

THE
LAST
TOMORROW

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A commentary on the book of the Revelation

G. R. CROW

Foreword by Dr Jack Layman

Grace Ministries

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To my mother

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
to receive power, and riches, and wisdom,
and strength, and honour,
and glory, and praise. . . . Praise,
and honour, and glory, and power be
to him who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb for ever and ever.

Rev 5:12,13

FOREWORD

I first saw *The Lamb and the Book* [now called *The Last Tomorrow*] in 1965. I was serving in Kenya and a visitor passing through from India showed me a copy. I was intrigued by my brief perusal — the author concentrated on what the book of Revelation says rather than reducing it to “spiritually profitable” fiction or an unlikely scheme of church history. In the summer of 1966 I met G. R. (Bob) Crow and he graciously provided me with a copy of the book.

I have the habit of adopting a Bible “book of the year” for special study, so *The Lamb and the Book* seemed a providential reason to choose Revelation for 1967. Revelation is a wonderful book, and it is a shame that it is so neglected (or, too often, so misused). John describes what he has “seen”, and his descriptions are beautiful and inspiring. I found joy in reading them out loud. In chapter one, for example, we hear the loud trumpet and see the golden sash, in chapters two and three we hear the strength and troubling weaknesses of the church and, in chapters four and five, perhaps the most dramatic in all of Scripture, we are around the throne.

And in the center of it all is Jesus Christ: the son of Man standing among the lampstands, the Alpha and Omega, dead and alive forevermore, the Lamb slain and risen, who alone is worthy to open the Scroll, the warrior with eyes of blazing fire, and the Lamb at His wedding feast. Over and over again, the only appropriate response is “Hallelujah! Salvation and power and glory belong to our God.”

Revelation is, however, written in a code, in figurative language based on the Old and New Testaments, and one must not arbitrarily interpret that language. *The Last Tomorrow* is a considerable help and a reliable guide. It is logical and analytical, but most importantly Bob Crow uses the Bible as a commentary on Revelation, linking passages and images to their roots.

The Last Tomorrow is not light devotional reading or meant to be dipped into “here and there”, but it will reward the serious student. It is simple and clear, but also a thorough and enriching study, not only of the book of Revelation but of the core teachings of the Bible; it is an exposition of Biblical history and theology, a Biblical education in itself!

Joseph Bayly wrote, “Lord Christ, Your servant Martin Luther said he only had two days on his calendar, today and *that day*. And that’s what I want too. And I want to live today *for that day*.”

I commend to you this reprinting of Bob Crow’s *The Last Tomorrow*. May it help you as it helped me to “live *for that day*.”

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Excerpts from the original Foreword

This exposition of Revelation by Rev. G. R. Crow is a monumental work and I am more than glad to recommend it. Mr Crow has gone into his study of the Revelation in great detail and has brought out many truths that are not usually contained in most expositions. He covers the entire Book and writes in a plain and clear way so that his exposition is easy to read and understand.

I am not going to go into details in this Foreword in regard to his interpretation except to say that I have held the position he takes for a great many years and I do not believe it can be successfully answered. We should be preparing the Church for what lies ahead.

I would recommend this book to ministers, theological students, missionaries, and all who are interested in presenting the truth of the Revelation which is one of the most important Books of the Bible. It ought not to be ignored. It was written for a purpose. Those who will diligently study it will understand it. Its truths will not be hidden to the devout student of prophecy. It should create new interest in the study of the Book of Revelation.

I have known Mr. Crow for a number of years. He has been instrumental in putting many of my books into the languages of India and distributing them. I appreciate the great work he has done for God in India and I trust that his own book will now be circulated widely and that it will be accepted by God's servants everywhere. May His richest blessing rest upon it.

The Peoples Church
Toronto

Oswald J. Smith

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Author's Preface to the first edition

God, the maker of the starry heavens, is also the author of the Bible. The whole of it is His revelation to man. It gives us His thoughts, His character, His ways, His designs for the world in the measure that He has thought good to reveal them. In it there are heights still unreached and depths as yet unfathomed. Through it all we can hear the breathings of the Eternal Spirit, catch gleams of glory, and feel the power of the mystery. We are sometimes blinded by the brightness and lost in the infinite reaches of the divine mind. We see in the Holy Scriptures a book worthy of its Author and we cry with the apostle Paul: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God".

Nowhere in the Bible is this truth more evident than in the book of the Revelation, which is, according to the opening verse, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him."

We have a right to expect a great deal from a book that comes as a special revelation from the Almighty. We may justly reason that God should employ at least as much care on this, his spiritual creation, as He has on his physical creation. And we shall think to find the same majesty, order, and attention to detail in this as in that.

If we have such expectations we shall not be disappointed. This book is the consummation, the crowning glory of that marvelous work of God, the Holy Bible. Here we find God taking up the unfinished story of Scripture, gathering its varied themes perfectly together, and presenting to us the completed record of His revelation.

We see in this book the mighty Creator, who made the heavens of the stars, drawing aside the veil and revealing His handiwork in the spiritual heavens. Here indeed are stars of the first magnitude, sunbursts of glory, splendid solar systems, and whole galaxies of interlocking truth wheeling in their courses, far above us and but dimly seen.

We should not be surprised, then, to find here, as in all of God's Word, some things hard to understand, and deep mysteries that may baffle even the most diligent student.

And we should not be alarmed when we discover that there is a great variety of opinions in regard to certain details of interpretation, and even conflicting theories on how the whole book should be understood. And we should not be dismayed if we cannot arrive at a position of absolute certainty in interpreting every vision and symbol in the book. I believe there are some things here, as in

certain prophecies of the Old Testament, that will become fully clear only when they are finally fulfilled.

However, it should be kept in mind that this book is a *revelation*, and that the express purpose for which it was given was to show the servants of God things which must surely come to pass. All the true children of God can, and should, understand the principal features of what their Father has revealed here. And even in regard to those things difficult to grasp, we should always remember that the believer in Christ has the Holy Spirit of God living in him, the Holy Spirit who “searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.” In utter dependence on that Spirit to teach us we should proceed in our study. The Lord Jesus who before opened the minds of his disciples to understand the scriptures (Luke 24:45) is with us still.

There are, in general, four different systems of interpretation that attempt to explain the Revelation.

The *Preterist* system teaches that the signs and visions of the book relate to circumstances of the apostles’ own day and were, for the most part, fulfilled then. Not many evangelical Christians have adopted this view.

The *Historicist* system asserts that the book gives an outline of events that have been gradually fulfilled throughout this Christian era from John’s day to ours – a sort of pre-written Church history. This was a common view of Protestant commentators from the time of the Reformation to fairly recent times, and was taught by many well-known teachers. At present it is not held by many students of the Bible.

The *Spiritual or Poetic or Idealist* system affirms that the visions and symbols do not indicate specific events at all, but are only meant to set forth spiritual principles that are at work throughout this whole age. Revelation in this view is a sort of divine Pilgrim’s Progress.

The *Futurist* system holds that, apart from the first three chapters (and some would include even these), the visions and symbols indicate specific persons and events that will appear in the future at the very end of this age, and are directly connected with the second coming of Christ.

I do not wish to appear unduly dogmatic. And I do not deny that valuable insights have been gained from writers who hold different views than my own on how best to interpret the Revelation. But I must express my deep conviction that the Futurist system alone can do full justice in interpreting the language of this book. So these comments are presented from that point of view. Reasons for this will appear as we proceed in our study.

Doubtless there were circumstances in that first century when the Revelation was written that were similar to events prophesied for the last days. Thus far the Preterists are right. Also if we read the Historicists we may possibly think that the history of the Church and the world has had its persons and events which may have been shadows or faint pictures of persons and events still to come. And no doubt there are spiritual principles to be found in the book that can apply to every generation from the first to the last. In this we certainly can agree with the Idealists.

But I cannot think that any of these (or all of them together) even begins to exhaust the meaning of the Revelation. I am convinced that this book is a prophecy that describes real persons and events yet to appear on earth, and that it is both unwise and unsafe to deny it.

We live in amazing times. Never before in this Church age have there been so many reasons to think that the end is near at hand, even at the doors. Dark and difficult days are in store for the earth. But in the growing dark the believer in Christ has, in the words of the apostle Peter, "a more sure word of prophecy. . . .a lamp that shines in a dark place." To this lamp we do well to pay close attention until the day dawns and the day star rises in our hearts. The Revelation, like a great light in the darkness, is tremendously meaningful and helpful for the times in which we live.

This book is sent forth with the earnest desire and prayer to God that it will contribute in some measure to an understanding of so important a part of God's Holy Word.

As in the study of all parts of that Word, so in this, the question uppermost in our minds should be, What do the Scriptures actually say? I counsel the reader to judge my comments on the Revelation always in the light of that question. "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." If there is any error of interpretation in these studies, may the reader be quick to discern it; and may God be pleased to richly bless that which is true, for His glory and the good of all who read this.

Author's Preface to the second edition

With fear and trembling I sent the manuscript for the first edition of this book to the publisher. I dreaded (and dread still) the possibility of uttering things I understood not, "things too wonderful for me" which I knew not (Job 42: 3). I had also (and I have still) a fear of leading any of God's people astray in their efforts to understand this very wonderful and important book of the Bible.

Perhaps I felt a little of what a great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, felt about preaching the Word of God. He once said, "We tremble lest we should misbelieve; and tremble more — if you are as I am — lest we should mistake and misinterpret the Word. . . .To preach the whole truth is an awful charge. You and I, who are ambassadors for God, must not trifle, but we must tremble at God's Word."

I have gone through the whole book very carefully for this edition, rewriting, deleting, or adding wherever I have thought necessary. Also I have read a number of new books on the subject of prophecy in general and the Revelation in particular, written from a variety of viewpoints, being willing to change any view of my own that I saw was of doubtful interpretation. As a result, I have made many minor changes, but no major ones at all. My views on all the larger points of interpretation have only been confirmed by further study and prayer.

In this edition I have taken the introductory material concerning the millenium from its former at the beginning of chapter 16, and placed it in an Appendix. Also I have added an Appendix on the Idealist interpretation — a view which I think obscures much of the clear teaching of the Revelation.

So I send this forth again — improved, I trust, here and there, but in the main as it was — with the same desire and prayer that were behind the first edition. May God bless that which is true in it for the good of His people, and for His own glory. And if there is any error here, may God give His people who read this wisdom to see it and reject it.

Author's Preface to the third edition

Many years have passed since the publication of the second edition of this commentary. Due to the pressure of other work, and because of a lack of funds for this specific project, it has not been possible to publish a new edition until the present. Now we are happy to make it available once more to God's people.

In this edition some changes in wording have been made here and there, but no change in the basic interpretation of the Revelation. Through the passing years further thought and study have not caused me to alter my views on either the principles of interpretation of the book or its broad outline or the meanings of its visions or the order in which events will occur in the future.

May God be pleased to bless this edition, as He did the first two, to those who read it, and enable them to understand all He would have them understand of this precious portion of His inspired Word.

The translation of the Revelation and the other Scripture used in this commentary is from a new revision of the King James Version of the whole Bible. This revision has been produced by Grace Ministries in India for the purpose of bringing out an English Study Bible for the Church in India.

1:1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to Him to show to His servants the things which must quickly take place. And he sent and signified *it* by his angel to his servant John, 2 who testified *concerning* the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus Christ, and everything that he saw. 3 Blessed *is* he who reads the words of this prophecy, and those who hear it and keep those things which are written in it; for the time *is* at hand.

4 John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be to you, and peace, from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits which are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, *who is* the faithful witness *and* the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and washed us from our sins in his own blood, 6 and made us kings and priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

7 Look, he is coming with clouds, and every eye will see him, and those also who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. Even so, Amen.

8 "I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the Ending," says the Lord, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

The book of the Revelation is a gift of God to His people, a very splendid gift. In some versions it is entitled "The Revelation of St John the Divine", because John recorded it. Actually, of course, it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ, and its source is God Himself. The Greek word translated Revelation is *apokalupsis* and the Revelation is sometimes known as the Apocalypse. The Word means disclosure, unveiling, manifestation. So the book is a special disclosure which God the Father gave to Christ and which He in turn revealed to His servant John. The strange symbols, the vivid pictures were not borrowed by John from other literature; they were shown to him by Jesus Christ. And they are recorded for our reverent study and great profit.

If we believe these opening verses of the Revelation we can have no doubt about its great importance for every believer.

The Revelation is called “prophecy” in verse three. This is repeated four more times in the book (22: 7,10,18,19). And we are not left to speculate what the word may mean as used here (whatever it may mean in some other context). In verse one the same Revelation called “prophecy” in verse three is said to be given to show the servants of God things which must quickly take place. This is a very clear and specific definition. The Revelation deals with future events that must have their fulfillment sometime after John wrote. It does not merely give spiritual principles that were already at work before he wrote (as some interpreters would have us think).

Of course, this does not mean that there is no instruction in righteousness, no spiritual principles revealed in it. No doubt one of the chief aims of all Bible prophecy is moral and ethical. In it all there are principles of righteousness which are meant to profoundly affect the lives of those who come to know it. That this is true of the Revelation is indicated in verse three — blessed are those who keep those things which are written in it.

But the Revelation does more than give principles. It is an unveiling of things future to John’s day by the foreknowledge of God. It is a prophecy unsealed (22: 10), a book open for all of God’s servants to read and, in a measure at least, to understand. This is what the Revelation says about itself, and it is very important for us to see this. And why should it be thought a thing incredible that God should reveal the future in the Revelation? Scores of prophecies in the Old Testament have already been fulfilled in a plain manner. And we have strong reasons to believe that these prophecies here that relate to the future will be fulfilled in the same manner.

It is not to the world in general that God reveals His secrets. In the opening verse the word “servant” appears twice. It is to his servants that God reveals the future, and it was to His servant John that the Revelation was given. The word also means bond-slave and is used of all true Christians in Romans 6:18. Not for the learned or curious has God made His revelation, but to His bond-slaves, to those whose main business in life is serving their master Christ. Only if our whole loyalty and faithfulness are to Him can we hope to have good success in understanding what is revealed.

It follows, then, that the best preparation for the study of this great book is a heart that yields loving obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. And the first question we should ask ourselves is not, what does this or that mean? But, are we true servants of Jesus Christ? Is He enthroned in our hearts? Have we taken His yoke upon us? Only such ones are wise, and only the wise will understand (Daniel 12: 10). “The secret of the Lord is with those who fear him” (Psalms 25: 14).

We see this in the case of Abraham. He stood on the plains of Mamre with three men and one of them was the Lord. He had come to confirm to Abraham the promise concerning a son, an heir. As they stood there they looked toward Sodom, for it was in the mind of the Lord to destroy it. Then the Lord, as though speaking to Himself, said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am going to do, seeing that Abraham will certainly become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him and so they will keep the way of the LORD, practicing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has told him" (Genesis 18:16-19).

That revelation concerned the destruction of Sodom. The revelation the Lord gives to His servants in these days concerns the destruction of the world's future ungodly powers.

Who was the John to whom the Revelation was committed? I am convinced he was the same John who was one of the original disciples of our Lord and the author of the fourth Gospel and the three epistles which are ascribed to him. This was the common opinion of the early Church fathers who have left us any information at all about the matter. Who but the apostle John could designate himself as simply John and hope to have the Church as a whole understand who he was? John gives us his name in this book five times — a thing striking and unusual in itself. In three of these occurrences he speaks emphatically, "I John". As the last living apostle he was doubtless the best known Christian on earth, and did not need to identify himself beyond a simple giving of his name. He declares in the opening chapter that he "testifies to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, and to everything that he saw"; and in the closing chapter he repeats, "I John saw these things and heard them" (22:8).

So the book of Revelation comes to us with full apostolic authority. We might add here that it comes with a good deal more than apostolic authority. This book, more than any other in the Bible, comes to us with the seal of heaven upon it. In verse eight we see God breaking in, as it were, to vouch for this book in a way He did not use in any other New Testament book. The heavenly origin of the Revelation is again emphasized in 22:6, "These words are trustworthy and true, and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show to his servants the things which must quickly

take place". In verse 16 of that last chapter the Lord Jesus himself speaks, "I Jesus have sent my angel to testify these things to you in the churches". In keeping with the divine testimony to this book Jesus Christ is called the "the faithful and true Witness" (1:5; 3:14); and the solemn phrase "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" is seven times repeated.

In no other book of the Bible do we have so strict and powerful a warning as the one with which this book closes (22: 18,19). Jesus Christ Himself testifies of the danger involved in either adding to or taking away from the words of the prophecy of this book.

So God from beginning to end impresses us solemnly with the vast importance of this book of the Revelation. We are to understand clearly that this is not a book either to ignore or to trifle with. The only proper attitude toward it is one of childlike faith and deep reverence. Then let us humbly, prayerfully, yes, with awe and godly fear, examine this wonderful handiwork of the Almighty.

The time is at hand

There are two other phrases in these opening verses which we must closely observe: "quickly take place", and "the time is at hand". I have expressed my conviction that the large part of the Revelation still awaits future fulfillment. Then how can it be said that the time of its fulfillment was "at hand" in John's own day? And how can it be said of predictions whose final fulfillment is many centuries removed from the time of John's writing that they must "quickly" take place? Some writers have expressed the thought that these questions cannot be answered. Therefore, they say, the futurist system of interpretation cannot be the true one. I believe the very opposite of this. The futurist position does not rest upon a foundation so easily destroyed.

(1) Some think that the Greek word translated "quickly" can mean soon.¹ Now two thousand years from our point of view is not soon. However, from the point of view of Him with whom a thousand years is but a day (2 Peter 3:8), it is only two days. "God's time seems long, because we are short" (Trapp). It is very significant that Christ speaks of His own coming in similar words — "Look, I am coming quickly" (22:7). The word "quickly" is from the same Greek root as "quickly" in 1:1. Now Christ will come

¹ But James M. Stifler in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans in discussing this word used in Rom 16:20 (translated there "shortly") says that the Greek word is used in seven places in the New Testament, and that "in no instance of the seven in the New Testament does the word mean 'soon.'"

many hundreds of years after the writing of the Revelation and will still fulfill His promise to come quickly. Just so it is possible that any number of events revealed in this book may occur at the end of the age and still be in harmony with the statement that they must quickly take place. The two statements are in exactly the same class. Now it is perfectly clear that at least some, if not all, of these events do relate to the end of the age, and yet come under the word "quickly". For example, the destruction of Antichrist, the fall of Babylon, the battle of Armageddon, the return of Christ, etc.

(2) The word translated "quickly" can mean suddenly. If that is the way we take word as used here in verse one, the phrase could mean, "things which must suddenly take place once they begin to happen". That is, they will come as a thief to careless people, without warning, and they will occur in rapid succession. In that case the things which must quickly come to pass — which occupy the large part of the Revelation — must be the sudden climatic events at the end of this age. Just as Jesus will come quickly or suddenly after many centuries of waiting, so these great prophecies will likewise be rapidly, suddenly fulfilled.

(3) Some writers have suggested that the meaning of this phrase is as follows: the word means "soon" but the time when they shall begin to come to pass is not John's day long past, but that future day to which the visions refer. John, they say, was caught forward in time, as it were, and saw the very end of the age. From that vantage point the events occurred with great rapidity.

(4) A similar expression is found in verse 3, "The time is at hand". The prophets of the Old Testament also sometimes declared that events seen by them in prophetic vision were at hand, when actually their fulfillment was to be delayed for hundreds of years. Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32 utters a prophecy concerning his people Israel that concerns their "end" (vs 20,29). Those things did not even begin to overtake them for many centuries. Yet he says "their foot will slide in due time, because the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that will come upon them approach quickly" (v 35). Isaiah, Joel and Zephaniah all declare that the Day of the Lord is at hand (Isa 13:6; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Zeph 1:7). This is the great day of God's wrath often predicted in the Scriptures. It is the time when God "Will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity" (Isa 13:11). It is a time that follows the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon Israel (Joel 2:28-32). It is a time preceded by great signs in the moon, sun and stars (Isa 13:10). And it is a time that has not even yet been fulfilled if we

are to judge by New Testament references to the subject (2 Peter 3:10; 1 Thess 5:2,3; 2 Thess 2:2; Acts 2:16-20). Yet the prophets speak of it as “at hand”. Now it is clear that these and some other events the prophets foretold were not at hand according to our ordinary reckoning of time. But God gave the prophets this far-reaching vision which looked through the centuries and brought these events near.² In the New Testament Peter informs us that the end of all things is “at hand” (1 Peter 4:7). Paul writes that the night is far spent, the day is “at hand” (Romans 13:12) and that the Lord is “at hand” (Phil 4:5).

The time element in prophecy has its mysteries, but it is clear that we always live, as it were, in the last days (1 Cor 10:11). The events that close the age are always at hand, always ready to take place suddenly when God’s time has come. From the time John wrote there has ever been a preparedness, an at-hand-ness about them.

Let us remember that the Lord does not regard time by our standards but by His own, and what is near to Him may seem far to us. No doubt when we too stand at last at the vantage point of eternity and look back over these slow centuries it will seem as though they had come and gone as swiftly as a weaver’s shuttle.

However this may be, one thing is evident. If some events declared by the prophets to be “at hand” were not to be fulfilled till the end of the age, then the events predicted in the Revelation likewise need not be fulfilled till the end of the age.

The blessing

“Blessed is he who reads the words of this prophecy, and those who hear it and keep those things which are written in it” (v 3). The blessing is pronounced on those who read to obey, who hear to obey, on the humble servant of God. Revelation was given for a blessing for those who will obediently, believingly read it — not for those whose aim is mere knowledge.

We would do well to enquire why such a blessing is pronounced on the reading of this book. Some writers think they see here an

² The words of F.F. Bruce are to the point here (quoted from his foreword to G.H.Lang’s commentary on the Revelation): “Some commentators have regarded it as an error in John’s forecast of the future that he expected the final consummation to follow immediately on the crisis of his own day. But to speak thus is to overlook the genius of apocalyptic, to forget what Delitzsch called ‘the foreshortening of the prophetic horizon’. This foreshortening is no more a defect in apocalyptic than it is a defect in a telescope that it makes distant objects appear near at hand”.

argument against the futurist interpretation. They say that the suffering and persecuted Christians of John's day could have received no possible good from detailed predictions which would not be fulfilled until two thousand years later. Therefore, they say, we must not think of a long delayed fulfillment of these things, but look only for principles that were meaningful to the people who first received the Revelation.³

I can see no strength at all in this argument. The Revelation itself has told us that it is prophecy of future events. No argument can overthrow this. It seems to me that such an argument does away with the possibility of prophecy at all. It is certain that there are at least some prophecies in the Revelation that have to do with far-off events. All are agreed that we have in it predictions of the second coming of Christ, of the final destruction of the "beast", of the fall of Babylon, of things in the new heaven and earth yet to come. Could believers in John's day have received good from these detailed predictions of events not fulfilled even yet? If not, why were they given in the Revelation? If so, if they could have received benefit from some predictions of far-off events, why not from many? In fact, why could not the whole of the Revelation be related to the future? Who is qualified to say we may have so much and no more such predictions?

In the Old Testament we have a great many detailed predictions of events far off to the people who first heard or read them. Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and other prophets wrote many whole chapters of such prophecy. Do we have the right to say that what they wrote was of no benefit to the people of God who lived then? If those people could derive good from those writings of the prophets, in the same way could not believers in John's day (and in every generation since) derive good from the Revelation, even though its fulfillment lies still in the future?

The Bible itself tells us that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfectly prepared and thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16,17). This is true whether Scripture is speaking of things far in the past or principles operating in the present. It is also true of the many chapters of detailed predictions of events still to come which are recorded in many chapters of both Old and New Testaments. It was true when the prophets wrote these things, it

³ William Hendriksen, among others.

was true when John wrote the Revelation, it is true today. All such things are “profitable” to the man of God, and help to equip him for every good work.

I can think of the following reasons why the study of the Revelation is, and always has been, a blessing to God’s people throughout this whole age, even though the large part still awaits fulfillment.

(1) First, an obvious point that is sometimes overlooked (especially, I suppose, by someone trying to establish a point of his own) — it has been impossible for anyone to know how far in the future the fulfillment of the Revelation might be. Each generation, including the first who received it, has had reason to think that it might happen in its own day, and no past generation could know that nearly two thousand years (or more) would elapse before the end came. Since believers of every generation have had reason to think it could come about in their day, they have also had motives to prepare themselves for what might happen. The Revelation has always given inspiration to live a life prepared for trial and tribulation, prepared to resist antichristian powers, prepared to die for Christ or meet Him at His coming. And so it has been a blessing to all believers.

(2) It is a revelation of the glorious person and the final triumph of Christ our Saviour. Here the Holy Spirit wonderfully performs His work of glorifying Christ (John 16: 14). Here there is an unveiling of His great majesty. Here beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord we are being changed into the same image from glory to glory (2 Cor 3:18). So the Spirit of God in this book as in all the Scriptures, though they relate to events two thousand years in the past or in the future, ministers Christ to our souls.

(3) The theme of the book is the second coming of Christ, the hope placed before the believer in nearly every book of the New Testament. This is a doctrine that provides all who rightly hold it with powerful motives for service and purity of life (1 John 3: 2, 3).

(4) In the Revelation we are brought face to face with the end of all things, with eternity itself. Thus the petty things of time and sense tend to lose their importance in our eyes and we are taught to be sober-minded and watch so we can pray (1 Peter 4: 7). “Since then all these things will be dissolved, what kind of people you ought to be in holy conduct and godliness” (2 Peter 3: 11). We see here the ultimate realities in vivid terms and so find much help for our pilgrimage through time.

(5) The graphic descriptions of the sinful world heading for the wrath and judgment of God teach us the bitterness of sin and unbelief. They warn us of the great danger of compromise with evil. They supply all with strong motives to “come out from among them and be separate”.

(6) This book is rich with promises and incentives to Christians to strengthen them for trial and tribulation whenever and however they may meet them, and to inspire them to go on to victory.

(7) Moreover we have spiritual principles here that are valid in all situations in all ages. In the Revelation we have the final development of forces and principles that have been at work throughout the age. Because they are revealed to us in the fullness of their development, we learn a great deal about what has been going on during the whole age. The Idealists are right in this one thing. It is not so much what they affirm but what they deny that makes their system so inadequate, unsatisfying, and, perhaps I should say, dangerous. It is not necessary to deny the plain prophecies of this book in order to emphasize spiritual principles. We can, and should, hold to both the one and the other. For my part I should not at all like to be among those who dare to deny that these predictions relate to specific events. To do so, it seems to me, is to obscure the more sure word of prophecy, to which “you do well to take heed to it as to a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns, and the day star arises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19). Days of great darkness and peril are to come on the earth shortly. We need all the light God has seen fit to give us concerning those days. Let no man take it away from you.

(8) If we wish to understand the rich symbolism of this book and its many allusions to other Scriptures, we need to do much searching of the Bible. The Revelation does not stand alone and cannot be understood alone. H. B. Swete in his commentary on the Apocalypse states that out of the 404 verses of the Revelation 278 refer to the Old Testament. J.B. Smith in his commentary says that it contains over 400 quotations from or allusions to other Scriptures, of which 50 are from the book of Daniel. Anything that causes us to familiarize ourselves with the whole of the Word of God, as a study of this book must help to do, is a blessing.

For a further discussion of the Idealist position, the significance of the Revelation for all generations, and the interpretation of symbols, see Appendix A. When these points are properly understood they will be seen to destroy one of the principal arguments of both the Idealist and Preterist interpretations.

Greeting and Benediction

“John to the seven churches which are in Asia” —Asia here is not the whole continent of Asia but a province lying on the western side of Asia Minor (now Turkey). Ephesus was its chief city. In that province there were more than seven churches but seven are fixed upon for special notice. The names of these churches are given in v 11. It seems certain that they were chosen, as we shall see, to represent all the churches on earth throughout this age.

Immediately following the mention of the churches comes a benediction from the triune God: “Grace” and “peace”. These words occur in the salutation of the apostle Paul in all the letters that he wrote. (It is significant that in three of them he added the word “mercy”. These three were written to Timothy and Titus — ministers of the Gospel). Grace is one of the great words of the Bible. It is God freely giving all things that pertain to salvation — even Himself — to undeserving sinners. Peace is the result of grace received. Because of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the grace of God and the peace of God, immeasurable and inexhaustible, flows from the throne of grace as a mighty stream to His people and to His churches, to teach, to strengthen, to equip, and to transform them. This is God’s provision for every child, every church of His; and thus He blesses the seven churches of Asia.

Soon in the Revelation we shall read of God’s fierce judgment on an unrepentant world and on a fallen, apostate church. We shall read of war and tribulation and wrath. Then it will seem indeed that God has forgotten to be gracious and has in anger shut up His tender mercy. But this message of grace and peace coming before the thunders and the judgments reassures the hearts of God’s people.

In verses 4 and 5 the Trinity appears as the source of grace and peace.

“From him who is and who was and who is to come” — the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“From the seven spirits which are before his throne” — these seven spirits are linked with the Father and the Son in this Divine benediction, and are set forth as a source of grace and peace to the churches. Therefore I am confident that they represent the one Holy Spirit of God in His seven-fold fullness. So we see very early that the Revelation is a mixture of symbolic and literal language, and that we are not to insist on a literal interpretation of every phrase. The number seven is used 54 times in the Revelation. It is obviously the number of completeness or perfection. We have

seven spirits, seven lamp stands, seven bowls, etc. An interesting portion in Isaiah presents the Spirit of God that anointed our Lord Jesus in His seven-fold perfection (Isa 11:1-3).

The Revelation itself in 5:6 gives further evidence that the seven spirits mean the one Holy Spirit. Christ does not have seven literal spirits any more than He has seven literal eyes. The seven spirits, we are told there, are sent "into all the earth." Yet they are also before the throne in heaven. This language can apply only to God who alone can be everywhere at the same time.

"And from Jesus Christ" — the eternal Son. Thus we have three sources of grace and peace to the churches: the Father, the Spirit, and the Son. Three sources that are after all but one source and one God.

Three titles of the Lord Jesus Christ are given in verse 5 — titles chosen, I doubt not, in harmony with the purpose and the contents of the whole book.

(1) "The faithful witness" — One who declares things exactly as they are. A witness is one who knows the truth and is thus qualified to speak. A faithful witness is one who speaks the truth without respect of persons, or regard for either personal safety or reward. This is what our Lord was when He humbly walked on earth (John 7:7; 14:1,2,6; 18:37; 1 Tim 6:13). This is what He is now that He is glorified in heaven. He is qualified to witness concerning the churches, the world, the end of the age, His own reign on earth, the doom of the wicked, the eternal joy of the saints, and the new heaven and earth. He is fully qualified to do so and He is the only one so qualified.

He is both God and man. In the beginning He was with God and He was God. And He became truly man and lived in the world of men. It is He who was dead but now is alive forevermore; He who walks in the midst of the churches; He who will bring the age to a close by His sudden appearance; He who will reign unto the ages of the ages. He is a qualified witness on matters of life and death, sin and judgment, heaven and hell. If his witness is rejected, then it is certain that a true witness to these things cannot be found.

The truth is that man without this Faithful Witness, without this mighty Revealer, is in utter darkness in regard to all the really vital matters of time and eternity. He is the true prophet, the light of the world, the very truth of God, and without Him all is vain imagination and dark speculation. If He has not spoken the truth concerning men, God, and eternity, then no man on earth knows or

ever can know the truth about them. The God-man only is qualified to speak. And since He has spoken, with what carefulness and humility and devotion and faith we should hear!

Thank God He has spoken. Faithfully He has declared the truth. He has not added to it or taken from it. And in the prophecy of this book He has not painted man's guilt too great, God's wrath too fierce, or the believer's eternity too glorious. He does not reveal what does not exist, does not predict that which will not come, does not lead us to expect something that cannot ever be. And concerning all that is written He could say again, "If it were not so I would have told you" (John 14:2).

Yet with this clear revelation from so faithful a witness printed and distributed throughout the world, the majority of men remain in utter ignorance of these things soon to come on the earth and of those things that will remain long after the heaven and the earth have fled away. The sad truth is most people have not believed this faithful witness or cared to examine what He said. And a great many have had no opportunity to do so.

(2) "The first begotten of the dead". First begotten or first-born is a title of pre-eminence and dignity (Col 1:18; Psa 89:27). Here it could mean that Christ is the Lord of the dead (Rom 14:9), the pre-eminent one among all who shall ever die and be resurrected. Or it could mean that He was the first to conquer death and rise to be alive evermore. Acts 26:23 tells us "He should be the first that should rise from the dead". Others in both Testaments had been raised from the dead, but they died again. They did not finally conquer the grave. Jesus is the first to be raised and glorified to die no more.

Whichever way we understand the phrase one thing we know. That One who came down for a little while to the land of Israel to suffer for the sins of mankind is now risen and ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high. That Man, despised and rejected of men, who went as a lamb to the slaughter to be beaten with a whip, mocked and crucified, is at the pinnacle of power and honor in the universe.

(3) "The ruler of the kings of the earth". He is the mighty Sovereign of the world and has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18). Before Him all the inhabitants of the earth are as nothing. He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, and no one can hold back His hand, or say to Him, what are you doing? Yes, the hearts of kings

are in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of waters, and He turns them wherever He will (Proverbs 21: 1). And He raises up one ruler and puts another down as it pleases Him (Daniel 5: 21). This power belongs to our Lord Jesus Christ.

From the entrance of sin into the world until now it has been Satan's determination to rule the earth in opposition to God. Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, truly described his character when he put the following words in his mouth: "To reign is worth ambition though in Hell: Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven" — though the word "earth" might well be substituted for "hell" (Satan is not yet in hell but roams the earth where his throne is). In this mad attempt to shut God out of His world Satan has had the co-operation of the large majority of mankind and nearly all of its kings and rulers. Pharaoh in Egypt is typical of these: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go" (Exodus 5:2). But while earth's politicians scramble for power, the Son of God retains all true power in His pierced hands. And in the fullness of time, He will step forward and openly claim His right to rule the earth.

The Revelation, I believe, depicts the final struggle of this age between the forces of Satan and the forces of God. It gives the final battle of the long war that has been going on through this whole age. And, of course, we learn a great deal about this era by seeing the end of it. Evil will be permitted to come to full fruit in one man and his reign. The struggle will be similar to that one long ago in Egypt between Pharaoh and Moses. But here Satan's man is Antichrist and God's Man is Christ, and the question of who shall rule the world is finally and forever settled. Christ, the ruler of the kings of the earth, receives at last the kingdom of this world, not from the hands of Satan (Matthew 4: 8, 9), but from God the Father. And truly "He will strike through kings in the day of His wrath" (Psa 110:5).

Thus these three titles of our Lord perfectly harmonize with the whole aim and scope of this book.

Christ's work for believers

In verses 5 and 6 we have the following facts presented for our instruction:

(1) He loves us and washed us from our sins in his own blood. It was His great love that sent Him to the cross to shed His blood for sinners, but that did not exhaust His love. "It is finished" can be said of His dying pain but never of His love. Through that bleeding

sacrifice God took the sins of His people away. He has washed us once for all from our previous connection with sin. The guilt of it is removed, the power of it is being broken, and the finished work of Calvary makes it possible for us to stand one day "holy and blameless and above reproach in His sight" (Col 1:22).

