, ‘*how often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing’* (Mat 23:37). Jesus came to his own people but they did not receive him. In love, God sent his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Jesus wept because the alternative for those who rejected this salvation was condemnation and eternal death. Thinking of such an horrific end for these people brought tears to the eyes of Jesus. Jesus was entering Jerusalem to die for those who would be saved. Yet he knew that his death would also bring judgment upon those who rejected the grace of God. We have often referred to the following chapter in Matthew where Jesus tells his disciples about what will happen in the end. He also told them what would happen to Jerusalem. Divine judgment was coming upon this city. It would soon be destroyed and the people scattered. Entering Jerusalem was a bitter/sweet experience for Jesus.

**1.Eat the book**

In the passage before us John saw another strong angel coming down from heaven. He was standing with one foot on the land and the other on the sea- a picture which reminds us of for the third time in this chapter. He reminds us that this angel, who appears to represent Christ, has dominion over the whole world- over all nations and all creation. God the Father exalted his son Jesus and put everything under his feet when he raised him from the dead.

This strong angel had a little book open in his hand. A voice from heaven told John to take this book. ‘*Take and eat it and it will make your stomach bitter, but it will be as sweet as honey in your mouth’* (10:9). John was not the first prophet to eat a book. Ezekiel was similarly told to, ‘*eat this scroll and speak to the house of Israel’* (Ezek 3:1). Ezekiel found the words as sweet as honey in his mouth. Jeremiah, the prophet of doom, ate the words of the Lord and they were ‘*as joy and rejoicing* to him’ (Jer 15:16). The Psalmist also speaks of the word of the Lord as being as sweet as honey (Ps 19:10, 119:103).

How and why was this little book as sweet as honey in the mouth? The word of the Lord is a word of grace to those who are being saved. John knew of the wonderful grace of God, revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood (1:5). He knew the joy of the Lord in his own heart, just like David, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The word of God was his desire and his delight day and night. Nothing was sweeter to him than the wonderful gospel of salvation by grace alone. Is this gospel as sweet as honey in your mouth? Is it your desire day and night?

This gospel is not only for you of course- it is for the whole world. If you find something is deliciously sweet, do you not share it with those around you? We naturally share good things with those we love. Is not the gospel of Jesus Christ the sweetest thing you have ever tasted? Taste and see that the Lord is good. Is this the truth that you know and love? Those who know and love the Lord will have a love for all who are made in his image. They will have a passion to share this good news with people near and far. Jeremiah said the word of the Lord was a fire shut up in his bones- he could not hold it back (Jer 20: 9). Jesus wept over Jerusalem saying, ‘if only you had known, even you, especially in this day, the things that made for peace’ (Luke 19:42). Jesus longed for the people of Jerusalem to know forgiveness and the peace of God. He prayed and he preached the Kingdom of God with heartfelt concern for the lost.

The word of the Lord was sweet to John as he tasted it in this vision. It was the sweetest thing he had ever tasted. It was this word that brought him life. It was this word that sustained him, even as he was imprisoned on Patmos because of this very word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ (1:9).

**2.Digest the book**

The gospel of grace comes with a flip side, the wrath of God. Many fail to declare this truth in our day. They present the gospel as the good news, and exhort people in all sorts of ways to believe in Jesus. But they dare not tell the flip side, the consequences of unbelief. They dare not declare the whole counsel of God. Either they are not convinced themselves of the wrath of God against sin (Rom 1:18), or they do not want to upset their hearers. Such preaching is deceitful, and dangerous, for it leaves people content in their sin. They think that hell is a myth and that everyone will go to heaven in the end.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel would have loved to proclaim, ‘all will be saved in the end’. They would not have suffered as they did if they had preached such a message. When Ezekiel ate the book it was sweet in his mouth but it would not be sweet to all who heard it. He was told to go and speak to a rebellious and hard-hearted people, to people who would reject his message. He went away in ‘bitterness, in anger of my spirit but the hand of the Lord was strong upon me’ (Ezek 3:14).

The book that was sweet to John’s mouth became bitter in his stomach. As he digested this word from the Lord he understood the implications it would have upon the compromisers in the church, and upon the persecutors outside the church. John had just spoken about the sixth trumpet in which one third of the human race was killed. The seventh trumpet was about to sound and when this happened the wrath of Christ would come in judgment upon his enemies (11:18).

Telling of the coming divine judgment, prophesying of the wrath that is coming upon an unrepentant generation, is not a pleasant task. But it is the unavoidable task of a true prophet of God. Notwithstanding the unpleasantness of this task, those who, like John, have suffered for the gospel, do feel vindicated when the wicked are finally judged. They believe in divine grace but also in divine justice. Grace means nothing if there is no justice, no penalty for sin.

‘You did not know the time of your visitation’ said Jesus as he wept over Jerusalem. He knew that the day of salvation was fast coming to an end. He called upon the people to repent and believe in him for this is the only way to escape divine judgment. Divine judgment means the end of grace; it means the lake of fire for ever and ever. A more bitter end cannot be imagined.

**3.Prophesy**

John was told, ‘*you must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, tongues and kings’* (10:11). His eating of the little book was renewal of his prophetic commissioning. In his first vision he was told to write what he saw and send it to the seven churches (1:11). In this vivid image he is commissioned in the same way as the prophet Ezekiel, who prophesied to Israel in exile and to a number of other nations. The word translated ‘about’ means, ‘with regard to’, or even ‘against’, as was the case with Ezekiel. To translate as, ‘before', does not bring out the force of this word. The message John has to proclaim is primarily one of judgment, final judgment upon the rest of mankind that refused to repent.

We often hear that a particular preacher is very popular? A popular preacher is almost a contradiction in terms. Can you find a prophet or preacher in the Bible who was popular with the people? When a prophet eats or digests the word of God he must prophesy the truth regarding salvation and judgment. The word becomes part of his being. He cannot but speak of what he has heard. It becomes a fire in his belly, as it were. Do you come to church to hear emotional make-me- feel-good messages? Do you come to be entertained and uplifted? Or do you come to hear the truth? Do you love to hear the glorious gospel of salvation and judgment? This gospel has the power to reveal your sin and bring you to repentance and life in Jesus Christ.

**Measure the temple of God** Revelation 11: 1-2

Why do you go to the beach? To swim you say. Well not in India! The sight of a family with four blonde children going to the beach to swim was too much for the locals at a beach in south India. As we went along the road, lots of local children followed. When we spread our towels and sat down they also sat down. They watched our every move and drew closer and closer until they could touch the blonde children. The blonde children soon got sick of such intimacy. We could not ask them to move away as we did not know the local language. Eventually we took a stick - and drew a line in the sand. When a large circle was drawn in the sand we persuaded the locals to stay on the outside. The little blonde children felt safe and played happily inside the circle.

We often measure things to protect and preserve them, and this is the meaning of measuring that we often find in Scripture (Zech 1:16, Jer 31:38). Sometimes things are measured as a prelude to judgment, as when an army ‘measures’ the enemy before destroying it. But in this scene John is told to, ‘*measure the temple of God, the altar and those who worship there’* for divine protection, not destruction (11:1).

**1.Measure the temple**

John was given a reed like measuring rod, just like the man in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek 40). He was told, presumably by the same angel that gave him the little book, to ‘*measure the temple of God, the altar and the people who worship there’* (11:1). We have come to a new chapter and a new scene within the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments. This scene must be understood in the context of this interlude. John was commissioned to prophesy after eating the book. In this chapter two witnesses are given power to prophesy. The previous interlude between the sixth and seventh seals should also be kept in mind. In that interlude the saints of God were sealed and numbered. That sealing protected them from later torment and judgment (9:5). Moreover, the wider context of OT apocalyptic writings must also be kept in mind, particularly Ezekiel (40-43) and Daniel.

Why was John told to measure the temple? As already suggested, it was for the divine protection of the people of God. He was only to measure the inner courts and not the outer court of the temple. Those occupying the outer court did not come under this divine protection.

**2.Which temple?**

Jewish believers in the church would have been familiar with the structure of the temple. You may also be familiar with the central sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, in which was the Ark of the Covenant. The presence of God was above the Ark. Priests entered the next court, and then other Jews. Outside this was the court where Gentiles came to worship. This basic layout was given to Moses when he was on Mt Sinai. The tabernacle he built, and later the temple, were constructed on the basis of this divine revelation. It was a copy of the heavenly temple (Heb 9:24).

This was all under the old covenant. What became of the temple under the new covenant? What did the temple signify under the Old Covenant? God’s presence was there. It was the place of sacrifice and worship. Under the New Covenant, God came to earth as God the Son. Jesus referred to his body as the temple (Jn 2:19). Under the New Covenant there are no more blood sacrifices. The church is also referred to as the temple of God with ‘*the Spirit of God dwelling in you’* (1Peter 2:5, 1Cor 3:16).

Despite this change in meaning from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant regarding the temple, d

Dispensational futurists read this passage literally and say that the temple must be rebuilt in Jerusalem. They say that the church is raptured in chapter 4:1, and that this passage refers to the Jews who will literally rebuild the temple in Jerusalem immediately before the second coming of Christ. The worshippers John measures are a remnant of believing ethnic Jews, according to this interpretation. Some even believe that animal sacrifices will resume in this temple. The outer court, according to this interpretation, is identified with Gentiles who will persecute the remnant and overrun a literal Jerusalem for a period of 42 months.

This is why some Christians are ready to support Zionists in their effort to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem today. However, this vision is not to be understood literally. Besides, the word ‘temple’ takes on a different meaning in the NT, as we have seen. ‘*The most high does not dwell in temples made with hands’* as the first Christian martyr, Stephen, said, quoting the prophet Isaiah (Acts 7:48). How foolish to think that divine revelation speaks of the temple being literally rebuilt by human hands.

In this very chapter, the temple of God was opened in heaven (11:19). The Book of Revelation closes with a vision of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. There is no temple in this city because the Lord Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (21:22). God the Father and God the Son are present in all their glory in this New Jerusalem.

**3.The outer court and holy city**

The temple, the outer court and the holy city all represent the Christian community or church. But how is it that only the inner courts are measured and so protected from judgment? The explanation given by Hendrickson is as follows:

‘Divine protection does not extend to ‘the court’, that is to those who, although outwardly belonging to the church, are not true believers. Just as in the vision the heathen trample upon Jerusalem, so the world tramples upon the outside court of merely nominal Christendom. The world invades the false church and takes possession of it. Worldly church members welcome the ideas of the world; they feel perfectly at home with the world; they have a good time in worldly company; in voting for political offices they are prompted by worldly considerations; in brief, they love the world’.

Do you sometimes wonder about Christians and church leaders who deny the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Do you sometimes wonder how Christians can promote homosexuality when it is so clearly condemned in the Bible? Remember, there are many who call themselves Christians but in the end it will revealed that they are not among the elect of God (Mat 7:21-23). The Westminster Confession of Faith chapter XXV speaks of the true church or the invisible church as ‘consisting of the whole number of the elect’. The visible church includes many who are only elected by themselves.

In the churches to which John wrote there were Jews who were persecuting the Christians. They thought they were the chosen ones of God but Jesus calls then children of the devil, and members of the synagogue of Satan (2:9). So it is within the church today- there are those who not only compromise with the world but actively side with the world in persecuting the true church.

**4.Trampled for 42 months**

*‘Our adversaries have trodden down your sanctuary’* (Isa 63:18). The prophets spoke in such a manner when referring to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 597 BC. Daniel was in the associated exile, and he also spoke of a time when a ruler will, ‘*persecute the saints of the Most High for a period of times, times and a half time’* (Dan 7:25). This was the interpretation given to him of a vision which he had. He was speaking of the terrible suffering the Jews faced when Antiochus Epiphanies took Jerusalem with great violence and desecrated the temple in 167BC. The holy city, including its temple was again destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

John appears to adopt the time frame of 42 months from Daniel (see 12:14). Time, times and a half time is taken to mean three and a half years. Three and a half years is equivalent to 42 months or 1260 days, time periods found later in this chapter. “John is ‘mirroring’ this concept (of Daniel) speaking of the ‘42 months’ or ‘1260 days’ or ‘three and a half years ‘during which there will be persecution and trial” (Thomas).

This period of 42 months is not literal but ‘a long but not unlimited historical period’. It refers to the period between the first and second coming of Jesus, the period otherwise spoken of as ‘the Last Days’ or sometimes as the ‘Church Age’. For Christians suffering intense persecution, as they were in the churches to which John sent this letter, the call, ‘how long, Oh Lord’ is common. How long will the people of God suffer tribulation? The message John gives is, ‘it is a definite time set by God and a short time in the context of eternity’.

Worldly people believed ‘their world’ would go on forever. They saw no end to the present universe. John had a different message. God had set a day when he will judge the world. Humanistic or worldly thinking has changed in recent years. Now there is the proviso that man must act soon to make sure that the present world continues. Man's thinking changes, but the word of God remains firm. The time of the end has been set and will not change.

**Powerful witness** Revelation 11: 3-6

The exile in Babylonian had come to an end. Zerubbabel led the captives, including Nehemiah, back to Jerusalem and they started rebuilding the temple (Ezra 2:2). Jeshua the priest was there also. But when opposition came the people stopped rebuilding the temple. Zechariah (along with Haggai) was the prophet who exhorted them to return to work and complete the rebuilding. He had a number of visions of the future glory of the temple as the dwelling place of the Lord.

Zechariah’s message to them was, ‘*not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord’* (Zech 4:6). The opposition will be overcome, and God will once again dwell among his people. In these visions Zechariah saw beyond the present to the Messianic kingdom, the coming Kingdom of God.

Zechariah saw two olive trees beside a seven-branched lampstand. These olive trees gave a continuous supply of oil to the lamps. What did these trees represent? ‘*These are the two anointed ones, who stand beside the Lord of the whole earth’* (Zech 4:14). God will provide his fruitful Spirit and cause it to come forth from the priest and king, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, to lead to the completion of the temple.

This is the background to the vision which John relates here in this passage of the Book of Revelation. Just as the priest and king were the means to establish the temple in the midst of opposition, so here, two witnesses are empowered by the Spirit to perform the same role in relation to the temple referred to in verse 1-2. This temple is the church, which is the body of Christ and the true temple.

**1.Two witnesses**

The mention of two witnesses prophesying for 1260 days has led to many suggestions as to the identity of these two persons, and the particular time period of their witness. Some say they were two Jewish High priests killed in AD68, just before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. The passage before us goes on to give an unambiguous reference to the ministry of Elijah and Moses. Some point to Peter and Paul, while still others look for two mighty preachers to come. ‘It is difficult to decide whether John thought of these two witness as actual historical persons or whether they are representative of the church and its witness to Israel’ (Ladd). In the context it seems the latter is the more appropriate interpretation. The Spirit has been poured out upon all believers and the whole church is to be involved in witness in these Last Days (Acts 1:8).

Joel, another OT prophet, spoke the word of the Lord saying, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, your sons and daughters will prophesy’. Peter remembered these words when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. In the power of the Holy Spirit he began to preach the glorious gospel of salvation- and judgment. He called upon all to ‘*repent and be converted that your sins may be wiped out and so that times of refreshing may come from the Lord’* (Acts 3:19).

Why the number two you may ask? The number two seems to come from the two olives trees in Zechariah 4. ‘*These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord of all the earth’* (11:4). What do lampstands represent in John’s vision? ‘*The seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches’* (1:20). Lampstands represent churches. Were there not seven churches representing the whole church in John’s first vision? But only two of these were not called upon to repent. Maybe because of this, or some other reason, there are only two lampstands.

Some other reason may be the need for at least two witnesses to establish a truth, according to the Law of Moses (Deut 17:6). This stipulation carried over into the New Testament. Indeed, when Jesus sent his disciples out as witnesses of the kingdom of God, he sent them out two by two (Luke 10). When the church sent Paul out as a missionary they sent Barnabas with him. Ministry should be done with at least two persons bearing witness to the truth of the gospel.

**2.Power**

These lampstands were ‘*standing before the Lord of the earth’* (11:4). They were as servants of the Most High God, ready to go forth at his command. They would go forth in the power of Almighty God as witnesses to the world of the salvation and judgment of God. These witnesses went forth clothed in sackcloth, a symbol of lament and mourning. The message they proclaim will touch people hearts, it will stir the conscience and people will react. Some will humble themselves, repent and believe, but others will reject the message and become antagonistic. They will seek to harm the witnesses. This has been the experience of faithful witnesses even since sin entered this world.

The prophet Jeremiah comes to mind as a man who went about clothed in sackcloth. He was hated by the king, and most of the people, for the message he preached. But before him Elijah also suffered greatly for his faithful witness, being hunted by Jezebel for many years. And before him Moses had a tough time dealing with rebellion among the people he was leading to the promise land. But it was in the land of Egypt, as he confronted the heathen ruler, that the Lord displayed his power through the plagues that he sent upon the Egyptians.

The Jews often tried to stone Jesus because they did not like the message he was preaching- but they could not because his hour had yet come. They tried to kill Peter but the Lord brought him out of prison- and Herod who tried to kill him was put to death by the Lord. The Jews sought to stone Paul but the Lord preserved him and struck his enemies with blindness.

Witnessing the truth from God is always a bitter/sweet experience, an experience which John had as he ate the little book (10: 10). It is done clothed in sackcloth, not in king’s robes. But remember, it is done in the power of the Holy Spirit. No one can harm the servants of God unless and until God allows. ‘*If anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies’* (11:5). The witnesses were not violent, of course. The kingdom of God will not be established with a physical sword like man-made religions. This fire from the mouth is symbolic. It refers to the word of God that goes forth from the mouth. Jesus said, ‘*He who rejects me and does not receive my words has that which judges him- the word that I have spoken will judge him the last day’* (Jn 12:48). The word of God that witnesses speak, the word of God that you speak as his witnesses, is like a two-edged sword. It is a word of salvation, and also a word of judgment.

The two witnesses, as already mentioned, are likened to two principal OT prophets, Moses and Elijah. These two men appeared with Jesus when he was transfigured on the mountain. Moses, as we know, confronted paganism in Egypt, and Elijah confronted apostasy in Israel. In the power of God, Moses turned water into blood as one of the ten terrible plagues that the Lord sent upon the Egyptians when they refused to let the people of God go and worship. ‘*Elijah prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain for three and a half years’* (James 5:17). At the end of this time he confronted the people with their apostasy, and called for judgment upon the prophets of Baal.

**3.How long?**

The witness will prophesy for 1260 days (11:3). This is the same as 42 months or three and a half years. Three and a half years was the time God withheld the rain in Israel. From Egypt to Canaan, Moses led Israel for 42 years. The number 1260 has symbolic significance in the light of OT prophecy, and even NT events. How long was the ministry of Jesus? How long was Jesus in the tomb? We will come across such allusions later in this chapter and in the following chapters (eg.12:6,14).

Why the reference to time periods in this prophetic book changes from days, to months, and to years is unclear. However, the period of 1260 days, being the same as 42 months, is still to be understood as the interval from the first to the second coming of Jesus. The Cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the single most important event in history of this world. We recognise this in the calendars we use: BC for before Christ, and AD after the year of the Master/Lord in Latin.

Is the Cross and resurrection the single most important event in your life? Jesus came into this world and redirected history. Has he come into your life and redirected your life. Whether you like it or not, you are living in the Last Days. You are fast approaching Judgment Day. You cannot change history, or delay the second coming of Jesus, but you can change your life. You must decide whether you will accept or reject the powerful witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**A beastly death** Revelation 11: 7-10

*‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel’* (Mark 1:15). With these words Jesus began his ministry. ‘*When the fullness of time had come God sent forth his Son’* (Gal 4:4). God sent his Son into this world at the time determined since the beginning, according to his divine timetable. Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth.

In the garden of Eden Satan effectively captured this earth when he led Adam and Eve to disobey God. They listened to and obeyed Satan, thereby acknowledging him as king and becoming his subjects. As such they exalted themselves against God their creator and true king. Such rebellion reached a peak at the tower of Babel. Such rebellion is seen all around us today, and even enters our own hearts if we give way to the tempting voice of Satan.

Satan even tempted Jesus when he came into this world. He offered Jesus world dominion by giving him all the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4:5). All worldly kingdoms belong to Satan. Jesus did not come to set up an alternative worldly kingdom. Jesus is not out there in the market place of religions, as is so often portrayed. He did not even come to set up a dominant worldly kingdom. It is not just that Jesus is a better king than all others; He is King of kings.

Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God and to do this all other kingdoms must go. ‘*The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever’* (11:15). All other kingdoms will be destroyed. We know this for certain because of the victory of the Cross. Do not be deceived by the power and glory of earthly kingdoms that you see today.

**1.Time fulfilled**

The two witnesses, who symbolise the church in these last days, prophesy for 1260 days, a long but definite period. They prophesy with power and cannot be harmed, even though ‘earth dwellers’ take offense at their words (11:10). They are divinely protected for the divinely ordained period of prophesying. When this time is completed the scene changes. They come under attack from the Evil One and are overcome (11:7). Such a scene is reminiscent of the ministry of Jesus. ‘Just as the three and one half years duration of Jesus’ ministry is identified with the course of the witness’s ministry (11:2-3), so also the time of his apparent defeat at the end of his ministry is associated with the conclusion of their period of ministry’ (Beale). Jesus came declaring, ‘the time is fulfilled’. ‘*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’* he announced in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:21).

Jesus came in this world and he ministered every day according to the divine timetable. No one could touch him until his hour had come. When that hour came Satan entered Judas, who went out to betray his master. ‘*Behold the hour is at hand and the Son of man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners’* (Mat 26:45). The ministry of Jesus ended with him being killed by his enemies, the enemies of God the Father. He was killed by those who rejected him because of the words that he spoke.

No one can harm the servants of God unless God allows. The apostle Paul walked each day in the light of this great truth. He went up to Jerusalem knowing the hostility that awaited him there- even death (Acts 21:13). It is still the same with ministry today. Do not be discouraged but be assured as you witness the truth of the gospel that the Lord is with you. He will give you words to say and keep you from harm until the day he has determined (Luke 21:15).

**2.Witnesses killed**

*‘The beast that ascends out of the abyss will make war against them, and overcome them, and kill them’* (11:7). This is the first mention of the beast in this book, although we have come across the abyss in chapter 9. We saw smoke coming out of this pit, and horrible tormenting locusts in this smoke. The leader of these was an angel called Abaddon or Apollyon. The beast is probably a different symbol for this same angel. The beast will feature more in later chapters. This destroyer comes from below, not from above. He comes to make war, not peace. Such features are fitting for the enemy of Christ and his church.

OT readers, like those to whom John sent this letter, would have been familiar with the figure of the beast from the vision of Daniel (Dan 7). Daniel saw four beasts coming up out of the sea to make war against the saints. One in particular ‘*will persecute the saints of the Most High, and shall intend to change times and law. Then the saints shall be given into his hand for a time, times and half time’* (Dan 7:25). The beast of Daniel 7 represents an evil king and kingdom that persecutes the saints. In the immediate context this refers to Antiochus Epiphanies who attacked Jerusalem and desecrated the temple in 168-164BC. Further on in NT times it refers to the destruction of the temple and dispersion of the Jews when the Roman ruler, Titus, overran the city in AD70. Jesus was mindful of this as he spoke of the future (Luke 21). But the ultimate fulfillment of Daniel’s vision is the same as that of John’s vision. Not just the agents of Satan but Satan himself will enter the world to make war against the saints. He will attempt to exterminate the church at the end of the church age in a brief period of intense persecution. This final onslaught is seen in parallel visions in Revelation 17:8 and 20:7.

The depraved and evil nature of this beast/Satan and his followers is seen in the way the dead bodies of these witnesses are treated. The ultimate indignity inflicted upon a person in the ancient world was to refuse burial. Bodies of criminals would be left in the open for dogs and vultures to devour. To add to this dishonouring of the dead, the ‘earth dwellers’ will actually party and send gifts to one another as the bodies of these saints lie exposed in the street. These people come from every tribe, tongue and nation (11:9). This is a formula meant to include the entire human race. We saw it earlier with the gathering around the throne in heaven. There it was of men and women rejoicing in the salvation of God. Here it is of men and women rejoicing in the death of God’s servants.

The enemies of Jesus mocked him even as he hung upon the Cross. They probably rejoiced when they finally saw him dead. They would not have taken him down except for the Sabbath Day. They would have cast him into a common grave after taking him down from the Cross if Josephus of Arimethea had not come to give him a decent burial. Gloating over the suffering of others is a mark of evil. God will judge such evil (Ezekiel 25).

**3.The great city**

*‘Their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city’* (11: 8). Connecting this phrase with the final phrase of the verse – ‘*where also our Lord was crucified’* –leads many to conclude that this great city is Jerusalem. But we must note the words in between. Moreover, Jerusalem is called the holy city, not the great city (11:2). In Revelation the great city almost always refers to Babylon (14:80) - but still it is symbolic not literal. This great city is ‘*spiritually called Sodom and Egypt’*. Sodom was destroyed by God because of corruption and immorality. Egypt was destroyed by God because of its harsh oppression of God’s people and rejection of God’s word. These names came to represent such forms of wickedness, and the judgment of God upon such sin.

Jerusalem, the city where our Lord was crucified, was no better than Sodom or Egypt. Spiritually it was like them. It opposed, oppressed and killed the Son of God. This great city represents any city hostile to the word of God. Such a city will come under judgment, just like Sodom and Egypt. Babylon and Rome are also seen as corrupt and persecuting cities in Revelation. For NT believers, Rome was the seat of the Caesar, and the city from which persecution flowed upon the church. Peter and Paul, and many others, were killed in Rome (64-65AD).

The victory celebrations of the beast and his followers will be short lived according to this vision. It will last for only three and a half days, a short period compared to the three and a half years of their ministry, and very short in the light of eternity. Like the smoke that came out of the abyss with Satan, so he will soon disappear. ‘*The court shall be seated and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and destroy it forever’* (Dan 7:26).

Do not be afraid, dear child of God, when you see reveling over evil in the streets. Mardi Gras parades and political rallies will be short lived. The kingdoms of this world are disappearing. Jesus Christ is coming to establish his eternal kingdom. It has already been inaugurated; the victory has already been obtained at the Cross and resurrection.

As Jesus ate the last Passover with his disciples he told them, ‘I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God’ (Luke 22:16). He went on to say, ‘*I bestow on you a kingdom just as my Father bestowed upon me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel’* (Luke 22:29-30). As you eat the bread and drink the cup today, do you look forward to this kingdom and to eternity at the table of the Lord in heaven?

**Resurrection triumph** Revelation 11: 11-14

*‘The hand of the Lord came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley that was full of dry bones’* (Ezek 37:1). In a vision, Ezekiel heard dry bones rattling and coming together. He saw sinews and flesh and skin cover them. He saw the breath of life return to these dry bones. God was revealing to Ezekiel his plan for the return of the exiles from captivity in Babylon.

The vision which the Lord sent to John has many similarities to Ezekiel’s vision. It speaks of the resurrection of two faithful witnesses who represent the church, the people of God. The people of God were first delivered from bondage in Egypt- salvation for them and judgment for Egypt. They again came under bondage in Babylon. This was because of their own sin, but God still held their captors responsible. God would judge Babylon and bring a remnant back to Jerusalem.

In the NT we find another great salvation/ judgment event in the Cross of Jesus Christ. In fact, this is the fulfillment of these OT events. Jesus died to set free the Lord’s chosen people. He paid the ransom. With great power God raised Jesus from the dead, demonstrating acceptance of his sacrifice and declaring judgment on his enemies. That final judgment is the subject of the visions which John had, including this vision of the two witnesses. Their faithful witness for 1260 days provides the basis for divine judgment. ‘*The gospel will be preached throughout the whole world* ***as a witness to the nations*** *and then the end will come’* said Jesus (Mat 24:14).

**1.Resurrection glory**

The beast, symbolising Satan, overcame the two witnesses and killed them. Their bodies lay exposed in the ‘street of the great city’ (not ‘holy city’) for three and a half days. The followers of the beast would not allow them a decent burial. At the end of this relatively brief period God intervened to vindicate his two witnesses. After three and a half days the breath of life from God entered the dead witnesses and they stood on their feet. Death could not hold them. The God who first gave them life, who breathed into the nostrils of man when he was first created, breathed anew into these faithful witnesses.

The witnesses did not stay any longer in the world of fallen men, but were called up to heaven. ‘*Come up here’* a loud voice said, and a cloud carried them up to heaven (11; 12). Some commentators link these words with those found in 4:1 and speak of a secret rapture of the church. But there is nothing secret about this resurrection and ascension. The only rapture of the church will be when Jesus comes on the clouds- again this will not be secret (1Thes 4).

This resurrection reminds us of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. He was taken up and a cloud received him (Acts 1:9). The resurrection of Jesus is the basis for our hope in the resurrection of the body (1Cor 15:12f). In this vision ‘the ascent of the witnesses figuratively affirms the final, decisive deliverance and vindication of God’s people at the end of time’. Faithful witnesses of the gospel will suffer and even be put to death by ‘earth dwellers’ who find their message ‘tormenting’, but their time of suffering will be short and in the end they will be vindicated by God.

**2.Resurrection terror**

God will judge according to truth. No one will escape his judgment. Glory, honour and peace await those who do good- both Jew and Gentile. But affliction and anguish awaits those who are self-seeking evildoers- both Jew and Gentile (Rom 2). The partying of the beast’s followers came to an abrupt halt when God raised the two dead witnesses in the street of the great city. Great fear/terror struck these wicked revelers, these enemies of God and everything good.

‘Earth dwellers’ think death is the end. Have you noticed at funerals these days there is often more celebration than mourning. It is a hollow celebration of the past life of the dead person because that is all the wicked now about. There is no thought to what comes after death. ‘Let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die’ is all many can say. They thought by killing these witnesses their torment would stop. What a shock it was for these unbelievers to see these witnesses rise from the dead. They not only feared these men, but realised that God is not dead and were terrified- and with good reason. The enemies of God’s people are enemies of God, and to have God as your enemy is most terrifying.

Are you an enemy of God? You were born an enemy. If you walk in sin, if you refuse to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, you are an enemy of God. The wrath of God is upon all who fail to worship and glorify him as the only true God. By his death Jesus satisfied the wrath of God against sin, so it is only in Jesus Christ that you escape the wrath of God. Only in Jesus Christ can we have peace with God. Are you still at war with the Almighty God, or are you at ‘*peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’* (Rom 5:1).

**3.Great earthquake**

The resurrection of the witnesses occurred in the presence of their enemies- and God’s enemies. God’s vindication extends beyond personal resurrection to judgment upon the city where they were killed. ‘*In the same hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. In the earthquake 7000 people were killed’* (11:13). In the Greek it reads, ‘the names of seven thousand people’. All those who were killed had names.

Flood, fire and earthquake can kill large numbers of people- not to mention man-made bombs. Although we do not experience earthquakes where we live, they are perhaps the most terrifying and deadly of all ‘natural’ disasters. When the earth shakes and buildings collapse, many get crushed to death. In the book of Revelation the earthquake is a symbol of God’s judgment (8:5, 11:19, 16:18). With the opening of the sixth seal there was a great earthquake, and terrified people fled to the hills. Now, as the sixth trumpet comes to the end (*the second woe is past*), a great earthquake destroys a tenth of the city and kills 7000 people.

The death of the last and greatest prophet of God was accompanied by an earthquake (Mat 27:51). Those watching Jesus die were terrified when this happened saying, ‘truly this was the Son of God’. When Jesus was raised from the dead there was another earthquake, and the guards were terrified and became like dead men (Mat 28:4).

This of course, is historical fact- it happened 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. What we have in Revelation is a vision full of symbols, but symbols that are to be interpreted in the light of Scripture. These visions refer to the future return of Jesus, which is no less real than his death and resurrection.

A tenth of the city, a round figure, seems a small proportion in the light of the wickedness just perpetrated in this city. Seven thousand people were killed and the rest were terrified. This number is interpreted in various ways- some even take it literally. The population of Jerusalem has been reckoned at 70,000 in AD 70. Bauckham, in ‘reverse arithmetic’, twists it to refer to remnant imagery in the OT, specifically the 7000 who did not bow the knee to Baal in Elijah’s day.

The terrified survivors ‘*gave glory to the God of heaven’* (11:13). Many believe this to refer to repentance and conversion. Dispensationalists see in verse 13 the final conversion of the Jewish people as a whole, a mass conversion of the Jews. But there is no indication of this elsewhere in this book or in Scripture (apart from Romans 11). Others think it refers to the conversion of the majority of Gentiles on the earth at the conclusion of history. But do these words point to true conversion?

The ‘God of heaven’ is a rare title for God. In the NT it is found only here and in Revelation 16:11 (‘*they blasphemed the God of heaven... and did not repent’*). It is, however, a popular title in the book of Daniel. Daniel was living among polytheistic pagans in Babylon. When Nebuchadnezzar saw the power of Daniel’s God he said, ‘*truly your God is the God of gods’* (Dan 2:47). After experiencing the power of God personally he said, ‘*I blessed the Most High and praised him’* (Dan 4:34). But there is no mention of Nebuchadnezzar ever repenting. And no mention of him ever turning way from other gods.

Similarly, there is no word about repentance by these survivors, even though they ‘*gave glory to God’* (11:13). They were simply ‘scared to death’, we might say. This was not a positive fear of the Lord as found in the heart of believers but a terror of the Lord (the Greek word is different). The glory they gave to God was more from a terrified heart than a changed heart. It was a case of the knee being forced to bow to Jesus out of fear and expediency.

The majority of people in Australia write ‘Christian’ on their census form. But have they all repented of their sin and believed in Jesus Christ? When some calamity strikes they may be ‘forced’ to pray, and may even go to church for a while. But do they truly glorify God in their words and works? Are they any different to the majority of people in India who are Hindus but happily worship Jesus as another god when it is convenient or expedient.

The sixth trumpet or third woe is past. The seventh trumpet is about to announce the final judgment of God.

**The Last Trumpet** Revelation 11: 15-19

In military tradition the ‘last post’ is sounded out across the camp as soldiers go to rest at the end of the day’s battle. You will be familiar with this tune being played on the bugle at Anzac day services. The tune is also played at funerals to signify the end of valiant service and victory on the battle field. It signals the end of the battle and the beginning of peace.

The seventh and last trumpet was sounded by the angel in this vision given to John. Along with the sounding of the trumpet was a loud cry from heaven: ‘*the kingdom(s) of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ’* (11:15). This is a cosmic cry of victory, of the end of the battle, indeed, of the end of the war.

**1.Christ conquers**

When the previous trumpets sounded, destruction came upon a third of the land, the sea, the rivers and the sun, and then upon a third of mankind. John saw plaques, not unlike those that Moses saw God inflict upon the Egyptians. Through these plagues God judged Egypt, finally destroying Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea. God delivered his people from the hands of the enemy and brought them into their inheritance, to the land of rest. This OT background continues with the seventh trumpet. The declaration, ‘*He shall reign forever and ever’* (11:15), is the same as that made by Moses and the children of Israel when the Lord saved them and destroyed the Egyptians (Ex 15:18): ‘*The Lord shall reign forever and ever’*.

The Lord brought his chosen people into Canaan, judging and destroying the nations along the way. They marched around Jericho seven times with priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant and blowing trumpets. Note the presence of the same things in this passage. The walls of Jericho came down and the city was destroyed, never to be rebuilt. This passage notes the end of the evil world kingdoms. They will all be destroyed, just like Jericho and the other Canaanite kingdoms. The kingdoms of this world are those that seek after power in this world. They defy God and exalt man. We think of Hitler as a modern example of such a ruler, but in effect all earthly kingdoms are the same. Even the kings and queens of England have opposed the true church, as John Knox and other Reformers testify.

Is it only political kingdoms that we are to consider here? The ‘*kingdoms of this world’* extend beyond politics. There are global economic kingdoms with rich and powerful men at the head. There are influential think- tanks and philosophical groups that oppose the kingdom of God. At the more local level are rulers similarly motivated by sin and directed by Satan in opposing the kingdom of God. All will be destroyed when their rulers are taken out and Satan himself is cast into the lake of fire.

The last trumpet heralds the coming of Christ in all his glory. He **has** come- the tense is not future but perfect (11:15,17). With this cry from heaven, all the power that Satan was allowed is dissolved. The worldly kingdoms over which he reigned as the ‘ruler of this world’ crumbled the instant Christ came. Here is the answer to the prayer of the martyrs- ‘*How long, O Lord they cried, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth’* (6:10).

Here is the answer to your prayer also. Do you not pray, ‘*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’*? What are you praying here? Do you really want the kingdom of God to come? If so, then the kingdoms of this world must go. You cannot pray for the Lord to come while at the same time wishing he would delay so you can enjoy this world a bit longer.

In this vision we see God’s kingdom come in it fullness and finality, with the overthrow of all earthly kingdoms. The battle is not even mentioned- it just happened. There is no question, there is no doubt, about the ultimate victory of Jesus. Nothing and no one will oppose God again. Nothing and no one will persecute the people of God again. Christ shall reign forever and ever.

Christ inaugurated his kingdom when he came to this earth*- ‘The kingdom of God is at hand’* he declared. His death and resurrection was confirmation of this victory. ‘*Now is the judgment of this world, now the ruler of this world will be cast out’* said Jesus, shortly before he was crucified (Jn 12:31). This victory is consummated in this vision. Even now Christ is on the throne in heaven, but when he comes again he will destroy all his enemies and the only kingdom that exists will be the kingdom of the Lord and of his Christ.

Back in heaven, John saw the 24 elders fall down and worship God when they heard the seventh trumpet sound. We saw them worshipping in this heavenly throne room back in chapter 4. This is the throne from which all judgments emanate. They give thanks and praise the Lord for taking power and reigning over all creation (11:17). The anthem of praise is now, ‘the One who is and who was’, in contrast to the earlier, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come’ according to most MSS. The, ‘who is to come’ has now arrived.

**2.Judgment**

*‘Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain*

*The kings of the earth set themselves*

*and rulers take counsel together*

 *against the Lord and his anointed*’ (Psalm 2)

It was said of the apostles that ‘*they have turned the world upside down’* with their preaching (Acts 17:6). Like Jesus, the apostles simply preached the kingdom of God. They did not take up arms, they did not go into politics, and they did not march in the streets. There did not pressure anyone to believe but simply preached the gospel of the kingdom of God. Yet, for this they were violently opposed. The world raged against them, throwing them out of one city after another. The world continues to rage against faithful witnesses of Christ.

Remember how the Gadarene demoniac recognised Jesus as the Son of God. He feared Jesus would torment him. And the demon-possessed girl at Philippi recognised Paul and Silas as servants of the Most High God. These are instances of kingdom conflict. The Devil or Satan recognises his enemy. His followers who rule over earthly kingdoms also recognise Christians as a threat to their power and authority. And so they rage against then.

Do you sometimes wonder at the persecution directed at just a handful of Christians in some nations? Do you wonder at those who do their utmost to keep Christians out of the workplace? Do you wonder at the vehemence with which evolutionists and some scientists attack those who believe in the Creator. The kingdoms of this world oppose the kingdom of God, but not for much longer. In this vision John is shown the wrath of God coming upon the nations and the dead being judged. Death is no escape for persecuting tyrants, evolutionists, or atheists. They will all face divine judgment. God will ‘*destroy those who destroy the earth’* (11:18).

It is a great irony that those who think they are preserving the earth are actually destroying it. There is a proverb that says, ‘*a righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel’* (Prov 12:10). Those who fail to see the hand of God in all that exists are really fumbling in the dark when it comes to the environment and the animals. They try to make an enduring world but are in fact destroying it, according to the word of God. The root of all our problems is sin; sin in the heart of all people. Sin brought man into conflict with God, with other men, and with all God created.

**3.Reward**

The song of thanksgiving refers not only to judgment but to rewards also. Who will be rewarded when Christ comes again? The prophets and saints of God, and all who fear the name of the Lord (11:18). There is no reason to make a distinction between prophets and saints in this verse. Remember the faithful witnesses who were killed and whom God raised from the dead, earlier in this chapter.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the centre of all NT preaching. Why? Because Jesus took the penalty for sin, and by his resurrection declares that all who believe in him will live. All who believe have the hope of the resurrection. They will be raised to enter into the presence of the Lord, and reign with him eternally. Do you look forward to your heavenly reward in Christ Jesus? ‘*You have made us kings and priests to our God, and we shall reign’* was part of what these elders sang in a previous song (5:10).

**4.Covenant fulfilled**

Finally, John saw the temple opened in heaven. The Ark of the Covenant was inside. This picture from the OT tells of the presence of God in his temple and of access into the Holy of Holies. The Ark was the focus of worship in the OT. On the Day of Atonement blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat above the Ark. It was also a symbol of judgment. Not only were the priests blowing trumpets as they marched around Jericho, they were carrying the Ark.

Under the New Covenant Jesus is on the throne in heaven. From his throne he will come in judgment upon the whole world. ‘*Lightning’s, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail’* come from the throne. This happened when the seventh seal was opened - only now great hail is added to the outpouring of divine judgment upon the earth. The end of the world has come. From the days of Adam, all who have ever been born are judged by Christ who now reigns forever and ever.

