

**The Revelation
of St. John the Divine**



Frontispiece, Book of Revelation, Bible of San Paolo fuori le Mura, 9th century.

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Warning: I had never preached through the Revelation before until Pentecost season in 2007. After over a decade of pastoring, I sensed God leading me to the last book in the Bible and the last book I ever wanted to touch. Nonetheless, when God calls, I must obey.

These sermons were delivered at New Hope Baptist Church in Romulus, Alabama during Pentecost 2007 and the First Sunday of Advent 2007. I've placed these sermons here for my non-resident members (or anyone else interested in some sermons). Unless otherwise noted, all scriptures are from the English Standard Version, copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. These sermons are not for profit; I'm not selling them, and you can't either. If they help you, please let me know. Feel free to share them if you think they're worth it. You should know that I rarely preach exactly from manuscript; things come to me as I go. (Most ministers will empathize.)

I tried to emphasize to my congregation that these are not your typical sermons on Revelation. I realize some of what you find here does not agree with the predominant views held by the Southern Baptist Convention on this book. You'll probably disagree with me at times; that's fine with me. If you can prove me wrong, please email me with Scriptural and historical facts.

One last caveat. I passionately believe that God speaks to His people here and now through Scripture. Revelation is not a crystal ball; it is a book of Scripture with exhortations, warnings, and celebrations that apply to our current lives. In this light, you'll find that each sermon contains applications to the lives we live today and every day.

May God use this book to speak to you as He continues to use it to speak to me.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Introduction to the Revelation of St. John: Revealing the Father's Love

17 June 2007 (Father's Day U.S.)

Scripture reading: Revelation 1:1-8: The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. 4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. 7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. 8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Sermon text: Revelation 22:1-9: 22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. 6 And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." 7 "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." 8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, 9 but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God."

Every good father wants to do everything he can for his child. He wants to give his children everything they need and help guide them to become successful adults. Perhaps a father knows he has succeeded when he sees his children build on his work and become successful parents of their own children.

Today, we begin a study of one of the Bible's most misunderstood and misinterpreted books: The Revelation of St. John the Divine. Many people will study this book today to predict the future. Many people will watch today's news about Middle East events and turn to Revelation looking for answers. Others will

try to use this book to understand what they see in the news or read in the newspaper (or on the Internet). Even more people will intentionally ignore this book out of fear or out of insecurity, believing that if they don't read the book its predictions won't come to pass.

If you're looking for a normal study of the book of Revelation, I assure you: This isn't it. I'm not trying to predict the future in great detail; I'm not trying to scare anyone with horrific tales of judgment or graphic depictions of persecution. If you're looking for the normal approach, I encourage you to look elsewhere.

Instead, I want to approach the Revelation from a totally different view. I want us to see a Father's love for His Son and for His children. I want us to see the magnificent passages of worship, in which all heaven rejoices at the Son's exaltation and in which all creation sings the praises of its Creator. I want us to see the Father's love for the Church, the Bride of His Son. I want us to see the culmination of all history in a glorious enthronement of Our Lord and in an eternal dwelling place for everyone who played a role in that enthronement. I want us to see that God loves us so much He invites us to participate, here in this life and in the life to come.

Know this isn't a mushy, affectionate kind of love. This book reveals a love so determined to purify creation that God will do anything necessary to bring repentance from rebellious humanity. This book reveals a love so strong that those who persecute God's beloved children will experience the judgment that results. This book also reveals a love so incomprehensible that we can only accept it: A love that leads God to take us into a new creation where we will live with Him forever.

First, we must understand the circumstances of the book and its origin. Please repeat after me: Revelation was written to first century Christians. Did you notice the date? The Revelation was written to people in first century A.D., to people who lived in the Roman Empire under the domination of emperors whose word was law. The Roman emperors realized the diversity of the Empire's residents (not citizens, mind you) and sought to unify the Empire through one nominal religion: The worship of the emperor himself. Each year, every Roman citizen and resident was required to offer a pinch of incense on an altar and proclaim, "Caesar is Lord."

Unfortunately for Rome, a new faith proclaimed a new lord. Christianity began in Jerusalem in A.D. 33 on the day of Pentecost and spread throughout the Empire, primarily through persecution and through the efforts of one Saul of Tarsus. (We know him as St. Paul the Apostle.) Ironically, this new "lord" seemed very unlordly to most Romans. After all, what's lordly about hanging on a cross, crucified as a common criminal?

Word began to spread, however, that this crucifixion had been prophesied by the Jews for centuries. Prophet after prophet, beginning with Moses, had prophesied about One who would come and serve as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Furthermore, in a remarkable twist to the event, His followers claimed that the Man hadn't survived the crucifixion; instead, He had risen from the dead after 3 days in the tomb! Not even Caesar could compete

with this accomplishment!

The believers in this Lord — Jesus the Christ — claimed that His sacrifice had paid the penalty for every sin ever committed. A good thing, too, since the world had sunk into sin and depravity such as most people could never imagine.

This, then, is the story behind the Revelation. One of Jesus' followers, John the Apostle (and yes, Church history proves the apostolic authorship of this book), found himself on the wrong side of Roman civic religion and was therefore exiled to the small island of Patmos off Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). We'll see this didn't stop him from worshiping his Lord. Even in exile, even in persecution, Christians have proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord."

While St. John found himself in exile, he didn't find any rest. While there, he experienced a vision that revealed the final result of humanity's rebellion against its Creator and Lord. The vision revealed the final acts in a process that began before the foundation of the world.

You see, before the foundation of the world — in eternity past — God the Father loved God the Son. This love spurred the creation itself. Scripture reveals that the Father had always planned to give the creation to the Son for Him to rule in righteousness and justice. St. Paul had written to the Philippians about this plan (cf. Philippians 2:5-11).

And what a creation! Tonight, look up into the sky and try to count the stars. In the morning, step outside and listen to the sounds of nature. Look around you right now, at the people in your life. Read about the geography of the world and the rich diversity of life in other regions. Everything in creation was created out of the Father's love for the Son.

However, a rebel appeared, convincing the pinnacle of creation — humanity — that it alone was the purpose of creation; that God created everything for humanity to use as it saw fit. The innocuous beginning with a piece of fruit from a forbidden tree led to every sin and atrocity history has recorded. Every sin in history and in our lives today begins when we believe that we, and we alone, are the reason for creation. This pride leads us to exalt ourselves above others and eventually above the Son for whom everything exists. The Old Testament tells us the story of the rebellion. The New Testament, including Revelation, tells us about the deliverance from the rebellion.

The deliverance came when the Son Himself sacrificed His life for His creation. We often read of princes and kings who give their lives for their kingdoms. We uphold these tales of bravery as examples for us to follow. How much more should we follow the example of the Son, Jesus the Christ, who gave Himself for rebellious humanity!

So here's the story of the Revelation. The Father loved the Son and created the universe for Him. The greatest beings of creation, humanity, rebelled against our master. The Master Himself, the Son, sacrificed His life to pay the penalty for our rebellion. Then, through the Holy Spirit, God lives within humanity and calls us from rebellion into relationship. Revelation tells us that God loves us so much that He protects those who respond to the call. God protects His saints in persecution. Even death cannot harm the saints of God. Revelation also tells us that God will give repeated opportunities for those who remain in rebellion to

come to a relationship instead.

And yes, Revelation also tells the fate of those who choose to remain in rebellion. It bothers me to hear people talk about the lake of fire as if they're happy someone's going there. It bothers me just as much for people to use the talk of judgment to decry God, saying He is cruel if He sends someone into everlasting punishment. However, what do we expect Him to do? If someone chooses to stay in rebellion against Him, do we expect Him to force the rebel into heaven? St. John tells us in the Revelation that we will live in a new heaven and a new earth for all eternity, and that God Himself will live there with us. Anyone who rebels against God in this life would consider an eternity with Him to be the ultimate punishment.

However, the Revelation doesn't end with justice and judgment; it ends with restored humanity living with God forever in a restored creation. I looked around Friday night here at the church after Vacation Bible School. I stood outside and looked up at the stars; looked around at the trees; and listened to the crickets and the whippoorwills. I thought to myself, "I'm blessed to live in the South." (If you live outside the Southern U.S., I'm certain you feel the same way about where you live — at least I hope so.) Now, imagine a creation that has never been stained by sin; never marred by the prideful acts of humans who believe they actually own this world instead of serve as its caretakers. Imagine a creation never touched by disease or death. That's what awaits everyone who says, "Jesus is Lord," believing that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9). In other words, everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord rather than anything or anyone in this life (remember Caesar?) will live forever in a new heaven and new earth with the God who loves us so much He died so that we could live there. That's love!

And so, we embark on the Revelation of St. John. Join New Hope in reading a book that reveals the Father's love: His love for His Son, and His love for us. Join the Church in celebrating a love that transcends any human father's love for his children. Join us in leaving rebellion and living in relationship with God. Join us now — and live with us and Our Lord for eternity.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Chapter 2: Faithful unto Death

1 July 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 2:1-7: 1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 " 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Sermon text: Revelation 2:8-11: 8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 9 " 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

Today, we begin to study the message of Christ to the 7 churches specifically addressed in the book of Revelation. You've probably heard all kind of interpretations for these churches. We'll cover some of the major rumors about the churches addressed in the next 2 chapters.

Know that these are literal churches, not ages of the Church. The 7 churches mentioned actually existed. You can go to modern Turkey and visit the ruins of these cities, and in some places actually see the sanctuaries where the churches met in these cities.

I find it interesting that those who believe each "church" represents a certain age of Church history always place themselves in what they see as the best "church." I've never met anyone with this belief who didn't think they were a member of the Philadelphia church. I promise you'll never hear anyone say, "I'm from the Laodicean church!" (Nor, I 'll wager, will you hear anyone claim to be from the church at Smyrna facing persecution.)

However, while no one can prove by Scripture that these churches represent Church history, we still see these types of churches today. Furthermore, you see Christians typified by these churches. For this reason, the messages to these churches still ring true to us. The messages call us to examine our own lives as well as the life of our congregation. Where do we find ourselves? Can we rightfully claim we belong in the best group, or do we see ourselves in a group

we'd rather not? The call of Christ to these churches continues to resound throughout history to our time today.

Jesus specifically chose 7 churches out of the churches of the Roman Empire for special messages. These messages applied to every believer and congregation, not only to the 7 specific churches.

We find similar words in each address: "I know." Nothing in these churches escaped Jesus' attention. He knew their works; He knew their patience; He knew their circumstances. And, as frightening as it may seem, He knew their faults. In each case, Jesus addressed their faults even as He praised their accomplishments. Jesus doesn't sit in heaven waiting for us to sin so He can condemn us; rather, He intercedes for us in our sins and assists us in our works on His behalf.

Jesus first directed His attention to the church at Ephesus. St. Paul had founded a congregation at Ephesus on his third missionary journey from A.D. 53 to 57. Paul spent most of this time in Ephesus (Acts 19), with great results.

Jesus upheld the church at Ephesus because they could not "bear with those who are evil." This church also "tested those who call themselves apostles and are not." This church tested the credentials and doctrines of the traveling preachers of their time and refuted those who didn't pass the tests. Ephesus passed the test of doctrinal purity. They had certainly maintained the tradition Paul established in his time there.

Ephesus also passed the test of working for Christ. Regardless of that they had to endure, regardless of what they had to bear, they did not "grow weary." Ephesus was a working church!

Unfortunately, Ephesus had a major problem: Their work no longer sprung from their love of Christ or others. Ephesus worked hard and kept the faith, but they did so more out of habit than out of passion. They had lost their "first love." Whatever passion they had for Christ had been lost in their busy schedule and their testing of false teachers.

I don't know about you, but I've noticed a certain tendency toward those who try to remain doctrinally pure. After a while, these people become skeptical of everyone around them. These people so fear doctrinal corruption they can no longer tolerate any deviation in any doctrine or disagreement in any discussion, regardless of whether the issue is worth the loss of fellowship. Don't misunderstand me: We cannot agree with everyone for the sake of peace. Some doctrines are too important for compromise. However, we cannot afford to break fellowship over issues that are not pertinent to the core of our faith. Worship style doesn't matter, as long as the worship is biblical. Teaching style doesn't matter, as long as the teaching is Scripturally truthful. Buildings don't matter. We can think of other issues over which congregations have divided that, in the long run, did no one any good. The broken relationships weren't worth the fight.

Fortunately, Jesus saw something else good in the Ephesian church: They hated "the works of the Nicolaitans." The Nicolaitans were a group that allowed sexual immorality in the congregation. Ephesus was the center of worship of the goddess Diana (Greek Artemis), the goddess of the hunt and moon. The

worshippers often engaged in sexual practices at the temple to Artemis, a building so grand it is considered one of the 7 Wonders of the ancient world. Some people tried to bring these practices into Christianity, only to find themselves stymied by the Ephesians. Note that although Jesus called the Ephesians to return to their true love, He also praised them for their faithfulness.

Do you see yourself in the Ephesian church? Are you striving so hard to be doctrinally pure you've lost your love for Christ and the congregation? Jesus said that the one who "conquered" would receive fruit from the "tree of life." Know that we can recover our love for Christ. Love motivated Jesus to die for us and face death for us. Only love can motivate us to serve Him as He expects.

Jesus also knew the work of Smyrna. Smyrna's congregation was new compared to the Ephesian congregation; this congregation may have existed only a few years before St. John's exile. A future bishop of this church, St. Polycarp, would face martyrdom in A.D. 153. Polycarp was a disciple of St. John, so John may have thought of Polycarp the youth as he recorded the words of Jesus to this church.

Anyone who's participated in starting a new church knows why Jesus would say, "I know your tribulation and your poverty." However, in this case, the tribulation wasn't merely referring to the usual difficulties of a startup. This church faced real opposition from the "synagogue of Satan." Most churches started as Jews came to believe Jesus was the Messiah; these Jews would then be forced to leave the synagogue. This split rarely proved an amicable departure, and in Smyrna the animosity to the new believers was especially bitter.

This trouble was nothing compared to what they faced. Jesus warned them, "do not fear what you are about to suffer," and for good reason. This church would face "10 days" of tribulation. We don't know how long this period actually lasted, whether for 10 intense days or for a longer period. Some persecutions lasted only a short time, while the Roman government occasionally extended the persecution far longer than most people would have thought. Regardless, this church faced serious difficulties. Many would suffer; some would die. Only the true believers would remain faithful.

However, those who remained "faithful unto death" would receive the "crown of life." St. James, the brother of Christ, mentioned this crown in his epistle, saying, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." Notice that both apostles tied this crown to perseverance in trials. We cannot expect the blessings of God when we waver in our faith and in our obedience. Fortunately for us, St. Paul told Timothy, "if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 1:13). There is forgiveness when we falter, but the true believers will remain faithful until death, as Jesus remained faithful to God's will even through His own death.

Where do you see yourself in these churches? Do you take comfort that Jesus knows everything about you? Do you see yourself as faithful? Do you see yourself as obedient? Do you see yourself as wavering under pressure?

Christians throughout history have found themselves resembling the believers of Ephesus and the Smyrna. Many have found themselves feeling like the

Ephesians: doctrinally correct, but having lost their love for Christ and their fellow believers. Many have found themselves needing to repent for their attitude toward others, believing that Jesus treasures “correctness” over love. Remember what I wrote in the first sermon of this series? This book is about the love of God the Father for God the Son, and about God’s love for us.

Remember what Jesus told the church at Smyrna: “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.” When we conquer temptation and fear, we find ourselves overcoming that which the world fears most. When we stand firm in faith and love, we demonstrate Jesus’ strength and power to the world. Stand firm in your faith. Jesus knows your life and will help you overcome the world.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Chapter 2: Hold Fast

15 July 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 2:12-17: 12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 13 I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

Sermon text: Revelation 2:18-29: 18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. 20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. 25 Only hold fast what you have until I come. 26 The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, 27 and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. 28 And I will give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Today, we discuss 2 more churches of the 7 Jesus addressed in the Revelation of St. John: Pergamum and Thyatira. Please note this is a "sermon series," not a commentary on the book. Many good commentaries exist explaining this book, and I'll not try to re-invent the wheel.

Rather, I hope that as you read about the churches in Revelation, you see something of your own spiritual life, and of the life of your congregation. I hope you see yourself in the good things Jesus said about each church and its

congregants. If, on the other hand, you see yourself in the warnings, don't lose hope. First, if you see something of yourself here, at least you're not spiritually blind to your shortcomings. That's good. Lastly, please notice that Jesus gave each church a space to repent. Jesus always accepts those who come to Him repenting their sins. He always offers forgiveness to those who ask.

The church at Pergamum sat in the capital city of a former kingdom. The king had bequeathed the entire kingdom to the Roman Empire at his death in 133 B.C. to avoid a disastrous civil war. Rome inherited a rich city with an extensive library, a beautiful marketplace, and a thriving trade with other areas. The city housed the sanctuary of Asclepius, a god of healing.

At some point in the history of the early Church, this city had gained a more dubious distinction: the place of "Satan's throne." It seemed as if persecution weren't enough in Pergamum; Satan troubled this church through the lifestyle of the populace and through the idolatrous worship that permeated society there. Don't assume that Satan troubled only the church here, however. Every church that accomplishes great things for Christ draws Satan's attention, and he has his ways of troubling every church. We should not be surprised when opposition rises against the Church. We should consider this opposition a mark that we're troubling the worldly powers through overcoming their ways through the power of Christ.

Nonetheless, the Christians at Pergamum had stood firm against evil in their city. Although Antipas had died for the faith, their loyalty to their Lord never faltered.

However, the church at Pergamum faced a serious flaw: the doctrine of Balaam. Balaam appears in one of the stranger episodes in the Hebrew journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. In Numbers 22-24, the Moabite king Balak hired Balaam, a "prophet for profit," to curse the Hebrews. At first, Balaam refused, claiming the LORD would not allow him to come. Balaam changed his mind after Balak raised the price, but he found himself talking to his donkey on the way to curse the Hebrews. The story gets really strange because the donkey talked back!

Anyhow, Balaam blessed the Hebrews rather than curse them, sending Balak into a major fury. Balaam redeemed himself in Balak's eyes by advising him to send Moabite women into the Hebrew camp to lead the Hebrew men astray. It worked to a point, bringing serious plagues on the Hebrews. The Hebrews had the last laugh; in Numbers 31, Moses recorded that the Hebrews killed Balaam in a raid on the Midianites.

What does Balaam have to do with Pergamum? Apparently, someone in the church thought that Balaam had a good idea about the sexuality of believers. As if sexual immorality weren't bad enough, these members encouraged others to eat food sacrificed to idols. St. Paul had spoken to the Corinthians about this (1 Corinthians 8), concluding that although the Corinthian Christians knew the idol wasn't really a god that their unbelieving neighbors thought otherwise and it was thus best for the Corinthians to avoid eating meat they knew was from a pagan sacrifice.

In other words, the danger faced in Pergamum was that of intellectual pride.

“Certainly we know that an idol is nothing!” “Certainly God will forgive our immorality; He preserved the Hebrews!” The answer, in both cases, was Jesus cared a great deal about the immorality and the witness of those who intentionally ate meat from a pagan sacrifice. In so doing, these members risked their own lives and the spiritual growth of new believers.

Christians, many of us are far more mature than other believers we know. However, their spiritual growth is our responsibility. We cannot indulge in questionable acts and expect God to bless our growth. Jesus said He would war against those who did not repent “with the sword of my mouth,” or His holy Word. When Jesus speaks, we must listen and obey. He is our Lord, not our advisor.