(2) Not only so, but we are made kings (some Greek manuscripts have the word for "kingdom" here) and priests to God. It is clear from the Scriptures that believers in this age are brought into a position where they are kings in prospect, true princes of God. They have no throne as yet but the promise is given that they shall some day reign with Christ. It is also clear that they are made a kingdom over which Christ rules. It is a kingdom entered only by the new birth (John 3:3,5). It does not consist of outward things as meat and drink: but "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

It is a kingdom in which every believer is a priest under Christ, the great High Priest. That is, every true Christian can enter directly into God's temple, into the holiest through our Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16; 10:19-22; 1 Peter 2:9). There he may worship and adore the Lord of the universe. There he may offer the sacrifice of praise (Heb 13:15) and both pray for himself and intercede for others. The New Testament never speaks of a special class of priests in the church distinct from other Christians. Every believer is a priest who has full and complete access to the presence of God through the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and men. There is no need of any other mediator -- neither living person, unseen saint or angel.

"To Him. . . who has made us kings and priests". It is not we who have made anything of ourselves. The work was His and His alone. It is interesting to see that this work of the Lord Jesus on behalf of His people figures very prominently in the remainder of the book. As His titles given here, so His work is in complete harmony with all that shall follow. The common name for the Lord in Revelation is the Lamb (it appears 26 times). This name always connotes the truth of verse 5. The sacrificial Lamb of God who shed His blood to free us from our sins is in the very center of all the visions of this wonderful book. Then, too, there is more here about the reign of the saints than in any other New Testament book (2:26,27; 3:21; 5:10; 20:4,6; 22:5). The power of the priesthood of believers is also strongly in evidence (5:8; 6:10,11; 8:3,4). Is it too much to say that all that takes place here is in answer to their prayers?

“To Him be glory and dominion forever and ever”. This should be said only to One who is true God. Look at the last verse of Jude, “To God our Saviour, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power”. This is but one of many indications in the Revelation of the true Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The theme of the Book

“Look, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, and those also who pierced Him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. Even so, Amen”. As though He were so near at hand that our eyes even now could see Him. I say this is the theme because His coming is continually emphasized throughout the book and it seems to me that all that is recorded either leads up to, or is directly connected with, or flows from, that climactic event (2:25; 3:3; 3:11; 11:15; 14:14-16; 16:15; 17:14; 19:11; 22:7,12,20). When He comes it will be everlasting grace and peace to the believer but to the unsaved a time of bitter lamentation.

The personal, sudden, open, bodily appearance of Jesus Christ is a truth found everywhere in the New Testament (not to speak of the Old). It is taught by our Lord Himself in all the Gospels. We see it in Acts. Paul either directly taught it or indirectly referred to it in nearly every one of his epistles. We find it in Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John and Jude.

It is the one fact of the future we can be more sure of than any other, one doctrine concerning the end times about which all lovers of God’s Word fully agree. Though we may not, indeed do not, agree about all the events connected with His coming, one truth unites us all — “This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same manner as you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). And all those who love His appearing, regardless of their opinions on less important matters will say reverently with John, “Even so. Amen”.

The speaker in verse 8 may be our Lord Jesus Himself. But whether He or the Father speaks here, it is evident from a comparison of this verse with 1:11; 1:17; 22:13 and Isa 44:6, that Jesus has every right so to speak. Alpha was the first, Omega the last letter of the Greek alphabet. Christ Himself is the full revelation of God from beginning to end. He is the Alpha and Omega of God’s Word for He began it in Genesis and He finishes it here in the Revelation. He is the Alpha and Omega of the Revelation

for He appears in the first verse of chapter 1, and in the last verse of chapter 22. He is the Alpha and Omega of the heavens and the earth for He made them when they were made and will destroy them when they are destroyed. He is the Alpha and Omega of salvation for He appeared the first time to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself and will appear the second time without sin for the eternal salvation of his people. He is the Alpha and Omega of faith for he is both the author and finisher of it. He is the sovereign of the ages beginning them and ending them according to the good pleasure of His will.

Let us rejoice in our Almighty Saviour who is in control of all events and who is well able to help His people in dark and difficult days, in very dark and difficult days of tribulation.

1:9 I John, who also am your brother and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos, for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, 11 saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last. Write what you see in a book, and send *it* to the seven churches which are in Asia, to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamos, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

12 And I turned to see the voice that spoke to me. And being turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands, *someone* like the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the feet, and with a golden sash tied around the chest. 14 His head and *his* hairs were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like a flame of fire. 15 And his feet were like fine bronze, as if they burned in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. 16 And he had seven stars in his right hand, and out of his mouth went a sharp double-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in its strength.

17 And when I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. And he laid his right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 18 *I am* he who lives. I was dead, and look, I am alive for ever and ever. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and death."

Tribulation, dark and difficult, came to John on Patmos. The year was about A.D. 96 (according to the testimony of the early Church), and the aged apostle was in exile for his faith on that bare and rocky isle off the coast of Asia Minor. He received the Revelation in no ivory tower or peaceful study, but in the furnace of affliction. John writes much of tribulation in this book, but before he wrote of it he suffered it.¹ This is the usual way of God

¹ Sir William Ramsey described the punishment John might have had to undergo. It would be "preceded by scourging, marked by perpetual fetters, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleep on the bare ground, a dark prison, work under the lash of the Military overseer". All but the first and last he may have suffered, and these two as well if they were not omitted because of his great age.

with all His ministers and prophets. To be effective in any teaching it is first necessary to know it not by report only but by experience. God pours His truth through the hearts and the lives, and not merely through the minds of His servants.

So John was in tribulation and was comforted in it that he might comfort others. Though afflicted he had his eyes on the kingdom and the King and thus was able to patiently endure all things. Looking at things unseen, even his deep suffering seemed light affliction which was but for a moment and worked for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (2 Cor 4:17,18). Soon many of us may have the privilege of enduring such affliction for Christ's sake. But if we are enabled to see Him who is invisible (Heb 11:27), none of these things will shake our faith.

“Oh dare and suffer all things:
 Yet but a stretch of road,
 Then wondrous words of welcome,
 And then — the face of God.”

Tersteegen

John in tribulation was also “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day.” The meaning of this seems clear — John was in a trance or state of spiritual ecstasy produced by the Holy Spirit on Sunday the first day of the week. There are some who think “the Lord’s day” means the “day of the Lord”, that period of wrath and judgment that comes at the end of the age. They think this verse states that John was caught forward to that day to see the visions he has recorded. I think this very unlikely for these reasons: there is in this book much that does not pertain to the day of the Lord at all but is to be fulfilled, as we shall see, before that great and terrible day ever comes. Moreover the phrase “Day of the Lord” is never found in this form elsewhere in the Bible. It is never called “the Lord’s day”.

It is true that this is the only time in the New Testament that we have the phrase “the Lord’s day”. However, it is found in early Christian writings and there refers to the first day of the week, the day on which believers met for worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:1,2).

Why are we informed that it was on the Lord’s day that Christ appeared to John on Patmos? Doubtless each phrase is written for a purpose and has a significance in harmony with all the rest had we but eyes to see it. The first day of the week is the memorial day of Christ’s victory over death and the power of all evil forces. It is the day that speaks of resurrection, of final victory, of deliverance from the curse, of a new creation. And so it is fitly linked with the great themes of this book.

John, in the Spirit on the Lord's day, suddenly hears a great trumpet-like voice commanding him to write what he is about to see. All unexpectedly the Lord of the Lord's day had come and stood behind him. And when he turned to look he saw one of the greatest wonders ever given a man to see.

C. H. Spurgeon beautifully says of the passage that follows, "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. If God manifest in a bush commands solemnity, what shall we say of God manifest in Christ, and manifest, too, after the most marvelous manner?" Truly here we see no burning bush, but burning feet and burning eyes and a burning countenance.

This symbolical representation of Christ is given that we might realize something of His glory as He walks about unseen in the midst of the churches, then and now.

The figure John sees is ringed with golden lampstands, but they do not occupy his attention and he makes no attempt to describe them. He is overwhelmed by the sight of that one central figure.

Christ's appearance had something familiar about it. He was "like the son of man". The form, though now clothed with splendor, brought to John remembrance of other days when the Son of man meekly walked the earth in company with His disciples. It was the same Lord, but how changed!

Now no longer dressed in the rough garments of the carpenter, or clothed with a mocking robe of purple, or hanging stripped on a cross, He is robed in priestly garments and girded with gold. I believe this garment speaks of His office as High Priest. That is His great work for His people in this age of grace and there is nothing else here to suggest this ministry if this garment does not. It certainly seems fitting to have a symbol here of this wonderful ministry.

His head and His hairs were as wool, as snow. Not crowned now with thorns but with dignity and honor. "The grey head is a crown of glory" (Prov 16:31). He appears with the eternal purity and wisdom of the ancient of days (Dan 7:9).

"His eyes were like a flame of fire". If a person's character can be known by his eyes what shall we say of Christ? His is holy splendor, a burning purity that sees all, knows all, judges all. His are the eyes that can see in the dark, for no artificial light is needed for eyes that are themselves self-generating flames of fire. "If I say, surely the darkness will cover me; even the night will become light

around me. Yes, the darkness will not hide from you, but the night will shine like the day. The darkness and the light are both alike to you" (Psa 139: 11,12).

His feet were like fine bronze burning in a furnace. That part that comes in contact with the earth, those feet that walk about in the midst of the churches, are of a blazing holiness, uncontaminated by their surroundings. His ways with His people are dazzling. His conduct toward everyone forever aflame with purity.

His voice like the sound of many waters, unfathomable, irresistible, suggests Himself as the source of all those mighty oceans of grace and blessing that ever flow from heaven to earth. It suggests, too, the power of His word. "The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty" (Psa 29:4). All He needs to do is speak, and it is done. His voice identifies Him with the glory of the God of Israel who came, in Ezekiel's vision, from the way of the east: "And his voice was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory" (Ezek 43:2).

His right hand held seven stars which are the angels of the churches. The right hand is the place of highest honor and authority (Acts 2:32,33; Heb 1:3). Christ has exalted His ministers above kings and princes. In the eyes of Him who searches all things on earth, there is no higher place, no greater dignity than the service of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not earth's kings, not merchants or bankers, not those regarded by mankind as powerful and successful, but His messengers are in His hand in this special sense. It is far better to be a true servant of God even in the lowliest of places than to have the highest office that earth can give without Christ. John exiled and confined on Patmos was yet in a position far above Caesar at Rome who put him there, though Rome was the mightiest empire that the world had known up to that time. It is sad that many Christians think so highly of earthly honors and so meanly of the honors that Christ can give. They who are wise and shine in Christ's service now will some day "shine like the brightness of the heavenly expanse, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever" (Daniel 12:3).

Christ, who made the stars, will also keep them. His hand is a place of full protection (John 10:28).

Christ's hand is the place of provision, the place of usefulness, the place of power in service. If we are in His hand there is no lack of supply for any moment for any work in any place of His choice,

as His servants keep trusting and obeying Him. If we are not in His hand then we are not stars at all regardless of the position we may occupy in the church.

“Out of his mouth went a sharp double-edged sword”. This is the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Every time it appears in the New Testament it speaks of offensive warfare. It is the weapon the believer may use in his battle against Satan (Eph 6: 17). It is the weapon God uses to lay the heart bare before Him (Heb 4: 12). And it is Christ’s offensive weapon against evil both in the churches (Rev 2: 12,16), and in the world (19: 15-21). The weapons of His warfare are not carnal but mighty through God for the pulling down of strongholds. It is the one weapon He will need when He comes back to destroy the armies of Antichrist. If He whets His glittering sword and His hand takes hold on judgment, He will render vengeance to His enemies and will reward them that hate Him (Deut 32: 41). Truly the slain of the Lord will be many.

“His face was like the sun shining in its strength.” Who can safely gaze at such incandescence? It was the glory of this light which blinded Saul of Tarsus and made him grope for the wall (Acts 22: 11).

The messengers of the churches are like little twinkling stars that can be obscured by a tiny cloud or a leaf on a tree. The churches themselves are but lamps that need a constant supply of oil and are in continual danger of being extinguished. But Christ is as the blazing sun that fills the heavens, whose source of light and heat is in itself, borrowing from none but giving light and life to all.

“Eternal Light! Eternal Light!
 How pure the soul must be
 When, placed within Thy searching sight,
 It shrinks not, but with calm delight
 Can live, and look on Thee.

The spirits that surround Thy throne
 May bear the burning bliss;
 But that is surely theirs alone,
 Since they have never, never known
 A fallen world like this.

Oh, how shall I, whose native sphere
is dark, whose mind is dim,
Before the Ineffable appear,
And on my naked spirit bear
The uncreated beam?"

T. Binney

Who can stand before that fiery countenance, that face of dazzling radiance? Not we. Not yet; though some day the redeemed will be able to do so (22:4). Not John, for he fell at His feet as dead (v 17). Then came again the old, sweet touch, the same compassionate voice that John had known before on the mount of transfiguration when he saw Christ's glory and prostrated himself in great fear (Matthew 17:6,7). Fear not, John; fear not, disciples of Jesus. Though His eyes, His face seem changed, yet His heart is not. Though He appears now in glory, yet He is Jesus Christ our Lord, "the same yesterday, today and for ever".

He reassures John in verse 18, and leaves no doubt as to His identity. This glorious person was the same one who lived, died and rose again. He has the keys of Hades and of death. That is, He has absolute authority over the unseen world of the dead. Only he can open the gates of death.

This is the vision of Jesus Christ that was given to John on Patmos. It is full of instruction for every believer, and far more could be written if space allowed. But let everyone look for himself and draw sweetness and strength from this picture of the Lord.

It is a picture of overwhelming glory. God has glorified His Son Jesus with the glory that He had with the Father before the world was (John 17:5).

It is a picture of pure holiness. Sin cannot live in that presence and sinners without Christ's righteousness will be destroyed by it.

It is a picture of One prepared for battle, and no weapon that is formed against Him can prosper. He will fight for His Church, and for His world, and He will conquer, and all who obstinately oppose Him will perish. The Lord is a warrior (Exodus 15:3).

But there is one thing absent from the picture that we might expect to find there. You will observe that He has no crown. Later on in chapter 5 where the Lamb is described we observe the same striking fact. The elders in chapter 4 are crowned (4:4); the rider on a white horse in chapter 6 is crowned (6:2); the woman in chapter 12 is crowned (12:1); the beast in chapter 13 is crowned

(13:1). But Christ here in chapter 1 is not crowned. This requires an explanation.

It is true that He is now crowned with glory and honor (Heb 2:9 — this is the only place in the New Testament that speaks of Jesus being crowned with anything except thorns until the closing pages of Revelation). It is also true that He has the unseen sovereignty of the world (Matt 28:18), and He is the ruler of the kings of the earth. But it would appear that He has not yet received the crown that marks Him out as the open Ruler of the kingdoms of this world. Now He waits until His enemies become His footstool. At the sounding of the 7th trumpet, in the end of the age, the kingdoms of the world become His (Rev 11:15). Thereafter when we see Him coming on a white cloud to reap the earth His head is crowned (14:14); and when He returns to earth as King of kings He has many diadems (19:12); for at last He comes openly to rule all the nations of the earth. At present He sits on His Father's throne; then He will sit on His own throne (3:21).

Thus we see, as we should expect, that this opening Patmos vision is likewise in perfect harmony with all that shall follow. The personal attributes and offices of Christ depicted here are emphasized throughout the Revelation.

The outline

1:19 "Write the things you have seen, and the things which are now, and the things which will take place after these things."

We need not be concerned with trying to devise an outline for the Revelation. The Lord Himself gives it in verse 19. It is an outline that is perfectly natural and clear and has been recognized by many writers: the things which you have seen, and the things which are now, and the things which will take place after these things. Some have suggested there should be a two-fold division of v 19 rather than a three-fold one. The Berkeley version has "Write what you have seen, both what is now and what shall occur hereafter". This is not possible because John had not yet seen "what shall occur hereafter". He saw that later. So the proper division is this:

(1) "The things which you have seen" evidently refers to the vision John had just seen.

(2) "The things which are now" plainly refers to the various conditions prevailing in the seven churches, described in chapters 2 and 3.

(3) "The things which will take place after these things" refers, in my opinion, to the things which will take place after the conditions prevailing in the churches have run their full course.² We will leave this verse for the present and look at it again later on.

In verse 20 for the first time, we have symbols explained for us. Concerning the seven lampstands, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that they refer to the seven churches. We are plainly told so. However, even with the explanation, there is some dispute over the meaning of the seven stars. They are designated as the "angels" of the seven churches.

Because of this some think that they must be literal angels. They think that these heavenly beings are responsible, in some measure at least, for the churches. But in no other Scripture are we ever led to believe that angels have any superintendence over the churches. I must say that it seems to me a bit absurd that John would be writing letters to heavenly beings. Nor can I imagine that literal angels were required to come and read these letters in the churches. Nor can we rightly think that here they are being warned and rebuked for the sins and failures of the churches, or that one of them was in danger of being spit out of the Lord's mouth with the lukewarm church at Laodicea.

Others have suggested that the word refers to the prevailing spirit or character of each church. But the majority of commentators take the word as meaning messenger, and some translators actually translate it "messenger." The Greek word translated angel here can indeed mean a literal angel, but it is also used of men in the above sense in Luke 7:24, James 2:25, etc. I believe the angels of the churches are those whom the Lord counts as responsible as representatives of the churches, the messengers through whom He speaks to them. I also believe that it is significant that there was a single messenger for each church, but perhaps this should not be pressed too far.

² Abraham Kuyper in his comments on the Revelation states very strongly that we cannot understand these prophecies unless we realize that they refer to end-time events. His words: "The Apocalypse of St. John treats exclusively of what will come to pass when the ordinary course of things is broken up, and the concluding period of both the life of the Church and the life of the world is ushered in" (p. 18). Again, "The events which form the prophetic content of the Apocalypse shall only come to pass, when the end of the world is at hand" (p. 22). He calls this the "only correct understanding of the Apocalyptic prophecies". I do not think he overstates this, but I prefer to say they will take place at the "end of the age" rather than at the "end of the world".

The mystery of the golden lampstands

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

The lampstands are of gold. This indicates the Divine origin off the churches and their preciousness in His sight. Christ is in the midst of them. This indicates His nearness and His relationship to them. Churches composed of true believers, weak and failing in many ways though they be, are still the most precious things on earth to the Son of God. And they perform the most valuable service. Their chief function is to give spiritual light in a world ignorant of the true God. They are to be witnesses to the truth as it is in Jesus. And woe to the church where the light and witness are extinguished.

Christ is in their midst to enable them to accomplish this ministry. He is the sun, they are the planets revolving about Him and drawing their life and light from Him. Every local church and every individual Christian should continually recognize His nearness and open all the windows of the soul to that face that shines as the sun in its strength. To be filled with His light and to pour it forth into the dense darkness that surrounds every church everywhere -- this is the churches' true glory.

"Make my life a bright outshining
Of Thy life, that all may see
Thine own resurrection power
Mightily put forth in me;
Ever let my heart become
Yet more consciously Thy home."

J. S. Pigott

Happy is the church where the presence of Christ is recognized and loved, where the Sun of Righteousness is shining in His strength. There will be warmth, life, light and power in such a church that is not found anywhere else on earth.

Christ is the Lord of the churches. He makes and holds the stars. His flaming eyes search all things. His shining feet walk up and down in the churches and tread in judgment on the evil. He fights against the unrepentant sinner with the sword of His mouth. He is always there to comfort, to warn, to rebuke, to uphold, to build up, to destroy. And in the midst of the many churches He is ever

performing His secret ministry of sanctifying and cleansing the one Church which is His Body, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Eph 5:23-27). Chapters two and three give us the Lord's own letters to the churches. These letters are not John's and do not give his thoughts. They were dictated by the Lord of Glory, and are therefore of exceptional value and interest.³ They contain just what He would say to the churches if He were to speak to them face to face.

The list of these seven churches is given in 1:11. It begins with Ephesus, located in the chief city in that region, and doubtless the largest church of the seven. Somewhat less than 40 miles to the north lay Smyrna; and somewhat more than 40 miles north of Smyrna was the church at Pergamos. Thyatira was 45 miles southeast of Pergamos, and Sardis was 30 miles nearly due south of Thyatira. Philadelphia lay 30 miles east southeast of Sardis, and Laodicea, the last mentioned, was 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia.

These seven churches may certainly be viewed in two different ways.

(1) As literal, historical churches of John's day which stood in need of these messages. There can be no question about this.

(2) As churches that represent all churches throughout this whole age. There is considerable evidence for this and I think it can hardly be doubted. We are plainly told that there is a "mystery" in connection with them.

(a) The number seven itself is significant. It suggests completeness. Just as the seven spirits (1:4) speak of one Holy Spirit of God, so the seven churches speak of the whole church from the beginning to the end of this age. Just as Paul wrote to seven churches to give the sum of his Divinely inspired doctrine for all churches in all times, so our Lord here sends His messages to seven churches for all churches in all times. So the lampstands are not

³ Though I do not hold to any mechanical view of Biblical inspiration, I do not hesitate to use the word "dictated" here. If we truly believe the words recorded by John before each of the letters ("to the angel of the church...write") and if we recognize the obvious fact that the Lord Himself is represented as speaking directly in them, we cannot fail to see that Christ alone is responsible for the exact wording of these letters. I deplore any language of the commentators that tries to make out that John used his wisdom, and knowledge of conditions in the seven churches in order to write to them. It is the Lord's wisdom and knowledge revealed here.

merely seven churches, but *the* seven churches, the whole of the church for the whole of the age. That is, the whole of the outward professing church, composed of good and bad, true and false Christians. The 7 lampstands do not mean, as far as I can see, the one true church which is the spiritual body of Christ, the church which is composed altogether of true believers. Certainly when we study the churches at Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea, we see a mixture of true and false, good and bad.

(b) The churches chosen suggest the same thing. There is no letter to the large and famous churches at Rome, Antioch or Jerusalem. Had the Lord nothing to say to them? Why were they passed over in favor of Thyatira or Sardis or Smyrna? Is it not evident that the Lord chose various types of churches as representatives through whom He could speak to all?

(c) The picture of Christ in the midst of the lampstands, holding the seven stars, teaches us the same truth. We see only seven lampstands and only seven stars. Had Christ, then, only seven churches in His care, and did He hold only seven ministers in His hand? It is plain that the seven lampstands represent all the churches, the seven stars all the ministers of John's day. But does Christ care only for the churches and ministers of that day, and not churches throughout the age? We know He cares for all. Thus the seven lampstands represent all the churches, the seven stars all their ministers throughout this whole age.

(d) The phrase "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" is repeated seven times and so brings these messages home to all churches in every age.

(e) In these letters there are prophecies that relate to the second coming of Christ. The people of these literal churches of John's day, to whom these things were said, have long since passed from the scene and these prophecies in their final and complete sense were not fulfilled in them. For the fulfillment of these things that are written it is necessary then that these churches in their "mystery" meaning be in existence at the end of the age.

For these reasons I think we can safely hold that the Lord Jesus chose these seven churches as representatives to show forth the various spiritual conditions that would prevail throughout the age. These letters are vital, not merely as a study of conditions in the early church, but for our Christian lives now. It is not too much to say that few portions of the whole Bible are as important and useful as these letters to the churches.

(3) In addition to these two interpretations of the churches, many writers have taught that they have a further meaning. According to them, the seven churches give us a prophetic outline of the history of the outward professing church from its beginning at Pentecost to the end. In this view, the seven churches were chosen in perfect order beginning at Ephesus and ending at Laodicea, to indicate seven successive ages through which the church would pass. According to this view,

Ephesus represents the early church

Smyrna, the church age of Roman persecution

Pergamos, the church united to the world under the Roman Emperor Constantine

Thyatira, the Roman Catholic Church of the dark ages Sardis, the church following the Reformation

Philadelphia, the church of modern revivals and missionary effort

Laodicea, the final apostate church, forsaking Christ and being forsaken by Him.

The following arguments are advanced to support this view by those who hold it.

(a) We are told that since the seven churches are a "mystery" (1:20), we are to expect far more in them than at first meets the eye, and that the mystery consists of this prophetic history of church.

(b) We are told that the book of the Revelation is a prophecy (1:3) and therefore, the letters to the churches of necessity have a prophetic meaning.

(c) We are told that there is a wonderful agreement between the letters here given and church history itself. H. A. Ironside wrote: "You have only to read these seven letters, then take any good, reliable church history and see for yourself how perfectly the key fits the lock" (Lectures on the Book of Revelation).

What shall we think of this interesting interpretation? It seems to me that it is a definite possibility. But it does not rest upon the same sure foundation as the two views given above. The first two reasons given to support it can apply equally well (or nearly as well) to the second of those views. The last reason may seem to be a strong one. I do not deny that there is sometimes a striking agreement between these letters and successive ages of church

history. But I do not think it proves the point beyond doubt. Some writers have thought they found wonderful agreement between church history and the events later described under the seals, trumpets and bowls. But this does not make it so.

However, even though we may not be able to speak with certainty, this prophetic interpretation may still be of interest and value. So I have included some comments from this point of view in the following studies of the churches.

The Holy Bible is at once both beautifully plain and wonderfully profound. It is both a clear treatise on salvation and a marvelously intricate work of creation. It would not surprise me if in these letters there were all, or nearly all, that God's servants have thought they found, and a good deal more besides. And I might add that it seems strange to me that some writers who deny any prophetic significance to these letters as regards church history, yet think they find church history everywhere under the seals, bowls and trumpets. I think if church history is to be found anywhere in the Revelation, it must be found here in this portion that plainly deals with the churches.

In any case, we should be more interested in the practical side of these letters and what they say to us personally. Very much has been written concerning these churches in their local settings as they existed in John's day, and a good deal of it is fascinating and useful as background material. But we cannot include much of it here. Likewise, it would be possible to examine church history in detail in its agreement with each of the letters. But here, too, I much confine myself to a few remarks. We must always keep before us the main purpose for which these letters were given by our Lord. This, with all Scripture, is for "doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness". It would be very easy and pleasant to be occupied with the background, or with the prophetic elements of these letters, and miss the thing of first importance.

So let us with humble hearts turn our attention now to the letters themselves to receive these words from Heaven, to obey these commands, and to believe these promises of our Lord.

3

“The things which are”

Ephesus

2:1 “To the angel of the church of Ephesus write: He who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands says these things.

2 “I know your works, and your labour, and your patience, and how you cannot endure those who are evil, and that you have tested those who say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars, 3 and that you have persevered, and have had patience, and for my name’s sake have laboured, and have not fainted.

4 “Nevertheless I have against you that you have left your first love. 5 Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the first works. Or else I will come to you quickly, and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent. 6 But this you have: You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

The church in Ephesus had begun with the visit of the apostle Paul many years before. His ministry in Ephesus was mightily blessed of God. It was one of the most marvelous works of God ever to be accomplished in the amazing life of service of that chief of apostles. He found in the large city of Ephesus a group of twelve baptized with the baptism of John the Baptist. He left, after three years, a city shaken to its foundations and a large multitude baptized with the baptism of the Lord Jesus and with the Spirit of God. “So mightily the Word of God grew and showed its power” (Acts 19:20).

The church there was among the brightest and biggest and best of the apostolic churches. It was a church to which Paul could fully open his heart in the wonderful letter to the Ephesians. It was a church from which the Word of Life sounded out through all the regions of Asia (Acts 19:10). It is possible that the Gospel had at

first been carried from Ephesus to the other six churches named here in the Revelation.

“I know your works”. This solemn declaration is found in each of the seven letters. This is an emphatic indication of the importance Christ places upon the outward works of His people. If our faith does not issue in a practical life of godliness and service it is a dead faith that cannot save. It is deeds and not fine talk that Christ approves.

The works of the Ephesian church were very good indeed. They labored and labored patiently. This patient continuance in well doing is mentioned twice in verses two and three and must have been the outstanding characteristic of this church. In spite of failure there these Ephesian Christians are commended very highly for their works' sake.

It was not only a laboring church but a holy church as well. They were able to discern evil in their midst, and willing to discipline the evil-doer. This is clear by three things said of them.

(1) They could not tolerate wicked persons. They had no interest in building up the number of church members at the expense of truth and holiness. In that city of uncleanness and abominable idolatries they kept themselves pure for the Lord. They recognized evil when they saw it and refused to compromise with it. They were not reluctant, as the Corinthians had been, to put away wicked people from among themselves if and when they crept in.

(2) They discerned and rejected false apostles. These ministers of Satan, more subtle than any beast of the field, came wriggling into the early churches. They tried to hiss their poison doctrine into the ears, to sink their fangs into the vitals of God's congregations.

In many places Paul warned against them.

“I plead with you, brethren, look out for those who cause divisions and hindrances contrary to the teaching you have learned, and avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own stomach, and by flattery and fine speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom 16:17,18).

“Such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, outwardly changing themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan outwardly changes himself into an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:13,14).

“There are some who are troubling you, and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ” (Gal 1:7).

“Beware of dogs! Beware of evil workers! Beware of the mutilators” (Phil 3:2).

“I say this so that no one may deceive you with persuasive words” (Col 2:4).

“Let no one deceive you by any means” (2 Thess 2:3).

“Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so these also resist the truth, these men of corrupt minds, rejected as far as the faith is concerned” (2 Tim 3:8).

“There are many unrestrained people, empty talkers and deceivers” (Titus 1:10).

Think too, how Paul called the elders of the church at Ephesus to himself at Miletus and expressly warned them: “Take care about yourselves and about all the flock. . . .for I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up and speak distorted things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:28-31).

They remembered these tears, they heeded this warning. And behind the mask of fair speeches and persuasive words of those false apostles they discerned the face of Satan. They knew the Word of God, they had learned sound doctrine and so found them to be liars. Happy is the church that follows in their steps.

(3) They hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. It is not altogether clear just who these people were. Some think they were followers of one Nicolaus who, after professing to adopt Christianity, became a heretic and the leader of an immoral sect. The result of his teaching (say these) was a life of immorality and self-indulgence in the name of religion. The basis of this interpretation is uncertain church tradition.

Others think that we can only properly understand who these Nicolaitans were by looking at the meaning of the name itself. The name can be derived from two Greek words — *nikan* which means to conquer, and *laos* which means the people. The Nicolaitans could signify the rise of a class of people who tried to gain power in the church in order to lord it over God’s flock. If this view is correct the appearance of these Nicolaitans would indicate the beginning of that priestly caste that soon came to dominate the early church,

subjugated it for many centuries, and still retains its hold over many of the churches of Christendom.

Whether one explanation or the other be adopted it is clear that the Lord Jesus Christ hates both evils. Neither unclean self-indulgence in the name of Christianity, nor the pretensions and self-thing singled out for special praise to this Ephesian church was that they, too, hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans.

So the church at Ephesus was holy. They were quick to discern, strong to denounce and reject the evil that presented itself there. What a contrast to the churches of Pergamos and Thyatira which suffered Balaamites and fornicators and Nicolaitans, and “that woman Jezebel” in their midst! What a contrast to so many churches of today where “evil men and seducers wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived”. Now evil men, infidels and unbelievers, some who openly deny and some who secretly try to destroy nearly every fundamental doctrine of the Word of God are allowed to be pastors and bishops and teachers in churches and seminaries, and nothing is done about it.

It was not so at Ephesus. In many ways that was a model church, toiling patiently for the Lord, keeping itself unspotted from the world, the flesh, and the devil. But there was something eating out the heart of that church, and Christ the Faithful Witness must point it out — “Nevertheless I have against you that you have left your first love” (v 4). The word “somewhat” in the KJV softens the blow that was given in the original — the word does not appear there. It was not “somewhat” that He had against them but a matter so vital that their very existence as a church was threatened. If they did not repent the whole of their light and testimony would die (v 5). Williams translated: “But I hold it against you that you do not love me as you did at first. So remember the heights from which you have fallen and repent”. “The heights from which you have fallen.” These heights appear in the third chapter of the letter of the apostle Paul to this same church at Ephesus. Paul’s great burden for them was just this: “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is its breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge”.

These heights they had known and enjoyed; but now the freshness and sweetness of that love was being forgotten. They no longer delighted to choose the better part and sit with Mary at

Christ’s feet. They had begun a downhill slide to ruin. A love of other things was crowding out His love. They were fallen. Perhaps this coolness to the person of Christ was beginning to manifest itself in a lack of interest in meetings for prayer. Perhaps there was a weakening desire for quiet hours alone in the Lord’s fellowship over the Word of God, and a loss of love for others of the Lord’s people in their own and other churches. There was certainly a loss of heart obedience. Obedience is what love is all about (John 14: 15,21,24). So the Lord said to them: “Do the first works”. Love is a matter of doing what God says, not merely feeling a fine emotion.

To the fallen church at Ephesus He must speak this command — “Remember. . . and repent”. Remember the heights and scale them again. Remember the sweetness of Christ’s fellowship, the tenderness of heart, the songs in the night, the overflow of holy affection. And above all that, remember the glad obedience to His commands. Remember and fall at His feet to mourn the present barren coldness.

The church that will not do this is heading for disaster. Christ will come quickly and take away the lamp stand and there will remain a name perhaps but the light will be gone. The church at Ephesus, heedless of this warning, long ago ceased to be a church. And that famous city of Ephesus today is an utter desolation.

Let us learn from this letter something for our own hearts.

(1) Our Lord Jesus wants first our love, after that our work. First we must love Him, then fight His battles. We should thank God for every tireless servant of Christ who causes men to glorify the Father in heaven by their good works. We should be grateful for every courageous champion of the truth who contends earnestly for sound doctrine and carries the battle into the very face of the enemy. But we should remember that a servant of God can do both of these and still be fallen from the heights.

(2) We are held accountable for our state of heart and for the state of our churches. It falls within the area of our responsibility to have or not have our first love. It is ours to guard, ours to keep. We are commanded: “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov 4:23).

(3) It is wonderfully possible to regain first love if it is lost. If it were not possible, repentance would not have been commanded to the fallen Ephesians. We would not be told to “do the first works” if we were not in a position to do so. It may well take fasting and weeping and mourning and a rending of our hearts, for a regaining

of lost ground in the Christian life is one of the most difficult of all things. But once we stand with Christ again on the sunlit heights looking back over the dark ravines, the cold valleys, all that is involved in regaining our first love will seem as nothing.

Even those who have not fallen greatly as the Ephesians, can still look forward to new mountain peaks of love to be gained. We have not yet reached the summit of the possibilities of life in Christ.

"Make us Thy mountaineers;
We would not linger on the lower slope,
Fill us afresh with hope, O God of hope,
That undefeated we may climb the hill
As seeing Him, who is invisible.

Let us die climbing. When this little while
Lies far behind us, and the last defile
Is all aight, and in that light we see
Our Leader and our Lord, what will it be?"

Amy Carmichael

I was interested to find in reading the life of Charles G. Finney, a great evangelist of another day, the following account of a time of heart-searching and prayer.

"At this time it seemed as if my soul was wedded to Christ, in a sense in which I had never had any thought or conception of before. The language of the Song of Solomon was as natural to me as my breath. I thought I could understand well the state of mind he was in, when he wrote that song; and concluded then, as I have ever thought since, that that song was written by him, after he had been reclaimed from his great backsliding. I not only had all the freshness of my first love, but a vast accession to it. Indeed the Lord lifted me so much above anything that I had experienced before and taught me so much of the meaning of the Bible, of Christ's relations, and power and willingness, that I often found myself saying to him, I had not known or conceived that any such thing was true. I then realized what is meant by the saying, that he is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. He did at that time teach me, indefinitely above all that I had ever asked or thought. I had had no conception of the length and breadth and height and depth and efficiency of his grace."

Praise God for the blessed possibilities of renewal and advance in the experience of His love.