**The Woman, the Child and the Dragon** Revelation 12:1-6

‘What is happening to me? Wherever I turn I find trouble. I feel like I will go under any minute! Why is all this happening to me?’ Have you ever asked such questions? If so, you will find help in the Bible. You will find help in Job. You can imagine what this man felt when he got news that all his possessions were stolen or destroyed, and then that his whole family had perished when their house collapsed. ‘Why?’ asked Job. He brought his questions to God. The amazing thing in the book of Job is the ‘behind the scenes’ view the reader is given. We are shown a whole new dimension to his suffering.

The Christians to whom John wrote this Book of Revelation were suffering intense persecution. The Jews were accusing them, and the Romans were harassing them. ‘Why?’ they asked. ‘What have we done to deserve this?’ Through these visions from the Lord, John takes them behind the scenes as it were. The battle they are engaged in is not confined to this earth. In fact, the real battle is in heaven. Job’s suffering came because of the accusations of Satan, and because God allowed Job to be tested. God was allowing the churches in Asia to suffer, and he allows the church today to suffer at the hands of Satan, for his own glory. But the good news is that this suffering is limited in extent and in time. Satan is on a leash as it were, and he will be reined in and destroyed in the end.

‘The main point of chapter 12 is the protection of God’s people against Satan because of Christ’s decisive victory through his death and resurrection. The purpose is to encourage the readers to persevere in their witness despite persecution’. Jesus said he came that he might destroy the works of the Devil (1Jn 3:8), and the power of the Devil (Heb 2:14).

**1.A woman**

The seventh trumpet sounded and the nations were judged. The wrath of God against the wicked was fully and finally revealed. In chapter 12 we come to another sign appearing in heaven. We come to a major division in this book- some say to the second half of the book of Revelation. But it is not to be viewed chronologically. What we have in chapters 12-14 is a deeper view into the kingdom conflict or cosmic battle going on in the universe. This battle persists even though the enemy of God and of God’s people is already defeated. This chapter takes us right back to the beginning when ‘*that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world’* (12:9) deceived Eve and plunged the whole world into spiritual darkness and death. But even there in Eden the Lord declared to the serpent, ‘*I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heal* (Gen 3:15).

In this vision John saw a woman and her child being confronted by a dragon. The fiery red dragon was on the rampage, especially after he failed to devour the male child. His actions are consistent with one having a bruised head. In his rage he went after the woman, and then after the rest of her offspring. If you belong to Christ you are among her offspring, as we will see. The woman John saw was magnificent and glorious. She was clothed with the sun and stood on the moon. She was garlanded with twelve stars. This woman was also pregnant and about to give birth. John saw her give birth to a male child which the dragon tried to destroy.

So who is this woman? From this description our first suggestion might be Mary, the mother Jesus. The Roman Catholic Church strongly holds to this understanding because it supports their veneration of Mary. It is interesting however, that the woman has other offspring (12: 17), a fact that does not support their doctrine of her perpetual virginity. A closer look at this woman will show that the imagery extends well beyond the person of Mary.

The twelve stars point to her being Israel because of the twelve patriarchs or tribes. This is supported by Joseph’s offensive dream that the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to him (Gen 37:11). The OT prophets often spoke of Israel as a woman- mostly as an unfaithful woman, but sometimes as faithful and bearing children (Jer 4:31, Isa 26:17-18). In his incarnation, Jesus was a Jew. He was of the seed of Abraham, and of David (Rom 1:3, 9:5). So not just Mary but all Israel in a sense gave birth to the Messiah- ‘*of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came’* (Rom 9:5).

In the NT the church is referred to as the bride of Christ (Eph 5). The church is founded upon the apostles and prophets. The number twelve refers to the twelve apostles, as well as the twelve tribes. So the woman alludes to the continuation of true Israel in the twelve apostles and the church that they represent. Her other offspring bear testimony to Jesus Christ (12:17). This image of the woman giving birth to a child who will ‘*rule all the nations’* will later be contrasted with another woman, the great harlot/prostitute (17:1) who satisfies the desires of the kings of the earth in cohorts with the dragon or Satan.

What happens to this first woman and her child? Her child is caught up to God and his throne, while the woman ‘*fled into the wilderness’* (12:6). She was chased there by the dragon. But God had prepared this place for her and cared for her. And there she stayed for 1260 days (12:6). This time interval we understand to be that between Christ’s first and second coming, the church age.

What is the wilderness? After delivering his people from oppression in Egypt, God cared for them in the wilderness for 42 months. He protected them and fed them just as he did the woman in this vision, until he brought them into their rest. God will protect his church; he will keep us as his people until he brings us safely into our eternal rest.

**2.A Child**

The woman ‘*gave birth to a male child who was to rule the nations with an iron rod/scepter. And the child was caught up to God and his throne’* (12:5). This is unmistakably the Christ-child or Messiah. ‘The scepter shall not depart from Judah’ said Jacob in his blessing (Gen 49:10). In Psalm 2 the Son of God shall rule the nations with an iron rod. So here again the child is spoken of as a cosmic ruler/shepherd- a ruler who will march forth to take nations promised to him (19:15). The seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent remember! The child was caught up to God. There is no mention of the life and ministry of Jesus- he was simply born and then snatched up to heaven. Although Jesus as a child was snatched away to Egypt to protect him from Herod’s horrific infanticide, the snatching away here refers to his resurrection and ascension.

Jesus’ coming into this world and his return to the Father were significant events in themselves. The Son of God came down to a fallen world, to a world under the rule of Satan. He suffered satanic attacks all his days but remained obedient to God. He came to overthrow Satan (Jn 12:31, 1Jn 3:8), and by his death and resurrection he did just that. He ‘*destroyed him who has the power of death, that is the devil’* (Heb 2:14).

In all of this let us remember this deeper dimension to our lives, and remember that our fight is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and the ruler of this present age, namely Satan. We are engaged in a spiritual battle. So we need spiritual weapons- the weapons of human warfare will not suffice. We must pray and take up the word of God. How well are you armed for this battle? Are you still relying on your fists, on guns or on bombs to win the battle? If so, Satan is laughing his head off, for you are exactly where he wants you.

**3.Dragon**

Know your enemy is the first rule of warfare, whether it is Hitler, Osama bin Laden, or Satan himself. Many people are fighting battles without even knowing who their enemy is. They look for someone to blame for their troubles and end up attacking some person, even their spouse and their children. The great troubler of our souls is Satan. He is the one who tempts us, who accuses us, and desires our downfall. The sooner we recognize our enemy, the sooner we will get victory and peace in our life.

The fiery red dragon we are told is the Devil or Satan (12:9). Satan means adversary and accuser. The Devil is a deceiver. This is what we see from him right through the Bible, from Eden to Gethsemane and beyond. Why the symbol of the dragon you might ask? Some like to tell us it comes from ancient NE mythologies, but we find ample reference in the Hebrew literature. The wicked kingdom of Egypt is often portrayed as a dragon or large sea creature (Ps 74:14, Ezek 29:3). Isaiah speaks of the day when the Lord will slay this sea dragon (Isa 27:1). So, as Egypt was a dragon that persecuted and pursued the people of God until it was destroyed in the sea, Satan will also be cast into the lake of fire.

The seven heads with seven crowns symbolise the supposedly complete rule of Satan. The ten horns represent great power (cf. the ten-horned beast of Daniel 7). Satan thinks he has all power and authority, but in truth only has what God allows. Christ is the true ruler, the one with the iron scepter. The dragon is red, stained with the blood of the saints.

In this chapter the dragon, that ancient serpent, makes his appearance. He is the same one who deceived Eve, who accused Job and continues to accuse the saints of God. But the child born of a woman and then caught up to God proves to be his nemesis. Jesus came to defeat Satan and destroy his power. Satan was the one behind the attacks upon the churches in Asia. Knowing their true enemy, and knowing that he was already defeated, was a great comfort and strength to these poor, persecuted Christians.

**Satan thrown out of heaven** Revelation 12:7-17

What do you know about angels? Are they feathery-white all over, with wings so they can fly? Angels are popular on TV commercials at present. There are angels that love ‘divine cream cheese’. There is also a breakfast cereal portrayed as your ‘guardian angel’. It is interesting that this latter angel is a man rather than a young girl- but he still has those wings! These depictions have little basis in truth. When angels appear in the Bible they do so in human form, but there is never a word about wings. The Bible tells us that ‘*all angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation’* (Heb 1:14). Angels are created beings that inhabit the spirit world. They serve the church and believers from there, or can appear visibly. An angel from heaven appeared in Gethsemane to strengthen Jesus (Luke 22:43).

The Book of Revelation begins with John sending a letter to each of the seven churches in Asia Minor. They are addressed to the angels of these churches. In his vision John sees and hears many angels. Angels blew each of the seven trumpets. Few angels are named in Scripture; we come to one of these in this passage before us today.

What do we know about the angel called Michael? This is not the first mention of him. He appeared in Daniel’s visions (Dan 10, 12) and is mentioned in the book of Jude, where he contended with the devil about the body of Moses (Jude 9). ‘In Daniel, Michael is closely associated with one like the Son of man, and both are set forth as heavenly representatives of Israel’. Michael, a chief prince or archangel, came to help the Son of man who was contending with the evil prince of the kingdom of Persia (Dan 10:13).

**1.Rejoicing in heaven**

The vision which began in 12:1 continues, with John seeing war break out in heaven. He had previously seen events on earth with the dragon standing before the pregnant woman waiting to devour her child. Even then his tail dragged a third of the stars of heaven, probably symbolising angels, and threw them to the earth (12:4). The dragon failed to destroy the child so went after the woman. The chase is picked up again in 12:13. In 12:7 we are shown another perspective, a heavenly perspective that is behind events on the earth.

What was going on in heaven? War! The dragon is now seen in heaven at war with Michael and his angels. Michael is the guardian angel of Israel, continuing into the church of the NT. The dragon we are told is ‘*that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world’* (12:9). He was the serpent who came into the Garden of Eden to accuse God and deceive Eve. He accused God of lying to Adam and Eve. God said to Adam, ‘do not eat of the tree that is in the middle of the garden for the day you eat of it you shall surely die’. Satan said, ‘you will not surely die’, and Eve fell for the lie.

Satan has existed from the time of creation. Created by God, he exalted himself against God, and was removed from God’s presence. His fate was sealed there in Eden when God declared, ‘*the seed of the woman shall bruise your head’* (Gen 3:15). Satan became the adversary of God, and all God’s people. As we see in the story of Job, on a certain day Satan came before God and made accusations against Job. He said that God was prospering Job, and in effect bribing Job, to worship him, and that Job was not sincere in his faith.

Jesus was acutely aware of Satan’s opposition when he was on the earth. He saw Satan enter Judas as he went to betray him. He even rebuked Peter for being a mouthpiece for Satan. Jesus told his disciples that he saw Satan fall like lightning as he anticipated the victory of his own death and resurrection (Luke 10:18). What Jesus saw was this war in heaven and Satan being cast out of heaven.

As in Daniel’s vision, Michael the archangel helped the Son of God in overcoming Satan and his angels. Satan was defeated and cast out of heaven (12:9). He was thrown down to the earth along with his angels. When did this occur and how did Michael and his angels prevail against the great dragon or Satan? The loud voice from heaven explained how they overcame Satan- ‘*by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony’* (12:11). The lion of the tribe of Judah prevailed. The lamb that was slain prevailed and became the Lamb on the throne in heaven (5:5, 6). It was by his blood, by his death and resurrection that Jesus prevailed in the war against Satan. When he returned to heaven Satan had to leave. He was cast out. ‘*Having disarmed the principalities and powers, Jesus made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them’* (Col 2:15).

At Eden Satan prevailed, gaining the power of death. Whenever a man or woman sinned, Satan could say to God, ‘Look! You said they must die’. So death prevailed from Adam to Moses, and until Christ. But through this man’s obedience and righteous act came justification of life (Rom 5). Death was defeated in the death of Christ. Satan’s power was destroyed in the death of Christ. Now when he accuses the brethren saying, ‘look at his/her sin, they must die’, God says, ‘look at the Cross, Christ died for them’.

John heard rejoicing in heaven. He heard a song of praise, just like in 5:12- ‘*worthy is the Lamb who was slain’*. The heavenly choir sang, ‘*Now salvation has come and the kingdom of our God and the power of his Christ’* (12: 10). Who were the ones singing this victory song? They were those who prevailed in Christ ‘*by the word of their testimony’*. They were those who ‘*did not love their lives to death’* or, in other words, were ready to die for Christ (12:11). There were many martyrs under the altar in heaven (6:10) and there was a multitude of faithful witnesses who had died in Christ. They were those who clung to Christ, keeping the commandments and the testimony of Jesus Christ (12:17). Did not Jesus say, ‘*in this world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’* (Jn 16:33).

**2.Woe to the earth**

Where did Satan end up after being cast out of heaven? He was cast to the earth (12:9). ‘*Woe to the earth and the sea*!’ (12:12). In these last days, in the short time that Satan has left before being finally cast into the lake of fire (20:10), he is creating havoc on earth. His work is obvious, to us at least. Corruption and quarrels, fighting and war, men and women driven by hatred and revenge; is this not what we see today? This is the work of Satan. Satan is a liar. Satan is a murderer. All who are without Christ are pawns in the hands of Satan. Jesus said of the Jews, the strict law-keeping Jews who were trying to kill him- ‘you are of your father the devil’ (Jn 8).

There is no indication that his great wrath does not come until the millennium, or that the church will escape this wrath. Satan has come to make war on the earth, against the woman and the rest of her offspring (12:17). If her male child symbolised Christ, then the rest of her children must be brothers of Christ. Jesus was not ashamed to call believers his brothers (Heb 2:11). The whole world, including the church, and even more so the church, will suffer under the wrath of Satan.

Satan still tries to accuse believers. He tells them, ‘God will not accept you because you have done such wicked things’. He says, ‘you must do good works to earn salvation, and that you are not able to do those works’. He gets believers to doubt their salvation, to doubt the reality of heaven and hell, and even to doubt his own reality. He tries to keep us from hearing of the wonderful grace of God in salvation and of the forgiveness of sin that we have in Jesus Christ.

**3.Watched by God**

His time is short. Satan is on the prowl seeking whom he may devour (1Peter 5:8). He is powerful but not all powerful. God can and will protect his people. He protected them in the Exodus when he brought them through the water and into the wilderness. Pharaoh threatened to drive Israel into the sea but the sea divided and they passed through on dry land. The agents of Satan were destroyed by those same waters. God led them through ‘*the great and terrible wilderness in which were fiery serpents and scorpions’* (Deut 8:15). In a thirsty land God provided water and also food. God protected them from their enemies and brought them into the land of rest.

Cast down to earth, Satan chased the woman. The woman was given wings to fly into the wilderness. Satan followed spewing out a great flood to drown her. But the earth opened up and swallowed the flood. God protected her as he did Israel, and as he does the people of God today. Christians in the churches of Asia were suffering greatly. Jews were accusing them, the Romans were persecuting them to death, and false teachers were deceiving them. They were the target of Satan on the rampage on earth. This is what John wanted them to understand. They were in a spiritual battle. Hold fast to Christ and you will overcome. ‘*Hold fast what you have till I come’* said Jesus. ‘*Hold fast that no one may take your crown’* (2:25, 3:11).

**Beast from the sea**  Revelation 13:1-10

The dragon, ‘*that serpent of old called the Devil and Satan’*, was cast out of heaven. He was cast to the earth where, in the short time that he has, he is making war against faithful Christians and the church of Christ. But how does Satan wage this war? We do not see Satan shooting at us or dropping bombs on us. For one thing, his attacks are often more subtle- more like guerilla war. And secondly, he has many agents leading the attack for him. One of these agents is revealed in this passage.

**1.Agent of Satan**

John saw the dragon cast down to the earth and straddling the land and the sea. It was as if he was rallying his forces, the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth. In the symbolism of this book, the sea is a cesspool of evil. There is no sea in the new heavens and the new earth. There is no new sea! As the beast emerged from the water John saw ten horns and then seven heads. This was one horrible and terrifying beast! He looked like the dragon himself (12:3), except that on his heads a blasphemous name was written, and his crowns were on his horns rather than his heads. Ten crowns are better than seven. Any crowns at all were, of course, pretentious for a beast that had been defeated.

As the body comes into view John saw what looked like a leopard with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion. This beast is characterised by its big mouth. He ‘*was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies’* (13:5,6). He blasphemed against God, against his name, against his tabernacle, and against the people of God. The features of this beast remind us of the vision which Daniel had when he was exiled in Babylon (Dan 7). He saw a lion, a bear, and a four-headed leopard coming up from the sea. It is as if these are all rolled into one beast in John’s vision, this beast being like the dreadful and terrible fourth beast with ten horns that Daniel saw. The little horn on the fourth beast had a mouth speaking great things, just like the one John saw.

Daniel was told that these four beasts stood for four kingdoms and that the ten horns stood for ten kings. The fourth beast is understood to represent the Roman Empire. The little horn is understood to be Antiochus Epiphanies the ruthless king who calling himself *theos*/god, overran Jerusalem (167BC) and set up the ‘abomination of desolation’ in the temple; but this fulfillment does no exhaust this prophecy.

The beast of the sea had seven heads symbolising a claim to be all powerful, just like the dragon. Satan lusts after power, seeking to be omnipotent like God. He thought Jesus would have a similar lust for power, and so he offered him all the power in the world if he would worship him, that is Satan. ‘*All authority I will give to you, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish’* (Luke 4:6). The dragon gave power and great authority to the beast of the sea, so much so that the ‘earth dwellers’ all worshipped this mighty and powerful figure. He was given authority over every tribe, tongue and nation. ‘This formula for humanity refers universally to all unredeemed people throughout the created earth, as in Dan 7:14, and has the same all-inclusive scope as in 5:9 and 7:9 where it refers to redeemed humanity throughout the cosmos’.

While the dragon gave this beast his power, ultimately it was God who gave him this power. His power was limited in extent and time. He was given authority for 42 months- Satan would not have imposed such a limit. Moreover, there was a predestined number who would worship him. There are those whose names have been written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world who will not worship the beast (13:8). Nevertheless, in this limited time the beast will make war with the saints with fierceness like that of a lion separated from her cubs.

One of the heads of this beast looked different to John. It had a distinctive scar from a mortal wound, a wound inflicted by a sword (13:3, 14). What does this feature point to in this vision? Many scholars think it points to Nero, the first persecuting emperor of Rome, and to his suicide in 68AD. His suicide was clouded in mystery, and a rumour spread that he had just disappeared (to Parthia) and would one day reappear, as if from the dead- the theory of Nero *redivivus*. Some believed that the emperor Domitian was a reincarnation of Nero.

But a closer look at the facts shows that this wounded head is a parody of Christ, the Lamb on the throne ‘*as though it had been slain’* (5:6). The Lamb had seven horns, the number of completion- the beast tried to be more powerful with ten horns. The beast is ‘taking off Christ’ in order to get people to worship him. Just as the true Christ has a death wound, having been slain to redeem people to God, so the false Christ, the anti-Christ also has a head wound. From another perspective, this bruised head is a fulfillment of the Eden prophecy that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15).

**2.Anti-Christian government**

Just as the dragon was seen as the power behind earthly kingdoms, so this beast of the sea is even more closely associated such evil kingdoms. He symbolises political and economic powers in this world that oppose God and oppress God’s people. The beasts of Daniel’s vision represented the kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, kingdoms that oppressed the people of God. John was writing this letter during the period of Roman rule. Roman governors arrived in Ephesus in ships decorated with images of Roman gods. John’s first readers were living under the rule of Domitian, a king who demanded to be addressed as, ‘Lord and god’. Domitian set up images in temples dedicated to himself. Here was blatant blasphemy in the style of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon.

But neither Nero nor Domitian ruled over all people, tribes, tongues and nations. While their anti-Christian rule was a manifestation of the beast of the sea, the power and authority of this beast was not limited to Rome. It encompasses the entire globe and continues throughout history until he is finally cast into the lake of fire (19:20). The beasts recovery from it mortal wound could be linked to the rise and fall of oppressive states, world systems and social structures. World rulers come and go and many leave their terrible footprint upon the church of God. The world is currently judging nations and their rulers for their environmental footprint. But the footprint that God sees is that of rulers who persecute the people of God. This beast goes forth trampling the poor and the people of God. He demands to be listened to, he demands to be worshipped, and woe to those who stand against him.

The beast may act by stealth, as we have seen in modern history. Anti- Christian governments did not cease with Rome. Millions were killed by Stalin in his attempt to eradicate the church of Christ. Millions were killed in Cambodia, and men and women are still suffering unto death in openly anti- Christian regimes today. Just as the Christians in Asia Minor were to see Satan’s hand behind their persecution by Domitian, so we today are to see Satan’s hand behind anti- Christian regimes. It was not by might nor by power, but by prayer that the Soviet Union fell. Are you praying against evil regimes today? Many of your fellow Christians are suffering at their hand; suffering under the crushing feet of the beast. Political and economic powers often go hand in hand. The British first came to India to trade. The East India Company refused to let Christians take the gospel to the people of India for fear their trade would be affected. William Carey was not allowed to settle where this company held the power.

Globalisation is going on a rapid rate today. Global companies wield great power over people and nations. Christians who believe the Bible are not welcome by such companies. They must trade on Sunday to make more profit, they must exploit the poor to get more profit, they must promote gambling to get more profit, and they must do embryonic stem cell research to get more profit. We hear the mantra, ‘market forces will determine the future’; we hear the mantra, ‘technology will determine the future’. We would do well to read such mantras as, ‘Satan and the beast of the sea will determine the future’. ‘*All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life’* (13:7).

**3.Anyone to hear**

What must the saints do when the beast declares war on them? Are they to take up arms and fight back? God has allowed the beast to make war and even to overcome the saints (13:7). How can this be? The Bible says that all authorities that exist are appointed by God (Rom 13:1). How can God allow evil regimes? What are believers to do when such regimes start to persecute them? This question was very real for John’s first readers and for many readers since.

*‘Patient endurance and faith’* are commanded by God (13:10). This is not the way of the world and it is not the message people want to hear. Each of the seven letters sent to the churches concludes with the words, ‘*he who has ears to hear let him hear’*- hear what- hear what the Spirit says. Christians will suffer, but let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to him as doing good as to a faithful Creator (1Peter 5:19). John adopts words from Jeremiah (Jer 15:2, 43:11) declaring that if anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he will go, if anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he shall be killed. God’s sovereign purposes will not be thwarted by Satan or his agents. His eternal purposes will be fulfilled.

God will preserve your soul even if Satan kills your body. God preserved Daniel in the lion’s den, and his friends in the fiery furnace. But remember their confession- even if it is not the will of God to save us from the flames we will not worship the beast. God is glorified through the death of his saints, when they remain faithful to the end. Will you remain faithful to God to the very end?

**Beast from the earth**  Revelation 13:11-18

Not long before we left India there was a big rush on the temples of Ganesh, the elephant god. I remember going to the city and finding the road blocked because of the crowd. What was the reason for this sudden rush to worship this idol? News got out, and spread like wildfire, that this idol was drinking milk. Thousands of people were coming with bottles or cups or spoons of milk to offer this idol. To have it drink your milk offering would have been immensely auspicious. Shortly after we arrived back in Australia I heard news that was remarkably similar. A priest in Brisbane reported that a statue of Mary was weeping. People were flocking to see this rare and very auspicious phenomenon. The beast out of the earth ‘*was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast that the image of the beast should speak’* (13:15).

**1.Sheep-like**

Following the emergence of the beast of the sea, John saw another beast coming up out of the earth (13:11). This beast had ‘*two horns like a lamb’*. Compared to the ten-horned beast of the sea he looked harmless- just two horns. But looks can be deceptive. He did not speak like a lamb, but like a dragon. He causes ‘earth dwellers’ to worship the first beast. We find the OT background to this vision in a vision which Daniel had of a ram with two horns (Dan 8).

The beast of the earth was expert at performing signs and wonders. In this way he got people to worship the beast of the sea, the beast that had been ‘*wounded by the sword and lived’* (13:14). The beast of the sea was very impressive as one who looked like he had overcome death and was going to live forever. The beast of the earth worked in collusion with the beast of the sea; they both worked as agents of the dragon or beast out of the abyss.

Pharaoh had his magicians who were able to counterfeit the signs which Moses performed before him- up to a point. Jezebel had the priests of Baal who could perform wonders before the people, although they failed to call down fire from heaven like Elijah. No doubt if they had been allowed to cheat they could have come up with something. There is a ‘holy man’ in India who is able to produce ‘holy ash’ out of nothing- or so it appears to the millions who flock to his ashram/commune to worship him.

The beast of the earth is later called the **false prophet** (16:13, 19: 20). As early as the time of Moses, God warned his people about false prophets who do signs and wonders (Deut 13). Jesus warned his disciples about those who ‘*come in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves’* (Mat 7:15). He called them false prophets. He said that in the last days, ‘*false Christ’s and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders to deceive if possible even the elect’* (Mat 24:24).

**2.Symbolic**

If the beast of the sea was a parody of Christ with his head as if it had been mortally wounded, the beast of the earth is even more of a parody. He looked as harmless as a lamb. He performed signs and wonders before the people, and told those who dwell on the earth to worship the beast (13: 12). Remember the people saying, ‘*who is like the beast*?’ (13:4). This is what the beast of the earth wants all people to say, as they make an image of the beast and worship him. The likeness to Christ goes only so far of course. If people refuse to worship the beast they were to be killed (13: 15). In Asia there was a high priest who was responsible to Rome for ensuring loyalty of the population to the great power of Rome, loyalty demonstrated by idol worship. We are very familiar today with a religion, and also sects, that use violence to promote worship of their god.

The beast of the earth represents false religion or anti-Christian religion. He is the false prophet. Some have linked him with the ‘man of lawlessness’ in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-7, thereby indicating a particular figure that will arise towards the end of the church age. The sixteenth century Reformers identified this Antichrist figure with the Pope. Hence the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter XXV, carries the statement that, ‘the Pope of Rome …is that Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition that establishes himself in the church against Christ and all that is called God’. The Reformers suffered terrible religious persecution at the hands of the Pope. They took a stand against the false teaching of the Roman Church. In so doing the fury of the Pope was unleashed in violence and death to these rebels and ‘apostates’. The description of the beast of the earth fitted such false and persecuting religion - and still does.

For John’s first readers however, the Roman Papacy was not an issue- nor is it for many believers today. It was religious Jews from the ‘synagogue of Satan’ who were persecuting them. Moreover, from their own midst had come that ‘*woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess’*, and also the Nicolaitians (2:15,20). These were the false prophets seeking to seduce them and lead them into worshipping idols. Elsewhere, John writes of the Antichrist – ‘*even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us’* (1Jn 2:18,19). ‘What seems to be in view here (Rev 13) is not an Antichrist figure, one who can be pin-pointed in history, but a more general description of the **religious** character of the Antichrist, just as the beast of the sea had alluded to the **political** character of the Antichrist’.

One of the interesting features of the Papacy is its association with politics. Vatican City is a state in its own right. The Pope is not just a religious head but a political head of state. Down through history the Pope has sought to dominate world leaders in the name of religion, instigating the inquisitions and other measures aimed at forcing the population to worship the beast. The beast of the earth works in close association with the beast of the sea. Most persecuting regimes have sought the support of religious leaders. The emperor of Japan is not unlike the emperor of Rome- he is regarded as a god. We know little about the brutal pogroms that have been undertaken against Christians in Japan. The separation of religious institutions and the state, as we know it, is rare in the history of the church.

Deception is the mark of the beast of the earth (13:14). He was granted power to perform signs and wonders- or counterfeit miracles. God allowed him to practice this deception. Today we have men wandering the streets and invading homes seeking to deceive gullible ‘earth dwellers’. Mormons come with their own human composition which they read before reading the Bible. Jehovah Witnesses come with their false doctrines and promises. Signs and wonders mark the ministry of this beast of the earth. Perversion of the gospel and of true Christianity is all around us today.

This calls for faith and patient endurance (13:10). This calls for wisdom, wisdom from above (13; 18). ‘*But you have an anointing from the Holy One and you know all things’* wrote John (1Jn 2:20). We must be alert, but not alarmed, to use a popular phrase. Your enemy, the devil, is on the prowl. Resist him standing firm in the faith.

**3.666**

The parody of Christ continues with the matter of a personal mark. The elect of God were sealed with a mark on their forehead to protect them from the army of Satan (7:3, 9:4). Satan’s agent, the beast of the earth, was entrusted with marking all who follow him. A cross section of people from all levels of society was ‘caused’ to receive a mark on the forehead, or right hand (13:16). What was this mark? It was the name of the beast, or the number of his name, 666.

Even people who could not find the book of Revelation in the Bible know about this number 666. It is the subject of much study and speculation. Many years ago a friend of mine showed me a bankcard on which was printed three ‘b’s- or to him 666. The other day I received an email about a medical company in the USA that was implanting microchips in patients. The email was prefixed with this passage from the Bible. How are we to understand this mark of the beast and the number 666?

In Hebrew and Greek it is not possible to write numerals, so alphabets are used to denote numbers- e.g. a=1, b=2 etc. (as we have in phone dialing today). By this system, called Gematira, many have sought to identify the beast of the earth or Antichrist. Nero is the first and most popular choice, but his name in Greek does not add up. It was found that a Hebrew translation of his name **could be made** to add up to 666. Many have tried to do the math on other names like Stalin, Hitler- and Osama no doubt.

What do we know about numbers in the book of Revelation? They are almost always symbolic. So why do people try to work this number out in a literal fashion? Is this the wisdom that John spoke of? Clearly, with no agreement no one is much wiser from all these calculations. If the number seven symbolises perfection and completion what might the number six mean? If the number seven is most appropriate for God, what is the number six about? If we represented the divine Trinity by 777, what would we use to represent the evil trinity of Satan, antichristian government and antichristian religion? Six means falling short of perfection. It is ‘*man’s number’* as we read here (13:18). Man in his own strength can never be perfect, ‘*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’* (Rom 3:23). No matter what man does to determine his own destiny, no matter what he does to make this world utopia, no matter what he does to achieve immortality, he always comes up short. Satan hides this truth and keeps promising men that they can achieve divine status- if they submit to the rule of Satan.

The effect of the mark of the beast was to exclude those not having it from trade. Trade guilds that existed in Ephesus and other cities were possibly excluding Christians from their trade. In India the poor are eligible for government assistance- unless they convert to Christianity. Those without the mark of the beast, those who do not go along with idolatry, immorality and corruption, will come into social and economic discrimination. We enjoy God’s protection from overt attacks of Satan and his agents, but do not become complacent. He is very deceptive. He can be like an angel of light (2Cor 11:14). The people of God have suffered unto death in the past, and still do so today in many places. Stand guard against Satan and his agents. Stand in the truth of the gospel.

**Lamb on Mt Zion**  Revelation 14:1-5

War broke out in heaven and the dragon or Satan was cast out. He was cast down to earth where he gave power to the beast of the sea and the beast of the earth. They made war against the saints, killing any who would not worship the image of the beast. They persecuted those not bearing the mark of the beast. All this was done under the cloak of great signs, of peace and prosperity.

The next vision takes us back to heaven. We move from the dragon standing on the seashore to the Lamb standing on Mt Zion. The focus is upon the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We move from those having the number of the beast to a multitude having the name of God written on their foreheads. We move from deception and death to the place of rejoicing and no deceit. John is again given a glimpse into heaven and hears rejoicing and praise rather than the cries of agony and death. This vision is not entirely new within this book. We have been here before. This book is not chronological with one event happening after another. It is a series of visions in which we often come back to the same place and the same point. There is, after all, only one place and one point that matters in all of history. That place is the cross of Jesus, and the point is his death and resurrection. He is seen here upon Mt Zion and upon the throne in heaven. Through his death he won the victory, defeating and destroying him who has the power of death, that is the devil (Heb 2:14).

What and where is Mt Zion? Those who read this literally, and there are many who do so, think that Jesus will one day stand on the temple mount in Jerusalem. Some even think that the temple will be rebuilt and sacrifices will resume before he comes. Mt Zion is believed to be the place where Abraham went to sacrifice his son Isaac. David captured Jerusalem and ruled from this city. The tabernacle came to its resting place here, and Solomon built the temple on Mt Zion. God’s presence was in this temple- above the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. Mt Zion was associated with the dwelling place or throne of God.

In Psalm 2 we read that the Lord has set his king ‘*on my holy hill of Zion’*. This is a messianic Psalm in which God installs his Messiah as king over all the nations. With great power, God raised his Son from the dead and exalted him to his right hand. He rules the world from his throne in heaven. From his throne all the judgments described in this book emanate. From the throne proceed lightning, thunder, earthquakes and hail, all symbolic of massive destruction and death. ‘*Kiss the Son lest he be angry and you perish in the way’* (Ps 2: 12). Do you know Jesus as King of Zion, the King of kings and Lord of lords?

Believers today are not called to worship on the earthly Mt Zion or in the Jerusalem which is in Palestine. ‘*You have come to Mt Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven’* (Heb 12:22f). This picture is like that which John saw. Jesus is in heaven, where he remains until he comes again. He will come in the New Jerusalem, the eternal home of his covenant people. With the Lamb on Mt Zion were 144,000. These are the same saints whom he saw sealed in a previous vision (7:4). The number is not literal but symbolic, representing all the elect from both the old and new covenants- the 12 tribes and 12 apostles. They are sealed by God as his own possession. Divine ownership means divine protection (9:4). Apart from having the Father’s name written on their foreheads, John tells us some other things about the 144,000.

**1.Redeemed**

The 144,000 were redeemed/purchased ‘*from the earth*, and *from among men’* (14:3,4). The story of the Exodus is alluded to in many ways in the visions of Revelation, and that story also gives us a clear picture of redemption. The people were slaves in Egypt; they were in bondage and powerless to help themselves. God heard their cry, and in his mercy came to redeem them from the clutches of Pharaoh, the agent of Satan. He took them as his own people, his own possession. The 144,000 were similarly redeemed by God from the clutches of Satan. By the power of his death and resurrection Jesus rescued them, including us, from sin and death. This is symbolised by the slain Lamb. ‘*You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slain and have redeemed us to God by your blood’* (5:9).

As a child of God you are redeemed from slavery to sin and death. You are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. ‘*You are not your own, you were bought at a price’*- the same Greek word for ‘bought’ as ‘redeem’ (1Cor 6:20). You belong to Jesus who gave himself for you. You have been given the Holy Spirit of promise. You bear the mark of a child of God. Therefore honour God in all you say and do. May all that we say and do bring glory to our Saviour and Lord, the one who saved us and made us his own.

**2.Fidelity**

These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins (14:4). How are we to understand this somewhat strange characteristic? Are only celibate people among the 144,000? Do virgins have a special place in heaven? Whilst the apostle Paul commends virgins, he also commends marriage, as did Jesus. ‘Defilement with women’ can hardly refer to marriage.

Some think that the basis for this prohibition is holy war. In the OT, soldiers were to abstain for sexual relations during battle (Deut 23:8-10- cf. Uriah). Others think it refers to ritual prostitution that was often part of idol worship. This is probably closer to the mark, but it is better to take this symbolically as spiritual defilement. OT prophets, like Hosea, spoke of Israel as defiling herself by going after other gods. Indeed, later in this chapter Babylon is introduced as the great city with which the nations were committing fornication (14:8).

Satan and his agents make the things of this world look very attractive. The unwary and the unwise are tempted, and start lusting after the things of the world- the treasures and the pleasures of this world. Moses turned away from the passing pleasures of sin and chose to suffer affliction with the people of God (Heb 11:25). He kept himself from defilement or pollution by the world. He forsook Egypt, looking unto him who is invisible and looking to his heavenly reward which is eternal. Those who are purchased by Christ will keep themselves pure for him as his bride. Christ loved the church and gave himself for her that he might make her holy and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word (Eph 5:25,26). To be clean is the opposite of defilement or pollution.

**3. Follow the Lamb**

With the name of God on their foreheads, the 144,000 follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4). Like branded sheep they belong to the shepherd and follow him. It is paradoxical that the shepherd they follow is a lamb. He is not just any lamb but **the** Lamb who sacrificed his life for them. The Lamb was slain when he came into this fallen world. The agents of Satan put him to death. He suffered unto death in this world, so those who follow him will also suffer. Did not Jesus say, ‘if anyone will come after me let him take up his cross and follow me’? Jesus does not call upon us to go where he has not already been. In this world Jesus suffered and died, but in his death he overcame the sin and death. He overcame him who has the power of death, that is the devil. Only by following the Lamb will we overcome the world.

**4. Firstfruits**

The 144,000 are described as, ‘*firstfruits to God and to the Lamb’* (14:4). This is another characteristic we may find somewhat unusual. What does ‘firstfruits’ mean? In the OT the people of God had to bring the first of the harvest as an offering to the Lord. This was pleasing to the Lord and the Lord would bless the rest of the harvest. The prophets spoke of the people themselves being firstfruits to the Lord. Israel was ‘*holiness to the Lord, the firstfuits of his increase’* (Jer 2:3).

Through man sin entered the world, and death through sin. The whole of creation is subject to frustration and decay. We see around us the creation groaning under the burden on man’s sin. The more man tries to fix up the mess he has made the worse the condition of the earth becomes. Man is trying to fix up the creation without reference to the Creator. Years ago on the farm we had an old car. It was great fun driving it around the paddocks. One day it broke down and I tried to fix it- without a repair manual from the maker. You can guess what happened. I fixed it so well it never went again! Men are trying to fix the environment without reference to the Creator. We have not heard the last environmental problems.

The creation groans and labours with birth pangs. It eagerly awaits for the sons of God to be revealed. We have the firstfruits of the Spirit. The redeemed are the firstfruits of the creatures of God (Jas 1:18). Their redemption will lead to the deliverance of the creation from bondage to decay. When the full number are brought in, Christ will come in all his glory with a new heaven and a new earth in which there is no more death.

**5. Faultless**

Finally, we read that the 144,000 are faultless and without blemish before the throne of God (14:5). No deceit was found in their mouth- note the contrast with the beast who was full of deceit. We might think of Daniel as a man who fitted this description. Or maybe Nathaniel. But these men, like all men, are sinners. Only Jesus lived a sinless life. He is the only one who is without blemish. Because he offered up himself as a lamb without blemish he has become our righteousness. Only in Christ can we be found faultless before the throne of God.

The 144,000 were singing a new song before the throne. The four living creatures and the elders were there before the throne, but this time it is the redeemed who are singing a new song (cf. 5:9). What a wonderful picture of rejoicing and praise, a great contrast to the picture of deceit and death on the earth at the hands of Satan and his henchmen.

**Warnings from three angels** Revelation 14:6-13

At the end of WW2 the United Nations was formed. A new world order was declared. The UN would ensure that the world would not go to war again. But what do we see today? We not only see war at every turn, but we see corruption within the UN itself. When the Berlin wall came down the cold war came to an end and a new world order was declared. We were assured of an era of unparalleled peace and prosperity. Within a few years the World Trade Towers came tumbling town and war on terrorism was declared. Mankind is forever declaring the arrival of a new age or new world order- especially when elections come around. But what do we see? We see regimes come and go. We see continuing corruption, continuing wars, and continuing poverty. Man’s gospel is not worth the paper it is written on. The gospel of Jesus Christ on the other hand is an unchanging gospel. It is an eternal gospel.

John’s visions continue in the passage before us. After seeing the Lamb on Mt Zion and the 144,000 engaged in worship in heaven, the focus shifts back to earth. In the bigger picture, we are in the extended interlude between the seven trumpet judgments and the seven bowl judgments. Some see a pattern of seven in these chapters, chapters 12-14, but it is not at all clear. What we have seen so far is the dragon, a symbol of Satan, the beast of the sea, a symbol of antichristian governments, and the beast of the earth, a symbol of antichristian religion.

For the preacher this passage is automatically subdivided with three angels bringing messages or warnings to those who dwell on the earth or those who worship the beast. It concludes with a word of encouragement to the saints, to those who keep the faith of Jesus.

**1.First angel**

*‘I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven having the eternal gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth- to every nation, tribe, tongue and people’* (14:6). This angel reminds us of the one that proclaimed the three woes of the last three trumpets (8:13). Torment and death came upon earth dwellers when these trumpets sounded. This first angel preached the gospel to all earth dwellers.

What was this gospel, and what was its power? It was a call to worship the Creator, to ‘*fear God and give him all the glory, for the hour of his judgment had come’* (14:7). This was the final call. Was it a call to repentance or more of a warning of the judgment to come? Commentators are divided, but most see it as a last minute call to repentance. Yet there is no mention of repentance here. It is more like a warning- ‘acknowledge the sovereignty of God or else suffer his wrath’.

To fear God and give him the glory does not necessarily mean conversion, as we concluded with reference to Revelation 11:13. With the book of Daniel in mind, and particularly king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, we see that a person can be left with no alternative but to worship Almighty God. ‘*At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow… and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’* (Phil 2:10,11). This does not mean universal conversion.

The true gospel, the eternal gospel, is not good news to all people. What do we see in the NT preaching of the gospel? Firstly, we see that along with the cross and the resurrection was preached the judgment of God (Acts 17:31). Secondly, not all who heard the gospel saw it as good news. Many rejected the gospel as bad news; they attacked Paul and other preachers. We have reason to question some gospel preaching today. Is the true gospel being preached if the consequences of rejecting this gospel are not made clear? Preaching of the gospel will bring division. A preacher must expect that some will not like the gospel and will leave. If no one leaves his church he has cause to be concerned.