Those who repented, along with those who remained faithful, would receive “hidden manna;” they would be counted among the children of God, who fed His children in the wilderness. They would also receive a “white stone” with a “new name.” It was common in early times for a ruler to change the name of a faithful follower to express gratitude for faithful service and to describe the accomplishments that led to the name change. (This was especially common among Roman military heroes.) Jesus promises to care for us throughout eternity. He also promises to honor the faithful with a new name. Regardless of who you are, your Lord knows you and will one day give you a name that you and He alone will know. Jesus died for the sins of the world, but He knows each of us by name and will address each of us in the life to come.

Jesus then turned to the church at Thyatira. Thyatira first appears in Scripture in Acts 16, where St. Paul and Silas met Lydia, a dealer in purple goods from this city. This church had a great heart; their “works” based on “love and faith and service and patient endurance” had actually grown over time.

Unfortunately, this church also housed a major problem: a woman Jesus bluntly called “Jezebel.” Regardless of how anyone tries to read this, hearing Our Lord call someone “Jezebel” never bodes well. This woman had blatantly set herself up as an authority in the church and then led many members into sexual immorality. Although Jesus had given her a time for repentance, she defiantly stood firm in sin. Jesus gave no warning for this woman and her followers; He would strike them all. Everyone around would see her fall and know that Jesus is Lord and that He cares about His churches — even if it takes judgment to purify them.

Jesus gave a clear warning: “I will give to each of you as your works deserve.” If we desire good things in the life to come, we must work on Jesus’ behalf in this life. This verse teaches clearly that some of our eternal rewards are based on our works here. How will you fare in the judgment to come?

Yet, Jesus tenderly spoke to those who did not follow Jezebel, saying He would not give them any further burden. If you’ve ever been in a situation where someone defies the rules, you know the anguish and stress that results. Jesus knew these believers had suffered enough. St. Paul tells us that Jesus never puts more on us than we can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). Jesus asked only that they “hold fast” until He came. Then, Jesus spoke again of eternal rewards, quoting Psalm 2 to state that those who remained faithful would receive “authority over

the nations” and “rule them with a rod of iron.” Jesus would protect His people in Thyatira with perfect justice; one day, His people will rule with perfect justice.

What lessons should we learn from these churches?

First, we should note again that Jesus knows our faithfulness and promises to reward those who remain faithful. Time and again, Jesus commends those who remained faithful in life, living godly lives before their ungodly neighbors and families. Jesus knows your faithfulness. One day, those who hold fast in this life will reap eternal blessings in the life to come.

Secondly, we need to know that Jesus will deal with evil. People today, including many in the Church, have no fear of judgment. This is a fatal mistake. Jesus has never tolerated sin. Remember, Jesus is God, and although Jesus will intercede for His saints, He will never condone sin.

Furthermore, some may question how any true believer could live like a “Balaam” or a “Jezebel.” Note that the Church has always sheltered unbelievers just as much as believers. There has never been a perfectly regenerate congregation. Hear this: “There has never been a perfectly regenerate congregation.” Your congregation isn’t fully regenerate; neither is mine. Jesus knows His own and will protect them by judging the unbelievers and overcoming their attempts to destroy His saints.

Lastly, I would encourage you to heed Jesus’ words to “hold fast.” The word Jesus used in Greek is an imperative; it is a command. When temptation threatens, hold fast. When trouble strikes, hold fast. When sin seems to overwhelm the Church, hold fast. Jesus is coming. When He comes, the rewards He brings will make every effort to hold fast seem as nothing compared to the glorious eternal rewards He will give those who remain faithful.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Chapter 3: Cold or Hot?

5 August 2007

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

Sermon text: Revelation 3:7-20: 7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens. 8 “ ‘I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. 11 I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

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

the Spirit says to the churches.' "

We hear the terms "hot" and "cold" a lot in American culture. If a team is playing well, we say the team is "hot." If a team or athlete is playing poorly, we often say they're "cold." We apply the same terms to people in life. If someone's doing extremely well at their career, they're said to be "hot". If someone is extremely motivated to do something, we say he's "hot on the trail."

These terms aren't specific to Americans. Centuries ago, Jesus used these terms to refer to 2 of the 7 churches He addressed in the book of Revelation. Chapter 3 completes the letters to these churches with admonitions, warnings, and encouragement to 3 churches: Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. While these were literal churches in the first century A.D., we see their qualities — both good and bad — in congregations and believers today. Where do you see yourself?

Jesus addressed the church at Sardis first. Sardis was an ancient city founded some time before the 8th century B.C. It once served as the capital of the Lydian empire before its capture by the Persians in the 6th century B.C. Cyrus the Great conquered the city, but he found its king so wise that he spared his life and consulted him as an advisor for many years. In Roman times, the city was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 17 and rebuilt.

Church tradition states that one of St. Paul's disciples, Clement (mentioned in the letter to the Philippians), founded the first church in Sardis and served as its first bishop. By the time of St. John's visit by Christ, Sardis served as an important city in Asia.

Unfortunately, Sardis had a serious problem. Its reputation stated that it was "alive;" it seemed a vibrant place to worship. However, Jesus said the church was "dead." This poses a question: How did no one notice that the church had died? Each Sunday, people gathered there for worship. Each week, people attended the events of the church, whatever they may have scheduled.

Jesus said this wasn't enough. The church needed to "wake up." We see this term in Matthew 24, where Jesus told the disciples to "stay awake" and await His second coming. This church had lost its sense of urgency in ministering to the community where it existed. Jesus wanted the church to awaken and "strengthen" what was left.

Jesus also implied that some in the church had "soiled their garments." The word for "soil" implies ritual impurity. Apparently, some of Sardis' members were living worldly lives rather than remaining pure in their living. In other words, their religion applied only to their lives on Sunday. No one could see any difference in their lives throughout the week.

In spite of all this, some in Sardis remained fervent believers, living righteously before their families and neighbors. These people were promised "white garments;" their purity would be on display for all to see. Jesus would not "blot out" their names from the "book of life;" instead, He would "confess" their names before Almighty God and the angels. These people would find themselves proclaimed as righteous before all heaven.

Do you see yourself in Sardis? Have you allowed the flame of your faith to

burn so low it seems it's out completely? Do people in your life still see that your faith matters to you?

What about our church? Do we see ourselves in Sardis? I hope not. However, almost every congregation experiences the "Sardis Syndrome" at times in its history. I find hope in the fact that Jesus didn't write off this church; instead, He gave them the opportunity to repent. Jesus honors our repentance when we turn to Him for forgiveness.

Next, we read about the church of Philadelphia. Like Sardis, Philadelphia had a storied history. The city was built by a ruler of the kingdom of Pergamon in honor of his brother. Unlike many royal families in history, these brothers remained loyal and faithful to one another throughout their lives. Their example continued in the church of this city.

Of all the churches in the Revelation, Philadelphia alone receives no reprimand. Jesus told the Philadelphia church He had given them an "open door." This church received what every congregation wants: Opportunities to serve its community. When Jesus presents a church with an open door, He says that no one can "close" it. This church received a great blessing.

Note this church didn't receive this open door because of their strength; they had none. This church didn't receive this blessing because of their power; they were weak. However, this church had kept Jesus' word — they continued to follow His teachings — and did not "deny" His name. In the face of secular opposition by the Romans and pressure to declare "Caesar is lord," the Philadelphian church boldly proclaimed, in word and deed, that Jesus was Lord of their lives. In response, Jesus would teach their enemies of His love for His church. Jesus also promised to preserve them from the "hour of trial" that would engulf "the whole world." When the ultimate persecution hit the earth, the Philadelphian church would experience Jesus' gracious deliverance, just as the Hebrews had experienced in the Exodus.

Do you see yourself in Philadelphia? Do you see yourself holding fast in the face of temptation? Do you see yourself remaining firm in your witness before the world? For those who remain in this state, Jesus promised an eternity in His presence in the New Jerusalem. If you don't see yourself in Philadelphia, know that those who repent of their sins and retain their faith will experience deliverance from the trial to come. This isn't a promise of an easy life. Instead, it's a promise that Jesus will protect His saints and provide for them regardless of what trials may come.

Nor, we should note, is this a promise that we will never experience persecution. The Philadelphian church experienced persecution throughout its history until the legalization of Christianity in the Edict of Milan by the emperor Constantine in A.D. 313. For the Christian, every moment with Jesus seems like a little bit of heaven on earth. We can endure anything the world throws at us because we know that God Himself dwells with us in the Person of the Holy Spirit, guiding us and protecting us from Satan's worst.

Lastly, we come to the Laodicean church. St. Paul mentioned this church in his letter to the Colossians. Laodicea and Colossae were only 11 miles apart. Paul told the Colossians to read the letter he had written to the Laodicean

church and to send them the letter he had written to them. We don't have a record of Paul's letter to the Laodiceans.

We do know that the Laodicean church seemed to have it all: wealth, prestige, and power. When an earthquake destroyed Laodicea in A.D. 60, the city refused imperial help to rebuild; instead, the citizens rebuilt their city with no outside aid.

This wealth should have blessed this congregation; this wealth should have opened new opportunities of service and blessing to its members. However, this church sadly let its wealth replace reliance on God as its strength.

Jesus said this church was "neither cold nor hot." No one could tell the congregation was a church; its pride in wealth overshadowed its faith. The Laodiceans forgot that wealth could not buy salvation, nor could it purchase the approval of Christ. Jesus threatened to vomit the church from His mouth. Of all the churches we've discussed, with their problems of sexual immorality, loss of love, and spiritual coldness, Jesus threatened to evict Laodicea alone.

The Laodiceans thought they were rich; Jesus said they were poor. The Laodiceans thought they had wealth; Jesus counseled them to buy "gold refined by fire." Fire purifies by burning the impurities. St. Paul had already warned the Corinthians that in the day of judgment, many would see their works burned to ashes. Jesus warned the Laodiceans to buy "white garments" to clothe themselves; their lives needed purifying. Jesus admonished the Laodiceans to buy "salve" for their eyes so they could see their wretched condition before Him.

Again, Jesus gave the church a chance to repent, saying this chance proved His love for them. If Jesus didn't love this church, He wouldn't have warned them of their condition and given them the opportunity to change their ways.

What follows demonstrates the worst possible state of a congregation. Jesus said that He stood at the door, knocking, wanting in. Can you imagine a group calling itself a church without the presence of Christ Himself? Whereas Jesus opened the door for Philadelphia, Laodicea had shut the door in His face. Have you shut the door to blessings in your life by your lifestyle? Have you allowed the door to close on opportunities to grow spiritually and bless others in your life?

Do you see yourself in one of these churches? If so, where do you honestly belong?

As I said in an earlier sermon, everyone wants to see himself in the church of Philadelphia; faithful, vibrant, and boldly confessing the name of Jesus Christ to the world. Unfortunately, as we look at the Church today, we see both believers and congregations that fit into the examples of other churches addressed in Revelation.

If you see yourself anywhere but Philadelphia, remember that Jesus offers the chance to repent. Forgiveness is available to all who believe and repent of their sins. Jesus can take the worst believer or congregation and mold it into a living example of His love for the world. Any church, any believer, can experience the blessings of Philadelphia when we approach Him in repentance. Jesus loves open doors; He wants to open the doors in your life to bring others to salvation.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Chapter 4: Oh, What Worship!

12 August 2007

Scripture reading: Psalm 150: 1 Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness! 3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! 5 Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! 6 Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!

Sermon text: Revelation 4:1 After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." 2 At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. 3 And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. 4 Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. 5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, 6 and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" 9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

Can you remember the greatest, most beautiful and meaningful worship experience of your life? For many, this question reminds them of vast sanctuaries with soaring ceilings, filled with the sound of music and perhaps the scent of incense. For others, this question takes them to simple buildings and music, or perhaps no building at all. Every human, however, probably can answer this question by recalling at least one memorable event in our lives.

Now, think of this: Nothing we've ever imagined can match what we'll witness in heaven.

Jesus has spoken to the churches; He has given them both stern warnings to repent as well as encouragement to persevere. These admonitions speak only to

life as we know it. Unfortunately, as with the first century churches addressed in chapters 2 and 3, the Church today faces persecution in places and temptations everywhere. Many people look around at our society and think, with good reason, that the battle against evil has never looked more desperate. As with the first-century Church, we sometimes need reminding that God controls all human history, and that His reign over the universe remains secure. John's experience as recorded in the rest of the Revelation should assure us of God's worthiness of our worship. "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD" in this life — and in the life to come!

After hearing Jesus' words to the churches in Asia, John received an invitation: "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." This reminds us of another invitation extended to John. In chapter 1 of the Gospel of John, Jesus told John to "come and see" where He was staying. When he accepted the first invitation, John saw where Jesus stayed during His visit with John the Baptist. At this invitation, John would see where Jesus will remain for all eternity.

Jesus wasn't inviting John simply to see heaven. Rather, Jesus told John that he would see "what must take place." In other words, John would see the end of history up until the return of Jesus to earth.

This fact alone would help both John (who was enduring exile on Patmos) and the saints who were suffering persecution from Rome at this time. God still controlled human events. Regardless of what the enemy may try, no matter what he does to attack the Church, God continues to guide human history to a glorious conclusion.

John would not witness history first, however. History would wait! When John arrived "in the spirit" in heaven, his eyes first landed on a glorious throne "with one seated on the throne." This vision reminds us of Moses and the elders of Israel, who saw the throne of God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:10); Isaiah, who saw the throne of God in the temple (Isaiah 6); and Ezekiel, who saw the throne of God at the Chebar river in Babylonia (Ezekiel 1). Each time anyone saw the throne of God, they responded with worship. Moses and the elders of Israel ratified the covenant before God. Isaiah received a call to prophesy and responded by saying, "Here I am, send me!" Ezekiel received such a shock at God's presence that he remained silent for days.

A "sea of glass... like crystal" surrounded the throne. John could see through this "sea" down onto the earth. Nothing on earth is hidden from God's eyes. God sees every event that happens in the universe. A rainbow surrounded the throne. When God made the covenant with Noah, He used the rainbow as a symbol of His care for humanity. The rainbow, here on earth and in heaven, reminds us that God always fulfills His promises to humanity.

Next, John saw two groups of beings around the throne. The first group John saw consisted of 24 "elders," the title of an office of the Church. In St. Paul's writings, the elders served as church pastors and administrators. We know these "elders" were not human, however, because they are distinguished from saints later in the book. Most scholars and pastors throughout Church history believe the elders represent the entirety of God's people in both Old and New

Testaments: 12 for the tribes of Israel, and 12 for the Apostles (although the elders and Apostles are separate beings). These elders represent everyone who has confessed Jesus as Lord. As such, they play an important role in the events of the Revelation.

The next group consisted of 4 supernatural beings that guarded the throne of God. These beings appeared also in the visions of both Isaiah and Ezekiel. The early Church saw the 4 Gospels in the faces of these creatures (Mark for kingship, Luke for priesthood, Matthew for humanity, and John for the Spirit). These creatures observe everything that occurs in heaven, but their primary mission is to praise God. We still sing their song: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" The three-fold "holy" demonstrates the perfect holiness of God.

Their declaration of God's holiness compelled the elders to bow before God, casting their crowns at His feet and singing, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." The Psalms tell us, "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19). In the book of Job, God challenged Job by asking him, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? (Job 38:4). Read the rest of Job 38 and see how God describes the creation of the universe. God's position as Creator of the universe earns Him the right to our praise and worship.

The Church recognized early that this honor also belonged to Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father Almighty. St. Paul told the Colossians that by Jesus "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17). In his Gospel, St. John wrote of Jesus that "all things were made through Him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3).

The elders' worship around the throne demonstrates a key mission for the Church in this life: To worship God before all creation. Do people in our lives know we gather weekly for worship? Do they understand why we worship God? The elders worshiped God because He created us and granted us the privilege of approaching His throne through the sacrifice of God the Son, Jesus Christ. The Church exists today because of Jesus Himself and His love for us. He is worthy of praise!

I see several lessons in this passage, all of which describe both the ways we should worship and the reasons why we should worship the Lord our God.

God's holiness always awed those who witnessed it in Scripture. He rules over creation because He created everything that exists. If He rules over creation, He can certainly work in creation to bless those who worship Him.

We also see that everyone who approaches God in faith through Jesus Christ receives access to the throne. Without Jesus' sacrifice, we were separated from a holy God with no hope of approaching the throne. Now, because of Jesus' sacrifice and our belief in Jesus as the Lord of all creation, we, like the elders, can approach the throne of God with our petitions.

However, the elders do not simply approach and ask God for favors. The Church militant, those of us in this life who still fight temptation and evil, must praise God for His work in our lives. The elders' worship in chapter 4 only presages the worship of all the redeemed by the end of the book. God controls all history and works history to His glory and the good of His saints. He deserves our worship.

We worship Him in our services by praising His name, both in song and in testimony. We worship Him in our lives by telling others how He has brought us through the trials of life and by living holy lives before the world. We cannot praise God for delivering us in life without remembering our deliverance from sin. We must demonstrate holiness before the world that they, too, may understand the God we serve.

"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" Jesus will come again. All creation will give Him true worship, as St. Paul told the Philippians: "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). Let your worship begin in this life, so others may come to worship the God who created us and redeemed us.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Chapter 5: Worship the Lamb!

12 August 2007

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

Sermon text: Revelation 5:6-14: 6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. 8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, 10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." 11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" 13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" 14 And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Many professions in America today require qualifications for admittance. To enter the profession, an application must complete some form of training or meet certain educational standards. One cannot practice these professions without the proper certification.

This fact is even more true in our spiritual lives. As Christians, we know we can boldly approach God's throne through our prayers (Hebrews 4:16). However, not all people possess this right; only those who confess Jesus as Lord, believing God raised Him from the dead, can expect God to hear and answer those prayers.

Today's passage from the Revelation reveals an even more exclusive qualification: "who is worthy?" St. John saw a scroll with the entirety of human history written on its front and back. He desperately wanted to know what the

writing said. However, only One in all the universe, in all eternity, could open the scroll. Only the Lamb of God, the Lion of Judah — Jesus Christ Himself — could open this scroll by breaking the seals. All of human history revolves around the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Following the glorious praise of chapter 4, St. John looked to the throne and saw that a scroll rested in the right hand of the One seated on the throne. The scroll contained writing on both sides, a rarity in ancient times. Most scrolls contained writing only on the inside of the scroll to protect it and to preserve privacy.

This isn't the first occurrence of supernatural scrolls in Scripture. Ezekiel was given a scroll to eat so he could prophesy (Ezekiel chapters 2 and 3), and the prophet Zechariah saw a flying scroll in one of his visions (Zechariah 5). St. John will encounter another scroll in chapter 10; like Ezekiel, he will eat the scroll and prophesy its contents to God's people. Many scholars believe the scroll mentioned here represented all future history from St. John's vision forward. This scroll contained powerful knowledge, and St. John desired to see it opened.

There's only one major problem with this scroll: No one in heaven can open it. St. John's first audience would have understood this problem. In Roman law, a will was sealed with six wax blobs with different names of the person who sealed it; he alone, or his representative, could open the will. In this case, St. John heard an angel ask, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" Heaven filled with anticipation at the scroll's contents. Unfortunately, "no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it." Can you imagine St. John's disappointment? Have you ever felt immense anticipation and excitement at an upcoming event, only to experience devastation when the event failed to happen? No wonder St. John wept openly in heaven!

Fortunately, the disappointment didn't last long. An elder approached St. John with good news: "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." Someone could open the scroll; someone could reveal the end of history. That Someone was "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David." In Genesis 39, Jacob called Judah a "lion's cub." The lion symbolized strength and royalty. The prophet Isaiah said of the Messiah, "In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10). The Lion and the Root — Jesus Christ, the Son of God — would break the seals. He could break the seals because He had "conquered" the worst enemies of creation, sin and death.