In verse 7 we have the first of seven promises to overcomers given in these seven letters. We will note the promise now but reserve our discussion of overcomers and overcoming for Appendix B in the back of this book. Some of the sweetest promises in the Word of God are here. This first one looks back to Eden. Genesis 3:22-24 has the picture of man driven from the garden. “And now he must not put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever. Therefore the LORD God. . .drove the man out and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every direction to keep the way of the tree of life”. In due time the sword of flaming judgment that barred man from the tree of life was quenched in the blood of Jesus Christ. The barriers are down, the tree is open to all — overcomers.

He that has an ear (in any church, in any age) let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

So much for the church at Ephesus itself and the practical lessons we can learn from it. But what prophetic significance, if any, does it have? This Ephesian church of all the seven, and perhaps of all the churches of that first century was admirably suited as the church to represent early Christianity.

(1) The early church universal, as Ephesus, was the purest in doctrine (it had the living apostles of Christ as teachers), and it was fervent and zealous in good works (in one generation the Gospel was spread throughout the world).

(2) The early church universal, as Ephesus, discerned the true apostles and the false. They recognized and accepted the books inspired by the Holy Spirit that were to make up the New Testament.

(3) The early church universal, as Ephesus, did not long retain the splendor of her first loving, but declined in fervor.

In these letters we seem to have a picture of spiritual decline steadily progressing from the first to the last, with the exceptions of Smyrna and Philadelphia. Pure Ephesus lost its first love. In Pergamos the deeds of the Nicolaitans which were hated at Ephesus became a doctrine which was tolerated, and there the Balaamites were also accepted. Thyatira suffered Jezebel herself to corrupt the church. Sardis was a dead shell of a church with few true believers. Laodicea, where there is not one thing to commend, is the final sickening stage of a fallen church that is fit for nothing but to be spit out of Christ’s mouth. Is this the history of Christianity? Will

anyone who knows the facts of church history dare say it is not? Remember that it all starts with loss of first love.

"Every sin, in its own nature, has a tendency towards a final apostasy" (John Newton).

Especially that sin.

Smyrna

2:8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The First and the Last, who was dead, and has come to life again says these things:

9 "I know your works and tribulation and poverty (but you are rich). And I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but *are* a synagogue of Satan. 10 Fear none of those things which you are going to suffer. See, the devil will cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful even to 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. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death."

It is said that Smyrna was the most beautiful city of Asia Minor. It was known by such lofty titles as "the first city", "the Beauty of Asia", and "the city of strength". Man looks on the outward appearance but God looks on the heart. And Smyrna's beautiful exterior concealed a heart of deep antagonism to God and dark cruelty to God's people. He whose eyes are like a flame of fire had no time for the city's broad avenues or noble buildings. He saw there His church, His beloved people crushed beneath the heel of its citizens. That which was the most beautiful thing in Smyrna in the sight of Christ was scorned and despised in their sight. Its lovely port, its flourishing trade, its handsome streets, its culture and art, what were these to Him? Members of His own body there were treated as the lowest people of the earth.

The name Smyrna derives from word "myrrh", a fragrant gum that came from the bark of a certain shrub found in Arabia. From other occurrences of this word in the Bible we know that it was used for embalming the dead (John 19:39), was in the holy oil used to anoint the furniture of the tabernacle (Exodus 30:23), was a perfume of the king, the Bridegroom (Psa 45:8) and the Bride (Song of songs 3:6). The suffering church at Smyrna was as

a holy oil, a rare perfume, a sweet aroma to Christ. At the time this letter reached them their suffering had taken three forms as indicated by three words in verse 9.

1) *Tribulation*. The Greek word suggests a crushing weight of affliction. They were being pressed beyond measure, ground beneath the rock of oppression until their very life blood burst forth and stained Smyrna's fair earth. It was given to these noble believers to have one of the highest honors that God gives to men on earth — not only to believe on Christ but also to suffer for His sake (Phil 1:29).

Observe in verse 8 how Christ presents Himself to them. He is the first and the last, who was dead and is alive — that is, the absolute sovereign of earth and heaven, of time and eternity. Before Him all the nations are as a drop in the bucket, and are counted as the small dust in the balance. The town of Smyrna was like an ant-heap that He could destroy at His will. He could stop its persecutions if He willed and He could let them continue for the good of His people and the glory of His name if He willed. And He chose to let the believers there be as incense, crushed and precious, for a time longer.

“Look down from heaven, and see from the habitation of your holiness and your glory. Where is your zeal and your strength, the yearning of your heart and of your mercies toward me? Are they restrained?”

“Give ear to my prayer, O God, and do not hide yourself from my supplication. My heart is sore pained within me, and the terrors of death have fallen on me.”

“Make haste, O God, to deliver me; make haste to help me, O Lord.”

Prayers like these from the Psalms were born in suffering and may have found expression again in the prayers of these Smyrna believers. Then they could think again of Him who went into the valley of tribulation before them — He “who was dead, and is alive.” It was He who received myrrh at His birth, drank the bitter cup in His life, and with myrrh lay down in the tomb. He did not sit cold and impersonal in the skies over Smyrna; He did not carelessly shut out His people's prayers. “I know. . . .your tribulation.”

“How long, O Lord, how long?” He promises there will be only ten days more of tribulation (v 10). He knows the exact measure for His children's good and His glory. “Every trial is measured by the heart of infinite love in a hand of infinite care” (William Newell). This is our confidence and our strength.

(2) *Poverty.* Many of them were no doubt from the poorest classes of society. “Has not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?” (James 2:5). They were the despised poor, the outcasts and the slaves of others. My thinking now is colored no doubt by what I have witnessed in many villages of the Orient, but I imagine something like this. Their homes were the huts of mud and sticks that spoiled Smyrna’s fair landscape. Their food, when they had food, was the coarse food that no one else wanted. Their jobs, when they had jobs, was the work everyone else scorned to do. Destitute, ragged, afflicted, in constant danger of abuse from those with even a little power — this was the state of God’s beloved children in “the city of life and strength”. This was their beauty in “the Beauty of Asia”. Discriminated against for work, shoved aside for every honorable position, barely able to exist in the midst of plenty, kicked into poverty and despised — this was the way “the first city of Asia” treated its Christians.

“I know. . . your poverty, (but you are rich).” He who was born in a stable, had no place to lay His head during His ministry, and was at last cast out of Jerusalem to die stripped of His only garment, He knew their poverty. And they knew “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

Their poverty was worldly and temporary, their riches spiritual and permanent. They were rich in spirit, rich in Christ, rich with eternal riches. All things were theirs, whether Paul or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all was theirs. and they were Christ’s (1 Cor 3:21-23).

(3) *“Blasphemy.”* Or, “slander”. Not only did they know the bitterness of tribulation and the misery of poverty, they suffered the lies, the slanders, the reviling of those who professed to be the people of God. There was a numerous and powerful congregation of Jews in Smyrna and they were the implacable enemies of the Christians there, as indeed they were in almost every city where the Gospel was preached. They professed to know God, but in works they denied Him, being abominable, and disobedient, and for every good work reprobate. When Polycarp, the famous bishop of Smyrna, became a martyr for his faith, the Jews were very forward in crying out for his death, and with their own hands they carried logs to the stake where he was burned. As the Bible Says, “The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes on him with his

teeth.” Their tongue was a sharp arrow when they taunted the afflicted and suffering, “Where is now your God?”

The Jews there boasted that they were the synagogue of the true God. Christ calls them the synagogue of Satan. This is the deceitfulness of sin. This is the terrible fruit of unbelief. How many there be in the world around us who are convinced their religion and ways are right and true, yet who sacrifice to demons and are captured and motivated by the chief of demons, Satan himself!

The Lord Jesus did not promise the afflicted Christians of Smyrna immediate relief. Rather He warned them of more to follow. Prison, tribulation and martyrdom still awaited them. But in the midst of the storm that the devil was soon to cause to beat on them they could hold fast the encouraging words of their Lord and Saviour.

(1) “Fear none of those things which you are going to suffer”. “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body” (Matt 10: 28). “If you suffer for righteousness’ sake, blessed are you. And do not fear their dread, nor be troubled” (1 Peter 3: 14). By such words He encourages His people to endure all things.

(2) Their affliction had a purpose. It was all that they “may be tested.” And they could know that the trial of their faith was “much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire” (1 Peter 1: 7).

(3) “Be faithful even to death, and I will give you the crown of life.” This does not mean that salvation is promised them if they hold fast their faith until the end of life. It is a promise of the special reward of a martyr’s crown for those who faithfully continue to confess Christ’s name even though they are killed for it. It appears to be distinct from the promise made to overcomers. Overcomers will not be hurt of the second death, but these will win a crown of life. Those will escape the lake of fire, but these will gain a reward beyond that. All believers have the promise of the one, martyrs for Christ have the promise of the other.

He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to churches.

Where does the church of Smyrna fit into the prophetic interpretation of these seven letters?

(1) The second age of the church was one of suffering and persecution. Christians in many places were forced to meet in

caves and catacombs, and tribulation and death pursued them for more than two hundred years. Christians were hunted like animals, and the Roman amphitheaters were drenched with their blood as they were thrown to ravenous beasts in the presence of applauding multitudes.

They were blamed and slandered for everything. If the Tiber flooded or the Nile failed to rise, it was thought to be the fault of the Christians and their presumed false worship. Famines, droughts, plagues, even the burning of Rome, were all charged to their account. Many there were who went up from prisons, from fiery stakes, from blood-soaked arenas to take the martyr's crown from the Lord's pierced hand.

(2) It was also time when Judaism began to make headway in the church. The false doctrines that had crept into the churches of Galatia, which so troubled the churches in Paul's day, began to make more progress after the death of the apostles. Legalism, ritualism and priestcraft began to take giant strides, and heartless formal religion pressed the battle hard against the spiritual.

Are there no Smyrna churches now? We know there are. We know that there are still places on earth where men and women boldly confess Christ at the risk of losing all they possess, including their lives. And it may well be that soon God's people, East and West, may have the glorious privilege of winning crowns of life by dying for Christ. We may all need very shortly all the consolation of this letter to the suffering church at Smyrna.

Then we will need to know the truth so beautifully expressed by a father in the church who was himself a martyr. His name was Cyprian and he wrote, "In persecutions, earth is shut up, but heaven is opened; Antichrist is threatening, but Christ is protecting; death is brought in, but immortality follows; the world is taken away from him that is slain, but paradise is set forth to him restored; the life of time is extinguished, but the life of eternity is realized."

Fear none of those things which you will suffer.

Pergamos

2:12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write: He who has the sharp sword with two edges says these things.

13 "I know your works and where you live: where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to my name, and have not denied my faith, even in those days when Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan lives.

14 “However I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak how to cause the children of Israel to stumble, to *have them* eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication. 15 You also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. 16 Repent! Or else I will come to you quickly, and will fight 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 him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, known to no man except he who receives *it*.”

Pergamos (or Pergamum) was the seat of administration for the Province of Asia. Although it was not as large as Ephesus or as beautiful as Smyrna it was the most famous city in the whole region. It was well-known for its culture (its library was the second largest in the world), for its devotion to the worship of the Roman emperor, and for its temples dedicated to heathen deities. One of its favorite gods was Asclepios, the Greek god of healing, who was worshipped under the image of a serpent.

Pergamos was known by the Lord Jesus, who has the sharp sword with two edges, not for its fascinating history or its Greek culture, but as being the place of Satan’s throne (Greek “*thronos*”). This expression suggests a truth plainly taught elsewhere in the word of God — Satan’s throne is not in hell but on earth. He is “the ruler of this world” (John 14:30), “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4), the chief of the “rulers of the darkness of this world” (Eph 6:12). He has a throne and when the Revelation was written that throne was in Pergamos. A phrase in verse 13 -- “where Satan lives” — emphasizes that this was his particular home.

It might be inquired why Satan had his throne in this comparatively small city in Asia Minor. Rome was the capital of the empire and the largest and most important city on earth, in man’s eyes. Athens was the center of Greek culture and philosophy. Alexandria with its great library (the world’s largest) was the center of learning. Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus and other cities were more important as centers of Christianity. Yet Satan chose Pergamos as his headquarters. The facts previously mentioned concerning this city do not explain why he did so. What, then, shall we say? It is possible, of course, that he was driven to make his

home there rather than in some larger or more important center by the power of the sovereign Lord. But beyond this possibility other reasons suggest themselves.

(1) Satan's throne in the world will probably be where he is most welcomed by men. The citizens of Pergamos must have given him a peculiarly warm reception.

(2) Satan's throne in the world will be where he conceives he can most injure the work of God. We do not know, of course, what locations and distances may mean to Satan, but we know that he cannot be everywhere at once and will doubtless have some place or other as a center of operations. It is a fact that Pergamos was very near the center of that wonderful work of God accomplished in the first century. Nearly equidistant from Rome and Jerusalem it was also the center of a broad arc that included Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, the cities of Galatia, and Antioch in Syria. From Pergamos he could send out his angels of darkness in all directions to try and work havoc in the churches. Perhaps the poison that infected the churches of Galatia and the false teaching that disturbed Corinth and other churches had its secret, unseen source there. Size is not necessarily the most important thing in these matters. A cancer may form in a small part and yet destroy the whole body. And at Pergamos Satan was able to infect the church with a deadly cancer, as we shall see.

(3) Satan's throne in the world will no doubt be chosen in accordance with invisible principles that affect the total religious system of the earth. The false religions of man are exceedingly mysterious in their origin and development. There are devilish forces, secret councils and dark designs abroad in the unseen world affecting the religions around us that we never guess at or imagine.

Some think they have traced all false systems of religion back to one common source. That source is Babylon, the ancient city on the Euphrates river. The tower of Babel was the center of civilization after the flood. It was also the expression of man's arrogant rebellion against the word of God. In process of time a system of false worship was developed there that had certain well-known features. Satan's greatest weapon in his war against God is false religion, and there, at the fountainhead of civilization after the flood, he taught his dark doctrines to men who would listen.

That system had mysteries known only to the initiated and a priesthood to guard the mysteries and to act as mediators for the people. There, first of all, idols were introduced as objects of worship and there began the deification of human beings. Very

early one of the favorite deities became a mother with a child in her arms. This worship of the so-called “queen of heaven” spread from there throughout the earth. Over this false and corrupt religious system there was an individual high priest who had as one of his titles “Chief Bridge Builder”, meaning bridge builder between God and man. Centuries later, when Babylon and its temples were destroyed, the high priest at that time fled to Pergamos where he found a welcome. Later he passed over to Rome. His title in Latin became Pontifex Maximus and was so inscribed on his miter. Beginning with Julius Caesar the office of high priest of the heathen was held by the Roman Emperors. Afterwards the title eventually passed to the bishop of Rome. When the bishop of Rome became the pope of the Catholic Church the name Pontifex Maximus fell to him. In this matter the popes became the successors of the high priests of ancient idolatrous Babylon.¹

Mark the descent — Babylon, Pergamos, Rome. It is true that Satan kept his throne in Pergamos for a time after the high priest had passed over to Rome. But is it unreasonable to think he later followed?²

One thing we know — wherever Satan’s throne is, his emissaries are everywhere and he himself walks about in the earth as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8,9). Wherever his dark intelligence sees a possibility of working ruin in the midst of God’s people, there his malice directs him.

So Satan lives on earth and has his throne here. What a fallen world it must be when the devil himself feels at home in it!

In Pergamos Satan used two methods to disrupt the church — first, persecution from without, then, corruption from within. There, as in many other cities and towns where Christ was known and loved, he used violence first, and when that did not stop the work of God, he introduced false doctrine in their midst.

Persecution has never destroyed the Church and it never will. Some of the brightest pages of Church history record the times when Christians paid for their faith in their own blood. “I know your works, and where you live” the Lord says. He knew the

¹ H. A. Ironside, Lectures on the book of Revelation, pp. 286-296.

² That the Roman Catholic Church is radically Babylonian in character is the thesis of Alexander Hislop’s well-known and fascinating book, *The Two Babylons*. This main theme seems to me to be confirmed by the language concerning the harlot woman of Chapter 17, “Mystery, Babylon the great, the monther of harlots and abominations of the earth”. This woman, as we shall see, is *Rome*.

tremendous difficulties His people faced in Pergamos, the threat to life and limb that frequently confronted them. And He commends them for holding fast His name even in the days of Antipas, the faithful martyr.

The name Antipas is interesting. It means “against all”. He stood firm for the truth against all that came against him and received for himself a new name, “my faithful martyr”. This is the same in the Greek as the name given to Christ in 1:5, “the faithful witness”. Christ rewards his faithful servant with one of his own titles. In a later age Athanasius was another “Antipas”. He stood against all the power of Rome in insisting on the true Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was told “the whole world is against you”, but boldly replied, “Then I am against the whole world.” Is there anything more needed today than bold and fearless Christians who are willing to stand against all and everything that exalts itself against the truth of God?

Satan, unable to destroy the church by force, began to corrupt it with detestable teachings. In this he met with more success. This is the meaning of Christ’s severe warning and rebuke to this church in verses 14-16. Two false doctrines had made considerable headway and threatened the spiritual life of the Pergamos congregation. There was the teaching or doctrine of Balaam, and there was the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.

Balaam is mentioned three times in the New Testament. Peter speaks of the way of Balaam (2 Pet 2:15). Jude writes of the error of Balaam (Jude 11). And here in Revelation we have the doctrine of Balaam. His way is to love the wages of unrighteousness, to desire gain regardless of the source. His error is to run greedily after it, to sell himself to the highest bidder, to hire himself out as a prophet. His doctrine is worse even than his way and his error. What his teaching was is clear from these verses in Revelation and from the Old Testament account of his activity (Numbers 24:25 - 25:5).

Satan, unable to halt the victorious march of Israel to the land of Canaan by force of arms (Num 21:21-35), used Balaam to teach Balak, the king of Moab, to entice Israel with Moab’s evil young women. Satan well knew that if Israel could be corrupted by idolatry and fornication God’s wrath and judgment would come upon them. He hoped by this means to cause their destruction before they ever entered Canaan. Balaam was his willing tool because he loved the gifts Balak promised. Being unable to openly curse Israel he secretly taught Balak his devilish method. Thus

covetousness and greed destroyed Balaam as it later did Judas Iscariot and many since. Satan's plan brought disaster to many in Israel. Because of the wickedness of His people God sent a plague that killed 24,000 of them in one day, and only the drastic action of Phinehas averted further calamity.

In Pergamos the Balaamites taught that it was all right to take part in feasts in idol temples, and to engage in sexual immorality.

What is Balaam's doctrine today? You may be sure that Satan has not given up a plan that succeeded so well for him then. His purpose is the same — find someone who will corrupt the church for a price, have false religious leaders cause the professing people of God to fall into immorality and idolatry, get them married to the world, break down the walls of separation, unite believers and unbelievers, make the church seek its satisfaction, not in God, but in the pleasures of the world, entice the church slyly by fleshly temptations. This is the plan of Satan and the doctrine of Balaam.

Search the letters of Paul and Peter and Jude and you will see that the apostles had to fight this Satanic teaching everywhere. This evil had begun to flourish in Pergamos and it was being tolerated. They did not, unlike the Ephesian Christians, put away those wicked men from themselves.

And this was their greatest danger.

The Nicolaitans appeared in Pergamos as they did in Ephesus but here their deeds became a doctrine. This is always the tendency of error — deeds at first performed without justification will, in the end, have a doctrine to justify them. And evil, if at first merely tolerated, will eventually be boldly taught (this accounts for many dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church).

Christ commanded repentance to this assembly at Pergamos. This weak toleration of evil must be mourned and forsaken. “Else I will come to you quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth”. How perfect is Scripture! How fitting here that the threat of a sword follows the reference to Balaam. There were two occasions in Balaam's life when the sword came against him. The first time it appeared in the hand of an angel to bar his way when he desired to go to Balak. Still he went madly on until there was no remedy. Joshua 13:22 records his end. “With the sword they also killed Balaam the son of Beor, who practised divination.”

The Balaamites of Pergamos have long since fallen by the invincible sword of judgment, and with them all that loved their evil doctrine. Say, if Christ Himself fights against a man, a people, a

church, how will they stand? Therefore, come out from among them and be separate and touch not the unclean thing. If you will not, you may find that Omnipotence is at war with you (Jer 21: 5).

Overcoming the power and wiles of Satan at Pergamos was no easy task, but the promise of reward to those who did so were great. To those who would not eat at idol sacrifices will be given to eat of the hidden Manna. And to those who hold fast Christ's name and faith as Antipas did, will be given a white stone with a new name written on it.

The hidden Manna can be none other than Christ Himself. He is the living bread which came down from heaven. Unlike the idol gods of the heathen, which were used in an attempt to seduce them from the faith, Christ was the Invisible One and His feast spiritual and hidden in the heart. This Manna is promised to the overcomer for an eternal feast. Now we have tasted, now we have seen a little of the Lord's goodness; then we shall see and know what no tongue on earth can describe.

According to some, the white stone will be an expression of Christ's delight in the overcomer. "It is a secret communication of love and intelligence between Christ and the overcomer, a joy which none can share, a reserved token of appreciative love. In the glory the manna is the expression of our appreciation of Christ in His humiliation; while the white stone equally sets forth His appreciation in us as overcomers" (W. Scott).

R. C. Trench thought the white stone should be identified with the "Urim and the Tthummim". George E. Ladd says white stones were used as tickets of admission to public festivals, and thinks this meaning fits the context best. "The white stone," he says, "is a symbol of admission to the Messianic feast" (Manna).

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Those who see in these seven letters a prophetic outline of the history of the Church discover added evidence in this letter. Pergamos in this view represents the third age of the Church that began at the end of the period of persecution signified by Smyrna.

(1) This third age was a time when Satan, now, most likely, having his throne at Rome, in general ceased for a time his method of persecution and began to corrupt the Church from within by the promotion of idolatry and fleshly indulgence. Babylonian idols, rites and doctrines found a place in the Church and spread rapidly until they infected, in some measure, nearly the whole of Christendom.

(2) Nicolaitanism (understood as a self-exalting ruling party in the Church) became the doctrine of the Church and the bishop of Rome became Pontifex Maximus, the so-called high priest of Christendom — or that part which would follow him.

(3) As the nation Israel had joined itself to Baal-peor in Balaam's day (Num 25:3), so now the Church made an unholy alliance with the world. This happened more particularly in the days when Constantine, who had forsaken pagan gods and adopted Christianity as his religion, ascended the throne as emperor of the Roman empire (A.D. 313). He immediately halted all persecution and took the Church under the protection and patronage of the state. Christendom has never been the same since. The Church and the imperial power joined themselves in unholy wedlock and eventually the harlot Roman Catholic Church was born.

(4) This was a time when Athanasius, a later Antipas, fought the good fight of faith and won the victory against those who raged against him in their denial of Christ's true deity. In this matter at least the Church held fast Christ's name and did not deny His faith.

Thyatira

2:18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: The Son of God, whose eyes are like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like fine bronze, says these things:

19 “I know your works, and love, and service, and faith, and your patience, and your works, and *that* the last are more than the first.

20 “However, I have a few things against you, because you permit that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols. 21 And I gave her time to repent of her fornication, and she did not repent. 22 Look, I will cast her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. 23 And I will kill her children with death, and all the churches will know that I am he who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to every one of you according to your works. 24 But to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, to as many as do not hold this doctrine, and who have not known the depths of Satan (as they call *it*): I will put on you no other burden. 25 But hold on to what you *already* have until I come.

26 “And he who overcomes and keeps my works to the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; 27 and he will rule them with a rod of iron. As the vessels of a potter they will be broken to pieces. This I have received 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.”

This city was the smallest and most insignificant of the seven, but the church there received the longest of the letters. At the outset we are given some indication of the spiritual condition of this church by the title Christ gives Himself in relation to it. He presents Himself as the One with “eyes like a flame of fire”, and with “feet like fine bronze”. He stands in their midst to search out all their inner thoughts and motives. They were utterly exposed to His flaming vision and could hide nothing of what they were or did. And He is the “Son of God”, mighty to judge what His eyes discern. This is re-emphasized in verse 23 — “I am he who searches the reins and hearts. And I will give to every one of you according to your works.”

They had works in abundance. The word is twice used in verse 19, and the interesting thing is that they were working harder when this letter was written than in the beginning of their ministry. In many churches the passing years seem to bring a decrease in zeal and effort, but not here. Their last works were more than their first, and with them they showed real love, service, faith and patience. Although most of this letter is taken up with a condemnation of the evil that Christ found there, yet He gives praise where praise is due and begins His message even to this church with an appreciation of their good works.

What was the sin of this church at Thyatira? It was the sin of tolerance. “You permit that woman Jezebel. . . .to teach and to seduce my servants”. In many countries of the world people live in outwardly tolerant times, times when intolerance in matters of religion is often frowned on. At least many pay lip service to the idea of tolerance. There is nothing more acceptable in certain circles than the lie that all religions lead to God. The world will perhaps permit someone to believe in Christ as a way of salvation if he wishes, as long as he does not insist that Christ is mankind’s only hope. The world does not like to be told that Jesus is the only way

to God, and His blood the only fountain of cleansing for sin. The great sin in the eyes of such people is not error, or falsehood, or blasphemy, or diabolical heresies — it is what they think of as intolerance. An accusation of intolerance is supposed to shut all of our mouths, and make us hesitate to stand for the uniqueness of the saving gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately this spirit has taken possession of some Churches. In many circles if God’s servants insist on sound doctrine and a holy, separated walk, they are opposed with charges of bigotry, prejudice, and narrowness. Some seem to think that it is all right to wink at sin, embrace damnable heresies, deny the faith of Christ, trample His blood under foot, and make unholy alliances with the world and the devil. But they cannot tolerate it when someone takes a stand for vital truth or attacks sin and error. The attitude of some is that we must be tolerant though Balaamites, Nicolaitans and Jezebel corrupt the church beyond measure, and though the world be blinded to true Christianity by the false picture presented by them.

It is very clear that this is not the view of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the third time in four letters that this matter of tolerating evil in the church has come up. The Ephesians were twice praised for not doing it, the Christians at Pergamos and Thyatira were condemned for doing it.

The apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, revealed once and for all his attitude towards those who worm their way into churches to corrupt the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. “If any man preach any other gospel to you than that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal 1:9). These terrible words were directed against those who troubled the Galatian churches. They did not deny the gospel, they perverted it. But doubtless any one guilty of one or the other of these sins will earn for themselves the curse of God.

I am not suggesting that true Christians should be intolerant of one another in matters of secondary importance. It is past time that all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth should recognize their oneness in Christ and love as brethren even when there is disagreement about various matters not related to the great fundamentals of the faith. But we must not have two minds in regard to evil in either doctrine or practice that threatens the spiritual life of the Church. And this was the state of things in Thyatira.

See whom they tolerated! Jezebel was one of the most utterly wicked women to appear in the pages of history. Her black story is

recorded in 1 Kings, chapters 16 to 21 and 2 Kings, chapter 9. That was in the days of Elijah and Elisha, nine centuries before Christ. The name Jezebel is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture until suddenly in the church at Thyatira appears a woman so depraved in character and so dangerous in her teaching that she earns the name of that infamous wife of Ahab. We are not to imagine that she calls herself by that name or that it once entered the minds of her deluded followers. It is the Lord who calls her Jezebel.

The following facts are recorded concerning that literal Jezebel who corrupted Israel long ago.

(1) Her name was Jezebel. This means "chaste" or "pure". Was ever a person more misnamed?

(2) She was a heathen and the daughter of a heathen king. She had no faith in the God of Israel. Instead, her one aim was to destroy His work.

(3) She was a persecutor who attacked the prophets of the Lord.

(4) She was a murderess who had Naboth killed for his vineyard.

(5) She was married to a Jew and she corrupted him beyond any other king in Israel's history. It is written: "There was none like Ahab who sold himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up" (1 Kings 21:25).

(6) She surrounded herself with 450 false prophets of Baal, and 400 prophets of the grove, and they ate at her table.

(7) She taught the professing people of God to sin by introducing that idolatry among them.

(8) She was guilty of adultery and witchcraft (2 Kings 9:22). So we can say that she was a false prophetess herself.

(9) She tried with paint and adornment to keep the avenger Jehu from attacking her. No doubt her method had always been to allure and seduce with beauty and silver and gold and costly garments.

(10) She remained unrepentant to the end and perished fearfully in her corruption.

Was it not truly terrible that such a woman should rise to the throne of Israel? Is it not even more dreadful that such a one should be tolerated in the church at Thyatira? But what language shall we borrow to express our horror and amazement that she should rise to the most powerful position in Christendom? That, you say, can surely never happen. Read chapter 17 of Revelation with full understanding and be amazed at what you see there. If it

happened in Israel, if it happened in Thyatira, is it not possible that the whole of Christendom could be similarly affected?

Was it possible that Jezebel should rise to such power in Israel, God’s chosen holy nation? Then it is possible that history will be repeated and that one professing to be the pure Church and the chaste virgin bride of Christ will have both the heart of Jezebel and her ways. In Paul’s day the mystery of iniquity was already at work (2 Thess 2: 7). Has it not come almost to full development in ours? Never has false Christianity put on a more seductive demeanor, or a more alluring smile, never has union with the Church of Rome seemed more appealing to leaders of some church denominations. And what shall be the end of all this?

This church at Thyatira, instead of casting this depraved woman from her high place, tolerated her and her teachings that lead to adultery and idolatry.

Christ wanted even her to repent and waited patiently for a while (v 21). But repentance was not in her thoughts. So the righteous and holy Lord had no choice other than to threaten tribulation and death to her and her followers (compare 17: 16). We do not know how these judgments came upon the church at Thyatira, but we can be sure that some calamity overtook those who obstinately refused to repent and turn to the Lord.

There is a reference in verse 22 to “great tribulation”. We know from Scripture that there will be a time of tribulation and trouble at the end of the age greater than any in history (Matt 24:21). That time is referred to in chapter 7, verse 14, where it is called “the great tribulation”. Other parts of the Revelation refer to that fearful time. In the reference in this letter to Thyatira the article “the” is absent. The reason for this, of course, is that the local historical church at Thyatira did not endure the great tribulation. That time has not yet come on earth. But the term “great tribulation” is sufficiently ambiguous as to have a possible double meaning. As regards the local church at Thyatira it refers to great trouble that surely came on “Jezebel” and her children. But as regards Thyatira in its mystery meaning it may refer to the great tribulation at the end of the age. This is another example of the great care with which the Scriptures were written. Each word, even “the” (or the lack of it), can have its deep significance.

We should understand the nature of the threat. Tribulation (and sometimes great tribulation) has been the common lot of real Christians throughout this whole Church age. The church at Smyrna was told to expect ten days more of it. But there is a vast

difference between being led through tribulation by God’s strong and loving hand for His people’s testing and good, and being cast into tribulation as a punishment. The reprobates at Thyatira are threatened with the latter.

In verse 23 the Lord Jesus emphasized again the ground of every man’s judgment. All who profess the faith of Christ, as well as those who make no profession of faith, will receive according to their works. There are many who would love to hear Christ say to them, “Well done, good and faithful servant”. But none will even hear it unless he or she has done well. Many desire the bliss of heaven but none will be there but those who “by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality” (Rom 2:7). Are we, then, saved by good deeds? Never. Salvation from first to last is altogether of grace. But the grace of God which saves also teaches us that “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in this present world” (Titus 2:12). Such grace brings salvation, but no system of religion whatever that permits men to live in continual self-will and sin will ever save anyone.

Christ did not demand too much of those Christians in Thyatira. It was enough if they held fast the true faith and kept themselves from the corrupt teaching of Jezebel and her followers (vs 24,25). He lay no other burden on them. Notice the phrase “until I come” in verse 25. This indicates that the church of Thyatira in its “mystery” sense will be in existence at the end of the age when Christ returns. See also what is said to the churches at Sardis (3:3) and Philadelphia (3:11). This is evidence, as previously noted, that the seven churches represent the entire Church age and that “the things which are” (1:19) are now. We still await “the things which will take place after these things”.

In Israel long ago it was Jezebel’s purpose to remove the influence of the true God from His people and rule over them herself. Such, no doubt, was her aim at Thyatira. Therefore the promise the Lord gives here to the overcomer is especially appropriate. “To him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. As the vessels of a potter they will be broken to pieces” (vs 26,27). This is the very same promise given to Christ by the Father in Psalm 2:8,9. The overcomer is so joined to the Lord that they share in suffering now but shall reign together when He comes. “If we suffer, we will reign with Him.” It seems perfectly clear that these verses have not yet had their final

fulfillment. “Hold on to what you already have until I come” — then, at His coming, the people of the Lord Jesus will reign over the earth where once they suffered. Not Jezebel, not the harlot woman of chapter 17, will rule, but those who by faith have gained the victory will inherit the kingdom.

“And I will give him the Morning Star” (v 28). We can hardly doubt the meaning of this. The Lord Jesus says “I am. . . .the bright and morning star” (22:16).

“Lo, Dawn has lit his beacon fire;
The Conqueror rides in His car;
He comes, He comes; yea nigher, nigher,
The nations’ hope, the world’s desire,
The bright and morning Star.”

Amy Carmichael

The star of morning signals the end of the dark night and the soon rising of the bright day. “The star of morning, the soul and substance of spring and youth, of promises always fulfilling, of rapturous anticipations always rising to full fruition — such is the glory Christ gives His overcomers” (H.C.G. Moule).

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Could any church have been better chosen to represent the fourth age of Church history than this one at Thyatira? According to the view that sees in these churches a prophetic outline of Church history, Pergamos is a picture of the Church in the days of Constantine and somewhat after when, under the influence of Balaamites and Nicolaitans, an alliance was made with the world. Thyatira represents that period in Church history extending from the 6th century to the Reformation when the Roman Catholic Church was the dominant power in Christendom, and the “Jezebel” spirit was very active and continuously gaining power. I cannot say that this interpretation is true beyond possibility of doubting, but again there are some striking similarities between Thyatira and the church age which it is supposed to represent.

Before looking at the comparison that has been drawn, a word of explanation -- by including this comparison the author of this book does not intend to show any animosity toward individual Roman Catholics. I assure you I feel none. We are to love all men and try to help all to see the truth of Christ’s gospel of grace. Some Roman

Catholics are outstanding and upright people, and I have no wish to offend any of them. It is not individual Catholics I oppose, but the system of false doctrine and practice which I see is contrary to the Word of God. I believe the Roman Catholic Church is pictured in chapter 17 as a prostitute in spiritual matters, like a woman who has been unfaithful to her husband and who has sold herself to do evil. Now to the comparison.

(1) Does Jezebel mean “chaste”? The “Jezebel” spirit in Rome calls herself the pure Mother Church, the Bride of Christ, and puts forth Mary as an object of worship, and insists on her “perpetual virginity”. Do not be misled. There are many differences between the Mary of the Bible and the Mary of the Roman Catholic Church, as anyone can see by studying what the Bible says about the mother of Jesus and comparing that with the teachings of the Roman Church about their Mary. Their Mary is more like the goddesses worshiped in ancient times by the nations of the world than the Mary seen in the Holy Scriptures. This worship of “virgin” goddesses reaches far back into antiquity. The heathen of Ephesus had their “virgin” — Diana (Acts 19:28). Other nations had their virgin goddesses, often worshiped with a child in her arms. Ashtoreth and Tammuz that corrupted Israel, Isis and Horus in Egypt, Aphrodite and Eros in Greece, Venus and Cupid in Italy, and goddesses innumerable in the Orient — these and many other “chaste” abominations were worshiped by the nations of the world.

(2) Was Jezebel heathen? Study Rome’s rites and teachings and mark the truth: much of it does not come from the Holy Bible.