In the hour of judgment there will be no doubt as to where people stand. There will be no confusion surrounding the gospel that is preached by the angel- unlike a lot of preaching today. It will not, of course, be a different gospel. We have the same gospel in our hands. The confusion comes from man’s handling of this word and the desire to please hearers. Let us be clear- outside of Christ there is no salvation- without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin (Heb 9:22).

**2.Second angel**

This angel announces the fall of the great city of Babylon. Babylon is introduced here- it is dealt with in detail in chapters 17-18. Briefly, what do we understand by this name? The name Babylon is derived from the name Babel, the place when men exalted themselves against God by building a tall tower (Gen 11). Daniel lived in the literal city of Babylon in the 6th century BC. There he was confronted by kings who called themselves gods, and by rampant idol worship.

In NT times ‘Babylon’ became a metaphor. Christians referred to Rome as Babylon. Rome was the capital of the world. It was the seat of great political and economic power. From Rome came emperor worship and gross idolatry. Christians suffered under the rule and power of Rome. In Revelation, Babylon carries this same symbolic meaning. Babylon is much the same as the beast of the sea. The second angel announces the fall of Babylon as if it had already occurred- in the prophetic perfect tense (14:8- the same announcement is made in 18:2). Isaiah prophesied the fall of the literal Babylon (Isa 21:9), while John prophesied the fall of the symbolic Babylon, the Babylon that represents all earthly rule and power.

Babylon is personified as a prostitute, as a woman who attracts men and leads them to destruction. She has made the nations drunk on ‘*the wine of the wrath of her fornication’*, or in other words, the wine of her passion for adultery (14:8). The picture of drinking wine will come up again in verse 10. Wine is pleasant to drink, but it is intoxicating. Earth dwellers get intoxicated by the things of this world. They can never get enough of what money can buy- just look at the credit card debt we have! People get sucked into getting more and more of what the world offers. They are never satisfied. In the end they will find they have been duped; they will find they have been lured by a great lie. ‘*Babylon is fallen, is fallen’*. ‘Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’.

**3.Third angel**

This angel also had a message for unbelievers, for those who worship the beast and have the mark of the beast (14:9). The mark of the beast enables them to buy and sell in this world. They may prosper in this world, but this world is coming to an end. The Day of Judgment will come and then the tables will be turned. Those who worship the beast will find themselves suffering great torment as the wrath of God is poured out upon them.

*‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in their unrighteousness’* (Rom 1:18). Those who love Babylon’s wine of adultery will be given to drink the full cup of the wine of God’s wrath (14:10, Ps 75:8). The punishment fits the crime. The wicked fall into the pit they have dug. Men often like to brew their own liquor. They can make it stronger, and in India they could make it cheaper. It is easy to get drunk on this cheap liquor. But sometimes things go wrong. Sometimes we hear of men who died from drinking their home brew. What seemed like a harmless pleasure killed them.

In another picture, divine judgment is seen as fire and brimstone (14:10). Followers of the beast will be cast into the lake of fire (as will the two beasts and the dragon- 19:20). They will have no rest, day or night, but will suffer torment forever and ever (14:11). Just as the followers of the Lamb will worship God and sing his praises day and night, so these his enemies will suffer torment day and night for ever and ever.

This is not a picture of annihilation, as many foolishly think will be the case when they die. This is one of the greatest deceptions of the devil today- the idea that there is no hell. Some people think all will go to heaven when they die, while others think they will just cease to exist- and some Christians say nothing to dispel this view. Few today believe in the reality of hell. Jesus spoke very clearly about the horrors of hell. He spoke of everlasting punishment for the wicked (Mat 25:46). He spoke of the fire of hell that cannot be quenched (Mark 9:43). He spoke of the rich man being in torment in the flames after he died (Luke 16:24). Asaph was a godly man who started to envy the wicked. ‘Their life is so easy; they never have any troubles; they have so much more than I do’- this is what he said. Then he went to the house of the Lord and remembered their end, the judgment of God (Ps 73:17).

John’s first readers were like many Christians today. They were tempted by envy for the wicked. Life was so much easier for those who prostituted themselves to Babylon. They did not suffer persecution like those in the church. John called upon the saints to persevere in the ‘*faith of Jesus’*, or faith from Jesus. Jesus was the source of their faith, not just the object of faith. Faithfulness to Jesus and obedience to Gods commands was needed. Keep in mind the end of the wicked. Their time is short. They are on the slippery slope to destruction. Keep in mind also, the reward that is yours in Christ Jesus as you run the race set before you. A blessed rest awaits those who are faithful in serving Jesus to the end. ‘*Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour in the Lord is not in vain’* (1Cor 15:58).

**Grapes of wrath** Revelation 14:14-20

If you have ever been a farmer or just tried your hand at gardening you will know the need for patience. You cannot plant seed one day and expect to harvest the next. You have to wait for the plant to germinate, to grow, to flower and then produce the food you want. The farmer has to watch his crop closely to see when it is ripe for harvest. He does not rush in before it is ready or he will get only sour grapes. Nor does he leave it beyond the right time and get rotten grapes.

Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a crop that is sown (Mark 4:26f). A man sows seed that sprouts, grows by itself, and produces fruit. Then he takes his sickle to harvest the crop. ‘*The harvest is the end of the age and the reapers are the angels’* (Mat 13:39). In a vision, John sees one ‘*like the Son of Man’* coming on a white cloud with a gold crown on his head and a sickle in his hand (14:14). He proceeds to harvest the earth in what is a vivid picture of the final judgment.

Just as the Amorites became ripe for judgment (Gen 15:16), so the sins of the nations will reach their fullness and they shall become ripe for judgment (Dan 8:23). The prophet Joel spoke of God’s judgment as putting the sickle into the crop - and further of treading out the grapes in a winepress (Joel 3:13). God treading the winepress in wrath is a common picture of judgment in the OT (Isa 63:3).

**1.Command**

With a sharp sickle in his hand Jesus is told in a loud voice to, ‘*thrust in your sickle and reap, for the time has come …the harvest of the earth is ripe’* (14:15). The ‘Son of Man’ title comes from Daniel (7:13), and is clearly a reference to the Messiah, to Jesus Christ - as also in Revelation 1:13. The golden crown further points to this ‘one’ as Jesus. He is the King of kings, the Son of God, who won the victory over sin and death, and over the one who has the power of death, that is the devil.

How come Jesus is instructed by an angel you might ask? Firstly, remember that angels are messengers. This angel came out of the temple. He came for the presence of God. He was sent by God with this message- ‘*the time has come for you to reap’ (*14:15). Secondly, Jesus himself said he did not know when the Day of Judgment would be (Mat 24; 36). We may think that since Jesus returned to heaven he would know this, but he does not say so. What Jesus said is that the Father committed all judgment to the Son, and that this judgment will be according to the will of God (John 5:22, 30). If neither the angels nor Jesus know when the Judgment will come, how foolish for any man to think he knows.

A second angel came out of the temple in heaven also having a sharp sickle in his hand (14:17). Like Jesus, this angel was given a command by another angel, this time coming from the altar within the temple. The altar was probably the altar of incense. John previously saw the souls of the martyrs under the altar crying out for justice. He saw the prayers of the saints coming up as incense before God. He saw an angel take fire from this altar and throw it on the earth in judgment (8:5). From the altar he now sees this angel come with ‘*power over fire’* and with a message to thrust in the sharp sickle (14: 18).

The harvest was undertaken at the command of God- and in response to the prayers of the saints (6:11). God determined that the earth was a ripe for harvest. He has set a day when he will judge this world. He will judge with righteousness. He will separate the weeds from the wheat; he will separate the sheep from the goats. The harvest image is often accompanied by that of a threshing floor or, in this case, with that of the winepress.

This world is proceeding inexorably towards this Day of the Lord. You are powerless to stop this progression. Do you have this great day in your vision for the future? Do you make your plans with this day in mind? These days we are being brainwashed with the idea that we can slow down and even stop this move towards the end of the world. Al Gore wants you to join him in stopping the progress, but let Al Gore and every one on this earth know that God has set a day when **He** will judge the earth. God will judge the earth by the man He has ordained- and that man is not Al Gore. It is Jesus Christ of Nazareth. There is no stopping the clock, dear friend. The only way to change your eternal destiny is to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

**2.Crop**

Many divide this vision into two harvests- a harvest of the elect (14-16) and a harvest of the wicked (17-20). While it can be understood in this way, notice that this is just one vision, as indicated by the opening phrase, ‘*I looked/saw’*. There does appear to be two harvests, or what some refer to as a ‘twofold harvest’, and there is no doubt that the second is that of the wicked, but what about the first harvest? The nature of the first harvest is not so clear. In light of the parable Jesus told, we tend to think of this as a grain harvest, a harvest of wheat and tares/weeds. But all that we are told is that it is a harvest of the earth. If you say ‘what about the sickle’, then note that the sickle is also used for the vines. Moreover, in the parable Jesus told it is the tares that are the focus of the harvest- ‘*therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age’* (Mat 13:40).

The second angel coming from the temple uses his sharp sickle to gather clusters of grapes, for the ‘*grapes are fully ripe’* (14:18), as determined by God. The OT background to this vision is found in Joel 3. The harvest is followed by the vintage in Joel 3, and so it is in this passage. ‘As in the OT, so in Revelation, the two metaphors of harvest and vintage connote the thoroughgoing and definite judgment of sinners by the Lord’.

**3.Completion of judgment**

What happens to wine grapes after they are harvested? They are taken and dumped into a large vat where they are crushed to expel the juice. In ancient times the vat was a hollowed-out rock, and the pressing was done by people stamping their feet. ‘*For the winepress is full, the vats overflow- for their wickedness is great’*. So wrote Joel as he completed the picture of God’s judgment (Joel 3:13). John saw the grapes of the earth thrown into ‘*the great winepress of the wrath of God’* (14:19). This is a picture of divine judgment, a picture of God treading the winepress in his wrath against the wicked. The image comes from the OT and is seen again in Revelation (19:15) – ‘*He himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God’*.

Some time ago on TV I saw a preacher standing in the valley of Jezreel declaring how blood- human blood- would flow to the depth of a horses bridle down this valley in Northern Palestine. He is not the only one to take these verses literally. But this is a vision, a picture of the Judgment, not a literal record of it. Nevertheless, ‘while we do not take John’s picture literally, it is certain he wishes to be taken seriously. Behind these horrendous images lies the reality that the eternal wrath of God rests on those who reject and oppose him and who make war on his people’.

The winepress was trampled outside the city, probably the holy city of Jerusalem. Blood flowed out to a depth of over one metre, and for a distance of some 300kms (1600 stadia). It is interesting that the land of Israel stretches for some 300kms from north to south, but the reference to a distance of 1600 stadia is probably symbolic. The number ‘four’ symbolises the earth, while ‘ten’ is a round figure or symbol of completeness- 4x4 x 10x10 gives 1600.

**4.Conclusion**

This sixth section of these interlude chapters (12-14) can be compared to the sixth seal, and the sixth trumpet, which also envisage the final judgment or Day of Judgment. It is disturbing to read a renowned Bible teacher writing, ‘the future day of the Lord which unleashes God’s wrath falls into two parts’. Only one Day of the Lord is spoken of in the Bible. This writer was, of course, referring to the end of the Tribulation, and then the end of the Millennium- two ‘Days of the Lord’?

The picture of a sea of blood, of human blood, is not at all pleasant and one which men want to water down or even remove from the Bible. But remember the martyrs under the altar. They prayed, as many do today, for justice, and for God to avenge their blood. Do you worship a God who turns a blind eye to wickedness, to injustice and oppression? Do you worship a God who does not listen to the cries of his people?

When Jesus came into this world ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ he wore a crown of thorns. He came to die; he came to save sinners by grace through faith. When Jesus comes again he will be wearing a golden crown and carrying a sickle in his hand. He will judge the earth, gathering the wicked into his winepress where they will suffer the wrath of God for ever and ever.

**Victory song in heaven** Revelation 15:1-5

With the opening of the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour (8:1). John saw seven angels in heaven ready to sound the seven trumpets of God’s judgments. As he looked into the temple in heaven he saw the smoke of incense coming up before God. With the sounding of the seventh trumpet John again saw into heaven and heard a song of victory (11:15f).

We have come to the end of another sevenfold vision, a series of judgments that are not so clearly enumerated. Final judgment has come upon the earth – described as the winepress of the wrath of God (14:19, 20). In this seventh section John saw another great and marvelous sign in heaven. He saw seven angels with the seven last plagues of the wrath of God (15:1). These plagues are pictured as seven bowls full of the wrath of God (15:7). Before these are poured out, John is again given a glimpse into the throne room, and into the temple which are in heaven.

**1.Sea of Glass**

John saw ‘*something like a sea of glass mingled with fire’* (15:2). He saw this same sea of glass when he was first lifted up to see into heaven, and the things that must soon take place (4:1,6). A sea of glass like crystal surrounded the throne. Glass is a very interesting and useful material. We have it in all our houses. It is very hard, yet we can see through it. Or else we use it for its quality of reflection in making mirrors. Glass can be molded into beautiful ornaments like plates and vases. Imagine a floor made of glass. This is what appeared to be around the throne of God in heaven. It is not called a floor but a sea. Ezekiel (1:22) called it a ‘firmament’. The glory of God must have been reflected and refracted most brilliantly in this sea of glass, especially with the rainbow that was around the throne (4:3).

This sea has it background in the OT, most probably in the Red Sea, the place where God finally and fully judged the Egyptians, while delivering his own chosen people. Moses and the people sang a song of victory as they stood on the shore of the Red Sea, realizing what a great deliverance the Lord had worked for them. In the OT temple there was large flat bowl of water for ceremonial washing which was called the Sea. It was probably a reminder of the Red Sea also.

The sea of glass was ‘*mingled with fire’* (15:2). Fire is symbolic of judgment. Fire destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. The lake of fire is ready for Satan and his followers. Moreover, the sea is symbolic of evil. The beasts of Daniel’s vision, and the beast of Revelation 13, came up out of the sea. That sea was stirred up and in turmoil. With his lying and murderous ways, Satan loves to stir up trouble. The sea of glass is calm, for evil has been defeated by God and the Lamb.

Standing on the sea of glass, with harps in their hands, are the victorious saints of God. They are those who did not succumb to the intense pressure to receive the mark of the beast and his number 666, and to actually worship the beast. The beast, remember, represents antichristian governments of this world. Some think these victorious ones are only martyrs- but all true followers of Jesus must worship only God, and must never deny the Lord Jesus Christ who saved them.

The victory is in keeping the faith of Jesus without compromise with the world. ‘*If anyone loves the world or the things of the world the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life- is not from the Father but is of the world’* (1John 2:15,16).

**2.Song of victory**

The victorious saints, those who stood firm in the Lord Jesus Christ to the very end, were now standing on the sea of glass in heaven singing praises to God. It is natural to burst forth into song when we are happy and blessed, and especially when we have won the battle. What is interesting here is that they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God (15: 3). We find the song of Moses in Exodus 15. It is the song Moses and the people sang when they ‘*saw the great work which the Lord had done for them in Egypt. They feared the Lord and believed the Lord’* (Exod 14:31). They sang this song in praise to the Lord who saved them.

There are many parallels between the Exodus and the final judgment of the God through Jesus Christ. In fact, the song of Moses is also called the song of the Lamb (15:3). The song of Moses not only looked to the deliverance from Egypt, it anticipated an even greater deliverance from evil. It pointed forward to an even greater judgment than that seen at the Red Sea. Moses anticipated such a judgment and the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ. He looked forward to his heavenly reward in Jesus Christ (Heb 11:26). This victory song could be sung by the people of God from both old and new covenants, those who followed Moses the servant, and those who followed Jesus the Son. They sang to the one and same God enthroned in heaven.

The victory song praises God Almighty for his marvelous works. When we call God ‘Almighty’, we understand that he can do all things. Nothing is impossible for God. Is this what you believe? God made this planet and this universe. He is the Almighty Creator of all things. And he continues to intervene in his creation for his glory. He divided the sea to save his people and closed it again to destroy his enemies. God sent his son Jesus to the Cross to save his people, and raised him from the dead in victory over death. The Cross is bad news to the enemies of God. Jesus’ death and resurrection sound the judgment of God upon his enemies (John 9:39). Those who do not believe in Jesus are condemned. Those who ‘*do not believe in Jesus shall not see life, for the wrath of God remains on them’* (John 3:36).

God is truth. God cannot lie. Jesus said, ‘I am the truth’. Those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth- they must worship in the truth that is Jesus Christ. God does not accept worship that is not true. He does not accept any old thing that man wants to bring to him. God has declared how we are to worship him, a truth well explained in the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter XXI. God is just. The message of the Cross is justice, just as much as it is a message of grace. The Cross is a symbol of God’s justice, for, at the Cross God justified sinners who believe in Jesus. ‘*God demonstrated at the present time His righteousness, that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus’* (Rom 3:26).

*‘Just and true are your ways, O King of the ages’* (15:3). The God who is almighty, who is sovereign over all creation, the God who is just and true in all his ways, is rightly to be feared. He alone is to be worshipped and glorified by all people. ‘*For all nations shall come and worship before you’* (15: 4). God will be universally recognized as the Most High God, the Lord of heaven and earth. One day the blasphemy which we see and hear so often in our society will cease. God’s name will no more be dragged into the dirt. At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow- willingly or unwillingly.

This does not mean that everyone without exception will be saved. There is no universalism here, as some try to tell us. This is ‘all’ without distinction; it is people from all nations, tribes and languages. In heaven will be men and women and children from the four corners of the globe. It is encouraging when the church on earth reflects this multinational dimension. ‘*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ. You are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ’* (Gal 3:28, 26).

God is praised for his works, for his justice, and for his judgments/righteous deeds. His judgments are transparent. God hates partiality and corruption. Because God is just, he has to condemn the guilty. He has to condemn them for his own names sake, and for the sake of those who cry out to him for justice (6:10). Whilst no one is innocent before him, God declares, ‘not guilty’ those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the most marvelous of all God’s works. It is the Cross of Jesus that stands between life and death in the court of heaven.

‘For You alone are holy’ (15:4). Whilst we think of holiness as moral purity it actually means being separate. God is set apart from his creation. It is a fundamentally fatal error to believe that God is part of the creation- as many people do. Pantheism is the belief that the existence of the world is not separate from God’s existence. Some see god in the sun, the trees or the mountains. They say that god is in me and in you. Let us remember that God is holy and that he alone is holy. In awe and wonder, in fear and reverence, let us worship the sovereign God who made us and redeemed us from sin and death through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**God’s wrath in seven bowls** Revelation 15:5-8

Looking into heaven, John saw a great and marvelous sight. John was exiled on the prison island of Patmos when he had this vision. He was there for preaching the word of God and testifying to Jesus Christ. It was the Lord’s Day and he was probably worshipping God when he had this vision. The vision was about things that would soon happen in this world. In fact, it was about the end of the world.

Imagine if John had been busy doing his own thing on this Lord’s Day. Imagine if he had not bothered to worship God on this day. He would not have seen the great and marvelous things which he saw. Those who absent themselves from worship on the Lord’s Day miss out on seeing great and marvelous things. They miss out on the blessings of God. It is very easy to find excuses for not coming to church but remember, God blesses those who come to him in worship.

John wrote down what he saw and sent it to seven churches in Asia. Did these churches bother to read his letter? They were having a hard time as Christians living in a pagan society. Some of their number were falling away. Were they so busy or so discouraged that they did not read this letter? We know what they would have missed if they had not read this letter. Indeed, this letter actually promises a blessing to those who read it and pay heed to it (1:3). How tragic that many are missing this blessing from God.

The prevailing philosophy in our society sees religion as a crutch. People depend upon themselves, and the government, and see no need of God. They are ignorant of the strategies and the strength of Satan- until Satanic based religion actually threatens their lifestyle. They are ignorant about the future, about what will happen beyond their well-planned retirement. It is just like the days of Noah. The Day of Judgment is fast approaching. John saw seven angels ready to pour out the seven last plagues of God’s wrath upon the earth.

**1.Sanctuary**

John saw through an opened door into heaven. He saw into the sanctuary of the tabernacle/temple in heaven. This is the temple on which the earthly temple was modeled. Moses was given the plans while on Mt Sinai, where he was also given the covenant commandments. ‘Tabernacle’ means ‘dwelling place’. God would dwell among his people. This was the tabernacle of witness/testimony, for it stood as a witness of the Lord’s presence among his people. In Jesus Christ we have a living witness to God dwelling among us (John 1:14).

When Moses finished building the tabernacle, a cloud came down and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. No one, not even Moses, could enter the tabernacle when this happened. In the innermost room of this tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant. In this box were the stone tablets of the testimony of God, otherwise known as the Ten Commandments. The mercy seat above the Ark represented the throne of God. Around the throne in heaven John saw four living creatures (4:6f). One of these four living creatures John now saw giving golden bowls to the seven angels as they emerged from the tabernacle. It is clear from all this that the wrath that is about to be revealed is the wrath of Almighty God.

**2.Seven angels**

The seven angels that came out of the tabernacle were clothed in pure bright linen, with a golden band around their chest (15:6). To this extent their appearance was not unlike that of the Son of man whom John saw in his first vision (1:13). Emerging from the presence of God they reflected his glory. These angels, like all angels, were messengers of God. They were sent out by God with the seven plagues. A loud voice coming from the temple, probably the voice of God, told them to ‘*go and pour out the bowls of the wrath of God on the earth’* (16:1). As the bowls were poured out, devastation and death came upon the earth. The target was those who follow the beast or Satan, those who do not worship God according his command- ‘you shall have no other gods before me’.

The word ‘plague’ reminds us of the ten plagues with which God afflicted the Egyptians in the time of Moses. In fact, we will see that there are parallels between those Egyptian plagues and these worldwide plagues at the end of the world. Disaster after disaster hit that nation, but the king and people did not repent. They became harder and harder. They refused to humble themselves before the Almighty God. In the end God destroyed the Pharaoh and his whole army in the Sea.

Today we see and hear of disasters happening around the world, including own nation, and even in our own lives. But how many recognise the power of God and turn to him, repenting of their sin and believing in Jesus Christ. Many have become hardened in their sin and rebellion against God, just like the Egyptians. To say this or that disaster happened because of climate change, or because of human error, conveniently avoids the sovereign power of God. Is not God in control of the climate? Is not God the creator of man and all creatures?

The seven plagues also closely parallel the seven trumpets of a previous vision. The seven seal judgments and the seven trumpet judgments both end with the final judgment, with thunder, lightning and an earthquake being hurled upon the earth from the temple of God in heaven (8:5, 11:19). These seven plagues or bowls end with the same outpouring of thunder, lightning, earthquake and hail (16:18).

So it is not that these plagues come after the seals or trumpets but simply that they are another vision giving a slightly different perspective on God’s judgment in the Last Days. To the extent that there is repetition in these, it is for our benefit. How slow we are to learn spiritual truths. People are so ready to believe whatever they read in the paper or see on the TV. Yet here is the truth about our life in this world and about the end of the world. This is truth given to John by Jesus Christ, who was given it by God (1:1). He who has ears to hear let him hear.

**3.Seven bowls**

‘The image of bowls comes partly from the OT where bowls are mentioned in connection with the priestly service at the altar in the tabernacle. They were probably used to carry out the ashes and fat of sacrifices’. Pouring hot ashes on a person’s head is symbolic of vengeance and judgment (Rom 12:20). Such vengeance has no place in the life of a child of God. ‘*Vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay’* (Deut 32:35). God promises to repay the wicked who bring harm to his chosen people.

*‘Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good*’ is the teaching of the Bible (Rom 12:21). People without God and without hope in this world do not know that God will judge the wicked. Consequently, they take revenge themselves. Almost every day we hear of some incident of road rage or of revenge leading to death. Did you hear about the man who was killed in an argument over water? Some people are driven by revenge. All they can think about is getting back on someone who has wronged them. The Christian knows that God will ultimately execute justice for all the oppressed. Christians can, and must, leave vengeance to the Lord.

These golden bowls link the prayers of the saints with the outpouring of Gods wrath. When John first saw golden bowls they were full of incense ‘*which is the prayers of the saints’* (5:8). Saints and martyrs pray for justice, for retribution on those who persecuted them for the name of Jesus. The golden bowls full of their prayers become golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives for ever and ever (15:7). ‘This emphasis upon the eternity of God is a reminder that although evil may seem to dominate affairs in human history, God is the eternal one whose purposes cannot be frustrated even by Satan and demonic evil’.

**4.Smoke filled the temple**

Seven angels came out of the temple with bowls full of the wrath of God. Divine judgment is ready to be poured out on the earth. Nothing can stop what God has determined and declared. The temple was now filled with smoke and ‘*no one able to enter the temple till the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed’* (15:8). The time for intercession was over. Not even Moses could enter the sanctuary when it was filled by the cloud (Exod 40:36). The priests were not able to enter the temple at the time of its dedication by Solomon because of the cloud, because of the glory of the Lord that filled the house of the Lord (1Kings 8:10). Smoke similarly prevents entry into the tabernacle- and even more so. Isaiah saw the house of God filled with smoke (Isa 6:4). Where there is smoke there is fire. Fire symbolises the judgment of God. God’s glory and his power filled the temple in John’s vision (15:8). The power of God is almighty power. There is no escaping divine judgment. Nothing and no one can stand against the fury of Almighty God.

God has set a day when he will judge all people by Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31). This was the flip side of the message Paul preached to the heathen at Athens. He preached the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, calling upon all to repent and believe in Jesus. He also made it clear that this same Jesus who died and rose again will come again to judge not only the living but the dead also (Acts 10:42, 1Peter 4:5). Not even death will deliver from the wrath of God.

**First four bowl judgments** Revelation 16:1-9

*Do you despise the riches of God’s goodness, tolerance and patience not realising that God’s kindness leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your unrepentant heart you are storing up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God* (Rom 2:4-5). When Paul wrote to the church at Rome outlining the gospel, this is what he wrote. He warned the people about the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment would be revealed. John’s vision is of this same day, the day of God’s wrath. God desires that all people hear the gospel; that they repent and believe in Jesus Christ (1Tim 2:4). The gospel includes warnings for those who refuse to repent. Only a fool thinks he can escape the righteous judgment of God.

**1. Idolaters**

The seven bowl judgments only come upon those who worship the beast, and upon the beast himself. The fifth trumpet judgment, in which people were tormented by horse-like locusts with scorpion tails, only affected those not having the seal of God on their foreheads. The sealed saints were divinely protected from this plague of locusts (9:4). The people of God were also protected from most of the plagues that God sent upon Egypt. Only idolaters, only those worshipping the beast, were afflicted with the terrible sores that came with the bowls being poured out. These idolaters chose to worship created things rather than the creator. Although they knew God they did not glorify him as God. Do you know anyone who fits this description?

There is hardly anyone in our society who does not know about the true God and Jesus Christ. I was surprised the other day when, on a radio quiz show, the question was asked, ‘how many decks were there on Noah’s ark’. The Bible, the word of God, is freely available, with at least one or two copies in most book stores. The Bible can be downloaded in an app for free. In many homes there is a Bible already- often in pristine condition because it has never been read. The point is that no one has an excuse for not believing in God. Remember, there are only two types of people here in Revelation- those having the mark of God, and those having the mark of the beast.

The bowls judgments are further aimed at those who persecute the saints and the prophets (16:6). From the very time that sin entered the world faithful men and women have been persecuted by the wicked. Cain murdered his brother Abel because God accepted Abel’s sacrifice and not his. And so it has continued to this day. Servants of the beast or Satan, so called atheists and all idolaters, continue to harass and persecute the saints, and even kill them. Divine justice may not be seen in this life or even in this world, but this vision reveals that it will surely come. The prayer of the saints and martyrs is heard, and the wicked will be judged.

**2.Bowl judgments**

The first four bowls are poured out on the earth, the water and the sky. When God made the earth he gave it to men to inhabit and manage for his glory. God watered the earth; he made the sun to shine and the plants to grow for our food. The sovereign God of creation will disrupt these elements as he brings judgment on the world. Moreover, he will afflict the body of man with dreadful pain.

The first bowl poured out on the earth brought terrible sores on idolaters (lit. bad and evil sores). In one of the plagues that God sent upon the Egyptians they all broke out in boils (Exodus 9:10). God later declared to the Israelites that if they broke his covenant he would curse them with the boils of Egypt, with tumours, scabs and itch (Deut 28:27). Jesus came healing the sick as a sign that the kingdom of God was at hand. By the same token Jesus, and the apostle Paul, could afflict the enemies of God in their bodies (Acts 13:11).

The second bowl was poured out on the sea, turning it to blood (16:3). The first miracle of Moses was to turn water into blood- all the water in Egypt. The Egyptians went crazy digging for water to drink. Moreover, the whole land stank as the fish and other sea creatures died. The sea is full of life which we depend upon. When, in the wrath of God, the sea turns to blood everything in it will die. Some scholars think that this refers to a disruption of sea trade leading to famine- on the basis of chapter 18. But there is no direct indication of this here. This is all a vision full of symbols of course, yet visions which portray the reality of horror and death as the wrath of God is poured out on the ungodly.

The third bowl also changed the water into blood, this time all the drinking and washing water (16:4). A whole city can be quickly brought to its knees by a little poison in the drinking water supply. There is a parallel here with the third trumpet in which water in the rivers and springs became unfit to drink- and in fact many men died from the water (8:11). But with the trumpets only one third of the waters became blood. The bowl judgments are more extensive- indeed they are total.

The fourth bowl affected the sun causing it to give off great heat that afflicted followers of the beast. We depend on the sun for light and heat and our food. Because the sun so controls our life, many worship the sun. Pharaoh claimed to be an incarnation of the sun god ‘Ra’ that was worshipped by the Egyptians. Hindus worship the sun, as do many other people.

The sun can also burn our body and cause cancer, as we know today. In India one of our children suffered heat stroke and was in a coma for four hours. The power of the sun is beyond measure. God will unleash the power of the sun that he created upon all idolaters in this world in the last days. In the end the sun will completely burn up and darkness will descend upon the wicked. There will be no sun in the kingdom of God for his own glory is brighter than the sun. The saints will not suffer from the scorching heat of the sun. They were promised the sun would not strike them nor any heat (7:16).

All these afflictions brought no change of heart in the idolaters. They did not repent and give glory to God (16:9). Rather they cursed and blasphemed the name of God. Their hearts were hardened, just like the heart of Pharaoh. The time for intercession will soon be over. Now is the day of salvation, now is the time to repent. Tomorrow may be too late; one day tomorrow will not come.

**3.Just judgment**

A cry of, ‘it’s not fair, what did I do to deserve this’ is anticipated from the idolaters of this world when God’s wrath is poured out on them. Rolling on the ground in terrible pain from sores and the scorching heat they will claim to be innocent and ignorant of what God has declared in Jesus Christ. But the angel of the waters, supported by a cry from the altar, probably another angel, will defend God in his judgment. ‘You are righteous O Lord, just and righteous are your judgments’ (16:4, 7).

Just as there was an angel with power over fire (14:18) so now is one with power over the waters. This angel refers to God as infinite and eternal, as the one who is and who was. He also maintains that God is just in all his ways (cf.15:3). What was happening to those having the mark of the beast was retribution. They had shed the blood of the sealed saints of God so now God was giving them blood to drink (16:6). This may refer to them fighting among themselves and killing one another, as often happens among the wicked (cf.17:16).

They were getting their just dues. You reap what you sow. God will not be mocked. God will not be silent in the face of injustice and persecution. God hears the cry of the poor and he will act to vindicate them. He may not act as quickly we think he should, but he will surely act one day, and will act with truth and justice.

*I will feed those who oppress you with their own flesh*

*And they shall be drunk with their own blood as with sweet wine*

*All flesh shall know*

*That I, the Lord, am your Saviour*

*And your redeemer* (Isa 49:26).

**Darkness and demons- bowls 5 & 6** Revelation 16:10-16

Have you been out to the country lately? Maybe you are planning a holiday there soon- not in a town but out on a farm or in the bush. One thing you will notice is how dark it is a night. If you wake up in the night you cannot even see your hand in front of your face. If you try to move about you will trip over something or bump into the wall. Imagine what it would be like if such darkness continued for three days. Imagine what it would be like if such darkness continued forever.

Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, kept rejecting Moses’ requests to let the people go into the desert and worship God. The penultimate plague which God sent upon the land of Egypt was darkness for three days. They did not see one another, ‘*nor did any rise from his place for three days’* (Exod 10:23). No one could move about, no one could work and no one could prepare food. The darkness was oppressive and people started to go mad. Pharaoh called Moses and said he could go and serve the Lord. Speaking of the wicked, Jesus said they will be cast into outer darkness were there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mat 8:12, 22:13, 25:30).

**1.Fifth bowl**

The bowl judgments which come on the great day of divine judgment reflect the plagues God poured out on Egypt in the time of Moses. John saw the water turned into blood, and sores break out on those having the mark of the beast. The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast and his kingdom was filled with darkness; ‘*and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain’* (16:10).

The kingdoms of this world are currently in the hands of Satan. The beast or Satan is on the throne ruling in the kingdoms of men. He is the prince of the power of the air (Eph 2:2); he is the ruler of the darkness of this age (Jn 12: 31). Christ’s message to the church at Pergamum was that Satan had his throne in their city (2:13). Satan’s rule is referred to as darkness. He has blinded earth dwellers to the truth. Satan binds people in spiritual darkness. People are not unhappy in this bondage for their deeds are evil. They prefer darkness to the light for their deeds are evil (Jn 3:19). If the people love darkness then in ‘giving them up’ God gives them total darkness. The kingdom of Satan becomes total darkness. There will be no light at all when God judges the kingdoms of this world.

With the fifth trumpet, you will remember, Satan came up out of the abyss. The sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke - and the plague of locusts that came out of the smoke (9:2). And further back with the sixth seal the sun became black (6:12). It seems the sun will give a final burst of intense heat in the fourth bowl and then burn up completely with the fifth bowl.

This darkness caused great anguish and torment to the worshippers of the beast. In pain they kept biting their tongues. They could not sleep as they kept looking for the dawn. But dawn never comes. Jesus spoke of this coming perpetual night when no one can work (Jn 9:4). This pervasive and oppressive darkness brought great agony, but the wicked did not repent of their deeds. They continued in their wicked ways, in their idolatry and immorality, as detailed in the plague of the sixth trumpet (9:20, 21). In their agony they actually cursed God. They were like Job’s wife. As Job sat on the dunghill scratching his sores his wife told him to curse God and die. Tragically, this is the reaction of many to suffering. They will not repent. They will not bow the knee to Jesus, the only one who can save them from death. They grit their teeth; they bite their tongue, and press on into the darkness of death.

**2.Sixth bowl**

*‘The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, so that the way of the kings from the east might be prepared’* (16:12). Some years ago, when Iran declared war on Iraq, a friend of ours pointed to this verse about the Euphrates being dried up. ‘This was the beginning of the end’ he said. ‘Soon Israel will be invaded and it will be Armageddon’. Many hold to a literal understanding of this apocalyptic prophecy about the Euphrates and Armageddon.

We have come across the Euphrates previously in Revelation. The sixth trumpet saw the release of four angels, ‘*bound at the great river Euphrates’* (9:14). A great horde surged forward to kill one third of humanity. Back in the OT, the Euphrates features in the book of Daniel. Babylon was situated on this river. It served as a natural barrier to invasion from the east. However, Cyrus was able to divert this river and capture Babylon. Belshazzar was slain and the mighty but idolatrous kingdom of Babylon fell (Dan 5:30). At the same time Israel was restored. The exile was over, as foretold by Isaiah (Isa 44:27,28). This picture is not unlike that of the Red Sea. When God dried up the sea his people were saved and his enemies destroyed.

In the book of Revelation, Babylon represents the worldly system. In the time of John, Rome was referred to as Babylon. Just as God dried up the waters and destroyed Babylon, so he will again dry up the waters and destroy the present day, or future ‘Babylons’. Note that in the next chapter the great harlot sits on many waters (17:1). These are interpreted as ‘*peoples, multitudes... and nations’* (17:15).

**3.Interlude**

With the seal judgments and the trumpet judgments there was an interlude between the sixth and the last judgment. This interlude included a vision of the sealed saints, their suffering and their salvation. It included a mention of war/battle with the beast attacking the two witnesses (11:7). Verse 13-16 can be seen as an interlude also, an interlude between the sixth and seventh bowls. The evil trinity appears again- the dragon or Satan, the Beast of the sea or satanic government, and the Beast of the earth or satanic religion. The Beast of the earth is called the false prophet. Like a false prophet he performed great signs but does them in order to deceive the earth dwellers (13:14).

John saw, ‘*unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet’* (16:13). Frogs were regarded as unclean creatures under OT law. Moreover, the second plague on Egypt was frogs (Exod 8). We do not see a lot of frogs these days, although there are plenty of cane toads up north. Having frogs or toads in your breakfast bowl and in your bed would not be pleasant. The croaking noise made by frogs may be alluded to in this vision. These unclean spirits, or spirits of demons, went out to all the kings of the earth (16:14). They performed signs, and probably made a lot of noise and false promises to get the kings to gather together for the great battle- or what will be the great slaughter. This battle will be ‘*in the great day of Almighty God’* (16:14). They will combine forces to fight against Almighty God. Such is the power of demonic deception that people can think they can fight against God.

Pharaoh thought he could fight against God. Nebuchadnezzar thought he could fight against God. God kept telling them they must acknowledge him as the Most High God who rules in the kingdom of men, but they would not listen. Power corrupts. Power blinds men to the truth. Pride leads people to oppose God, to exalt themselves against God and blaspheme his holy name. A proud heart is a very dangerous thing. Satan is well aware of this and delights to stir up sinful pride.

*‘They gathered them at the place called in Hebrew, Armageddon’* (16:16). If people today know anything at all about the book of Revelation, they know about the Millennium and Armageddon. But Armageddon occurs only here in the whole book. What are we to understand by Armageddon? In Hebrew it means mount (*har*) Meggido. Megiddo was a fortress city at the foot of Mt Carmel and on the edge of the valley of Jezreel in northern Israel. This was the site of many battles, including that of Deborah and Barak in the time of the Judges. The name Megiddo became symbolic of every battle in which the people of God engaged, and of God’s mighty deliverance.

Many take this literally, as they do the reference to the Euphrates and even Babylon. Such people hold that after the seven year tribulation the Jews, who will have rebuilt the temple, will be attacked from the north and that Christ will suddenly appear to rescue the Jews. They hold that in this battle of Armageddon blood will literally flow to the depth of the horses bridle (14:20).

The outcome of this battle will be revealed in later visions (19:19f, 20:8f). But the battle is never described in detail for it has already been won. It was won by Jesus when he died on the cross (Jn 12:31,16). There is no indication of a protracted war between the followers of Satan and the saints of God- or even the Jews. The battle is going on now for we live in the last days. Satan is very active now for he knows his time is short. He is not waiting for the outcome of the battle of Armageddon for he knows it will mean his final demise- even if he does not let on.

In this interlude is a brief message of comfort for the saints. Some put this verse in brackets but it is a feature consistent with the other interludes. Jesus often spoke of his coming again like a thief. He told parables about being ready and not slacking off. ‘*Blessed is he who watches and keeps his garments’* (16:15). We have a saying about not being ‘caught with your pants down’. That is the message of this verse- in a spiritual sense, of course. Do not drop your guard against the attacks of the devil. He is like a lion prowling about, seeking whom he may devour. Stand dressed in the armour of God, ready to repel any and every attack of the evil one.

**It is done-bowl 7** Revelation 16:17-21

What was the last thing Jesus said as he was dying on the cross? John tells us that, “knowing he had fulfilled all Scripture and completed all that he had been sent into this world to accomplish, Jesus said ‘I thirst’”. But his was not his last utterance. After receiving some sour wine he said, ‘it is finished’. Not ‘I am finished’ but ‘it is finished’.

The words in the passage before us today echo those of Jesus on the Cross, and indeed lead us into a greater understanding of his words. ‘*It is done’* is the cry that comes from the throne in heaven as the seventh angel pours out the final bowl of God’s wrath (16:17). The cry of Jesus from the Cross is the basis for this cry from the throne in heaven, for on the Cross Jesus won the victory over death and the devil or Satan. It was a victory cry. In this vision John sees the final outworking of this victory, the end of all the enemies of God.

The world over which Satan has ruled since the Fall, the world that is the home of sinful human beings as they follow the ‘prince of the power of the air’, will come crumbling down faster than the twin towers in New York city on 9/11. And there will be even less left behind than there is of those towers. Even the mountains will not be found (16:20).

**1.Done**

The promised judgment of God upon this world, upon those who follow the beast/Satan has arrived. God is longsuffering. God is patient. The prayer of the martyrs (6:10) is ever before him, but he must bring in the full number of their brethren. But let us never forget that God’s patience does not mean any change in his declared purpose. God forgives sin, he forgives all who repent and worship him alone. But he will ‘*by no means clear the guilty’* (Exod 34:7). The death of Jesus means eternal life to those who believe, but destruction and eternal punishment to those who reject Jesus Christ.