St. John looked and saw a "slain Lamb." At least one ancient Christian author contrasted the Lamb here with the description of Satan as a "devouring lion" in 1 Peter 5:8. Unlike Satan, who attempts to devour everything in his obsession with power, Jesus willingly gave His life for creation's redemption. Isaiah wrote of Jesus, the Messiah, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:6-7).

Have you ever noticed how God works in unusual ways to advance His plan of salvation? Jesus' sacrifice seemed worthless when He hung on the cross. If any plan looked like a failure, Jesus' life was it. What difference did it make that He lived a perfect life? Did it matter that He healed the sick, raised the dead, and forgave sins? The Romans killed Him just as the Jewish leaders desired. This couldn't have been the way God planned it — except that it was exactly as God planned it. Only the death of the Son of God could conquer sin and death. When Jesus died, death suffered the final defeat.

Therefore, when Jesus took the scroll in St. John's vision, heaven erupted in praise! The creatures and elders threw themselves before Him, singing, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Notice that Jesus' victory didn't apply only to the Jews, or only to the Greeks, or only to the Romans. Jesus' blood "ransomed" people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" for the kingdom of God. This "ransom" was not paid to Satan; God owes Satan nothing at all. Satan is no better than a common thief and deserves nothing from our God. However, as we discussed on Wednesday night at New Hope, only the shedding of blood can atone for sins (Hebrews 9:22). Jesus' blood paid the penalty for our sins, and everyone who believes in this payment receives the benefits of this payment.

Throughout Scripture, God told His people, both Jews and Christians, that He intended to make us a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 1:6). Now, in heaven, we see the means by which God will accomplish this. God elevates us to a royal priesthood through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ, His Son. All believers throughout all history, from every racial and ethnic group, will join together to reign on the earth for all eternity.

Notice that we will not spend eternity in heaven itself, but we will reign on a re-created earth. As we continue in the Revelation, we will witness the fulfillment of St. Peter's prophecy that God will re-create the earth in fire (2 Peter 3). The earth that emerges will remain unstained by the taint of sin.

Then, we have our next glorious worship scene. St. John couldn't even begin to count the numbers of participants. "Myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands" sang a song praising Jesus for His sacrifice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" None other in heaven or in creation is worthy to receive the praise of Jesus Christ for His redemption of creation.

This praise demonstrates an important point about Jesus. If you'll recall in chapter 4, all praise in heaven is directed to God. Even when He lived on earth, Jesus regularly received worship from those He touched in some way. He never told them, as angels always do in Scripture, to direct their worship to God. Here in heaven, the angels, elders, and saints direct this song, this praise to Jesus — and He accepts it as God, even as God Himself allows Him to do so. Jesus is God the Son. His divinity is unquestionable. His identity as the eternal God is confirmed throughout the book of Revelation.

Finally, all creation takes up the song of praise to Jesus Christ. "And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshiped." St. Paul's prophecy of Philippians 2 will witness its culmination in Revelation. All creation will proclaim Jesus as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Whenever we read the Revelation, we see the worship of God and His love for His Son, Jesus Christ. God the Father willingly allows praise for His Son. The God we worship, unity in Trinity, stands as the greatest focus of this book.

As such, we see that God should become and remain the greatest focus of our lives here on earth. We see that everything we do in life, every word we say, should bring glory to God. We should live in a manner that glorifies Jesus Christ for His sacrifice on our behalf.

You say, "well, eventually everyone will confess Jesus as Lord, so why does it matter how we live now?" Note that this confession will occur in one of two times. Everyone who confesses Him as Lord in this life will receive eternal life in a new creation beyond our imagining. When we confess Him willingly now and mold our lives around this confession, we receive the assurance of forgiveness of our sins and the promise of that eternal life.

Some, however, will refuse to confess Jesus as Lord in this life. They will live in the illusion that they exist as their own lord, not realizing that Satan the thief has deluded them. Everyone in this life serves one of 2 masters. Either Jesus is Lord, or Satan is lord. Those who refuse to confess Jesus as Lord in this life willingly (if ignorantly, perhaps) refuse to accept the blessings promised to all who submit to Jesus now.

Which will you choose? The illusion of reigning over your life now, or to reign with Christ for all eternity? Christ alone is worthy to rule over all creation. Christ alone is worthy to rule over your life. Confess Him now, and reign with Him for all eternity.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation:

Chapter 6: The Day Has Come

26 August 2007

Scripture reading: 6:1-8: Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" 2 And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer. 3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" 4 And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another, and he was given a great sword. 5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, "A quart* of wheat for a denarius,* and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!" 7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 8 And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

Sermon text: 9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants* and their brothers* should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. 12 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. 14 The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave* and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

Everyone should have seen it coming. The madman had written of his intentions nearly a decade before; the book told his philosophy, his anxieties, and his solution to the problems faced by his nation. Too bad most people ignored the book. Then, when he began swallowing the nations around him, everyone feared another major war and therefore tried to buy him off.

Unfortunately, what England and France saw as "appeasement," Adolph Hitler saw as capitulation. Thus began the conflagration we know as World War

II, in which more than 70 million people died.

Today's chapter in the Revelation reminds us that everyone should anticipate the coming judgment on the earth. We read of "the day" in the Old Testament alone more than 200 times: the code phrase for the judgment of God upon unbelievers and idolatrous nations. Time and again, St. John will use Old Testament language to describe what he witnessed in his heavenly vision. Today's chapter reminds us that the final judgment will eclipse any national judgment ever experienced by Israel in its history. The final days of judgment will completely eradicate sin from the earth and from all creation, including those who intentionally rebelled against Jesus' reign over all his creation.

Last week's sermon dealt with the scroll of human history from the time of St. John's vision forward. When St. John despaired of seeing the contents of the scroll, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, came forward and took the scroll. This event caused all heaven and creation to explode in praise to God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Now, Jesus began to break the seven seals on the scroll to open it. Each seal caused significant events to occur in human history.

As Jesus broke the first 4 scrolls, St. John heard each of the 4 living creatures utter a command: "Come!" The creatures' commands herald the arrival of processes with cosmic consequences.

The first seal brought the arrival of a conquerer on a white horse. Scholars and theologians have long debated the identity of the conqueror. Jesus Himself will ride a white horse later in this book (chapter 19), and this rider receives a crown as the saints will receive at the end of time (2 Timothy 4:8, James 1:12, Revelation 2:10 and 3:11, among other passages). These facts have led some teachers to believe this horse symbolizes the Church and our fulfillment of Jesus' command to spread the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:19-20).

However, remember that Jesus is, at this time, opening scrolls; He Himself will not ride this horse. The Greek word for "crown" used here can refer to the temporary crown given to athletes and conquerors as well as to the crowns reserved for the saints (St. Paul uses this word for both types of crowns). Some scholars, with good reasons, believe this horse and its rider symbolize the antichrist that will appear at the end of time, deceiving the world into denying Christ and believing in himself.

Regardless of the identity of the first horse and rider, the second horse and rider appear all too clearly in human history. When Jesus broke the second seal, St. John heard one of the creatures cry, "Come!" and saw a rider on a red horse obey the call. The second horse represents war, with all its bloodshed and misery.

When we think about it, the red rider really has little to do but allow humans to act like humans. Our pride and greed and lust often drive us to attack others. We all want things we don't have, and when this occurs on a national level, warfare results. I found a quote long ago from my favorite science fiction writer, Jerry Pournelle: "A smart soldier wants to know the causes of wars. Also how to end them. After all, war is the normal state of affairs, isn't it? Peace is the name of the ideal we deduce from the fact that there have been interludes between

wars." In all the course of human history, few days have passed without someone fighting someone else for something they both thought they needed. While war unfortunately proves necessary at times, the survivors sometimes look back and wonder why the powers in control couldn't have settled the issue peacefully.

However, this horse represents another type of bloodshed as well. None of us sitting here should forget those who have bled and died for our faith. Beginning with the stoning of Stephen in the early years of the Church, Christians have forfeited their lives for the sake of Christ and His Church. The early Church author Tertullian once said, "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church." Earthly authorities have rarely failed to use their ultimate authority to destroy the Church. However, as Tertullian noted, the Church usually thrives more in times of persecution than in times of peace.

War naturally results in misery and poverty. Anyone who doubts this should read about the aftermath of World War II. Therefore, the natural successor to the red horse follows it about the earth. The third seal brings a black horse that represents famine, the scarcity of food that results from war and from natural disasters. The scales and the prices given (a quart of barley for a full day's wage) leave no doubt as to the identity of this rider. Today, we enjoy an economic system that shields us from crop failures and droughts. Even though crops around here were poor because of our drought, we can still go to the local grocery store and purchase practically anything we choose to eat. Remember this hasn't always been the case. Our near ancestors remembered times when people starved when the crops failed.

Then came the last horse with the fourth seal: "...a pale horse! And its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him." This rider appears throughout history: in times of war, in times of plague, of drought, and — as we've been reminded lately — in our everyday lives. Even those blessed to live in times of peace and prosperity meet this rider eventually. No one escapes him.

However, in this vision, St. John witness an almost overwhelming number of deaths: "a fourth of the earth" — with today's population, nearly 1.75 billion people — die at the hands of the pale rider. By contrast, the Black Plague of Europe in the 1340's killed at most an estimated 20 million in Europe (between 25% and 66% of the population), while the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 killed anywhere from 50 million to 100 million people. Imagine a time when over 1 billion people die in a short period. Needless to say, such a time will seem like the worst judgment the world could face. No one could deny this sign of the end!

Could it get worse? According to St. John, yes, it can, and it will, but only because of the reason for this judgment. After Jesus broke the fifth seal, St. John saw those who had died for "the word of God." These saints cried for justice: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Is there anything wrong with this prayer? What about Jesus' admonitions in the Sermon on the Mount, to bless those who curse us (Matthew 5)? Throughout history, God's people have suffered unjustly, but this fact doesn't condone the suffering. The Psalms contain

numerous cries for justice. God Himself commands that the nations preserve justice, more than 80 times in the Prophets of the Old Testament alone.

These saints cry for justice, and God lovingly answers with an answer that puzzles many: "Wait." God's mercy compels Him to wait for all who will receive Jesus as Lord of their lives to do so. Remember that St. Peter told his readers that "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). The martyrs of ancient times have waited patiently that you might come to repent of your sins and confess Jesus as Lord. Notice that the saints, once told to wait and why, complain no longer. They, too, are willing to prolong their wait for justice that you might receive mercy at the hands of their loving Father.

Yet, we see another visible warning of judgment in the breaking of the sixth seal. Using vivid Old Testament words, St. John describes cosmic events that remind us of Joel's description of the "Day of the LORD." We should remember that St. Peter also used Joel's words (Joel chapter 2) to proclaim the "Day of the LORD" at Pentecost (Acts chapter 2). These events cause even the most calloused, even the most courageous men to tremble and quake, leaving them to cry to mountains, "'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"

We cannot forget St. Peter's sermon from Acts 2. In some way, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost signaled the coming of the Day of the LORD. You may wonder why God would wait nearly 2,000 years to conclude the judgment. Remember that God gave the Canaanites 400 years to repent and turn from their wickedness (cf. Genesis and Deuteronomy). He also called the Assyrians, one of the most violent nations in history, to repent (cf. the book of Jonah). God has a reason for delaying His judgment. Don't misunderstand God's mercy in postponing judgment and mistakenly believe that judgment will never come.

Actually, we should understand from reading this chapter that many of these events have repeatedly occurred over the centuries. War constantly plagues humanity. In the nineteenth century, people believed that Western civilization had progressed to the point that major wars were a thing of the past. World War I destroyed that fallacy. Today, medical advances have eliminated the possibility of many diseases. Yet, many people fear that a major pandemic is imminent. Famine seems only a remote possibility, but some scientists warn that farmers today plant too few types of plants to avoid a major catastrophe resembling the Irish potato famine of the nineteenth century.

And, in spite of the advances in human civilization and science, death still haunts us. No one escapes death in this life. Death brings judgment for all the sin we commit. One day, humanity will endure judgment for the injustice we've inflicted on each other over the millennia.

However, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God and Lion of Judah, suffered death that He might offer eternal life to everyone who believes in Him. While Christians still suffer along with the ungodly (even to the point of falling victim to the riders described today), we know we have God's promise of mercy at the impending

judgment. We will stand before God as sinners, but as sinners justified by Jesus Christ His Son. Everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord will escape the judgment and live eternally in a new creation

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation:

Chapter 7: Sealed and Saved

2 September 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 7:1-8: 7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants* of our God on their foreheads." 4 And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

5 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed, 12,000 from the tribe of Reuben, 12,000 from the tribe of Gad,

6 12,000 from the tribe of Asher, 12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali, 12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,

7 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon, 12,000 from the tribe of Levi, 12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,

8 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun, 12,000 from the tribe of Joseph, 12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

Sermon text: Revelation 7:9-17: 9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

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

15 "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Last week, we read of the unfolding of human history from St. John's time to the end of time itself. As Jesus broke each seal, mysterious horses and their riders emerged to wreak destruction on the earth. Then, at the breaking of the sixth seal, all creation erupted in praise of Jesus Christ for His victory over death.

Today's sermon comes from chapter 7, where we read of an enormous number of believers and an innumerable army of worshipers who praise Jesus for His deliverance from sin. This vast congregation continues to worship in heaven even as we worship here today.

However, this chapter also takes us into the Old Testament to examine the covenant promises of God to His people Israel. We cannot understand this chapter without an understanding of God's faithfulness to His people throughout the ages.

After Jesus broke the sixth seal, St. John saw 4 angels "holding back the 4 winds of the earth." These winds, we read in verses 2 and 3, threatened tremendous destruction to the earth. However, the angels could take no action until the "servants of God" were sealed.

St. John's description of the sealing reminds us of an ancient Christian ritual still celebrated in some traditions. In the ancient Church, when a person was baptized, the celebrant of the service would mark the candidate with the sign of the cross on his forehead using holy oil. St. John's first-century readers understood this vision as the marking of new believers at their baptism.

St. John heard the number of those sealed: 144,000, "from every tribe of the sons of Israel." However, not every tribe is represented. The tribe of Dan was omitted, and Ephraim is instead called "Joseph." Early Church tradition held that the Antichrist, the greatest false prophet of humanity, would rise from the tribe of Dan. In Genesis, Jacob awarded Joseph's son Ephraim the blessing of the eldest son, the blessing Jacob had intended for Joseph.

At this point, we need to ask, "Who are the sealed 144,000?" Two views hold sway in the Church today.

One view holds that the 144,000 "servants" sealed represent all the true believers of God, including both Old and New Testament saints. Holders of this view point out that 12 is a perfect number, as is 1,000; therefore, 12 tribes times 12,000 people would represent the totality of God's redeemed believers.

The other view states that St. John recorded exactly what he saw: 12,000 Jewish believers from 12 tribes of Israel. These people, holders of this view argue, are 144,000 literal Jewish believers that are sealed in the end times prior to — or in the beginning of — a period of great tribulation unlike anything ever seen on the planet.

These 2 views revolve around a major contention in biblical interpretation: Who is Israel? Many people today believe that, based on St. Paul's teaching in Romans 9, the Church has replaced Israel in God's fulfillment of Scriptural prophecy.

However, when we consider the prophecies in the Old Testament, we must ask the question, "Has God left promises unfulfilled? What becomes of those promises?" No one can read books such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Zechariah — to name a few — without wondering if the prophecies in these books will remain unfulfilled. If so, these prophets spoke falsely and therefore do not qualify as true prophets. The only alternative is that God has either fulfilled these prophecies in symbolic ways or will do so in later years.

Personally, I have great difficulty believing that God would promise

significant blessings to a nation He chose millennia ago and then “renege” on those promises. One cannot read the Prophets without realizing that God made literal prophecies that require literal fulfillments.

Regardless of which view one takes on the 144,000, the next verses remind us of other occasions of worship in heaven. St. John saw a group far too numerous to count praising God and Jesus Christ. These worshipers are all clothed in white robes, reminding us of the believers who received white robes at the breaking of the fifth seal in Revelation chapter 6. Their cry reverberates through heaven: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” Again, Jesus’ divinity clearly appears in this book. These saints are immediately joined by the creatures around the throne and the elders singing, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.” This song reminds us of the worship of chapter 5. Again, we cannot read the book of Revelation without comprehending the eternal worship that continually echoes throughout heaven.

St. John, however, wants to know the identity of the worshippers. When the elder asked him their identity, and St. John admitted his ignorance, the elder told him a great truth. These believers did not enter heaven lightly; they suffered “great tribulation” in their lives; they died for their faith. They understood suffering in life because they suffered for the sake of Christ. Therefore, they receive the privilege of serving God continually (“day and night”) as well as the protection of God. Regardless of what they suffered in life, these believers will suffer no more for all eternity. Nor will they ever mourn again, for God Himself “will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

This chapter may lead us to the question, “what is the great tribulation?” At this point in the book — and in this series — we should realize that the Church has always suffered tribulation. Jesus prophesied this Himself, reminding His disciples that the world hated Him and would therefore hate them as well. This hatred has continued throughout our existence. Therefore, while the “great tribulation” may appear later in this book — as I believe it does — we should realize that we are called to persevere in whatever tribulation we suffer in this life. Others suffered far more for their faith than we can imagine. Who are we to believe we should be spared when others have suffered martyrdom?

Keep in mind that St. John wanted his readers to persevere in their faith. We, too, must persevere in our faith. We, too, must remember that we are called to serve God in this life in the hope of serving God for all eternity. We will remain in God’s presence forever, cared for and guided by the Shepherd worthy of our praise. If Jesus is worthy of our praise in eternity, He is worthy of your service in this life.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Chapter 8: Chaos Unleashed

9 September 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 8:1-5: 1 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2 Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. 3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, 4 and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

Sermon text: Revelation 8:6-13: 6 Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them. 7 The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up. 8 The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. 9 A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. 10 The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. 11 The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter. 12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night. 13 Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"

We often hear of the "calm before the storm." This phrase refers to more than weather events; it also refers to historical events as well.

In chapter 8, we find a calm in heaven before the storm slams earth with a cosmic vengeance. Events in chapter 8 reveal the justice of God on a sinful world that rejected His Son and persecuted His people. Even worse for the unrighteous, the chapter ends with a pronouncement of even worse calamity to come.

At the end of chapter 6, Jesus had broken 6 of the seals protecting the scroll of human history. The 4 horsemen of chapter 6 unleashed havoc on the planet, only to be followed by events reminiscent of Joel 2's prophecy of cosmic chaos. These events drove even the most callous unbelievers to call for deliverance from God's judgment. Unfortunately, these unbelievers opted to call on rocks and mountains rather than on God's grace for their deliverance.

In chapter 8, St. John recorded the breaking of the seventh seal by Jesus

Christ, the Lamb of God. Silence descended on heaven when Jesus broke the seal. This seems odd given the rapturous worship scenes we've examined thus far in the book. This chapter records the first — and possibly, the only — period of heavenly silence recorded in Scripture.

The silence was broken when an angel offered incense at the altar in heaven. This incense accompanied the “prayers of the saints” as they rose before God. Every prayer for justice; every prayer for mercy; every prayer for forgiveness comes before the throne of God. God is not ignorant of earthly events, and He hears the prayers of His people.

Then, the angel threw the “coals” onto the earth, resulting in further damage similar to that at the end of chapter 6. Anyone living on earth in this time will experience fear like nothing ever experienced in our lifetimes.

Could it get worse? With the breaking of the seventh seal, 7 angels receive trumpets to pronounce the judgment of God. Just as those alive feel it couldn't get worse, the worst comes.

Notice the destruction that results from the first 4 blasts. A third of all vegetation dies; a third of the sea becomes blood, killing a third of the creatures and ships; a third of the fresh water becomes poisonous; and the celestial lights on which humans have relied throughout our existence becomes dimmed by a third. No one can ignore such events.