(3) Did Jezebel persecute the saints of God? Where is a blacker story in the history of all of earth’s religions than the persecution of true Christians by the Roman Church? Just trying to list the names of her victims causes revulsion and horror — Waldensians, Albigensians, Bohemians, Lollards, Huguenots, Savonarola, Huss, Tyndale, Latimer, and Ridley, the Inquisition in Spain, the Netherlands, France, Italy, tortures, murders, unspeakable cruelties, burnings not by ones and twos but by the hundreds and thousands. The number of her murdered victims through the centuries has been estimated as high as 50,000,000 and sometimes higher (A. B. Simpson, *Heaven Opened*, an exposition of the book of Revelation). Read Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* and doubt no more the Jezebel character of the Roman Catholic Church. Facts are facts and we should not try to look the other way or bury our heads in the sand. In our day Rome wears a benign smile and casts seductive glances at her so-called “separated brethren” — the Protestants. Do not be deceived by her sorceries (17:2; 18:23).

(4) Did Jezebel slay the righteous Naboth for gain? Rome has done similar deeds to gain some of the “vineyards” of the world.

(5) Was Jezebel married to a Jew and did she graft on to Israel heathen abominations? Is not Roman Catholicism a horrid mixture of paganism and Judaism within a framework of Christianity? Her festivals, rituals, mysteries, idolatries, and much of her doctrine are not truly Christian in any sense of the word.

(6) Did Jezebel surround herself with a false priesthood? Rome, too, ignoring the Biblical teaching of the priesthood of all believers, has her tables where her priests dine.

(7) Was Jezebel responsible for teaching Israel idolatry and the sins that accompany it? Hear what Bellarmine, many years ago one of Rome’s principal authorities in theology, had to say: “The images of Christ and the saints are to be adored, not only in a figurative manner, but quite positively, so that the prayers are directly addressed to them and not merely as representatives of the original.”³ And all prayers directed either to images, or saints, or angels or Mary is nothing less than that idolatry which God detests and has repeatedly forbidden and condemned in His word.

(8) Was Jezebel full of whoredoms and witchcraft? Rome is guilty seven times over of that spiritual adultery with the world which God hates — not to speak of anything else (17:2-5; James 4:4). Did she teach? Was she a prophetess? The pope is put forward as an infallible teacher and the official pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church are supposed to be binding in earth and heaven. How much some leaders in the Roman Church have been in conscious league with evil spirits is impossible to say, but her “sorceries” are denounced in 18:23.

(9) Did Jezebel try to make herself seductive and alluring? Rome’s method is the same — beauty, pomp, magnificence in art and architecture, gild and glitter, stunning displays of worldly greatness, purple and scarlet, gold, precious stones and pearls. “Architects, majestic porches, lofty columns, vaulted roofs, gilded altars have often proved the most influential of Rome’s missionaries” — d’Aubigne. It is strange how anyone can read the Bible and still see any connection at all between the vanities, the riches, the ostentations, the proud displays of the Church of Rome and the holy, humble, spiritual, unpretending religion of Jesus Christ.

(10) Would Jezebel repent? No, and I don’t think Rome will

³ As quoted by Williams R. Newell, *The Book of Revelation*

either. Christ could say of the Jezebel in Thyatira, "I gave her time to repent of her fornication; and she did not repent". Likewise Rome has never shown repentance for the way she has persecuted, tortured and murdered the saints of God; never has she reformed when challenged with the truth of God's word; never has she cast her idols to the winds and adopted that pure, holy worship described in the Scriptures; never has she fallen with bitter tears of regret at the Lord's feet to have the vast wickedness of the past blotted out. On the contrary, year by year, she has but added to her sins.

Will not the righteous Lord whose eyes are like a flame of fire be avenged on such an one? When Jehu took vengeance on Jezebel nothing remained but her feet, the palms of her hands, and her skull. What will remain of Rome when God judges her? "Therefore her plagues will come in one day: death, mourning, and famine. And she will be consumed by fire, for the Lord God who judges her is mighty" (18:8).

Sardis

3:1 "And to the angel of the church at Sardis write: He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says these things:

"I know your works, and that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. 2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, which are about to die, for I have not found your works complete before God. 3 Remember, therefore, how you have received and heard, and hold *it* fast, and repent. But if you will not watch, I will come on you like a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come on you.

"You have a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their clothes, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes will be clothed in white clothing, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name in the presence of my Father and his angels.

6 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches".

The city of Sardis had once been a famous and powerful city and its kings were among the world's richest. Built at the foot of a steep hill and surrounded by battlements it was a mighty fortress and a bulwark that seemed never falling. Yet on two occasions the city

with a name fell to the enemy, and for the same reason each time. The defenders of Sardis were so confident that no enemy could get over the steep cliffs behind them, or climb the walls which surrounded them, that they posted no sentries to watch through the night, even when they were in a state of siege. But each time opposing forces found a way up the cliffs and over the walls and so captured the city. They came as a thief in the night and the men of Sardis did not know what hour they came upon them. After the second defeat Sardis never regained its former glory. At the time when Christ gave this letter the city that once had lived was in a state of degeneration and decay.

The sad thing is, the church there was no wiser than the city had been. Christ presents Himself to this church as the One who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars — as One who can keep them safely and supply every need for spiritual life, as One who is indeed a Mighty Fortress filled with living resources. And this was their desperate need. For they had a name that they lived, but in fact they were dead.

“Write to Sardis, saith the Lord,
And write what He declares;
He whose Spirit and whose word
Upholds the seven stars:

All thy works and ways I search,
Find thy zeal and love decayed;
Thou art called a living church,
But thou art cold and dead.”

Cowper

They were a hollow shell, a graveyard, a corpse that still managed to keep up a reputation for being alive. Their Christianity was only in name and not in power. “The name of Sardis was a lie. Indeed, Sardis may be said to be the first church in the history of Christendom to have been well-nigh filled with what we now call nominal Christians” (J. R. W. Stott).

It might be profitable to enquire how the church at Sardis, being dead, yet had a reputation for being alive.

(1) We know nothing of the past history of this church, but is it not more than likely that the name they had for life had been won by their fathers who may have had much spiritual vitality? It is very possible that the church there began with a mighty

movement of the Spirit of God. But in process of time, as the Ephesians had left their first love, these had left their first life. This is suggested by verse two — something remained of life from a former day. It is also indicated by verse three: they were to remember how the church had received and heard the Word of God in other days.

Whether or not this be true of Sardis in that day, it certainly is true of many churches and whole denominations in this — their reputations for vital Christianity being earned not by themselves but by those of a former generation. Famous names may live on long after the churches they founded have died.

(2) It is almost certain that long after the life had gone out of Sardis, works were maintained in order to keep up their name of being a living church. And religious activity is often mistaken for spiritual life. “Churches are very apt to put the best goods into the window, very apt to make a fair show in the flesh, and, like men of the world, they try to make a fine figure, upon a very slender estate. Great reputations have often slender foundations” (C. H. Spurgeon). Once having had the name they would not easily give it up, even if the keeping of it involved pretense and hypocrisy. Thus were the Pharisees (Matt 23: 14, 23-28).

Instead of recognizing their deadness and prostrating themselves before the Lord in repentance, instead of pleading with Him to revive their cold stony hearts, they may have put on a greater outward show to impress men. If we were able to go back in time and pay a visit to Sardis no doubt we would see a church of great activity, many worshipers, and pleasant services on the Lord’s day. They wanted Christianity, no doubt, they wanted a name for godliness, but they didn’t want God. They probably didn’t mind much being dead, especially since they could have a reputation for life along with it. Yes, they certainly had works, but nothing was complete, nothing fulfilled (v 2).

(3) It may be that the reputation for life was maintained by those few even in Sardis who had not defiled their garments (v 4). Sometimes a whole church seems to be alive because of the living few. The vigorous activity of a handful of dedicated believers may make one forget for a time the dead masses in the church.

However they may have maintained their reputation for life, one thing is certain — they were just about to lose their reputation. What little vitality that did remain was ready to die, and when all was dead even these pretenders at Sardis could scarcely conceal the stench for long. They were threatened by a sudden overthrow.

As Sardis the city had twice been secretly captured, so Sardis the church lay exposed to One who would suddenly come as a thief, strip it bare and leave it a dead waste.

Five things were required if they would avoid this disaster.

(a) “Be watchful.” Already opposing forces are coming up the cliffs and climbing the walls. Arouse yourselves to action; stir yourselves up, be vigilant, be watchful. Or else you will soon find your last remaining treasures forever gone.

(b) “Strengthen the things which remain”. Still there is hope. You are not altogether without resources. Something remains from a better day. “Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be turned aside, but healed instead” (Heb 12:12,13).

(c) “Remember therefore, how you have received and heard”. The church had not merely heard, they had once received the Word of God. False teaching did not seem to be a problem there (we read nothing here of Nicolaitans or Balaamites or Jezebel). They still had the form of truth if only they would remember it and turn back to their former ways. They must call to mind the grand truths their fathers had gloried in.

(d) “Hold it fast”. Take hold of the truth and never let it go. You have it before you; believe it and act upon it.

(e) “Repent”. By thus waking up, remembering former days, and stirring yourselves up to obedience, you will find a spirit of deep repentance. Fall in your deadness before the Lord of Glory who has the seven spirits of God. He is the Prince of Life. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of life (Rom 8:2). Living contact with Him will flood the church with heavenly vitality. The dark winter of death will end and spring will come to Sardis again. Weep out your failure and your pretense and your deadness before Him. Take with you words and turn to the Lord. Say to him, “Take away all iniquity and receive us graciously” (Hosea 14:2). Say, “My soul clings to the dust. Revive me in accordance with your word” (Ps 119:25). Thus even dead Sardis can blossom anew.

There are always the few, the blessed remnant who listen to God’s Word. Some will watch their garments, their outward walk, and will keep themselves clean from the defilement of death all around them, and walk with the Lord here below. These are the ones who will walk with Him above. Those who keep their

garments white on earth will be clothed with white in heaven. "Follow peace with everyone, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14). "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:3). Thank God, there is always a fountain where garments can be kept clean (1 John 1:7,9).

Some writers take the sweet promise of verse 5 and turn it into a threat. The Lord Jesus does not threaten that He will blot the dead in Sardis out of his book. He promises that He will not blot the overcomer out. Had someone taught them that there was a possibility of it? Did they fear that sooner or later they might fall away from the faith and perish forever? This should reassure them. "I will never blot his name out of the book of life". Some teach that names of true Christians can be blotted from the book of life. But a careful examination of all references to the subject does not turn up one plain Scripture that positively teaches it. Others think that all men are originally written in that book and are blotted out only as they forfeit their right to salvation by refusing to trust Christ. Others have thought that there are different books, one from which the sinner and apostate may be blotted out; another from which the believer can never be blotted out.

This is a difficult subject because of our ignorance of God's books and the way he keeps them. Let no man presume to teach too much from a reference to them.

There is evidence, it seems to me, in this verse that all true Christians are overcomers. The overcomer here is promised the same thing that is promised in Matt 10:32 to all those who confess Christ before men. "With the heart man believes for righteousness and with the mouth confession is made for salvation" (Rom 10:10). Thus the saved confess the Lord, and the Lord confesses them before the Father, and before the holy angels (Luke 12:8).

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Does the church of Sardis fit into any prophetic outline of the whole church age? Many are sure that it does. Thyatira takes us up to the time of the Protestant Reformation (they say), when great names and reputations were made. Sardis is not the Reformation itself — that was life and not death — it is the age that followed when all too many churches, alas, did have a mere name without the life of their fathers.

(1) What names they had! Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, Tyndale! Protestant! — which suggests spiritual vitality, living protest against evil in doctrine and conduct. What a reputation had been handed down for courage in the face of danger, for exploits in the study and in the pulpit, for bold proclamation of recovered truth! What memories of glory and life! Now much was dead and the things that remained were ready to die, though the names lived on.

(2) The works of the Reformation and the age that followed were doubtless not altogether perfect before God (v 2). The Reformers were wonderfully awake to some extremely important truths. Everyone in this day who loves Christ and His Word owes much to that marvelous work of God through His servants. But must it not be confessed that a good deal of superstructure that came to be built at that time and afterwards was not always provided with a proper Scriptural foundation? Was sufficient care taken to keep the church separate from the world? Do any of us imagine that the Reformation was really perfect?

(3) However that may be, isn't it true that, following the Reformers, much of Protestantism for a great many years was indeed, like Sardis, in a state of spiritual death? Can it be doubted that a great deal of Protestant Christianity was (and is) merely nominal? There were a few names in every Sardis that did not defile their garments. But what shall we say of the masses of professing Christians whose names were on the church rolls?

G. Campbell Morgan has some valuable comments on these letters. His “The Letters of Our Lord” is to be recommended to anyone who wants to study this portion of the Revelation from the practical point of view. On Sardis he gives four evidences of life that will be found in any living church: “There will be growth, compassion, union, and emotion”.

Concerning growth he says: “That church is in a sorrowful condition that has added nothing to its membership through the propagative life forces of its own communion. . . . If none are born again directly through the working of the church, we may almost certainly say that the church is dead. I say this in all seriousness and without apology. I would be afraid to remain as pastor or member of a church if for any length of time there were none added to its fellowship upon confession of faith”.

On emotion: “It is the dead that have no tears, no laughter, no music, no mourning. I have no patience with the man who boasts that his religion lacks emotion. The church without tears and laughter Christ has little use for. . . . The church that lives thrills with

emotion, is full of laughter, and full of tears, perpetually breaks into song, and is silent again in the silence of pain".

On union: "Disintegration is a sign of death. If the church be filled with sections and parties and schism, it is because of the lack of the life element".

On compassion: "The church which has no heart or compassion for the lost, is dead. . . .Every church should be an asylum for the lost, a refuge for the broken-hearted, a home of welcome for the harlot and the publican".

Philadelphia

3:7 "And to the angel of the church at Philadelphia write: He who is holy, he who is true, he who has the key of David, he who opens and no man can shut and shuts and no man can open, says these things:

8 "I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no man can shut it, for you have a little strength, and have kept my word, and have not denied my name. 9 Look, I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie, look, I will make them come and show reverence at your feet and know that I have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will also keep you from the hour of trial which will come upon the whole world, to test those who live on the earth.

11 "Look, I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have, so that no man takes your crown. 12 Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never go out. And I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God which is the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God. And I will write on him my new name.

13 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches".

Philadelphia means "brotherly love". The church there was well named. The Lord does not rebuke them for anything (unless the words in verse 8 "You have a little strength" be taken as a mild reminder that they could and should have had more). Smyrna is the only other church that is not rebuked.

Christ's titles given in the opening verse indicate the emphasis of the whole letter. He is the Holy One, the True One. These are really divine titles and are used as such in 6: 10. Did they have but a little strength? He was to them the Almighty One. Northwest of Philadelphia was dead Sardis, and beyond Sardis corrupt Thyatira. Lukewarm Laodicea lay 40 miles to the southeast. These three, the worst of the seven and those which (with Pergamos) brought most dishonor to the holy name of Christ, were nearest to this church. But the Philadelphians were not to judge the character of Christ by what they saw in them. Though His churches had corrupted themselves and though they had listened to lying prophets, still Christ was holy, Christ was true. And He is the One who has the "key of David", who shuts or opens doors at His pleasure regardless of the weakness or strength of man.

The key of David is a clear reference to Isaiah 22: 22. Shebna was treasurer or steward over the king's house; but he was rejected for unfaithfulness and Eliakim was appointed in his place. The government of the affairs of the house were committed to him. But this whole passage evidently looks to One greater than Eliakim. Here the Lord refers the promise to Himself. The government is upon His shoulders; He is the One who is "a glorious throne to His father's house". He is the steward over the household of God, the treasurer who opens to His people the storehouse of wisdom and grace and spiritual gifts. In the affairs of earth, though He has not yet come personally to reign, the sovereignty, the authority are wholly His.

(1) He opens or shuts the door of salvation to individuals. He Himself is the door (John 10: 9) and no man can shut it. Satan may fill the world with lies; false prophets may proclaim other ways and other saviours; Pharisees may try to shut up the kingdom of heaven; the pope may boast that the keys of the kingdom are his. Still the door stands open and the righteous run into it and are safe. Neither Satan, nor false prophets, nor Pharisees, nor pope, nor governments and human authorities can by any means close the door. At the proper time, when all the sheep are safely home, the Master of the house, the greater Eliakim, will rise up and shut the door and no man will be able to open it (Luke 13: 25).

(2) He opens or shuts the door of service to His people. This seems to be the main emphasis here. He alone knows where each of them should be and what each should be doing. He knows their condition, talents and capacities. Let there be but a little strength where there is a confession of Christ's name and true obedience to His Word and Christ will open doors of ministry (v 8). "Have thy tools ready and God will find use for them" (Kingsley). This is a

true word. The church or the individual may be small, weak, poor and despised; only let them be truly ready and doors will be mysteriously opened that neither the power of Satan nor the malice of men can shut. Paul wrote to the Corinthians “A great door and an effective one has opened to me, and there are many opponents” (1 Cor 16:9). But none of those adversaries, much as they tried to hinder God’s work, could at all shut the door; not they, nor all the gates of hell, nor all the might of the Roman Empire. See also in Acts 16:6-10 how the One with the key of David shut and opened to His servants.

(3) He opens or shuts the door of opportunity to peoples and nations. It is He who “has made from one blood every nation of man to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined the times set for them, and the boundaries of the regions where they live, so that they would seek the Lord” (Acts 17:26,27). It is He who, in the fullness of time, “opened the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). It was He who directed Paul and his companions to Galatia and Phrygia, but not to Bithynia and Asia, and He who brought them down to Troas and opened a door to the whole of Europe. And He who having once forbidden them to preach in the province of Asia, later in His perfect time led them to Ephesus, the chief city of Asia.

All of earth’s open doors He has opened and all of earth’s closed doors He has shut, and both the one and the other because He sees it is right to do so. Think of the supreme sovereignty this involves among the nations. There is no doubt that He shuts the door in judgment to peoples who disobey and reject Him, and in grace opens to a people previously prepared by Him for the day and hour of their opportunity. To do this He can and does put down or exalt kings and governments at His pleasure. “Whatever the Lord pleased, that he did in heaven, and in earth, in the seas and all deep places” (Ps 135:6). All power in heaven and in earth is given to Him (Matt 28:18; John 17:2). This is our Lord Jesus, wonderful in counsel and excellent in working.

Yes, our Lord has the keys and He uses them. But let us remember that however He may exercise His sovereignty with nations or with individuals He is the Holy One, the True One. He is just and compassionate in the use of His power. We can know that for every Jerusalem handed over to a just punishment there are tears in the eyes of the Son of God. In this there is perfect rest for our hearts.

An open door to a church or an individual or a nation speaks of both opportunity and responsibility. There will be opportunities to believe for salvation, to glorify God, to serve Christ, to do exploits in His name, to win crowns, to lay up in heaven eternal riches. There will also be corresponding responsibilities. When God gives opportunities to a people He intends that they be taken; when He opens doors He means that they should be entered.

His judgments come upon men both in time and in eternity for neglecting these opportunities (Matt 21:43; 23:37,38; Heb 2:3). Nations lose their glory, churches lose their lampstands, unbelievers lose their souls, Christians lose their crowns just for this — God gives them an open door and they do not enter. The destiny of peoples and nations depends far more on their response to God’s Word than is ever imagined by them.

On the other hand, who can measure the rewards of obedience to the Word of God? At Philadelphia the rewards were great.

(1) It meant further opportunities for evangelism (v 8). The open door set before them suggests wider opportunities than they had previously known. This is always God’s way. To those who are faithful in a little, much will be given, and to those who faithfully enter small doors set before them, larger doors will be opened.

(2) It meant victory over their enemies (v 9). There was in Philadelphia, as in Smyrna, a group of Jews who were outwardly a synagogue of Jews, but inwardly a synagogue of Satan. Doubtless here as there they were the bitterest enemies of the Christians. The Lord Jesus here promises His faithful church that a time would come when these proud sons of Jacob would be compelled to prostrate themselves and acknowledge that God was in them for a fact. God’s blessing upon His people would be so unmistakable that even their enemies would understand that He loved them greatly. This verse, with the expression “I have loved you”, indicates the great affection the Lord had for this church. It is remarkably honored among the seven and is the only one of them to be promised a measure of present exaltation.

(3) It meant being kept from a great temptation (v 10). A universal trial was coming on all the earth and the believers at Philadelphia were promised deliverance. This does not mean that this church was removed from the world, but only that either the inner state of their hearts, or their outer circumstances, would be such that they would not be entangled in that time of temptation. See the note at the end of the comments on this letter.

(4) It meant opportunities to win crowns (v 11). In a sense they had already won one, but it was required of them to hold fast to the end in order to actually receive it. Judging from this verse, it is possible for others to take our crowns. They cannot take our salvation but they may take the rewards for faithful service we might have won had we continued in the path of faithful service. Those who enter the open doors we should have entered and do the work we could have done will win the crowns we could have won. These crowns represent priceless rewards in glory. If there are tears in our eyes when we stand before Christ to be judged for our works, surely one cause will be that through carelessness, or laziness, or unbelief, or lack of consecration to the Lord's will, we failed to win the prize of our Lord's approval (Matt 25:21; Luke 19:17; 1 Cor 3:8-15; 9:24-27). "So run that you may obtain."

The overcomers in Philadelphia, weak though they may have been, were presented with a glorious prospect. They would occupy positions of strength and stability in God's eternal temple. They would be pillars. Overcomers will be permanently built into that structure which will be the habitation of God forever. "I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (21:22). Thus the promise seems to speak of being built into Christ Himself.

The overcomer, as a pillar, will have three names written upon him. The name, of course, signifies the nature of a thing.

(1) The overcomer will have the name, the nature of God imprinted on him. He will have the mark of God's ownership. He will shine with the glory of God. He will have a nature perfectly true to that nature of light and love.

(2) The overcomer will have the name of the city of God. He will feel perfectly at home in that bright, shining, golden, glorious place. His character will be in perfect harmony with its character.

(3) The overcomer will have written on him the new name of Christ. Some yet unknown wonders of His person he shall not only see but partake of. We have not yet seen even the edges of His ways. In that day His glories and perfections, as yet unrevealed, will be written on the overcomer. "When he appears, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Does the church of Philadelphia represent an age in the history of the church universal? Those who think so point out the striking

resemblance between that church and the modern age of revivals and missions.

(1) It is true that the church age represented by Sardis was not known for great revivals and missionary activities. Christendom did, on the whole, seem to be in a state of spiritual lethargy and death. But in the 18th and 19th centuries the Spirit of God moved His people in a new way that resulted in a far wider dissemination of the truth than had been known for a great many years. Count Zinzendorf and the Moravian Brethren with their tremendous missionary zeal, the Wesleys and Whitefield and the English revival, William Carey and other early missionaries, Finney, Moody, Spurgeon and other great preachers of the 19th century, marvelous revivals of true religion in America, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, Europe, the rise of evangelical denominational and faith missions to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth — all this was truly Philadelphian.

(2) For all that, in comparison to the apostolic age (that evangelized the known world in one generation) this modern age could be characterized by the words, “you have a little strength”.

(3) It has been above all, perhaps, the day of open doors. Whole continents have been opened to the preaching of the Gospel. Opportunities beyond numbering have abounded and do abound on every side.

“See o’er the world, wide open doors inviting,
Soldiers of Christ, arise and enter in!
Christians awake! Your forces all uniting
Send forth the Gospel, break the chains of sin.”

Note on verse 10

Many writers take this statement in 3:10 as an unqualified promise to the true Church toward the end of this age that it will escape completely the Great Tribulation. They believe this teaches that all real Christians will be caught away to heaven before that terrible time of persecution begins on the earth. This catching away is known as the Rapture and the doctrine thought to be taught in this verse is called the Pre-tribulation Rapture. Others, while gladly owning the truth of the Rapture, insist that it will occur after the Great Tribulation is over. This teaching is known as the Post-tribulation Rapture position.

That there will be a catching away of the true Church from the earth at Christ's coming is a clear teaching of the New Testament. Christ will come for His own and we shall meet Him in the sky and behold Him face to face. This is the grand hope of the believer (1 Thess 4:13-18).

"Do we not hear Thy footfall, O Beloved,
 Among the stars on many a moonless night?
 Do we not catch the whisper of Thy coming
 On winds of dawn, and often in the light
 Of noontide and of sunset almost see Thee?
 Look up through shining air
 And long to see Thee, O Beloved, long to see Thee,
 And wonder that Thou art not standing there?"

And we shall hear Thy footfall, O Beloved,
 And starry ways will open, and the night
 Will call her candles from their distant stations,
 And winds shall sing Thee, noon, and mingled light
 Of rose-red evening thrill with lovely welcome;
 And we, caught up in air,
 Shall see Thee, O Beloved, we shall see Thee,
 In hush of adoration see Thee there."

Amy Carmichael

The Rapture of the Church is a fact of the future as certain as any fact of the past. However, there is considerable disagreement about the time of the Rapture. Some of those who teach a pre-tribulation Rapture think that this promise to the church at Philadelphia is evidence for it. Now I must confess that it seems to me a very doubtful matter to use this verse so dogmatically in this way. To be fully assured that a pre-tribulation Rapture is taught here the following statements would have to be proved.

(a) It would have to be proved that the "hour of trial" refers to the Great Tribulation. That it did not mean this in reference to that local, historical church in Philadelphia is perfectly clear. They were delivered in some time of trouble, but it was not the time of the Great Tribulation for that time is still in the future. Remember that the primary interpretation of these letters must see them in their relation to those historical churches. It is likely that the phrase has a double reference both to a period of temptation in that day and to some future trial in the last days. But it would still have to be

proved that the “hour of trial” referred to the Great Tribulation, and not to the Day of the Lord that follows it, or to something else altogether. It may even mean the ten days of tribulation coming on the church at Smyrna from which believers there were not to be delivered. In the letter to Thyatira we saw that when the Lord wishes to indicate great tribulation He uses those words. Is it not significant that he uses different words here?

(b) It would have to be proved that to “keep you from the hour of trial” means a catching away before the hour begins, and not a keeping during that hour from spiritual danger. Many scholars defend one position and many the other. It is evident that, whatever it may mean in the future, as regards the local, historical church at Philadelphia, being kept from the hour did not involve a catching away from the earth before the hour began. In their case at least (assuming that there was a fulfillment in that local historical church) it meant protection from the trial while they remained on earth. Now if it is possible that this promise was fulfilled in that historical Philadelphia without a “rapture” before the trial began, then it would appear equally possible that it could be fulfilled in the same way in any Church in any future time of trouble.

Robert Gundry points out that a promise similar to Rev 3:10 was given to Israel concerning their time of trouble — “Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it. It is the time of Jacob’s trouble, but he will be saved out of it” (Jer 30:7). He says, “If a pre-tribulation rapture will not be required for deliverance from the time of Jacob’s distress, neither will a pre-tribulational rapture be required for preservation from the hour of testing.” (The Church and the Tribulation, page 60).

(c) It would have to be proved that that local church at Philadelphia was chosen by the Lord Jesus to represent the entire number of His true people living in the last days before the Tribulation breaks on earth.

For my part, while admitting the possibility that the promise may apply to the true Church in the end time, I have not read or heard any conclusive proof for the above propositions.

It seems likely that “kept from the hour” means this: the church at Philadelphia would be kept from being entangled in an especially severe time of trial, a dangerous hour when temptation would be very urgent and pressing, and almost irresistible for those entangled in it. Christ would give them a state of heart, or arrange circumstances in such a way, that they would not be ensnared in that hour of temptation and overcome.

John Owen in his book *Temptation and Sin* makes a distinction between being tempted and entering into temptation. The latter means to be exposed to an excess of violent temptation which traps a person in a way that ordinary temptation does not. And so we are to pray that God lead us not "into" temptation.

At the time of His crucifixion Jesus said that it was the hour of the power of darkness (Luke 22:53). Yet there were many then living in Israel who did not enter into that hour — that is, they were not entangled in the peculiarly dangerous temptations of that hour. In the garden Jesus said to His disciples, "Watch and pray, so that you do not enter into temptation" (Matt 26:41). An hour of extraordinary temptation had come, but by prayer and watchfulness they could be kept from entering into it. That is, they would be preserved from circumstances that would endanger them, or the inner state of their hearts would keep the temptation from working in them as it did in many others. In similar ways the church at Philadelphia was to be kept from the hour of temptation. See *Temptation and Sin*, pages 96-101, 137-149.

Laodicea

3:14 "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God says these things:

15 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. 16 So then, because you are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I will spit you out of my mouth; 17 because you say, 'I am rich, and have many possessions, and need nothing', and do not know that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold tried in the fire, so that you can be rich; and white clothes, so that you can be covered and *that* the shame of your nakedness does not appear; and ointment to put on your eyes, so that you can see.

19 "All those I love I rebuke and discipline. Be zealous, therefore, and repent. 20 See, I stand at the door, and knock. If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will eat with him, and he with me.

21 “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with me on my throne, just as I also overcame, and have sat down with my Father on his throne.

22 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”.

Our Lord Jesus Christ loves the churches too well to withhold from them a witness concerning their true condition. He presents Himself to this church as “the faithful and true witness”. He stands before them to declare things as they are; and He will do it no matter how costly to Himself or grievous to them. And He is the Amen, the One whose word is utterly final. He has but to speak and it is done. These two titles appearing here together are an emphatic declaration that the message He gives to this church is unquestionably to be believed, that His warnings and promises are certain beyond all doubt.

He is also the “Beginning of the creation of God”. This phrase does not mean that He was the first to be created (for as God He was never created at all). It means that He is the One from whom creation began. Williams translated, “The origin of God’s creation”. It is the Mighty Creator Himself who speaks to this church. And it is He who stands outside the door and tenderly knocks. He who has an ear let him hear.

In the whole of the church at Laodicea there was not one thing to commend. They had works and riches and no doubt many other things highly esteemed among men. But to Christ it was all nauseous and abominable. Behind the mask of religion and respectability and outward prosperity He saw the loathsome reality. He had come to taste of their spiritual condition and He found it lukewarm and disgusting. They were not openly against Him, but they were not wholeheartedly for Him. They had not given up their profession, their religious activities, their church services, but there was no heart for Him in any of it. They had form without fervency, profession without passion, activity without ardor. They were not like Saul breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, not they. If they had been like that there would probably have been more hope for them. Nor could they, like Paul, say “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord”. They were neither the one nor the other. They had heard the truth concerning Christ and it left them unmoved. They kept up their profession of religion because

of supposed advantages to themselves, but they made sure there was no fanaticism, no enthusiasm, no emotion. Their attitude has been well described as "insolent indifference". G. Campbell Morgan wrote, "Lukewarmness is in itself a contradiction of all we profess to believe".

If the Gospel of Christ is worth anything at all, it is worth everything. If Christ is truly Lord then He has every right to demand all we have and are. Christians are to forsake all that they have, take up their cross and follow hard after Christ (Luke 14: 25-27, 33). They are to present their bodies living sacrifices (Rom 12:1,2). They are to be fervent in spirit (Rom 12:11). They are to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Their one business in life is to be well pleasing to their Lord in everything (2 Cor 5:9). Where were these blessed fruits of the Gospel in Laodicea? Christ searched for them in vain. He found nothing but lukewarmness, the most sickening of all spiritual conditions to that One of zealous love. The Faithful Witness tells them plainly that He cannot stand them and that it would have been well for them had they been either hot or cold.

There would seem to be three reasons for this.

(1) The cold are those who have made no pretense of being Christian, and may be even violently opposed to the Gospel. They have been untouched by the power of grace and thus still have possibilities of becoming fervent Christians. But whether they turn to Christ or not it is plain to all in their case how they stand toward Him. But the lukewarm have heard the truth, have had the Spirit of God witnessing to the Gospel in their midst, have made a profession of faith with their lips, but yet remain unmoved and uncommitted in their hearts. There is hope that those here called "cold" will be converted. But what is to be done with those who react to the clear preaching of the Word of God with smug indifference? If the truth and the Spirit cannot move them what is left?

(2) Another reason why He prefers cold to lukewarm, I think, is that at least the cold, godless man does not give the world a false picture of God's church. But those lukewarm Christians who profess to be Christ's people, His representatives on earth and the congregation of the righteous, create a lying impression of what true Christianity is, and so become a stumblingblock to others as the cold could never be. The Church is called to be a peculiar people to show forth the virtues of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9). But these

lukewarm! Christ is on the outside and they are content to have it so. How will they show forth His perfections? Instead they create an altogether wrong idea in the minds of unbelievers concerning Christ and Christianity. They are a living lie continually presenting to the world an utter perversion of the holy truth of God. Unbelievers viewing the smugness, the spiritual poverty, the hypocritical profession of these individuals or churches might well ask, “Is this Christianity? Is this all Christ can do? Is this that salvation and abundant life of which they boast?” And so the lukewarm spoil Christ’s witness on earth and are nauseous to Him.

(3) There is no doubt another reason for Christ’s displeasure with them. We saw in the letter to the church at Ephesus what Christ desires to experience in His assemblies. We see it in verse 20 of this letter to Laodicea. We see it in His pleading words to even this church, “All those I love, I rebuke and discipline. Be zealous therefore and repent.” We see it indeed everywhere in the Bible — this strange yearning of God for loving fellowship with men. How often in the days of Israel did He hold out His arms to rebellious and unresponsive people. How carefully did He search out the few with whom He could walk. What mighty appeals, appeals to move hearts of stone, did He give through His prophets. With what reluctance did He at last withdraw from them. He, whose name is Love and whose nature is Jealous (Ex 34: 14) cannot act differently now. He will ardently desire the love of the Laodiceans. He will come to satisfy His heart with their fellowship. But He cannot fail to turn away in disgust when there is no response, no returning affection. He will spit them out as He did Israel long ago. But, as with them, He will groan as He does it and weep.

What a contrast we have here between Christ’s view of these Laodiceans and their thoughts of themselves! What a gulf existed between what they said of their condition and the awful reality! The terrible truth was this -- that which sickened Christ was a source of pleasure and satisfaction to themselves. They were smug and at ease and proud of their church and their religion, and were confident that God and man shared their view of things.

“You say, I am rich, and have many possessions, and need nothing.” There may be some question whether they prided themselves on their material prosperity or on an assumed spiritual prosperity. It is true, no doubt, that the church was a wealthy one. The city of Laodicea was a banking and trading center. It had a famous medical school where (among other things) a powder was prepared for the eye disease, ophthalmia. And it was well known for

the manufacture of beautiful cloth. Christians there made money and the church coffers were probably full. But I am inclined to think that their biggest boast was in what they considered their religious attainments. They made a common mistake and confused material prosperity with spiritual progress. They took the favor of Mammon for the favor of God. They truly felt that they had need of nothing. They knew not their weakness, their sin, their need of God's grace, the presence of Christ, the power of the Spirit. They would never have confessed with David, “I am poor and needy; make haste to me, O God.”

“And do not know that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” “Do not know.” Self-deceit is very dangerous. It is a dreadful thing to be before God wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. It is more dreadful still to be so and remain in ignorance of it. “God, I thank you that I am not as other men are”, prayed the Pharisee. This was the spirit of Laodicea. They were the sort to thank God that they weren't dead as the Sardis Christians, poor and despised as Smyrna, torn with heresies as Pergamos, in the grip of a false prophetess as Thyatira. They were not like Lazarus, full of sores and begging crumbs of bread — they were as the rich man himself, clothed in purple and fine linen and eating only the finest things every day. As so many professing Christians of this day, they thought themselves righteous when, in fact, they were abominable. They felt warm and content and basked in the glow of self-esteem when, in fact, they were pitiable in themselves and contemptible in their behavior toward the Son of God. The source of their lukewarmness, their indifference was their self-ignorance.