The last bowl is poured out into the air. The previous ones were poured out on the waters, upon the sun and upon the earthly throne of the beast. The air may refer to this element of creation, or it may refer to the realm of the spirits. Air is vital to human life. The air or atmosphere is where the final deluge of hail comes from. But in a spiritual sense the devil is called the ‘prince of the power of the air’ (Eph 2:2).

There is a finality in these words, ‘*It is done’*. The verb is in the perfect tense, meaning the consequences of this ‘doing’ are ongoing. This is not some ‘phoenix-type’ end. There will be no rising again from these ashes. Moreover, this will not be some slow running down of the universe. This is not some end that can be averted by man with all his sophisticated technology. The only way you can avoid this destruction is by coming to Jesus and entering his kingdom, the only kingdom that will remain.

‘It is done’ speaks of the completion of what Almighty God has determined. It reminds us of those words that rang out from heaven in the beginning- ‘the day that you eat of it (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) you shall surely die’. Disobedience is rebellion, and God being God will share his glory with no other. In these bowl judgments ‘*the wrath of God is complete’* (15:1).

**2.Destruction**

The seventh bowl was marked by ‘*noises, and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake coming from the throne in heaven’* (16:18). We have come across these previously- with the seventh seal and seventh trumpet. For the Jews, such a picture would remind them of the time when God came down and spoke with Moses on Mt Sinai. A mighty storm erupted and the mountain shook. The people trembled in fear. The prophet Haggai also spoke of the Lord once again shaking ‘*heaven and earth, the sea and the dry land and all nations’* (Haggai 2:6-7). The writer to the Hebrews picks up on this truth, writing of a day when our God, who is a consuming fire, will shake and remove all that belongs to this world, leaving only the unshakeable kingdom of God (Heb 12:27f).

In this vision John sees this word come true. He sees a great earthquake such as has not been seen before. And along with the earthquake came great hail (16:21). One of the plagues God sent upon Egypt was hail. Hail destroyed their trees and crops and killed men and animals that did not take shelter. Yes, there were people who ignored the warning from God and stayed out in the hailstorm.

We have had some huge hailstorms in recent years. Many homes and cars were damaged in a terrible hailstorm in our city just a few years ago. Men have been killed when hit with hail stones. I have not seen hailstones bigger than golf balls. Some tell of tennis-ball-sized hail. But look at the size of the hail in this bowl judgment. At over 30kg, the hailstones are larger than a basketball. To be hit by such an object falling from the sky would mean instant death. What about shelter you ask. But remember the earthquake. As buildings shake and crumble people flee outside. And outside they run into this great hail. The destruction will be terrible- it will be total. There will be no place to hide. There will be no escape on this great day of Almighty God.

*‘The great Babylon was remembered before God’* (16:19). The fall of Babylon was referred to back in 14:8- remember, we do not read this book chronologically. It will be referred to again in 18:2. Babylon is symbolic of the world order or worldly system. Men first made a pact to exalt themselves against God at Babel, and they have been doing so ever since. What about the climate change meeting in Bali last week? Was there prayer at this meeting?

In Babylon, Daniel was confronted by rulers who kept exalting themselves against God. In the time of John, Roman rulers were doing the same thing. John and the churches of Asia were suffering just like Daniel from this world order. Such a world order continues today with rulers who arrogantly stand against God and his word, the Bible.

What will become of Babylon? Babylon had made all the nations drink of the wine of her fornication (4:8, 17:2). All the nations were drawn into her economic system and its associated corruption and immorality. It is the system of humanism- God denying and God defying humanism. ‘Secular humanists, Marxists and others who believe a Utopia on earth is possible, are wrong. They are wrong for the simple reason that earthly rulers are corrupted by power and deify the power by which they are corrupted’. In divine judgment Babylon is made to drink the wine of God’s wrath. She will get her just due (16:6). She will be divided and fall, never to rise again. The great city will crumble under the mighty hand of God- and all the cities of the nations fell with her (16:19).

With the great and final shaking of the earth, ‘*every island fled away and the mountains were not found’* (16:20). ‘The recognisable frame of the creation of God disappears at his command, just as it had appeared originally at his word of command’. This will be some shaking when the mountains cannot be found! Some may think this points to flooding but God has promised there will never again be a worldwide flood- and has given the rainbow as a sign of this covenant (Gen 9:11).

Some think that environmental devastation going on today is of ‘apocalyptic proportions’, but this outpouring of God’s wrath in the seventh bowl is beyond our imagination. Moreover, it will be sudden and total destruction. It will be the end of this earth brought about at the word of God, not man.

**3.Delinquents.**

Where are the earth dwellers when all this devastation comes upon the earth? Are they turning to the mighty creator God in humility? Like Pharaoh they are being hardened. They are turning to God to curse not to plead mercy. We often hear of juvenile delinquents who reject authority as they engage in criminal activity. The word ‘juvenile’ can be left out to describe all who live in rebellion against God and his law- ‘delinquents’. They abide by the law of ‘Babylon’ but not the law of God. They violently oppose God and blaspheme his holy name, especially when the finger of God’s wrath touches them.

This is an aspect of the gospel which we seldom hear today, and many do not want to hear it. The gospel is preached with the premise of ‘take it or leave it’- ‘it is your choice’. This is not wrong, but the consequences of leaving it must be made clear. ‘This negative side of the gospel is as much part of the gospel as that which declares that Jesus saves and that he is Lord’. One day every human being will have to face the consequences of their choice - the choice to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ or reject it.

‘It is done’ (16:17). In this vision John sees the end of humanity and the end of this world. God’s wrath is poured out in full in these seven bowl judgments*- ‘for in them the wrath of God is complete/ ended/ consummated’* (15:1). The earth disappears. The kingdoms of men come to nothing. Only the kingdom of God remains. To which kingdom do you belong?

**Beauty and the beast** Revelation 17:1-6

In this chapter we come to a new vision given to John. Some say it is the sixth of seven visions, and others the sixth of eight. What we find is an angel showing John the great harlot/prostitute and her judgment. This is the focus of chapters 17, 18 and 19:1-10.

It is not ‘another angel’ that called to John but one of the seven angels who had poured out the bowls. In the outpouring of the last bowl of God’s judgment we saw Babylon being judged and the cities of the nations falling along with her (16:19). It may well be the seventh angel who now comes to explain further the mystery of the great Babylon.

**1.Beauty of the prostitute**

You will have heard the story about the boy who got a cute little bear cub for his birthday. The cub was very sweet and cuddly. The boy had a lot of fun with the cub. But bear cubs grow up into big grizzly bears. One day this bear showed its natural instincts and attacked the boy even though he loved it and cared for it.

Prostitutes make every effort to make themselves attractive to their customers. In the book of Proverbs, the young man is warned about the immoral woman or prostitute. ‘*Her lips drip honey and her mouth is smoother than oil’*. But what happens in the end? ‘*She is as bitter as wormwood’ (*Prov 5:3,4).

John is shown ‘*the great harlot/prostitute who sits on many waters’ (*17:1). He was taken into the wilderness where he saw her more clearly. She was seated on a scarlet beast and was herself adorned in purple and scarlet. She was dressed like a princess, wearing gold and precious stones. In fact she thought of herself as a queen (18:7). Her beauty dazzled and blinded many inhabitants of the earth. Many were seduced by her. When John saw her he ‘*marveled with great amazement’*. The angel said to him, as if by rebuke, ‘*why do you marvel*?’ (17:6, 7). She is a dangerous woman and her powers are not to be underestimated.

The kings of the earth committed fornication with the great prostitute. They fell for her, for her beauty and what she offered them; pleasures and treasures, and a sense of security. Not only kings but multitudes of earth dwellers were sucked in, as it were. They were made drunk with the wine of her fornication. In their intoxication they committed indecent acts with her.

She turned out to be a filthy and repulsive woman. John saw that she held a cup full of filth and abominations. What looked so sweet, tasted very sour. The prostitute was not only seductive; she was vengeful towards those who rejected her advances. John saw that she was made drunk ‘with the blood of the saints and with the blood of martyrs of Jesus (17:6). She was responsible for the persecution of many followers of Christ.

**2.Babylon the prostitute**

Who is this great prostitute that John is shown in this vision. He is not being warned about sexual immorality as such. In the OT the people of God were accused of adultery when they turned away from God to worship idols. Even in the NT such imagery is used. James calls those who make friends with the world, those who go after what the world offers, adulterers and adulteresses. ‘*Whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God’* (James 4:4). Friendship with the world is idolatry.

John saw a name written on the forehead of the great prostitute. It is believed that prostitutes in Roman times wore name bands on their heads. It is interesting to see sports people these days with their names emblazoned across their hat or shirt. The name is called a mystery. Mystery does not mean riddle. This is not a puzzle we have to solve. Mystery simply means something that was hidden and is now made known. It is an open secret to those who see.

Her name was, ‘*Babylon the great, the mother of all harlots and of the abominations of the earth’* (17:5). She is the greatest prostitute in the entire world. She is the most beautiful woman but also the filthiest of all women. Why is she called Babylon the great? What is the significance of this name? We have come across the name ‘Babylon’ previously. It was in the city of Babylon that Daniel had to contend with kings who thought they were gods, and people who worshipped the king, along with a collection of gaudy idols. They may have had an idol to the goddess of wealth, as some do today. The name Babylon goes way back to the very beginning when sinful men moved out over the earth. On the plain of Shinar they came together to ‘*make a name for themselves’* (Gen 11:4). To do this they would build a tall tower reaching to the heavens. They would delight in the work of their own hands.

The name Babylon symbolises ‘prevailing economic-religious systems in alliance with the state and related authorities existing throughout the ages’. A brief look at world history, and even at the world today, will show how politics and business can easily become allies in corruption. Sometimes religion also takes its place in alliance with business and the state.

The prostitute was sitting ‘*on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns’*. This is none other than the beast of the sea (17:3 cf. 13:1). This beast symbolises antichristian government. Many rulers down through history have exalted themselves against the Most High God and persecuted the people of God. Daniel and his friends suffered under Babylonian rulers. He also spoke of the coming of Antiochus Epiphanies. John’s first readers were suffering at the hands of the Roman emperor. They even referred to Rome as Babylon. Business in Rome and its colonies usually operated through trade guilds. In order to trade one had to be a member of the guild, and members of the guild were obliged to worship the patron idol of that guild. To ‘belong’, to have security in business or employment, one had to go along with the ‘culture’. ‘Any institution or facet of a culture that is characterised by pride, economic overabundance, persecution and idolatry is part of a Babylon’.

Fornication with the great prostitute is not sexual immorality as such; it is spiritual adultery. It is worshipping the creature, worshipping man-made things rather than the creator. Only God our maker is worthy of our worship. But many are lured away from pure worship by the great harlot. They are shown the treasures and the pleasures, the control and the comfort that money can buy. ‘*If you will worship me’* Satan said to Jesus then, ‘*all this will be yours’*, referring to the kingdoms and the glory of this world (Luke 4). Jesus was not seduced, but heaps of people are.

Resisting the prostitute carries a cost. Jesus soon ‘felt the heat’ when he rejected the offer of Satan. He did not fit into the culture into which he was born. He was rejected by his own. “Those who do not submit to the idolatrous requirements of economic well-being will be persecuted by the economic system itself, by Babylon the great. John expresses this by portraying ‘*the woman drunk with the blood of the saints’* (17:6)”.

Have you felt the pressure to conform to our own economic system? What an amazing system we have! Millions of people owe billions of dollars in debt on their credit cards. How did this come about? Were we not seduced by the system? I remember once not being able to do business because I had no credit card and no credit rating. The system promotes credit because it makes the rich richer. But God tells us in his word to be content with what we have and to owe no man anything (Rom 13:8).

**3.Beware of the prostitute**

John was ‘*carried away by the Spirit into the wilderness/desert’* (17:3). Is there any significance in this place? God punished his people in the desert when they rebelled against him after coming out of Egypt. He also prepared them there in the desert for life in the Promised Land. In the end, Babylon will be judged; the once beautiful and prosperous city will become a desert. The once beautiful and prosperous prostitute will be stripped naked and left to perish in the desert.

The other point with regard to the desert is that it is a place away from the city, a place where economics has little meaning. It is a place for reflection. In the desert John could see clearly what was going on in the city. He was himself in exile on Patmos at this time. He could see the bigger picture of the economic system operating in collusion with Roman imperial power. He wrote to warn the churches.

It is not easy to see clearly when one is living within the city and the system. Paul often prayed for discernment for believers. We must open our Bible and read what God has to say to us. We must come together for fellowship and worship. The prostitute beckons us and many are seduced by her. Many are too busy to read their Bible and too busy to come to church. Soon they are bowing to idols. In their quest to be financially secure, and to get rich, they will sacrifice anything and everything, including friends and family, and even Jesus.

Beware of glittering gold. Beware of the economic system of this world that promises everything but in the end delivers nothing. Seek security in the Lord, not in your wealth. God gives eternal security to those who worship him, and him alone.

**Beast’s deception and defeat** Revelation 17: 7-14

The great prostitute, labeled on her forehead as ‘Babylon the Great’, was sitting on a beast with seven heads and ten horns. This was the beast of the sea seen in an earlier vision. Daniel also saw such a beast in one of his visions- the fourth beast ‘*had ten horns’* (Dan 7:7). This fourth beast, Daniel was told, is a fourth kingdom on earth and the ten horns are ten kings who will arise from this kingdom. Many understand this fourth beast to symbolise the Roman Empire. John was living at the time of the Roman Empire when he wrote this letter. He was in exile for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Christians were being severely persecuted at this time. The Romans killed Christians for sport. When would this suffering end? Would the church survive? The Lord gave visions to John revealing what would happen in the end, the end that was near.

One of the seven angels showed John the great prostitute sitting on the beast. He went on to tell John what this vision meant. We have seen that the great prostitute represents economic-religious systems of this world that align themselves with state powers. The beast is antichristian government, government that opposes God and his people, government that seeks to destroy the true church

**1.Wily beast**

The woman, the great prostitute, is supremely seductive. John marveled; he was awestruck by her beauty, yet perplexed by the blood which she drank. ‘Do not marvel’ the angel told John. Millions look upon her and are seduced. Do not be taken in by her beauty or her many promises.

The woman is closely associated with the beast at this stage- she is sitting on his back. What is the mystery of the beast? As in a previous vision (chapter 13), Satan gave this beast great authority and power. He is a ‘clever devil’ of a beast. Seven heads point to great knowledge and ten horns to great power. He is not a candidate for the Darwin awards! He is a wily old beast, able to deceive as well as dominate human beings numbering millions.

*‘The beast that you saw was and is not, and will ascend out of the abyss and go to destruction’* (17: 8). Earth dwellers will marvel when they see the beast ‘*was and is not and yet is present’*. What is significant about this time line? Firstly, it is a parody, a mimicking of the way God and Jesus are described (1:8, 4:8). The beast thinks he is God and portrays himself as such. Remember the mortal wound that was healed on one of his heads.

Secondly, the beast was very powerful, until Jesus came. Jesus came across lots of people who were demon possessed; he cast these demons out of people, thereby angering the devil. Then at the Cross Jesus outsmarted the devil. He thought that by killing Jesus he would defeat him, but Jesus rose again from the dead. But still the devil tries to trick people into thinking he is great- he also ‘*was and is not and yet is’*, as if he has come back from the dead. We still see people claiming to be reincarnations and to have come back from the dead. Beware of any who make such claims. Jesus is the firstborn from the dead and the only one to be resurrected before he comes again.

The truth about the beast is that he was defeated at the Cross; and that he is now bound- in effect he is on a leash. But he will be released to bring great havoc on the earth for a short period at the end. He will come out of the pit before being assigned eternally to destruction of the lake of fire (19:20).

Not all will be taken in by this blaspheming, boastful beast. He will be particularly enraged in the end when he finds that some people will not bow down and worship him. Those whose names are written in ‘*the Book of Life from the foundation of the world’* (17:8), those who are called and chosen, will be faithful to the very end. They will stand firm in the word of God and worship only God and the Lamb upon the throne.

A professor of medicine was very upset to discover that a number of his students did not believe in Darwinian evolution. He could not accept that educated young people would believe in ‘old hat’ creation. He was determined to change their beliefs. But as he derided creation and vigorously promoted evolution he found even more students believing in creation.

**2.Seven heads and ten horns**

*‘Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits’* (17:9). The woman or prostitute symbolises Babylon, which in John’s day was a term used when referring to Rome, at least by Christians. Rome was the capital city of the greatest empire the world had seen, the centre of government, commerce, arts and science. Rome was also known in the ancient world as the ‘city of seven hills’ because of its geography. Is this the mystery of the seven horns?

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John is next told that they are also seven kings (17:10). It is easy to be led into thinking of seven literal kings in the Roman Empire. But which kings. When do we start counting- at Julius Caesar or Augustus? What about those who ruled for a short time? Domitian, the king who we agreed was ruling at the time John was on Patmos, was historically the 12th emperor.

The king *who is* after five have fallen would be the one who was ruling in John’s day. Nero was the sixth ruler after Julius Caesar- some do date this letter in Nero’s time. But then others think Domitian is the one who ‘*must rule for a short time’* (17:10). They point to a contemporary rumour that Nero would one day reappear. Nero was the greatest persecutor of Christians but Domitian was a close second. Was he in some way Nero reincarnate? (17:11- note that the eighth is of the seven, not **one** of the seven).

Going back to the seven mountains; mountains are often used figuratively to refer to strength and to kingdoms. Seven kings can also refer to kingdoms rather than kings. Therefore Hendriksen and others identify the seven kings with world empires- Ancient Babylon, Assyria, New Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. The seventh is yet to come- it is a collective title for antichristian government between the fall of Rome and the final empire of antichrist.

‘It is possible’ writes Beale, ‘that just as the seven churches represented seven actual churches but also symbolized the church universal, so these seven heads and mountains could represent seven historical empires, or seven Roman emperors, figuratively representing all Roman emperors, themselves symbolizing all empires throughout history’. In other words, Rome did sit on seven literal hills and there may be seven literal kings or empires, but that does not exhaust the meaning of the vision. We do not, however, agree with the pre-millennial interpretation that the Roman Empire will be literally revived directly before the return of Christ and that the ten horns refer to ten European rulers.

What about the ten horns? These are also kings but without a kingdom (17:12). They were given authority for a very short time. Horns are symbolic of power, as seen in the seven horns of the Lamb (5:6). These kings may be more like local rulers given power within the larger kingdom. Local rulers were able to get Daniel thrown into the lion’s den. They serve the beast without question and are ready to worship him (17:13). These ten kings may represent things like art, education, industry and science. Such aspects of a culture are often brought under the authority of the king. Did not Hitler use such institutions for his known evil purposes? Darwinian evolution served Hitler well. How much are art, education and science today directly controlled by governments. Schools are used for social engineering. Who is driving the climate change crusade today? Where is the mind which has wisdom?

**3.War with the Lamb**

As the beast assumes greater and greater power in this world he comes to think of himself as invincible- and this is his downfall. He is just like some rich people, politicians and lawyers in the world today-or rather, they are like him. They think they are above the law- Conrad Black and Justice Einfield come to mind as high profile men who never thought they would face prison sentences.

Daniel saw the beast prevailing against the saints (Dan 7:21) and John also saw the beast make war against the two witnesses and overcome them (11:7). The beast has such success in persecuting the people of God that he decides to take on their leader, Jesus Christ. ‘*He will make war with the Lamb’* (17:14). In doing so he oversteps the mark. His head gets too big, or, in this case, he runs out of heads. He has doggedly gone on attacking the people of God proving to be like a cat with nine lives. John saw him coming up out of the sea, one head after another. But in the end he oversteps the mark.

Making war with the Lamb of God who is on the throne in heaven is not wise. Jesus ‘*is Lord of lords and King of kings’* (17:14). He tried to overcome Jesus when he was on the earth, first tempting Jesus and then having him crucified. But Christ rose from the dead, victorious over death and the devil. So when the beast and his evil followers launch this final attack, the Lamb will overcome them. Jesus will expose as false the divine claims of emperors and others like them. He will defeat them with the breath of his mouth (Isa 11:4).

Remember, the end is near. Remember, the outcome of the war between Satan and Jesus is already decided in favour of Jesus. Blessed are those who are in Jesus, the ‘*called, the chosen and the faithful’*.

**Prostitute put down** Revelation 17: 15-18

Have you heard the name Jezebel? Does that name bring certain images to your mind? Jezebel was a queen in Israel, a wicked queen. She brought idols into the palace of the king. She tried to kill the prophets of God. She conspired to murder the poor man Naboth, just so the king could have a veggie garden. In the end, dogs licked up her blood and ate her flesh.

The name Jezebel appears in the book of Revelation. It is the name, real or symbolic, of a woman calling herself a prophetess in the church at Thyatira. She led the Christians into sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols. She told them to compromise with the world in the face of persecution.

The prostitute shown to John by one of the seven angels having seven bowls was the mother of all prostitutes. She was the great seductress ‘*with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication’* (17:2). She carried the name ‘Babylon the Great’. She was ‘dressed to kill’ we might say, wearing lots of fine jewelry and make-up. John marveled at the sight of this woman sitting on a scarlet beast which had seven heads and ten horns. But the angel told him not to marvel. All that glitters is not gold. And even gold perishes, as Moses showed the people of God in the desert. The angel had, in fact, come to show John ‘*the judgment of the great prostitute’* (17:1). This is what we see in the closing verses of this chapter.

**1.City on the waters**

The great prostitute was sitting on many waters (17:1). Yes, he saw her sitting on a beast also- that is part and parcel of apocalyptic writing in which images are quite fluid. The woman is identified as ‘*that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth’* (17:18). She is ‘Babylon the Great’.

Babylon was a great city in the days of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and took the Jews, including Daniel, captive to Babylon. Babylon was on the river Euphrates. Actually it was literally on the river for a canal ran under the city. In the year 539BC the Medes and Persians managed to divert the water and enter the city via this canal. They found King Belshazzar drunk at a massive party he had thrown for his friends. He was slain that very night, some say by his own people (Dan 5:30). That was the end of the mighty kingdom of Babylon. Jeremiah spoke of this moment in history- ‘*O you who dwell by many waters, abundant in treasures, your end has come, the measure of your covetousness’* (Jer 51:13).

John was living centuries later, in the time of the Roman Empire, but the world had changed little. Rome was in power and was just as corrupt and violent as Babylon. In fact, the Jews referred to Rome by the epithet ‘Babylon’. Babylon is so typical of worldly kingdoms that it is used in a universal sense in this vision.

The great prostitute symbolises economic and/or religious systems of this world which make alliances with political or state authorities. There was no distinction between the state and religion in Babylon, or in Rome. The emperor could make himself god if he wanted, and some did. Business and trade was tied up with idolatry. Trade guilds had their patron gods or saints. Such associations were in direct opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The word ‘covetous’ appears in Jeremiah 51:13 with reference to Babylon and its end. We do not hear this word much these days, but that is not to say it is a thing of the past. Coveting is one of those sins with lots of euphemisms. Coveting is no longer seen as a sin- it is actually encouraged. Even Christians see nothing wrong with desiring something their friend has. ‘Why do you want such and such a thing?’- ‘because my friend has one.’ The Bible calls that coveting. See the tenth commandment; ‘you shall not covet your neighbour’s house or his field or his wife or anything that is your neighbours’. Like the rest of the world, many Christians are so busy acquiring the things of the world that they look like, and act just like the people of the world. The prostitute has seduced them into seeking the things of the world rather than the things of God.

**2.Harlot off the horse**

What happened to Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, in the end? In 2Kings 9 we read that while she was powdering herself and making herself seductive, Jehu rode by. She called out to this new king of Israel. He looked up at her briefly and called upon her servants to throw her down. They threw her down, and her blood splattered on the wall and on the horses, and Jehu trampled her underfoot (2Kings 9:33). Her own servants cast Jezebel to her death.

The great prostitute, sitting on the scarlet beast with ten horns, was turned upon by those ten horns. They ‘*will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire’* (17:16). The very horse that carried her suddenly becomes the horse which tramples her to death. In village India, a woman found to be a prostitute may be stripped naked and made to march down the main street. Those she seduced, those ‘made drunk from the cup of her fornication’ will be among those stripping her naked and parading her down the street.

‘The political side of the ungodly world system will turn against the heart of the social, economic and religious side and destroy it’. This world is a fallen world; it is an evil world, and those who live by the rules of the world will die by those rules. Evil is self-destructive in the end. Infatuation with the things of the world and gratification from such things is short lived. The world will devour its own, just as most criminals die at the hands of ‘their own’.

Compromise with the world may save the life of those persecuted by Babylon or Rome, but in the end such Christians will lose out. They will be devoured by the very system they sought to make peace with. Listening to Jezebel and following her teaching is appealing. There are many self-proclaimed prophets who offer an ‘easy gospel’, a gospel that does not upset the world. But in the end such a gospel will be shown to be one of straw. It will be burned up.

The Lord made a covenant with his people when he brought them out of Egypt. He said, ‘you shall have no other gods before me’. He told them not to make graven images and not to covet things. The Lord has made a covenant with us today, a covenant in the blood of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. We must flee from idolatry (1Cor 10:14). ‘*Pure and undefiled religion is this’* writes James (1:27), ‘*to visit orphans and widows in their trouble and to keep oneself unspotted from the world’*.

**3.God’s eternal purpose**

While the great prostitute was hated, abused and killed by the very ones she drank and fornicated with, it is also true that God ‘*put it into their hearts to fulfill his purpose’* (17:17). We might say that evil is by nature self-destructive, but nature and all creation is under the sovereign power of God. God can and does control the hearts of men. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem- this is true, but Daniel tells us that, ‘*the Lord gave the king of Judah into his hand’* (Dan 1:2). The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, to command the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple (Ezra 1).

The world we live in is blind to this truth, and some Christians are also. People fail to see the hand of God in anything that happens- except to curse him when things go wrong. Sometimes we fail to see the big picture that God presents in his word. We fail to see the hand of God moving to raise up kings and put down kings. We fail to see him moving in the hearts of men and women. We may even lose hope that he will save his chosen people.

Let us look to the Lord and pray for revival. Let us pray, ‘your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. God is not sleeping. He has not gone into retirement. He has a great plan and purpose for the salvation of men and women, for his own glory. In the fullness of time he sent his Son Jesus into this fallen world. He sent him for the purpose of redeeming men and women who are born in sin and are bound by sin. God raised Jesus from the dead to sit as the Lamb upon the throne in heaven. God has set a day when he will judge the world in righteousness by this Lamb. In the meantime he is building his church.

Satan and his cohorts are striving to destroy the church but they will not prevail. They may appear to do so from time to time (11:7, 13:7), but the Lamb will overcome them by the breath of his mouth (17:14). Indeed, he has already overcome them at the cross of Calvary. Babylon the great is fallen. The beast of the sea and the beast of the earth will be next, and then finally Satan, the great deceiver himself.

Will you stand firm to the end? Are you standing in the Lord Jesus Christ today? In him you have a sure and certain victory over the world, the flesh and the devil.

**Come out of Babylon** Revelation 18:1-5

I received a prayer letter the other day from friends in Central Asia. They are in a remote valley bringing the gospel to these isolated people. One concern they shared was that these people were selling their wheat seed to put money into a pyramid investment scheme. The tentacles of some ‘Nigerian’ investment scam must have reached this remote place, deceiving even more people. Why do people put their savings into such risky schemes? We still hear of people around us putting money into these Nigerian schemes. They look so attractive but are in fact too attractive to be true. Such is the lust for money, such is the desire of some to get rich quick that they take the bait and get hooked. It is much the same with gambling of course. People dream of the big win, which for most never comes. This lust seems to override all sense and worldly wisdom. Tragically even heavenly wisdom is sometimes overridden by this powerful attraction of money. Even the people of God can be deceived and lead astray by lust for the treasures and pleasures of the world. The love of money leads to all kinds of evil.

**1.Heavenly messenger**

Babylon the great, the mother of all prostitutes is bold and boastful as she struts the world stage. She is seriously seductive, she is dangerously deceptive. She symbolises the prevailing economic/religious systems of the world. She seduces even the kings of the earth, as well as the common man, making them drink the wine of her fornication. The merchants get a special mention in this chapter. They have ‘*become rich through the abundance of her luxury’* (18:3).

John saw ‘*another angel coming down from heaven having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory’* (18:1). For all the dazzling lights surrounding the prostitute, all the bright lights of the city she symbolised, there is a much more powerful light coming down from heaven. Her lights will one day go out, but this heavenly light will shine for ever and ever. All the glory of men in this world cannot be compared to the brightness and glory of this light from heaven. He illuminates the whole earth. Some think this angel is actually Jesus himself and that this is a Christophany. There certainly are similarities with the mighty angel of Revelation 10:1, who was Jesus in all his glory. Moreover, the glory of God and the Lamb illuminate the city of the New Jerusalem (21:23).

As Jesus ascended into heaven in his glorious, resurrected body, he declared, ‘all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’. This angel had great authority (18:1). He was more powerful than the great prostitute and even the beast on which she sat. He cried out with a *loud voice, ‘Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen’* (18:2).

A similar cry has been echoing from stock exchanges around the world in recent days. The market has fallen, the price of stocks has fallen, and many are getting their fingers burnt, as we say. Some had borrowed money to put into shares. Money lenders and financial advisers were encouraging this. It was a smart way to get rich quick. But with interest rates going up and share prices coming down some are very worried.

This is not the first time the market has fallen and it will not be the last- well, it may be. The day is surely coming when all stock markets will close. Much activity on these markets is under the control of the evil one. In such places we see the great prostitute doing her work, luring men into bondage to money and the things of this world. We see it happening in religious circles also. Did you hear the comments of a pastor who went to a Benny Hinn performance? Here is a man who knows how to seduce the blind and the gullible.

One day these world systems will come to an end. John was being shown the judgment of the great prostitute. In the previous chapter we saw how the very beast on which she sat turned against her to ‘*eat her flesh and burn her with fire’* (17:16). God himself was behind this downfall of the great prostitute called Babylon the great.

**2.Babylon is fallen, is fallen**

You will be saying to yourself, ‘we have seen these words before’ - and you are right. When the seventh bowl was poured out God gave Babylon ‘*the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath’* (16:19). And before this in Revelation 14:8 we read, ‘*Babylon is fallen, is fallen’*. If you are reading this book chronologically you will be quite confused- how can Babylon keep falling! But we must read this book as a series of parallel visions, each giving another aspect, or greater insight, into the end time judgment of this world.

In the chapter before us we are given a closer look into the judgment and destruction of Babylon the great. The judgment is actually spoken of as if it has already happened- Babylon **is** fallen. This is called the prophetic-perfect speech. It is God’s revealed will, and God’s word never fails. So what God has promised can be spoken of as if it has already happened. How amazing! This divine certainty is based upon God’s judgments in the past. God does not simply say, ‘believe me’, as we might do, because he is Almighty God, the God who does not lie. But God says, ‘look at what I have spoken and done in the past’. Babylon literally ruled this world in the time of Daniel. No one could stand against this great juggernaut of economic and religious power. But God brought that great kingdom to an end overnight- literally overnight. God will bring this symbolic Babylon to an end in one day (18:8).

Do you remember the story? King Belshazzar was weighed in the scales by God and found wanting. In the scales of justice and glory he came up short according to the writing on the wall. He was guilty of idolatry, indeed of praising gods of silver and gold with the sacred vessels of God’s house. He was guilty of failing to glorify God, ‘*the God who holds your breath in his hand’* (Dan 5:23). That very night Belshazzar was slain (Dan 5:30).

Long before the time of Belshazzar, God sent two angels to the city of Sodom. The outcry against this city had grown great before the Lord (Gen 19:13). The people of Sodom were exceedingly wicked. God had given them up to vile passions, to lust for those of their own sex. The angels had come to warn the people of the imminent destruction of their city. We might reflect on how many people in New Orleans were crying out to the Lord as they suffered under the sins of that city, famous as it was for its Mardi gras festival.

The sins of Babylon the great ‘*have reached to heaven and God has remembered her iniquities’* (18:5). The angel announces the fall of this great city*. ‘It has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!’* (18:2). The city was made desolate; it was like a ghost town.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied the fall of Babylon and the language here is reminiscent of their proclamations. Isaiah spoke of the destruction of her ‘*carved images’* (Isa 21:9), and Jeremiah of Babylon becoming ‘*a heap, and a dwelling place for jackals’* (Jer 51:37). The great city once revered by the whole world became a heap of ruins. The crows and the vultures fought with the jackals and the rats for the rotting bodies.

**3.Come out**

*‘Escape for your life, do not look behind you nor stay anywhere on the plain. Escape to the mountains lest you be destroyed’*. Where do we find these words in our Bible? Were these words heard and heeded? Remember Lot’s wife! The angels urged Lot and his family to leave the wicked city of Sodom before it was too late. But they had become accustomed to living in that city. They were reluctant to leave. They must flee if they were to live. Flee and do not look back! Lot’s wife was fleeing in body but not in spirit. Her heart was still in Sodom. It was not just physical separation but spiritual separation that was called for.

Jeremiah called upon the people of God to get out of Babylon and escape the fierce anger of the Lord (Jer 51:45). Daniel was not at Belshazzar’s party but there may well have been some Jews among the thousand guests. Some Jews had compromised with the world and joined the economic and religious system of Babylon. Daniel was, of course, living in this city and even served in the government, but he was not part of its idolatry and corruption, as his life story clearly shows. He lived a life of integrity and honesty, praying three times every day. Like his three friends, he was ready to die before he would worship an idol.

The angel John saw called upon the people of God not to share in her (Babylon’s) sins, ‘*lest you receive of her plagues’* (18:4). If Christians want to live according to the rules of this world they will be judged along with the world. Too many want to have a foot in both worlds. They want to go along with the world, enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season, but also to keep in good with God. They will go to church if nothing else is on that Sunday. Have you come out of the world? Have you set your heart on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God? Remember, the things of this world are all passing away.

**Babylon boomeranged** Revelation 18:6-9

You will not find the word ‘boomerang’ in the Bible but it is a good word to describe the principle of repayment found in the Bible. When you throw a boomerang it comes back- and hits you in the face if you are not careful! ‘Whatever a man sows, that he will reap’ is how the Bible expresses this truth (Gal 6:7). If you sow love, you will reap love, at least from God, but if you sow hatred, you will not reap love.

**1.Pride**

Pride is one of the seven mortal sins, according to the Church of Rome. They have now declared several other deadly sins, sins which are merely an outworking of the evil heart of man. They continue to miss the mark, however, with regard to sin, focusing even more upon the outward manifestations of evil instead of the seat and source of sin, the sinful heart on every human being. Pride in the heart is what leads us to be selfish and self-centred. Because of pride we do not look out for others as we should. Because of pride we think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Because of pride we even exalt ourselves against God. With God-given wisdom King Solomon warned against the sin of pride. He said, ‘*Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall’* (Prov 16:18). We sometimes say, ‘the higher they rise the harder they fall’, which is largely true. It is true if that rise is the result of selfish ambition and pride.

In chapter 18 of Revelation we have already seen the fall of the mother of all prostitutes called ‘Babylon the great’. In this passage before us we see the reason for her fall. Her fall was ultimately of God, and it was because of her pride. ‘*I sit as queen, and am no widow, and will not see sorrow’* (18:7). It was because she exalted herself against Almighty God. She failed to understand the nature of divine judgment and the power of God. She did not express this pride openly but said these things in her heart. Outwardly she was very flattering and seductive. She may even have appeared humble at times. Pride is a very sinister sin. It resides in the heart. It is in our hearts from birth. God tells us to keep it under control, and with the help of the Holy Spirit we can. But Satan tells us to let pride rule in our hearts. He tells us, ‘look after number one, you deserve it, you must have the best, you are strong and self-sufficient, you deserve to get all the praise’. You hear Satan’s voice in the media and in advertising all the time. But do you hear the voice of God telling you to keep a lid on pride.

*‘You said in your heart I will ascend into heaven. I will exalt my throne above the stars of God…I will be like the Most High’* (Isa 14:13). Many understand these words as referring to Satan- called Lucifer in some versions. Indirectly this may be so, but in the context Isaiah is speaking about Babylon and its kings. In the book of Revelation, Babylon becomes symbolic of evil and is closely associated with the beast and the dragon which represents Satan (20:2).

Babylon was the name of a literal city and kingdom in the 6th century BC; in Revelation it takes on symbolic meaning. The kings of Babylon that we read about in the book of Daniel were full of pride. Nebuchadnezzar was a man whose ‘*heart was lifted up, and his spirit hardened in pride’* (Dan 5:20). At one time he challenged God, saying to Daniel’s friends, ‘*who is the God who will deliver you from my hands’* (Dan 3:15). God struck him with madness, making him live like a cow, until he realised and acknowledged that God rules in all the earth. Belshazzar refused to humble his heart although he knew all that had happened to his ‘father’, Nebuchadnezzar. He exalted himself against God by drinking from the sacred vessels- a toast to his idols. He refused to acknowledge God and give him the glory. God struck him down without delay.

Many years later King Herod suffered the same judgment. He was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon but when he went down to that city the people praised him. They said he was a god (Acts 12). Because Herod revelled in this praise, God struck him down without delay. Many others have come under such judgment even in our day- what of those who glory in the homosexuality, which is an abomination before God? God will not give his glory to another. God will not be mocked. God will silence all who exalt themselves against him.

The proud and seductive prostitute, representing the economic/religious systems of this world, considered herself a queen. She lived in luxury, adorning herself with fine clothes and jewellery. She despised poor widows, vowing never to become like them. She would never see sorrow she told herself. Widows in the past, and in some places still today, were reduced to begging to survive. God says to look after widows and orphans (James 1:27). The world simply vows never to become one.

The sin of pride, self-sufficiency and self-glory ruled in the heart of the great prostitute. She is behind this very sin. Our struggle, says Paul, is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers of the darkness of this age against spiritual hosts of wickedness (Eph 6:12). These rulers will be exposed according to the book of Revelation. We need spiritual help, we need God’s help, in the fight against the seductive power of material things, and the praises of other people. Let us be encouraged as we read this passage, encouraged that God has judged this seductive, spiritual power.

**2.Payment**

It is written, ‘you will reap what you sow’. The prostitute who made men drunk with the wine of her fornication, and who was drunk herself with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus (17:6), was made to drink the cup of God’s wrath. Previously John heard the martyrs crying out for just judgment and for the Lord to avenge their blood (6:10). They were told to wait a little longer. According to this angel, the sins of the prostitute had reached to heaven (18:5).

The cry goes out to repay her double according to her works (18:6). Double here simply means ‘in duplicate’, to render to her in full measure according to what she has done. This is the principle known as ‘*jus talionis*’. It can be seen in the command God gave to Noah stating, ‘whoever sheds a man blood, by man his blood shall be shed’ (Gen 9:6). Whilst our society has turned away from this principle, God has not. He will render to each person just punishment. God will ‘*render to her just as she rendered to you’* (18:6). ‘*In the measure that she glorified herself and lived in luxury, in the same measure give her torment and sorrow’ (18:7).* This reminds us of the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived in luxury, ignoring Lazarus who lay sick at his gate. In the afterlife the tables were turned.

Daniel advised Nebuchadnezzar to repent, to stop sinning and show mercy to the poor (Dan 4:27). Daniel knew the mercy of God towards those who repent. But the king ignored Daniel’s advice. He kept on oppressing the poor, building his great city. He was heading for greater heights of worldly glory, from which he would surely fall. Even when men were scorched with great heat in the plague of the sixth bowl they did not repent and give glory to God. It is the same today. Despite all the warnings- and I hope you are warning your family and friends of the coming judgment- despite the warning, many go on living under the influence of Babylon. But God brought Nebuchadnezzar to his knees, and he will do the same with every proud and selfish person. God is all powerful.

**3.Power**

*‘Strong is the Lord God who judges her’* (18:8). Nebuchadnezzar put out the challenge. ‘What god will be able to rescue you from my hand?’ There are many who shake their fists at God. There are many who mock and blaspheme the holy name of God. There are many who spurn the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. ‘Christ is for cripples’ they say. ‘We do not need a religious crutch’ they proudly proclaim. But God will have the last word. ‘*She will be utterly burned with fire’* (18:8). The great prostitute, the economic/religious system of this world, continues to seduce people all around the world, not the least in our own nation. But the word of God has gone forth in our land.

At one time, in giving missionary talks, I would remind people that on almost every other street corner in our city is a church. But where are the people? In India there are thousands of villages without a single church. Nevertheless, God will render to each one according to his deeds (Rom 2:6). God has spoken, and his words will not fall to the ground. He is powerful to save and powerful to judge.

Oh, that the rich and powerful would heed the word of God, that they would realise, before it is too late, that God will not be mocked or ignored. Oh, that every man, woman and child whose breath God holds in his hand would hear and heed this word. How tragic to see even children mocking God, their creator. But this is what they learn from parents and especially from the TV and movies.

Just as surely as the autumn days are drawing in, so the day of the Lord is drawing near. The end will come suddenly. The plagues will fall upon the prostitute in one day. It will be a day of unparalleled disaster and destruction. Everything the prostitute has given will go up in smoke, just as she herself will. All who blindly follow her will also be cast into the lake of fire. Only the kingdom of God will remain.