Someone may ask, “Is St. John speaking literally or figuratively here?” I would ask that person to examine the Scriptures and see what such language foretells throughout the Bible. Every time a prophet used cataclysmic language, God's judgment appeared on the horizon and marched toward the unbelievers, inevitable and unstoppable.

Actually, these events remind us of another time God's judgment fell on a sinful nation, and in that case the language is literal; the events really happened. Remember the plagues of Egypt? We discussed them on Wednesday night back in the spring. God turned the water to blood, plunged the nation into darkness, destroyed the crops and livestock with horrific weather, and practically destroyed the nation before Pharaoh Amenhotep II found himself presiding over a ruined, powerless nation.

The connection with Egypt should give us a clue about the big question regarding these events: why? Why would God send such destruction on the earth?

This question has an ominous answer: God's holiness requires that He judge sin, and God's sense of justice requires that He answer the prayers of His people. Notice that the saints in heaven had prayed for justice for their sufferings. Remember that the Hebrews in Egypt had prayed for centuries for justice. When God answers the prayers of His people, He does so completely. Egypt reaped the judgment for the sins it committed against Israel. Human civilization as a whole has rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ and persecuted His people throughout the history of the Church. Nations have refused to submit to the lordship of Christ and fulfill God's call for justice and compassion.

This lesson is emphasized by the words of the “eagle” who proclaims, “woe, woe, woe.” At no other place in Scripture will you see this word used 3 times

together. Every time this word appears, terrible things fall on the hearers. Now, the world hears it 3 times together. Nothing in Scripture or in history — no invasion, no war, no plague, no earthquake, no hurricane or tornado or tsunami — will compare with the destruction to come. God's justice will fall on an unbelieving world. All the world will understand that God has acted on behalf of His believers.

Far too many people read these verses and think, "This won't happen to me; I have nothing to worry about." However, St. John's words should apply to our everyday lives as much as they warn us about the judgment to come. Can we see any lessons here that apply to our lives today?

First, I see that God hears our prayers and will work on our behalf to bring justice for His saints. While those who persecute us may seem to win in the short term, God works on an eternal scale to bring justice for His people.

Also, I see that God will never ignore sin. St. Peter tells us that God is withholding justice now that more people may believe in Jesus Christ and find salvation from the coming judgment (2 Peter 3). However, as in the Old Testament, God's patience will eventually end in justice and judgment. The time will come when God's patience will end and rebellious humanity will receive its due reward.

Lastly, I see a challenge. Does this judgment trouble you? Do you know people you'd rather see avoid the coming chaos? What if these events were to occur in our lifetimes? If you know someone that you don't want to suffer this, what are you doing to help them receive mercy from God rather than justice? Remember that anyone fixating on the when of this prophecy had better think of loved ones who will face this terror. You could be the person to help others avoid the catastrophe of justice and instead experience the ecstasy of eternal worship.

If you've never heard of the coming judgment before, you now know what the world will one day face. If you so choose, you can receive mercy for your sins. St. Paul tells us that everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord, believing God raised Him from the dead, will be saved from judgment. Do you wish this release? Confess and believe. Eternal joy awaits those who avoid chaos through confession in Jesus as Lord.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Chapter 9: Chaos Unleashed

16 September 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 9:1-12: 1 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. 2 He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. 3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. 4 They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 They were allowed to torment them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. 6 And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them. 7 In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, 8 their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; 9 they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. 10 They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. 11 They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. 12 The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

Sermon text: Revelation 9:13-21: 13 Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." 15 So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. 16 The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. 17 And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire* and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. 18 By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. 19 For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

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

Sometimes, we find that life really *can* get worse just when we need it the

least.

At this point in the Revelation, we've already seen war, famine, earthquakes, and cosmic events rock the earth. It would seem as if history really is coming to an end here. Could it get any worse?

In Chapter 9, the answer is "yes."

We don't know exactly what St. John meant to represent with this part of the vision. Personally, I'll leave the speculation to others. Regardless of what St. John tried to convey — and we must admit his description of these creatures is frightening — we can see that God's judgment continues to roll over the earth. The final judgment continues its unstoppable journey to the final coming of Christ to establish His reign on the earth.

St. John saw an angel come to the earth and open the "shaft of the bottomless pit." For those who think this pit exists under the earth, we must realize that any pit in the earth would not qualify as "bottomless." This pit must have some "entrance" on the earth, but it apparently extends far beyond the earth.

Once the angel opened the "shaft," St. John saw smoke accompanied by strange creatures resembling locusts out of someone's nightmare. Remember that locusts have appeared in Scripture before as an instrument of God's judgment. In Exodus, locusts plagued Egypt and ate every plant left by the plague of hail (Exodus 10). In Joel, a locust plague served as an object lesson of God's judgment on His people (Joel 1).

These locusts apparently have supernatural properties. They torment humans, but notice that God limits their destruction; they cannot touch any plant or anyone with the "seal of God." Even in their nightmarish participation in judgment, God's word limits the creatures of the abyss.

Can we say that something resembling this plague has happened in history before? I would say probably not. At no point in human history have men sought death only to find it eludes them. For 5 months, no one will find death. Everyone not marked as God's own will suffer intense persecution and pain at the hand of these beasts. Therefore, we must assume that this vision predicts future events.

St. John clearly identifies the leader of these beings: "Abaddon," or "Apollyon" in Greek. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this word comes from the Hebrew word for "destruction." At times in the Old Testament, the word seems to refer to eternal punishment (cf. Psalm 73:18-19, 27). In Ezekiel 28:16, the word is used to refer to a "guardian cherub." Ezekiel's passage is often seen as a description of Satan, pointing to the sheer evil of these creatures.

This sounds horrible. The world will endure intense suffering for 5 months; can it get any worse? Notice this is only the "first woe." Two more are yet to come!

Following this, the sixth angel blew his trumpet, unleashing more destruction. The 4 angels described in chapter 7 finally receive their freedom to wreak havoc on the earth. These angels apparently bring a massive army with them. If the numbers used by St. John are literal, he describes an army of 200 million cavalry soldiers.

This number should tell us something about the nature of this army. According to Google Answers (<http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview?>

id=144565, last accessed 15 September 2007), there are only between 60-65 million horses on the planet at this time. Adding donkeys and mules, the number approaches 119.1 million. Therefore, I believe this army represents supernatural powers more than a literal human army. Should anyone believe this army represents a literal human army, remember that untold numbers of people died from the poisoned water of chapter 8, not to mention those who died in the great earthquakes that have already shaken the earth to this point in the book. Furthermore, this army will kill a third of humanity. A human/horse army could inflict this destruction only on the Eurasian land mass. A supernatural force could literally cover the planet.

Notice something about this disaster. After 5 months of torment; after witnessing the deaths of over 2 billion people; after surviving the near destruction of the planet, those left refuse to repent of their wickedness, nor did they turn from their idolatry. Their pride will prevent them from admitting their need for salvation in Jesus Christ and their error in worshipping other gods.

What can we see in this passage that helps us today?

First, notice that evil cannot run unrestrained in our lives. The “locusts” in this chapter find themselves submitting to the rule of Almighty God, who limits their destruction in spite of their evil nature. When you think that evil will overrun God’s people, understand that even Satan must submit to the rule of God, regardless of how much he despises doing so.

This fact alone should comfort us in our lives. We have authority over evil, not power over it. God alone has power over evil, but His love for us leads Him to restrain evil in our lives. Every believer who seeks to obey God — frankly, who determines to behave themselves as we know we should — will find help through the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, we should see that God’s judgment will bring far more destruction than anything imaginable. Anyone who fears that humans can destroy the world needs to better understand the power of Almighty God.

Lastly, however, we need to see something in this chapter. Notice that St. John says the people refuse to repent. I infer this to mean that they receive a chance to repent. In the Old Testament, God’s judgment always follows numerous opportunities for sinners to repent. As St. Peter reminds us, God truly wants everyone to repent, not to perish (2 Peter 3:9).

As Christians, we know we have repented of our sins and received God’s forgiveness. Our confession of Jesus as Lord and belief that God raised Him from the dead gives us spiritual life now and eternal life in the world to come.

Perhaps you’re reading this and you’ve never come alive spiritually; you recognize yourself in the category of those who, to this point, have refused to repent. God’s judgment will come. If you die before the events of this chapter, you’ll face judgment at death. Wouldn’t you rather repent now and avoid the judgment of God? Repentance always brings forgiveness. Repent; confess Jesus as Lord, believing in His resurrection; and live in the joy that comes with forgiveness.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation:

Chapter 10: The Mystery Revealed

23 September 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 10: 1 Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. 2 He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, 3 and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. 4 And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." 5 And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven 6 and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, 7 but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets. 8 Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." 9 So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey." 10 And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. 11 And I was told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

Sermon text: Revelation 11:1 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, 2 but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. 3 And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth." 4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. 5 And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. 6 They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. 7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, 8 and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically* is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. 9 For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, 10 and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. 11 But after

the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. 12 Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here!" And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. 13 And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. 14 The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come. 15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." 16 And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.

18 The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." 19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

"Mystery." The word "mystery" evokes images and memories in our minds. We think of famous mystery novels (such as Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*). We remember famous detectives such as Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe, men who could solve the most difficult crimes with a single, crucial leap of intuition.

When we think of Scripture and mystery, most of us think of the Revelation of St. John, the focus of this sermon series. In the history of the Church, countless hours and untold amounts of money have been invested in attempts to decipher St. John's graphic descriptions.

Needless to say, I doubt I have all the answers to this book. Others have written far more and spent much more of their lives in trying to unravel St. John's work. Remember that this is a sermon series, not a Bible study. Sermons tell us how to apply the Scriptures to our lives, and I believe God wants us to apply the truths of this book to our lives today while we prepare for life tomorrow and in the ages to come.

Therefore, we need to determine the mystery of Scripture in this chapter and apply it to our lives as we leave the sanctuary. God wants us to read this book and learn to live according to its precepts. Applying this chapter to our lives revolves around the mystery of God. What is this mystery? Do we have a role in this mystery? If so, how do we fulfill our roles in God's mystery of creation?

First, we need to consider the Greek word "mystery." Believe it or not, the Hebrew Scriptures have no equivalent to the word "mysterion." When we search the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, for this word, no instances appear in any of the books considered canonical by Protestants. The word "mysterion" appears only in the books contained in the Apocrypha, those books written between the Testaments and not included in our Protestant Bibles.

This doesn't mean the Old Testament contains no mysteries. The meanings of numerous passages in the Old Testament remained hidden for centuries until the coming of Jesus in human flesh. People read the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others for centuries and wondered who would fulfill these prophecies. God revealed through the New Testament writers that Jesus had fulfilled the prophecies of the Suffering Servant; the Holy Spirit fulfilled the prophecies of the new covenant written on people's hearts.

The Greek word "mysterion" refers to secret knowledge known only to those selected to hear it. A mystery is known only to a few and understood by even fewer. In the mystery religions of the Roman Empire, initiates learned more of the mysteries of the cult as they progressed through stages of their training. Only the highest practitioners knew all the mysteries and understood them.

When we look at the New Testament — remember that the Old Testament never mentions the word "mysterion" — the word occurs only 3 times in the Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each record Jesus using the word on one occasion to describe His teachings of the "secrets" of the kingdom of heaven. In the Greek, Jesus used the word "mysterion."

Other than Jesus, only 2 other New Testament people use the word "mysterion:" St. Paul and St. John. Since we remember that St. John wrote the Revelation after St. Paul's death, we must infer that St. John's original readers knew St. Paul's letters and therefore understood St. Paul's use of the word "mysterion."

St. Paul used this word 21 times. Among the "mysteries" of St. Paul, we find:

- the "mystery" of the hardening of Israel so that salvation would come to the Gentiles (Romans 11:25).
- the "mystery" hidden for ages but now revealed that would lead to obedience to faith (Romans 16:26-27).
- the "mystery" now revealed to believers that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ would open to us the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to come to guide us (1 Corinthians 2).
- the "mystery" of the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15). Hallelujah! All those who die anticipating the coming of Our Lord will live again!
- and, of course, the "mystery" revealed in Ephesians chapter 3, that the Gentiles "are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6).

I believe this latter mystery best applies to our chapter today. St. John heard that the "mystery of God would be fulfilled" and then recorded its fulfillment in the next few chapters.

First, notice that while St. John may prepare to reveal one mystery, he leaves another unknown, much to his own chagrin. The "mighty angel" brought a small scroll down to earth and then cried out something that St. John really wanted to write. Even more, St. John wanted to write the answer of the seven thunders, but he was forbidden to do so. Apparently, this book wasn't meant to give us all the answers.

The angel then "swore" by God Himself "there would be no more delay." The

judgment of God was imminent; the revealing of the mystery had come. When the seventh trumpet sounded, the earth would witness the mystery's fulfillment.

What, then, was the mystery?

Remember St. Paul's mysteries of 1 Corinthians 15 and Ephesians 3? Those mysteries tie in well with the mystery we see here. God had revealed through St. Paul that the death of Jesus Christ, foretold by the prophets, opened the door to salvation for the Gentiles. The ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy would come in the great gathering of the saints in the end times, just prior to the final judgment and wrath of God on earth. All the saints of the ages, Jews and Gentiles, will experience the gathering St. Paul described in 1 Thessalonians 4.

When will this gathering occur? St. Paul told the Corinthians it would happen "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:52). All we need to hear is the last trumpet.

Meanwhile, remember that St. John was in exile on the island of Patmos. How would he tell anyone what he had seen, what he had heard about the mystery's fulfillment? He heard an unusual request followed by comforting words. First, he was to eat the scroll the angel brought to earth. This reminds us of Ezekiel's experience in Ezekiel chapter 3, where Ezekiel ate a scroll containing the words of judgment he would prophesy against Israel. St. John found the scroll to be "sweet as honey" but "bitter" to his stomach. However, he was then told he would survive the exile and continue to minister about "many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

I believe we can see something in this experience. The prophecies St. John would give to the world — those we're reading — seem comforting to believers until we remember those in our lives that haven't experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Then, these words become bitter to us. We like to hear of our redemption and deliverance, but we hate to hear of the judgment to come on those who have rejected salvation. Nonetheless, our duty is clear. The words of God apply to all humanity. We must insure that everyone in our lives has heard these words and received the chance to accept these words.

Now comes the mystery's fulfillment.

In chapter 11, St. John was told to "measure the temple." This verse has led some scholars to posit that the Revelation was written prior to Titus' destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70. However, remember that many prophecies in the Old Testament remain as yet unfulfilled. Ezekiel prophesied about another temple, one that remains unbuilt thus far in history. The fact that the "holy city" would remain in Gentile hands for a specified period should lead us to believe that this prophecy of St. John remains unfulfilled as well.

This time frame, along with other details in this chapter, should tell us something about the nature of St. John's vision. Far too much of it is recorded in far too exact detail to merely spiritualize it away, saying "this means this" or "that phrase means something else." St. John is far too precise in his descriptions for us to take the easy way out.

The 2 witnesses serve as a prime example. When Zechariah witnessed a vision of 2 "olive trees" (Zechariah 4), the olive trees symbolized two people,

Zerubbabel and Joshua, the civil ruler and the high priest. Some people throughout history and today say the 2 witnesses represent believing Israel and the redeemed Church. However, as with Zechariah — who recognized the two olive trees represented physical people — St. John clearly saw the olive trees as typified by 2 physical people. While some will try to say the witnesses stand for something else, St. John is far too exact in his description.

Other details tell us this passage remains unfulfilled. The Church has never possessed the power to spit fire from our mouths! We've never turned waters to blood, and we've never stricken the earth with plagues. We simply don't possess these powers. The witnesses — regardless of their identities — possess authority and power unlike anything yet seen on this earth.

The witnesses will prophesy for "1,260 days," or the 42 months during which the holy city remains under Gentile control. Their words will irritate the unbelievers on the earth, to the point the unbelievers will wish for their deaths. Unfortunately for the unbelievers, no one will even approach these men to kill them. Death by burning proves a rather potent deterrent.

However, a "beast from the bottomless pit" will arise and will succeed in killing the prophets. Their deaths will cause a world-wide celebration as everyone sees their dead bodies in the streets of Jerusalem (the city "their Lord was crucified"). Unbelievers will celebrate like Christmas, giving gifts to one another to celebrate their deaths.

Too bad for the unbelievers — and the beast — that someone forgot to tell the rest of the story. The witnesses will rise from the dead in plain sight of everyone and then ascend into heaven.

Think about this. Today, the technology exists for us to view events happening "live" in Jerusalem (except for the satellite delay). We think nothing of corresponding with people across the planet instantaneously by email; we consider it routine to view people halfway around the world in a instant via television. For the first time in history, the possibility exists for this prophecy to be fulfilled.

Just as everyone finally grasps what they're seeing, an earthquake hits the city, destroying a tenth of it and killing thousands. Those remaining there will give "glory" to God. It sounds as if someone's ready to repent! Remember that the Roman soldiers at Jesus' crucifixion glorified God as well. A resurrection followed by an earthquake will cause anyone to look for something to say!

But what about the mystery of St. Paul? Two things tell us the mystery will be fulfilled at this moment in history.

First, St. Paul told the Thessalonians the great gathering of the redeemed could not happen until "the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction" (2 Thessalonians 2:3). The beast that kills the prophets will fulfill this description.

Next, St. Paul told the Corinthians that believers would experience a resurrection "at the last trumpet" in chapter 15 of his first letter (15:52). When we examine the book of Revelation, we find that the seventh trumpet of chapter 11 is the last trumpet mentioned in the book. At the sounding of this trumpet, the resurrection of 1 Corinthians 11 and the "gathering" of 1 Thessalonians 4

occur, throwing the entire world into panic.

The popular term for this event is “rapture,” a term I’ve avoided thus far in the series.

I know many people will disagree with this interpretation. Many people, especially in America, hold that believers will experience the rapture before this time in the book. Some, especially outside American Evangelical traditions, deny this event will occur prior to the end of the world. I also understand that, somehow, “saints” will still live on earth because we read of their defeat in Revelation 13 (13:7). However, given the prophecy of St. Paul and the witness of St. John, I fail to see how we can arrive at any other interpretation. If you believe you can prove another interpretation, please contact me.

Regardless, the hosts of heaven erupt in praise yet again. The worship in this chapter inspired the words of George Frederick Handel’s masterpiece “Hallelujah Chorus” in his oratorio *Messiah*. Quoting Psalm 2, the elders praise God because “you have taken your great power and begun to reign.” The time has come: the dead will be judged, and His servants will be rewarded.

Verse 19 concludes this chapter with the opening of “God’s temple in heaven.” In his book *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, Allen Ross surmises that the worship of ancient Israel served as a pale imitation of heavenly worship, and that the sanctuaries of ancient Israel — both the tabernacle and the first temple — mirrored a sanctuary in heaven. Now, we see this sanctuary, complete with “the ark of His covenant.” Is this the ark mentioned in the Old Testament? St. John obviously saw something he recognized. At this point, I’ll only surmise that we’ll know when we see it for ourselves.

What, then, should we take from these words today?

First, we’ve seen St. Paul’s explanation of the mystery. God has extended His grace to Gentiles, meaning that everyone who hears the gospel may be saved.

Secondly, what role do we play in this mystery? We must insure that others hear of the grace of God. People in our lives need to know Jesus. They need to hear that although their sin has separated them from God, Jesus has come to bring everyone the opportunity to experience a relationship with God. Everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord, believing that God has raised Him from the dead, will experience eternal life. Our role in the mystery is to insure everyone hears of this good news, of the gospel of Christ.

Lastly, how do we fulfill this role? We do this by living joyous lives before others. We know our salvation is secure; we must live in that security. Others should see us living joyously regardless of the circumstances of our lives. Remember that St. Paul has already told us this joy will extend into eternity following the gathering of the saints. Given that death has no hold on the saints of God, we can face life confidently and live boldly before the world.