The Lord really said to them, “You are the wretched one.” Of all the churches this one had the highest opinion of itself, but was the worst of them all — worse than Thyatira, worse than dead Sardis. It was the exact opposite of the church at Smyrna. They were suffering great poverty but were rich in spiritual things. This church was rich in material things but desperately poor in the things that really matter. If only they would see the truth!

See Christ's loving counsel to this church. “Buy from me gold” — true divine riches; “white clothes” — the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ in which alone we can safely stand before God; “ointment” — Christ's remedy for spiritual blindness. All we can ever need is in Him. He is the supplier of every good that we require to make us acceptable to God and happy forever. Blessed indeed is he whose sin is covered, whose eyes are opened, whose

treasure is in heaven. Come, then, without money and without price to buy from Him.

He cannot leave the Laodiceans like this without a final appeal. Even now if they will only show a little zeal and turn heartily from their sin — Outside the closed door the Saviour waits, barred from the fellowship of this church, shut out of the hearts of its people. Not here does He make as though He would go further (Luke 24:28), but solemnly stands, earnestly knocks. There is a choice before all such churches, all such people. The choice is to be complacent, self-righteous, lukewarm or to make Christ the very center of life; to open the door wide and gladly receive Him -- or to keep it shut in His face. You who read this, if you have not yet opened your heart to Him, I plead with you in Christ's name to receive him now by faith. “As many as received Him, to those who believed in his name, to them he gave the right to become the sons of God” (John 1:12).

To this church — “the wretched one” — is given the most moving invitation and one of the most wonderful promises to overcomers in all the seven churches. This is the loving heart of Christ. This is the grace of our God “Where sin abounded, grace much more abounded” (Rom 5:20). To those who receive this abundance of grace, to the overcomer, will be given the highest outward honor a mortal can receive on earth. “To him who overcomes will I grant to sit with me on my throne, just as I also overcame, and have sat down with my Father on his throne”.

He who has an ear (yes, in any church, in any age), let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Let him hear and let him respond.

Great Dweller in eternal light
Who filleth all the holy place,
Thou radiant Image of God's face
High throned above all other height:
O Jesus, wouldst Thou dwell in me?
Canst Thou desire my company?

Pure unexampled Love Thou art
And all my yearning soul demands.
Come, Saviour, though all hell withstands
Since Thou wilt stoop to this mean heart;
Since Thou wilt stoop to such a throne,
Take Thy great power and reign alone.

O Lamb of God, I groan for Thee
 With sighs too deep for feeble speech.
 Come, grant the gift beyond the reach
 Of words, or thoughts, or imagery.
 Cleanse this Thy temple through Thy blood,
 And make my heart Thy fixed abode.

Depart, ye thieves of unbelief;
 The high and lofty One above
 Will show the measure of His love,
 Will early speed to my relief.
 He, to this contrite heart, draws near
 To make His habitation here.

By faith I seize the joyful prize.
 My Lord, come to Thy house in peace.
 My heart awaits Thy bright increase,
 My Master, O my Master, cries.
 And from the bliss Thy presence brings
 Eternal adoration springs.

Across the threshold of my soul
 He comes, a holy, heavenly Guest.
 He enters now within this breast,
 Destroys the sin and fills the whole.
 By faith I claim Him as my own
 And know that which cannot be known.

My prostrate spirit worships Thee.
 My tears are seen, my prayer is heard.
 I rest upon Thy promised Word
 To live and will and walk in me.
 What splendid things shall I not prove
 Filled with the fullness of Thy love?

According to the prophetic interpretation of these letters, Laodicea was chosen to represent the final age of the church. It is perfectly clear from the New Testament that the last state of the church on earth will be one of deep and wide-spread apostasy. Laodicea might well be a picture of this in the following ways.

(1) There is perhaps a suggestion of it in the very name. Laodicea is a compound of two Greek words and means people's

rights or rule. Not apostles, not prophets, certainly not Christ, but the people themselves taking everything into their own hands. Christ is shut out and the church tries to run its own affairs without His interference. This is democracy in the worst sense of the term. “Understand this also: In the last days perilous times will come. For men will be lovers of themselves”; “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but following their own desires they will accumulate crowds of teachers for themselves because they will have itching ears. And they will turn away their ears from the truth” (2 Tim 3: 1,2; 4:3,4).

(2) The last state of the church will be a time of indifference to the person and fellowship of Christ. “Men will be lovers of themselves. . . .lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim 3:2-5); “Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Matt 24: 12). This is the final fruit of that loss of first love seen in the early church.

(3) Wealth and prosperity will also be a mark of the last days. “Come now, you rich men, weep and howl because of your miseries that will come on you. . . .You have heaped together wealth for the last days” (James 5: 1-3).

(4) The last days will be a time of great self-deception. “Now the Spirit clearly states that in later times some will depart from the faith, giving attention to seducing spirits, and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim 4: 1). “That day will not come unless the apostasy comes first and that man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition. . . .This one’s appearing will be according to the working of Satan, with all power and miraculous signs and lying wonders. . . .God will send them strong delusion so that they will believe the lie” (2 Thess 2: 3-11).

(5) As Laodicea was the last and worst of the seven churches, so it seems the last condition of the universal professing church will be the worst in its history. I judge this from the description given of the last days in the references quoted above and in others like them. “When the Son of Man comes will He find faith on the earth?” The Lord Jesus asked this question in a way that requires a negative answer. That is, true faith will be rare and the vast majority will be without it.

The awful truth is that Christianity will end in failure (Christianity, not Christ and His body, His bride). This should not surprise us, for man in every age is a failure. In the age of innocence he sinned. Both before and after the days of Noah he corrupted himself thoroughly. Under law the Jews were such a failure that they rejected and crucified their Messiah, the Son of God. Christianity, too, ends with Christ shut outside the church, scorned by the very people He gave his blood to save. This age of grace, this church age has been the grandest of all. But as someone has said, the corruption of the best things is the worst of all corruptions.

As the Jews perverted the law and made it an instrument of self-righteousness, so Christianity has been, and will increasingly be, perverted to similar ends. The Jews took that which was given to reveal their sin and to humble them in the dust before God, and used it for self-glory. They twisted it to its exact opposite meaning. So Laodicean Christianity handles the Gospel to its own destruction. In its hands the Word of God's grace becomes only a means of self-glory and self-exaltation, or a means of gaining wealth. They believe they have need of nothing, nothing at all. The final sins of the church will be self-righteousness, self-delusion, amassing wealth, and indifference to Christ. And when He can endure it no longer and spits the insipid mess out of His mouth what will be the end of those enmeshed in that system?

Note on the seven letters

A study of the things which Christ approves and the things which He condemns in these letters would reveal some valuable lessons for our souls.

He commends, directly or indirectly, good works (2: 2,3,9,13,19; 3:8), patience (2: 2,3,19; 3:10), hatred of evil and rejection of evil persons (2:2,6), patient endurance in tribulation (2:9,10), faithfulness to His word and His name (2:10,13; 3:10), faith (2:13), love (2:4,5,19), seizing of opportunities (3:8), holiness (3:4), and fervency of spirit (3:15). A hearing ear, faithful endurance, separation from evil, a loving heart, a life of true service, whole-hearted commitment to Him, an overcoming faith — these are the things our Lord emphasizes.

He condemns false apostles (2:2), loss of love (2:4,5), hypocritical religious pretenders (2:9; 3:9), the deeds and doctrine of the Nicolaitans (2:6,15), toleration of evil persons, wrong teaching, and practice (2:14,20), a lying name (3:1), carelessness (3:3), lukewarmness (3:15,16), impenitence (2:5,16,21,22; 3:3).

This is Christ’s message to all churches everywhere. There are things included here that many churches seem to think unimportant. And there are things left out that some churches greatly emphasize. For instance, there is nothing here on this or that gift of the Spirit, or about this or that form of church government, or order of service. It is past time that the churches learned to emphasize the things the Lord emphasizes, and count as secondary the things he counts secondary.

Note on apostasy and revival

It appears that some are very sure that we are now in the very last days of this age and have entered into the Laodicean period of the church, and that, because of this, the days of revival are past. We can no longer expect, say they, such movements of the Spirit of God as took place at Pentecost or, in more recent times, in the United Kingdom and America in 1858-59, or that which occurred in Wales and other places in the early years of this present century.

Now it may be that we are in the final period of the church (the evidence seems to point this way, though it cannot be proved beyond doubt). But it doesn’t follow that revival is impossible.

Even Laodicea is urged to repent. “Be zealous therefore and repent” is the Lord’s word to her. If it were not possible it would not be commanded. And if she did show zeal in repentance surely new life would follow.

But even if Laodicea remains unrepentant there are other possibilities of revival. Organizational, denominational Christianity may go deeper and deeper into apostasy. But God is not limited in His working by organizational Christianity. He may use small, independent groups as great instruments of revival. Or He may do a new thing altogether. There will be Philadelphia churches until the very hour of Christ’s coming, and where such churches exist there are always possibilities of revival.

The Scriptural teaching concerning the Holy Spirit also indicates that there are great possibilities of revival in the last days even until the Day of the Lord. “It will happen in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. . . .before that great and renowned day of the Lord comes” (Acts 2:16-21).

We must not allow our views of the church of the last days to be a stumblingblock to our faith in God’s grace and power. Renewed spiritual life on a large scale is always possible when His people meet the conditions laid down in the Word of God.

4

Sights and sounds of glory

4:1 After these things I looked, and saw a door opened in heaven, and the voice which I first heard speaking to me was like a trumpet which said, "Come up here, and I will show you things which must take place after these things". 2 And immediately I was in the Spirit, and saw that a throne was set in heaven, and someone sitting on the throne. 3 And he who sat there in appearance was like a jasper and a sardius stone. And there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. 4 And around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, dressed in white clothing, and they had crowns of gold on their heads. 5 And from the throne came lightning flashes and thunderings and voices. And seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.

6 "Also before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the middle of the throne and around the throne, were four living creatures full of eyes in front and in back. 7 And the first living creature was like a lion, and the second living creature was like a calf, and the third living creature had a face like a man, and the fourth living creature was like a flying eagle. 8 And the four living creatures each had six wings. All around and on the inside of the wings they were covered with eyes. And they do not rest day and night, saying "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come."

9" And when those living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

11 "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power, for you have created all things, and for your pleasure they exist and were created."

The outline of the Revelation given in 1: 19 indicates a three-fold division of the book. We have already seen the first two divisions. "The things which you have seen" was the vision of the glorified

Christ in chapter one. “The things which are” we saw in the letters to the seven churches. The last great division, “The things which will take place after these things”, remains and it seems perfectly clear that we enter into it with the first verse of chapter four. John is called up to heaven to see these very things.

But while it seems clear enough that the third division begins here, it is perhaps not so clear just what is proved by it.

Those who believe that we have here, in the remaining chapters of the Revelation, the history of the Church throughout this whole age -- the Historicists — might teach that these three divisions should be interpreted in the following way:

The things which John saw — the vision of Christ

The things which are — the literal churches of the first century.

The things which will take place after these things — the history of the Church from the first century to the return of Christ.

I believe there are very serious objections to this view. We have already seen that the seven churches of Asia as a “mystery” (1:20) represent the Church on earth throughout this whole age.

Consequently “the thing which will take place after these things” cannot have begun at Pentecost or at any time in the first or second century, but must occur when the age approaches its end. Even taking the churches in their ordinary literal sense we come to the same conclusion, for all these churches continued in existence past the first century, and two of them, Smyrna and Philadelphia, have existed through the passing centuries into modern times. But whether taking them in their “mystery” or in their literal sense, it cannot be sound interpretation to teach that “the things which will take place after these things” began long before “the things which are” had reached their full development. For this reason (and others — a fuller discussion of this subject is given in Appendix C) I am persuaded that the events recorded in chapters 4-22 will occur at the very end of the age.¹

¹ If these visions signify real events that must occur, the interpretation of the Idealists or Spiritualists cannot be wholly correct; if these events were not completely fulfilled in the first centuries the interpretation of the Preterists cannot be correct; if they have not been truly fulfilled in Church history the interpretation of the Historicists cannot be correct. This leaves the position of the Futurists as being the only adequate one to explain the visions and prophecies of the Revelation.

Tribulation and Rapture

Those who teach that we do indeed have here a picture of end-time events are divided for the most part into two main groups. Unfortunately, sometimes the division is very sharp between them. They have already been referred to while commenting on the letter to the church at Philadelphia. One group affirms that the Church will be taken to heaven before these end-time events, including the Great Tribulation, begin. Their view is called Pre-tribulationism. Most of those who hold this view place the Rapture of the Church at the opening verse of chapter 4. According to this view, John, caught up to heaven, symbolizes the future Rapture of the whole Church.² The second group teaches that the Rapture will take place, not before the tribulation begins, but after it is finished. This view is called Post-tribulationism.

According to those who believe in a Pre-tribulation Rapture as described above, the book of Revelation should be divided as follows:

The things John saw — the vision of Christ in chapter 1

The things which are — the seven churches of this whole age (chapters 2,3)

The things which will take place after these things — the things to occur after the Rapture of the Church (chapters 4-22).

William Newell calls this outline “The final and unanswerable argument that the church cannot be in the Great Tribulation” (The Book of the Revelation, page 402).

On the other hand, in answering this argument, those who believe in a Post-tribulation Rapture could divide the Revelation as follows:

The things John saw — the vision of Christ in chapter 1

The things which are — the seven churches of this whole age up until their full development as described in chapters 2 and 3

² The Scofield Reference Bible has the following note on this verse: “This call seems clearly to indicate the fulfilment of 1 Thess. 4:14-17. The word ‘church’ does not again occur in the Revelation till all is fulfilled”.

John F. Walvoord in his commentary states “the rapture as a doctrine is not a part of the prophetic foreview of the book of the Revelation.” But he still thinks the rapture occurs here at the beginning of chapter 4. He assumes it but does not prove it.

The things which will take place after these things — the things to occur after the churches in their “mystery”, worldwide meaning have reached their full development (chapters 4-22). God will let things go on as we see them in these letters until He sees it is time to bring them to an end. With the true church remaining on earth, He will work in a way that will swiftly lead to the culmination of evil in the apostate church and the world, the judgment of both, and the return of Christ in glory³ and the events which will flow from that — chapters 4 to 22.

Many arguments have been presented for each of these views. We will mention here only those that relate to this fourth chapter of the Revelation. A fuller account of this subject is included in Appendix D in the back.

It may be best here at the very outset to give the conclusions that I have stated there. Most of us no doubt would like a definite “yes” or “no” to the question, Will the Church go through the Tribulation? After examining a great many volumes and carefully weighing the evidence given on both sides of this question, it is my opinion that it may not be possible for us to know with absolute certainty.

I do not think that Pre-tribulationism has been proved -- far from it. Yet it may possibly be the true view. Therefore I will not dogmatically deny it. Nor is it absolutely settled in my mind that the true Church will remain on earth to endure the Tribulation (though I think the evidence is far more weighty on this side). Therefore I will not dogmatically affirm it. This uncertainty, far from being a drawback, may actually lead to the proper attitude of heart commended in the Scriptures. Let us walk in the light as children of the light. Let us watch carefully events taking place in the world. Let us patiently wait for our Lord from heaven. And let us be ready for anything.

It seems to me that the attitude that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego showed to king Nebuchadnezzar is a fitting one for the days in which we live. When threatened with tribulation they boldly

³ “The things which shall be hereafter” can hardly mean after the seven churches (“the things which are”) are raptured -- for the simple reason that not all the churches are to be raptured. Will Pergamos be, or Thyatira, or Sardis? Certainly Laodicea will not be. Philadelphia alone can hardly represent “the things which are”. The seven churches in general are a mixture of saved and unsaved people. Remember that *“the things which are” are all the seven churches and not the one true Church being prepared for rapture.* Therefore, I think the last of the outlines given above is much more true to the context.

answered, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the blazing fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hands, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, or worship the golden image which you have set up” (Dan 3:16-18).

Indeed, God did deliver them, but in a manner that perhaps no one guessed at beforehand. He delivered them, not by keeping them from the furnace, but by going into it with them (Dan 3:24,25).

No doubt God is able to deliver people from fiery tribulation. But if He does not, He will go into it with them — and who will say that this is not the more blessed way of the two?

Long ago in Judah it was a very serious thing in the eyes of God that those called prophets in Jerusalem, Jeremiah excepted, taught the people that king Nebuchadnezzar would not come and destroy their city. They thus made them to trust in something that was not true (Jer 28:15). Terrible tribulation was soon to overtake them, as the despised Jeremiah faithfully warned, but the people were soothed with predictions of peace and safety and were poorly prepared for that time of trouble when it did come (Jeremiah, chapters 28,29).

How much more serious, I ask you, would it be to lull the Church into expecting only peace and safety and deliverance from the Great Tribulation when actually it might soon break upon her? Let it not be thought that I am accusing any godly Bible teacher of prophesying falsely. But is it not possible that some do show a lack of wisdom by being excessively dogmatic about doubtful things? For my part I do not wish to teach any of the people of God to trust in anything that might prove to be false — especially anything that would leave them poorly prepared for some of the most extraordinary and dangerous events ever to occur on earth.

Let us now look more directly at some of the arguments Pre-tribulationists use in relation to this chapter.

(1) The voice John heard was “like trumpet” (v 1). Many who believe the Rapture occurs at this point try to connect this with the trumpet mentioned in 1 Cor 15:52 and 1 Thess 4:16. It seems to me that any connection at all is very unlikely.

(a) This voice that John heard was not a trumpet at all but was a voice that merely resembled the loud and clear tones of a trumpet.

(b) It was the “first voice” John heard.

(c) Paul plainly taught that the Rapture will occur at the “last” trumpet (1 Cor 15:52). Now “first” does not mean last, and “last” does not mean first. So how could the voice like a trumpet which is called the first be the last trumpet which indicates the Rapture? How could this voice be the last when there are 7 more trumpets to sound afterwards in chapters 8-11? How could it be the last when we read of one that sounds after the Tribulation is over (Matt 24:31)? It is not proper to argue that Paul wrote that letter to Corinth before the Revelation was given and could know nothing of the seven trumpets. Paul may not have known, but the Holy Spirit did, and the Spirit inspired him to write that the Rapture would occur at the last trumpet. And are we to think that Paul knew nothing of Christ’s teaching in Matthew 24 and the reference to a trumpet there?

(2) There is no mention of churches or the Church, we are told, after chapter three until the Revelation is over (22:16). William Kelly wrote “After Revelation 3 right onward, there is the most unaccountable silence as to the church on earth, if the church is really there”. John Walvoord takes the same view. But this is an argument that cuts equally well both ways. For many of these visions are of things in heaven and we read of no Church there by name. We read of the millennium and the eternal state in the closing chapters of the book but the Church does not appear by name. Are we, then, to assume that because the name is not used the Church is not there? Of course not. If the Church can be represented in heaven by elders (as is insisted by some), or by the bride in chapter 19, or by those who sit on thrones in chapter 20, can it not equally well be represented by the saints on earth who appear many times in chapters 5 to 20? After all, “saints”, which simply means holy ones, is the common word for Christians during the present Church age (Rom 1:7; Phil 1:1; etc.).

As Oswald T. Allis has pointed out, the Church is on earth the last we saw it in chapter 3. We are not told it went anywhere, so it is possible to believe that it is still there in the remaining chapters. Moreover, all admit that the apostate church will be on earth throughout the Revelation; yet we do not read of it by name.

(3) When John is caught up to heaven, the next thing that catches his eye after the throne of God and He who sat on it, is the sight of the 24 elders. They are clothed in white and have crowns on their heads (4:4). A good number of those who believe in a Pre-tribulation Rapture try to identify these elders with the Church in heaven already resurrected, judged and rewarded, and they count

this as added evidence for their position. Others are equally insistent that the elders cannot represent the Church. Here are the reasons given on each side.

First, the position of those who argue that the elders are the Church, and not angels or other beings:

(a) The word elder is the same used for elders in Israel and in the Church, and can only signify human beings.

(b) They are crowned, which angels are never said to be. John Walvoord writes, "The word here is the crown of a victor rather than that of a sovereign. It was made of gold, indicating that the elders had been rewarded for victory accomplished" (The Revelation of Jesus Christ, page 106).

(c) They are enthroned very near the throne of God, which thing is never said of angels.

(d) Their garments are white, and such garments are not promised to angels but to the people of God (3:4).

(e) They are associated with Christ in a priestly ministry (5:8), which thing is not appropriate to angels.

(f) Their worship recorded for us in 5:9,10 gives praise to God in language no angel can use: "You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe, and language, and people, and nation."

Against this view consider the following reasons given by those who say the elders do not represent the Church.

(a) 5:9,10 in the KJV is not based on the best Greek text (something I personally am reluctant to believe). The New American Standard Bible, counted by some scholars as the most accurate of all versions, has, "Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth." In this version the elders, far from identifying themselves with redeemed men, actually keep themselves distinct. A few commentators insist that the KJV is based on the best Greek text and that the elders say "us" (making them among the redeemed) rather than "men" (which excludes them). J.B. Smith put together quite a bit of evidence for this. But most scholars who have knowledge of Greek manuscripts seem to prefer the text used by the translators of the NASB. But even if the KJV is correct here, this still would not prove that the rapture has taken place at this point in the Revelation. The elders could be redeemed spirits of men still awaiting the resurrection. In this case their crowns would simply indicate that they were overcomers, victors through Christ in the battle of faith.

(b) These elders are individuals and not a symbolic company. "One of the elders said to me" (5:6). They are put in contrast to 144,000, to innumerable saints, to thousands and thousands of angels. And we are nowhere told either that they are a symbolic company, or, if they are, what the symbol means.

(c) It is not possible to identify the bride of Christ with the 24 elders. They are enthroned before the marriage of the Lamb and His bride. Of the bride it is said that white raiment will be given in the future (19:8); the elders here in chapter are already wearing white clothing. Rev 19:4-7 seems to distinguish clearly between the two groups.

(d) The fact that they are crowned with victor's crown does not at all prove the elders represent the Church, or that they cannot be angelic beings. For all we know these are angels who have been given the victor's crown for successfully resisting the original rebellion when many angels fell with Lucifer. It is interesting also that the same Greek word for crown is used in 6:2 and 9:7.

(e) The church is nowhere promised in Scripture that it will reign on thrones in heaven. A search of every occurrence of crown or throne or reign or rule in the New Testament fails to turn up any such promise. It is clearly promised that the saints will reign on the earth (Matt 19:28 with Matt 25:31,32; Rev 3:21; 5:10; etc.)

(f) The fact that the elders are dressed in white certainly does not show they cannot be angels. White dress is associated with angels in other places in the New Testament (Matt 28:3; Mark 16:5; Acts 1:10).

(g) John is supposed to represent the Rapture (say some) but when he arrives in heaven the elders are already crowned and enthroned. They are separate from him. Since they are already there when he arrives and since they are already judged and rewarded how can they represent a Church just that moment raptured?

(h) According to Rev 11:8 rewards are not given to the saints until the 7th trumpet has sounded. Therefore these elders cannot be a picture of believers who received their rewards long before that.

(i) If the elders represent the Church, then the four living creatures must also represent the Church, for they sing the same song as the elders in 5:8-10. But we shall see that the four living creatures are cherubim and not redeemed men.

Such are the arguments on either side. It may not be possible for us in our present state of knowledge to affirm with certainty just who these elders are. Our ignorance of heaven and heavenly things is vast indeed, and it is not unwise or improper for us to confess it. There are a number of things in the Revelation about which we may not speak with certainty — we may only give an opinion. It seems likely to me that these elders are powerful heavenly beings very near to the Most High. The Bible speaks of “rulers and authorities in heavenly places” (Eph 3:10), and of thrones, dominions, principalities and powers both visible and invisible (Col 2:16). The teaching that there are thrones now invisible surely means that there are crowned heavenly beings sitting on them.

A word of caution

Before continuing in our study of this wonderful book of the Revelation let me say something that I consider very important.

When both sides of a question are presented and no definite conclusions are given the reader might gain the impression that it is not possible to speak with certainty on any matters that relate to this book. This is not true. I am persuaded that the broad outlines of the Revelation are clear and that there is much here which we should not hold two opinions about. But there are difficulties and obscurities as well, and concerning them we should ever be cautious. It is better to be charged with timidity or ignorance of the truth than to make serious mistakes in so important a matter by immoderately dogmatic utterances. I dare not pass on the opinions of men as though they were the undisputed truth of God. Considering the great variety of interpretation that has been suggested through the centuries by godly scholars, we should by now have learned to be cautious. But at times we are still dismayed by the reckless dogmatism displayed by some in their statements of what they think is the proper interpretation.

However, I am confident that if we come with open minds and humble hearts to this great unveiling of the future, keep these things ever before us, and view them from all sides in real dependence on the Holy Spirit who inspired them, we will understand much of what is yet to come on this earth, and in the process learn many valuable lessons for our Christian life. Let us lay aside our arguments now and turn our attention, not to the elders, but to the One who sits on the throne, and let us, with them, worship lowly at His feet.

The throne

That which first captured the attention of the apostle, taken up in the Spirit to Glory, was the central throne and the radiant being who sat on it. In the Revelation a fact of supreme importance is this: whatever happens, God is on His throne and rules over all. God's throne is referred to 40 times in the Revelation. John makes no attempt to describe the form of that Holy One and is only permitted to say that He was "like a jasper and a sardius stone". The stone here called jasper is described in 21:11 where the light of the Holy City of God is said to be "like a very precious gemstone, like a crystal-clear jasper". This description of the jasper suggests a gem like a diamond rather than the stone now known as jasper which is dull and opaque. The gem translated sardius here is believed to be a blood-red stone.

Thus the appearance of indescribable Deity seemed to John as bright and flashing gems now deep red, now scintillating with clear light. The crystal-clear radiance of the diamond-like jasper may speak of God's holy glory, His Being which is light. The blood-red sardius may well remind us of His wrath against all sin and unrighteousness. His very Being is set in judgment against evil. Or it may speak of that blood sacrifice for sin that has come out of His very nature. Or it is possible that these gems speak only of God's glory, and that we were not meant to try to find separate meanings in the individual gems.

Who can approach that eternal Brightness and who can bear to stand before that One whose nature flashes, as it were, holy judgments against the sinner? Ah, there is a rainbow there about the throne which reassures us that the One who sits on it is our faithful covenant-keeping God. And there is a Lamb in the midst of the throne with the marks of sacrifice on Him (5:6).

"There is a way for man to rise
 To that sublime abode;
 An Offering and a Sacrifice,
 A Holy Spirit's energies,
 An Advocate with God;

These, these prepare us for the sight
 Of holiness above;
 The sons of ignorance and night
 May dwell in the eternal Light,
 Through the eternal Love."

T. Binney

“From the throne came lightning flashes and thunderings and voices” (v 5). Is this not an indication that the events soon to be revealed have to do with great judgments that will break like a storm on the world?

The Spirit of God appears here as seven lamps of fire (see remarks on 1:4). Thus the Trinity is present in this vision as the brilliant central figure on the throne, the Lamb in the midst of the throne and the seven lamps before the throne. If the One Holy Spirit is not represented by these 7 lamps of fire then He is not represented by any symbol at all in heaven in these visions -- a thing very difficult to understand.

The sea of glass like crystal is next observed, but nothing more is said of it until 15:2. There we see the redeemed who triumph over Antichrist standing on it and singing the song of Moses. In front of the tabernacle in the wilderness there was a laver where the priests who entered the holy place always had to wash themselves. Solomon later had made a “sea” and placed it in the court of the temple for the priests to wash in (2 Chron 4:2,6,10). In heaven it will no longer be necessary for priests to wash away defilement. The work is done for ever; they stand on a solid sea.

The living creatures

In verses 6 to 9 John describes four “living creatures”. There has been much speculation concerning the identity of these four living ones. Some have thought that they are symbols of the attributes of the living God — the lion suggesting kingly power; the calf or ox suggesting unwearied strength; the man would speak of intelligence; and the eagle of swiftness in executing His own will.

Some have thought that they represent God’s sovereignty over all created life -- the lion as the king of wild beasts; the ox, of domesticated animals; man as the head of all earth’s creatures; the eagle as the king of the skies. Some have thought they are an allusion to the four Gospels where Christ is presented in Matthew as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, in Mark as the unwearied servant of man, in Luke as the Son of man, and in John as the Sovereign of the heavens. Some have taught that these four living creatures symbolize the Church in heaven.

But a good many commentators, laying aside speculation, recognize that these living ones are of the same order of beings as the cherubim of Ezekiel chapters 1 and 10, or the seraphim of Isaiah chapter 6. There are certain differences in the various descriptions but the resemblances are so striking that we can hardly doubt that they are of a similar nature. And we are told by Ezekiel that

the living creatures are the cherubim (Ezek 10:20). The cherubim seem to be of the very highest order of heavenly beings and are closely connected with glory of God. In Gen 3:24 we learn that cherubim were placed at the east of Eden to keep man out. And in Ezek 28:14 it seems that one called a "cherub" is Satan himself. These two facts alone seem to destroy the foundation for much of the speculation given above.

The first vision that Ezekiel saw, which he records in the opening chapter of his prophecy, was marvelous indeed. By reading it we gain the impression of great mystery and power and brightness and glory. Ezekiel was overwhelmed with the total impact of his vision: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I prostrated myself" (Ezek 1:28). What Ezekiel saw, and what John saw, was inexpressible glory.

The function of these living ones in John's vision was to declare ceaselessly the holiness of God. This reminds us of the six-winged seraphim of Isaiah chapter 6 who kept up a similar cry. We get the impression from this that in heaven the most overwhelming attribute of God is not His love or His grace, but his holiness. The inhabitants of Glory are made unceasingly aware of the holy character of the Creator. When the living creatures thus give glory and honor and thanks to the Lord God Almighty, the twenty-four elders in utter humility and self-forgetfulness prostrate themselves before the Holy One who sits on the throne and a fountain of worship, praise and adoration bursts from their hearts (vs 9,10). Together they all worship because of creation. Thus it was when God laid the foundations of the earth and raised its cornerstone. Then all the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy (Job 38:6,7). Thus it is in heaven now and ever shall be. Thus it should be now in our hearts when we consider the heavens, the work of God's hands, the moon and stars which He has ordained. We should shout for joy because we know the Mighty Creator of all these things. We should give Him the praise and the glory because He only is worthy, He only is holy, He only is the Lord.

The reason for creation is given in verse 11. God made all these things simply because it was His good pleasure to make them. No better reason can be imagined. Of our Lord Jesus Christ it is written, "all things were created by him, and for him" (Col 1:16). No better cause can be conceived.

5:1 And I saw in the right hand of the one sitting on the throne a scroll written inside 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 to break the seals?" 3 And no man in heaven, or on earth, or under the earth, was able to open the scroll, or ever to look at it. 4 And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or even to look at it. 5 And one of the elders said to me,

"Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to break its seven seals."

6 And I looked, and there in the centre of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the centre of the elders, stood a Lamb looking as if it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. 7 And he came and took the scroll out of the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders prostrated themselves before the Lamb, each of them having a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

9 And they sang a new song, saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals, for you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe, and language, and people, and nation, 10 and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we will reign on the earth."

11 And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and elders. Their number was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands. 12 *They were saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and praise."*

13 And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and those which are in the sea, and everything that is in them, I heard saying,

“Praise, and honour, and glory, and power be to him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb for ever and ever.” 14 And the four living creatures said “Amen.” And the twenty-four elders prostrated themselves and worshipped him who lives for ever and ever.

With the praise of the living creatures and the elders still sounding in the courts of heaven, another object engages John’s attention. He sees a seven-sealed scroll (not “book”, as we know books today) in the right hand of Him who sits on the throne. It is an object of tremendous interest and importance to all of heaven. The sound of praise temporarily dies away. All eyes are riveted on that sealed scroll with its hidden contents. All seem aware of its vast significance to the redemption of the world, to the future of the universe.

A strong angel calls out in the sudden silence with a voice loud enough to be heard in heaven, in earth, and under the earth: “Who is worthy to open the scroll, and to break its seals?” There is no reply. None among the angels, or the spirits of just men in heaven, none among the living on earth, none among the buried dead was able to open the book; no, not even to look at it. Not Adam, to whom the earth was given; not Abraham, friend of God; not Moses, mighty lawgiver; not David, sweet singer and king of Israel; not Daniel, greatly beloved; not Mary, the mother of Jesus; not Paul, greatest of the apostles; not elder or living creature nor seraph; not any departed monarch or living saint; all must stand with downcast eyes and acknowledge their unworthiness.

John, too, in the Spirit, seems completely aware of the significance of the scene. In the prevailing stillness the sound of his sobs is heard. He weeps bitterly, the tears course down his cheeks. He seems to recognize that the sealed book contains the record of the “things which will take place after these”. Does he grieve at the possibility that, after all, these things might remain unfulfilled forever, that the story might have no ending?

One of the elders said to him, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and its seven seals”. And John looked, and there in the center of the throne, unobserved before, appears a little Lamb (such is the meaning of the word). Ah, John, had you not missed Him? Did you not ask yourself the moment you arrived in glory, Where’s Jesus? Wasn’t there something missing in spite of thrones and elders and living creatures and angels innumerable?

At last He appears as the Lamb. But here is no ordinary lamb.

(1) The Lamb is a sacrificed lamb. The marks of slaughter are still on Him.

Five bleeding wounds He bears, received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers, they strongly plead for me.
“Forgive him, O forgive!” they cry,
“Nor let that ransomed sinner die.”

C. Wesley

(2) He has seven horns. Horns, when used symbolically, stand for power or authority or strength (Deut 33:17; Ps 89:17; Zech 1:18,19). These seven indicate the perfection of Christ’s power and authority. A lamb has the appearance of softness and weakness rather than majesty and strength, and it might be thought that of all the animals of the fields it is least capable of triumphing over the wild beast that rises up out of the sea (13:1,2). But this Lamb is also the Lion of the tribe of Judah, earth’s coming King.

(3) He has seven eyes. We are told what this means. They are the “seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the world”. The Lamb has been given the Spirit without measure. He has perfection of intelligence and knowledge. He sees all, knows all that is taking place on earth.

Thus with few and ordinary symbols the beauty, the power and the perfection of Christ are set forth.

Verse 7 records one of the greatest moments in Scripture. Tears stain the apostle’s face. All heaven is still. Angels, principalities and powers watch with keen expectation. Not one worthy person in the universe comes forward to open the sealed scroll. Yes, there is One. The Lamb comes, meek and lowly, but with utter confidence to the shining Omnipotence on the throne, reaches out and takes the scroll from God’s right hand.

Instantly there is a universal burst of acclamation. Heaven falls prostrate before the Lamb. Living Ones, elders, myriads of angels, all heavenly, all earthly creatures unite in tones of purest harmony to hymn His praise. Their voices are many, their theme but one — worthy is the Lamb. They worship Him, the Lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. They give to Him the honor and glory due only to God. If Jesus Christ is not true God these are scenes of wild blasphemy and abominable idolatry. But heaven has long known what most of earth has yet to learn — “That all men should honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the

Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (John 5:23). So they in heaven worship the Lamb and render Him divine honors in the very presence of Him who sits on the throne.

"Who is worthy?" asks the strong angel.

"You are worthy" sing the elders and the living creatures in reply.

"Worthy is the Lamb" join in the angels with thunderous praises.

"To the Lamb forever and ever" be "praise, and honor, and glory, and power" cries all creation.

"Join all the glorious names,
Of wisdom, love and power,
That ever mortals knew,
That angels ever bore;
All are too mean to speak His worth,
Too mean to set my Saviour forth."