**Mourning or rejoicing** Revelation 18:9-20

The price of oil is at an all-time high. Oil companies are making profits in the billions. Imagine if a new fuel suddenly came onto the market which made the use of oil obsolete. The economic and political implications would be enormous. What would happen to the Middle East? What would happen to the global oil companies, and the thousands of ships carrying oil around the world? Back in 1833 a law was passed making slavery illegal in the British Empire. With the signing of that law, slaves became worthless. Ships carrying slaves from Africa suddenly found their human cargo worthless. A whole industry, the evil industry of slave trading, came to a halt overnight. Many mourned the death of this industry from which they had profited greatly over a long period of time.

**1.Kings weep**

*‘Alas, Alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come’* (18:10). An angel came down from heaven crying out, ‘*Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen* (18:2). Babylon was the name given to the great prostitute, and the great prostitute represents the economic/religious system of this world. The name ‘Babylon’ comes from the literal Babylon which was once a world power. But there were other such power bases in the world, before and after Babylon. Tyre was a sea-port city fitting the description of the great prostitute. Take a look at Ezekiel 26-28 and you will see language very similar to that found in Revelation 18. Tyre was a great trading city which came to boast of its riches and beauty. In their prosperity the people lifted up theirs hearts saying, ‘I am god’, and consequently came under the judgment of Almighty God.

In NT times Rome was seen as ‘Babylon the great’. Emperors like Nero and Domitian lifted up their heart against God. They declared themselves to be divine, and demanded to be worshipped. They persecuted those who refused to bow down and worship them. Their power was closely linked to economic prosperity. Big business profited from their political favours and they, in return, got the support of big business.

In Asia Minor the close connection between idolatry and economic prosperity was a fact of life. ‘Allegiance to both Caesar and the patron gods of the trade guilds was essential for people to maintain a standing in their trades. Local and regional political leaders had to support this system to keep their offices, and the economic benefits that came with their high position’. If the picture is one very similar to what you see in the world today then do not be surprised. That is the point of this vision given to John. The lessons of this book are for the world today and for the future (1:1). We thank God who restrains evil in this fallen world, but we do live in a fallen world that is evil and will remain so until it is judged and destroyed by God.

The kings of the earth drank the wine of the great prostitute and committed fornication with her (17:2, 18:3,9). They were seduced by her charm and beauty. They lived in luxury, thanks to the great prostitute. They were captivated by money and power, but became captive to these things. The great prostitute held the kings of the earth in her power. See how property developers can hold politicians in their power. Money, drink and sex can corrupt politicians and administrations. This alliance is mutually beneficial; it is cosy relationship, but an uneasy one. It can suddenly turn sour and come unstuck.

When the kings of the earth saw ‘*the smoke of her burning’* (18:9) they wept and cried out, ‘alas, alas, the mighty city has fallen’. They stood at a distance for fear of her torment. They felt sorry, not for her, but for themselves. They, in fact, tried to distance themselves from her as she came under judgment. The great prostitute was paid back in full measure for her evil and the harm she had done to innocent people. The cry of those innocent sufferers had come up before God, even from the grave.

‘But was it not the kings of the earth who destroyed the great prostitute’, you ask? Images in this book are quite fluid so that the kings of chapter 17 may be different to those here in chapter 18- but it does seem that they are the same. The great prostitute was on a beast having ten horns which represented ten kings (17:12). These horns hated the prostitute; they turned on her and destroyed her (17:16). The cosy relationship turned sour. Destruction followed, and following destruction weeping in self-pity. Not weeping of repentance but of remorse, remorse like that of Judas as he threw away the ‘blood money’ he got for betraying Jesus.

**2.Merchants weep**

The great prostitute had many lovers. The merchants of the earth became rich through her (18:3). The luxury in which they lived was the result of their submission to the great prostitute. They sold their own souls to her, even as they traded in the bodies and souls of men (18:13). When they see the great prostitute going up in smoke they ‘*weep and mourn over her because no one buys their merchandise anymore’* (18:11).

The abolition of slavery in 1833 caused weeping and mourning among those who profited from this evil business, as we have seen. In this passage we see a long list of products sold by the merchants. While some would be considered essentials, notice the word ‘precious’ describing many of these things- precious stones, precious wood and fine linen. Such products were for the rich and powerful, for those living in luxury. With the demise of the great prostitute, and with the kings all in mourning, the bottom dropped out of the market for such goods.

*‘The fruit that your soul longed for has gone from you, and all the things that are rich and splendid have gone from you’* (18:14). The merchants, like the kings, stand at a distance for fear of her torment, weeping and wailing (18:15). They fear lest they go down with her to destruction. What will be revealed in the court at her judgment? Will it become known that they exploited their workers (James 5:4), will it be made known that they did not pay their taxes (Rom 13:7), will it be made known that they siphoned off some of the company profits for themselves. The great prostitute encouraged such business ethics but now she was gone. Is this why the merchants wanted to distance themselves from her?

With trade guilds and their patron idols, being a Christian businessman in the Roman Empire would not have been easy. It is interesting that few Christians in India are in business. Most are in public or private service or in education- education is itself a business and open to corruption. It is not that different here. Running a business is not only hard work, it can be difficult because of corruption. We must pray for Christians who are in business.

The great city that has fallen was clothed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, along with precious stones (18:16). Some see in this picture an allusion to the garments of the High Priest and hence to the religious facet of the world economic system. Some churches are greatly adorned with the treasures of the world and are noted for their impressive rituals. The tentacles of the great prostitute reach even into the church. Maybe the aim of this scene is ‘to depict a system in which apostate religion has merged with the ungodly world’. Unholy alliances between church and state punctuate the history of the church, even to the present time.

**3.Sea captains weep and wail**

This is the first mention of such a group in this vision. They join the kings of the earth and the merchants in weeping over the destruction of the great prostitute. Maybe the mention of such sea traders in Ezekiel (ships of Tarshish in Ezekiel 27:25) is the basis for their inclusion here. Most great trading cities were sea-ports, including Tyre and Rome. We see a few ships coming into our ports today but to fly over the harbour at Singapore is amazing. Hundreds of ships can be seen waiting to load or unload their cargo as they ply the oceans of the world. The whole city is dependent on this sea trade- as is the sea trade dependent on this city.

The angel told John in this vision that all the sea captains who ‘*became rich through her wealth’* will weep and wail when they see the great prostitute going up in smoke- ‘*for in one hour she is made desolate’* (18:19). No one wants the cargo they are carrying because the economic system of the world has collapsed. This is not just a recession, but a complete closing down of the economic system of this world. Almost everything the rich desired and called precious has become worthless. This is a warning to all who profit from corruption and sin. The great prostitute received her just punishment, and all whom she seduced stand at a distance weeping and wailing in remorse and self-pity.

**4.Rejoice**

The whole world appeared to mourn the demise of Babylon the great, but this was not the case. It would have been the way the media reported things, but there were some who rejoiced over her destruction. ‘*Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy/saints apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her’* (18:20). The people of God who were warned about this evil woman, and in the strength of God withstood her, rejoiced. They had been beaten and imprisoned, starved and had their property stolen, and some were put to death (Heb 10:32f). They rejoiced when their persecutor was destroyed.

*‘Come out of her my people lest you share in her sins’* (18:4). Have you come out of Babylon or have you been seduced by the things of this world. Coming out is not easy; walking in the truth is not easy but the Lord gives the strength, the strength to say ‘no’ when the world pressures us to break the commands of God. Rejoice today because Jesus overcame the power of Satan. He cast out the ruler of this world at the Cross. Satan fell like lightning before the power of the Son of God. But do not rejoice in this alone. Rejoice rather in that your name in written in the Lamb’s book of life. Rejoice that your name is written in heaven, for it is heaven, not on this earth, that your future lies.

**Babylon buried** Revelation 18:21-24

What comes into your mind when you hear the word ‘Titanic’? This was the name of the biggest ship in the world which sank in the Atlantic Ocean almost a hundred years ago. The name comes from the Greek word ‘titan’, which means a man or thing of enormous size and strength. The ‘Titanic’ was a super ship, so large and powerful it was said to be unsinkable. Architects, engineers, builders and all craftsmen could be proud of their work. On board the Titanic the passengers, including some of the richest people in the world, enjoyed the finest of food and wine, of music and entertainment, as the ship glided across the ocean. Some probably took the opportunity to get married while on board this magnificent ocean liner. You know what happened. It was a moonless night and the sea was calm. The party went on until 11.40pm when an iceberg was sited; 37 seconds later the Titanic hit the massive iceberg and within a few hours the biggest ship ever built by man was at the bottom of the ocean, and two thirds of the people on board were dead.

**1.Not anymore**

If John were writing the book of Revelation today he might have used the word ‘Titanic’ instead of ‘Babylon’. Yes, I know he was writing what the angel told him, but the point is, Babylon was a word that brought specific thoughts to the mind of NT Jews and Christians. The Babylonian empire came to an end hundreds of years before but the picture of the Exile, recorded in the prophets, was still vivid. They were experiencing similar tribulations in the Roman Empire- deprivation, enforced emperor and idol worship, persecution and death.

The message Jesus gave to John to send to the churches was that the power of Rome, symbolically called Babylon, would be broken. The message, in fact, extended beyond Rome and to the very end of the age. All world powers would come to an end, and not just world powers but the power behind these powers, the power of Satan. ‘Babylons’ exist today, and will do so into the future. The point for us to observe is that ‘the pleasure mad, arrogant world, with all its seductive luxuries and pleasures, with its antichristian philosophy and culture, with its teeming multitudes that have forsaken God and have lived according to the lust of the flesh and the desires of the mind, shall perish’. Greed and covetousness are sins, according to the word of God, but according to the world and to Babylon, they are essential to success in this world.

*‘Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen’* the angel declared (18:1-2). Now, what seems to be another angel, a mighty angel, appears to tell of the fall of Babylon from another perspective (18:21). Here, if you like, is another eye-witness account of Babylon’s destruction. Is this the same mighty angel who appeared to John previously (5:2, 10:1)? Certainly this angel needed to be strong in order to throw what was like a great millstone into the sea, where it ‘*shall not be found anymore’* (18:21). A millstone was a large flat stone pulled around by an animal to grind grain and make flour.

The previous angel announced the fall of Babylon in terms of her being ‘*utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judges her’* (18:8). Fire evokes images of total destruction, with things being reduced to ashes. But there are some things that do not burn up in a fire. Here we have another picture of the destruction of Babylon which ensures her destruction is comprehensive and final. There will be no phoenix rising from the ashes. Consigned to the depths of the sea, Babylon will disappear, never to be seen again.

Jeremiah prophesied of the fall of the literal Babylon, the great city that was full of idols, corruption and violence. He sent a man to Babylon with a book detailing the judgment of God. He told the man that after reading the book he was to tie it to a stone and throw it in the river saying, ‘*thus Babylon shall sink and not rise from the catastrophe that I will bring upon her’* (Jer 51:63). The prophecy came true, of course. King Belshazzar was assassinated in the middle of the party he had thrown for a thousand of his friends.

In the NT, Jesus speaks of one who causes sin having a millstone hung around his neck and being thrown into the sea (Mat 18:6). Being lost at sea usually means a person’s body is never found. The picture is one of Babylon’s sudden and certain end. Note the words, ‘no more’ or, ‘not anymore’ repeated six times in this passage. Think of the Titanic if you like, as you read this passage about Babylon. Music was a must for any party then, just as it is nowadays- the louder the better! The band kept playing as the Titanic sank into the icy waters of the Atlantic- they did not want the party to stop. Some find it strange to worship God without music- and the louder it is the better they worship. ‘A church without musical instruments, how can that be’ they say. ‘*The sound of musicians …shall not be heard in you anymore’* (18:22).

The work of the craftsmen shall cease (18:22). The great prostitute encourages men to build bigger and bigger things- like tall towers or the Titanic. Nebuchadnezzar looked over Babylon and said, ‘I have built a royal house by my mighty power’ (Dan 4:30). While these words were still in his mouth, a voice fell from heaven condemning him. The millstone fell silent in symbolic Babylon (18:22). The food and wine ran out. Moreover, the voice of those taking their wedding vows was heard no more (18:23). In the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark (Mat 24:38). Their voices fell silent as the waters rose to engulf them. As much as the Lord delights to hear people take marriage vows, he must the hate the word that breaks those vows. All will be silenced one day.

Finally, her lights go out (18:23). Lifeboats were launched from the Titanic and people scrambled to get on board- although some refused to go outside because it was too cold! Apparently most lifeboats left with only half their capacity. In the midst of this scrambling the lights went out. Darkness suddenly engulfed the whole ship as it sank- it was a moonless night. On this darkest of nights, the ship slowly but surely disappeared beneath the water of the Atlantic Ocean, sinking almost 4km to the bottom of the sea where it remains, silent forever.

**2.Self-glory**

In the aftermath of the Titanic sinking an enquiry was set up. Why did this mighty ship sink? When God judges the world many ask, why? Why did Babylon the great get judged by God? After all, the ‘majority’, it seemed, were happy to be in the same house as the great prostitute. Beware of this word ‘majority’ so cleverly used by ‘Babylon’, by the press, and by politicians today. Not matter how immoral or evil something may be in the eyes of God, Babylon will seduce the ‘majority’ and claim everyone wants it made legal.

The angel gives the reason for the divine judgment of Babylon. The first of these is pride and self-glory. ‘*Your merchants were great men of the earth’* (18:23). The picture is one of riches and luxury, but it is not the possession of riches *per se* that brings judgment. ‘Possession of wealth is not the reason for God’s judgment of Babylon. The cause lies rather in her arrogant use of it and trust in the security it brings which is tantamount to idolatry’.

Riches often blind the eyes to the needs of the poor (as with the rich man and Lazarus story), and to God (as with our generation). The merchants became rich by association with Babylon. They boasted, ‘I am a self-made man’- and they worshipped their creator! They worked hard to get to the top or to get rich; they are congratulated by the world and themselves. Does the CEO being paid millions think for a moment he does not deserve what he is paid?

**Sorcery**

*‘By your sorcery all the nations were deceived’* (18:23). This is the second reason for her judgment. Babylon will be punished because she influenced the nations to worship idols through sorcery and magic. She promoted false religions and idol worship. Idol worship is compatible with pride and self-glory, unlike true religion. True religion on the other hand is this – ‘*to look after widows and orphans in their trouble and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world’* (James 1:27).

It was Satan himself who sought to lead the Son of Man astray with promises of worldly glory. ‘Turn this stone into bread’ he said and, ‘jump off this tower. I will give you all this if you worship me’. The great prostitute was in cohorts with the beast of the sea, and the dragon or Satan. Jesus would only use his power according to the will of God. Too many people still look to Jesus as a miracle worker rather than the Son of the sovereign, holy God who demands repentance, belief, obedience and exclusive worship.

**3.Saints**

The third reason for Babylon’s guilt is the blood of the saints (18:24). In an earlier vision the martyrs cried out from under the altar in heaven for God to avenge their blood (6:10). The great prostitute was drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6). She was guilty of persecuting the church, the special people who belonged to God. She was also guilty of the blood of many other innocent people- victims of poverty, war, and abortion. The sovereign, holy God will ensure justice in the end.

We are reminded of a man like Hitler, who was guilty on most of these charges. The great prostitute must have been so pleased to see this man marching across the world. Bent on self-glory, on conquering the world and being worshipped as a god, he killed Jews, Gypsies, the disabled, and millions of other innocent people who got in his way. We rejoice over the demise of such a man, but was he the last man to be deceived by Satan? Was he the last man to be ruled by pride and self-glory, by the lust for power and everything this world offers?

The party is almost over. The lights will soon go out. This world will soon be no more. Are you on the ship that is sinking, or are you, by the grace of God, in the lifeboat with Jesus?

**The Lord God Almighty reigns** Revelation 19:1-6

Is the book of Revelation just about judgment, death and destruction? It is about the final judgment, about the Lord God judging his enemies. The great prostitute, otherwise known as Babylon, has been consigned to the flames- or to bottom of the sea, in a different image. Kings and merchants are weeping and wailing over her destruction. But the judgment of the great prostitute and her followers brings relief and rejoicing in heaven.

‘Halleluiah’ is the cry that John heard coming from heaven after being told of the fall of Babylon. The scene returns to the throne room in heaven which John looked into in chapters 4 and 5. A great multitude is shouting in unison, ‘*Halleluiah’*- which means ‘praise to Yahweh’. This word occurs four times in this passage – and it is the only passage in the NT where this word occurs.

**1.Halleluiah for righteous judgment**

In the first Halleluiah the Lord is praised for true and righteous judgments. He has judged the great prostitute, who seduced millions with her adulteries. She had corrupted the whole earth; princes and paupers fell for her promise of wealth and luxury, pleasure and fun. Turning to her means turning away from God; the God who created all human beings and demands their exclusive worship.

As people become enamoured with the great prostitute, and get drawn into an intimate relationship with her, so they become enemies of God. ‘*Adulterers! Do you not know that the friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God’* (James 4:4). Those who are enemies of God are under the wrath of God and will face divine judgment – that is the reality. God is holy. God is a jealous God and tolerates no rivals.

God is also just. Destruction of the great prostitute is a demonstration of divine justice. She had shed the blood of God’s servants. In collusion with world rulers, including religious leaders, she made many martyrs of Jesus Christ. They are pictured under the altar in heaven, crying out for justice, for their blood to be avenged (6:10). This cry of the martyrs is actually answered here in Revelation 19:2. God told them at the time to wait a little while. God is patient. He is longsuffering and ‘*not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance’* (2Peter 3:9). But this does not mean God will acquit the guilty. He will exact just retribution on all who persecute his people and shed innocent blood.

God is praised by this heavenly chorus for his salvation, glory, honour and power. It is those who are saved, those who are in heaven, who are praising him. They suffered while on this earth, but now they are saved and see the glory of God. They are in his glorious presence. They honour and praise him for his great power, the power by which he has destroyed their persecutors and power by which he raised them from the dead to join Jesus Christ in heaven.

**2. Halleluiah for final judgment**

The heavenly chorus shouts, *‘Halleluiah’* yet again. They rejoice that God has finally judged the great prostitute just as he said he would. She will never rise again. ‘*Her smoke rises up for ever and ever’* (19:3). She is in the lake of fire and there will be no phoenix rising from the ashes. Babylon’s influence has been obliterated. God’s people will never again have to fear her. No wonder the cry of, ‘*Halleluiah’* echoes through heaven. We often hear the word ‘Halleluiah’ in songs today. Those who sing may know that it means ‘praise the Lord’, but are they aware of the context in which this word occurs in Scripture. Praise the Lord for his justice and power- power to destroy the oppressors of God’s people and all who are the enemies of God.

Salvation and judgment are two sides of the same coin. God does not save his chosen and ignore the rest. The rest, who refuse to believe in Jesus, remain under the wrath of God and will suffer God’s judgment (John 3:36). When Jesus comes again he will be coming in judgment, and the opportunity to repent will be gone.

**3.Halleluiah in God-centred worship**

The third ‘Halleluiah’ comes from the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders around the throne in heaven. We find ourselves back in the throne room of heaven described in chapters 4 and 5. John was taken up in the Spirit to witness heavenly worship and see things that must shortly take place. Much has now taken place and there is rejoicing in heaven. The four living creatures, or cherubim, are closest to the throne; behind them are the twenty-four elders representing the people of God from the OT (12 tribes of Israel) and NT (12 apostles). They fell down and worshipped God who sat on the throne saying, ‘*Amen! Halleluiah!’* (19:4). They give their voice of approval to the praise being offered up by the great multitude behind them.

The shouts of ‘Halleluiah’ to the One seated on the throne brings a response from the throne itself. Is this the voice of Christ? Some say that Christ would not be identifying himself so closely with other creatures by saying, ‘Praise **our** God’ (19:5). Is it the voice of an archangel? We cannot be certain. But clearly, the praise and worship being offered up by the elders is accepted by the One seated on the throne.

All the servants of God, all who fear God, are exhorted to praise our God. From the lowest to the highest, angels and men, all are called to glorify God, the God who not only saves his people but judges their enemies, who are by definition his enemies also. This scene of worship by the elders in heaven parallels the scene found in chapter 11. When the seventh angel sounded his trumpet, divine judgment was announced. God’s wrath came upon the nations, nations under the power of the great prostitute. The servants of God, ‘*those who fear your name, small and great’* were rewarded (11:18).

**4.Halleluiah the Almighty reigns**

The final ‘Halleluiah’ John heard comes from the great multitude once again. It sounds like many waters and mighty thunder (19:6). He had heard such a voice from heaven previously- the voice of the 144,000 singing a new song to the Lord (14:2). These were the ones redeemed from the earth. Last Sunday evening we had very good sound effects to accompany the sermon. A mighty storm broke overhead as we were worshipping. Lightning flashed and thunder cracked above us. The rain on the roof was deafening. Some people are afraid of storms. They go into a room and pull the blinds, and even crawl under the bed. Others are not so afraid, and some are so foolish as to keep on with their game of golf.

Actually, there is no lightning here in this scene for it is the heavenly choir singing praises to the Lamb on the throne. There is a mighty noise but there is no danger. It is the noise of rejoicing, the noise of ‘Halleluiah’. Lightning does accompany the judgment coming from heaven. Lightning, noises, thunder, earthquakes and hail mark the outpouring of divine judgment on the earth (11:19). It is lightning, earthquakes and hail, which have the power to kill, not the noise.

When the seventh trumpet was sounded there were loud voices in heaven (11:15). They proclaimed, ‘*the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever’*. So it is that in this scene they are singing, ‘*Halleluiah! for the Lord God Almighty reigns’* (19:6). God has revealed his almighty power. He has begun to judge his enemies, the enemies who ruled over the kingdoms of this world. Babylon is fallen. The beast and the false prophet will soon fall also (2:20).

Can we join with this heavenly choir in singing, ‘the Lord God Almighty reigns’, or do we have to wait and see who will be victorious in the end? Some look forward to a great, end-time battle with trepidation. We see people going into bunkers and storing mountains of food. What do they expect to find after the great battle?

Jesus never denied that he was king when he walked on this earth. The kingdoms of this world felt threatened even when Jesus walked as a man. The Jews charged him for making claims to kingship- ‘*he says he is Christ a king’* (Luke 23:2). Pilate asked Jesus if he was a king. Jesus said he was, but that his kingdom was not of this world (Jn 18:36). He is the King of kings, the ruler of heaven and earth. There is no doubt as to who will conquer and who will rule. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who gave himself as the sacrifice for sin, is now the Lamb upon the throne in heaven. He has **already** won the victory over sin, over death and the devil. He tells us to watch and pray, and be ready for his return, to be ready for the new heaven and new earth.

Those who think they will survive his coming by going into the desert, or hiding in a bunker, are completely mistaken. If you want to prepare for the coming of Jesus then draw near to him today. Live to please him today, worship him today, praise him today, singing with all your heart, ‘Halleluiah, *for the Lord God almighty reigns’*!

**Marriage Supper of the Lamb** Revelation 19:7-11

Years ago I was invited to a wedding in a remote village in India. I arrived around eight with a young colleague who came with me on my motor-bike. The village was home to the young bride- young as in 11yrs old. The place was decorated with lights and banners. As guests, we were expecting a rich feast- mutton-curry and rice. According to custom, the bridegroom would come with family and friends- and a brass band. After the marriage, or what was in fact betrothal, the young man would return to his home until his wife had come of age. I waited till nine, ten, eleven and still nothing happened. We had a long wait.

Jewish marriage custom also involved a period of betrothal or engagement. Engagement was a formal ceremony, almost as binding as marriage. Mary was betrothed to her husband Joseph- she was called his wife even before they started living together (Mat 1:19,20). The betrothal involved the giving of gifts by the groom’s father. The groom himself had to pay a bride price- seven years work in Jacob’s case. After the period of engagement came the marriage day. The bride prepared herself for her husband. She adorned herself with perfume, with jewellery and fine clothes. She came to her husband’s home, to the place, the marriage tent, that he had prepared for her. This was a time of great celebration and feasting. The celebration went on for a week or even longer.

Jesus’ relationship to us parallels that of husband and wife, including this marriage ceremony. Hosea said that the Lord had betrothed himself to Israel (Hosea 2:19). The book of Hosea is all about the unfaithfulness of Israel to whom the Lord had betrothed himself. The apostle Paul writes, ‘*I am jealous for you for I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ’* (2 Corinthians 11:2). He also told the Corinthian believers, ‘you were bought at a price, therefore honour God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s’ (1Cor 6:20).

**1.Marriage supper**

Jesus’ first public appearance, and demonstration of his power and glory, was at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. His last appearance as a free man was at the last supper with his disciples. At this supper he said, ‘*I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes’*. As he gave the cup to his disciples he was looking beyond the Cross to the fulfilment of God’s eternal purposes in the coming kingdom of God. Moreover, he said to them that they would eat and drink with him at his table in his kingdom (Luke 22:30).

‘The Lord’s supper is an anticipatory meal of this coming union of Christ and his church’. Jesus was pointing his disciples to the marriage supper of the Lamb. He said to them at that same meal, ‘I go and prepare a place for you, and I will come again and receive you to myself’ (Jn 14:6). He was using words familiar to the Jews from the marriage custom. He would come and take them to be with him in his Father’s house. Jesus spoke of drinking anew with them in his Father’s kingdom (Mat 26:29).

*‘Let us be glad and rejoice and give him the glory, for the marriage supper of the Lamb had come’* (19:7). In this prophetic letter to the seven churches, John writes that the marriage supper has come. John is writing what he hears from heaven. The picture is that of a great wedding feast in heaven. Jesus the Lamb is at the table with his bride, the people of God. There is great rejoicing, with all giving praise and glory to God who has planned this wedding from eternity.

Dispensationalists argue about whether this supper is on earth or in heaven. They also fail to agree whether it is before the millennium or during the millennium. We do not have to enter into such arguments because the Scripture is clear. The marriage supper will be at the end, it will be when Jesus comes again; and when Jesus comes again heaven and earth will pass away (21:1). In fact, the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God is referred to as, ‘*a bride adorned for her husband’* (21:2). Remember also, there will be one bride not two- there will not be a Jewish bride and a Gentile bride, as some dispensational teaching seems to indicate.

**2.Bride made ready**

The amount of time and money some women spend on making themselves beautiful for their wedding day is mind boggling. Not hundreds but thousands of dollars are spent on a dress, on shoes, on hair and on makeup- not to mention jewellery and the bouquet of flowers. To some it may seem extravagant and over the top- all this expense for just one day, for a few hours. But the bride is not dressing up to please you; she is dressing to please her husband. She spares no expense in making herself ready for her husband.

*‘The Lamb’s wife has made herself ready. To her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright’* (19:7, 8). She has made herself ready with the garment granted/given to her; given to her by whom? This word ‘granted’ usually refers to divine permission (13:7, 15). Here it is a divine gift. Yet the garment is said to be, ‘*the righteous acts of the saints’*. A divine gift, yet also the righteous deeds of the saints- how can this be?

The picture becomes clear when we look to Ephesians chapter 5. Before doing so, note that this can be understood as, ‘*righteous acts for the saints’*. Elsewhere in Revelation, white robes are given to the saints (3:6,11; 19:14). In Isaiah 61:10, wedding robes of righteousness are given by God to Israel his bride. The apostle Paul writes of Christ and the church, ‘*that Christ mighty sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that he might present her to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish’* (Eph 5:26,27). Jesus, the Lamb, actually makes his bride, the church, ready for the marriage with himself.

This is the marriage of a pauper to a prince. The pauper is filthy and dressed in rags. Some years ago I picked up a hitch-hiker on the side of the road. When he got into the car I realised my mistake. The smell was horrible. I opened every vent I could find, wound down the window, even though it was freezing, and managed to survive for 4 hours! Imagine a bride smelling and looking like that. The truth is, that is how we were when Jesus found us- lost on the road to hell. He took us and washed us in his own blood to make us acceptable to himself, the Prince of peace and King of kings.

The bride arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, stands in contrast to the other woman, the great prostitute. The great prostitute was arrayed in purple and scarlet, not white. She had many lovers who did not clothe her but stripped her naked (17:16). This woman, who symbolised money and worldly pleasures, was now consigned to the lake of fire. With her out of the way there is rejoicing in heaven and great celebration as Christ and his bride make their glorious appearance. *‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb’* (19:9). One, who was presumably an angel, spoke these words to John. Did he think that it was Christ? The angel told him to write this beatitude down. These are important words. They are *‘the true words of God’*. They are wonderful words, declaring the blessing of Almighty God on those called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Have you been called? Are you one of the elect of God, invited to this heavenly feast that never ends? Do you know the wonderful blessings that are yours as one washed in the blood of Christ and clothed in his righteousness? This is, of course, the only way you get a seat at this table. Are you a member of the true church which is the bride of Christ? Being a member of this church or another visible church is not what gets you a place at this supper- it is being called and clothed by Christ himself. Are you ready to dine with Jesus at his banqueting table in glory?

**3.Worship God**

Did John mistake the angel for Jesus, or was he just so filled with awe and wonder at what the angel was telling him that he fell down at his feet in worship? It was not Jesus but a ‘*fellow servant and one of your brethren’* (19:10). It was an angel, a created being like us. Amazingly, John later fell down ‘*to worship before the feet of an angel’* a second time (22:8). At that time he also heard a beatitude – ‘*Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book’* (19:7).

John was rebuked for worshipping an angel, but before we stand in judgment we might ask ourselves what we would have done in the same circumstances. How do you respond when you hear God’s blessing pronounced? How do you respond when you hear the word of God read? Some people are so bold as to walk out of church when the word of God is being read. Some choose to chatter or let their mind drift off somewhere. John was so moved when he heard the word of God that he fell down before the messenger!

Worship God! This is the theme of this whole book. God, the Triune God alone is worthy of our worship. We are not to worship angels or any other created thing or being. Idolaters do not have a place in heaven. Millions worship idols of wood and stone, or of money and men. Even some who call themselves Christians fail to worship God alone. Paul had to condemn some in the church at Colossae who started to worship angels (Col 2:18). What of those who worship Mary and so called saints? What of those who worship their ancestors? It is very easy to fall into such idolatry in worship. We must worship God alone! We must worship him in spirit and in truth. The truth is Jesus, testified to in this book and the rest of Scripture. The spirit of prophecy is the power by which we understand the words of this book and apply them to our hearts.

**Behold the King** Revelation 19:11-16

Students were receiving their awards at the annual prize giving ceremony of the Law School. There were awards for property law, contract law, criminal law, and so on. In the middle of ceremony one student was called up to receive his award for war law. We might think that war goes on outside the rule of law but it seems there are laws to study regarding war.

A case can be made for the conduct of just war- however flawed such arguments can become. The judgment of all men and governments is flawed by sin so there will never be agreement on what is true justice. Only God is absolutely just. Divine justice means condemnation for all human beings, for all have rebelled and sinned against God. God is just but also the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Rom 3:26).

God will execute his justice at the time of his choosing. In his mercy he has delayed such execution, but it would be extremely foolish to confuse postponement with cancellation. ‘*God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man he has ordained. He has given assurance of this by raising him from the dead’* (Acts 17:31). Jesus himself said that the Father had given him the authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of man. And ‘*the hour is coming when those who are in their graves will hear his voice and come forth’* (Jn 5:27, 28). Jesus emphasized that his judgment is righteous because it is in complete accord with the will and the word of God the Father.

**1.Warrior**

In another glimpse into heaven (cf.4:1), John saw Jesus Christ seated on a white horse. It is the same risen Jesus he saw in his very first vision while in exile on Patmos, as we see by comparing the descriptions he gives. John was in exile on Patmos for ‘*the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ’* (1:9). He has just heard these same truths in the message of the marriage supper of the Lamb. He was told to write ‘*the true words of God’* and to worship God for he had been given ‘*the testimony of Jesus*’ (19:10).

In this new vision John saw heaven opened. This time he did not see the Lamb upon the throne but Christ on a white horse. It is interesting that in his first glimpse into heaven he heard of the lion of the tribe of Judah, but when he looked he saw a Lamb as though it had been slain. This time he **heard** of the marriage supper of the Lamb but **saw** Christ on a white horse at the head of the armies of heaven. Heaven was open not only for John to see in, but for Christ to ride out. Jesus ascended into heaven almost two thousand years ago, promising to return. What will his second coming be like? He will not come ‘born of a woman’ but will come as the divine warrior and judge. He will come on a white horse, the horse being a symbol of battle, and a white horse of victory in battle.

Years ago the story of the ‘Lone Ranger’ was serialized on TV. The Lone Ranger wore a mask and rode a silvery white horse. In each episode he would ride off to bring justice to a town that was being plagued by criminals. He would ride off as quickly as he came, leaving the people asking, ‘who is that masked man?’

There is no mistaking the rider on the white horse which John saw in heaven- even if he had a secret name that no one knew. Look at the way he is described. He had many crowns on his head- not just one but many. Maybe these represented all the kingdoms of the world that had become his. The evil beast had ten crowns but the King of kings has many crowns.

The divine warrior had eyes like flames of fire, just like the Son of Man in Revelation 1:14. Fire is symbolic of cleansing, of purification, as well as destruction. Another feature familiar to us from that earlier vision is the sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. This symbol was also used by the prophet Isaiah (Isa 49:2). In the vision here in Revelation 19, the sword is said to be for striking the nations. A sword is a weapon of war. It is appropriate for a warrior to carry a sword. This divine warrior will strike the nations of men in the same manner as he struck Pharaoh and his armies, destroying them in the sea.

The sword is not in his hand, however, but in his mouth. What does this mean? Words come from the mouth. Judgment will be through the word of God. He will strike the earth with the sword of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked (Isa 11:4). Men and nations will be judged, and condemned, on the basis of the word of God. With God there is no difference between his word and his work- not like there is with men. When God says, ‘let it be done’, it is done. God has spoken and his word will not fail. This vision also points to a fulfilment of Psalm 2, where it is prophesied of the nations that he (Messiah) will break them with a rod of iron and dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.

Another symbol of judgment is that of treading grapes in a winepress. This symbol, which comes from Isaiah 63:2-6, was used of divine judgment in an earlier vision. Divine judgment was pictured as a harvest- for the earth was ripe for harvest (14:19-20). Presumably the gospel has been preached to all the nations as a witness to them (Mat 24:14). They have been called to repent but refused to do so. They are now ripe for the wrath of God. ‘*He himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God’* (19: 15). In this image the juice becomes blood which flows out (14:20), or in this case, splatters on the robe of the righteous warrior coming out of heaven (19:13).

**2.Written names**

Whilst the visual features of the one on a white horse point to judgment, the names by which he is called indicate that his judgment is entirely righteous. Firstly, he is called ‘*faithful and true’*. He is faithful and true to his promise to vindicate his people. They have suffered and died at the hands of Satan and his evil agents in this world. This letter, remember, was first read by Christians suffering at the hands of imperial Rome, with it oppressive idolatry and insatiable appetite for blood. Similar regimes exist in the world today. The people of God are still crying out for their blood to be avenged. Gods hears their cry and he will vindicate them one day.

You might also suffer one day because of your faith in Jesus. Satan is on the prowl wanting to devour the children of God. Are you standing firm in the Lord Jesus Christ and resisting his attacks, knowing that your brothers in the world are going through the same sufferings (1Peter 5:9). Is this picture of divine judgment clear to you, and is it firmly fixed in your heart and mind?

The divine warrior has another name- ‘*the word of God’* (19:13). John first used this name for Jesus in his gospel (Jn 1:1). God has spoken fully and finally in his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus is the embodiment of God’s great plan and purpose for the human race- namely salvation and judgment. Salvation for those who bear the Father's name, and judgment for those having the mark of the beast. Jesus has been lifted up, like Moses’ snake in the desert. Those who look to him will live, but those who don’t will die.

On Jesus was written a name that no one knew except himself (19:12). He also had a name written on his thigh. It may be that this is the secret name made known. Why written on his thigh? The thigh has significance in the making of solemn promises in the OT (Gen 24:2). Jesus was wearing a robe dipped in blood, the blood of the wicked he had crushed. It was on this robe around his thigh that this name was written.

This name refers to his sovereignty over all the kings and kingdoms of this world. This name is much superior to ‘Babylon the great’, the name the great prostitute had written on her forehead. On the Cross of Jesus was written the title, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews’. This is the name that is above every other name, the name before which every knee shall bow. Jesus is the Lamb of God who overcame the world, the flesh, and the devil (17:14).

**3.War**

The one called ‘faithful and true’, sitting on a white horse, went forth in righteousness to judge and make war (19:11). He was followed by the ‘*armies of heaven clothed in fine linen, white and clean’* (19: 14). Some think these are angels but in the context they may well be saints. Remember the bride of the Lamb was ‘*clothed in fine linen, clean and bright’* (19:8).

The word of God has been proclaimed in all the earth. It is a word of life for those who believe, those who turn from following Satan to follow Christ. This word is violently rejected by Satan and those who remain loyal to him. There must ultimately be a showdown for the kingdoms of this world can have only one king. God made this world. It belongs to him. He has redeemed his chosen ones and will establish them in his everlasting kingdom. ‘*The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever’* (11:15).

Despite the already determined victory of the Lamb, his enemies foolishly prepare for war (16:14, 17:14). The place for battle is symbolically called ‘Armageddon’ (16:16). The divine warrior will make war but, as we have already noted, his sword is in his mouth. ‘Making war refers not to a literal battlefield conflict but to a legal battle and judgment’. Jesus is coming as judge and executioner. The enemies of Jesus and his followers will make a desperate last ditch effort, but they will not prevail. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, coming forth on a white horse, has prevailed!

**Lake of fire** Revelation 19:17-21

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, erected a massive gold image and made a law that everyone must bow down and worship this image. Anyone who refused would be thrown into the burning fiery furnace he had built. This king knew how to torment and kill people. Imagine what it would be like to be roasted alive. What a terrible way to die. No wonder most of the people in Babylon chose to worship the image. Three of Daniel’s friends, however, refused to worship the idol because God had said not to worship idols. They were thrown into the furnace, but God saved them through the flames. Did anyone die in that furnace? Actually, the strong men who threw Daniel’s three friends into furnace were burned and killed when they came near the fiery furnace.

A long time ago God judged this world and destroyed all the people, except Noah and his family. Afterwards he promised not to destroy the earthy again by flood. Rather, he has reserved it for fire. Both the earth and all the works that are in it will be burned up (2Peter 3:10). Jesus spoke of the ‘*everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels’* (Mat 25:41). The lake of fire is the place of everlasting torment for the enemies of God, for the beast and those bearing the mark of the beast. ‘*Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am in torment in this flame*’ cried the rich man from hell (Luke 16:24).

**1.Birds**

Looking into heaven, John saw Jesus seated on a white horse at the head of the armies of heaven. He appeared ready for war. He carried the title ‘*King of kings and Lord of lords’*. What did John see next? He saw an angel standing in the sun. The angel was calling to all the birds to come to the great supper of God. What sort of birds were these? What would they feast on? They would feast on the dead bodies or the flesh of kings, captains and mighty men, as well as their horses and all people who were on the side of Satan.

Ezekiel spoke of such a gathering of birds to a sacrificial meal of princes and mighty men of war (Ezek 39:18-20). What John saw may well be the fulfilment of this prophesy. Jesus also alluded to such a feast of flesh when he said, in the context of false prophets arising at the end of the age, ‘*wherever the carcass is there the eagles/vultures will be gathered’* (Mat 24:28). This supper or feast comes as a contrast to the marriage supper of the Lamb which John had just been told about. Some see this as a parody of that supper. While the marriage supper of the Lamb is going on in heaven, this other supper is going on on earth.

The picture is horrible but it is a stark reminder to those who think that life consists only of this body in this world, those who focus on fashion parades and football games. Body image is a major concern for a lot of people these days. Let all remember that their beautiful bodies will one day be just flesh that the birds and dogs may eat- remember what happened to Queen Jezebel. ‘*Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food but God will destroy both’* (1Cor 6:12).

What has this feasting of the birds got to do with the war that Jesus comes forth to fight? There has been no engagement as yet; rather, John hears about the aftermath of a great slaughter. It is as if the war is over before it starts. The outcome has been determined; and that is the case. The victory is certain, so certain that the birds can be called to feast on the flesh of the defeated armies of Satan. Jesus won the victory long ago. He won it at the Cross. At the Cross he defeated death and the devil. As he went up to Jerusalem to be crucified he said, ‘*now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out’* (Jn 12:31). Death came into this world because of sin. Sin gave Satan the power that he has in the world. At the Cross and resurrection Jesus conquered Satan, sin, and death.

**2.Battle**

We come now to the battle or war. But what do we see? It is an anticlimax. There is no battle as such. It is more like a case of judgment and execution. The sword of the Lord is in his mouth. It is his word that does the fighting. It his word that judges and condemns. The devil has deceived men down through the ages into thinking that power resides in great armies and a large arsenal of weapons. Who would have thought that David could defeat Goliath? David went out in the name of the Lord. It was the Lord who gave him the victory. King Nebuchadnezzar was forced to acknowledge the power of the Most High God by Daniel, the servant of God. The apostles faced great opposition as they preached the gospel but they did not depend upon their numerical strength or an army of men. They trusted in the Lord and in the power of his might. ‘*Trust in the Lord and fear him only who has power to destroy both body and soul in hell’* (Mat 10:28).