Part of God’s mystery has already been revealed. Our salvation as Gentiles demonstrates this revelation. Following the events of this book, we’ll see the complete revealing of God’s mysteries. If God has saved you through your confession and belief in Jesus, live joyfully, knowing your salvation is not a mystery; it is a reality in the power of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Pentecost, Series on The Revelation

Chapter 12: War in Heaven

30 September 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 12:1-6: 12:1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. 5 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

Sermon text: Revelation 12:7-17: 7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. 12 Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!” 13 And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. 15 The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

Powerful witnesses. Tragic earthquakes. Mysteries revealed, trumpets blown, believers gone. No one can deny that chapter 11 of Revelation described enough action to leave readers breathless.

Unfortunately, St. John gives us no rest in chapter 12. In spite of the scene shift from earth to heaven, the action continues to escalate. Time rushes pell

mell to the final judgment, in which rebellious humanity will receive its due reward and the ultimate deceiver — Satan himself — will receive his ultimate, humiliating end.

However, Satan has quite a few scores to settle. Therefore, St. John's vision of the woman and war sets the scene for Satan's final, open reign on earth. Fortunately for us today, St. John also demonstrates God's control even in the face of outright revolt. God remains in control of the situation, even as He remains in control of the situations in our lives today. God continues to protect His saints in the midst of trials and dangers.

Following events in chapter 11, St. John saw a "sign" in heaven in the form of a woman clothed in a way that fashion models would envy: the sun for her clothes, the moon under her feet, and stars forming her crown. Who is this woman clothed with the heavens? The woman's identity seems to revolve around the identity of the child she bears. While many people would say her identity matters little to events, incorrect interpretations have led to erroneous doctrines in parts of the Church today.

Most early Church teachers believed the woman represented the Church, clothed in the splendors of creation as the Bride of Christ. Many Christians in the Church continue to hold this view. However, anyone who holds this view must then identify her child, "who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron." Has the Church produced such a child?

When we examine the Scriptures, we see only 4 occasions where a person is said to rule with a "rod of iron." The first instance occurs in Psalm 2, a coronation psalm for Israel's kings. St. John will quote this psalm quite frequently in the book; in fact, the elders in chapter 11 quoted this psalm in verse 18. This psalm is considered a Messianic psalm that pointed ahead in time to the ultimate fulfillment of God's "son" reigning on the earth.

The only other 3 instances of one ruling with iron, and all 3 occur in this book. In chapter 2 verse 27, Jesus had promised the faithful in Thyatira that they would receive "authority over the nations" and "rule them with a rod of iron."

The remaining references refer more specifically to Psalm 2. In this chapter, the woman's son is prophesied to rule the nations with a rod of iron. Then, in chapter 19 — which we'll discuss in November — Jesus Himself will return victoriously to earth and rule with a rod of iron. The prophecy of Psalm 2 will find its ultimate fulfillment.

Given the evidence in Scripture, I believe we can agree that Jesus Himself fulfills the identity of the child in chapter 12. Following His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus returned to heaven as this chapter describes.

If Jesus matches the identity of the Child, who then is the woman? This leaves us two possibilities.

Some would say that the Virgin Mary is the obvious choice. This interpretation has enjoyed wide popularity throughout the centuries, as artwork describing the Virgin attests. However, we see no instance in Scripture of God so honoring any individual.

Therefore, our next choice — and, I believe, the correct choice — identifies the woman as Israel. Scripture supports this identification. In Genesis 37, in his

dream regarding his rule over the family, Joseph identified the stars in the dream as his brothers. Notice the woman's crown consists of 12 stars. Joseph's dream alone, of all the Scriptures, identifies 12 stars, and Joseph recognized them as his brothers.

God has always used the nation of Israel in His plan for creation. God chose Abraham and promised to bless all nations through him (Genesis 12). In Exodus 19, God told Moses His plan to make Israel a "holy nation" and a "kingdom of priests." St. Paul told the Galatians that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5).

However, as we discussed last week in St. Paul's mysteries, when Israel mysteriously did not recognize its Messiah, their mistake actually opened the doors for Gentiles to receive salvation. When you read the rest of St. Paul's argument regarding Israel in the book of Romans, you see that he concludes the history of his nation by saying "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:25-27). This doesn't mean that every genetic Jew of all time will receive salvation. Instead, St. Paul foresaw a time when every Jew on earth would recognize Jesus as their Messiah and confess Him as Lord.

We also find another player in the drama: a dragon with 7 heads, 7 crowns, and 10 horns. If you think of the Greek mythological figure the hydra, you probably have an accurate picture of this dragon. This dragon had stirred trouble everywhere we find him: At the birth of the child, after the child's ascension to heaven, and even in heaven itself. The dragon identity requires no elaboration: Satan himself makes an appearance in chapter 12.

Satan's actions throughout history fit the description of this dragon. He appeared in the Garden to destroy the creation of God, only to hear his destruction prophesied by the woman's seed (Genesis 3:15). He worked in humanity to assure its judgment at the Flood, only to see its survival through Noah and his family (Genesis 6-9). Then, in spite of his best efforts to stamp out the Jewish people (cf. Esther for a good example), the Messiah was born in Bethlehem. Satan had a good servant in the person of Herod standing by for just such emergencies, but Herod himself could not destroy the Messiah. In spite of everything, Satan saw Jesus' life, death and resurrection destroy any hope of his success.

Satan's very presence in this book leads to a question: How did history come to this? What led to such a horrible creature inhabiting creation, destroying everything it touched and leading humanity into ruinous rebellion against its Creator? Does Scripture tell us anything about the situation?

The prophet Isaiah, in something of a "flashback," witnessed the beginnings of the conflict. The dragon — Satan — exalted himself above all angels and attempted to overthrow the very throne of God (cf. Isaiah 14:12-14, where Isaiah began prophesying about the king of Babylon and inexplicably veers off into describing a being far more powerful and deadly than any human monarch). Following this futile attempt, Satan found himself thrown from heaven to earth, where he deceived Adam and Eve and spread his poisonous attitude "to be as

God" (Genesis 3:5).

Job wrote that Satan retained access to heaven as one of the "sons of God" (Job 1:6). However, this access comes to a brutal end in St. John's vision. St. John witnessed Satan in open war against Michael and angels who remained loyal to God. Michael overcame Satan, but he did not succeed in his own strength. The book of Jude tells us that even Michael dared not do more with Satan at Moses' death but say, "The Lord rebuke you" (Jude 9). Michael acted with the authority of Almighty God; Satan had no choice but to accept his exile.

Again, as with last chapter, heaven breaks out in praise at the victory of Michael and the angels. A loud voice shouted out the victory of God and proclaimed the end of Satan's accusations against God's people. Those accused "have conquered by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." As Michael conquers Satan through the strength of God, we will conquer him through the victory of Jesus Christ at the cross and the tomb.

However, the voice also warns the earth: "woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

Satan wasted no time fulfilling this prediction. Satan immediately turned his wrath on the woman, Israel. Had God not provided protection for Israel, the nation would have perished. Consider the history of Israel. No other ethnic group has maintained its distinct identity without a viable nation-state. Even Satan's worst attempts to eliminate it failed. The Romans nearly annihilated the nation in A.D. 70 and again in A.D. 135. Anti-Semitic attacks throughout the Middle Ages caused immense suffering; Jews faced regular expulsions from the nations they had adopted as their homelands. Then, in Nazi Germany, the Jewish race faced its ultimate threat when it lost nearly 6 million of its people. Still, God preserved the nation.

It seems, given St. John's vision, that the Satan the dragon will try one last time to eliminate the people of God. However, the nation will again experience God's miraculous protection. Satan's will turn his fury on "the rest of her offspring." We'll examine this action more thoroughly next week, as well as Satan's actions "on the sand of the sea."

What do we take home from this chapter?

First, know that God protects His people. We may think of the martyrs of the ages and believe that God forgot about His people. However, God worked in our behalf through the birth of His Son, Jesus Christ, in whom we have the assurance of eternal life through of confession of Him as Lord of our lives. Since God has protected us from eternal condemnation, He has already provided for the worst of our enemies. Furthermore, remember that history tells us about more than the deaths of martyrs; it also contains countless stories of miraculous escapes from danger as God has protected His people. If God has protected others in life, He can protect you as well.

However, we also see that God's protection will not contradict His greater plan. This chapter describes intense suffering in both heaven and earth. Nonetheless, our suffering can lift God's name in this world and contribute to His eternal glory. As His children, God's glory should remain our greatest

concern in life.

We also see that God maintains control of history. Satan has constantly attempted to rule the earth under his own authority, but God has thus far thwarted every attempt. Some may believe that God has nothing to do with the events of nations and the movement of history; Scripture says otherwise. One day, the world will experience complete peace and justice as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, will rule "with a rod of iron" and bring perfect government to the earth.

Lastly, we need to see that our accuser has no power over us. We are forgiven of our sins when we confess Jesus as Lord, believing God raised Him from the dead. Any sin you commit is covered by the blood of Jesus Christ at our conversion and again when we confess our sins to Him and ask forgiveness. If you've already been born again, rejoice in your forgiveness. If you've never experienced the spiritual birth, confess Him, believing in His resurrection. Then, celebrate the defeat of your accuser and your forgiveness of your sins.

Pentecost 2007, Series on The Revelation:
 Chapter 13: The Worst Choice of the World
 7 October 2007

Text: Revelation 13:1-8: 13:1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. 4 And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" 5 And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. 6 It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, 8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.

Sermon text: revelation 13:9-18: 9 If anyone has an ear, let him hear: 10 If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. 11 Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 12 It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. 13 It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, 14 and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. 16 Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, 17 so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. 18 This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

St. John's vision continued with more wondrous beings and momentous events affecting the planet. In chapter 13, St. John witnessed the appearance of 2 "beasts" who will dominate humanity, even overpowering those remaining on the earth who believed in Jesus as Lord.

As we read chapters 13 through 18, we must remember an important fact of history. Humans have always sought to run their lives according to their own

wishes. This includes creating institutions that preclude any accountability to Almighty God, the Creator of the universe. These chapters will display the culmination of humanity's rebellion against God. How well will people run the earth without recognizing the authority of God?

Following the dragon's fury at the woman's escape in chapter 12, St. John saw a "beast rising out of the sea." This vision points to 2 clues to the identity of Satan's ultimate servant.

First, references to the sea abound in the Old Testament, and many of them carried the same message for the Hebrews: Avoid the sea. The world was destroyed by the rising seas in Genesis 6; the Red Sea destroyed the Egyptians in Exodus; and who can forget Jonah's encounter with a sea storm? In the time of the Prophets, the sea came to represent chaos and disorder, primarily as it referred to the Gentiles. The reference to the sea told St. John's readers that their greatest enemy would arise among the Gentiles.

Secondly, St. John told his readers (including us) that the beast had 10 crowns, 7 heads, and "blasphemous names" on its heads. These references clearly described the Roman Empire. The crowns probably referred to the emperors beginning with Augustus. (It should be noted that, including the 3 short-lived emperors in the Year of the 4 Emperors, Domitian was the 11th true emperor of Rome). The 7 heads reminded everyone of the 7 hills on which the city of Rome rested. The blasphemous names reminded St. John's readers of the emperors' claims to divinity. Most Christian persecution in St. John's time resulted from Christians' refusal to confess Caesar as Lord.

The beast resembled the worst of the predators of the animal world: the speed of the leopard, the crushing power of the bear, and the haughtiness and ruthlessness of the lion. This ruler would contrast directly with the promise of Jesus' rule of perfect justice and peace.

Some may read of this beast and wonder, "who in the world would consent to its rule? Why would anyone worship such a creature?" You'll find the answers in the preceding chapters. Think of what has happened to this point:

- At the breaking of the seals, the 4 Horsemen have ridden out to wreak havoc on humanity. By this point, humanity has endured the results of their work for millennia.
- Cosmic events rend the universe, bringing fear to the hearts of every observer.
- Planetary catastrophes destroy huge swaths of the planet, rendering the water undrinkable and the plants wiped out.
- Countless creatures resembling locusts have tormented unbelievers, driving them to wish for death.
- Two prophets have prophesied for three and a half years, driving unbelievers into a murderous rage. Only the appearance of this beast will end their ministry.

Lastly, we've seen the blowing of the last trumpet in the book. According to St. Paul, the blowing of the last trumpet and appearance of the "son of perdition" will fulfill the requirements for the great gathering he predicted in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15.

Time and again, history proves that societies look for strong leaders in times of distress. Lest we believe that people always seek the best leader, we should remember that the Germans actually voted for Adolph Hitler to rule their nation in 1934. Germany found itself in ruins during the aftermath of World War I and the Great Depression. The German people desperately wanted strong, clear leadership and thought they had found it in Hitler. Given the catastrophes of this book, those remaining after the gathering of believers will look anywhere for someone to rule them and lead them out of the disaster that has fallen.

Furthermore, something will happen to cause people to believe in the beast's invulnerability. Somehow, this person — I believe we can agree this term describes a political leader — will survive a lethal wound. Yes, I know the term "lethal" implies deadly; however, this person will suffer a wound that would kill anyone else. Yet, he will survive. People will begin to believe this person cannot die.

Of course, we understand that people seek more than political leadership. Everyone seeks deeper answers in times of tribulation, and this time will definitely qualify to be called "tribulation." The dragon will call another "beast" come to join the political leader. This person will seem very religious; perhaps he will be religious. People like to follow those who seem religious, but we should always remember the difference between religion and righteousness. This second person will duplicate all the miracles of Christ and the Church throughout history, including the 2 prophets of chapter 11: calling down fire, raising people from the dead, and so forth.

Between these two leaders, practically everything everyone would want is fulfilled. Strong political leadership; strong religiosity. No one will stand against them and succeed, not even the "saints."

St. John's references to the "saints" causes problems. Weren't believers taken into heaven prior to this? I believe that St. Paul and St. John describe the taking up of all believers before the events of chapter 13. However, we should consider that, if the beast of chapter 11 is the same as the first beast of this chapter, then the first beast may accumulate enough power prior to the gathering to cause active persecution of believers. St. John clearly expected the Church to experience fierce persecution because he told his readers, "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." Why would he call for the saints to endure for no reason?

Furthermore, St. Paul mentioned a time of persecution in his writings. (You've probably noticed that God used St. Paul and St. John to tell us what we need to know about the end times.) In 2 Thessalonians 2, St. Paul said the day of the gathering would come after a "falling away" and the revealing of the "son of perdition." At this point, we've seen no mass exodus from the Church. Few things will purge the Church of the "summer soldiers" like intense, fierce, life-threatening persecution. Those who consider church attendance as a social event will quickly disappear when attending brings active opposition.

We should also remember a troubling line from Jesus Himself. In Luke 18:8, Jesus referred to the time of justice. The verse ends, "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Jesus Himself expected few to

remain faithful when faced with the ferocity of Satan as he takes over the earth.

By the end of chapter 13 of the Revelation, Satan will exercise complete control over humanity. His political control through the first beast will even extend to total financial domination of the world's economy. His religious control will come through the beast who will lead the world to worship the first beast.

Perhaps some will ask, "Why will God allow this? Why will God allow the adversary to conquer the earth and destroy the Church?" This shouldn't surprise us. God believes in free will. I know the Scriptures teach much of God's eternal plan, but for some reason God continues to allow people to make history-changing choices in their lives. Unfortunately, as Dumbledore reminds us in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, "the trouble is, humans do have a knack for choosing precisely those things that are worst for them." As a race, we have always wanted to do things our way; we have always wanted the power to control our own destiny with no influence from God. And, as C.S. Lewis says in *The Great Divorce*, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" I believe Scripture here proves that, at long last, humanity will get its wish; humanity will have its chance to prove it can exist without God.

And given the chance, humanity will, again, choose what is worst for it. Humanity will learn the hard way that the great temptation "to be as God" without the wisdom of God will result in ruin and destruction.

Some believe this chapter refers only to the future. Nothing here applies to our lives; we, of course, rest secure in the fact our faith is firm and persecution happens only overseas.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Remember that God speaks to His people through every passage of Scripture, including this one.

First, this chapter should remind us that even though our society continues to descend into depravity, God expects His people to resist and remain steadfast. Yes, the world will one day choose to bow to the worst. No, we have no right to sit back and wait for it to happen.

God expects us to resist evil. He expects us to carry the gospel to the world, including to our community, our families, and our friends. Time and again, evil has threatened to overwhelm the earth. Time and again, believers have prayed for deliverance and rejoiced when God answered their prayers. Although the events of this chapter will happen one day, we must continue to work to demonstrate God's love to the world.

Secondly, in the face of evil, God remains in control of history. When humanity chooses the worst, God will not be surprised. Nor will God allow evil to run amuck over His people. Fierce persecution may purify the Church, but God will step in and intervene by gathering His people before the worst of Satan's rule afflicts the earth.

This really brings us back to the first point. Do you know someone you want to take with you when we leave? If so, how are you bringing them to salvation, to the point where they are open to the Holy Spirit's drawing in their lives?

I also see a warning here in this chapter. It's easy to say, "only unbelievers

would behave in such a way." I'm not so certain about this. Far too many believers seek to live their lives with little or no guidance from God. This tendency to live without God's leadership will one day bring the world to ruin. When we confess Jesus as Lord of our lives, we declare our allegiance to Him. This declaration of allegiance means He has every right to expect our obedience in life. If you know of some point in your life where God is calling you, obey the call. If you know of something in your life you must surrender to God, surrender.

The world will one day learn the consequences of rebellion and disobedience. Don't let these consequences happen to you. Confess Jesus as Lord and live your allegiance before others so they, too, will experience the joyful gathering before the ultimate rebellion against God.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation
Chapter 14: Singing a New Song
14 October 2007

Text: Revelation 14:1-8: 1 Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, 3 and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. 4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless. 6 Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. 7 And he said with a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water." 8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality."

Sermon text: Revelation 14:9-20: 9 And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." 12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. 13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Blessed indeed," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!" 14 Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." 16 So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped. 17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." 19 So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. 20 And the

winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

We've all heard the phrase, "I have good news and bad news." Depending on the situation, we sometimes want the bad news first so the good news can lift our spirits.

The book of the Revelation often reads like a "good news, bad news" work. We read good news in the first chapter: Jesus loves us, has freed us from our sins with His blood, made us a kingdom of priest, and is returning to gather us to a glorious eternity. We read bad news in succeeding chapters: heresy, immorality, war, famine, and catastrophes, culminating in the beasts' victory over the prophets in chapter 11 and the saints themselves in chapter 13. By the time we reach chapter 14, we really need more good news!

St. John has good news to give in chapter 14. Remember that St. John's original readers, like many believers in the world today, faced persecution on a daily basis. When St. John prophesied the victory of the beast in chapter 13, these people probably felt a sense of despair, as if their worst fears had just been confirmed.

Then, St. John wrote chapter 14 — and hope, coupled with joy and celebration, rose in their hearts again. Who can read of a song so glorious that only believers can sing it without desiring to join this choir? Who can hear of Jesus' deliverance of His saints from persecution without rejoicing in their salvation? Yes, the chapter ends with bad news, but the bad news is for those who have rejected Our Lord's salvation and have persecuted His people.

St. John's readers realized that God cared about them, giving them new hope in their dilemma. Regardless of the trials you face today, God has a new song prepared for His people.

At the end of chapter 13, St. John described Satan's total domination of the world by his minions, the 2 beasts. At long last, Satan will have his wish: a time to demonstrate his ability to rule over the earth. His rule will surpass any brutality ever witnessed by history. Even worse, remember that those who remain on the earth will choose to submit to this government.