Isaac Watts

Observe the reason for such praises. "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals, for you were slain and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe, and language, and people, and nation" (v 9). "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (v 12). The praises in chapter four are on account of creation. In chapter five they are on account of redemption. Here it is not a question of holiness merely, or power, or exalted position. It is the fact that He was sacrificed that makes Him worthy to open the scroll. It is redemption that stirs the strings of heaven's harps.

"Come, let us join our cheerful songs
with angels round the throne;
Ten thousand thousand are their tongues,
But all their joys are one.

Worthy the Lamb that died, they cry,
To be exalted thus;
Worthy the Lamb, our lips reply,
For He was slain for us."

Isaac Watts

Now we should enquire concerning the scroll written inside and on the back and sealed with seven seals. What is this scroll? Why is it of such importance? What does the taking of the scroll from God's hand by the Lamb signify? Why is it sealed and what is meant by breaking the seals?

There has been no little speculation about this seven-sealed scroll and some of it very idle speculation. Also there have been some positive assertions made concerning it that seem to have little foundation in reality. For example, William Hendriksen says that it represents God's eternal plan and symbolized the purpose of God concerning the whole universe throughout history and concerning all creatures in all ages and to all eternity (More Than Conquerors, page 89). Here, as in many other places in his interpretation of the Revelation, I find myself asking, How does he know this? What sure ground is there for such a statement?

Both J. A. Seiss and H. A. Ironside suggest that the true meaning of the book can be understood only by regarding Christ in this vision in His position as Kinsman-Redeemer. I believe this is more likely to lead us to the truth, because it sends us to the Bible itself for the interpretation of the meaning of a sealed scroll. The function of the kinsman-redeemer was a familiar one in Old Testament days. The law given to Israel concerning it is found in Leviticus 25:23-27. A beautiful illustration of how this law worked is seen in the book of Ruth chapter 4.

Jeremiah chapter 32 gives us more details of how the transaction was sometimes accomplished. The fierce Babylonian armies were at the gates of Jerusalem. Hanameel decided that this was a good time to sell his inheritance, if he could find anyone willing to buy it at such a time. So he came to Jeremiah, his near kinsman, and offered him his land for a certain price. The word of the Lord had already come to Jeremiah telling him to go ahead and buy the field. So Jeremiah bought Hanameel's field and weighed him the money. Jeremiah now describes what followed. This is interesting because it has to do with a sealed document, and in interpreting the Revelation we should always seek for clues in other parts of the Word of God, and pay particular attention to them when found.

"I signed and sealed the deed, and took witnesses, and weighed out the money to him in the balances. So I took the deed of purchase, both the one that was sealed in accordance with the law and custom, and the one which was open, and I gave the deed of the purchase to Baruch" (Jer 32:10-12).

The Lord of hosts had spoken to Jeremiah saying, "Take these deeds, this deed of purchase, both the sealed one, and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, so that they may remain a long time. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: houses and fields and vineyards will be possessed again in this land" (32: 14,15). Jeremiah was not to fear that the Babylonians would occupy the land for ever. It was safe to buy the field now, for future heirs would be able to occupy it. Someone in the years to come could take the sealed deed, break its seals and claim the property as heirs of Jeremiah.

The seven-sealed scroll that Christ receives may well be the title deed to the earth, the scroll of inheritance. Christ is the near kinsman, the redeemer who paid the purchase price. And He is also the rightful heir, who now in the end of time rises to claim His property. First, He will pour out His judgments on those who would keep His possession in their own hands and oppose His claims. We who are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise wait with patient longing for "the redemption of the purchased possession" (Eph 1: 13,14).

Certain facts of Scripture are in striking harmony with this interpretation.

(1) The dominion of the earth was originally given to man (Gen 1: 26; Ps 8: 4-6).

(2) Man, by sinning, sold, as it were, himself and his dominion of the earth to Satan. Thus the devil could offer all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them to Christ — Matt 4: 8,9; Luke 4: 6)

(3) Man, having lost both himself and his inheritance, is completely dependent on a kinsman-redeemer, if one can be found, to restore him and his lost estate. One has been found. He is the Lord Jesus Christ.

"And didst Thou love the race that loved not Thee?
And didst thou take to heaven a human brow?
Dost plead with man's voice by the marvellous sea?
Art Thou his kinsman now?"

Jean Ingelow

Yes, Jesus is the Son of man — a Kinsman. And He gave His life as a ransom — He is the Redeemer. He paid the purchase price in His own blood and bought both fallen man and his lost inheritance. We are not saying that He paid something to Satan, for He certainly did not. Rather, He paid the price that Justice demanded. In the little book of Ruth we see that Boaz (a type of Christ), in his office of kinsman-redeemer, obtained both the land and the bride, Ruth (Ruth 4:9,10). Redemption in the Bible means more than the redemption of men's souls. It includes at last the redemption of believers' bodies and of the physical world (Romans 8:21-23).

(4) Thus Christ has become heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2). The world and its kingdoms are His rightful inheritance. And this inheritance He will share with His own beloved people who are collectively His Bride (Romans 8:17).

(5) But though the purchase price of redemption is complete and though the inheritance is sure, our Lord has not yet taken possession of His property. He is as a nobleman who has gone into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return (Luke 19:12ff). The whole creation (notice the words) groans and travails in pain until now waiting to be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom 8:21,22). Christians, too, groan within themselves while waiting for the final fruits of redemption. They wait to be resurrected to partake in the inheritance (Rom 8:23). We do not yet see all things put under man (Heb 2:8); but we see Jesus crowned with glory and honor and waiting at the right hand of God until His enemies be made His footstool (Heb 10:12,13). It is not until the sounding of the seventh trumpet in the end of the age that the kingdoms of the world finally become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ (Rev 11:15). It is not until then that He will come as King to reign on the earth. Only then does He finally rise to claim His property. Only then will the dominion be restored to man, and only then will they "reign on the earth" (Rev 5:10). Only then comes the restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began (Acts 3:21).

Or so it appears to me. No wonder, then, there are tears in heaven when no one is found to open the book. No wonder that Christ alone in His office of Redeemer (and as the "Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" — earth's coming king — Rev 5:5) is able to open the book. No wonder that there is an immediate reference to redeemed men who will reign on the earth, and that there is such a release of praise from creation when the Lamb takes the book. These things are just what we would expect if the

receiving of the book is a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ rising at last to claim His inheritance. And I believe this is the picture.¹

At the end of the age He will begin to put in motion those events that quickly lead to the final destruction of evil and His own reign over the world.

Let us notice other features of the scroll and circumstances that surround it.

(1) It was written “inside and on the back” (5:1). Does this suggest that part of it was concealed and part open, as Jeremiah’s deed of purchase (Jer 32:11)? Does it mean that the contents of the book were partly known from other Scriptures and partly hidden until the Revelation was given? Or does it indicate that inside were specifications of the inheritance, and outside were the names of witnesses (as in Jeremiah’s day)? Can it be that inside are to be found the main chain of events that lead up to the return of Christ, and outside there is added supplemental material and words of explanation? Or is it simply that the scroll is filled to overflowing with God’s decrees? I don’t see how we can say with certainty.

(2) The scroll surely contains the “things which will take place after these things”, things to come after the professing church has reached its full development.

(3) It is taken after some from every tribe, language, people and nation have been redeemed by Christ’s blood and have been made kings and priests to God (5:9,10). This is added evidence (if more

¹ Patrick Fairbairn saw that the 7 - sealed book was the book of inheritance, though his views of how and when Christ should claim the inheritance differ from mine. In the last century, he wrote of “the marvellous difficulty” connected with the opening of the seals and the significance of it in these words: “After the challenge had been thrown out to the wide universe for any one to attempt it, no one, it is said, was found capable of undertaking the task, but the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Root of David. It is clear from this, that by the opening of the book, something more must have been meant than the mere disclosure of its contents; it must have involved, besides, the personal appropriation of these, with a view to their actual accomplishment. Nothing else could have created so gigantic a difficulty. It is clear also, from the designation of Christ on the occasion, as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Root of David, that the book must have borne respect to a work of war and conquest — a work in which heroic energy and lion-like strength should require to be put forth . . . What, then, was this? No other than the universal possession and sovereignty of the earth, the right to reign over it, to its uttermost bounds . . . The book, therefore with which none but this royal personage could intermeddle was, in other words, the book of the inheritance — laying open the way by which the possession must be made good” (*The Interpretation of Prophecy*, p.402).

is needed) that the mighty events that occur with the opening of the seals does not describe Church history but comes at the end of it.

(4) There is an intimate connection between the scroll and the “prayers of saints” (5:8). Through the passing centuries the prayers of God’s people have filled the golden bowls full to the brim. Now in the end of the age they are ready to be offered. Their prayers will be powerful and effective in bringing to pass the events that follow.

(5) Whatever else may be said of this scroll one thing seems beyond dispute. We have its contents opened to our gaze in the remaining chapters of Revelation. That which heaven breathlessly waited to see, and that which angels desired to look into, is now revealed to God’s servants on earth. Let us then reverently and eagerly examine these previously hidden counsels of God.

6

The opening of six seals

6:1 And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come and see." 2 And I looked and saw a white horse, and he who sat on it had a bow. And a crown was given to him, and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

The Lamb has taken the scroll sealed with seven seals from God's hand. He now breaks the seals one by one.

We are not to think of a book of many pages, bound with cloth or leather as our books are now. The scroll that John saw was a document rolled up and sealed in such a way that as each seal is broken a portion of the scroll is unrolled and its contents revealed to view. With the breaking of each seal an event, or a series of events, begins to come to pass.

If these events are the final climatic events of this age (as I believe), there should be a more or less exact agreement with other portions of Scripture that describe these final events. I believe there is such an agreement, and that this is strong evidence that the things we are about to study refer to the time of the end.

On one occasion the disciples, hearing the prophecy of the Lord Jesus concerning the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, asked Him some questions. They are recorded in Luke 21:7 and Matthew 24:3. In Luke we have, "Teacher, but when will these things be? And what sign will there be when these things are about to take place?" The answer of the Lord Jesus seems to refer mainly to the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman general, Titus, in A.D. 70. But (and this is common in prophecy) there is an interweaving of that near event with the far event of His personal coming in glory. The one becomes a picture, a type, of the other. The time of trouble that occurred at the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple long ago represents, in general, perhaps the whole course of this age, and, more particularly, the time of great tribulation at the end of the age.

In Matthew the question is, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?" Notice the significant additions to the questions recorded in Luke. From these questions we may infer that the disciples at that time thought that the end of the age was very near and that it was

somehow connected with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. In His reply the Lord Jesus (it appears to me) emphasized, not the near event of the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus, but more directly answered the question "What will be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the age?" In both Luke 21 and Matthew 24, we can gather that the trouble soon to come on the early Church was typical of the time of danger and tribulation to come at the very end of the age.

It is an interesting fact, pointed out by many others, that the outline of events given in Matthew 24 is strikingly similar to the outline of events that appears when the seals of the scroll are opened.

With these seven seals in mind it is possible to divide Matthew 24:4-29 into seven portions.

1. The appearance of deceivers and false Christs (vs 4,5)
2. Wars and rumors of wars (v 6,7)
3. Famines (v 7)
4. Plagues and earthquakes (v 7)
5. Prediction of tribulation (vs 9-26)
 - (a) Martyrdom (v 9)
 - (b) Suffering multiplied because of hatred, betrayal, great deception, and abounding iniquity (vs 10-12)
 - (c) Preaching in those troublesome times in all the world (v 14)
 - (d) The abomination of desolation which ushers in the Great Tribulation, when false Christs and false prophets will abound (vs 15-26)
6. Signs in the sun, moon and stars, and a shaking of the powers of heaven (v 29). This comes "immediately after" the Great Tribulation. This is a sure indication that that terrible time immediately precedes the coming of Christ.¹
7. The coming of the Son of man with power and great glory, and events connected with it (vs 30,31).

¹ It cannot refer to the time of trouble at Jerusalem's destruction in A.D.70; for it cannot be said that immediately after that time these signs appeared in the sun, moon and stars, or that the sign of the Son of man was seen in heaven (v. 30). It cannot refer to the general tribulation of the saints throughout this age because it is a peculiar time of intense tribulation previously unknown (vs. 21,22).

This, I believe, is an outline, not only of Matthew 24, but suggests the contents of the book of the Revelation, chapters 6 to 19, and in the order in which they will occur. You will observe that the main portion of the chapter is taken up with a prediction concerning the tribulation of the saints, and the principal warning concerns false prophets and false Christs.

Let us now return to Revelation 6 and watch as the seals are opened.

Seal 1

As the first seal is broken a conqueror comes forth on a white horse. Unfortunately, there is more disagreement concerning that which is intended by the opening of this seal than any of the others. The following two interpretations have been most often offered to explain the rider on the white horse.

(1) Some say he is Christ coming forth spiritually to conquer His enemies during this whole age of the church. I have elsewhere given reasons that would, if true, make this interpretation impossible (pages 98, 99, 115, and Appendix C). Other reasons can be added here.

(a) Christ is in heaven opening the seals and can hardly be one of the riders who comes forth when the seals are opened.

(b) Christ rode forth as it were, spiritually, long before the opening of this seal. A new beginning can be seen at Pentecost, but not at the time of the events described here which come many years after Pentecost. Remember that John is told that the Revelation is a book of prophecy that must be fulfilled at some time after he received it (1:1-3).

(c) In any case, we are not given now a symbol of the progress of the Gospel through this age, but one that indicates an event near the very end of the age.

(d) It should be clearly noted that the three horsemen which follow all symbolize some earthly disaster. The first should be in harmony with these. All remaining seals and all the seven trumpets and all the seven bowls likewise signify judgments of various kinds. How could this first seal alone indicate something else? Note, too, that this first rider is announced in a voice of thunder. This suggests a coming storm.

(2) Some say the rider represents antichristian forces of the last days out of which the personal Antichrist will be manifested. I am convinced that this is the proper interpretation, and for the following reasons.

(a) In the chronology of end-time events, this is just the time for Antichrist to arise.

(b) This view is in perfect agreement with Matthew chapter 24. While there will be false prophets and false Christs throughout this whole age of grace (1 John 2: 18), there will be a multiplication of them at the end. This, together with the world's rejection of Christ, and the church's apostasy, will produce circumstances out of which that son of perdition, the personal Antichrist, will come. This being the first sign given in Matthew 24, we can expect to see it here.

(c) The rider goes forth with a bow "conquering and to conquer". This is just what Antichrist will do at the age's end. He will make war and he will prevail; for power will be given him "over all tribes, and languages, and nations". And the world will wonder and say, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war with him?" (Rev 13: 4,7).

(d) The rider now receives a single crown. Someone is about to get a great victory and reign on earth. Only Antichrist fits this description at this time. Certainly it cannot be shown that Christ was given a crown at any time after the seven churches came into existence. So far in the Revelation Christ is seen without a crown, in both the vision on Patmos in chapter 1 and the vision in heaven in chapter 5. When Christ comes on a white horse, after all the seals are opened, His head will bear many crowns (19: 12).

Though the rider appears on a white horse, as Seiss shows this may be typical of Satan's desire to counterfeit everything God does. God has a city, Jerusalem; a King, Christ; a prophet, His own Son; and a Lamb. So Satan has a city, "Babylon"; a king, Antichrist; a prophet, the false one, who is a lamb-like beast (13: 11; 19: 20). It is no wonder then that Antichrist, like Christ, appears on a white horse. This may simply indicate his deceptive powers. In some ways he will be an imitator as well as an opposer of Christ. (See 2 Cor 11: 14,15 for Satan's method).

It is true that in the Revelation white is always associated with that which is holy and heavenly, except in this one case. If this fact alone is sufficient to overthrow all the above arguments (and I do not think it is), and prove the rider must be Christ, then we could say that the vision speaks of Christ arising at the end of this age to begin the final work of conquering His enemies and claiming His kingdom. But I do not think this fits so well in the context as the above interpretation.

Seal 2

6:3 And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come and see." 4 And there went out another horse, a red one, and he who sat on it was given power to take peace from the earth, and to cause men to kill one another. And a great sword was given to him.

This vision of the red horse and its rider is self-explanatory, and there is general agreement on its meaning. War is plainly indicated. I believe it pictures a great conflict that will come with the rise of Antichrist.

(1) Antichrist will not gain control of the earth without conflict. He goes forth "conquering and to conquer", which speaks of war.

(2) This agrees with the second sign as given in Matthew 24. The peace movements of the day, the United Nations, and other organizations will all ultimately fail in their attempts to bring in universal peace. There is no peace to the wicked; there will be no peace in a world in revolt against God.

(3) The war symbolized by this rider may be a great war between Russia and the Western powers. Many Bible scholars believe that such a war is foretold in the prophecy of Ezekiel, chapters 38 and 39. If Antichrist arises in western Europe (and I am convinced he will), it will mean war eventually with all who oppose him, and this may well include Russia as that nation will be at the end of this age. I am not positively affirming that this is the war indicated under this second seal, but I think it very possible, in spite of Russia's present weakened condition in the year 2001.

Seal 3

6:5 And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come and see." And I looked and a black horse appeared. And he who sat on it had a pair of balances in his hand. 6 And I heard a voice among the four living creatures say, "A measure of wheat for a day's wage, and three measures of barley for a day's wage; and see that you do not damage the oil and the wine."

The black horse and its rider can also mean but one thing. The Greek word translated "measure" was about a quart. A "day's wage" in Greek is a denarius, the usual amount paid a laborer for a day's work (Matt 20:2). These are famine conditions. Men will not be able to earn enough to buy sufficient food because of its scarcity.

A quart of wheat is hardly enough for a whole family, and there is no money for other food, clothing, etc. George E. Ladd says that ordinarily the same amount of money would buy twelve to fifteen times as much food. Yet while needs are scarce, luxuries are in abundance. The oil and wine are not hurt; the rich are largely unaffected. Notice the voice that announces these conditions comes from the midst of the four beasts. Is this not the voice of the Lamb again warning His servants of future famine as He did in Matthew 24: 7 when He gave them the third sign of the end of the age?

Seal 4

6:7 And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come and see." 8 And I looked and a pale horse appeared. He who sat on it was named Death, and Hades followed along after him. And power was given to them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with the sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

The fourth horse was pale and bore a terrible rider, and a terrible companion followed with him. The rider is Death, the companion is Hades (not Hell). These unseen powers of destruction are here personified to indicate the terrific devastations that will be inflicted on the earth in the end time. "Power was given to them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with the sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth". That is, conditions that began to prevail under the first seals continue under this one, with two things added — plague (death), and wild beasts.

The fourth sign given in Matthew 24 is plague, and earthquakes follow. This is the one place where Matthew 24 and Revelation 6 do not fully agree. But because earthquakes are not mentioned under the 4th seal does not mean that they will not occur then. Earthquakes do appear throughout the book of the Revelation (6:12; 8:5; 11:13; 11:19; 16:18); and earthquakes "in various places" will be a very general sign throughout the end days.

The four destructive powers revealed under this seal are called God's four severe judgments in Ezekiel 14:21: "How much more certain this will be when I send my four severe judgments on Jerusalem, the sword, and the famine, and the wild beast, and the plague to cut off from it man and beast?" It was God, acting in

righteous judgment, who sent those plagues on Jerusalem long ago. It is God who has sent judgments on unrepentant peoples through the centuries. And it is God who will send them on a world given up to rebellion and iniquity in the last days. Let no one think these are wild speculations. They are words of soberness and truth.

The question arises, is it proper to think that the true Church, composed of God's dear children, could be on earth during these calamities? Very often in the history of this age wars, famines, earthquakes, and plague have occurred in areas where Christians lived in the midst of unbelievers. And very often Christians have suffered and died with the others. If this has happened already repeatedly in this age of grace, it would be no strange thing if it happened again at the end of it. These calamities will be no different in kind than others that have occurred before. But, of course, if He chooses to do so, God is able to protect each believer in any such time and bring them safely through it.

Seal 5

6:9 And when he had 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 testimony which they held. 10 And they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging those who live on the earth and avenging our blood?" 11 And white robes were given to each of them, and they were told that they should rest a little longer, until *the number of* their fellow servants and their brothers who would be killed, as they *had been*, was completed.

Here we have a scene of martyrdom. Let us observe the following:

(1) The altar spoken of here certainly seems to be in heaven. It is the reality of which the altar that stood in the court of the earthly tabernacle was but a shadow. Beneath that earthly altar the blood of animals was poured out in sacrifice. Beneath the heavenly one we see the souls of faithful believers, as though they had been poured out as an offering to God. In the eyes of men they are despised and counted worthy of death. The great God regards them as sweet-smelling sacrifices. The thought that martyrs are an offering to God has other foundation in the New Testament (2 Tim 4:6; Phil 2:17).

(2) The souls of these believers are fully conscious of where they are and what has happened to them. Soul sleep is not the doctrine of the Bible. Departed souls are not unconscious.

(3) They pray for vengeance on those on the earth who have slaughtered them. For this reason many have thought that they cannot be Christians as we understand the term in this age of the Church, but must be those who are saved in the time of tribulation that occurs after (as they teach) the Rapture of the Church. Christians now are taught, "Love your enemies. Bless those who curse you. Do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who abuse you and persecute you" (Matt 5:44). But these cry out for vengeance. Therefore, it is taught, they are not members of the Body of Christ, not Christians, but some other order of believer.

But the end of the age is the time God has appointed to send judgments and to take vengeance. And when that time comes, the whole of heaven will be in perfect harmony with the decision. Angels will proclaim "You are righteous, O Lord, who are and was and will be, because you have judged like this" (16:5-7). Elders will give thanks that the time is come to destroy those who destroy the earth (11:16-18). And martyrs will cry "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging those who live on the earth and avenging our blood?" The Christian's Saviour with ten thousands of His saints will come to execute judgment on all. In flaming fire He will appear (with Christians following Him) to take vengeance on those who do not know God, and who do not obey the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then will be fulfilled the saying of the Apostle Paul, "It is a righteous thing for God to repay tribulation to those who trouble you" (2 Thess 1:6-10).

(4) It is time to enquire where this scene that appears at the opening of the 5th seal fits into the prophetic outline of the last days. The answer is, I think, not difficult to find. I believe that it corresponds to the fifth division of Matthew 24 and indicates the Great Tribulation (Matt 24:21,22). It is just one brief picture that shows us that the Great Tribulation is in progress. Many details will be added to this original sketch in other chapters of the Revelation. Here in chapter 6, we are given only a very brief outline of coming events.

(5) These martyred saints are told to "rest a little longer". This suggests also that this scene is given to show events that will occur just a little time before the end of this age. The Tribulation is in progress, but the day of vengeance has not quite come. This

indicates that the Great Tribulation and the day of God's wrath and vengeance do not cover the same time period, but are periods of time distinct from one another — a fact that appears more clearly with the breaking of the 6th seal.

Seal 6

6:12 And I looked when he had opened the sixth seal, and immediately there was a great
, and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood, 13 and the stars of heaven fell to the earth, just as a fig tree drops its late figs when shaken by a mighty wind.

14 And the heaven receded like a scroll when it is rolled up, and all the mountains and islands were moved out of their places.

15 And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every slave, and every free man hid themselves in the dens and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 And said to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who will be able to stand?"

This agrees so perfectly with Matthew 24:29 that surely we are right in thinking they refer to the same event.

Matt 24:29

"Sun will be darkened

"Moon will not
give its light

"The stars will fall
from heaven"

"The powers of the
heavens will be shaken

Rev 6:12,13

"Sun became black"

"Moon became as blood"

"The stars of heaven fell"

"Shaken by a mighty wind"

Revelation 6 adds details absent from Matthew but present in other Scriptures that refer to the same time. “The heavens will be rolled up like a scroll” (Isa 34:4). “They will go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the LORD and for the glory of his majesty, when he arises to shake terribly the earth” (Isa 2:19). This time of fierce judgment and wrath that closes this present age is a constant theme of the prophets and is known to them as the “Day of the Lord”. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Malachi, Luke in Acts, Paul in Thessalonians, and Peter, all use the term. In their descriptions it is frequently accompanied by tremendous natural disasters. Apart from the Revelation, we are told some ten times that there will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. It is one of the most unmistakable signs of the end of the age, and one of those most often given in the Bible.

In spite of this, some try to explain it all away. It is a fact, incredible as it may seem, that some teach that all this refers to the so-called victory of Christianity over heathenism at the time of Constantine in the 4th century! This is the sort of interpretation the Historicists are driven to because of their theory.

Isaiah described that coming day of the Lord in the following words (and I cannot imagine that he had Constantine in mind when he wrote): “Look, the day of the LORD comes, cruel with both wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and he will destroy its sinners out of it. For the stars of heaven and its constellations will not give their light. The sun will be darkened in its rising, and the moon will not shed its light. And I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity, and I will cause the arrogance of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible” (Isa 13:9-11).

Many teach that these signs are not to be taken literally, but indicate future convulsions in the realm of society and government. For my part, I have no difficulty whatever in believing that nature itself — the sun, moon and stars — will be affected in some striking way. I fail to see how anything else, such as the collapse of governments, etc, could truly be a sign clear and significant enough to indicate the Day of the Lord. After all, governments are continually rising and falling in this world of ours. Nor do I see how that could really fulfill the language used by many of the prophets and by our Lord Jesus Himself.

Where do the signs given under this 6th seal come in the outline of future events?

There are two Scriptures which, taken together, should settle this matter once for all. Here they are:

Matthew 24:29,30: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened. . . .And then the sign of the Son of man will appear in the sky".

Acts 2:20: "The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before that great and renowned day of the Lord comes".

The reference in Matthew seems conclusive proof to me that there will be a great tribulation at the close of the age just before the Lord Jesus returns. Combined with the reference in Acts, we have conclusive proof that the Great Tribulation and the Day of the Lord are distinct periods of time separated by well-defined signs in the heavens. To confound these two times (as so many writers and preachers and teachers do) is to join together what God has separated.² The signs in the sun, moon and stars come "after" (and, mark, "immediately" after) the Tribulation; they come "before" the Day of the Lord. Those who do not distinguish between these two separate periods of time are failing to take into consideration some very important information God has given to us about the time of the end. So they will inevitably make mistakes in their interpretation of the Revelation.

These signs, then, which appear under the 6th seal separate these two times. They close the one and signify the near approach of the other.

This confirms the view given above that the 5th seal refers to the Great Tribulation.

The Day of the Lord which comes after the Tribulation is the "great day of his wrath" which has not yet come (6:17). Therefore, the Great Tribulation is not that day of wrath. It is rather a time of man's and Satan's wrath against the saints. God's wrath is poured

² For instance. J. Dwight Pentecost in his book, *Prophecy For Today*, writes, "The day of the Lord is that extended period of time which begins with the inception of the Tribulation following the rapture of the Church and extends through the millennial age." There is no evidence for this, and I am convinced it is a major blunder.

out, not under the first five seals which include the Tribulation, but with the pouring out of the bowls of wrath (15: 1, 7). True Christians will not partake of the wrath of God to be poured out on a guilty world. But they may have to taste of man's and Satan's wrath during the Tribulation.

As we read again the events that take place under the 6th seal, one fact stands out above all. Whether here or there, soon or late, God will arise to punish the inhabitants of this earth for their wickedness. His wrath and "the wrath of the Lamb" (long despised and meekly enduring) is certainly coming and who will be able to stand? Neither wealth, nor power, nor poverty, nor bondage, nor freedom, nor greatness will be any excuse or any refuge in that day.

It appears from our study of the seals that the following order of events are to be expected in the last days.

Seal 1 — The rise of Antichrist

Seal 2 — War

Seal 3 — Famine

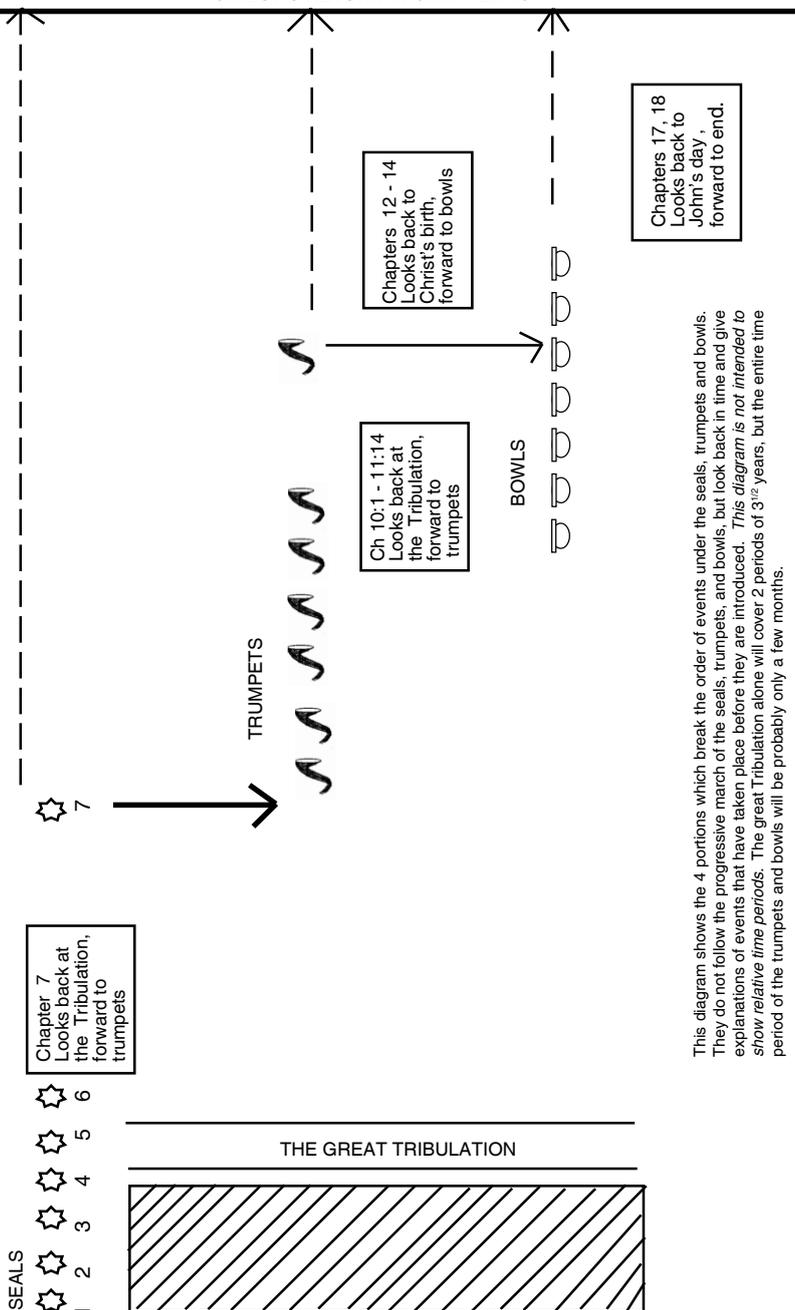
Seal 4 — Desolations

Seal 5 — The Great Tribulation

Seal 6 — Signs that precede the Day of the Lord

The 6th seal with its clear signs indicates that we have approached in the Revelation to the very end of the age. Those who will witness these signs will doubtless think that the end has come. But actually, before the Day of the Lord fully comes, there is some delay, as we shall see in due course.

CHRIST'S RETURN IN CHAPTER 19



This diagram shows the 4 portions which break the order of events under the seals, trumpets and bowls. They do not follow the progressive march of the seals, trumpets, and bowls, but look back in time and give explanations of events that have taken place before they are introduced. *This diagram is not intended to show relative time periods.* The great Tribulation alone will cover 2 periods of 3^{1/2} years, but the entire time period of the trumpets and bowls will be probably only a few months.

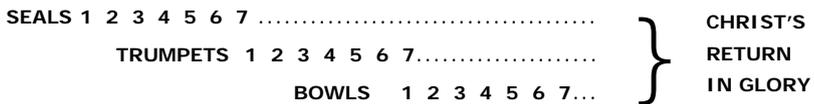
7

A pause in the narrative

We have seen the Lamb in the center of the throne opening the first six seals. At the sixth there is great fear on earth. All ranks of society are filled with dread. They feel that God has risen in fury against them and they are terrified of the face of Him who sits on the throne and of the wrath of the Lamb. The meek and lowly Jesus, the despised Nazarene, the apparently helpless, slaughtered Lamb, prepares at last to execute the righteous judgment of God, and somehow men will be aware that calamity hastens to overtake them. It is the gracious Saviour who knocked patiently at the door of the Laodiceans who now makes ready His fiery chariot.

But before the events to follow under the seventh seal are described there is a break in the narrative.

This is a good place to say something about the structure of the Revelation. The most obvious fact in its construction is that beginning with chapter two and continuing through chapter 16 there is a series of four sevens -- 7 churches, 7 seals, 7 trumpets, 7 bowls. We have already studied the churches and so will confine ourselves now to the seven-sealed scroll. It seems clear enough that as this scroll unrolls there is a real progression and order from the first seal to the last bowl. That is, the seven trumpets are contained in the seventh seal and come out of it, and the seven bowls follow the sounding of the 7th trumpet.



Thus they follow a perfect order in time. They move in regular succession to the climax of the age the second coming of Christ to reign on earth. This is the most simple, natural, and unstrained way of taking them, and I am convinced it is the right way. The sixth seal brings us up very near to the Day of the Lord but does not describe it in detail. At the opening of the seventh seal there is a time of silence in heaven immediately followed by the appearance of the seven angels with the seven trumpets (8: 1,2). They directly follow the opening of the seventh seal and describe certain preliminary judgments that bring in the Day of the Lord. After the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11: 15) there is a long break in the narrative before the seven angels appear with the seven bowls. Yet the

bowls directly follow the trumpets in time. They are called “the seven last plagues” (15:1) — that is, they are the very last judgments and distinct from the judgments that have gone before.

But we are not to think that the seals, trumpets and bowls each take up the same amount of time to fulfill. As we have seen, most of the closing events of the age occur under the first six seals. The rise of Antichrist, destructive wars and attending disasters, and the Great Tribulation all come out of the opening of those seals. It is not unreasonable to think that when six seals of a seven-sealed scroll are broken by far the larger part of the scroll is unrolled to view. Moreover, the sixth seal takes us very near the end and leaves comparatively little time for the fulfillment of the trumpets and bowls. The time area bounded by the sounding of the trumpets may be only a few months compared with a few years for the seals (the fifth trumpet judgment takes up 5 months — 9:5,10). The pouring out of the bowls may take even less time and perhaps will be crowded into a space of weeks or even days at the very end.

However, though the seals, trumpets, and bowls follow one another in orderly procession there are here and there breaks in the narrative. We may call them explanatory visions or parenthetical portions. They are like information given in brackets. These portions are four in number. One comes between the 6th and 7th seals (chapter 7). Another appears between the 6th and 7th trumpets (from 10:1 to 11:14). The third comes after the 7th trumpet (chapters 12 to 14). And the last is seen after the 7th bowl (from 17:1 to 19:11). It would be a mistake leading to considerable confusion to think that all these explanatory portions follow the same perfect order as the seals, trumpets and bowls. A careful reading of these explanatory visions reveals that they look both forward and backward in time. This we shall see as we go along. They seem to be given as added information to make more clear the main stream of narrative that moves to the final climax of the age's history under the seals, trumpets and bowls. I have tried to indicate this in the diagram.