The beast of the sea, symbolising antichristian government, gathered the kings of the earth to make war against Jesus and his army. But the next thing John saw was this beast being captured and thrown into the lake of fire (19:20). This is the end of the beast, the tormentor and persecutor of the children of God.

The false prophet is cast into the lake of fire along with the beast. This is the beast of the earth seen in an earlier vision (chapter 13). Note the description of the false prophet in Revelation 19:20 and that in 13:13-14. He works signs and wonders to deceive those having the mark of the beast into worshipping the beast. The false prophet symbolizes antichristian religion and philosophy.

The Jews were opposing the Christians in the churches to which John first sent this letter. Jesus called them synagogues of Satan. Not only synagogues but mosques, temples, lecture halls and also some churches, are home to Satan today. False prophets are active in deceiving many with lies and false promises. But they will come to an end. At his second coming Jesus will cast the beast and the false prophet into the lake of burning brimstone/sulphur.

*‘The rest were killed with the sword coming from the mouth’* of Jesus (19:21). ‘The rest’ are all who follow the beast, all who receive the mark of the beast. Again, there is no indication of any physical battle. The sword symbolises the word of Jesus. ‘*The word of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two edged sword’* (Heb 4:12). God has spoken. We have his word in the Bible. This the word by which he will condemn sinners, just as it is the word by which we are saved. The devil deceives many regarding God’s word. ‘Did God really say you must not eat of any tree in the garden’ he said to Eve? And then he said to her, ‘you will not surely die’.

We hold the Bible to be the word of God but many regard it as old fashioned and outdated. To the delight of the devil, they say that science is more reliable and that many things in the Bible are false. Modern, sophisticated men like Richard Dawkins, and many others, regard the Bible as some sort of superstition. Even when the so called ‘facts’ of science and evolution are shown to be false, they still prefer man’s ideas to the infallible and timeless word of God. But God has spoken. His word is unchanging. The Bible is God’s word for all nations for all time. It is the word in which we find life. By the same word Jesus will judge every human being at the end of the age.

Realising too late that he would be tormented in the fires of hell forever, the rich man pleaded for someone to go and warn his brothers about this place of torment (Luke 16:19f). But he was told they have Moses and the prophets, they have the Scriptures, they have the Bible. If they read the Scriptures and heed the words of God they will be saved from the tormenting fires of hell. This word is sufficient for all men, for all time. Do not let anyone tell you it is deficient or outdated.

**3.Lake of fire**

We began with the lake of fire and we are ending with this picture of divine judgment. The beast, the false prophet and all their deceived followers are in the lake of fire. They are cast alive into the lake. There they will be ‘*tormented day and night forever and ever’* (20:10). There is no hint of annihilation here- or anywhere else in the Bible for that matter. Perhaps the greatest deception of the devil in our day is this idea of annihilation. Another deception is that everyone will go to heaven. Yet another is that after death we will cease to exist. We hear of eastern philosophical ideas like ‘nirvana’ and the ‘great nothingness’. These are man’s ideas, ideas of the creature not the word of the Creator. Do not be deceived by the father of lies.

As we come to the end of this chapter only the dragon remains among the enemies of God. But look ahead to Revelation 20:10. He will soon join the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire where they will be tormented day and night forever. This is just what Jesus said when he was on the earth. ‘*Depart from me you cursed into the everlasting fire’* (Mat 25:41). The rich man was alive and crying out to Abraham from the tormenting fires of Hell.

It is only in this life that we can be saved. God has spoken fully and finally in his Son, Jesus Christ. He calls upon us to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. ‘*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven among men by which we must be saved’* (Acts 4:12).

**Satan bound for 1000 years** Revelation 20:1-3

From very early days Christians have taken differing views with regard to the millennium or 1000 years referred to in Revelation 20. The millennium has been the cause of division and even conflict in the church. A lady came to me once almost apologetic that she was talking to other Christian ladies who were premillennialists. She was not sure what premillennialists believe but knew it was not what she believed. When I started preaching from the book of Revelation I was asked what view I held on the millennium. I preferred to explain the passages as I came to them rather than be pigeon-holed from the start; although my views have been expressed on various occasions. In this chapter we come to the only mention of the millennium in Revelation, and the Bible- the Greek term is *chilias*=1000.

Our view on the millennium hinges on two factors. Firstly, understanding the genre of literature found in this book. Revelation is clearly different from other parts of the Bible (except Daniel and Ezekiel). The introduction of this book states that it is the ‘*apocalypse/revelation of Jesus Christ regarding things that must shortly take place’* (1:1). We call this ‘apocalyptic writing’ because images, symbols and numbers are used to describe spiritual realties. Numbers like 666, 7, 12, and 144,000 have symbolic significance, as most agree. Yet when we come to 1000 many want to read it literally. To be consistent we must understand 1000 symbolically -probably indicating a long period.

Secondly, this book is a series of visions which the Lord gave to John. It is not historical narrative. The visions are about the end of the age and divine judgment. A number of visions come to the same end point, namely God’s judgment upon the wicked (6:17, 11:18, 16:17) - unless we think there are multiple ends to the world. In the second half of Revelation the focus is upon the spiritual enemies of God who deceive human beings or earth dwellers. The leader of these is the dragon, that ancient serpent called the devil (accuser) and Satan (adversary). The others, namely the beast and the false prophet were cast alive into the lake of fire in Revelation 19:20.

**1.Millennium**

What are the different views taken on the millennium? There are three main views with variations in each.

Premillennial- Jesus will return prior to the start of the millennium. When Jesus returns to earth Satan will be bound for a thousand years, Christians will be resurrected and reign with Christ on the earth for literally one thousand years. At the end of this time will be a final rebellion against Christ and then the great white throne judgment (20:11). Dispensationalists hold this position but also say that Israel will be restored, along with sacrifices in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, which is in Palestine. Some also believe in a secret rapture of saints prior to the seven-year tribulation, all before the millennium. All this has been drawn up along a detailed time line.

Premillennialism is not new. The church fathers, Justin Martyr and Iraeneus, were ‘chialists’ who believed in a literal 1000 years. Augustine opposed this view and premillennialism virtually disappeared until the 17th century. Modern dispensational teaching stems largely from the teaching of Darby and the Schofield Reference Bible in 19th century.

Postmillennial- Jesus will return after (post) the millennium. The millennium, which may be literal or not, occurs towards the end of the church age. It is seen as a time of great blessing, peace, and revival in the church. Some look for a large scale conversion of the Jews during this period.

Millennial- the millennium is understood symbolically rather than literally. It begins with the death and resurrection of Christ and ends with his return. There is no belief in better times ahead or of a glorious church age before the return of Christ. Amillennial means no millennium but this is not what is actually believed. It is better to refer to this as 'inaugurated millennialism' because the belief is that the millennium coincides with the church age.

These different views arise from different approaches to the context and content of this chapter. The chapter begins with the word ‘then’ or more correctly ‘and’ (*kai*). This ‘and’ may refer to historical sequence but more probably to a sequence in the visions. There are many parallels in the visions of this book. In Revelation 19:20 armies gather for war. In 20:8 we see them gathering again- or is it again. Is this another war or just another perspective on the same war? In 19:20 we saw the beast and the false prophet cast alive in to the lake of fire. In 20:10 the devil (dragon) is cast into the same lake in a scene that parallels that of chapter 19.

**2.Satan bound**

What do we learn from the content of this chapter? John saw an angel coming down from heaven. He was carrying a key and large chain. The key was for locking or unlocking the abyss or bottomless pit. Satan was given the key to this pit in an earlier vision. He opened the pit to release a plague of horrible stinging scorpion-like locusts (9:1). But it is Jesus who holds the keys of Hades and death (1:18, 3:7). It seems that Jesus is overall in charge of this key.

The angel from heaven grabs the dragon, binds him and throws him into the pit, locks the door and seals it (20:2,3). The dragon symbolises the devil and Satan as we saw in Revelation 12:9. Satan is bound for a thousand years, to the extent that he cannot deceive the nations. Not all activity of Satan is ruled out. He is only bound, not totally inactive. It is amazing what some criminals can get up to even from the confines of prison.

Clearly the angel is more powerful than the dragon. Jesus made this point when the Jews accused him of casting out demons in the name of the devil. He said, ‘*no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man’* (Mat 12:29); note the word ‘*bind’*. Jesus also spoke of Satan falling like lightning from heaven, again in the context of demons being cast out in the name of Jesus (Luke 10:18). Just days before going to the Cross Jesus said, ‘*now is the judgment of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be cast out’ (*Jn 12:31). The binding and casting out of Satan is seen here in the context of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

We can understand the binding and casting down of Satan here in Revelation 20 within the same context. Jesus was confronted by widespread demon possession when on the earth. Satan also attacked Jesus directly trying to deceive him. Satan was not bound before Jesus came but it was different after his resurrection. Jesus defeated Satan at the Cross.

*‘That serpent of old’* (20:2). Satan was described by these same words in an earlier vision (12:9). In fact, we find a number of parallels in that passage in which the angels fight with the dragon in heaven, and the dragon is cast to the earth, along with his fallen angels. That passage goes on to say they overcame the dragon ‘*by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony’* (12:11). Down on earth the devil prowls around in great fury because his time is short. ‘*Serpent of old’* of course, takes us right back to the Garden of Eden. The serpent deceived Eve into disobeying the command of Almighty God. He led Adam and Eve into sin which separated them from God. God’s wrath was turned away by the propitiating sacrifice of Jesus. Satan’s power was curtailed. He was bound. He was put on a leash as some say. He is furious and dangerous, like a pit bull terrier. But God does not allow him to destroy the elect or the church that belongs to Christ.

Looking at the world in the time of Hitler, and even today, we might question to what extent Satan is bound. If you hold a premillennial view you do not have this problem for Satan is not yet bound. But the words of Jesus already referred to, along with other words of Scripture, point to the triumph of Jesus in his death and resurrection (Col 2:15, Heb 2:14). ‘From the point of view of the history of redemption, Satan’s power over the nations of the world is no longer what it was during the OT period’.

Prior to the Cross, the Gentiles were totally ignorant of the grace of God. It was the disciples who took the gospel into the world, according to the command of the risen Jesus. He said, ‘*all authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth’* (Mat 28:18). ‘*All authority’* must include authority over the devil and his agents. Jesus will build his church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it (Mat 16:18). Satan has been bound and cannot stop the church from advancing in the world. Persecution there will be, but the church will not be destroyed. Is this not what we see in the world today? Satan’s binding ensures and enables the evangelism of the world.

**3.Satan released**

After this period of a thousand years Satan will be released for a short time to go and deceive the nations and gather them for war (20:3, 7-8). There is no mention of a time of peace and blessing as the end approaches. Satan will be released to make a last ditch effort to overcome Christ. It reminds us of the Lord telling Moses that the sins of the Amorites had not yet reached full measure (Gen 15:16). The words ‘must be’ (20:3) indicate that this is all in the eternal plan of God.

It is difficult to fit this ‘little while’ into the scheme of premillennialists. If Christ is reigning on earth with resurrected believers for a thousand years, Satan must be released into this paradise. Does he go out to deceive the nations comprising resurrected believers (20:8)? Dispensationalists usually include a seven-year period of tribulation immediately prior to the millennium.

We see a lot of evil in the world today and we cry out to God because of it. We see humanism increasing in extent and depravity. We see idolatry increasing in some of its ghastly forms. But let us remember that at the Cross Jesus won the victory over Satan who is behind all these manifestations of evil. By his death Jesus destroyed him who has the power of death that is the devil. His final destruction in the lake of fire will surely come.

**Saints reign with Christ 1000 years** Revelation 20:4-6

While Satan is bound for a thousand years Christ is reigning, and the saints are reigning with him. We presume the 1000 years in this passage coincides with the 1000 years in Revelation 20:2-3. This is not a literal time period but an extended, indeterminate period between the first and second coming of Jesus. Satan was thrown out of heaven to the earth when Jesus won the victory on the Cross and in his resurrection (12:7-12). Jesus died and was physically raised as ‘*the firstborn from the dead’* (1:5). Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven where he has been ever since. When John first saw into heaven, and the throne in heaven, he saw the Lamb in the midst of the throne (5:6).

**1.Thrones**

When John saw thrones with people sitting on them in this vision, it is almost certain that these thrones are in heaven. Throughout this book the throne of Christ and his people is invariably in heaven (1:4, 3; 21, 4:2 etc). Moreover, those sitting on these thrones were with Christ (20:4), and Christ is in heaven.

Who does John see on these thrones in heaven? Some identify two groups in verse 4 while others see a single group. John saw ‘*the souls of those beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God’*. ‘*Beheaded’* clearly means they are dead- physically dead. It refers to martyrs, but there would have been martyrs who died in other ways so maybe this term is figurative for all degrees of persecution up to and including death. It may include all who have been faithful witnesses to Jesus, those who persevere through suffering and die from various causes ‘in the Lord’.

Jesus promised the Laodiceans who repented and overcome the world that they would sit with him on his throne, just as he overcame and sat with his Father on his throne (3:21). The central teaching of Revelation is patience and faithfulness to Jesus to the very end. Worship God and God alone. Jesus was called ‘*faithful and true’,* and we are to be like him.

Jesus saw the souls of those beheaded. This reminds us of what he saw with the opening of the fifth seal. He saw the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held (6:9). Their souls were under the altar in heaven crying out to God for justice. In the Bible it is common for ‘souls’ to be just another way of referring to living people, but there is a distinction between body and soul. They have been beheaded so the body is dead- John sees their souls, their living souls in heaven (20:4). In Revelation 6:9 they are living souls also, for they are praying.

Those who have not worshiped the beast and his image, or received the mark of the beast, are thought to be a second group by some, a group different to martyrs. Clearly, they are believers and not followers of Satan. The question arises as to where their souls are. ‘*And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years’* (20:4) must include all believers, not just martyrs. The next verse (20:5) contrasts these with ‘*the rest of the dead’,* who must be unbelievers.

This letter was sent to Christians who were going through intense persecution. Roman rulers did not take kindly to people who refused to worship their emperor or his image. They made sport of killing such traitors. Already Antipas has been martyred in Pergamum. Others were facing the same end if they remained faithful to Jesus. These were just ordinary Christians like us. It was a great test of their faith. A clear understanding of what would become of them after death would give them strength. The apostle Paul had such an understanding – ‘*for me to live is Christ and to die is gain’* he said (Phil 1:21). He was eager to put off the earthly tent or body and be in heaven. He knew that to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord (2Cor 5:8).

John did not see souls in purgatory or soul-sleep. He saw souls living and reigning with Christ in heaven. The soul remains conscious after death and the soul of the believer is always seen in heaven with the Lord. ‘*Today you will be with me in paradise’* Jesus promised the repentant thief (Luke 23:43). Stephen died a martyr saying, ‘*Lord Jesus receive my spirit’* (Acts 7:59). The Westminster Shorter Catechism Q37 states: ‘The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection’.

While heaven is beyond our understanding of space and time, we have concluded that the millennium is between the two comings of Christ, that is the church age or era in which we now live. The souls of the thief on the cross and the apostle Paul are now with Jesus in heaven, along with all others who have died in the Lord. Premillennialists are of course waiting for the millennium to start. They hold to a physical resurrection of believers when Christ returns, and rightly so, but then say they will reign with Christ here on earth for a thousand years.

**2.First Resurrection**

In this passage we find two resurrections- the resurrection of believers, or martyrs at least, and then the resurrection of the rest (20:5). Premillennialists argue that these are both physical resurrections- and with good reason. The same Greek word is used for ‘*live again’* in verse 4 (believers) and verse 5 (the rest of the dead). They argue that these must both refer to physical resurrection. But nowhere else in the Bible do we find two physical resurrections. (Some do take this first resurrection to be the resurrection of Jesus).

What we do find in John 5:25f is Jesus saying that the dead will hear his voice and live- ‘*now’*. At some future time (‘*the hour is coming’*) those who are in the grave will be resurrected, either to life or to condemnation. There are two comings to life in this passage, one spiritual and one physical. The apostle Paul often writes of believers being raised with Christ in the present, a reference not to physical but spiritual resurrection (Rom 6:4-13, Col 3:1). He speaks of this spiritual resurrection in the same context as Christ’s physical resurrection.

What John saw in this vision is consistent with the rest of Scripture in that believers are alive in Christ and reigning with Christ in what he calls the first resurrection. All believers are raised or resurrected with Christ when they are born again of the Spirit of God. They are spoken of as being raised up and made to sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:6). Yet we are still in our earthly bodies. John sees souls without such bodies. Their bodies are still in the grave, but their souls are alive in heaven. They are sitting on thrones reigning with Christ and judging the world, including the tribes of Israel (Mat 19:28, Luke 22:30, 1Cor 6:2).

Hear what the Westminster Confession of Faith says on this matter (WCF XXXII:1) - ‘The souls of the righteous… are received into the highest heaven where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting the full redemption of their bodies’.

**3.Second death**

‘Those who are born twice will die once, but those who are born once will die twice’. This pithy saying summarises what is taught in this passage- and in the entire Bible. ‘*The rest of the dead did not live again until the millennium was finished’ (20:5)*. This refers to unbelievers, to those who were happy to worship the beast and his image, and receive the mark of Satan. They heard the gospel but did not heed it. They did not repent of their sin and believe in Jesus, the Son of God. They preferred the way of the world. They were deceived by Satan.

The ‘*rest of the dead’* will die and be buried like all human beings, but after death their souls will not be seen on thrones with Christ in heaven. Their souls will be confined to ‘Death and Hades’. They will come out of their graves when Christ returns at the end of the millennium, and at that time will face divine judgment, condemnation and the second death (20:14).

This resurrection of all the dead is the second resurrection as far as believers are concerned. They are called blessed and holy for ‘*over such the second death has no power’* (20:6). They will rise to eternal life, they will rise with new bodies, bodies fit for heaven. Paul makes it very clear that there are earthly bodies and heavenly bodies, and that what is sown a natural body is raised a spiritual body (1Cor 15).

The focus of this passage in Revelation, and indeed of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, is that this new body is immortal. It is a body over which death has no power. The mortal has put on immortality. The Christian has a lot to live for, but even more to die for! No wonder Paul, who for a brief time was caught up into paradise, was so eager to get to heaven. John must have felt the same way after seeing this vision. How about you? Do you count yourself blessed and holy because of this great truth?

**4.Priests and judges**

This passage begins with souls on thrones judging, and ends with priests of God and of Christ reigning with him for a thousand years. Priests in the OT ministered in the temple before the presence of the Lord. They had access into the immediate presence of God. The king sat on his throne judging but was not allowed into the sanctuary. Jesus is the great high priest who entered into the Holy Place with his own blood. Jesus is the King to whom God committed all judgment. He defeated death and the devil at the Cross.

Since believers are raised with Christ, since we are in Christ, we are also priests and kings. He has made us kings and priests to God (1:6, 5:10). We are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, a people called out of the darkness to praise and glorify God. This we can do today here on earth.

We are already kings and priests in Jesus. We are already blessed and holy, for we are part of the first resurrection. We walk in the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Satan has no power over us. Though we die yet we shall live. Let us not focus on the first death but the second death. That is the focus of this passage and the entire Bible. **The last battle** Revelation 20:7-10

In a vision Daniel saw a ram pushing west, north and south until it met with a goat (Daniel 8). In this vision the ram represented the kingdoms of Persia which overthrew the Babylonian Empire in Daniel’s day. King Cyrus gave permission for the exiled Jews to return and rebuild the temple. The goat represented the kingdom of Greece. Alexander the Great marched to the east conquering all before him. Although a great figure in secular history he does not feature much in Biblical history. Alexander died at the age of 33 and his kingdom was divided among his four generals. The Seleucids ruled in the north and the Ptolemies in the south, i.e Egypt. Towards the end of the Greek empire, a Seleucid king called Antiochus Epiphanies took power. He was a vile and violent king, a king referred to in Daniel as the ‘little horn’. ‘*He shall cause deceit to prosper under his rule, he shall exalt himself in his heart…he shall even rise against the prince of princes, but he shall be broken without human means’* (Dan 8:25).

In 164BC Antiochus Epiphanies attacked Jerusalem killing many Jews, defiling their temple and stopping the daily sacrifices. He symbolised the antichrist as he came from the north (Syria) to attack Jerusalem and the people of God. Some regard Gog and Magog, referred to by Ezekiel, as pointing to this same king and ultimately to the antichrist. With his armies, antichrist will attempt to destroy the church at the end of history.

**1.Loosed**

Satan was bound and locked away for a thousand years, but after this time ‘*must be loosed for a little while’* (20:3, 7). He ‘*will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth’*- symbolism meaning ‘all the nations’. He will deceive them into joining him in battle against the saints of God. This is the final assault of Satan on the church of Jesus Christ. The nations are not distant nations like China and Japan, as some think, nor does it mean a nation from the north like Russia, which is what many dispensationalists contend. ‘*Rosh’* in Ezekiel 38:2, they say, is another name for Russia. They see this battle as Russia attacking the Jews and the temple in Jerusalem- well that was their interpretation before Russia lost most of its power.

In Ezekiel 38 Gog is the leader of the land of Magog who comes up against the people of Israel in the latter days. Here in Revelation, both Gog and Magog are spoken of as representing nations of the earth which are deceived by Satan into gathering together for battle. As suggested, Ezekiel may have been alluding to Antiochus Epiphanies, but the picture of the nations gathering for battle against the people of God takes on a wider meaning here in Revelation. As Armageddon symbolises the place for battle because it was where Israel fought many battles, so Gog and Magog symbolise the nations which gather for battle.

The nations are subjected to a powerful deception by Satan as they gather in their hordes like the sand of the sea (20:8). This is the last battle. They surround the camp of the saints and the beloved city. The camp reminds us of the wilderness wandering of Israel. They were a fledgling nation but in the power of God were able to strike down the nations that attacked them. The city refers to Jerusalem which was set on a hill with excellent natural defences. Still the nations joined forces to attack this city on many occasions. But it was only when God withdrew his presence from the city that it fell to the enemy.

The church is being attacked by the nations today, both overtly and covertly. The true church of Jesus Christ does not fit well into any society in the world- not with communism, not with socialism, not with monarchy, not with republicans, not with Islam and not even with secular democracy. The nations are in opposition to the church. Postmillennial hopes of a great revival and time of peace in the church are not seen in John’s vision. Rather, there will be intense suffering and persecution of the saints as Satan is loosed for his final attack. Jesus spoke about the last days saying, ‘*you will be hated by all for my name’s sake; but he who endures to the end will be saved*. *In those days there will be tribulation … and unless the Lord cut short those days no one would be saved: but for the elect’s sake, whom he chose, he shortened those days’* (Mark 13:13f).

**2.Lake of fire**

In 1Kings 1 we find the prophet Elijah sitting on a hill when the king sends men to arrest him. Elijah called down fire on them and they were consumed- the captain and his fifty men. This happened a second time. On the third attempt to take Elijah the captain pleaded for his life from Elijah, resolutely sitting on the top of the hill.

The end-time battle in Revelation turns out to be no battle at all. The nations came and encircled the camp of the saints – and what happened? Fire came down from heaven and devoured them (20:9). That was it! The Satan inspired hordes, bent on destroying the church of Christ, will be consumed in fire from heaven.

Jesus told his disciples that after the tribulation the stars will fall from heaven and the powers of the heavens will be shaken (Mat 24:29). With the opening of the sixth seal the stars of heaven fell to earth as the wrath of the Lamb was revealed (6:13). Falling stars may be associated with this fire from heaven, but we must remember this fire from heaven did not consume the saints. In the day of the Lord, writes Peter, the elements will burn up in the heat and the earth will be burned up (2Peter 3:10).

John saw Satan ‘*thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone/sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet are’* (20:10); note that the word ‘*are’* is not in the original. There is no indication of relative times in this verse. These events can be understood as occurring at the same time. ‘The sense is that the punishment of the beast and the false prophet has already been described, not that they were cast into the lake in an earlier battle’.

Teaching about his return in glory to judge the earth, Jesus said of those on his left, ‘*depart from me you cursed into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil, and his angels’* (Mat 25:41). John’s vision is of just such a fire. He says that they, namely Satan and his cohorts, will be tormented day and night for ever and ever (20:10). This is not a picture of annihilation, or of disappearing into nothingness. This is a picture of ongoing torment; of everlasting fire, as Jesus said.

There is no ambiguity about their destiny, just as there is no ambiguity about the destiny of wicked people (20:15). God does not lie. The idea that God will not in the end punish anyone in such a horrible way is wishful thinking and not what we find in the Bible. The Bible is not a fairy tale in which everyone lives happily ever after. Moreover, it is not just a story to scare people into being good. Fire and brimstone preaching is founded on the truth.

‘The throne of God is the ultimate answer to the problem of evil’ writes one scholar. The wicked may prosper in the world today. The church may be attacked, and Christians suffer and be killed by evil men, but ultimately truth and righteousness will triumph. The martyrs cry out to God for their blood to be avenged, and justly so. Why would they suffer for the name Christ if, in the end, the unrepentant join them in heaven? They suffered believing in the God of grace and justice.

Jesus came the first time to give his life a ransom for many. He came full of grace and truth. The second time he comes he will come in judgment. God has set the day. Jesus will come, Satan and his cohorts will be thrown into the lake of fire, and the great white throne judgment will take place.

Are you ready for Jesus to come again? Are you ready for persecution for the name of Jesus? He will come when least expected. He will come after a time of tribulation for the church. He gathers the elect, those who names are written his book. But those whose names are not written in his book, those who followed Satan, and bear the mark of the beast, he will cast into the lake of fire. Do you understand these words? Do they impact your life today? Are you being a watchman and sounding out the warning to a wicked generation?

**Great White Throne** Revelation 20:11-15

Sin has corrupted the human heart in many ways, not the least of which is our attitude towards judgment. We are pleased to see others punished for wrongdoing but will not accept such punishment ourselves. A young swimmer, who smashed the face of a friend, presumably because he said or did something to offend him, is not willing to accept just punishment for his violent attack. He has spent thousands of dollars trying every avenue of appeal because he thinks he has been treated unjustly.

Jesus put it very succinctly when he said, ‘*why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye but do not consider the log in your own’* (Mat 7:3). We have no problem seeing the faults of others and condemning them, but are not ready to examine own hearts and see our own faults. We all have this inherent sense of justice, as seen in the child saying, ‘it’s not fair’, but fail to see that we condemn ourselves by doing the same thing. Paul points this out in his letter to the Romans and concludes that on this basis God justly condemns us all (Romans 2:1-3). God will render to each one according to their deeds. God is totally just. God knows the truth about every one of us- even the secrets of our heart. And on judgment day he will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to the gospel (Rom 2:16). Are you ready for such judgment? Can you escape divine condemnation? If so how?

**1.Setting the scene**

John had a vision of Judgment Day which he tells us about in this passage of Revelation. He ‘*saw a great white throne and him who sat on it’* (20: 11). He saw dead people standing before the throne and books being opened. He saw judgment being given and those whose names were not found in the book of life being thrown into the lake of fire (20:15).

Daniel had a similar vision. He saw the Ancient of Days sitting on a fiery throne. Thousands upon thousands stood before the throne. ‘*The court was seated and the books were opened’* (Dan 7:10). In a later vision he saw even more clearly the dead being raised, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt (Dan 12:2). He was told that what he saw was a vision of the time of the end. The day of judgment is referred to throughout Scripture.

Some refer to this ‘great white throne judgment' as just one of God’s judgments. Dispensationalists call it the ‘great white throne judgment’ because they see it as distinct from other judgments. They claim there is a judgment of the nations in Matthew 25, a judgment which decides which nations will enter the millennial kingdom. Then comes the judgment of believers before Christ in heaven, a judgment to receive rewards as in 2Corinthians 5:10. This ‘great white throne judgment’ they say, is of unbelievers only. Such an interpretation is a case of fitting Scripture into a predetermined scheme rather than interpreting Scripture by other Scripture, as commended by the Westminster Confession of Faith I.9.

There is nothing in Scripture which points to multiple judgments. On the contrary, in John 5 Jesus says that the hour is coming when **all** who are in their graves will hear his voice and come forth. They will rise to face final judgment, divine judgment. What about those who are still living on this day? Paul deals with that question in 1Thessalonians 4 (the ‘rapture’ passage). Jesus said, ‘*as I hear I judge and my judgment is righteous’* (Jn 5:30). This is the final judgment at which the eternal destiny of all people is determined.

What Jesus said accords with what John saw in this vision- and what Daniel saw also. They saw a throne. What does a throne symbolise? A king sits on a throne. He does so for his coronation but also for making pronouncements. Pilate, as the king’s representative, sat on a judgment seat to hear the case against Jesus and make his judgment (Mat 27:19).

The throne John saw is great and white. White is the colour of purity and holiness. There will be no mistakes and no corruption in the judgments made from this throne. Moreover, this is the highest court in the universe. There will be no appeals to a higher court because there are no higher courts. Who is sitting on the throne? No name is given in this passage- nor is a name given in chapter 4 or Daniel 7. But the description of majesty and glory in Daniel and Revelation 4 obviously point to God. So it is in this vision. In fact, earth and heaven fled from his presence. Who but the Lord God who created the earth and heavens could command them to flee away? The present earth is corrupted because of sin. It must pass away before the new earth and new heaven can come (21:1). Some speak about a restoration and renewal of the earth but we read here that it fled away and no place was found for it.

John saw Jesus in the midst of the throne in heaven (5:6). God has committed all judgment to the Son (Jn 5:22), and Jesus spoke of sitting on a throne judging the nations when he comes again in his glory (Matthew 25:31). ‘I and my Father are one’ said Jesus, and so it is in the judgment. Jesus is on the throne with the Father judging according to the will of his Father.

**2.Second resurrection**

John saw the dead standing before the throne. They were small and great. This description was used when referring to the saints worshipping God (11:18, 19:5), but there is nothing intrinsic in the term to limit it to the saints- or to unbelievers. Rather, it is an inclusive term referring to all the dead, believers and unbelievers. Dispensationalists have to limit it to unbelievers because they say believers were bodily raised one thousand years previously.

We might call this the second resurrection, in contrast to the first resurrection (20:5). It is a bodily resurrection. The first resurrection referred to believers being raised with Christ to live and reign with him during the millennium or church age. ‘*The rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished’* (20:5). John saw this time. The throne of God appeared with the coming of the Lord (21:5). All the dead, small and great, those lost at sea, those buried in the earth and those cremated, will be raised from the grave to stand before the great white throne.

It will be a case of ‘This is your life’, without any editing. It is amazing how men and women can write such glowing reports of their lives. One wonders if there is an honest CV anywhere in the world. Even when people have done evil they can make themselves look good. Recently, one politician even drafted an apology to himself to make himself look good. But before the throne of God there will be no cover up. CV’s, glowing reference letters and self-written apologies will be of no value. God knows the truth about us all.

Each and every human being will be judged according to their works, by what is written in the books (20:12). People get concerned about invasion of their privacy. They get worried at what the government and banks know about them. But what God knows about them should be of much greater concern because God knows everything, even the secret things. And God will render to each according to his deeds (Ps 62:12, Prov 24:12, Rom 2:6). All who seek to be saved by good works understand this. They want their good deeds to outweigh their bad deeds. But such thinking is twisted. Good deeds do not cancel bad deeds. The Bible says that just one bad deed brings condemnation before God (James 2:10), and it is God’s judgment that we must be concerned about. Many think they will be judged by their peers or some benevolent old man in the sky. God is holy. God will not accept even the slightest blemish on offerings made to him.

Standing before the judgment seat it will be patently obvious that the record of your deeds will only serve to condemn you. But see! There is another book, the Book of life (20:12). This book is spoken of by Moses (Ex 32:32), Daniel (12:2), and Paul (Phil 4:3). Jesus told his disciples that their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:20). What do we know about this Book of life? It is the Lamb’s Book of life (21:27). It is a book associated with the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Lamb refers to sacrifice, so the names in this book are linked to the sacrifice of Jesus. Indeed, the names in this book are of those who have believed that Jesus died to take away their sin, that in his blood they have been washed from their sins.

**3.Second death**

John does not see what happens to those whose names are written in the Book of life- at least not in this vision. What he saw was the fate of those whose names were not written in this book. ‘*Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire’* (20:15 cf. 13:8, 17:8). The lake of fire is where Satan, the beast and the false prophet were being tormented day and night (20:10). Human beings who choose to reject Christ and follow Satan now find themselves in this same lake of fire suffering eternal torment. Even those who live relatively good lives will be there if their names are not in the Book of Life.

This is the second death. Those who think that their physical death will be the end are in for a terrible awakening. For they will rise from the dead to face divine judgment, before being cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death. This second death will be for ever and ever, it will be torment, weeping and gnashing of teeth for ever and ever. The fact of the last judgment should provoke us to bring the gospel to all people, warning them to repent of their sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, Death and Hades, the place of the departed, will be cast into the lake of fire (20:14). This may refer to the occupants of this place, or the place itself. With the occupants all risen and judged there is no more place for Death and Hades anyway. In his death and resurrection, Jesus defeated death and the devil. On his return, death itself will be destroyed. Unbelievers will be consigned to the lake of fire and believers will be with Christ forever. With Christ in the new heaven and new earth there will be no more death, no more sorrow nor crying nor pain (21:4).

**A new heaven and new earth** Revelation 21:1-3

The thought of something new is always exciting. It may be a new dress, new car, a new house or just a new breakfast cereal. We are never satisfied with the old; we are always looking for something new. It can be this way with religion. People want something new. Why do we want something new all the time? Clearly, the old things are satisfying us. The world we live in is not perfect. The things of this world are not fulfilling our deepest desires.

He who sat on the throne said, ‘*Behold I make all things new’* (21:5). The throne is the throne of God in heaven. God created this world and put man in charge; but man rebelled against his maker. God’s wrath came upon man and the whole creation. ‘*Cursed is the ground for your sake… by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread’* (Gen 3:17,19). Living under the curse of God is not pleasant. Man seeks release from this curse in his own creativity and pleasures. But only God can release us from this curse. This he has done in Jesus Christ (Rev 22:3). In the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God has removed the curse (Gal 3:13) and inaugurated the making of all things new.

This new creation has begun in the place where the old creation was corrupted- the heart of man. ‘*If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation: the old has gone and the new has come’* (2Cor 5:17). One day all creation will be made new. ‘The *creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God’* (Rom 8:21).

**1.New heaven and new earth**

John ‘*saw a new heaven and new earth, for the first heaven and first earth had passed away’* (21:1). We come to a new chapter but not a new vision. In verse 9 an angel invites John to come up and see a new vision. What has John seen thus far in this vision? He saw Satan, the beast and the false prophet thrown into the lake of fire. All people bearing the mark of the beast, rather than having their name in the Book of life, have been cast into the lake of fire (20:15). Death itself has been cast into this fire. The forces of evil and the power of death have been destroyed. Can you imagine a world without evil, without lies and corruption, and without death? It would be a world very different to what we live in today.

When the Lord appeared on the great white throne, earth and heaven fled from his face (20:11). The corrupted old creation could not exist in the presence of the holy God. Again, John tells us that the first earth and heaven have passed away (21:1). They have disappeared or gone away. The apostle Peter writes of the day of the Lord in the same way- ‘*the heavens will pass away with a great noise and the elements will melt in the fervent heat…both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up’* (2Peter 3:10). He goes on to speak about these things being ‘dissolved’.

Around 70% of the earth’s surface is, at present, covered by sea. The sea is not the natural habitat of man, even if many like to live by the sea, paying millions of dollars for ‘ocean views’. Imagine if all the oceans were drained. A lot of people would be unhappy. But then again, they are also unhappy that sea levels may rise.

In the Bible, and especially in this book, the sea is associated with things evil. We saw sea merchants being seduced by the great harlot. The beast comes out of the sea (13:1). The crashing waves and murky depths threaten man with death (20:13). In the new earth there will be no more sea (21:1). The beast has been destroyed as well as the merchants. Even death has been destroyed (21:4).

Scholars argue about the newness of this new heaven and new earth. Will the old be utterly destroyed or will it be restored or renewed. Peter certainly writes as if nothing is left with words like ‘burned up’, and ‘dissolved’, but elsewhere the words ‘regeneration’ and ‘restoration’ are used (Mat 19:28, Acts 3:21). Some scholars point out that in the Greek there are two words for new and the one used here (‘*kainos’*) means newness in quality not in time. It is, of course, still called ‘earth’, and God did make the first earth, but we must remember we are no longer the perfect beings God created and this earth is no longer the perfect place that God created.

The new heaven and new earth will be radically different. For one thing, there will be no more sea. Moreover, Isaiah says, ‘*the former will not be remembered or come to mind’* (Isa 65:17), and that ‘*the heavens will vanish like smoke’* (Isa 51:6). Whatever continuity there is, and there will be a continuity just as we have seen in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and our own ‘new creation’, there will be a radical discontinuity. The main thing about the new earth is that it will remain forever (Heb 12:27). Let us not start thinking like humanists and some cults that the new earth will be much the same as the old. Do the Jehovah Witnesses still have those pictures of heaven with a beautiful little cottage in the woods and all the birds and animals gathered around?

**2.New Jerusalem**

Many years ago I was telling a friend how I hated living in the city. They reminded me that in the Bible heaven is described as a city. John tells us he ‘*saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God’* (21:2). This city is described in greater detail in the next vision. Yes it is a city and not a mountain, not a forest, not a desert, and not a cottage by the sea that symbolises heaven. Why a city you might ask. Can a city be beautiful? A city is full of people and things man has made- how can that be like heaven! But this is not any city- it is the New Jerusalem. It is the holy city where only redeemed people, people who are a new creation in Christ Jesus, reside.

The earthly Jerusalem that is in Palestine was the place God chose for his holy presence to be among his people. The temple was there, and in the temple was the Ark of the Covenant, and above the ark was the Mercy Seat. God’s presence is no longer in that earthly temple and will not return there. People of various religions flock to Jerusalem today but what they see bears little resemblance to the New Jerusalem seen in this vision. They may live in hope of the temple being rebuilt in Jerusalem but it is a vain hope because the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands (Acts 7:48).

In these Last Days God came to earth, dwelling among us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. ‘*The word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory as of the only begotten of the Father*’ (Jn 1:14). The glory of God was revealed in Jesus Christ. After his resurrection Jesus returned to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in believers (John 14:17). So it is that we, individually but also corporately, are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1Cor 3:16). Corporately, we are the church of Jesus Christ. We ‘*are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit’* (Eph 2:22).

It is no longer Jerusalem and the temple there in Palestine but the church, the body of Christ, in which God tabernacles/dwells today. The church includes Jew and Gentile. The church is the ‘*New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’* (21:2). Jesus contemplated this great day, even as he sat with his disciples in the upper room contemplating the cross. He said, ‘*I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes’* (Luke 22:18). He spoke further of them eating and drinking in this kingdom (Luke 22:30).

In a vision, John saw the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7). The bride was made ready, the bride whom he now sees coming down out of heaven from God to be joined with her husband, the Lord Jesus Christ for ever and ever (Isa 62:5). ‘Throughout history God is forming his people to be his bride so that they will reflect his glory in the ages to come (Eph 5:25), an idea developed in what remains of Revelation 21’.

**3.New covenant**

At the Last Supper Jesus declared, ‘*this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for you* (Luke 22:20). A covenant is an agreement between two parties. Marriage is a covenant relationship. In his own blood Jesus has made a covenant with us. In the blood of Jesus, God dealt with the sin that separated us from our maker.

God made a covenant with his chosen people Israel declaring, ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’ (Lev 26:12). Through Jeremiah he said he would make a new covenant with his people- ‘*I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people* (Jer 32:33). Paul saw this covenant as being fulfilled in the church (2 Cor 6:16). It is not surprising therefore, that when John saw the New Jerusalem he also heard a loud voice from heaven declaring the fulfilment of this age old covenant. ‘*God himself will be with them and be their God… and they shall be his people’* (20:3). The word, ‘people’, is plural for it is now Jew and Gentile; it is people from all nations, tribes and tongues.

The central feature of the new heaven and new earth is the holy city, the New Jerusalem. Attempts to understand just how the old will give way to the new, and what the new heaven and new earth will be like will be fruitless if we miss this central feature. And even more central is the presence of God in this holy city. As the Lord promised in ages past, and as we saw briefly in the coming of Jesus, so we will see fully, finally and forever when Jesus comes again- ‘I will dwell with them and they shall be my people and I will be their God’.

**All things made new** Revelation 21:5-8

The sea has claimed thousands of lives in the course of history and continues to claim lives today. If a boat sinks and the people cannot swim they quickly drown. Those who can swim may be able to persevere and make it to land. It is no wonder that many fear the sea. Life is like swimming in the sea. We press on against adverse currents and waves that threaten to overwhelm us. ‘*Save me O God, for the waters have come up to my neck’* cried the Psalmist (Ps 69). He was not in the water but this is how he imagined his life. Like swimmers we must press on. We cannot stop lest we sink.