St. John's original readers would have probably thought, given the clues regarding the Roman Empire in the chapter, that their pleas to God would fall on deaf ears. Hadn't St. John's vision predicted the complete domination of Rome over the Church?

Fortunately for them, St. John continued by describing a scene straight from the Old Testament. In Zechariah chapter 14, the prophet had predicted the return of the Lord to the Mount of Olives to fight for His people. In Revelation chapter 14, St. John saw Jesus standing on Mount Zion with the 144,000 sealed in chapter 7.

We must ask about the timing of this appearance. When will this occur in the chronology of the book? Jesus clearly has not returned yet; this comes in chapter 19. We know this hasn't happened prior to the gathering of the saints, for these believers appear to sing "before the throne" in heaven.

St. John seems to see a "flash forward" to a time when the redeemed 144,000

will join the believers of all ages in a song reserved specifically for Jesus' people. However, "no one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth."

Again, some believe the number "144,000" represents all the redeemed believers of all ages. Again, St. John seems to refer to a far more specific group. These believers "have not defiled themselves with women;" they have lived celibate lives and retained their virginity. Furthermore, they "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" as something of an honor guard.

Some will question why these believers, of all the ages, receive the honors given them. What about those believers who suffered in the first century A.D.? What about the martyrs of the ages? Why are these believers honored above all others?

We need to remember a major lesson of Scripture: none of us deserve salvation. None of us deserve forgiveness of our sins; none of us deserve eternal life in a new heaven and new earth. All rewards we receive in the eternal life to come will come by grace, not by merit.

Regardless, this chapter still gives us good news. Jesus cares about all His people; Jesus will return to the earth and bring them with Him. This chapter gives us a preview of what's to come in chapter 19.

We must remember that God remains in control throughout history. Even in the domination of Satan, the gospel will cover the earth. Yes, the Church has been removed; yes, the people on earth will refuse to submit to Jesus' reign. Still, an angel will fly over the entire earth, giving its inhabitants another opportunity to escape eternal wrath. The earth will receive yet another chance to "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

What of those who accept this opportunity? We learn in Scripture that doing so will result in the forfeiture of their lives. Only those willing to die for their faith will accept this offer.

Just as this chapter contains good news for the saints, it also holds bad news for those who refuse the offer of the gospel. Another angel follows the one spreading the gospel with horrible news: a prophecy for the fall of "Babylon." The name "Babylon" often stood in for Rome in early Church writings (cf. 1 Peter 5:13). Given what the early Church writers had to say about Rome, using the name "Babylon" was much safer. The beasts had established their rule here; now, Babylon's fall would come quickly.

Then comes even worse news for the unbelievers of the tribulation. A third angel will make the consequences of their decision clear:

"If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."

This warning clearly states the result of agreeing with the beast. Regardless of

anyone's belief to the contrary, anyone who rejects Jesus' offer of salvation will suffer eternally for their choice.

Following this bad news, the saints receive more good news: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'" This verse has formed the basis for funeral readings for centuries. St. John's readers understood that with their deaths — and the deaths of every saint following them — their eternal rest was assured, as was their rewards for the works they did on behalf of the gospel. While we will not deserve salvation, St. Paul clearly taught that we will receive rewards for our works.

Then comes a graphic example of the horror of Satan's reign. A "reaping" occurs that results in blood flowing "as high as a horse's bridle" for roughly 180 miles. This will only begin the worst of humanity's experience in our existence.

Do we see good news in this chapter? Of course we do.

First, we see that Jesus stands with His believers even in the midst of persecution. One day, we will stand with Him in victory over sin and death, never to suffer again.

We also see, again, that God remains in control of every situation. Much to Satan's fury, the gospel will continue to cover the earth even in his "day." While most of the world will submit to the beasts, many will refuse to submit to their rule, even at the cost of their lives.

This tells us something about God's love for us. God loves humanity, regardless of our fall. He will constantly reach out to us in love and will accept everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord, believing in His resurrection.

I mentioned earlier the new song sung by the 144,000. Think of everything God has done for you in this week. Doesn't He deserve your praise? Doesn't He deserve your worship? Don't wait until heaven to praise Him. Praise Him for His love; praise Him for His deliverance; praise Him because He is truly worthy of praise.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation:
Chapters 15-16: The Wrath Outpoured
21 October 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 15: 1 Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished. 2 And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. 3 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! 4 Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.” 5 After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, 6 and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. 7 And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, 8 and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

Sermon text: Revelation 16: 1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.” 2 So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. 3 The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea. 4 The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, “Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. 6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!” 7 And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!” 8 The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. 9 They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory. 10 The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish 11 and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds. 12 The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. 13 And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. 14 For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. 15 (“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays

awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!") 16 And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. 17 The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" 18 And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. 19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. 20 And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. 21 And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

"It is finished." This single verb in Greek, the last uttered by Jesus on the cross, declared His victory over sin and predicted His victory over death. In the first verse of chapter 15, St. John heard the same word He had heard from Jesus' lips, a word that signaled the end of sin's domination and the beginning of salvation for the earth. In this case, St. John heard the word in relation to God's wrath. Death's wrath ended when Jesus said, "It is finished;" God's wrath will end with 7 final plagues.

Most people today recoil from thinking of God's wrath. We like to think of God as a God of love, and justifiably so, for He is love. However, God's love for humanity includes His hatred of sin. The period of the beasts' rule will culminate sin's reign over earth, for Satan himself will rule the world through his minions. These plagues will signal the end of this rule and the beginning of the end for those who reject God's offers of salvation and deliverance from the results of their sins.

St. John begins his description of the plagues with a joyous description of worship before the throne of God. The believers who "conquered the beast" sing 2 songs that depict God's deliverance of His people and His reign over all creation.

The first song St. John mentions is the "song of Moses." In Exodus 15, Moses and the Hebrews sang a song to celebrate God's deliverance from the Egyptian army. When we read this song, we see several of God's characteristics, but the primary characteristic we see is God's work on behalf of His people. We see this again in the "song of the Lamb" beginning in verse 3. The redeemed sing of the "great and amazing" works of God, using words that come directly from the Song of Moses (Exodus 15:11).

The redeemed recognize God as the "Almighty" and the "King of the nations." In spite of Satan's rule on the earth, the believers sing of God's rule over all nations. In spite of Satan's best efforts, God remains in control of humanity. The redeemed prophesy of a time when "all nations will come and worship" God for His "righteous acts."

Following this worship, the angels emerge from the temple in heaven, and receive the "bowls" with God's wrath. The end of God's wrath will bring the end of Satan's rule, but it will seem like the end of the world to those unfortunate

enough to experience it. These plagues will dwarf anything the world has seen to this point, and given what we've read earlier in the book, that's really saying something.

Chapter 16 describes the plagues in graphic detail; you can read them in the sermon text. For now, we should realize several points about these plagues and their results.

First, notice that although the beasts claim the worship of humanity, they prove themselves powerless to stop the plagues or to allay their effects. Anyone who worshiped the beast would find their "god" impotent before the power of Almighty God.

Secondly, notice a repetitive phrase in these plagues: "They did not repent..." Each plague results in an opportunity for people to realize their need to repent of their sins and confess Jesus as Lord. God's offer of repentance will stand until the very end, but those who suffer for their sins at the end will refuse to accept this offer and the forgiveness that comes with it.

Also, notice how many of these plagues resemble the plagues of Egypt. We see boils and sores; water turned to blood; darkness; and hail. The earth has seen this before, although many people today dismiss Moses' records of the plagues on Egypt as fairy tales. The truthfulness of Moses' words will become vividly clear to anyone who reads them during this time of tribulation.

Lastly, notice that the plagues will set the stage for the final battle between the beasts and Jesus. The cities of the earth will fall under the weight of the hail; the city known as "Babylon" will experience its utter devastation; and the Euphrates River itself, the northern boundary of the land promised to Jacob's descendants, will dry in its bed to make way for the eastern armies to gather at Armageddon. The stage will be set for the return of earth's true King and the overthrow of the false ruler.

What do we see here that speaks to us today?

First, we see that although God is a God of love, He is still a God of justice. We tend to focus on His grace in our lives, but we cannot forget that He extends grace to us out of mercy. Our sins still required atonement, but Jesus Christ Himself provided atonement on the cross. We come before God as His children not because we are innocent, but because He has declared us justified before Him when we confess His Son as Lord of our lives.

Secondly, we see that God's omnipotence overcomes everything that Satan can muster against it. When we see temptation threatening us, we know we can call on God for help and receive help from a God who can deliver us.

We also see that God's offer of repentance stands for anyone who will accept it. Even when the Church has left the earth to escape the tribulation of chapter 16, the "everlasting gospel" of which we read in chapter 14 continues to resonate around the earth. Everyone will have an opportunity to receive this gospel and believe it in faith; anyone who accepts this offer will still find forgiveness.

We know the end will come. We know it's closer than when St. John first saw it in the first century A.D. If you have never accepted the everlasting gospel, call on Jesus today and escape the wrath to come. If you have already confessed

Jesus as Lord, rejoice with the redeemed as God prepares the earth for the return of her rightful King.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation
 Chapter 17: From Luxury to Ruin
 28 October 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 17:1-8: 1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk." 3 And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. 5 And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations." 6 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.* When I saw her, I marveled greatly. 7 But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. 8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit* and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

Sermon text: Revelation 17:9-18: 9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; 10 they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. 11 As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. 12 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. 13 These are of one mind and hand over their power and authority to the beast. 14 They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful." 15 And the angel* said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. 16 And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, 17 for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. 18 And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

We've already discussed one mystery in the book of the Revelation, but when we consider the contents of this book, we must confess that more than one passage mystifies us. Many of these passages will remain mystifying until Our Lord Himself returns from heaven and explains what we need to know.

Today's passage, however, becomes rather clear when we examine both Scripture and human history. The "woman" in chapter 17 has outlived every ancient civilization and will thrive until the final judgment of humanity. She has exhibited herself in every society, in every age. However, her end is near; her doom is certain. Jesus Himself will end her reign and break her grip on the world.

Following the seven plagues of chapter 16, one of the participating angels approached St. John and offered to show him the "judgment of the great prostitute... on many waters." This description, along with other clues in the chapter, give us a rather accurate description of her identity.

Throughout the Old Testament, God used the imagery of adultery to describe the idolatry of the Hebrews. In the book of Ezekiel, God used graphic descriptions of Israel's chasing after other gods. In the book of Hosea, God used Hosea's marriage to Gomer (possibly a temple prostitute) to describe Israel's broken relationship with their God and true love. Therefore, we can safely infer the "prostitute" represents a system that includes a false religion.

The term "on many waters" also describes the woman. This false religion does not affect only Israel; by the time of her judgment, the false religion has completely infiltrated the nations of the world. As we've seen previously, Jewish Scriptures use the sea to represent the chaotic Gentile nations.

Notice that this system encompasses every level of society and government. The "kings of the earth" have also fallen under her sway. Actually, the description we see in verse 2 tells us that the world's ruling elite have willingly joined forces with the false religion to exploit her control over humanity. This collaboration between the false religion and the ruling elite have enriched both at the expense of those they purport to serve. In this case, the false religion itself is arrayed in "purple and scarlet" and covered in riches.

We see, then, that the "prostitute" of chapter 17 refers to a universal system that, by this time in history, had completely overcome humanity. We shouldn't find ourselves surprised, as humans have always sought to worship anything but the true God.

In this chapter, both the woman and the "dwellers of the earth" are described as "drunk:" the woman with the "blood of the saints" and the dwellers of the earth with her "sexual immorality." Throughout the history of the Church, followers of false religions have actively opposed the testimony of the Gospel, even to the point of bloodshed. Today, we still hear of the martyrdom of believers around the world. Just as bad is the heady feeling of those who had rather worship in a false religion rather than accept the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the true King of Kings.

Verse 3 tells us the woman actually sits on a "beast" with 7 heads and 10 horns. The angel explains to St. John that the 7 heads represent both 7 "mountains" on which the woman sits as well as 7 "kings," 5 of which have already fallen by the first century A.D. Who are these kings, and do the mountains give us a clue?

We've already seen this terminology in the book. In chapter 13, we saw 7 "heads" referring to the 7 hills of Rome. In this case, not only do the mountains

point to Rome; so does the name of the woman. The woman's name is called a mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations." Remember that in both chapter 14 and chapter 16, St. John used the common "safe" term for Rome when he referred to her as "Babylon." This part of the vision reminds us of the political aspect of the system.

We should notice that the overall effect of this vision left St. John awestruck. Even after everything he had witnessed so far, this is the first time he describes himself as such. The effect of this woman and her seeming control of the earth left an apostle completely speechless!

The angel, however, remained unimpressed. "Why do you marvel?" said the angel. To the angel, a being who had dwelled eternally in the presence of the true God in heaven, saw nothing impressive in this woman. This should remind us of true love. When a man experiences the true love of a godly woman — a love that lasts a lifetime — the false love of infatuation holds no power over him.

The angel then described the woman's power and her future. It seems that cooperating with the world's rulers will not guarantee her success or even her existence. Those who live by the political process risk dying by it. Religions who attempt to control their adherents by legislation rather than by true spiritual transformation will find themselves destroyed when the legislators turn against the religion. At some point in the time of tribulation, the 10 "kings" that will rule for a short time will turn on the woman and destroy her. We'll read the description of her destruction next week in chapter 18.

At this point, we need to address a common belief among Protestants: that the woman in the chapter represents the Roman Catholic Church. This belief is too widespread to ignore.

We must admit the evidence of history: this world system has, at times, corrupted even the Church, as we'll see in tonight's sermon and in Wednesday night's study of the Reformation (Wednesday is Reformation Day). When Rome fell in A.D. 476, the Catholic Church remained the only organization in Western Europe with any ability to carry on the duties of government. However, this responsibility led to the mistaken belief that the Church could usher in the kingdom of God in this world on her own efforts.

The resulting cooperation with the secular rulers of the Middle Ages corrupted the Church beyond Satan's wildest dreams. For centuries, holy men in the Catholic Church fought to restore the spiritual vitality of the Church, to no avail. Godly men gathered in monasteries and worked in local areas to maintain the faith of those worshiping Christ in spirit and truth, but these efforts rarely reached Rome itself. In 1215, St. Dominic traveled to Rome to win papal approval for an order of preachers (we know them as the Dominicans). While there, it is said that the pope gave Dominic a tour of the Vatican's treasures. The pope turned to Dominic and placidly said, "no longer can Peter say, 'silver and gold have I none.'" Dominic is said to have replied, "yes, and no longer can he say, 'rise up and walk.'"

The temporal power of the Middle Ages, when popes ruled Europe as their own domain, sapped the spirituality of the Church. The Reformation we'll discuss tonight and Wednesday night did not occur in a vacuum, and Martin

Luther was not the only Reformer that saw the need for spiritual renewal. Not until the twentieth century did the Roman Catholic Church fully surrender the illusion of temporal power.

However, we must take care with trying to identify the prostitute specifically with any one organization. We know she will be powerful, rich, haughty, highly influential, and willing to do anything to maintain power until her destruction. For the first few hundred years after Revelation was written, Christians assumed the Roman Empire was the prostitute, for it combined both the cruelty of Rome's secular power with its idolatrous worship of the emperor. Unfortunately for generations of Christian exegetes, the Roman Empire had the audacity to implode from within, leaving the Church without a prostitute for several hundred years.

In that time, I'm quite certain someone decided that the Muslim empire fit the bill. (North Africa, after all, was Christian for at least 6 centuries before the Christians there were slaughtered and forcibly converted to Islam, a fact the Muslims screaming about the Crusades conveniently forget to mention.) To Russian Christians in the Middle Ages, the Mongol Horde would have looked like the harlot.

By the 1200's, there was no power that fit the description in Western Europe but the Roman Catholic Church, and as I said earlier, Rome had done plenty to endear herself to the description. The Ottomans were brutal to the Orthodox. Read some of the histories of the Constantinople patriarchate and see how many patriarchs were hanged or otherwise executed by Ottoman rulers simply in fits of temper.

First century Christians, placed in the 21st century, would probably think that Paris in the 1600's, London in the 1800's, and Washington, D.C. in our day would qualify. We, of course, recognize that Paris and London no longer fit the description. Time will tell whether our current political system will stand long enough to play a role in the end times.

Actually, given the fact that Satan is far worse than we give him credit, I dare say that whatever organization arises to fulfill St. John's vision will far exceed any brutality and depravity than anyone can attribute to the Roman Catholic Church. We interpret Scripture by what we know, and the interpretation of the Catholic Church as the prostitute has now been around for roughly 800 years, primarily because the Roman Catholic Church did a fairly good job of looking like the fulfillment over the centuries preceding and immediately after the Reformation. There's a reason why Baptists traditionally advocate separation of Church and State: the Church has never made a good, compassionate State. "My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus said.

Still, I doubt any of us can really imagine the horror Satan will unleash in the Whore of Revelation. If you think the Roman Catholic Church was bad in years gone by when it possessed temporal power, try to imagine what Satan will concoct when he has full reign during the Tribulation. I'd rather not think about it, and I'm certainly glad I won't be here to see it.

Given that trying to identify the prostitute is tricky business, is there anything in this chapter that applies to us today?

I see a critical lesson here, one that couldn't come at a better time for American Christians especially. We cannot rely on temporal power to accomplish spiritual renewal. For too many years, American believers have been deluded into thinking that political power will lead to a godly nation. History tells us that the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, the Puritans of England and America of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Protestants of the early twentieth centuries believed the same. Our goal in this world is spiritual transformation of every human being, one person at a time, one heart at a time.

On the other hand, we must realize that humans prefer darkness rather than light, as St. John said in his Gospel. Given the choice between accepting the Lordship of Christ and settling for false religions that merely give lip service to godliness, most will always choose the latter. However, as we see in chapters 17 and 18, any false religion will fall one day and leave its adherents comfortless.

Therefore, we have a major lesson for all believers. We must pray, "Thy kingdom come." However, the kingdom will not come by our political efforts; it will come in the hearts of those we know only through the Holy Spirit. Will you live before them in such a way to lead them to Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Savior?

If you've never believed in Jesus as Lord, know that whatever holds your allegiance today will one day reveal itself as a worthless fraud. Only Jesus Christ will stand the test of time. Confess Him as Lord today and experience the true love of God in your heart and life.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation
 Chapter 18: The Fall of Babylon
 4 November 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 18:1-10: 1 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. 2 And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast. 3 For all nations have drunk* the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality, and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living." 4 Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; 5 for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. 6 Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. 7 As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning, since in her heart she says, 'I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.' 8 For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her." 9 And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. 10 They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, "Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come."

Sermon text: Revelation 18:11-24: 11 And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, 12 cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.* 14 "The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your delicacies and your splendors are lost to you, never to be found again!" 15 The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, 16 "Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! 17 For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste." And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off 18 and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, "What city was like the great city?" 19 And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out, "Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in a single hour she has been laid waste. 20 Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!" 21 Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea,

saying, "So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more;

22 and the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters, will be heard in you no more, and a craftsman of any craft will be found in you no more, and the sound of the mill will be heard in you no more, 23 and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more, for your merchants were the great ones of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery. 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth."

Last week, we read about the angel's identification of Babylon and the promise that Babylon would meet a sudden end. Satan has always maintained and promoted a false religion in competition to true, spiritual worship of God.

In chapter 18, we read of heaven's praise at Babylon's destruction. The false religion and the corrupt world system that supports it have oppressed humanity for nearly our entire existence, sowing death and misery in their wake. If we see nothing else in this chapter we cannot miss a joyful fact: God's keeping a record. God will repay Babylon above what she has earned for her sins. People of God, Babylon will fall, to the lament of those who joined with her and to the celebration of the saints who suffered at her hands.