Since the Revelation records events to occur at the end of the age — something of a brief pre-written history — it is not surprising that these explanatory visions, these added descriptions should appear in it. This is the way of histories. For example, reading a history of the last great war we see the author proceeds to describe events in an orderly fashion for a few pages. But then he comes to a place where he feels an added word of explanation is necessary. So he stops his main narrative, and taking up some character or other, briefly sketches his personal history and his relationship to the

main events. A town, a country, a striking or important happening may be treated in the same manner. This, I believe, is the meaning of these visions that interrupt the regular order of the seals, trumpets and bowls.¹

Let us now look at chapter seven which contains the first of these explanatory portions. Here we see two groups of people: one on earth, the other in heaven. One group has to do with events to follow; the other with events in chapter 6. One group is being sealed against coming judgments; the other has already come out of the Great Tribulation. One group is Jewish; the other is of all races and tribes and nations.

From the opening of the first seal earth has presented a scene of gloom and darkness seemingly unrelieved by a single ray of light. When the trumpets begin to sound more trouble strikes an already groaning earth. But here in this first break in the thread of the story we have glimpses of glory. We see God's good purpose being worked out toward two groups of people even in those darkest of days — His elect among both Jews and Gentiles.

Group 1: The 144,000 Jews

7:1 And after these things I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that they would not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God. And he shouted with a loud voice to the four angels, who had been given power to harm the earth and the sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth, or the sea, or the trees, until we have put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." 4 And I heard the number of those who were sealed, and a hundred and forty-four thousand from all the tribes of the children of Israel were sealed.

5 Of the tribe of Judah twelve thousand were sealed. Of the tribe of Rueben twelve thousand were sealed. Of the tribe of Gad twelve thousand were sealed.

6 Of the tribe of Asher twelve thousand were sealed. Of the tribe of Naphtali were sealed. Of the tribe of Manassah twelve thousand were sealed.

¹ This view is neither new nor uncommon. I first met with it many years ago in a helpful little book by James McConkey giving a series of outline studies on the Book of the Revelation.

7 Of the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand were sealed. Of the tribe of Levi twelve thousand were sealed. Of the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand were sealed.

8 Of the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand were sealed. Of the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand were sealed. Of the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand were sealed.

Here God inspired John to record the names of twelve tribes of Israel. Observe too that they are evidently placed in contrast to the second great multitude in the chapter which is "of all nations, and tribes, and people, and languages". It seems clear, therefore, that they are literal Jews. It is a very strange thing that some writers, in spite of this, think these twelve tribes symbolize the present Church composed for the most part of Gentiles.² I do not see how they can possibly represent the Church. Nor are they an exclusive group within the Church that keep the Jewish Sabbath faithfully. Nor are they Jehovah's Witnesses who profess to witness to Jehovah but fail to see one of the plainest and most important truths concerning Him -- that Jesus is Jehovah's incarnation.

No, I believe they are of the literal people of Israel,³ and they are being marked out by God for special protection. They are called "the servants of our God", but it is not altogether clear whether they are given this protection for service that is past or for service yet to come. It is very possible that they are called servants of God in view of what they will yet become. The nation Israel will be preserved through the day of God's wrath and turn to Christ at the end of it and become His servants.

In any case, let no one be surprised that the Jews will, in the end of the age, repent of their age-long unbelief and trust in their

² "The 144,000 are all of God's people" (R. C. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation*, p. 252). For a fuller discussion of this, and the probable meaning of the number 144,000, see Appendix A.

³ "There are no fewer than 29 lists of the tribes of Israel throughout the Scriptures, thus showing the prominence accorded them in the sacred page" (J. B. Smith). Is it not a bewildering scheme of interpretation that makes 28 of these lists refer to literal Jews and only one refer to the church? Some have argued that literal tribes of Jews cannot be meant because there are no longer 12 distinct tribes in Israel -- ten of them being lost at the time of the Assyrian captivity. However there are clear indications in Scripture that all the tribes have been preserved and will again be a united kingdom. See Ezra 6:16, 17; Isa. 11:12,13; Jer 3:18; Ez 37:15-22; 48:1 ff.; Matt 19:28; Acts 26:7; Jam 1:1

Messiah, Jesus Christ. This is a thing foretold many times in the Holy Scriptures. Isaiah clearly prophesied of that time when the enemy will come in like a flood. Then the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a banner against him, “and the Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob, says the Lord” (Isa 59:19-21). This is the verse quoted by the apostle Paul in Rom 11:26 when he shows that “all Israel will be saved”. He goes on to say that at present the Jews are enemies of the Gospel, “but concerning the choice of God, they are loved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and calling of God are not to be withdrawn”.

Paul might have quoted from some other source in the prophets and proved just as well the future conversion of Israel (i.e. Jer 23:5-8; 31:1-3,35-37; 32:37-41; Ezek 20:33-44; 37:11-28; Daniel 12:1; Hosea 3:4,5; Zech 12:9-14; 13:1,9). The eternal God has chosen His people Israel and He will not repent. “This people I have formed for myself. They will show forth my praise”, says the Lord Almighty” (Isa 43:21).⁴

Now in time of the end God, true to His Word, seals these people descended from Jacob who are called the servants of God. It may be that the angel coming from the east with the seal of the living God (v 2) is Michael, for we read in Daniel 12:1 — “At that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the children of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of trouble such as never occurred since there was a nation until that same time. And at that time your people will be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.”

⁴ Romans 11 speaks of the future conversion of the literal nation of Israel. Paul is not speaking here of spiritual Israelites converted now. Rather, it is those who have now fallen who will later experience fulness (v. 11,12); it is those now cast away who shall be received (v. 15); it is the branches now broken off that will be grafted in again (v. 17 with v. 24); it is the people now in blindness who will be saved later (v 25,26). The blindness has happened *until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in*. It is those who are at present *enemies* who are yet *beloved* for the father’s sake (v. 28). For God will not repent of His calling of that nation or His promised gifts to them. It is the people who now have not believed who will later obtain mercy (v. 31). It seems perfectly clear that these Scriptures cannot be fulfilled either in believing Israelites of this age, or in unbelieving Jews who have died. The one group is not blind, or broken off, or cast away, or enemies; the other group will not be grafted in, or received, or obtain mercy. No, these Scriptures can only be fulfilled when the nation of Israel, now cast away, now enemies, now blind, turns back to God and receives Christ as Lord and Saviour.

It has been thought by some that these 144,000, during the Great Tribulation, become preachers of a so-called Kingdom Gospel. According to these, when this present Gospel age is ended the Church will be caught up to heaven. Then God will raise up some from among the people of Israel to go to the ends of the earth and to proclaim that their Messiah, earth's coming King, will soon appear. These teachers believe that through their efforts the vast multitude that is described in the remaining verses of this chapter repent of their sins and turn to God.

It seems to me that there is not sufficient evidence for this position. I personally see no reason anywhere given in Scripture to believe that there will ever be any gospel to preach other than the glorious Gospel of the blessed God that we preach now: "How that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3,4).

Moreover, a thorough search of the Scriptures fails to turn up a single prophecy that the Jews will become an evangelizing nation during the Great Tribulation. Actually the people of Israel in chapter 7 are sealed after the Tribulation is over, and those from every nation, kindred, people, and tongue have already come out of the Tribulation. So the second group has no clear or necessary connection with the first group. This is important to keep in mind. Also Israel (we learn from Rom 11:25,26) will not be saved until the fullness of the Gentiles has already come in.⁵

Group 2: The great multitude

7:9 After this I looked and saw a great crowd, which no man could number, of all nations, and tribes, and people, and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, dressed in white robes with palm *branches* in their hands. 10 And they shouted with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

11 And all the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and they prostrated themselves

⁵ Isaiah 66:18-22 is sometimes offered as evidence that the Jews will evangelize during the Tribulation period. However, the setting there is not the Tribulation but afterwards — after the Lord has come "with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire" (66:15-17). That is, after the time of God's wrath in the Day of the Lord.

before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, 12 saying, "Amen. Praise and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might be to our God for ever and ever. Amen."

13 And one of the elders responded and said to me, "Who are these who are dressed in white robes? And where did they come from?"

14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know."

And he said to me, "These are those who have come out of the great tribulation, and who 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 dwell among them. 16 They will hunger no more and thirst no more; nor will the sun beat down on them, or any excessive heat. 17 For the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them, and will lead them to springs of living waters, and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes."

This group is plainly distinguished from group one. They are people of the twelve literal tribes of Israel sealed against coming judgments; these are from all of earth's tribes who have come out of the Tribulation. They are 144,000; these are "a great multitude which no man could number". Who are these who appear in this second group? This question can only be answered by carefully noting the things said of them.

(1) They are of all nations, tribes, people and languages. That is, a vast multitude composed mostly at least of Gentile believers. So, as to their origins, they are in sharp contrast to the first group.

(2) They are "before the throne and before the Lamb"; they are in heaven. But we are not told whether they have been resurrected or stand there as spirits without bodies. Some have taught that the Rapture occurs here between the 6th and 7th seals and that this multitude signifies the Church taken away from the earth. This interpretation is perhaps not impossible; but it can hardly be proved. There is no suggestion here of the coming of Christ or a resurrection. Only one thing we can say — in some form, or another they are in heaven.

(3) They are clothed with white robes and have palms in their hands. They are righteous and victorious. The promise made to

overcomers in Sardis — “He who overcomes will be clothed in white clothing” — seems to be fulfilled in them. This white clothing may also connect them with the group described in 6:9-11.

(4) They ascribe salvation to “Our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb”. This is the first indication that they have trusted, not in some kingdom gospel different from the Gospel we preach in this age, but in the Lamb of God sacrificed for their sins. “Their song is full of purest Gospel truth” — Spurgeon.

(5) They have already come out of the Great Tribulation⁷ — “have come out”. The definite article is used, indicating not tribulation in general but the great one to come at the end of this age. They stand “before the throne and before the Lamb” (v 9). We are not told how they came out of the tribulation, but if they are linked with the group in 6:9-11 they reach heaven by martyrdom. Perhaps this is the safest inference. According to 13:7 Antichrist will be given power to “make war with the saints and to overcome them”. He will have power over “all tribes, and languages, and nations” — an expression similar to the phrase here in 7:9. In those coming days of the Great Tribulation the false prophet will cause “all who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (13:15). Some at least of the vast multitude here in chapter 7 will resist this Satanic pressure and will pay for it with their lives.

(6) They will be those who “have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”. That is, they have heard and believed the same old Gospel that is precious to all believers in this day of grace. They have trusted the Lamb of God for salvation. They have depended on His blood alone as the ground for forgiveness and cleansing from sin.

(7) Their condition in Glory is a fulfillment of the Christian hope. They are in heaven tenderly loved. Their grief is forever gone, their eternal joy just this — “He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. . . .the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them, and will lead them to springs of living waters”. God’s arm embraces them, God’s own hand gently wipes the last tears from their eyes. Such a vision makes us long to be among them even though our ship, as theirs, must sail “through bloody seas”.

Who are they? Is it really likely that they will all be saved after the removal of the true Church, in that very brief period of time that

⁷ This alone is sufficient evidence that the Great Tribulation is far more than merely “the time of Jacob’s trouble”. It affects a vast number of Gentile saints.

closes this age, by the preaching of a kingdom Gospel announced by converted Jews, who are themselves at that time the victims of the mightiest oppression and persecution the world will even know? Will these Jews be able to do in six or seven years or less what the whole Church of Jesus Christ has been hard put to accomplish in 2000 years, and at a period when they are in hiding from Satan and Antichrist (12: 14)? If God plainly stated it we could believe it, even though it seems humanly impossible. But since He has not plainly stated it we might be excused if we do not believe it.⁸

The conviction grows on me that this vast multitude is the Church — or rather that part of it that is on earth at the age's end when the Great Tribulation breaks. They would thus enter the Tribulation and become martyrs whose spirits go up to appear before the throne in heaven.

Note on tribulation and the church

We have seen in chapter 6 that the Great Tribulation is not to be confused with the Day of the Lord. The one is produced by the wrath of men and Satan; the other is God's wrath upon the ungodly. That the true Church will not partake of the wrath of God is a truth admitted by all, or nearly all. But what of the wrath of its enemies, what of the Tribulation? Many writers and preachers (sometimes with more heat than light) argue that Christ's Church will never have to go through that troubled time. I do not dogmatically affirm that it will (though the preponderance of evidence points in this direction), but the following facts should be carefully considered in our study of this subject. They are offered not to prove that the Church must go through the Tribulation, but as evidence against the view that it cannot.

(1) The Church has endured much tribulation before. It has been true of God's people in this age, as it was of Old Testament saints — "Others experienced trials of cruel mockings and beatings, yes, and bonds and imprisonment. They underwent stoning, they were sawed in two, were tempted, were killed by the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, ill-treated, tormented" (Heb 11: 36, 37). The Great Tribulation can do no more than has been done to torture and kill the saints of God. Certainly

⁸ It seems to me that to attribute the salvation of this vast multitude to converted Jews preaching a kingdom gospel is to try to build a tremendous superstructure without any proper foundation at all. I repeat, there is not one clear Scripture that states it. Moreover, it seems clear that Israel will not become converted to Christ until the Tribulation is over.

that time will be more intensified, more determined, and more widespread than any previous tribulation. But it will not be of a different kind.

(2) No one can deny that there will be a vast multitude of saints (of one kind or another) in the Great Tribulation. We have just seen them in the present chapter. We read of them again in 13:7; 15:2; 20:4. The point is, will anyone dare to say that these saints are less precious to God than Christians are now? If God allows those whom He loves in the tender fashion described in 7:15-17 to endure the Great Tribulation, is there any just reason to think He will not call upon Christians now living to do the same? Is it not evident that what they face in the Tribulation is not God's wrath but man's? And that what they face, anyone may face? It should be transparently clear to all of us that if some of God's dear people must suffer and die in the Tribulation, then Christian believers (by the nature of the case) will not necessarily be removed from it. For my part, I cannot think that the Tribulation saints are an inferior species of believers whom God will permit to suffer after He has removed His choicest saints. Such a view is certainly contrary to the general teaching of the Bible concerning tribulation.

(3) The Bible frequently warns that Christians will face tribulation. Consider the following:

Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33).

Paul said, "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Peter wrote, "Since Christ has suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind" (1 Peter 4:1).

"Dear ones, do not think at your fiery trial which is for your testing, as though some strange thing happened to you, but rejoice because you have a share in Christ's sufferings" (1 Pet 4:12,13).

From these Scriptures and others like them we may learn the New Testament teaching on tribulation.

(a) It is to be expected as a natural accompaniment of faith in Christ. We have no right to expect anything else. Peter says that expectation of tribulation is to be well armed: "arm yourselves with the same mind". God forbid that I should take such arms from anyone. Tribulation is seen in the Bible to be the natural environment of true Christians. It is the garden where the sweetest flowers grow, the weather that produces the sturdiest plants. Let

us not count it a strange thing, then, if tribulation, even very great tribulation comes to the Church in our day. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

(b) Tribulation is a trial of faith most precious. As such it can even be rejoiced in, gloried in (1 Pet 1:7; 4:12,13; 2 Thess 1:4).

"Pain is no mystery when looked at in the light of God's holiness, and in the light of Calvary. . . . Pain, as to God's own children, is truly and really, only blessing in disguise. It is but His chiseling, one of His graving tools, producing the likeness to Jesus for which we long. I never yet came across a suffering (real) Christian who could not thank Him for pain" (A. J. Gordon).

Tribulation is a part of God's method to work that patient, enduring faith that is so precious in His sight (Rom 5:3). "Those whom God will make most perfect, He putteth them upon the greatest trials" (Thomas Manton).

(c) Enduring great tribulation is a source of great glory. Jacob, wounded, becomes a prince with God. Joseph, rejected and afflicted, becomes a beautiful picture of Christ. Job, struck to the earth, becomes an instrument in God's hand to shut Satan's mouth. Paul, suffering, was filling up "what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (Col 1:24). Tribulation is not something to despair about, not something to avoid at all costs. It provides the people of God great opportunities to glorify God in the fires. It reveals what God can do for His own in the storm.

"Away despair, my gracious God doth hear,
When winds and waves assault my keel,
He doth preserve it, He doth steer,
E'en when the boat seems most to reel.
Storms are the triumph of His art,
Well may He close His eyes, but not His heart."

George Herbert

"Storms are the triumph of His art." The enduring of such trials and tribulations, such storms, will but result in praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ. We might even say that there is a close connection between present suffering and future glory that is not often understood. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is producing for us an eternal weight of glory that far exceeds it" (2 Cor 4:17).

Jesus taught the same thing — “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven” (Matt 5: 10-12).

(d) Suffering with Christ is one of the greatest privileges the believer can have on earth. “For it is has been given to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake” (Phil 1: 29. See also Acts 9: 16; 1 Pet 4: 13; etc).

Sadhu Sundar Singh made his first journey from India into Tibet at the age of 18. The story of his afflictions, imprisonments, and sufferings for Christ’s sake is wonderful. He always seemed to be blessed with a sense of God’s nearness. Once, when he lay almost unconscious, he said in a faint voice, with a smile: “I am very happy. How sweet it is to suffer for His sake”. To this agree the words of the apostle Paul: “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you.”

(e) Tribulation of the saints is the suffering of Christ. See Acts 9: 4; Isa 63: 9; Rom 8: 17. How, then, can it be the wrath of God? A. B. Simpson has a good word about this — “This was the highest ministry of Jesus — to suffer. This is also the crowning ministry of almost every Christian life. The last two beatitudes are wholly about suffering, implying surely not only the climax, but a double climax. The dear Scotch martyr, dying at the stake. . . .expressed it finely when looking at the little maiden who was dying near her. . . .said, ‘What do I see but Christ in one of His members suffering there?’ It was not Margaret Wilson but Christ suffering there.”

So tribulation that comes to saints because of the activity of evil men and Satan, even in the Great Tribulation, will be the suffering of Christ in His people. When they are persecuted, He is persecuted; when they are afflicted, He is afflicted.

In the light of all the above, one wonders if the Church will miss the Great Tribulation. One is tempted to say, will she have to miss it? Will she be denied the privilege of sharing the fellowship of Christ’s suffering (which Paul longed to know — Phil 3: 10), such occasions for glory, such precious trials of faith? Is it not possible that she will remain on the scene and fight in the Lord’s battles, and die on the front lines in that final great struggle between Christ and Antichrist?

“Must I be carried to the skies
 On flow’ry beds of ease,
 While others fought to win the prize,
 And sailed through bloody seas?”

I. Watts

The most glorious annals of the Church are those that record the power of the Church in the midst of suffering, rising superior to pain, triumphing over torture, abuse, and death. Do not be surprised if the record is not finished, if the brightest, most stirring pages of all are yet to be written.⁹

The anxious desire to escape tribulation does not seem to be in accord with the spirit of Paul — “We glory in tribulations” (Rom 5: 3; 2 Cor 12: 9, 10), or Moses — who chose rather “to suffer affliction with the people of God” (Heb 11: 25), or the disciples — who, when they were beaten, rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name”, or with the early Christians — “To believe, to suffer, and to love, was the primitive taste” (Milner). None of these considered that escaping tribulation was a prize to be grasped after, a special reward for holy living, or the natural right of the Church.¹⁰

No doubt A. W. Tozer was right when he wrote about Christianity in the West: “Without doubt we of this generation have become too soft to scale great spiritual heights. Salvation has come to mean deliverance from unpleasant things. Our hymns and sermons create for us a religion of consolation and pleasantness. We overlook the place of the thorns, the cross and the blood” (The Root of the Righteous, page 137).

Personally I do not wish to contribute to the production of a generation of weak and flabby Christians who are not ready for tribulation and easily persuade themselves they will never face it.

⁹ It is an interesting fact that the Pre-tribulation Rapture theory did not arise out of a suffering Church. It has come out of a western civilization that has been the most comfortable and pleasant in the whole history of Christianity.

¹⁰ It is only fair to say that those who teach that the Church will escape the Tribulation usually hold that that time is the particular time of God’s wrath on a guilty world. But they assume that which cannot be proved. It is never called God’s wrath. And the very fact that there are a multitude of believers who suffer in it prove that it is not. God’s wrath is not mentioned until the 6th seal, and is not actually poured out fully until the 7 bowls — after the Tribulation. It is true that the events that occur under the first seal (war, famine, pestilence, etc.) are, in a very real sense, God’s judgments. But they are the sort of judgments that He has sent among men (and that His people have endured) in every age, including this age of grace.

If our interpretation is correct the trumpets are blown after the Tribulation called “the Great” is over.¹ This does not mean that trouble for the world will be over — indeed it will now become worse. But the trouble now to come is of a different kind and affects a different people. The Great Tribulation is directed by Satan and Antichrist principally against the people of God. The sounding of the trumpets sets in motion preliminary judgments that lead up to that time of fierce wrath and indignation called the Day of the Lord. And these are directed against the ungodly.² The opening of the seventh seal completes the unsealing of the book and brings us very near the end of the age.

8:1 And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

2 And I saw the seven angels who stood before God; and seven trumpets were given to them.

Silence

Here is another remarkable event in this remarkable book. In the preceding chapters we have had anything but silence in heaven. The four living creatures do not rest day or night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty. The elders join them in giving glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne. Later, the new song of redemption is sung and the voices of ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of angels is heard. In chapter 6 one of the living creatures announces the first horse and rider in a voice of thunder, and the martyrs cry out with a loud voice, “How long, O Lord.” In chapter 7 the saints who have come out of

¹ Pentecost in Prophecy for Today (p. 35) states: “In Revelation 8 -10 we have John’s depiction of the events of the last three and a half years of the Tribulation”. I believe this is quite incorrect. Walvoord also falls into the same error. He writes: “The trumpet judgments, which have their beginning in this chapter, confirm the predictions of Christ and the Old Testament prophets of the coming time of tribulation far worse than anything the human race had ever experienced before.” (The Revelation of Jesus Christ, p. 156). George E. Ladd makes the same mistake. As I have tried to show, the Tribulation ends at the opening of the 6th seal and the Day of the Lord are seen.

² Thus in Egypt long ago. Pharaoh’s oppression was directed against the people of Israel and was tribulation to *them*; the plagues were directed by God against Pharaoh and his people and resulted in tribulation to *them*.

the Tribulation raise their strong tones in praise to God and the Lamb, and all the angels worship again.

Now suddenly there comes an absolute hush in all the courts of heaven. The living creatures are silent. The angels cease their words of worship. The martyrs stop their cry. The saints are still. Nothing stirs and no one speaks for the space of half an hour. Minute succeeds minute as this powerful, significant silence holds heaven. Surely something of tremendous importance is about to happen, some storm will surely break this deathly stillness.

In the narrative of the Revelation we are approaching the Day of the Lord. Zephaniah writes of that time in these words: "Be silent in the presence of the LORD God, for the day of the LORD is at hand, for the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, he has invited His guests" (1:7).

It is my opinion that we would search both the Scriptures and Church history in vain to find another time in all this age of such threatening significance that the very atmosphere of heaven is quiet and heavy with impending judgments.

J. A. Seiss in his Lectures on the Book of Revelation lists seven significant events connected with the sounding of trumpets.

(1) Trumpets indicate war (Num 10:9). "O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war" (Jer 4:19).

(2) Trumpets were for the convocation of the people and the moving of the camps of Israel, as described in Num 10:1-8.

(3) Trumpets were used at the laying of the foundations of God's temple according to the apocryphal book Esdras (3:10).

(4) Trumpets are related to the announcement of the king. Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet were directed to anoint Solomon king and blow with the trumpet and say, "God save king Solomon!" (1 Kings 1:34,39; 2 Kings 9:13).

(5) Trumpets at Sinai were associated with the manifestation of the awesome majesty and power of God. Then there was "the voice of the trumpet exceedingly loud, so that all the people in the camp trembled" (Ex 19:16).

(6) Trumpets speak of the overthrow of the ungodly. We have only to think of the fall of Jericho. Trumpets were blown for six days and seven trumpets on the seventh day completed its ruin (Josh 6:13-16).

(7) Trumpets were used to proclaim the great festivals of Israel (Num 10:10; Lev 23:24; 2 Chron 29:27).

The use of trumpets here in the Revelation is further indication that we are to look for climactic age-ending events at their blowing. We might well expect to see a call to war, the gathering of the people of God, the appearance of a king, the manifestation of the majesty of God, the overthrow of the ungodly, and a great festival.

And this is just what we do see. In the following chapters we have the great battle that ends the age — the battle of Armageddon. We have the return of Israel to God and the gathering of the elect from the four corners of the earth. We have the appearance of the King of kings, and the manifestation of the majesty of our great God and Saviour. We see the utter overthrow of the ungodly and the final festivals of joy and praise — the marriage supper of the Lamb and the millennium. The millennial temple does not appear in the Revelation but the description of the temple in Ezekiel chapters 40 - 44 probably refer to it.

But it is clear that all these events do not appear immediately at the sounding of the seven trumpets. These are preliminary judgments, a prelude to all that follows.³

The Golden Censer

8:3 And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and much incense was given to him that he might offer *it* with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar which was before the throne. 4 And the smoke of the incense, *together* with the prayers of the saints, went up out of the angel's hand in the presence of God. 5 And the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw *it* onto the earth, and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightning flashes, and an earthquake.

6 And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to blow *them*.

³ The seals, trumpets, and vials seem to me to represent three distinct phases in the closing events of the age. Thus it was long ago in Egypt. Israel's tribulation under Pharaoh may be compared to the Tribulation period under Antichrist; the plagues that fell on the Egyptians, *with Israel still in the land*, were preliminary judgments that are comparable to the trumpet judgments here in Revelation; the final destruction of Pharaoh and his armies came afterwards, *with Israel safely removed from Egypt*, and can be likened to the bowl judgments that will result in the final overthrow of Antichrist.

In verse 8 of chapter 5 we saw that the four living creatures had golden bowls filled with incense, and this incense was the prayers of believers. God thus signifies that the prayers of His people are closely connected with the opening of the seven-sealed book and all that follows. Here in chapter 8 verses 3 and 4 we are reminded again of the great power and importance of believers' prayers. It has been well said that if God purposes to accomplish a thing in the world He first sets someone praying for it. I think it not too much to say that the terrific events that follow the blowing of the trumpets are a more or less direct result of prayer. For thousands of years God's saints have looked for the day of Christ's coming in glory.

"And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these people, saying, Look, the Lord is coming with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all the ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way" (Jude 14). Prophesied and prayed, too, you may be sure; and his prayers went into the golden censer.

David, three thousand years ago, sent up incense for this altar when he prayed "O Lord God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth! Mete out repayment to the proud. LORD, how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked triumph?" (Ps 94: 1-3)

"How long, O Lord, holy and true," cry the waiting martyrs. And their cries go into the golden censer.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," has been the prayer of the saints through this whole age. And these prayers are added to the rest.

"Even so, come Lord Jesus" — such desires and longings for His appearing, all prayers for it are there. Though the answer is long delayed, nothing is lost, and the golden censer is filling up with these sweet odors.

There was given to the angel who ministered at the altar "much incense. . . that he might offer it with the prayers of all saints". This incense, mingling with the other, and making it acceptable to God, speaks of the worthy merits, prayers and intercessions of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is "much incense" indeed, greater than all the saints' prayers together, filling up their deficiencies and making them powerfully effective to accomplish the work of God on earth.

The angel, having offered this incense, these prayers to God, now performs a startling act. He fills the censer with glowing coals, with leaping fire from the altar and hurls it upon the earth. Immediately the thunders roar, strange voices are heard, lightning flashes split the sky, an earthquake rocks the earth, and the seven angels prepare to sound the trumpets.

The things which follow, I believe, are literal disasters that will take place at the end of this age. Everyone knows there are symbols in the Revelation, and under the trumpets here and there (as elsewhere) we obviously have a mixture of literal and symbolic language. And in a mixture of literal and symbolic language it is not always easy to determine what is to be taken literally and what symbolically. Perhaps the only safe rule to follow is this — we should take those things as literal which cannot be shown to be symbolic by some clue in the context, or by some parallel passage elsewhere. Also we should remember that symbolic language should be interpreted in the light of literal language, and not the other way. We should also keep in mind that when symbols are used here, or anywhere in the Revelation, they point to real and specific things, persons or events, and not to things general and indefinite.

One fact is certain — these happenings under the trumpets (and later under the bowls) remind us of literal disasters in the past which God sent into the world to punish men for their wickedness.

The fire and sulfur that reduced Sodom to ashes was literal. The plagues of Egypt — the locusts, the thick darkness, the water turned to blood, the terrific storm, the sores on man and beast, the terrible darkness, etc — were literal events. I must confess it has always seemed to me a strange system of interpretation that admits these miraculous literal events in the past and denies them in the future. Since God brought such literal judgments on men in former days who can say with perfect assurance that He won't do it again in the last days? Micah 7: 14ff gives the impression that He will. There the Lord tells His people "as in the days of your coming out of the land of Egypt I will show him marvelous things" (v 15). Joel 2:30 indicates the same thing: "I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke". The first reference is connected with the future conversion of Israel; the second with the Day of the Lord.

And now the angels place the trumpets to their lips, and now they sound, and plagues are let loose in the world.

Trumpet 1

8:7 The first angel blew *his* trumpet, and there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth; and

a third part of trees was burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

Where have we read of hail and fire before? Under the seventh plague in Egypt long ago (Ex 9: 22-26). It was literal then. Who will tell us it cannot be literal again?

Trumpet 2

8:8 And the second angel blew *his* trumpet, and *something* like a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea; and a third part of the sea became blood, 9 and a third part of the living creatures which were in the sea, died; and a third part of the ships were destroyed.

We have read of similar things before (Ex 7: 19-21), and I would not dare to say that it could not happen again. But perhaps the great mountain signifies the collapse of some mighty earthly kingdom and the seas of life are bloodied at its fall (see Jer 51: 25). Some have thought so. Perhaps you will say that the burning mountain is some powerful nuclear reaction that poisons the sea with radiation. I will neither deny it nor affirm it. But in whatever way the vision is fulfilled the destructive results are the same. A third part of creatures in the sea die and a third part of ships is destroyed (see Isa 2; 12,16 and Zeph 1: 3).

Trumpet 3

8:10 And the third angel blew *his* trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, burning like lamp, and it fell upon a third part of the rivers, and upon the springs of waters. 11 And the name of the star is called Wormwood. And a third part of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from these waters, because they were made bitter.

Is this star which falls from heaven on the source of rivers and streams a literal star with the peculiar name of Wormwood? It seems unlikely that a literal star or meteor would fall on the rivers and make them deadly bitter. Perhaps the breaking up of a comet or huge asteroid in the earth's atmosphere and its falling at various sources of water could result in what we see under this trumpet — I do not know. So far in the Revelation we have seen that stars are used symbolically of ministers (1: 20). They are also used in Scripture to signify angels (12: 4,7). It seems doubtful to me that the star here indicates some powerful religious leader who falls and poisons the sources of spiritual life (as some think). The star

falls from the sky and a great many men die from the effects of the fall. It may be closer to the truth to regard the star as a fallen angel who is given power over certain rivers and streams. But I am unable to speak with certainty on this matter.

Trumpet 4

8:12 And the fourth angel blew *his* trumpet, and a third part of the sun was struck, and a third part of the moon, and a third part of the stars, so that a third part of them was darkened, and a third part of the day had no light, and likewise the night.

13 And I looked and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth because of the trumpet blasts of the three angels who are yet to sound."

When this trumpet sounds there are further signs in the sun, moon and stars and the regular ordering of day and night is affected. Though the language is obscure and we may not be able to envision just how it will be fulfilled, I do not see how this can describe anything other than some literal reality.

There is a pause after the sounding of this trumpet. Through the empty blue vault of heaven flies a lone messenger bearing a message of warning to the inhabitants of the earth (some versions have "eagle" here), crying out of woes to come. It may be that this scene was displayed before John for the purpose of informing him, and his readers, of the terrible character of these remaining trumpet judgments and that this written here is all the warning that men will ever get concerning them. However, it may indicate that just before these judgments take place in the end days God will once again warn the world through some special messenger. Whether this will be some saints on earth or some literal angel from heaven is not the important thing. Not to himself but to the coming woes he directs attention.

Trumpet 5

9:1 And the fifth angel blew *his* trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth; and to him was given the key to the pit of the Abyss. 2 And he opened the Abyss, and smoke came up out of the pit like the smoke of a huge furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened because of the smoke of the Abyss. 3 And from the smoke locusts came out upon the earth, and power was given to

them like the power the scorpions of the earth have. 4 And they were commanded not to harm the grass of the earth, or any green plant, or any tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5 And they were not given power to kill them, but to torment them for five months. And their torment was like the torment of a scorpion, when it strikes a man. 6 And in those days men will seek death and will not find it, and will desire to die, and death will flee from them.

7 And the shapes of the locusts were like horses prepared for battle. And on their heads were *something* like crowns of gold, and their faces were like men's faces. 8 And their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth like lion's *teeth*. 9 And they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of chariots with many horses running to battle. 10 And they had tails like scorpions, and there were stings in their tails, and they had power to hurt men five months. 11 And they had a king over them, the angel of the Abyss, whose name in the Hebrew language is Abaddon, but in the Greek language he has the name Apollyon.

12 One woe is past. And look! Two more woes are coming after this.

It is evident that the star that now falls from heaven is not a literal star, for a key is given to him and he opens a pit. But we are not to think because of this that every time the word "star" appears, or "sun" or "moon", etc that it must be a symbol for something else. When a symbol is used in the Bible it is generally clear that it is symbol. There is either a hint in the language itself, or in the context, or an explanation concerning the symbol is added or given some other place. In verses 1 to 11 of this chapter both the star and the locusts are obviously symbolic and it becomes plain by simply reading the passage that no literal star or locusts are intended.

Who is the star and what are the locusts? This can only be determined by a close examination of what is said of them. The one represented by the star is given power to open the "Abyss" and to release certain captives now held there. The Greek word used here is "abussos". It is used 7 times in the Revelation. It is also used in two other Scriptures. In Luke 8:31 demons begged Christ that He would not command them "to go into the abyss." This indicates

that the abyss is a prison house for evil spirits. In Romans 10:7 we read, "Who will descend into the abyss? (that is, to bring up Christ from the dead)". This shows that the abyss is connected in some way with the unseen realm of the dead.

It seems to me that any attempt to make the word mean anything else than this when used in the Revelation is doomed to failure. Some have tried to identify these locusts with the false doctrines and strong delusions that will afflict the world in the last days under Antichrist. But the sounding of these trumpets do not bring in the days of Antichrist and the Tribulation. They come after those days. These are judgments upon men who have already believed the lie of the Antichrist and who must suffer the consequences of their madness.

If these locust creatures ascend out of the abyss (as is plainly stated) then they are demons and not literal locusts or men, demons and not heresies. A study of their activities bears this out. They touch neither grass nor tree nor plant, but are bent on one deadly purpose. For 5 months it is given them to torment the men who do not have the seal of God in their foreheads.⁴ They cannot kill but they can inflict terrible suffering, suffering like the sting of a scorpion. This woe will be so dreadful that in those days "men will seek death, and will not find it, and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them" (v 6).

These malignant creatures are almost indescribable. They are not horses but they are "like" horses. They do not have crowns but "something like" crowns. Their faces are not the faces of men, their hair is not the hair of women, their teeth are not the teeth of lions -- they are "like" these. Their tails are not the tails of scorpions but "like" such tails.

Their king is called the Destroyer (such is the meaning of both Abaddon and Apollyon). Some have thought that he is Satan himself. If he is shut up in the pit with the locust-like creatures now and only released with them he cannot be Satan. Satan is not cast into the Abyss until the return of Christ (20:1-3). Now he goes about on the earth like a roaring lion.

⁴ So far in the Revelation we have read of the 144,000 Jews only being sealed in their foreheads, though we have seen a multitude of other saints. However, the seal of God in the forehead simply indicates God's ownership and keeping which all believers enjoy. A similar phrase is used of all God's servants in 22:4. See also Eph 1:13.