The people in the churches of Asia were going through tough times when John sent this letter to them. As we come to the closing chapters it is good to remember the opening chapters, and the letters that were sent to the seven churches. In fact, John takes us back to those chapters with a reference to the Alpha and Omega (cf.1:8), to writing words that are true and faithful (cf.1:19), and to overcoming the world (cf. 2:7,11,17;3:5,12,21). Each church was encouraged to press on in the faith, despite being tested and persecuted unto death. ‘Do not give up, do not waver in your faith, for the end is near and your reward is with the Lord’.

**1.Sovereign God**

We cannot press on against the attacks of Satan if we do not believe that God is sovereign in all things. If you think that Satan has even the slightest chance to win then you will give up. If you do not believe that God is sovereign, and that Christ has won the victory, why press on? In times when your faith is tested, ask God for wisdom and strength but do so without doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea being driven and tossed by the wind (James 1:6). Here is the image of the sea once again. We must believe that solid ground is near as we press on like a swimmer. ‘You must eat and be strong for land is near and we will not drown’ is what Paul told the sailors in their crippled vessel.

John hears God speaking from his throne in heaven. This is only the second time in this book that God speaks directly. The first time was in Revelation 1:8 where he spoke the same words: ‘*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end’*. What does this declaration mean? What does it mean if someone says I know from A to Z about cars or cricket? It means they know all there is to know. The first and last letters of the alphabet make it inclusive. There is nothing beyond or outside this realm. God is omniscient, knowing all things. God is omnipotent or all powerful. God is sovereign. He made all things and sustains all things. He will make all things new.

There is no pretending that things in this present world are perfect. Satan was allowed to seduce Eve and Adam, and so corrupt this world. God does not pretend that these believers in Asia were not suffering under the evil regime of Rome. But he tells them that he is sovereign and will make all things new. The time is at hand when Satan will be cast out, and the new heaven and new earth will appear. Jesus told his disciples that in this present world they would have tribulation; ‘*But be of good cheer’* he said, ‘*for I have overcome the world’* (John 16:33).

God said to John, ‘*It is done*!’ Because God is sovereign, because he is almighty, and because he is faithful and true, he can say, ‘it is done’. God’s word will not fail. It is as good as saying, ‘it is done’. What is done? In the second coming of Jesus, divine judgment and salvation has been fully accomplished. Satan and his cohorts, including unrepentant human beings who persecute believers, have been cast into the lake of fire. The redeemed of the Lord, those who believe in Jesus and persevere until the end, are gathered together unto Christ to enjoy his presence and his glory forever.

Do not be surprised, dear friend, when you go through trials and difficulties. You live in a fallen world. Satan has not yet been cast into the lake of fire, but is on the prowl seeking whom he may devour. Keep on swimming for solid ground is near. Soon the whole sea will dry up and be no more, and you will be able to cross on dry land, just as Moses and God’s people of old.

**2.Saved people**

What does God promise to those who thirst? What does he promise to those who overcome the world? It is ironic that people lost at sea can actually die of thirst. People who swim the English Channel must be regularly given fresh water to drink. Sea water is not thirst quenching; it is not life giving but, in fact, is deadly. People chase after the things of this world thinking that in such things they will find life. They cling to these things, even in death, but their thirsty souls are never satisfied by such things. If you thirst then cry out to God because he alone can satisfy your thirst. God says, ‘*I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts’* (21: 6).

Remember how Jesus spoke similar words to the Samaritan woman at the well. She came to get water from the well but this water would not satisfy the thirst in her soul. Jesus offered her life-giving water saying, ‘the water that I give will become in you a fountain of water springing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). Living water means eternal life. Jesus said that if anyone thirsts let them come to him and drink. He spoke of those who drank his blood as having eternal life and being raised up at the last day. This we do when we believe in Jesus, and as a sign of that belief, drink the cup at the Lord’s Supper.

How tragic it is to see a person drown as they are on the verge of stepping onto solid ground. With just a short distance to go they are overwhelmed by the waves. Close to shore is, of course, where we find the big waves. People can happily fish all day out in the ocean but come to grief in a moment as they try to enter the harbour.

The seven churches were sailing in dangerous waters- just as all churches are. John’s letters warned them of the dangers they faced. Idol worship is pleasing to the eye. Idol worshippers are free to indulge the flesh in drunkenness and sexual immorality. Most people in Asia worshipped idols, and those who refused were persecuted. Is it not the same in the world today!

Here at the end of the book, these churches are still being warned. Cowards who drew back from suffering, unbelievers and those who let the world pollute them, would be cast into the lake of fire (21:8). They had turned from idols to serve the true God. Turning back to those idols they would become worse than before. Press on. Keep swimming lest the sharks attack!

Daniel’s friends refused to worship the idol set up by the king. They were not saved from the fire but were saved through the fire. Jesus did not promise to take these churches to a safe place, or to destroy Roman power- at least not immediately. He told them to repent of their sin and persevere in the faith. They would overcome in the strength of the Lord. They were promised wonderful things when they overcame.

It is interesting to look at the promises given to the seven churches in the context of these final chapters. They were promised, among other things, escape from the second death, power over the nations, a place in the Book of life, a new name for life in the New Jerusalem, and the right to sit on the throne with Jesus. These promises are fulfilled in these final visions.

Throughout the book of Revelation, believers or saints are told to be patient and remain faithful (13:10, 14:12). ‘*The end of all things is near so be serious and watchful in your prayers’* (1 Peter 4:7). Put on the armour of God and keep it on. Do not lower your guard but be alert always. Be watchful and press on in the strength of the Lord.

You are familiar with the parable of the soils. Beware of the weeds that come up to choke what is growing well. Do not be choked by the cares, the riches and the pleasures of this world. Jesus taught us to pray, ‘do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from evil’. Is this what you pray? Are you an overcomer? Do not say, ‘I don’t know’. That is to admit defeat. That is to deny the grace and power of God. Say instead, ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’. ‘In Christ my Lord I will overcome’.

‘Overcomers’ are promised a glorious inheritance. ‘*He who overcomes shall inherit all things* (21:7). We are promised an audience with the King of kings and Lord of lords. We are promised the status of sons of God- ‘*I will be his God and he will be my son’ (21:7).* We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. We are, above all, promised in marriage to the wonderful and glorious Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.

**The Bride, the New Jerusalem** Revelation 21:9-14

In this last major vision of the book of Revelation, John is ‘*carried away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain and shown the great city, the holy Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God’* (21:10). He had already seen this city in the previous vision (21:2). This reminds us that the visions in this book often overlap, and one vision may elucidate another, as in this case. We have here another case of recapitulation. The symbolism continues in the description of the New Jerusalem, which is the bride of Christ.

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls of God’s wrath came to John (21:9). Is this the same angel that came to John to show him the judgment of the great prostitute, otherwise known as Babylon the Great? The introduction to this vision is very similar to that of the previous vision (17:1). We can compare and contrast these two visions. In both John sees a woman, but a very different woman. The first was a prostitute, the second a pure bride. The prostitute was judged and destroyed; the bride was glorified as the wife of the Lamb of God.

What did the prostitute symbolise? She was Babylon, that city of idolatry and corruption in which Daniel lived. She was Rome, the city and nation that was persecuting John and the churches of Asia. Babylon represents the economic and religious powers of this world, powers which seduce kings and lots of other earth dwellers. Jerusalem on the other hand is the holy city, the city housing the temple, the temple in which God’s presence resided. Just as Babylon becomes symbolic of this evil world, so Jerusalem becomes symbolic of the new creation coming down of heaven with the return of Jesus Christ in all his glory.

**1.Shining with glory**

The city which John saw was like no other city. The city shone with the glory of God. The dazzling light was like that which he saw in his first glimpse into heaven. He saw the throne of God which was like jasper stone, and there was a rainbow around the throne (4:3). Here he again describes what he saw as being like a most precious stone, ‘*a jasper stone, clear as crystal’* (21: 11). Jasper is like quartz or diamond. From it light is reflected and refracted in all directions. The glory of God shining from this holy city was something like the brilliance and radiance of an enormous diamond.

The ‘*glory of God’* is this city was not just a reflection but was the very source of light. The Greek word translated ‘light’ is the same as that in Philippians 2:15 where it is often translated ‘star’. Some use the word ‘luminary’. The point is that a star gives out light. The sun is a star which gives off light; light so bright that we cannot look directly at it. The brilliance of the sun does not compare with the brilliance of this glory of God. The heavenly ‘*city has no need of the sun... for the glory of God illuminated it’* (21: 23).

The reference in Philippians 2:14 is interesting in that there it is referring to ‘*the children of God’*, to believers as shining like stars in this world. But how can we compare such shining with that of the glory of God? The glory of God is linked to his people, to the church of Christ. The church is the bride of Christ. This holy city is called the bride of Christ. This is a city because it is a community of people. It is an inhabited city. The names of the tribes of Israel are on the gates, and the names of the apostles of Christ are on the foundations.

The name ‘holy Jerusalem’ stands in contrast to the ‘unholy Babylon’ that has been destroyed, as we have seen. The name New Jerusalem is also to be compared to the old Jerusalem. John would be thinking of the old Jerusalem, and the temple in it, when he heard the angel telling him about the New Jerusalem. Some say that what he saw was the millennial, rebuilt, earthly Jerusalem but clearly, the city he sees is a heavenly, not an earthly city.

This vision has an OT background in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel had a vision of the new city and new temple during the exile. He was carried away to a high mountain, as John was, to see a city (Ezek 40:2). He goes on to describe the temple. The temple, which was the central feature of the earthly Jerusalem, actually engulfs the holy city, the New Jerusalem. Ezekiel wrote of the glory of God coming and filling this temple (Ezek 43:25).

The tabernacle which Moses built and the temple which Solomon built were built on the same pattern, the pattern of the heavenly temple. God gave this pattern to Moses on the mountain. The glory of God departed from the earthly temple. It is seen again in the city and temple coming down out of heaven from God.

**2.Structure of the city-temple**

Years ago I visited a tribal village in NE India. The village had a wall around it with a very solid gateway. A hundred years ago these people were often at war with nearby tribes- they were head hunters. With the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ all that has changed, but the village wall and gateway remain. What the people did change was the sign over the gateway. It now reads, ‘to the glory of God’. It was a great joy to enter through that gate and worship the Lord with these people that he had saved in his wonderful grace.

The holy city which John saw had a great high wall with twelve gates. The gates were symmetrically placed on each of its four sides (21:12). The names over these gates were the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Ezekiel saw the same gates and lists the names that were on them (Ezekiel 48:30f). John saw an angel at each of these gates. This reminds us of the angels that were assigned to each of the seven churches in Asia. The city had twelve foundations on which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (21:14). The apostle Paul similarly described the house of God as being built on the foundation of the apostles (Eph 2:20). He was writing of the church, through which God’s manifold wisdom and glory would be made known to all creation.

Some envisage these foundations as being like pillars so that the wall of the city is of alternating foundations and gates. The promise made to those in the church at Philadelphia who overcome by remaining faithful to the end was, ‘*I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God …I will write on you the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven from God’* (3:12). Peter speaks of believers as living stones becoming part of the spiritual house of God (1Peter 2:5).

The holy city had a great, high wall symbolising divine protection. There are no dividing walls in this city or in the temple that it merges into. These walls were broken down in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as Paul explained in his letter to the Ephesians (Eph 2:15). The city, as we see later, is a square, or more correctly a cube.

In John’s first vision into heaven he saw twenty-four elders wearing white robes and golden crowns as they sat on thrones around the throne of God is heaven (4:4). We concluded at that time that the twenty-four elders were the twelve patriarchs representing the old covenant and the twelve apostles representing the new covenant. Here we find the same symbolism. The people of God from both old and new covenants are included in the New Jerusalem. All of God’s redeemed people are included in this holy city, this temple built of living stones to the glory of Almighty God.

**3.Saved community**

The ‘city is founded on God’s redemptive acts’, writes Paul Barnett in his brief, but insightful commentary. The tribes of Israel were redeemed from slavery in Egypt. This redemption was itself a forerunner of the great redemption in the Cross of Jesus Christ. God redeemed his chosen ones from sin and death through the blood of Jesus Christ. This saved community, this assembly of the people of God, this true church comprising the redeemed from all ages and all nations, is symbolised in this heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.

In the merging images of this vision the holy city is the bride of Christ. Christ has made his bride ready; he has made her pure and holy, ready for marriage. Here she is called the Lamb’s wife (21:9). This is a marriage in heaven; this is a wonderful and glorious union. No wonder the glory of God shines forth from this city. God has come to dwell in the midst of his chosen people for ever and ever.

The glory of the New Jerusalem is too wonderful, too dazzling for us to behold while we live in earthly bodies in this fallen world. For now we see but dimly. We see but a reflection of his glory. For now the King of glory ‘*dwells in unapproachable light whom no man has seen or can see’* (1 Tim 6:16). But one day we will see him in all his glory. When the risen Lord comes again in all his glory we will be changed, and we will see him as he is (1John 3:2). We will see him face to face, and dwell in his presence forever.

Are you lifted up in your spirit by this vision of the glory of God? Are you excited that you have a place in this heavenly city? Abraham, in faith, waited for a city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:10). Are you, by faith, waiting for this same city?

**City of pure gold** Revelation 21:15-21

Have you done any building work lately? If so, you will understand the importance of getting the measurements correct. ‘Measure twice and cut once’ is the old rule, which I forgot when cutting a length of timber the other day. I also slipped up while fixing a mirror- I forgot to check the levels. I now have a mirror that is crooked. I got some consolation from seeing the work of a friend of mine. He tried his hand a laying tiles. He started along one wall with the tiles in a straight line but by the time he got to the other wall nothing was straight. You will find some imperfection in any house if you look closely enough- except the house of the Lord.

**1.Measurement**

The angel that came to John in this vision had a ‘*gold reed to measure the city’* (21:15). If we look back at the temple Ezekiel saw we find a man of bronze, probably an angel, measuring the temple (Ezek 40:3). He went all around the temple measuring everything in intricate detail- so much detail that we find reading it all somewhat tedious. Why all this detail about the measurement of every part of the temple?

The earthly tabernacle built by Moses is described in similar detail in the book of Exodus. He built it according to the pattern the Lord God gave him on the mountain. The Lord told him the precise measurements to use in making each and every chamber and each and every article of furniture (Exodus 25:8, 9). If the earthly temple was built with such precision, the heavenly one must be made with absolute precision. It is, after all, the perfect place, built by the perfect God. It is the place of God’s presence, it is the throne room of God, it is the place where he dwells with his chosen ones.

In apocalyptic writings, when a city is measured it often symbolises judgment or preservation (cf. chapter 11). An enemy city is measured in preparation for an assault and destruction; or a city is measured when it is to be rebuilt and preserved. But here the measuring is somewhat different. It symbolises the perfection and beauty of the city-temple.

The Taj Mahal was built with great precision- so much so that the writing on the pillars is actually larger at the top because being further from the eye it would naturally appear smaller. But even the Taj has its imperfections and will one day become just rubble.

The holy city John saw is a place of perfect symmetry and infinite beauty. The measurements reveal it to be in the shape of a cube; an object of three-dimensional equality and perfection. The Most Holy place in the earthly temple was similarly built in the shape of a cube. It was 20 cubits in width, length and height, and was overlaid with pure gold (1Kings 6:20). The city-temple coming down out of heaven was the same shape but vastly greater in size. It was not a 10m cube but a 2200km cube- the distance from Melbourne to Brisbane! In John’s day this distance of over 2000km was probably the size of the known world. The heavenly city will engulf the whole world. It is the new heaven and new earth. These measurements, however, are to be understood symbolically not literally. The number twelve in 1200 stadia gives a sense of perfection and completion. Jesus had twelve disciples. There were twelve gates and twelve foundations, as we have seen.

*‘Then he measured the wall’* (21:17). The wall was 144 cubits- most probably in thickness, although some take it to be in height. But again, note the symbolism in the number. We have come across 144 before. It is the product of twelve and twelve, the totality of the redeemed people of God. The wall was measured according to human measurement, which the angel was using (21:17); John gives a hint that this measure is not to be taken literally. Here is an angel measuring the heavenly city and seeking to put things in human terms. It is human measurement by angel reckoning. We must not limit our understanding of this glorious New Jerusalem by taking these measurements literally and getting caught up in such an interpretation. Rather, we should be filled with awe and wonder as we contemplate the dazzling glory of God in this holy city coming down out of heaven from God.

**2. Materials**

John goes on to describe the dazzling beauty of this city-temple by referring to the materials with which it is made. Its walls were of jasper/ diamonds, and ‘*the city was of pure gold, like clear glass’* (21:18). A sparkling diamond set in pure gold is regarded by most as the most precious and beautiful object in this world. You may have such an object on your finger. Some kings in India built their palaces with gold-plated doors, studded with diamonds and precious stones. We saw them after the colonialists had been and stripped them bare. But no earthly palace or temple has ever had a whole wall of diamonds, or city streets of pure gold.

*‘The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones’* (21:18) The twelve foundations were clearly visible to John since he could see twelve different stones adorning them. What is the significance of these stones? Actually, some are unknown to us today. We are probably not meant to find meaning in each individual stone but rather to understand this vision from an OT background. Most of these stones match those found on the breastplate worn by the High Priest when he entered the earthly temple (Exod 28:15-21). Each was engraved with the name of a tribe of Israel. He was entering on their behalf. ‘It is doubtful if any symbolic significance is intended by the description of these foundations beyond the beauty and majesty of the whole’

There is a further OT reference to a place with foundations of precious stones in Isaiah 54. In telling about the unfailing covenant love of God, the prophet refers to the future glory of Zion. He refers to God as their maker and their husband - in John’s vision Christ is seen as the husband of the church. Isaiah describes a future city with foundations of sapphires, battlements of rubies, gates of sparkling jewels, and walls of precious stones. It is a city of peace and permanence for the children of God.

The complete interior of the Most Holy place in Solomon’s temple was overlaid with pure gold. This heavenly city-temple is similarly covered with pure gold, like transparent glass. This is gold even more pure and beautiful than the gold that Solomon used and the gold we use today. The very streets of the city were of pure gold (21:21).

Finally, each of the twelve gates was an individual pearl. What an enormous pearl it must have been. Again, this is a picture which stretches our imagination to the limits- and this is what it is meant to do. Many who speak about the ‘pearly gates’ of heaven have no idea of this glorious scene, or of the truth which underlies the whole scene. This city, remember, is the bride of Christ; it is the church which Christ himself is building, to the glory of Almighty God.

**3. Meaning**

Looking at the measurements of this city-temple, and the materials with which it is built, there is no escaping the truth that it is a city ‘out of this world’. Heaven is a beautiful place, full of glory and grace. We stand in awe and amazement at the glorious sight of dazzling diamonds and other gemstones, set against a background of gold more pure than the purest gold in this world. Such stones and gold are precious not only because of their beauty but their enduring quality. They never rust or decay but reflect the dazzling light of God’s glory for ever and ever. We saw earlier (21:11) that the glory of God shone from this city. God is the source of light and these precious stones reflect the divine glory.

In conclusion, this description ‘symbolises the pure, holy, gracious and radiant character of the fellowship between God and his people. In principle we enjoy it here and now; in perfection we will enjoy it by and by’. Do you enjoy something of this radiant glory of God now? Draw nearer to God and you surely will. Do you look forward to the coming of Jesus Christ in all his glory? One day soon Jesus will come on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory (Mat 24:30). This is what Jesus promised. Every eye shall see him, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:11).

**City with no temple** Revelation 21:22-27

The temple in Jerusalem was the focus of worship for the Jews. Every male Jew was supposed to go up to the temple at least once a year with his tithes and offerings. He went to make sacrifice for sin. God determined the place for his presence to dwell among his covenant people, and that place was in the Most Holy place of the temple in Jerusalem. With the coming of Jesus all this changed. Jesus gave himself as the all-sufficient and final sacrifice for sin. Animal sacrifices became redundant. Moreover, in Jesus Christ, God came to dwell in a glorious new and living way among his people. God no longer dwells in the temple built by man.

Challenged by Jews as to his divine authority, Jesus said, ‘*destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up’* (Jn 2:19). They thought he was talking about the temple that had taken forty-six years to build, but the inspired gospel writer tells us that Jesus was speaking of the temple of his own body. The apostle Paul speaks of Christ as the chief cornerstone, holding together the building which is the holy temple of the Lord (Eph 2:21). The temple is made up of the people in whom God dwells individually and corporately. The community of the redeemed, the church of the Old Covenant and New Covenant, is pictured as the New Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God.

John pictures the New Jerusalem merging with the temple, or more specifically, the temple engulfing the city and the whole world. All evil has been removed with Satan and his cohorts being cast into the lake of fire. Only the Most Holy place of the temple remains- hence the shape of a cube.

**1.No temple**

Whilst the temple was the central feature of the earthly Jerusalem there was no temple in the New Jerusalem in John’s vision. Rather, the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (21;22). What was the purpose of the old temple? It was for worship yes, but worship involving animal sacrifice. There were lots of priests and the High Priest who took blood and sprinkled it on the mercy seat on the Day of Atonement.

All this was made obsolete in Jesus Christ. Our High Priest is now at the right hand of God in heaven (Heb 8:1). He entered the Most Holy place by his own blood, the blood of the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Christ has gone through the heavens to minister for us in the heavenly temple. This temple will come down out of heaven from God one day soon. Jesus will come again, and God the Father will also make his home in the midst of his people. ‘*Behold the tabernacle of God is with men and he will dwell with them’* (21:3).

The Pope made a mockery of this truth, misleading thousands of young people into seeing him as some sort of divine figure. How presumptuous to drive through the streets to be worshipped by poor ignorant people. The Bible tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus and flee all who would divert our gaze from him. How presumptuous for men to assume the authority of declaring who will be saints or not- all on the basis of their works, of course. Where do we find such things in the Bible?

The Lord and the Lamb are its temple. ‘What about the church being the temple’ you may ask? Paul spoke of the assembly of God’s people, the church, as the temple of the Lord. John also saw this city- temple as the bride of Christ, which is the church. But in each of the pictures note that Christ is included. He is the cornerstone, the foundation, and the temple itself. It is the holy temple because it is the dwelling place of God and all who are washed and made holy in Jesus Christ.

**2.No sun or moon**

*‘The city had no need of the sun’* (21:23). Some contend that the sun may still be present – there was just no need for it. They do so with the understanding of continuity from the old heaven and earth to the new heaven and earth. But this is to miss the point of the vision. God did, of course, put the sun into the heavens to give light by day, but this was on the fourth day of creation. He said, ‘let there be light’ on the first day. The point is that the glory of the Lord and the Lamb in this city-temple removes the need for any other light, even the intensely bright light of the sun.

Isaiah spoke in the same way about the coming glory of God and the fact that the sun would not be needed. ‘*The sun shall no longer be your light by day … but the Lord shall be to you an everlasting light’* (Isa 60:19). How amazing that these two men of God living some 800 years apart spoke the same truth. They did so because the truth of God is unchanging. They were men inspired by God when they wrote this.

This is truth that encourages and comforts the people of God in all ages as they wait for the coming of the Lord. Thousands around us live in fear of the sun in the sky burning up, or of the earth heating up and affecting their life here on earth. Looking to the Son of God puts all such fears into perspective. God who put the sun in the sky will one day take it away, and he himself will illuminate the new heaven and new earth with his glory.

**3.No shut gates**

That the city- temple had gates at all is somewhat puzzling in this vision. Is this city- temple not all that remains after the wicked are destroyed and the old earth and heavens have passed away? John speaks of nations walking in the light of this temple and kings of the earth bringing glory and honour into it (21:24). Some argue that this picture of open gates points to universal salvation, while others say that this is the millennial city of Jerusalem. But this vision points rather to the universal knowledge of God. All the earth shall hear the salvation of God. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:10,11). The community of the redeemed will come from all nations and from the four corners of the earth. The coming of the wise men to Bethlehem to worship Jesus points to this great truth. There will be Gentiles as well as Jews in this redeemed community, all experiencing the wonderful glory of God and the Lamb.

The gates of the old Jerusalem were shut a night to keep out the enemy. Since there is no more night in the city-temple coming down out of heaven the gates will not be shut at any time. Moreover, since the enemy is destroyed there is no need to shut the gates for protection. The gates will stay open, symbolising openness for the nations to bring glory and honour to the King of kings and Lord of lords, to the throne of the Almighty, and the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world.

**4.No defiling**

The previous vision ended with the declaration that all the spiritually unclean, all unforgiven sinners, will be excluded from the holy city, just as the physically unclean people were excluded from the earthly temple. Those who had touched a dead body or in some other way had defiled themselves were not allowed to enter the earthly temple.

*‘Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire’* (20:15). The Book of Life comes up again in this passage. This time it is called the Lamb’s Book of Life. And this time is it mentioned positively. Only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life will enter this city-temple. No wonder Jesus reminded his disciples to rejoice above everything else that their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20).

Whilst this vision is encouraging and comforting to those in the church who remain faithful, there is this solemn warning to those tempted to go the way of the world, those tempted to take the easy way, the way that satisfies the flesh, and worship idols. Worship of idols probably involved ritual prostitution. Lies are among the things that defile the holy temple. Liars are excluded (21:8, 27, 22:15). All idols and other gods are lies. There is only one God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. All who worship idols are liars. God is a God of truth. Lies are an abomination to him.

The gates are open for all who repent of their sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is by faith, and faith alone, that names are written in the divine register. They are written by the Lamb of God for it is his book. They are written in his blood because it is by his blood that our sins are forgiven and we are made clean and holy before God.

‘Choose this day whom you will serve’ said Joshua. ‘As for me and my house we will serve the Lord’. We will serve the Lord, looking forward to the heavenly city, the city whose walls are called salvation and whose gates are called praise (Isa 60:18).

**River of life** Revelation 22:1-5

When God made Adam he put him in a garden, a beautiful garden called Eden. There were lots of trees in this garden, flowering trees and fruiting trees- and also the tree of life. A river watered the garden. God made all sorts of birds and animals to live there. He also made Adam a wife. We don’t read much about this garden after Genesis 3, until we come to a similar picture here at the end of the Bible. Why is this? It seems such a beautiful place. We don’t read much about this garden because Adam was thrown out of it when he disobeyed God’s command. God ‘*placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden and a flaming sword’* to prevent Adam from eating of the tree of life (Gen 3:24). Adam was thrown out with a curse on his head and on the whole of creation. But this is not the end of the story. God sent his Son, Jesus, into this fallen world, this world outside of Eden, to deal with the sin of Adam and the resulting wrath and curse of God. He sent Jesus to reverse the curse, and reopen the garden as it were, as an even more beautiful and glorious place.

**1.Water of life**

The angel who came to John in 21:9 continues showing him the bride, the Lamb’s wife, the New Jerusalem which becomes the holy temple. The city- temple now takes on features of a garden with a river and tree(s). The throne of God and of the Lamb reappears as the central feature of this city-temple-garden, otherwise known as heaven.

*‘A river of the water of life’* ran down the streets of city (22:1). Whilst there is no more sea in heaven there is a river, a river of clear, pure water. Ezekiel similarly saw a river flowing from the temple towards the east (Ezek 47:1). It was full of life and healing. It flowed into the sea and healed the waters of the sea- the Dead Sea. This is powerful, life- giving water if it can heal the Dead Sea! John does not see where the river in his vision goes but he does see where it comes from, and he sees its waters as life-giving. The river comes from the throne of God and the Lamb. It is life- giving water because of this source.

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, ‘anyone who drinks the water that I give will never thirst’. The water he gives is the water of eternal life (Jn 4). At the feast of Tabernacles during the water carrying ceremony Jesus said, ‘If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink’ (Jn 7:38). The river of the water of life symbolises this eternal life which Jesus gives, life that will be consummated in heaven. Eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ (Jn 17:3). True and enduring fellowship with the Father and the Son is what heaven is about. The water of life symbolises such intimate fellowship.

**2.Tree of life**

On the banks of the river of the water of life John saw the tree of life. That he saw it on either side of the river is strange- but this is a vision. In Ezekiel’s vision there were many trees, and there is an indication of this here also (22:2). But in Eden there was only one tree of life, and with regard to the symbolism of this tree it is best to see one tree. Why is this? The word for tree in this verse means ‘dry wood’. It is not the usual word for tree (*dendron*). It is, in fact, the word used for the cross on which Jesus died and by which he healed us from our sin (Gal 3:13). The tree of life in Eden had to be protected from sinful man but through the cross, the cursed tree on which Jesus died, the way to the tree of life is reopened. The tree of life is on the banks of the river flowing from the throne of the Lamb. It is vitally connected with Jesus. The life this tree gives, just like the life the water gives, comes from Jesus.

The life-giving quality of this tree is pictured in its abundant fruit; life-giving fruit every month. Normal trees give fruit for only a month or so each year but this tree is super productive. In Eden all Adam had to do was care for the garden and eat of its fruit. Outside it was very different. He had to cultivate the soil and fight against weeds, pests and diseases, as we do today. In this holy city there is no more fruitless toil and painful suffering.

Moreover, the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. Since there is no sickness or pain in heaven this healing must be spiritual. It probably refers to redemption in the blood of Jesus. ‘The nations’ is again a reference to this healing being for the whole world, for all who hear the gospel and believe in Jesus. ‘*Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord* (Acts 3:19).

**3.Throne of life**

*‘The throne of God and the Lamb’* shall be in this city-temple-garden (22:3). The river of the water of life flows from this throne. There is only one throne not two. In his first vision into heaven John saw a magnificent throne with One sitting on it (4:2). The Lamb was in the midst of the throne. Here it is made clear that both Father and Son are on the throne together. Jesus overcame and sat down with the Father on his throne (3:21). The holy Trinity is clearly one of unity and equality, three persons in one. Here we see two persons on the throne. The Holy Spirit may be symbolised in the water- ‘the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son’.

No longer do we see judgments coming from the throne because the wicked have been cast into the lake of fire. Those under the curse, because of sin, have been destroyed. God cursed the whole creation, including Adam, because of sin. The Canaanites were under the curse of God because of sin and were given over to destruction. Those who broke God’s covenant were under the curse (Deut 28).

On the cross Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law. The law has the effect of pointing out sin and condemning us. But it also leads us to Christ, who sets us free from the curse of the law (Gal 3:13). If you are saved by grace through faith in Jesus no curse remains. In your eternal home there is no more curse, hence no more suffering and death.

*‘His servants shall serve him’* (22:3). His servants will come before his holy presence and see his glorious face. Under the old covenant, to see God’s face meant death. No man could look on the face of God and live. Jesus wonderfully revealed the Father, saying to Phillip, ‘*he who has seen me has seen the Father’* (Jn 14:9). But that revelation was only for a short time. In eternity, and in our resurrected bodies, we will see his face continually and forever. We shall be eternally blessed as slaves who serve him - or ‘worship’ him, as some translate this word.

His saints will also have his name on their foreheads. This was promised to those in the church at Philadelphia who overcame. They overcame by not denying Jesus even when tempted or persecuted by the world. ‘*I will write on him my new name’* said Jesus (3:12). The 144,000 with the Lamb had the Father’s name written on their foreheads (14:1). This, you will remember, was in contrast to those having the mark of the beast on their foreheads. This name, like the brand on a slave, signifies ownership and protection. *‘They shall reign for ever and ever’* (22: 5). The servants/slaves are saints at the same time. They sit with the Lamb on his throne, reigning with him. Daniel also spoke of the saints of the Most High being given the everlasting kingdom (Dan 7:18,27).

What a glorious picture we have of the consummated kingdom of God and the Lamb. What awesome blessings await those who belong to Christ, those whose names are written in the Book of Life? God predestined us to be conformed to image of his Son. ‘*Moreover, whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified’* (Rom 8:30).

**4.Light of life**

Since the Lord God gives light there is no need for lamps or for the sun. There is no night there. This is a summing up of what John has already seen in this vision. It is a new creation- the old has passed away. It is a new city, the city with the throne of God and the Lamb at its centre. From the throne flows the refreshing water of life, irrigating the tree of life which yields an abundance of fruit. From the throne shines plenty of light, light of life. In his gospel John introduced Jesus as the true light that gives life to men. There is no more darkness, no more night. The glory of God and of Jesus will shine brightly forever, and we will bask in the glory as we worship the One who gave us life, life everlasting.

**I am coming quickly**  Revelation 22:6-7

The glorious vision of heaven has come to an end. All that God chose to reveal to us about the future, about heaven and hell, he has done in these visions he gave to John- along with other portions of Scripture. This is all we need to know, according to God. Indeed, even John struggled to describe what he saw in this vision of the New Jerusalem and in other visions. We struggle to understand what he has written - a city shaped like a gigantic cube!

The closing words of this book are words of exhortation. We are called to believe what is written as the faithful and true words of God. We are called to act upon these words, to let these words affect the way we live in this world. We live with hope and expectation of the return of Jesus, the same Jesus who came down and gave his life as a sacrifice for our sin. Let no one say on that Day, ‘if only I had known this is what would happen in the future I would have believed’. Many fools call upon God to reveal himself to them. ‘If God exists why does he not show himself’ they ignorantly and arrogantly protest? It is an ignorant declaration because God has revealed himself. He has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. ‘*We beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father’* wrote John(Jn 1:14).

Moreover, further revelation about heaven would be beyond our comprehension, and therefore of no benefit to unbelief. It is hearts hardened by sin that are the obstacle to unbelief, not a lack of revelation on God’s part. ‘*They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them’* (Luke 16:29). They have the Scriptures; let them read, let them hear, let them believe what God has spoken.

**1.Be assured**

These closing words of the book of Revelation are called the epilogue. You will notice that they reiterate things written in the prologue. We find at least three voices speaking in this epilogue- the angel, Jesus and John. It is not always clear who exactly is speaking. The epilogue consists of a group of exhortations. One scholar identified five exhortations to holiness. These exhortations are based on affirmations as to the authenticity of the words John has written in this prophetic letter to the churches in Asia. So sure is John that these words are the words of God that he gives a solemn warning to anyone thinking of adding to them or taking from them.

*“Then he said to me, ‘these words are faithful and true’”* (22:6). The angel continues speaking to John but is not showing him any new vision. Rather, he is assuring John that all he has seen and heard is completely true. It is, in fact, divine revelation. Back in Revelation 21:5 the One on the throne declared, ‘*write for these words are faithful and true’*. Jesus was called ‘Faithful and True’ in a vision where he is sitting on a white horse and coming forth to judge the world (19:11). As the words of the holy God, they are true in every detail. God cannot lie. As the words of the omnipotent God, they will be fulfilled in every detail. God is faithful in fulfilling his words, both in judgment and salvation.

How did God communicate these words? God is in heaven and we are on earth. How do we know these words are God’s words? Some people claim to have found God’s words on plates in a cave, or some tablets buried in the ground. But God does no communicate through some game of hide and seek. God spoke to men, to prophets to whom he gave the Spirit of God. ‘*Men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit’* (1Peter 1:21). The same God who spoke through the prophets sent his angels as divine messengers from time to time. This revelation about the future given to the apostle John came through angels of the Lord. John was in the spirit on the Lord’s Day when he saw and heard these things. An angel appeared to him to show and to explain to him what must shortly take place.

The line of communication is made clear in Revelation 1:1- from God to Jesus, to an angel, to John and finally to the saints or to us. God was in control of each step of this communication. There were no plates hidden in the hope they would be found! No step was left for man to insert his own opinion. John wrote what he saw and heard, not what he thought would, or should, happen in the future. Beware of anyone who claims to have had a brief visit to heaven and back, even if their book is in a Christian bookshop. The apostle Paul was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words (2Cor 12:4) but he did not utter these things. So beware of those who want to tell you every detail of what they saw while clinically dead. What we have in the Bible is what God has revealed to us.

**2.Behold**

*‘Behold, I am coming quickly!’* (22:7). These words are spoken by Jesus- or at least conveyed by the angel as his words. The newspaper boy used to call out on the street corners, ‘read all about it’. Nowadays, the two-dollar shop man calls out, ‘get your bargains here today, today only, for the next few hours only’. As the sale comes to an end, people rush to see how much money they can save. This world is coming to an end, but who is rushing to save their souls.

Jesus has an urgent message for the world, a message about himself. ‘*Behold, I am coming quickly!’*. The message that God sent through angels to John for his people was about things that must take place shortly (22:6). This is a reiteration of the opening words of this book (1:1). The message is an urgent message which needs repeating. It is repeated three times in this very chapter. How often do you hear this message today- ‘Jesus is coming quickly’? The word translated ‘shortly/soon’ is actually the same as that translated ‘quickly’ (*tachus*). The translation, ‘soon’, has led some to ask, ‘what does ‘soon’ mean if John wrote ‘soon’ almost 2000 years ago?’ Will it be another 2000 years? Others say, ‘of course not, look at the signs’. Still others say, ‘but things are going on the same as they always have’. But remember that with the Lord a thousand years is like a day.

The essence of the message is that Jesus can come at any time. There are no more redemptive events to be fulfilled before the second coming of Jesus. Jesus can come at any time. When Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the metallic man he said the stone which smashed the image referred to what will come to pass after this (Dan 2:45). It was a vision of Jesus smashing the kingdoms of this world. This would come to pass but only after the cross through which Jesus gained victory over the devil (Heb 2:14). After the cross and the resurrection there is nothing more for Jesus to accomplish before his return. He is in heaven ready to return. This is what he meant in saying, ‘*Behold, I am coming quickly!’*. Coming quickly also means Jesus will come suddenly. And when he comes, he will come quickly. He will come like a thief in the night, at a time when least expected (16:15). He will come on the clouds of heaven and every eye will see him (1:7, Mat 24:23-27). He will not come in secret.

Some in the early church started saying that the resurrection was already past (2 Tim 2:18). They may have been saying that Jesus has come and they have been bodily raised from the dead. Such teaching still arises today. Men deceive themselves and others saying that Jesus has already come. Beware of all such claims. No one will miss the coming of Jesus in all his power and great glory.

Beware also of those who say this or that must happen before Jesus returns. Jesus did tell of signs that would precede his coming but look carefully at these things and you will find they can be understood as being fulfilled already. Wars, famine, and earthquakes will increase, but these are seen already. Those who interpret Revelation literally are looking to the restoration of Israel on earth. But Jesus said, ‘I am coming quickly, like a thief in the night’.

Years ago some thought the Lord might end the world with an atomic bomb. Certainly that would be sudden and dramatic. Nowadays people are saying global warming threatens to burn us up, unless we stop it happening. I will not be surprised if some Christians start saying that this is how God will judge the world- a slow burning up over some years. Some Christians are ever ready to compromise with so-called science, as we have seen with the theory of evolution. But remember what Jesus said, ‘*Behold, I am coming quickly!’*

**3.Blessed**

The words of this book are words of prophecy. They are true and faithful words coming from the mouth of God. Granted, they are words which we find a challenge to understand. Some never read these words even though the opening verse declares, ‘*Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy’*. This is the only book of the Bible with such a promise. But reading and hearing is one thing- keeping these words is another (22:7).

‘The prophecies of Revelation are not written to satisfy intellectual curiosity about the future’. Some spend a lot of time delving into every detail of these prophetic visions, but do they obey the message of this revelation? Why did God reveal what is written in this book? John sent this prophecy as a letter to churches in Asia, not just to inform them about the events of the end time but to direct and encourage these churches to remain ‘steadfast and loyal to Christ in the face of demonic opposition and persecution’.

This message about the future, about what will shortly take place, is accompanied by a blessing to those who hear and heed it. Do not give in to the pressure of evil, or be duped by the world’s empty promises. The blessing of the Lord and the Lamb awaits those who keep the prophetic words of this book. Jesus is coming to judge the wicked. He is also coming with salvation for those who believe in Jesus Christ and persevere to the end.

**Worship God!** Revelation 22:8-10

In the town of Lystra, Paul and Barnabas came across a cripple. The man listened to Paul preach the gospel and afterward Paul healed him in the name of Jesus Christ. When the people saw what happened they started to worship Paul and Barnabas. They brought garlands, and cows to sacrifice before them. How did Paul respond? Did he revel in all the attention and the glory? Did he say, ‘bring me a special vehicle and drive me through your city so everyone can see me’?

Idolatry was rife in Lystra when Paul visited. It was rife in the nearby cities of Ephesus and Pergamum in the days of the apostle John. It is rife in India today, with people hiking up into the mountains to worship at the shrine of a god. It is rife in our city as recent events surrounding the visit of the Pope have shown. What did happen to that giant cross that was carried all over the place for people to hug and kiss? We are reminded of the words of Isaiah the prophet- after cutting down a tree they use half the wood to make a carved image and the other half they burn in the fire (Isa 44:15).

**1.John**

In this epilogue the writer identifies himself, as he did in the prologue. He simply calls himself John your brother. Clearly, this John was well known in the churches to which he sent this letter, pointing to him being the apostle John. This John was a leader in these churches of Asia Minor in the second half of the first century. One day, while in exile on Patmos, the Lord sent John a powerful vision. He heard, and then saw, the risen Jesus in all his heavenly glory. John was so overwhelmed he fell at his feet as in worship. John was not rebuked by Jesus for doing so. Rather, Jesus put his hand on him and said, ‘*do not be afraid, I am the first and the last’* (1:17). Jesus told him to write down the things that he saw and heard.