Following the vision of chapter 17, St. John saw a "mighty angel" sweep over the earth. Again, as in chapter 14, Satan will find himself impotent to stop a messenger from heaven from declaring God's victory in his kingdom.

The angel told the world that Babylon had fallen, and then told why: "She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast." Babylon had descended from the pinnacle of opposition to God to the dwelling for demons themselves.

Secondly, the angel told the world that "all nations" had joined Babylon in oppressing humanity. Contrary to popular belief, the world has never seen a truly righteous secular government. Not even Israel herself, under righteous kings such as David and Josiah, enjoyed a purely righteous government with no corrupt officials. Every government has succumbed to the temptations of greed and violence. Just as badly, greed has driven businesses and merchants to cheat their customers and creditors for millennia. Pride and greed, Babylon's two greatest weapons, have also been known as two of the traditional deadly sins. These sins will eventually lead to the ruin of the world system they spawned and support.

We may think that true believers will always recognize the false system and oppose it. However, St. John then heard a warning that may have surprised him as it surprises us: "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues...." Anyone who has ever participated in commerce knows the temptation to do as their competitors do, even if it's immoral. We must remember that we live according to a higher standard at all times. For us, the question isn't whether a practice is legal, but whether it reflects God's

standard. Every decision we make must reflect the standard of God's righteousness.

This voice continued by warning believers that Babylon will receive "double for her deeds." When we consider the wickedness of Satan's reign at the end of history, we should tremble to think that the world will receive double what she has earned.

Satan's kingdom will seem invincible; we read in chapter 13 that his kingdom will even overcome the saints. However, in this chapter we read that his kingdom, represented by Babylon, will face cataclysmic destruction "in a single hour." Satan's greatest efforts will fail miserably before God's omnipotent righteous judgment.

Again, we read that the "merchants of the earth" will mourn Babylon's fall. I remember a line from a movie called "Wall Street:" "Greed is good." We all recognize the necessity of profit in our capitalistic system, but we must never confuse legitimate profit with greed for immoral gain. All those who had profited from Satan's reign would mourn the fall of his system.

Not everyone will mourn this destruction. Beginning in verse 20, we find a celebration in heaven and the reason for that celebration: Babylon's consistent persecution of the people of God.

God's prophets railed against greed and oppression in the Old Testament. Read the books of Hosea, Amos, and Micah for examples of God's anger when society tramples on the defenseless. The Church actually prohibited lending at interest for centuries, trying to remove the temptation lenders faced to oppress debtors for their own greed. However, pride and greed have, thus far, always won, even in societies and systems that supposedly prohibited profit. (Anyone who studies the socialist society of the former Soviet Union will find plenty of examples.) God's people must always stand for justice and protection for those who can least afford it.

Do we see any lessons for us today?

First, we see that pride and greed will always bring judgment. Babylon's great sin in Genesis chapter 11 rested in the pride of humanity to think they could both defy God's command to spread across the earth and to attempt to build a tower to heaven. Any system that defies God's righteousness will always suffer judgment. This includes, in the end, any society that oppresses the defenseless.

Secondly, we must not fall into the temptation of participating actively in this system. We must live to a higher standard, a standard that reflects God's priorities in society. While some may believe that living according to God's standard puts us at a disadvantage, we must remember that God will care for His people and will one day reward those who remain faithful to His standards.

It may seem, at times, that Babylon towers invincible over the world. At the end of history, it will seem as if Babylon will ultimately conquer the people of God and remove all mercy from the world. However, Babylon's fall began with sin's defeat at Calvary. Jesus Christ, the rightful King of earth, will destroy unrighteous Babylon and establish His righteous reign.

Are you ready for this victory? Have you confessed Jesus as Lord of your life and are now living according to His standard? Jesus is coming again. If you're

ready for this return, and the victory He will bring, read chapter 19. Next week, we'll celebrate the return of the true King of Creation.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation
Chapter 19: The Return of the King
11 November 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 19:1-10: 19:1 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, 2 for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants." 3 Once more they cried out, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever." 4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" 5 And from the throne came a voice saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great." 6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; 8 it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." 10 Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

Sermon text: Revelation 19:11-21: 11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. 13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. 15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. 17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, 18 to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." 19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. 20 And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its

image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. 21 And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

J.R.R. Tolkien gave us the books before Peter Jackson gave us the movies. *The Lord of the Rings* series tells the story of the near-victory of evil over a weakened kingdom divided for centuries. After three millennia ruled only by stewards, the kingdom witnessed the return of a legitimate king to the throne of man.

This story remains a favorite decades after Tolkien's writing, primarily because we all empathize with the story in some way. We all see terrible things happen in the world and believe someone should right the wrongs. We all sense that if the right person were in charge, much of what the world endures would have been avoided.

Unfortunately, the Revelation tells us that things will grow far worse before the rightful King returns to restore a broken world and humanity. Satan himself will rule through his servants, the beast and false prophet. However, the end will come suddenly with the return of Jesus Christ and the complete annihilation of Satan's armies. Nothing will prevent the return of Our Lord to His kingdom.

Thus far, we've seen rebellious humanity choose evil and pay the price with the great plagues of Chapter 16. Then, the false religious and commercial system of the world suffer catastrophic destruction in chapter 17. We read of heaven's song at her fall in chapter 18.

The song of Revelation chapter 18 continues in chapter 19. As with the worship we've read before in the book, all the redeemed erupt in spontaneous praise at the destruction of the system that has persecuted believers of all times since its beginning in Genesis 11.

The redeemed sing, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants." The word "hallelujah" is Hebrew for "praise the LORD!" The redeemed praise God for the salvation He extends to us. He has revealed His glory and power throughout this book. Remember that even when Satan rules the world, God continues to exhibit His power in the world. God's "judgments are true and just;" humanity will reap its due reward for choosing pride and evil over His righteous lifestyle. The injustices suffered by God's people will return on the wicked of the earth.

Verse 3 reminds us that the wicked will suffer eternally for their choice. "The smoke" of the false system and her worshipers will go "up forever and ever."

Then, in verses 4-8, we hear one of the greatest songs in all history. The 24 elders and 4 living creatures join the song; a voice comes from heaven urging all to "Praise our God;" and then, in verses 6-8, we find the inspiration of George Frederic Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus:" "Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth." It is said that when Handel emerged from his room after writing this piece, he proclaimed, "I do believe I have seen all of Heaven before me, and the great God Himself."

St. John himself was so overwhelmed at this and the proclamation of the

marriage supper of the Lamb that he fell in awe before the angel accompanying him. The angel had to remind him, "I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God."

Then — finally — we see what Christianity has proclaimed since our beginning: The return of our King.

St. John saw a truly awesome sight. Heaven itself split open above the earth, and Jesus Himself returned on a white horse. The white horse in chapter 6 represented the Antichrist, the false Christ of prophecy. This time, the rider of the white horse is the real Christ, returning to claim His throne.

St. John calls Jesus "Faithful and True." Jesus had promised He would never forsake His saints and that He would return one day. We know He has kept His promise of staying with us always; one day, He will return and prove His word as true.

Jesus will come to rule "in righteousness;" finally, humanity will find itself held accountable to God's standards. He will "judge and make war;" this time, sin's judgment will result in its destruction. His very robe demonstrates the nature of this return. In His first coming, Jesus' robe was marred with His blood after His scourging. This time, Jesus' robe is dipped in blood to symbolize the deaths of His enemies.

He needs no weapon; nor do the armies who accompany Him. The words of Christ will "strike down the nations." He will fulfill Psalm 2, where David prophesied He would "rule [the nations] with a rod of iron."

Note that He does not return alone. "The armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure," come with Him. What a glorious return to earth for the saints of God! We will return to an earth destroyed by sin, but we will witness its re-creation by its Creator. In this world, we constantly face temptation; in the world to come, we will live in complete righteousness. In this world, we face weakness and fear; in the world to come, we will rule in the strength of Christ Himself.

While St. John saw that Jesus has "a name written that no one knows but himself," one name borne by Christ clearly appears to all creation: "King of kings and Lord of lords." In ancient history, the kings of Persia called themselves "Shah han Shah," or "king of kings." However, when Jesus claims the title, He will truly hold all the power of all kings on earth. Jesus alone is worthy of this exalted title.

Jesus' return, while glorious to His saints, will bring doom to the armies opposing Him. An angel called all birds to participate in "the great supper of God." In verse 9, the angel with St. John had said, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." The participants in the "great supper," however, are cursed, because the birds will "eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." What a horrible end!

Yet, isn't this a great lesson for the world today? Jesus died to redeem us; those who choose sin remain in bondage. Sin sends forth its armies to die needlessly; Jesus Himself died that those in His army may live forever. One day,

Jesus will serve His saints at the marriage supper, where we will consume the best heaven has to offer. Sin, on the other hand, consumes those who serve it, leaving only misery and eternal death.

As I observe our society and the sins we tolerate, I've come to understand that we really don't comprehend the depravity of sin. We don't fully recognize its horrific consequences; we overlook its disastrous effects on everything it touches. Only at the end of history will we finally see just how badly a righteous God hates sin and the lengths to which He will go to end it.

Jesus will waste no time fighting any battle; He will simply speak, and His words — the "sword" that comes from His mouth — will destroy all His enemies. The beast and false prophet will experience instant judgment as they find themselves plucked from the earth and thrown into the "lake of fire." Their armies will die instantly at Jesus' word, and the birds will eat their corpses. Thus ends the greatest tribulation the world will ever see; Thus ends Satan's most successful attempt to rule over the earth. Jesus speaks; sin loses. "Hallelujah!"

We see a question in this chapter: Why wait to rejoice at Jesus' victory? Throughout the book, the saints in heaven have rejoiced at every event that unfolds in God's plan to establish Jesus' rule. Everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord, believing that God raised Him from the dead, experiences a spiritual birth that signals Jesus' victory over sin. We receive the Holy Spirit in our hearts to guide us as well as the promise of eternal life. When you confess Jesus as Lord, you become a part of God's fulfillment of His plan.

Furthermore, we can live victoriously in life. If Jesus can overcome death, destroy armies, and establish righteousness in all the earth, He can certainly overcome sin in our lives. Jesus Christ is Faithful and True. He will keep His promises never to forsake us and to return to reign in glory one day.

When the *Messiah* was performed before King George II of England in 1742, he was so moved by the "Hallelujah Chorus" that he stood in honor of the Lord God omnipotent, a tradition we continue today. One day, Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, will return to reign. The King will claim His throne. One day, all creation will rejoice at the return of the King, the Lord Omnipotent.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation
Chapter 20: The Final Judgment
18 November 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 20:1-6: 1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. 4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

Sermon text: Revelation 20:7-15: 15 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, 10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. 11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Perfect peace. Perfect justice. Perfect society. Something in us seeks perfection in anything we do. Although we've always lived in a flawed world, we still hold the dream of a perfect world. Will we ever see it?

As St. John's vision continued, he saw the fulfillment of our deepest desire. When Jesus returns to earth, He will bring His saints with Him. The resulting reign on earth will demonstrate the joy of submission to Jesus and the fallacy of rejecting Him as Lord.

Unfortunately, this glorious chapter ends with a troubling event: a judgment in which those who have rejected Jesus as Lord receive their just punishment. We must accept the reality of judgment and punishment. Justice exists, and everyone will receive it. Only those who accept Jesus' payment for their sins will escape this judgment. Those who choose to reject Him as Lord will find themselves paying the penalty themselves.

Fortunately, this event also signals the final curtain on sin in the book and in humanity's existence. Sin disappears with its followers into eternal separation from God, leaving the believers in Jesus Christ to enjoy a joyful eternity basking in the pure love of God without any limitations imposed by sin or fleshly limits. We will experience a relationship with God unknown since the Garden of Eden.

Chapter 19 ended with the battle of Armageddon, where Satan's armies suffered instantaneous defeat at the word of Jesus Christ. Jesus' armies who returned with Him never had to lift a finger to participate in the battle; Jesus spoke, and Satan's legions disintegrated before his very eyes.

This event began a period of unknown peace and prosperity for all the earth: the millennial reign of Jesus Christ. For 1,000 years, Jesus will rule the earth with all His believers ruling under Him.

According to St. John, we will serve as "priests of God and of Christ" during this time. God had always sought to form His people into a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 1:6). We will finally fulfill this destiny in the 1,000 year reign of Jesus Christ on the earth.

How will this period happen? We find in verse 1 that following the battle of Armageddon, an angel will bind Satan for 1,000 years. For 1,000 years, the tempter will suffer imprisonment while humanity enjoys a respite from his work.

This passage gives us a good idea of how to interpret the 1,000 year reign. Early in Church history, most of the Church believed Jesus would literally rule over the earth for 1,000 years. St. Augustine, writing in the fifth century, introduced the idea that the 1,000 years represented the period following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a time when the Church would eventually spread to encompass all the world. St. Augustine reached this conclusion by allegorizing the number "1,000."

However, an examination of history since the Holy Spirit's coming amply demonstrates that Satan has remained unbound during this time. St. Augustine didn't witness the Islamic conquest of Christian Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries, the Viking raids of the ninth and tenth centuries, the Mongol invasion of the fourteenth century, or the horrific wars of the twentieth century. No one with even a vague familiarity of history could believe that the Church has reigned as priests over the earth, that Satan has been bound in this time. History since A.D. 33 demonstrates plenty of evidence that in spite of his defeat at Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, Satan has actively participated in the hearts of humanity.

Yet, even in spite of Jesus' literal reign in the period of the millennium, in spite of the absence of the tempter, some people will chafe at Jesus' rule over their lives. Humanity, even in the absence of Satan, will still succumb to the temptation to rule their own lives. At the end of the millennial reign, Satan will

find plenty of people awaiting his return to join Him in rebellion against Jesus. Satan will bring the nations “from the four corners” of the earth, “Gog and Magog,” to attempt an overthrow of Jesus’ rule.

Who are Gog and Magog? We find Magog mentioned first in Genesis 10 as a son of Japheth. Japheth’s descendants immigrated north following the debacle at Babylon in Genesis 11. Following this reference in Genesis 10, we next find Magog mentioned in Ezekiel 38 and 39, where Gog and Magog attack Israel only to suffer utter destruction through God’s direct intervention on behalf of His people.

Regardless of whether Ezekiel’s vision refers to another destruction of Gog and Magog (some believe Ezekiel 38-39 will be fulfilled prior to the events of the Revelation), the outcome is the same. Gog and Magog, in an army so numerous it resembles “the sand of the sea,” will gather around Jerusalem to overthrow Jesus and His saints. In another verse of God’s song of deliverance, their defeat will be instantaneous: “fire came down from heaven and consumed them.” Jesus will plan no battle in His defense; He will send forth no saints from the city to attack the innumerable army. The army will gather, God will intervene, and the army will suffer annihilation. The end!

Following this defeat, Satan will find himself thrown into the lake of fire with the beast and false prophet. We will never see Satan again.

This defeat signals the ultimate end of sin. St. John next saw a “great white throne.” The One seated on this throne is so terrible in appearance and majesty that “earth and sky” will flee. Imagine the terror of those who find themselves before this throne, especially when they comprehend that their own sins and their choice to reject God’s mercy brought them to this place.

St. John noticed several books, among them the book of life. The actions of the dead, all faithfully recorded in their lives, will be read to them; they will see from their own actions that they justly deserve the fate awaiting them. The book of life, however, will prove the ultimate judge. Anyone whose name “was not found written in the book of life... was thrown into the lake of fire.” This fate is so terrible St. John referred to it as the “second death.”

Some will try to say, “If God were really merciful, He would forgive all their sins and let them into heaven. He would make some way for everyone to enter heaven.” Remember that God sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to the cross to pay for the sins of the world. Even before Jesus’ sacrifice, St. Paul said in the first chapter of Romans that all creation spoke to the testimony of God’s standard. Everyone in history will have received a chance to live to God’s standard. Everyone who finds himself in the lake of fire will be there on his own actions, by his own choice. As C.S. Lewis put it in *The Great Divorce*:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.

On the other hand, while those who choose eternal separation from God receive their just reward, the saints enter their glorious reward they will receive

by grace. We'll discuss our eternity next week in chapter 21.

What does this chapter tell us?

First, this chapter tells us to persevere in temptation. Satan suffered his defeat at the cross, and while he continues to tempt humanity now, we will one day see how life can be without his activities. We will enjoy 1,000 years of Jesus' presence on earth, with all the peace and joy He will bring.

Secondly, we should understand that some people will choose their own way even in a perfect world. We shouldn't be surprised when people choose not to accept the lordship of Christ, but we should also continue to tell them of the joy we experience when we confess Him as Lord and receive the benefits of His atonement for our sins.

Perhaps you're reading this and have never realized the consequences of rejecting Jesus as Lord of your life. You should probably read another sermon I delivered at New Hope, *The Choice of Eternity*. Once you see the consequences, I urge you to confess Jesus as Lord and escape the coming judgment.

Lastly, we should rejoice that in spite of individual defeats in our lives, Satan will one day face His ultimate defeat. We will see Satan and his followers disappear for all eternity while we enter a period of ecstasy and joy that will never end. Chapter 21 will describe, as much as St. John could tell, what we will experience. Join us next week, on the Sunday of Christ the King, when we read of the eternal presence of Christ among His people.

Pentecost 2007, Series on the Revelation

Sunday of Christ the King: The Glorious Wedding

25 November 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 21:1-8: 1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Sermon text: Revelation 21:9-27: 9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. 15 And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare; its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. 18 The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass. 22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to

shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

This is the last Sunday of Pentecost, the Sunday of Christ the King. On this day, we celebrate Jesus' victory over sin and His reign over all creation.

Few passages in Scripture speak to Jesus' rule like this chapter in Revelation. Last week, we read of Jesus' millennial reign on the earth and of His final defeat of Satan at the judgment before the great white throne. In this chapter, we read of the arrival of the "holy city," known as the "Bride of Christ." The descent of New Jerusalem onto a newly re-created earth signals the beginning of a glorious eternity for Jesus and His saints.

In verse 1, St. John tells us that he saw "a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." At this point in the canon of Scripture, we see the final erasure of the sin that marred the first creation in Genesis 3. Every historical passage of Scripture testifies to the disastrous effects of sin on humanity. Even worse, our own lives tell us of the effects of sin. Without sin, we would never experience death. The book of the Revelation tells us of Satan's final fury on earth the wreck it left behind.

Therefore, God will complete recreate His creation. This new creation will never suffer from sin. This new creation will have no "sea." In Revelation 13, the beast Satan used to rule the world arose from the sea. In the Old Testament, the sea represented chaos among the Gentile nations. In the new creation, chaos and sin will never appear to ruin what God creates.

Next, St. John saw the "new Jerusalem" descend "from God" to dwell on the new earth. This "new Jerusalem" resembled a "bride adorned for her husband." In chapter 19, St. John first referred to the Church as the "Bride" of Christ (19:7). This passage will introduce the rich imagery of verse 9 and chapter 22.

Two things should be said about this imagery.

First, this imagery tells us why marriage is so important to God. Throughout Scripture, idolatry is referred to as "adultery" against God. God created us for relationship, and the greatest relationship between humans is the marriage relationship. Loving marriages reflect Jesus' love for His Church.

Secondly, this imagery reminds us that God has chosen Israel as His people and Jerusalem as the place where His name dwells on earth in a unique way. We are told in the Psalms to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122). God said that He would put "his name" in Jerusalem (2 Kings 21:4). It is no mystery that all three religions based in some way on Old Testament events holds Jerusalem dear to their beliefs. In the millennial reign, Jesus will rule from Jerusalem. God will defend Jerusalem in chapter 20. In chapter 21, Jerusalem serves as the image of the Church, the Bride of Christ.