In other visions angels appeared to John explaining the things that he saw. Angels are messengers; they are ‘*ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation’* (Heb 1:14). An angel ministered to Zechariah, to Mary the mother of Jesus, and to Joseph. They were ‘troubled’ at the sight of an angel but they listened to the message being conveyed from the Lord. The angel Gabriel explained to Daniel the meaning of his vision.

Just why John fell down and worshipped this angel is not clear (22:8). Some say he may have mistaken the angel for the risen Jesus. It may have been that he was so overwhelmed by what he saw and heard that he fell to his knees in worship. On the previous occasion when he did the same thing he had just heard a divine blessing also (19:10). John was overwhelmed by these blessings. But this was no excuse. John was rebuked for worshipping the angel. ‘*See that you do not do that’* (22:9). That John was doing this a second time is a warning to his readers, to the first century churches and to churches today of the subtle problem that even faithful Christians face.

John was just a man, a man despised by the world, a man rejected and sent into exile. To be suddenly made aware of his calling in Christ, and the blessings that were his as a faithful servant of Jesus may have been too much for him. Before you criticize John therefore, ask yourself how you respond when you read or hear the blessings the Lord has promised you. Are you overwhelmed by the blessings that are yours in Christ Jesus?

A parading Pope is not such a subtle form of idolatry, but clinging to crosses is seen as okay by many. The eyes of the Reformers were opened to this form of idolatry. The Puritans removed all crosses from their homes and their church buildings. Inordinate admiration of a particular preacher is another subtle form of idolatry, not uncommon even in reformed circles. Some men are held in such high regard that no criticism of them is tolerated.

Paul rebuked the church at Corinth for gathering around different preachers, including himself. ‘We are simply ministers and fellow workers’ said Paul. We are not to revere Peter or Paul or any other preacher of the gospel, living or dead. We are not to preach ‘our distinctives’ or ‘our heritage’ but Jesus Christ and him crucified. The warning is here in the life of the apostle John, that idolatry, the worship of anyone or anything other than the Triune God, can so easily overtake us.

**2.Worship God**

When John was taken up to see into heaven he saw a throne, the throne of God and the Lamb. He saw a great multitude around the throne, worshipping God day and night. God created all things. Through God all things exist. God has saved us from sin and death, and given us eternal life through the blood of Jesus Christ. Can you think of anyone more worthy of worship?

Satan thought he was worthy of worship and managed to deceive Adam and Eve into worshipping him. He has deceived millions of other human beings and angels into worshipping him. Satan says, ‘worship me and you can do what you like’- and we like that. We are free to keep on sinning when we worship Satan. But God says, ‘worship me and be holy’- and we do not like that. The book of Revelation however, makes it very clear that Satan is defeated and will be cast into the lake of fire to be tormented forever. Those who worship him will join him there. God and the Lamb are on the throne. This is the message of this book.

God declared to his ancient people, ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me’. God is a jealous God. He will not give his glory to another. When the people made a golden calf he was ready to destroy them. In the land of Canaan they were told to destroy any and every item of Canaanite worship. Achan suffered the ultimate price of disobedience (Joshua 7).

Has the church taken heed of this principle? Missionaries continue to be criticised for destroying cultures, heathen cultures. The world says, ‘let the people keep their pagan forms of worship- they are happy the way they are’. At times the church has taken on pagan forms of worship. The Church of Rome has readily adapted to worship in different cultures because it practices idol worship. Liberal churches are ready to adapt to pagan ways of worship. In India some Christians advocate worshipping like the Hindus- we just change the god they say. What about worship in our own city? Can you always be certain you are in a church worshipping God and not in a concert hall listening to a band?

How do we know if we are worshipping God acceptably? We are not free to worship God in any way we please, as many think. The Book that tells us to worship God alone also tells us how we are to worship him. Jesus said, ‘*God is Spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’* (Jn 4:24). This is the start- God is Spirit. Nothing can be made to represent God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. What an abomination it is to take a picture of some man and say it represents Jesus. If we are worshipping the true God we will not use icons and images. God is Spirit!

We worship in truth. Jesus said, ‘I am the truth’. We cannot worship God if we bypass Jesus. Mary or the saints are no help. John was rebuked for worshipping an angel, a creature more worthy one would think than a dead human being. But even an angel is not worthy of our worship. Is your heart focused on Jesus Christ when you come to worship? Some seem more focused on the order of service, on the band that is playing, or someone in the congregation. Let us focus upon God on the throne, and the Lamb on the throne. Let us learn from the worship which John saw in heaven.

**3.Seal not this book**

John is given a second instruction by the angel, this time something not to do. ‘*Do not seal the words of this prophetic book’* (22:10). He had been shown things that will happen in the future according to God’s plan. The present time was a difficult one for his first readers. There were being pressured by the Romans to worship idols, and taught by false teachers to compromise their faith and worship.

The churches to which John wrote were not unique in history. God’s people have suffered in this world ever since the Fall. Noah walked with God in the midst of a corrupt generation. Imagine the ridicule and opposition he would have faced building the ark to save himself and God’s covenant people from the coming destruction. “*God said to Noah, ‘the end of all flesh has come before me, for the earth is filled with violence through them, and I will destroy them with the earth’”* (Gen 6:13). The MSN website question for last week was, ‘do you think the world is becoming more violent?’ Even to ask such a question speaks volumes of the current generation.

Daniel lived in the midst of idol worshippers and violent people, much the same as Noah. God revealed the future to Daniel in visions. He was told of a time of trouble that was coming but that those written in the book will be delivered and shine gloriously for ever and ever (Dan 12:1). Daniel was told to ‘*seal the book until the time of the end’* (Dan 12:4). The Messiah had not yet come. John by contrast was told not to seal up the book. The Messiah, the Christ has come. He has come and has fulfilled all Scripture. He has won victory over death and Satan. The time is at hand, John was told, the time of Jesus’ return in power and glory. At his coming his enemies will be destroyed and he will rule without challenge in the everlasting kingdom of redeemed people.

The prophecy of this book is not sealed up. It is open for all to read. Have you read it? Are you obeying what is written? The time is at hand. The second coming of Jesus is just around the corner. Are you ready?

**Carry on**  Revelation 22:11-12

‘He who has an ear let him hear’. This is the solemn refrain that comes at the end of each of the seven letters to the seven churches. It is a refrain that Jesus often used at the end of his parables (Luke 8:8). He explained it with words from the prophet Isaiah: ‘*that* *seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand’* (Isa 6:9). Some understood the message of the parable but others simply enjoyed the story. They came to hear a fine preacher or be part of the crowd.

A time of tribulation works to shake out those who do not understand; those who have head knowledge but no heart knowledge of Jesus. The church on earth is made up of wheat and weeds/tares. Let them grow together until harvest, said Jesus. At harvest time the weeds would be gathered and burned in the fire and the wheat gathered into ‘my barn’.

**1.Be unjust and filthy**

What do you think became of the rich man’s brothers in Luke 16:28? From torment in hell, the rich man pleaded for Lazarus to be sent from heaven to tell the man’s five brothers about heaven and hell. They were on their way to hell and he wanted to warn them of the reality of hell. Do you remember what the rich man was told? ‘They have Moses and the prophets, let your brothers hear them’ (Luke 16:29). The rich man had Moses and the prophets himself but he did not care to hear what they said. He was too busy making money and living a comfortable life. Did his brothers follow in the footsteps of this popular and successful individual?

The words of the angel, ‘let the unjust continue to be unjust and the filthy continue to be filthy’ (22:10) are very disturbing, and indeed, theologically difficult. There seems to be inevitability about their future and no chance of repentance. We know that repentance is possible while ever we are alive in this world, but there is also the matter of hardening of the heart.

We hear a lot these days about hardening of the arteries but little about hardening of the heart. Cholesterol from fatty foods is deposited around the arteries until they are completely cut off and we die from an aneurism. We are warned about eating fatty foods which cause this deposit. Most people heed this warning and adjust their diet accordingly. Hundreds of food/diet/health magazines carrying such a warning are bought and carefully read. But how many read and believe the warnings about spiritual ‘heart’ disease written in God’s book, the Bible.

One thief on the cross beside Jesus believed and was saved the day he died. What about the other one? He ridiculed Jesus as he hung on a cross on the other side. He watched Jesus die beside him but still he did not repent of his sin and receive salvation. This is a picture of humanity. The cross of Jesus is there for all to see. Some will believe and enter paradise while others blaspheme his name to the very end.

The verse before us speaks of people continuing in their wicked ways in spite of the words of Jesus, ‘*Behold, I am coming quickly!’* It speaks of free will, with people hearing but not obeying. But it speaks even more of divine determination. The terrible truth about hardening of the heart is reflected in this verse. Pharaoh kept on rejecting the word of God which Moses spoke to him. Ten times he heard the call of the Almighty to let the people go and worship the Lord. After this he was destroyed. Pharaoh’s heart became hard and he refused to change his ways. Scripture tells us that God hardened his heart. The sovereign God ‘*has mercy on who he will and whom he wills he hardens’* (Rom 9:18).

Who are the ones who will enter heaven and inherit their reward? Those whose names are written in the Book of Life. How did their names get into this book? By the sovereign grace of God. By divine determination; indeed predestination. By the same divine determination some are given up to uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts (Rom 1:24). Some will go on in their filthy ways until the end.

*‘Many shall be purified, made white and refined but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand but the wise shall understand’* (Dan 12:10). This is what the Lord told Daniel regarding the time of the end. The message given to John was much the same, except that it comes as an imperative- ‘let it be so’. Hendrikson calls it the ‘let of withdrawal and let of exhortation’.

There is no indication here of any widespread turning to the Lord as the end approaches, and certainly no indication of universal salvation. Rather, people will keep on living in the same way that always have, just as in the days of Noah. Despite the words of Jesus, ‘*Behold, I am coming quickly!’* many will continue in their unjust/unrighteous ways and morally filthy ways. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life enslaves many. They cling to this world with all their might. Their only desire is for more and more of what this world offers. Even after death they want the world to remember them, for they see nothing beyond this world. But remember, ‘*this world is passing away and the lusts of it; but he who does the will of God lives forever*’ (1Jn 2:17).

**2.Be righteous, be holy**

What a contrast. Two ways of living are portrayed here- just two. The way of holiness and purity is the very antithesis of the way of filth. There is no middle way. ‘But what about those who live good lives yet never come to church’ you say? ‘Look at the rich man in hell’ I reply. He never thought of himself as unjust or filthy but the truth is he went to hell. Beware of those who say they are not fundamentalists or that they don’t want too much religion. You are either for Christ or against him. You either have the Holy Spirit or you don’t. Remember the luke-warm members of the church at Laodicea. They were self-assured and had need of nothing from God. They had no need of prayer or to study their Bible. And then there was the church at Ephesus which had lost its first love. They were urged to repent, to return to Christ and obey his words. ‘Be holy as I am holy’ says the Lord.

These words need to be heard by all in the church today. How much of what goes on in the church today is the work of men, not the work of God? Where is the fear of God, where is obedience to Christ and his word? The wise virgins had plenty of oil for their lamps. They were ready for Jesus to come at any time. Jesus is coming at an hour you do not expect (Mat 24:44). Will he find you walking in righteousness and holiness?

**3.Behold I am coming quickly**

John continues to encourage us with the words of Jesus, ‘*Behold, I am coming quickly!’* (22:12)*.* We heard these words a few verses back, and we will hear them again in this closing chapter of the Bible. Last time these words were associated with a blessing. This time they are associated with a reward.

; ‘*My reward is with me, to give to everyone according to his work’* (22:12).

What is this reward that Jesus has? What are the works he is rewarding? Does this verse mean that a person will be saved and get to heaven on the basis of good works? Certainly not! Salvation is the gift of God, not the reward of works (Eph 2:8). Jesus was asked, ‘*what shall we do that we may work the works of God’*. His answer was, ‘*this is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he sent’* (Jn 6 :29). The work referred to in this verse is the same work, the work of belief. The context here is the time of the end and the focus is upon keeping the faith in the face of opposition until the end. ‘*Hold fast what you have till I come’* (1:25). Patience and endurance will be rewarded in the end (13:10, 14:12).

What is the reward of Jesus? Again the focus is on salvation. He will grant to those who remain faithful to overcome the world, to sit with him on his throne and to reign with him. That is a very great reward, a reward worth keeping in mind as you press on through life in this world. Paul looked to the crown of righteousness as his heavenly reward (2Tim 4:8). Did he see a similar vision to John with the twenty four elders around the throne, clothed in white robes with golden crowns on their heads (4:4)? Jesus promised those who overcame to sit with him on his thrown; presumably they were given their crown at this time. He promised that they would sit at his table in the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:9).

What greater reward could you expect? Can you think of any greater reward on earth or in heaven than to be with your Lord and Saviour on his throne? Do you ever stop to contemplate the reward of Jesus Christ? Do stop and consider Jesus, his great salvation and his great reward to you who keep the faith and are obedient to the end.

**In or out**  Revelation 22:13-15

Many buildings in the city have restricted access these days. People carry swipe cards around their neck in order to get into the building. How do they get those cards? The owner or the boss gives it to them. When they are given a job in the place, they are given a card. Cards are given freely to those with a right to enter. Do you have the card that gives you the right to enter the city of God? Are you wearing it, ready to enter at any time? You may be called in at any time.

**1.Eternal Saviour**

*‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last’* (22:13). Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet so this is like saying, ‘I am the A to Z’. These are the words of Jesus who said in the preceding verse, ‘*Behold, I am coming quickly’*. Back in verse 7 he made the same announcement before giving a blessing. That was the sixth blessing in this book. In this verse we come to the seventh and final blessing or beatitude.

Not only does Jesus announce that he is coming quickly, he makes the claim to be the infinite and eternal God. The very same words of verse 13 are used in reference to the Lord Almighty in verse 8 of chapter 1. Jesus existed before his birth in this world. He was with God in the beginning (Jn 1:2). After his death and burial he rose from the dead and returned to his Father. Jesus has no beginning and no end. He is the eternal Son of God.

Jesus exists in history but is also beyond history. He exists outside the time and space constraints of this world which he created. He is not part of the creation. It is a great comfort to know we have a Saviour who is above and beyond this world, for this world is passing away- despite the most determined effort of men to ‘save the planet’. Jesus, not man, not the world, not the sun or the stars, is the beginning and the end.

Those who do not believe in God the Creator get completely confused when they start to consider the beginning and the end of this world. Ask how this world began and they say there was ‘Big Bang’ billions of years ago. It is amazing how evolutionists think they have a monopoly over time. Who else talks in terms of billions of years? It is way beyond recorded history, but that does not matter they say. They just project back on the basis of their theories and come up with wildly varying numbers which we are supposed to believe. To accept, ‘in the beginning God’, is too simplistic they say. While some of us seek the truth, others seek complication.

The Bible, and particularly this verse, makes it abundantly clear that nothing exists beyond the time and space occupied by God. The Triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, is infinite and eternal. ‘*By him (Jesus) all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible… all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things consist’* (Col 1:16, 17). These words allow nothing to be seen as outside of Christ.

The truth of creation is fundamental to the gospel and especially the coming judgment. If God did not create this world, including man, then he has no right to judge us; this is the thinking of the evolutionist. No wonder such people are so desperate to find some proof for their belief. If their theory is not true however, and if there is a creator God as the Bible says, then they have to consider what God says. God says he not only created this world but that he will judge this world (Rom 2:16, Acts 10:42, 17:31). God has set a day when he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ. Jesus is on his throne in heaven ready to return in judgment.

**2.Enter**

The one who is the beginning and the end, the one who is coming on the clouds of heaven in power and great glory, announces a blessing on those who wash their robes. The reading, ‘those who do his commandments’ is also possible- the words look very similar in the original Greek. Already in Revelation 17:3, the ones who come out of the great tribulation are spoken of as having washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The bride of Christ must be dressed correctly (19:8) and the wedding guests properly attired (Mat 22).

To enter into the holy city, to come before the heavenly throne, we must be wearing such robes. We dare not enter in our own robes for they are filthy; they are stained by sin. All our goods works are as filthy rags (Isa 64:6). We must put on clean clothes. What are these clothes? They are robes washed in the blood of Christ. How amazing that our filthy rags can be washed clean, allowing us to enter into the presence of God. Such is the power of the blood of Christ.

*There is power, power, wonder working power,*

*in the blood of the Lamb*

*There is power, power, wonder working power,*

*in the precious blood of the Lamb.*

So go the words of well-known hymn.

These robes of grace must be taken and worn by faith - in this sense we must ‘do his commandments’. We must persevere until the end, and we can do that only in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is the message of this letter to the churches. Trials and tribulation will come, but in Jesus we have the victory. Jesus took our sin away so Satan can no longer accuse us. We do not have to listen to his wicked schemes. We can say ‘no’ to the seduction of this world by standing in the victory of Jesus.

Clothed in washed robes, we have the right of access to the tree of life (22:14). We may enter through the gates into the city of God. What a glorious picture this is. The gates that were closed because of sin have been opened by the precious blood of Jesus. Adam was cut off from the tree of life when he disobeyed God, but now the second Adam, the perfect Son of God, has opened the way for us to enter in and partake of the tree of life.

*‘If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’* (Rom 10:9). “*No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit”* (1Cor 12:3). ‘Jesus is Lord’ is the password. When was the last time you said ‘Jesus is Lord’? Are you ready, no matter what, no matter you be laughed at or spat upon, no matter you lose your job or your family, ready to say, ‘Jesus is Lord’? At what point do you draw the line and say, ‘no more- I refuse to say ‘Jesus is Lord’?

In the church at Pergamon, Antipas had already been martyred. Others faced the same future. Jesus did not promise deliverance from such suffering but deliverance through suffering. Do not give up. Let us not become weary and discouraged. Let us not *‘fear those who can kill the body, but fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell’* (Mat 10:28).

The heavenly city has walls and gates. What are the walls? The twelve apostles. What are the gates? The twelve tribes of Israel. The twelve tribes and the twelve apostles have some bearing over who enters. The twelve tribes were chosen by God. They were the people whom he saved from bondage in Egypt by his grace and power. The twelve apostles were chosen by Jesus. They laid the foundation of the church, which is Jesus Christ. The gates of this heavenly city are only open to those who are chosen and saved by Jesus Christ.

**3.Outside**

Street dogs are part of life in the cities and towns of India. Mangy dogs that belong to no one roam the streets eating whatever scraps they can find. We had some camped in the lane behind our house. We had to keep the gate shut or they would come into our yard. Sometimes we would hear growling and fighting when one dog found a scrap to eat. It was a real ‘dog-eat-dog’ existence for these beasts- not unlike life down at the stock exchange, or in many work places in our profit-driven economy. ‘*Outside are dogs’* (22:15). What a terrible picture! Filthy, mangy dogs squabbling over the refuse of this world. It is another picture of hell. Every man for himself- the survival of the fittest. Hitler’s concentration camps are nothing compared to what is pictured here. Outside are dogs.

Paul called the Jews who insisted on circumcision for salvation, ‘mutilators of the flesh and dogs’ (Phil 3:2). He quickly and comprehensively condemned any who added works of the flesh to the pure and precious doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. What such teachers were doing was tantamount to idolatry. Such false teachers were still active in the church at the end of the first century and are still active today. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers.

*‘Outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murders and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie’* (22:15). Those excluded from the holy city are described in Revelation 21:8 and 21:27, as well as in this verse. Common to the three verses is the sin of lying. Lying is opposed to the truth, and Jesus is the truth. Sorcerers say there in truth in things and places other than Jesus- they are liars. The sexually immoral deny the truth of God in creation. They lie to themselves and others when they seek sexual gratification outside the divine institution of marriage between a man and a woman. Murderers are also guilty of lying; how else do people get away with abortion and euthanasia? Idolatry is an outright lie. Worshipping the creation rather than the creator is the biggest lie of all. It is the greatest of all Satan’s deceptions seen in the life of everyone who rejects the truth of God and his word. Outside are dogs.

Consider where you stand today. Are you living a lie? Are you living in the truth? Have you entered in through the gates, clothed in the blood- washed robes of Christ. Is your soul at rest in Jesus Christ?

**Come, come, come**  Revelation 22:16-17

The book of Revelation began with a vision of the glorified, risen Jesus- with hair as white a snow, eyes like fire and face like the shining sun, and a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth (1:14-16). Jesus spoke to John declaring himself to be the first and the last, the one who was dead but is now alive forever and ever. He told John to write what he saw and heard. John did that, writing down whatever the angels showed him, and their explanations.

We are told very clearly how this book originated. Jesus sent an angel to John who wrote what he saw and heard, and passed this on to the churches. It was sent to the churches as a testimony - a divine testimony. Note how often the word ‘testify’ occurs in these closing verses- and in the opening verses of this book. Some translate the word as ‘witness’. It has overtones of legal authority. These words have divine authority. These words are true in every respect, and what they declare will be accomplished. These are not vague predictions about the future but are the words of one who determines the future, the creator of heaven and earth and judge of all people.

This testimony of Jesus is for the churches. This book was sent out as a letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor, and is meant as a letter for all churches during the last days. The individual letters were like divine appraisals of those churches. Their faithfulness was acknowledged; their failures were also pin pointed. They were called to repent and return to the true gospel. They were told to hold firm this gospel and persevere until the end- or unto death. The end is what this book is all about. It tells about the coming of Jesus, his coming in power to judge the living and the dead. It tells of his coming in glory in the new heaven and new earth. Jesus has triumphed in the cross and resurrection, and taken his place on the throne in heaven. Jesus is coming with a crown for those whose names are written in his book, those who worship God and God alone.

All churches, including ours, should listen to these divine appraisals. Do we need to re-focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ, upon his first coming and his second coming? Both are, of course, tied together. We cannot believe the one without the other. You can have no hope in heaven if you do not believe in Jesus Christ and him crucified. This is the whole gospel that must be proclaimed. This is the work of the church. Too many churches are focused on other things- on meeting their own goals, upon buildings and budgets and other worldly matters.

**1.Jesus -the root**

*‘I am the root and offspring of David’* (22:16). Why does Jesus refer to himself by these words? What has David got to do with Jesus- they lived a thousand years apart? One thing we have noticed in Revelation is the many references and allusions to the OT. By looking into Daniel and the prophets we get a better understanding of this revelation of the time of the end. The prophets looked forward to the day of Christ, as did David and even Abraham. They looked beyond his first coming and to his second coming, beyond their earthly land to their heavenly home.

Jesus did not just appear out of the blue as it were, 2000 years ago in Palestine. He came in the fullness of time according to the eternal plan of God as revealed in the writing of Moses, the Psalms and the Prophets. In Psalm 110 King David wrote, ‘*The LORD said to my Lord sit at my right till I make your enemies your footstool’*. Who is this ‘my Lord’? Isaiah spoke of a shoot coming out of David’s father Jesse. ‘*He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked’* (Isa 11:4,11). Who is this shoot? It is the Messiah/Christ, the anointed of God. It is Jesus, who spoke these words to John.

When God called Abraham he made a covenant with him- ‘in you all the families of the earth will be blessed’. From Abraham came Isaac, Jacob and Judah. David was born into the tribe of Judah. A man after God’s own heart, David was the greatest king of Israel. Jesus was born into the family of David. He was the ‘*son of David according to the flesh’* (Rom 1:3). ‘*The root and offspring of David’* therefore points to the humanity of Jesus. As the root he was before David. He is also the offspring or Son of David. Jesus was fully human. He was born into this world like any other man, but at the same time he is ‘the beginning and the end’, the eternal Son of God.

**2.Jesus- the star**

Balaam was a prophet, but not a prophet of God. He prophesied for profit, yet God overruled in his utterances. He spoke of a star coming out of Jacob and a sceptre rising out of Israel (Num 24:17). Such words may seem a bit obscure but remember, the birth of Jesus was signalled by a star. A star led the wise men to the stable in Bethlehem. ‘*We have seen his star in the east’* they said (Mat 2:2). The coming of Jesus was the dawn of a new era. Political leaders like to speak of a new world order but Jesus has already inaugurated a new world order, and he will consummate this world order soon. He will draw the curtain on this present world and usher in a new heaven and new earth, according to his promise.

Jesus is the light of the world. He is the light of life. He is the bright and morning star, the star that shines in this dark world and ‘*the morning star that rises in your hearts’* (2Peter 1:19). He is the star that will never burn out. With the coming of the new heavens and new earth all other stars will cease to shine. There will be no need for the sun and the moon, for Jesus the Lamb is the light (21:2).

Jesus is the radiance of the Father’s glory (Heb 1:3). We saw his glory when he came into this world, and we will see it again when he returns on the clouds of heaven. As you gaze into the night sky do you reflect on Jesus, the bright and morning star? When you see the first light of a new day do you remember that Jesus is the bright and morning star? Do you pray, ‘even so; come Lord Jesus’, and live as if this is the last day of this present world?

**3.Come**

Jesus calls to us to come to him- ‘come unto me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest’ (Mat 11:28). But the call to come in the passage before us does not come from the mouth of Jesus; it comes from the Spirit and the bride- the first call that is. There are two calls in this passage. Who makes these calls and who is being called to come?

The first ‘come’ is thought by some to be addressed to Jesus, like the later call in Revelation 22:20. But the second is a call to come and drink the water of life freely. Clearly, this is not a call to Jesus but to the thirsty, to lost men and women in this world. It is best to understand the whole verse as being the people of God calling to one another, and to the lost of this world, to come to Jesus.

‘Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near’. This was the call of the prophet, and continues to be the call today. It is a call that will soon cease. When Jesus returns, the opportunity to repent will be gone. Do not be deceived by any talk about purgatory, nirvana, or some state of limbo. Jesus is coming in judgment, final judgment, heaven and hell judgment. But in the wonderful grace of God, this call goes out even unto the end. Come to Jesus. Repent and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The bride of Christ is the church, the church indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:22, 5:25). The Spirit and the bride say come. ‘*And let him who hears say, come!’* (22:17). The call goes out from the church, from the people of God. It goes out to the world even as the end approaches. Time is short. Jesus is coming soon. Let those who hear and believe in Jesus pass on the good news. Let them cry out to those walking in darkness to come. Let us be as shining lights (Phil 2:15), let us be as heralds in this world in which we now live.

Let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. Have you ever been without water in a hot, dry place? In hot summers in India people sometimes come to blows to get water to drink. One summer I was traveling on a train and it got delayed for hours. I was carrying drinking water but it was getting low. People began to get desperate for water. The water on the train was dirty but some started drinking this polluted water. Nowadays men carry bottles of Coke and Fanta in a bucket to sell to the train passengers. But this sweet fizzy water does not quench your thirst- it makes you even thirstier. Pure water is the only thing that will truly quench your thirst.

People today are thirsty for life. They are living empty and meaningless lives. As they seek to satisfy their thirst the world offers them all sorts of sweet fizzy drinks. Drink and drugs are being consumed as never before. Sex and sport are being offered as never before. But still the thirst is not quenched. Suicide rates are going through the roof. How tragic to hear that we have a suicide every 5 hours in this prosperous nation of Australia.

We as God’s people have something to satisfy thirsty souls. ‘Come!’ we call to such thirsty people. Come to Jesus! Come, drink of the water of life freely. Jesus offered living water to the world-weary Samaritan woman. She drank and was satisfied. ‘Come see the man who told me all about myself; *Could this be the Christ’* she said (John 4:29).

**Warning about this book**  Revelation 22:18-19

A retired judge was caught speeding on a roadside camera. In contesting the fine, he told the court that another person was driving his car at the time. Upon investigation, the other person was found to be deceased at the time of the offence. The former judge was found guilty of making a false statement to the court. Perjury is a very serious offence. Even more serious, according to God’s covenant law, is the offense of adding to his word or taking from it. God’s law is just that- the law of God. For any man to think he can improve on this law is the height of arrogance and blasphemy.

‘If we believe that what God has said in his book is not sufficient for salvation, but that we need to make certain additions of our own if we are to be saved; or if we believe that some of the demands of God’s book are superfluous, and we can get by without observing them; then we are not only saying that we know better than him – we are (which is much worse) acting as if that were true. Rudeness he can forgive; but blind wilfulness is the sin against the Holy Spirit. Of the curse that comes upon those who alter the gospel to suit themselves it will be said, with the most terrible truth, that they have asked for it’ (Wilcock).

**1.Covenant law**

When the Lord God brought his chosen people out of Egypt he made a covenant with them at Mt Sinai. Through Moses he gave his people covenant commands. He set out the consequences of observing, or of failing to observe, these commands- covenant blessings and covenant curses respectively. Moreover, they were warned not to add to, or take from, the word of the divine command (Deut 4:2).

In giving this warning, Moses reminded the people of the plague which killed thousands of their own people when they were led astray into harlotry and idolatry by Moabite women- the judgment at Baal Peor. ‘*The Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God’* (Deut 4:24). The Lord is jealous for his honour and glory. To add to his word, or subtract from it, is dishonouring to God and tantamount to idolatry.

**2.Add to these things**

The words of this book are the testimony/witness of Jesus. Everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book is warned not to tamper with them (22:18). It has been thought the warning applied to scribes copying the text or to those translating it – but the warning is to those ‘*who hear’*. It is not just a warning about using the correct translation of Scripture. The warning is specifically about the ‘*prophecy of this book’*, that is Revelation, this book sent to the seven churches in Asia Minor. It is nevertheless applicable to all of God’s law as similar words in the book of Deuteronomy indicate.

Jesus gave these words to an angel to pass on to John, and for John to tell to the churches. They are not the words of man but the words of God. As such, to deliberately distort these words and the message of this book is a serious sin. Perhaps no book of the Bible has been added to and distorted more than the book of Revelation. Leaders of religious sects often come out of churches and they have come out on the basis of some prophecy, usually a distortion of what is written in this book.

Charles Russell was a Bible study leader who denied the existence of hell - as well as the Trinity and the deity of Christ. There is no conscious existence after death according to Russell, the founder to the Jehovah Witnesses. The JWs are renowned for their many predictions of the date when Jesus will return- beginning in 1914 and at many other dates since then. They also declared that only 144,000 would be saved. They clearly and deliberately distort this book, as well as other parts of the Bible. They have their own translation of the Bible.

Joseph Smith of Mormon fame (or infamy) supposedly unearthed golden plates in a hill in New York State. He translated the ancient writing on these plates, some of it strangely similar to the KJV Bible, and produced the book of Mormon. The Church of the Latter Day Saints holds this book, not the Bible, as the final authority in matters of faith.

These are but two examples of adding to the words of God and deliberately distorting the message of this book. Thousands have been deceived by this false teaching. Here in these verses we clearly see the grave error of such teaching. There is a warning here for us to be very careful in our reading and interpretation of this book. Do not add to the words of this book. Do not hold another book above the Bible. Some people are too ready to latch onto a preacher and accept whatever he says – even in Reformed circles. We have our Confession of Faith as a summary of Biblical doctrine but it is a subordinate standard never to be held above or even alongside the Word of God.

To this warning is attached a covenant curse or penalty. The penalty fits the crime in that ‘*the plagues that are written in this book’* will be added to the person guilty of adding to this book (22:18). The wrath of God came upon the Jews for violating his covenant. ‘You want to worship other gods and live like the heathen, then go and live among’ was what the Lord in effect said as he sent them into exile. If you think you know better than God then you are aligning yourself with Satan. God will add to you the plagues promised Satan and his followers in this book.

**3.Take from this book**

*‘The devil who deceived them was cast into the lake of fire… and will be tormented day and night for ever and ever’* (20:10). ‘*And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire’* (20:15). Thousands who call themselves Christians do not believe in the reality of the devil or of hell. Many refuse to believe there is everlasting torment, preferring to believe in annihilation of body and soul. Such denial is clearly to take away from the words of this book- and the rest of Scripture. The reality of heaven and hell is taught throughout the Bible, most especially by the Jesus Christ the Son of God. Because non-Christians dislike this truth some Christians have removed it from the gospel they proclaim.

It is not just the sects but mainstream Christianity that has done this. Liberal doctrine has removed this truth, and much more, from the Scriptures, in critical studies and attempts to ‘get behind’ the words of Scripture. I remember a preacher turning the pages of his Bible and as he came to a passage denied by liberals (much of what Paul wrote), he tore the page out in a vivid demonstration of our text today. A more subtle way of taking from these words is simply to ignore them. Many leave off reading this book after the first three chapters.

What is promised those who take away from the words of this book? Again it is a fitting penalty- ‘*God shall take away his part from the Book of Life and the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book’* (22:19). Most MSS have the ‘tree of life’ rather than the ‘book of life’ in verse 19. We know that names are not removed from the Book of Life. There is no teaching that salvation can be lost, in this verse or anywhere else in the Bible. This is a warning to the church. Those who fail to heed the warning show they do not belong to Christ.

Access to the tree of life, and being in the presence of the Lord in the holy city, are wonderful promises given in this book. There shall be no more death, nor sorrow nor crying nor pain. These are wonderful promises given to those who believe- who believe in Jesus and all that he says. To say there is no hell means there is no heaven either. To say there is no resurrection of the body is to say that Jesus did not rise from the dead and you are still in your sin.

Remember what happened to the people of God when the covenant curse came upon them. That curse came because they neglected the word of God and did their own thing. It is amazing that keeping the Feast of Tabernacles stopped during the time of Joshua and was only celebrated again when Ezra read the Law to the returned exiles (Neh 8:17). Under the curse of God they were dispossessed of their land. They were scattered, and became slaves in a foreign land.

I pray that you have found this book enlightening and encouraging as we have listened to it together. That is why it was given to the seven churches and to us. Moreover, a blessing was promised to those who hear this book and heed its words (1:3). Understanding the apocalyptic genre is not easy, but with the help of the OT and the words of Jesus we have been able to see and understand something of what the Lord revealed to John on Patmos. Remember how he saw Jesus in all his glory. Then he was shown the Lamb upon the throne and people from very tribe, every tongue and every nation worshipping the Lord.

We have heard Jesus saying, ‘*Behold! I am coming quickly’*. No one knows when he is coming despite the efforts of some to determine this using the numbers in this book. The message of this book is not for us to work out a date for the second coming of Christ, but to be ready all the time, and to hold fast to the end.

**Come Lord Jesus** Revelation 22:20-21

Have you heard the word ‘Maranatha?’ You may have come across a book shop, a band, a business or school by this name. If you were in the Jerusalem church in the middle of the first century you would have heard this word often. In the Bible it is found only in 1 Corinthians 16:22. It is strange to find this word here because it is an Aramaic word in the middle of Greek writing. It appears that it was so well known that it passed into Greek speaking churches without translation.

‘It must have expressed a sentiment that the early church regarded as extremely important else it would never have been taken over this way by the Greek speaking Christians’ (Morris). The first part of the word, ‘Mar’, means Lord. ‘Maran’ means ‘our Lord’. The end of the word ‘atha’ means ‘to come’. So the word is translated in your Bible by the declaration, ‘*O Lord come*!’ In Revelation 22:20 we find the same words – ‘*come Lord Jesus*!’ - although these are translated from the Greek.

**1.Faithful witness**

‘Says the one witnessing these things, Yes, I am coming quickly’. This is a literal translation of the first part of verse 20. The reference is to Jesus who is named in verse 16. Jesus witnesses to ‘*these things’*, meaning all that is written in this book, as seen in verse 18. Under the Law of Moses truth had to be established by at least two witnesses. The Pharisees accused Jesus of failing to establish what he was saying with appropriate witness. They said, ‘*you bear witness of yourself; your witness is not true’* (Jn 8:13). Jesus countered their accusation saying, ‘*I know where I came from and where I am going’*. He had the witness of his Father in heaven. On a previous occasion Jesus claimed the additional witness of John the Baptist, and of his mighty works, and of Holy Scripture.

Jesus could call upon a number of powerful witnesses. But the truth is, Jesus is a faithful witness whose word must not be doubted. His testimony will ever be true and faithful because he is the Son of God. Jesus testifies to the truth of what John has written in this book of Revelation. Jesus told him to write in the first place (1:19). Jesus sent his angel to tell John what to write. The words of this book and indeed of the whole Bible are divinely authenticated. Men who write books often get a famous person to write a preface or forward in an effort to establish their credibility. No such preface or forward is found in this book because it authenticated by Jesus. Jesus is the only man to have walked on this earth and not sinned. This Jesus testifies to the truth of what is written in this book. Do you accept his testimony? Do you value this book like no other? Do you take this book, the Holy Bible as the best and only guide for your life? The Bible is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God (Shorter Catechism Q2).

**2.Coming One**

*‘Yes I am coming quickly’* (22:20). Paul preached Christ Jesus with a resonating ‘Yes’- not a ‘maybe’ or a ‘yes but’. ‘*For all the promises of God in him [Jesus] are Yes, and in him Amen, to the glory of God’* (2Cor 1:20). ‘*Yes’* says Jesus the great ‘I Am’. ‘*Yes, I am coming quickly’*. There is no doubt, no equivocation with Jesus. He has made this announcement twice before in this chapter and it will not change.

Let no one miss these words of Jesus. Jesus is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him (1:7). Let no one say when Jesus knocks on their door, ‘I was not expecting you. I am not ready’. You know the parable about the five wise and the five foolish virgins waiting for the bridegroom. The bridegroom came at midnight. He went into the marriage supper closing the door on those who were not ready for him (Mat 25). Jesus is coming soon, in power and great glory. He is coming whether you are ready or not.

The early church took this announcement very seriously, as we have mentioned. At the Lord’s Supper which they celebrated frequently, they remembered the words of Jesus, ‘*I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes’* (Luke 22:18). The apostle Paul states how in eating the bread and drinking the cup we proclaim the Lord’s death **till he comes** (1Cor 11:26). The solemn sacrament remembering the Lord’s death is also a joyous reminder that he is coming again.

*‘Amen’* (20:20). This must be John speaking in response to the words of Jesus. Amen- so let it be. John was in exile suffering deprivation because of the Word of God. Hearing the words of Jesus, ‘*I am coming quickly’*, he shouted, ‘*Amen, come Lord Jesus’*. The apostle Paul would have responded in the same way. When he was in chains for the gospel he declared, ‘*for me to live is Christ and to die is gain’* (Phil 1:21). Paul looked forward to being with Christ in heavenly glory- whether through his own death or Jesus coming on the clouds. ‘*I tell you a mystery’* he wrote – ‘*we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed – in a moment in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet’* (1 Cor 15:51-52).

Praying for Jesus to come, and looking to his coming, does not mean we sit and do nothing while we wait. Again Jesus told the parable about the manager who gave his servants varying amounts of money when he went on a journey- five, two and one talent (Mat 25). He expected them to use that money, to invest it and make it grow, not to sit on it or bury it. The apostles John and Paul longed for the Lord to come, but would serve him valiantly till that day. Peter also writes of ‘*looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God’* presumably through faithful service (2Peter 3:12). The full number of God’s people must be brought in (6:11).

*‘Amen. Come Lord Jesus’*. How often do you hear these words today? How often do you utter these words yourself? Maranatha was such a common word among the Jewish Christians it seems the Greeks started saying it also. But is this the case today? If not, why not? We hear ‘Amen’, but what about ‘Amen, come Lord Jesus!’ Is it that we are so focused on the here and now, so wrapped up in our earthly existence, our present needs and comforts that we have lost sight of this great truth- Jesus is coming.

In India lots of college students, including Christians, want to go to the USA for further study or for a job. At a student camp I once commented that they were so focused on going to America it was as if America was heaven for them! In our country and our city are Christians more focused on their earthly mansion than their heavenly mansion? Jesus told his disciples, ‘I go to prepare a place for you- a room in my Father’s house’. Are you sure you want to go there or are you comfortable in your earthly home- thank you very much! You would, of course, be more comfortable if Jesus would answer your prayer for just a few more things to put in your house. Let your prayer be ‘come Lord Jesus’!

**3.Grace**

The closing words of this book, and of the Holy Bible are, ‘*the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’*. Surely no more fitting words can be found than these. Our salvation is by grace alone- the unmerited, underserved love of God. Our life is lived in the daily grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his amazing grace we have a future, a hope, an inheritance kept in heaven for us. Paul could find no better words to close his letters, and neither could John.

*‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all’* (22:21). Some translations add the words, ‘all the saints’ or ‘all God’s people’, lest it be thought the grace of the Lord extends to those who reject him. But clearly this is not the case. The grace of Jesus, atonement for sin, is limited to those whom God chooses and calls. ‘*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day’* said Jesus (Jn 6:44). Those without the Spirit of God cannot call Jesus, ‘Lord’ (1 Cor 12:3).

The grace of the Lord Jesus continued to amaze Paul and the first believers. They rejoiced in the grace by which they were saved, and the grace by which they lived each and every day. They wanted to know more of his grace each day. They had tasted that the Lord is good and they wanted to have more of him every day. Does the taste of God’s wonderful grace drive you on for more and more of him? Are you looking forward to the day when you will see Jesus in all his heavenly glory? Only on that day will we fully appreciate the wonder of his grace and mercy to us, sinners that we are.

The closer you come to Jesus the more you comprehend his grace because you see your sin more clearly. The brightness of his glory reveals our sin, but his wonderful grace reaches out to cover that sin and draw us even closer to himself. On that great day we will enter into his presence. We will see his glorious face, we shall him as he is and we shall be like him (1 Jn 3:2). Maranatha, come Lord Jesus!

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