St. John then heard the voice of God Himself speak: "Behold, the dwelling

place of God is with man." The word for "dwelling place" literally means "tabernacle." In the wilderness wanderings and in the time of the First Temple, the Shikinah glory of God dwelled in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle and then in the Temple. "He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." All those who dwell in this city will experience relationship with God as Adam and Eve in the Garden. This "dwelling place" will allow us to experience the pure presence of God in a way unknown to us today.

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." When the old creation disappears, the effects of sin will disappear with it. We will never again have reason to grieve; we'll never again experience pain. What a glorious blessing!

Then comes one of the greatest promises of Scripture: "Behold, I am making all things new." Everything that has weighted us in this life will fade away. New life; new creation; new relationship with God and His Son Jesus Christ. If you've ever wanted to erase everything you've done, this will be the greatest blessing of your life.

Then, St. John heard, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." This creation began with Jesus Christ (John 1; Colossians 1); this creation will end in the new life that will last for eternity.

Given this new creation, this new life with Jesus, can anything go wrong in this creation? Only for those who will miss it. "The cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars" will miss the blessings of this joyous life. The word for "cowardly" refers to those who fail to confess their allegiance to Christ out of fear of persecution. The others in this list demonstrate by their actions that they never confessed Jesus as Lord and accepted His standards for life. These will experience eternal punishment in the lake of fire as told in chapter 20.

Next comes one of the greatest descriptions of glory in Scripture. Beginning in verse 9, an angel takes St. John to see the great city, the New Jerusalem, coming down. The vision contrasts directly with the last "woman" we saw in chapter 17. In that chapter, St. John traveled to the desert to see a "prostitute;" this time, he goes to a mountaintop to see a Bride. The prostitute of chapter 17 is depicted by the city of Babylon; the Bride of chapter 21 is depicted by Jerusalem. The prostitute of chapter 17 represented the false religious system to which the world willingly surrendered; the Bride of chapter 21 represents the faithful Church that worshiped its Lord in spite of persecution and hardship. The prostitute of chapter 17 suffered sudden and complete destruction; the Bride will have enjoyed the protection of her Lord and will spend eternity in blissful relationship with Jesus Christ.

The new city of St. John's description completely dwarfs any city in human experience in beauty and joy. The city's size demonstrates its ability to contain all the faithful of all ages (it's 1,500 miles square). Its perfect dimensions remind us of the dimensions of the Holy of Holies, which also resembled a square. Its gates are named after the tribes of Israel, again reminding us of God's special tie

to His chosen people. Its foundations are named for the Apostles. These names remind us of our spiritual foundation in the faith of Israel and the teachings of the Apostles after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The beauty of this city — pearls for gates, expensive stones for foundation, and pure gold for streets — defies the imagination. This is the city God has prepared for our eternity.

Notice that although the city has gates, the gates never close. Following His defense of Jerusalem in chapter 20, God will never have to defend this city. The gates never shut. Instead, all who worship Jesus will enjoy the safety of Almighty God.

This city has a unique feature unknown to human cities: This city will have no place of worship. Instead, “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.” God Himself will dwell here, as will His Son, Jesus Christ. The entire city will serve as the Holy of Holies, and all who dwell there will experience the joy heretofore unknown to any but the high priests of ancient Israel. Jesus will reign over all creation from a capital city beyond our imagination.

This description of our eternal dwelling place should lift our spirits beyond anything this world can provide. This city will provide for us beyond anything we can imagine. This city will be our reward for our acceptance of Jesus as Lord of our lives and our faithful service in that allegiance.

Can this vision help us in our lives today? Of course it can! Today, we celebrate the reign of Christ in our lives. While His reign rightfully brings obligations, His Spirit helps us live righteously before Him. His Church, the Bride of this chapter, provides us fellowship with others who understand our trials and pains as well as the joy of our salvation. These benefits give us strength in our lives, peace in our trials, and comfort in our losses.

The Christ we worship and serve today will bring us to a place beyond our wildest dreams. Everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord in this life will find eternal joy and bliss in His righteous reign that will never end.

First Sunday of Advent, Series on the Revelation
 Conclusion, Chapter 22: "I Come Quickly"
 2 December 2007

Scripture reading: Revelation 22:1-11: 22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. 6 And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." 7 "And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book." 8 I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, 9 but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God." 10 And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

Sermon text: Revelation 22:12-21: 12 "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay everyone for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. 16 "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." 17 The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. 18 I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. 20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

KJV: 21 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

This sermon concludes the series on the Revelation. We've read of glorious worship services, vivid visions, cataclysmic events, war on a cosmic scale, and the crushing defeat of sin and death by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We've seen

the second coming of Jesus Christ, reveled in His victories, and celebrated Satan's final condemnation.

Today, on the First Sunday of Advent, we begin the Church year by concluding our time in the Revelation. The book of the Revelation ends with a promise very relevant in the Advent season: "I come quickly." Jesus' last words in Scripture bring us hope that His return is imminent!

In the previous chapter, St. John described the beautiful city in which we will spend eternity with Jesus Christ. The description continues into chapter 22.

The angel that showed the holy city to St. John next showed him the "river of the water of life" "flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb." In his Gospel, St. John recorded Jesus as calling Himself "living water." In chapter 21, Jesus promised to give the "water of life" to everyone who wished it. Now, we find a river of this water coming from the throne of God Himself. This river will never run dry. For all eternity, those who wish to drink from its water will find it there for the taking.

Furthermore, the angel showed St. John a tree, the "tree of life." Somehow, this tree grows on both side of the river. We last read of the tree of life in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. In Genesis 3, God placed an angel at the entrance to the Garden to prevent humanity from eating of this tree and living forever in sin. Now, as with the river of the water of life, we will have constant access to this tree.

This tree will constantly bear fruit; it will never go fruitless. Its leaves will heal nations. Note that the Church today is called to bear fruit; we should seek to provide spiritual healing to everyone in our lives.

Do you see a theme emerging? New bodies; living water; and a tree providing constant healing all reinforce the reality of an eternity of joy and immortality. We will never experience pain or sorrow or sickness or death; we will experience an ideal life in a perfect environment.

This perfection extends to the entire new city: "No longer will there be anything accursed... Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." Nothing unclean will ever enter this city; those within will never experience temptation or suffer from sin any more.

Everyone in this city will dwell in the ultimate Holy of Holies. "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads." We will worship God forever, seeing His face as no human could ever stand in this creation. Like the saints in the time of tribulation, we will be marked with God's name. We will clearly bear His identity. We bear His name in this life in our hearts; in the life to come, we will bear His name where everyone can see it.

As before, St. John found himself overwhelmed to the point of wanting to worship anyone; in this case, any angel will do! Again, the angel warns St. John of the overwhelming message of time: "Worship God." Everything we do in this life and in all eternity should glorify God, for He is truly worthy of praise.

Jesus reminds St. John and His Church of His glorious identity: "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." Therefore, Jesus, the

fulfillment of all Messianic prophecies of Scripture, also deserves our praise as the Son of God.

Now, look at the key words of this chapter. Three times in this chapter, the last of the canon, Jesus says, "I am coming soon" (KJV "I come quickly"). A favorite author of mine has a saying: "What I say 3 times is true." Rarely in Scripture do we see anyone repeat something 3 times, much less 3 times in a single chapter. We should understand Jesus' message: He is coming soon! How important is this message?

First, the angel tells St. John, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near." Even in the first century A.D., Jesus' coming was seen as imminent. The Church must continually proclaim the message of Jesus' imminent return.

Secondly, notice that the Church must preserve the message of Jesus' return. St. John warned his readers, including us: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." Remember that while this warning applies only to the words of the Revelation, its inclusion in the last book of the Christian canon reminds us of our responsibility to live according to the words of all Scripture. No one who reads this book would wish to experience the plagues of this book; nor would anyone reading of the joy and beauty of the new creation would wish to miss it.

What a glorious ending to the canon! What a glorious ending to our Scriptures! Jesus promises that He will return, and His return will begin our unending life in a new creation .

Meanwhile, in this life, we should heed the lessons of the Revelation.

First, we must understand that Jesus expects His people to live to a higher standard. His words to His churches remind us that His judgment will begin with His people.

Secondly, we should understand that the war with evil, while resolved decisively at the cross with Jesus' crucifixion and at the grave with Jesus' resurrection, continues unabated in this creation. The time will come with it seems that evil will prevail, primarily because humanity will always, as a whole, choose its own way over God's.

However, while evil will often seem invincible, we must never forget that God maintains complete control over all creation. Jesus will return to rule on this earth and demonstrate to proud humanity the peace and justice we would experience if we had chosen to accept God's rule rather than our own way.

Lastly, we must never forget the lesson of worship in this book. Anyone who reads this book and ignores the spectacular hymns — including the "Alleluia" that so inspired George Frederic Handel's piece in the Messiah — misses the greatest glimpse of eternity we will ever have in this life. We will spend all eternity singing the songs of the Revelation, along with other songs beyond St. John's ability to describe or beyond our ability to imagine.

As for you, where do you stand with the lessons of this book? Do you eagerly

anticipate the return of Jesus as your Lord, or do you dread the return of your Judge? St. Paul tells us that all who confess Jesus as Lord, believing God raised Him from the dead, will be “saved,” meaning both eternal salvation from sin, peace with God in this life, and deliverance from the dreadful judgments of this book.

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.” The last word of the canon, in Hebrew, comes from the verb meaning “to be faithful.” Christ is faithful; He will return. May the grace of Christ continue to bless us all; and may His coming — and the blessings He will bring— come quickly.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

**Heavenly Hymns in the Temporal Temple:
A Comparison of the Songs of the Revelation
with the
Worship Hymns of the Psalms**

John Alexander
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Introduction

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.*1*” With these words, the Psalmist known as St. John the Apostle introduces his readers to the greatest descriptions of heavenly praise recorded in Scripture. These words remind the reader of the introduction to another book of heavenly praise: the book of Psalms. The Psalter begins by telling us, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*2*”

The hymns recorded in the book of Psalms cover a period of nearly 1,000 years, dating from the time of Moses to the time of the Jewish exile from Jerusalem. During this time, God inspired numerous authors to compose hymns of worship and lament that formed the basis for Israelite worship during the time of Solomon’s Temple. After Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity and rebuilt the Temple, the Psalms again became the “hymn book” of Jewish worship within the sanctuary.

In c. 90 A.D., St. John experienced a vision in which he witnessed worship as it was meant to be: praise at the very throne of heaven, where the heavenly creatures and the saints praise God for eternity. Some of the creatures St. John saw obviously pre-dated time itself. The songs of these creatures originated in eternity past and will continue into eternity present.

Is there a link between the praise in heaven and the Temple praise recorded in the Psalms? Only God Himself could inspire the praise of heaven. God Himself inspired the authors of the Psalms. Therefore, the hymns of Psalms share a direct relation with the hymns St. John witnessed in his vision. Beginning in chapter 1, the book of Revelation is saturated with words, phrases, and images drawn directly from the Psalms.

This paper seeks to examine the links between the Psalms and the songs St. John recorded in the Revelation. As the Church begins to re-acquaint herself with the message of Psalms, believers will gain a new appreciation of the hymns recorded in the book of Revelation. Hopefully, believers will also begin to realize there is far more to Revelation than the cryptic prophecies on which so many Christians have focused in the past century. Revelation is more than a code book to earth’s future; it is also a reflection of the praise we will offer to God throughout eternity.

Hymns in Revelation

Revelation contains numerous instances where the characters of St. John’s vision erupt into spontaneous praise. The hymns sung reveal the eternal character of God in a way that directly reflects the revelation of God in the Psalter: His holiness, His glory, His majesty, and His deliverance of His people from the godless.

The Song of the Four Creatures

St. John’s vision shifts from the isle of Patmos to heaven itself in chapter 4. In

chapter 4, we find the first hymns in the book. St. John sees 24 elders seated on thrones around the throne of God. These elders are joined by 4 creatures in continuous praise offered to God:

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

These songs contain references to the very character of God as described in the Psalms.

First, the hymns describe God as "holy, holy, holy." St. John's readers would rightly remember Isaiah's vision in the Temple when they heard the threefold "holy." However, the references to holiness of God permeate the Psalms. In Psalm 99, God is described as "holy" in verses 3, 5, and 9. Psalms 103, 105, 106, and 145 encourage worshipers to "bless His holy name,*3*" "give thanks to His holy name,*4*" and "glory in (literally "praise") His holy name*5*."

Of all the Psalms, Psalm 93 best matches the praise of the creatures and elders. The creatures and elders declare that God is the "Lord God Almighty." The Greek word *pantokrator* refers to God's omnipotent power and universal rule. Psalm 93 states that "The LORD reigns;... he has put on strength as his belt.*6*" The creatures and elders say God is the One "who was and is and is to come;" in Psalm 93, the Psalmist says of God that "Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.*7*" The creatures and elders state that God is worthy "to receive glory and honor and power;" Psalm 93 says that the LORD "is robed in majesty."

The Songs of the Creatures, Elders, and Host of Heaven

In Revelation 5:7-14, the Lamb comes forth to open the scroll sealed with 7 seals. St. John had despaired that no one was found “worthy” to open the scroll by breaking the seals. One of the elders told him to “weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.*8*” St. John then sees the Lamb, Jesus Christ, appear to open the scroll.

When Jesus comes forward to open the scroll, the elders and creatures again burst into praise. St. John records the scene and the song:

When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.*9*

Psalm 98 spoke of a time when God’s salvation would encompass all nations. The Psalm begins with the words, “Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things!*10*” St. John heard a new song in heaven. The Psalm continues by saying, “The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.”*11* In his time, St. John had seen the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire, far beyond the site of Jesus’ crucifixion in Jerusalem. The one “who sits on the throne” and “the Lamb” rule over all creation. Psalm 98:4 calls for “all the earth” to “make a joyful noise unto the LORD.”

Psalm 22 — the Psalm most closely linked to Jesus’ crucifixion — also contains a prophecy of the nations worshipping God. Psalm 22 declares that “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.*12*”

The Psalms had foretold that God would be worshipped by redeemed from “tribe and language and people and nation.” St. John witnesses the fulfillment of this prophecy in his vision in Revelation.

Revelation 6: the Lament of the Slain

Revelation 6 contains a disturbing episode. St. John describes what he saw:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before

you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Does this cry serve as the Revelation's lament song?

Lament Psalms always include a cry to God and a petition. The saints address the Lord directly: "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true." The saints then give their petition: "how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" The saints cry, "how long?" Psalm 94:3 echoes this cry: "O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?" The saints and the Psalmist both wonder how long the Lord will tolerate wickedness. The Psalmist concludes the Psalm with the confident statement that "will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out.*13*" Likewise, the saints in heaven are told that the time of their justice would come. God will always judge those who oppress the saints; God will always validate the suffering of His people.

Revelation 11: The Song of the Seventh Trumpet

In Revelation 11, St. John records the song of the 24 elders following the sounding of the seventh trumpet of judgment:

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.*14*"

Psalm 2 is the first Royal Psalm of the Psalter. In Psalm 2, the Psalmist states the decree of the LORD by which the Davidic king reigns over Jerusalem and the nations. In the Greek version of Psalms, the translators used the word *fruaꝥssw* ("to show insolent anger") to describe the nations' actions against the Lord's anointed. (The Hebrew word is *vÅgðr*, "to be in tumult.") The word St. John uses to describe the "raging" of the nations, *ojrgi÷zw*, refers to a furious anger. However, St. John's readers would still see the connection: The nations plot their revolt against the reign of the Davidic king, but His righteous rule will extend over them all. Psalm 2 warns the nations of the "wrath" of the LORD and encourages them to "kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled.*15*" Revelation 11 tells the end of the story: The nations do not heed the warning but reap judgment for their treatment of God's people.

Revelation 18-19: The End of the Godless

One of Psalms' recurrent themes is the eventual punishment of the wicked — and the fact that God's people despair of its coming. Psalm 73 is the best

example of this theme. The Psalmist begins with by declaring God's goodness, but he quickly descends to a vivid description of the tempting lifestyle of the godless. Nothing seems to go right for the godly; nothing seems to go wrong for the godless.

The entire Psalm turns with verses 16-19:

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!

The Psalmist recognizes that the destruction will come suddenly and sweep away those who refuse to live godly lives.

Revelation 18 and 19 describe the ultimate conclusion of sin and rebellion. As the judgment unfolds, evil Babylon is destroyed. The nations gather for the final battle against Christ and His people. Finally, judgment comes at last to those who rebelled against God and oppressed the saints.

The fall of Babylon comes suddenly. Those enamored with her will lament, "Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come.*16*" Babylon, the symbol of human pride and glory, will fall as the Psalmist decreed: "destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors."

The war of chapter 19 again reminds the reader of Psalm 2. The nations may rage, but Christ the Lord will prevail in the end. Furthermore, the judgment of Revelation 19 recalls Psalm 73:27: "For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you."

Revelation 21-22: The Call to New Jerusalem

After the final judgment, St. John tells of the "holy city, New Jerusalem," that descends from heaven. St. John says in Revelation 21 that "I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*17*"

The Psalms speak frequently of God's dwelling place. To the Hebrews, the Temple served as the meeting point between heaven and earth. The God who used earth as His "footstool*18*" had chosen Jerusalem as the place where His glory would dwell among humanity. Psalm 9 says that the LORD "sits enthroned in Zion.*19*" Psalm 74 calls on the LORD to "remember Mount Zion, where you have dwelt.*20*" Psalm 132 says that "the LORD has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place....*21*" St. John says in Revelation 22:3 that "the throne of God and of the Lamb" will be in Jerusalem. The call of Israel will be answered; God will dwell in Jerusalem.

Revelation contains one other connection to the Psalms. In Revelation 22:17, Jesus Christ calls, "Come." Come to God; come to His dwelling place, the New Jerusalem; come to His salvation. The Psalter contains several hymns called "Pilgrim songs" that were sung by the Hebrews as they approached Jerusalem for the great festivals. One of the Pilgrim Songs, Psalm 122, begins with the line, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'"*22*" St. John says that the kings of the earth will bring "the glory and honor of the nations*23*" into the city.

Will the people of earth sing the Pilgrim Songs as they enter the holy city? Or, will they sing a new song, one never heard on earth until then? Six Psalms mention the same phrase used by St. John in Revelation 5 and 14*24*, one of which is Psalm 96:

Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods.*25*

Conclusion

There is a deeper relationship between the Psalms and the Revelation than

merely the shared lyrics and terminology. St. John experienced events in eternity, outside time itself. When he recorded his vision, St. John would have used language drawn directly from the songs his people had used for centuries in their worship. However, in the relationship between time and eternity, the hymns St. John heard in heaven may well have pre-dated the Psalter with which he was so intimately familiar.

The praise of heaven filled the Temple at every sacrifice, at every festival. In eternity, this praise will resound throughout the new creation. The saints will eternally praise Almighty God with new songs, joining with Hebrews from ages past to praise the LORD who inspired the Psalms.

Notes

*1*Revelation 1:3. All Scriptures quoted are from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001).

*2*Psalm 1:1-2.

*3*Psalm 103:1, 145:21.

*4*Psalm 106:47.

*5*Psalm 105:3.

*6*Psalm 93:1.

*7*Psalm 93:2.

*8*Revelation 5:5.

*9*Revelation 5:8-14.

*10*Psalm 98:1.

*11*Psalm 98:2.

*12*Psalm 22:27.

*13*Psalm 94:23.

*14*Revelation 11:15-18.

*15*Psalm 2:12.

*16*Revelation 18:10.

*17*Revelation 21:3-4.

*18*Isaiah 66:1.

*19*Psalm 9:11.

*20*Psalm 74:2.

*21*Psalm 132:13.

*22*Psalm 122:1.

*23*Revelation 22:26.

*24*Psalms 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, and 149:1.

*25*Psalm 96:1-4.