Suddenly they are gone. Though released for a time from captivity they have only limited freedom to harm. Five months they are given, no more, no less. And they cannot touch those whom God has sealed. God watches over His own even when His judgments are abroad in the earth and nothing at all can harm them, unless He permits it for their good. Believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph 1:13) and are forever safe in His care.

“One woe is past. And look! Two more woes are coming after this” (v 12). The fact that the judgments under these last trumpets are singled out as “woes” is evidence that they are disasters more tormenting than any that precede them. This is saying a great deal — for the rise of Antichrist and his delusions, the wars, famines, and pestilences which follow, the Great Tribulation, and signs in the heavens have all taken place before these. What then is left to be classified as woes but supernatural afflictions of the most bitter kind?

Trumpet 6

9:13 And the sixth angel blew *his* trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, “Release the four angels who are bound in the great river Euphrates.” 15 And the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour and the day and month and year, were released to kill a third part of mankind. 16 And the number of the army of horsemen was two hundred million. I heard their number.

17 And I saw the horses in the vision *were* like this: They who sat on them had breastplates of a fiery *colour*, a dark blue, and sulfur yellow; and the heads of the horses *were* like the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire and smoke and sulfur. 18 By these three, by the fire, the smoke and the sulfur which came out of their mouths, a third part of mankind was killed. 19 For their power is in their mouths, and in their tails; for their tails *were* like serpents and had heads, and with them they do harm.

There are rulers and authorities both good and evil in the hidden world of spirits. They are no doubt much more active and influential in the world of men than we ever dream. We get glimpses here and there in the Scriptures of their presence and power on the earth, but we are given to see, I am sure, only a small part of the reality.

The powers of evil are ordinarily restrained by God from doing all they would like to do in polluting and destroying men. In this present vision we see terrible things let loose on earth.

Until the hour, the day, the month and the year when God's judgment is ripe, four angels are bound in the river Euphrates, and as long as they are restrained an immense array of cavalry is held in check. But the hour for their loosing will strike and these infernal hordes will rush forth to slay the third part of men. According to the present world population that would be about two thousand million souls (200 crores).

In Isaiah's day God sent one angel to fall upon the armies of Sennacherib that were besieging Jerusalem. That one angel in one night slew 185,000 soldiers (Isa 37:36). In this vision not one angel but a vast multitude of beings of some sort march to the battle. Their number is two hundred million, 200,000,000 (20 crores). John carefully adds that he heard the number — and we can be sure that it is not exaggerated. These creatures, marvelously described in verses 17 to 19, resemble nothing ever yet seen with mortal eyes. Horse-shaped, lion-headed, their mouths belch forth fire and smoke and brimstone and their serpent-headed tails have power to hurt.

Does this vision give us a picture of another eruption of evil spirits from some source near the Euphrates river? Or is it meant as a picture of some terrific clash of vast human armies equipped with frightful engines of destruction, perhaps using nuclear arms? I cannot say with certainty, but some details are clear enough. It is a terrible disaster that kills a third part of men (this is said twice and thus is emphatic, vs 15 and 18). The agent of death is fire, smoke, and sulfur. The destruction is delayed until the exact moment of God's decree. And it begins with the activity of angels.

The condition of men

9:20 And the rest of mankind which was not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the works of their hands, so that they would no longer worship demons, and idols of gold and silver and brass 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.

The last two verses of this chapter reveal the state of men as they will be in the last days. They will see exceedingly strange

things happening on earth. Extraordinary signs will appear in the sun, moon and stars. Tormenting plagues will afflict them, and vast devastations and destructions will carry off a third part of them. Still there is no turning to God, still they are wedded to their idols, still they love sin and after it they will go. The earth will be filled with violence and wickedness but there will be no repentance. Men will persist in worshiping demons though the heavens crack and though the earth splits in two. They continue to indulge in the very evils that bring God's judgments upon them.

Observe closely the evils that ruin the earth, that bring hellish torments on men.

(1) The worship of demons. Man, created by God for Himself, will not honor God as God, will not be thankful to His Name for all His wonderful gifts, will not give Him glory. On the contrary, they slavishly bow down to gods they have made with their own hands or imaginations, and actually, either knowingly or unknowingly, worship the demons behind them.

(2) Idolatry. This is the curse of India, the ruin of the world. Idolatry is a slander against God, a filthy lie, an utter perversion of true worship. It is changing "the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things" (Rom 1:23).

(3) Murders, sorceries, fornication, thefts. These are sins common enough now, but they will be even more universal in future days when evil is allowed for a little time to develop to the full.

(4) The sin which will be their complete undoing is impenitence and unbelief. All could yet be avoided if only they would repent. But they will not. They are utterly incorrigible in sinning. No promise of forgiveness, no threat of punishment, no hope of heaven, no fear of hell, no appeal to reason, no pricking of the conscience, no mighty signs, no fearful plagues, nothing that heaven or hell or life or death can bring to them can in any way cause them to turn from their insane love of themselves and their sins. As Pharaoh hardened his heart in the presence of the clearest evidence that God was speaking and acting through Moses, so these sinners will be so incurable, so hardened, so irreclaimable that they will still defy God and persist in their sinning when the world is in flames about them. This is what fallen human nature is like now (Jer 17:9; Rom 1:21-32; Eph 2:1-3; etc), and what it will be in fullest measure in days to come. Only God's mercy and His work in the human heart can change a person and set his or her feet on the path that leads to heaven.

But as for those who want no part of God's mercy and His work in their hearts — will not God avenge Himself on those guilty of such Satanic arrogance? Even now His wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom 1:18). Even now men, in their hardness and impenitent hearts, are storing up to themselves wrath for the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Rom 2:5). Then let no one enquire why terrible plagues and judgments will fall on the earth. "The earth also is defiled under its inhabitants, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore the curse has devoured the earth, and those who live in it are desolate; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few are left" (Isaiah 24:5,6).

10:1 And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud, and a rainbow was over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his feet like pillars of fire. 2 And he had in his hand a little scroll *which* was open. And he set his right foot on the sea, and *his* left foot on the land, 3 and cried out with a loud voice like the roar of a lion, and when he had cried out, seven thunders spoke *with* their voices. 4 And when the seven thunders had spoken *with* their voices, I was about to write; and I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Seal up those things which the seven thunders spoke, and do not write them down."

5 And the angel which I saw standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his hand to heaven, 6 and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and the things that are in it, and the earth and the things that are in it, and the sea and the things that are in it, that there would be delay no longer, 7 but in the days when the seventh angel sounds *his trumpet*, when he begins to sound it, the mystery of God will be completed, as he declared to his servants the prophets.

In these chapters we come to further explanatory visions. After the breaking of the 6th seal and before the 7th two such visions were given. So here after the 6th trumpet and before the 7th further information is given that helps us to understand more fully what is taking place and just where we are in the prophetic program of the last days.

A mighty angel in majesty and power now descends from heaven in the sight of John. In his hand he has a little open scroll which is given to John to eat. When he does so it is sweet in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. Immediately he is told that he must prophecy again. Three questions may arise in our minds from this scene. Who is the angel? What is the scroll? What is meant by John eating it?

Many believe that this mighty angel is Christ Himself. Others say he is one of the angels, Gabriel or Michael. Certainly the description of the angel suggests the Lord Jesus.

(a) He is clothed with a cloud. A cloud is the common symbol used in Scripture to represent the presence of Jehovah.

(b) He has the rainbow over his head. The rainbow was last seen around the throne of God in heaven and it speaks of the eternal faithfulness of our covenant-keeping God.

(c) His face is like the sun. This strongly connects with 1:16 and with Matt 17:2. Could it ever be said of anyone except Christ that his face was like the sun?

(d) His feet are pillars of fire. This is similar to the description of the feet of Son of God in 1:15.

(e) He cries out with a loud voice “like the roar of a lion”. This suggests the kingly Lion of the tribe of Judah.

(f) He calls the two witnesses in chapter 11 “my two witnesses” (11:3). This surely means witnesses chosen by him and empowered by him to be witnesses for himself. Can anyone but the Lord Jesus speak like this?

It is true that the word “angel” is used in this passage, and nowhere else in the Revelation is Christ called an angel. But this fact may not be fatal to the above interpretation, especially when we consider that in the Old Testament it is not unusual for the Son of God to appear as the “angel of the Lord”. (See Gen 16:10,13; 22:11-16; 31:11-13; Ex 3:2-4; etc). Also we should remember that the Greek word for angel simply means “messenger” and could even be translated so in this passage of Scripture.

What is the little open scroll? Many think that it is the same as the 7-sealed scroll seen in chapter 5 now opened. I do not think so.

(a) Can we think that the final disposition of that 7-sealed book is to be John’s stomach, and that this happens before the 7th trumpet is blown or the 7 bowls poured out? It seems most unlikely.

(b) The Greek word for little scroll differs somewhat from the word used of the 7-sealed scroll. The meaning of the two words is very similar but one wonders why a different word was used if not to distinguish between the two scrolls. Moreover, we are not told that this is *the* little scroll but *a* little scroll. That is, the article that indicates a previous reference is absent.

For these reasons it may be closer the mark to think that this little scroll contains supplementary visions and prophecies. This may also be indicated by the word that comes to John after he has eaten it. “You must prophecy again before many peoples and nations, and languages, and kings” (v 11). He has already prophesied in previous chapter. Now he must go over some of that same ground again. It seems to me that this is just what we have in several of

the concluding chapters of the Revelation. Some of the same personages, peoples, and events that have already been referred to are taken up again and new prophecies concerning them, new explanatory details, are given. The main thread of the narrative, interrupted after the sounding of the 6th trumpet, is not taken up again until the sounding of the 7th trumpet at 11:15. Then there is another long gap in the story thread until the seven angels appear in chapter 15 with the seven bowls of wrath. In these breaks in the orderly procession of trumpets and bowls, God has been pleased to give us as much information as He saw was necessary to enable us to understand all we need to know of those things which must take place in the future. Now it is very obvious that these visions which occur in these explanatory portions are not at all in orderly succession, as regards the time of their fulfillment. For example, the beast that appears in 11:7 which fights against the two witnesses and kills them, is seen to come up out of the sea only in 13:1. And in chapter 17 further things are said of certain activities of his that actually happen sometime before. Again, we are told in 14:8 that "Babylon is fallen, is fallen", yet the description of the fall is not given until the closing verses of chapter 17 and chapter 18. Other examples could be given to show that these supplementary visions do not follow a progressive order in time. No doubt there is Divine arrangement and order and I do not mean to create the impression that all is haphazard. But I believe there is a different order than an order in time.

Let us now look at some other details of chapter 10. The mighty angel who descends from heaven sets his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the earth (v 2). This act seems further evidence that he is the Lord Himself. Placing the feet on something indicates a victorious taking of possession (Deut 11:24; Josh 1:3; 14:9). It is significant in this connection that the 7th trumpet is referred to in verse 7, for when the 7th trumpet does blow it is said that "the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ" (11:15). That is, He has come to take full possession; the Lion of the tribe of Judah roars victoriously over what belongs to Him.

When this angel has shouted with a loud voice, seven thunders utter their voices. What did these seven thunders say? It is not revealed to us. E. B. Elliot in *Horae Apocalypicae* tells us that these thunders are Proclamations of the Pope against Luther and the Reformation. One can only wonder how he found out something that no man on earth since John has ever known. The truth is that there are mysteries of judgment concerning the end

times that are not revealed to us, and it is fruitless to try to pry into those things that God has kept hidden. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us.

Verses 5-7 record an exceedingly solemn moment in this most solemn book. The mighty angel stands on the sea and on the earth and lifts his hand to heaven and swears by the Almighty that there should be delay no longer, but that the sounding of the 7th trumpet will complete the mystery of God. The meaning of this is made clear in v 7. When the 7th angel sounds, the time of this age runs out. There will be no further waiting, no further delay.

It has appeared to God's waiting people through the ages that there has been no end to the time of the power of Satan and the triumphing of the wicked, nothing but delay in the coming of earth's King. But God's purposes are ripening fast and at the 7th trumpet the mystery will be finished.

In the face of this solemn declaration that the age ends with the 7th trumpet, it seems strange to read in some commentaries that this trumpet will blow several years or even centuries before the end. Yet "in the days when the seventh angel sounds" does indicate that the events will require a brief period to be fulfilled.

The mystery of God

"The mystery of God will be completed, as he declared to his servants the prophets."

A mystery in the Bible is not something completely unknown, but rather a thing that cannot be known except by God's revelation. Several such mysteries are mentioned in the New Testament (the word is not used regarding Old Testament revelations).

(1) The mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 13:11) — the secrets concerning the outward Church of this age revealed to the Apostles.

(2) The mystery of blindness to Israel (Rom 11:25) — this includes the teaching of the olive tree and the future conversion of the nation.

(3) The mystery of the Church which is Christ's body, and the mystery of Christ's indwelling (Eph 3:3-10; Col 1:24-27) — revealed only to believers of this age of grace.

(4) The mystery of godliness (1 Tim 3:16) — the incarnation of Christ and His relationship to sinners.

(5) The mystery of the Rapture of the Church (1 Cor 15:51,52).

(6) The mystery of iniquity or lawlessness (2 Thess 2:7).

(7) The mystery of Christ and His holy bride (Eph 5:22).

Now the question arises, which of these revealed mysteries will be completed under the 7th trumpet? Or are they all completed at that time? Are all of them gathered together in a greater and more inclusive mystery than all — “the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might bring everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and on earth, in him” (Eph 1:9,10)?

If “the mystery of God” as used here is a general term that includes all the mysteries, we could expect to see in the days of the 7th trumpet the following:

(1) The harvest of the wheat and tares and the fulfilling of the other mysteries of the kingdom as given in Matthew chapter 13.

(2) The conversion of Israel.

(3) The final things on earth relating to the true Church, Christ’s body.

(4) The final fruits of Christ’s incarnation — the manifestation of the children of God.

(5) The Rapture of the Church and the judgment and rewards that follow.

(6) The final struggle of the mystery of iniquity and its utter overthrow.

(7) The marriage of Christ and His bride.

(8) The final gathering together in Christ of all things in earth.

Now it is obvious that at least some, if not all, of these will be fulfilled in those final days of the 7th trumpet. Some of them are indicated immediately the trumpet is blown and others appear later in the narrative.

John eats the little scroll

10:8 And the voice which I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, and said, “Go *and* take the little scroll that is open in the hand of the angel standing on the sea and on the land.”

9 And I went to the angel and said to him, “Give me the little scroll.” And he said to me, “Take *it* and eat it. It will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth be as sweet as honey.” 10 And

I took the little scroll out of the angel's hand and ate it, and it was as sweet as honey in my mouth, but as soon as I had eaten it, my stomach became bitter.

11 And he said to me, "You must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and languages, and kings."

In His mouth the scroll is sweet, for sweet are the promises of Christ's coming and sweet are the thoughts of the New Jerusalem, of the days of heaven on earth, of the final destruction of all evil.

But it was bitter in his stomach. The eating of this scroll speaks of John's digesting and assimilating the truth of God. This prophetic word of God caused him bitterness of soul. Why? Who with a compassionate heart can understand the judgments to fall on the wicked and prophecy of them with joy? John, the apostle of love, is appointed to declare the doom of evil doers. He sees mankind worshiping Antichrist, judged by Almighty God, and cast into eternal fire. And can he declare all this without agony in his heart?

Ezekiel, who ate a similar scroll, was told, "Therefore, son of man, groan with a breaking heart, and with bitterness. Groan before their eyes". And again, "Cry and wail, son of man. . . terrors will be on my people" (Ezek 21:6,12).

Isaiah wrote, "I will weep bitterly. Do not attempt to comfort me, because of the plundering of the daughter of my people" (Isa 22:4).

Jeremiah cried, "Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears" (Jer 9:1).

The psalmist wept, "Horror has taken hold of me because of the wicked who forsake your law", "rivers of waters run down my eyes, because they do not keep your law" (Ps 119:53, 136).

This was the nature of true prophets. G.H. Lang has truly said, "If truth be only repeated, without being a vital force to the speaker, he is but a parrot, not a prophet." Those prophets ate the scrolls. They understood, saw, felt the doom of unbelievers. Their hearts were made bitter, they wept out their message and in this became an expression of the heart of God who must judge sinners but will suffer in Himself when He does it. And they became an example to us. We must never speak glibly, lightly of wrath and

judgment. We should not speak of hell as if we were not at all unhappy that sinners are going there. We too need to eat the scroll. We must so digest and assimilate the Word of God that the truth becomes a living, vital part of us. Only then are we fit to speak for Him to peoples, nations, languages and kings.

The Temple In Jerusalem

11:1 And I was given a reed like a rod. And the angel stood by, saying, "Get up and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and the worshippers there. 2 But exclude the court that is outside the temple, and do not measure it, for it is given to the Gentiles, and they will trample the holy city underfoot forty-two months.

In these verses an earthly temple appears. In verse 2 and later in verse 8 the location of the temple is disclosed. It is "the holy city", the place "where also our Lord was crucified". This identifies the city beyond all doubt as Jerusalem. It is spiritually called "Sodom and Egypt" because it has greatly corrupted itself (compare Isa 1:8-10).

Some may wonder just why, in a time of world-wide judgments, our attention is taken away to this one city. There are innumerable cities in history and prophecy, but in importance Jerusalem exceeds them all (Deut 12:11; Ps 132:13,14; Ezek 5:5; Isa 2:1-3; Matt 5:35; Isa 62:6,7). In the last days of this age it appears that it will be the very center of that terrific storm of devilish wrath called the Great Tribulation, and likewise the center of God's judgments against the nations (Joel 3:16,17). Prophetically speaking, Jerusalem is, I doubt not, the single most important spot on earth, and it would be a strange thing if there were no reference to it in the Revelation.

So we are taken in this vision to Jerusalem and see John measuring the temple there. Now if we were to go to Jerusalem today we would see no temple. Likewise if we had visited Jerusalem during the time of John's exile on Patmos we would have seen no temple. The last Jewish temple, built by Herod the Great (the temple standing in Jesus' day) was destroyed by the army of the Roman general Titus in A. D. 70. It has never been rebuilt. The question arises, what temple did John measure? Some have taught that no real temple is meant, but a spiritual temple, the Church of God (Eph 2:19-22). However, the location of the temple is so positively identified as the earthly Jerusalem that I am confident a literal temple is indicated. Moreover the measuring of it and the predictions concerning it are significant only if it be a literal temple.

Remember that these visions are prophecies of the end times and do not deal with the Church in past centuries.

From the language employed here it seems to me that there will be a Jewish temple built in Jerusalem in the last days. There are two other Scriptures in the New Testament that seem to require a temple there for their final fulfillment. The first of these is Matt 24:15. We have already seen that the destruction of Herod's temple by Titus was a picture of a terrible time of tribulation yet to come. Matt 24:21-31 plainly states that in the future there will be a time of tribulation such as the world has never seen immediately preceding the Day of the Lord and the coming of Christ in glory. We are not left to guess about this, if words are allowed to have their obvious meaning. Matt 24:15 with v 21 shows that this Tribulation is intimately connected with a certain event. "When you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place. . . .then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be afterwards."

"The holy place" signifies that part of the temple reserved for the ministry of the priests. In the final days of the age, then, it seems there will be a temple with its holy place and something called "the abomination of desolation" will enter and stand there.¹ This abomination that makes desolate, this terrible thing that brings ruin, was also spoken of by Daniel the prophet when he wrote of these days.

Daniel 9:27 speaks of a coming prince who will make a covenant almost certainly for a "week" (this means 7 years) with many of Daniel's people. In the midst of the week he causes the sacrifices and offerings (regular temple services) to cease² and brings in an abomination that makes desolate. This is referred to once again in Dan 12:11 where we are told that after the abomination that makes desolate is set up there will be 1290 days. This is a month more than three and a half years. In the Bible an "abomination" frequently means an idol or an image that stands in the place of God.

¹ The wording of Matt. 24:15-21 suggests that a temple in Jerusalem is meant. The Lord says "let them which be in *Judea* flee into the mountains", and "pray that your flight be not. . . .on the *Sabbath* day".

² Some have taught that Christ is referred to in this verse as being the one who causes the sacrifices and oblation to cease. However, a comparison with a parallel phrase in Dan. 11:31 (and other considerations) shows that Antichrist is meant.

Now from the information given in the above Scriptures, we might well expect the following to occur during the last years of this age.

(1) A temple dedicated to God in Jerusalem with a holy place and with sacrifices and offerings.

(2) A powerful ruler who will make a seven year covenant with the Jews but will break the covenant before the end of the seven years.

(3) This ruler will then make the ordinary services of the temple to cease and cause an image to be set up in the holy place.

(4) This will mark the beginning of the Great Tribulation.

There is a passage in 2 Thessalonians that tends to confirm this view. Paul, writing to believers in Thessalonica, tells them that before the Day of the Lord comes there will be an apostasy and an unveiling of a mysterious person called "that man of sin, the son of perdition". This coming one will "oppose and exalt himself above all that is called God, or that is worshiped, so that he as God sits in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:2-4).

But, someone will say, isn't it plain that the temple of God in this age is the Church, and that the man of sin arises because of apostasy in the Church, and that he will sit in the Church? No doubt there is a close connection between the apostasy, the false church and the man of sin. And quite possibly he will sit for a time in that which men call the Church. But the apostate church is certainly not the temple of God, and it can hardly be admitted he will sit in the true Church which is the real temple of God. The only way to get into this true spiritual temple is to be born again by God's Spirit, which Antichrist certainly will not be. So even if he sits for a time in the apostate church, this does not exclude the literal interpretation given above. The truth is that Antichrist (the man of sin) will exalt himself above every God and every religion, Christian or Jewish. Another fact about this future temple: In the information given here in the Revelation the temple is distinguished from the worshippers. Is this not an indication that the temple is not composed of people, but of literal building materials?

It seems clear that the abomination of desolation is either this wicked person himself or an image of him, the coming prince, the man of sin, the beast of the Revelation, the Antichrist of the last days. We will study more of him when we look at chapter 13.

So John in vision measures a temple as a prophecy of things yet to be. In verses 2-13 he records further details of those days. In the final days of that future temple, it would seem that Jerusalem will not be in the complete control of Israel. "It is given to the Gentiles". This is in perfect harmony with the statement of the Lord Jesus in Luke 21:24, "Jerusalem will be trampled down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled".

And so the Gentiles have done all these centuries, until the 1967 war. Now for the first time in many hundreds of years the Jews have sovereign control of the old city of Jerusalem. But judging from Zechariah 14:2 and other considerations, it seems they will not be able to hold it.

The times of the Gentiles will come to an end shortly. From the standpoint of John's vision of the temple only 42 months will remain for them to trample the holy city under foot. This last period of Gentile dominion is the time of greatest interest and importance in the Revelation. It is a period described as 42 months (11:2; 13:5), 1260 days (11:3; 12:6), a time, and times, and half a time (12:14, that is, a year, two years and half a year — 3 1/2 years).³ Some may wonder why this period is referred to in these three different ways. I believe the Holy Spirit has done so that we might well understand that this time period is to be taken literally. Not a few writers on the Revelation have taught that these 1260 days are actually 1260 years — a year for each day. But according to the language of Revelation, 1260 days are not 1260 years, they are 42 months. They are not 1260 years, they are a time, times and half a time (3 1/2 years). It is my opinion, based on the information given to us in the Scriptures, that each time this period is mentioned it refers to the last three and one half years that precede Christ's coming in glory.

The two witnesses

11:3 "And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for a thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth. 4 These are the two olive trees, and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth. 5 And if anyone wants to harm them, fire comes out of their mouth and devours their

³ The interpretation that makes these 3 1/2 years mean an indefinite period that spans the whole Gospel age is most unlikely. Let it be remembered that this is prophecy, not poetry. Some writers regard all these time periods of the Revelation as vague and indefinite. I think this is a serious error, as I have tried to show in Appendix A.

enemies. If anyone wants to harm them, this is how he must be killed. 6 These *witnesses* have power to shut heaven, so that it does not rain during the days when they prophesy, and they have power over waters to turn them to blood and to strike the earth with all *kinds of plagues*, as often as they will.

7 "And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the Abyss will fight against them, and will defeat them and kill them. 8 And their dead bodies *will lie* in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified. 9 And *some* from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will see their dead bodies *for three and a half days*, and will not allow their dead bodies to be put in graves. 10 And those who live on the earth will be glad about them, and celebrate, sending gifts to one another, because these two prophets tormented those who lived on the earth."

11 And after three and a half days the Spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. 12 And 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 saw them go.

13 At that very hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth part of the city fell, and seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were frightened and gave glory to the God of heaven.

14 The second woe is past, and now the third woe is coming quickly.

John is next given a prophecy concerning two witnesses who are to prophesy during this period of 1260 days. They appear very suddenly and dramatically on the scene dressed in sackcloth, the symbol of sorrow and affliction. The world is given over almost entirely to the worship of Antichrist. But during those dangerous days God will have strong and fearless witnesses who will be enabled to stand against all the wiles and power of the enemy until their work is finished. They are "the two olive trees" (Compare Zech 4:3) filled with the oil of anointing, with spiritual power. They are "the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth."

The question naturally arises, are these two lampstands two

individuals, or do they symbolize two groups of people? We have already seen that lampstands in the Revelation signify churches (1:20). Therefore if these two lampstands represent something other than individuals it would be natural to assume that they are churches. In this connection it is very interesting to observe that of the seven churches with their lampstands of chapters 2 and 3 only two are left without rebuke, are left standing, as it were, before the God of the earth. These two are Smyrna, the church in tribulation, and Philadelphia, the church with the open door of witnessing. And both of them are troubled by the same opposing force — “the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews, and are not, but lie” (2:9; 3:9). At the very hour that the two witnesses of chapter 11 are crying out, there in the Jewish temple will be a synagogue of Satan to oppose them. For these reasons a person might be excused for believing that they do represent a part of the true Church filled with great grace and power for that final time of witnessing.

However, in spite of this interesting comparison, I think from what is further said of them that they will be two individuals who witness in Palestine, do miracles in the earth, die and are raised to life in Jerusalem. From earliest times it has been thought that Elijah will be one of them, but there has not been the same unanimous opinion concerning the other. Some say he will be Moses, some say Enoch.⁴ At least one thing seems perfectly clear — Elijah will come again before the great and terrible day of the Lord (Malachi 4:5,6). Some think they see this prophecy concerning Elijah fulfilled completely in the ministry of John the Baptist. It is true that John did come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), but it is also true that he flatly denied that he was Elijah (John 1:21). And he certainly did not come just before the Day of the Lord. The Lord Jesus Christ, after John’s death, while emphasizing that John did come with Elijah’s power and spirit, plainly stated that “Truly Elijah will first come, and restore all things.”

Whether these two witnesses are Elijah and Enoch or Elijah and Moses, or some other, it is very evident that they are Elijah-like.

(1) They stand before God (11:4 with 1 Kings 17:1).

(2) Though they stand alone the whole world is not able to overcome them (11:3,4 with 1 Kings 18:21,22).

⁴ The one because he appeared with Elijah on the mount of transfiguration; the other because he, like Elijah, did not taste of death.

(3) They are able to call down fire from heaven on their enemies (11:5 with 2 Kings 1:9-12).

(4) They shut up the heavens so that it does not rain for 1260 days (11:6 with 1 Kings 17:1 and James 5:17).

(5) They have power to turn water to blood and strike the earth with plagues. Elijah did not do this but Moses did.

(6) They torment them who dwell on the earth -- the torment of truth powerfully spoken and plagues supernaturally sent (11:10 with 1 Kings 18:17).

In fact everything about them is so Elijah-like that I think we make no mistake in thinking one to be Elijah.

In verse 7 we have the first reference by name to "the beast". He comes up out of the abyss, fights against the two witnesses and kills them. Thus, at last, after 3 1/2 years, their voices are silenced. Until the hour when their work is finished they are immortal. "Whether life or death be mine, may Christ be magnified in me. If He has work for me to do I cannot die", said Henry Martyn, missionary to India and Persia long ago. But when the work is done God permits His servants to sleep for a while. For 3 1/2 days their dead bodies rest in a street in Jerusalem, unburied because of the malice of their enemies.

Now observe closely verse 10 and learn once for all what man is. The death of God's dear prophets is the best news the world has had for a long time! The fact that the vile beast has torn God's sheep and stopped the witness of the truth is a cause of merry making! Men dance in the streets! They send one another gifts! There is great joy in Israel!

"The mind occupied with the flesh is hostile to God, for it is not subject to the law of God, and indeed it cannot be" (Rom 8:7). This occupation by people with their fallen nature, this subjection to sinful principles is the root cause of all false religions, of all persecutions of God's true people, of all crimes against the truth. Thus it was at the death of Stephen (Acts 7:54,57). And thus the Roman Catholic Church rejoiced at the death of John Hus. Stop your ears to the cutting truth, blot it out if possible, slay God's prophets if need be — this is the mind bound up with the flesh in its fullest development. This is the heart of fallen man. Do not be surprised if the world hates the faithful witness, the truly holy man who speaks the truth with power. Actually it is to be expected.

The devilish joy will be short-lived. Before their very eyes these two prophets stir, they stand, they ascend into heaven, while their

enemies look on. "The triumphing of the wicked is short." Great fear falls upon all those who see them. Great fear, yes; repentance, no. They remain as obstinate, as insolently impenitent as ever. In the same hour a great earthquake strikes the city and 7000 men are killed.

Thus ends the second woe (v 14). This long explanatory portion that began with 10:1 is finished, and we are brought up again to the main thread of the narrative. The second woe ends with the killing of God's prophets, the silencing of the truth (surely one of the greatest of all woes), and the great earthquake. Now comes the third woe at the blowing of the 7th trumpet. If one of the two prophets is Elijah, we have evidence in this chapter that the Day of the Lord still has not come in the outline of the Revelation. Elijah is to come and prophesy before the great and dreadful Day of the Lord (Mal 4:5). So it is almost sure that only at the 7th trumpet is that day ushered in. Thus the judgments that occur under the trumpets, terrible as they are, are still only preliminary. They are still perhaps mingled with mercy and sent to call to repentance, to warn men that God's wrath is at last ready to be poured out without mercy and without remedy. Trumpets are meant to warn — "Whoever hears the sound of the trumpet, and does not take warning, if the sword comes, and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head" (Ezek 33:4).

The last trumpet

11:15 And the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and loud voices in heaven said, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."

16 And the twenty-four elders who had been sitting on their thrones in the presence of God, prostrated themselves and worshipped God, 17 saying, "We give you thanks, O Lord God Almighty, who are and was and are to come, because you have taken your great power and reigned. 18 And the nations were angry, and your wrath has come, and the time when the dead should be judged and for you to give rewards to your servants the prophets, and to the saints, and to those who fear your name, small and great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth."

19 And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and in his temple the ark of the covenant appeared. And there were lightning

flashes, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.

Six things are said to happen after this trumpet sounds.

(1) "The kingdoms of the world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever." But has He not been a great King over the earth through all ages and have not the kingdoms of the world always been His? There is a sense, of course, in which this is so. No one should question that He is, and always has been, the absolutely sovereign ruler of the universe. But His rule in the earth has been hidden, indirect and mysterious. Now at the 7th trump the kingship becomes His for a rule that will be open, direct and apparent. That there is a sense in which the kingdoms of the world are not now the possession of our Lord Jesus Christ, but still in the hands of a usurper is manifest by three considerations.

(a) Satan offered them to Him on condition that He fall down and worship him (Matt 4:8,9).

(b) Nearly all of the kingdoms of earth are still in the hands of godless men.

(c) Only at the 7th trumpet do they become incorporated into the kingdom of Christ.

But at last the event that God's people have eagerly awaited throughout the ages comes. The usurper (Satan) is cast out, his human tools have the rule of earth taken from them and Christ becomes King over all. This is the one greatest event that occurs under the 7th trumpet and it is announced by "great voices" in heaven. After this the 24 elders give thanks for other events connected with it.

(2) "The nations were angry". This reminds us of Ps 2:1-3 repeated.

(3) "Your wrath has come" — Ps 2:4,5. That wrath is more fully depicted in Revelation chapters 15 and 16. Remember that some days or weeks may be required to fulfill the events that occur under this trumpet (10:7). Remember too that all the 7 bowls of wrath of chapters 15 and 16 come out of the sounding of the 7th trumpet. Here the elders appear to be standing at the end of those days and looking back over the events that have transpired. Or perhaps they are uttering a prophecy of future events, using the past tense of the verbs. This is not uncommon in prophecy. For example, see

Isaiah chapter 53. In any case, the wrath of God does not fully come until the 7th trumpet.

(4) “The time when the dead should be judged.” Does this refer to the judgment of Christ’s believers? They are not usually referred to as the dead but sometimes are (see 14:13 and 1 Thess 4:16 — “the dead in Christ”). Does it refer to the judgment of the great white throne, before which “the dead, small and great” shall stand (20:11,12)? That does not occur until a thousand years afterwards (if I properly understand chapter 20). Does it mean those who are alive at the return of Christ yet dead in trespasses and sins? This question is not easy to decide. The second suggestion is most unlikely — unless the 7th trumpet be considered as covering a period of more than 1000 years. The third suggestion seems to stretch far the meaning of “the dead”, but it seems in the realm of possibility that this judgment has to do with the judgment of the “goats” revealed in Matthew 25:31-46. This leaves the first suggestion as being the most likely — they are Christians who have died before the 7th trumpet sounds. There is evidence for this in the statement that follows.

(5) It is time to “give rewards to your servants the prophets, and to the saints, and those who fear your name, small and great”. In the light of this it is difficult to see how the twenty-four elders in chapter 4 are symbolic of the saints already judged and rewarded before the 7-sealed scroll is opened. Nor is it so easy to maintain that the rapture of the Church occurs and the saints of this age already stand at the judgment seat of Christ before this trumpet is blown. It appears to me very likely that this trumpet is “the last trumpet” itself that brings the rapture of the Church (1 Cor 15:51,52), and the rewarding of saints (1 Cor 3:11-15; 2 Cor 5:9).

(6) It is time “to destroy those who destroy the earth”. Here sinners get a new name — they are destroyers of the earth. Not Moses, and not God, but Pharaoh and the Egyptians were the real destroyers of Egypt. Now if wars must come, if plagues, judgments and plagues must afflict mankind, if the fair earth itself be made to shake and reel under the onslaught of divine wrath, there is one and only one source of it all — it is sinful man, the destroyer of the earth.

It is remarkable how the whole picture in these verses is in such perfect harmony with the parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11-27). This parable was given by the Lord Jesus because the disciples thought the kingdom of God would immediately appear. They were utterly mistaken and this was given to correct them.

(1) Observe Luke 19:12. The nobleman, who represents Christ, goes to a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. See v 15 — “this happened when he returned, after receiving the kingdom” — he returned to judge and to reign. This corresponds with the first announcement under the 7th trumpet.

(2) Compare Luke 19:14 with Rev 11:18 — “the nations were angry”.

(3) Compare Luke 19:27 with 11:18 — “your wrath has come” and the time to “destroy those who destroy the earth.”

(4) Compare Luke 19:15-26 with the “time when the dead should be judged and for you to give rewards”.

In the main narrative of the Revelation we have come to the last trumpet with the end of the age in sight. Now once again there is an interruption, another explanatory portion. This is the longest of all, extending over chapters 12, 13, and 14. Up to this point mention has been made of the beast from the Abyss, the Great Tribulation, and the kingdom that Christ will possess. Our attention has been directed to Palestine and Jerusalem and Israel. In these three chapters a good deal of supplementary information is given to enable us to grasp the truth concerning the leading persons and events of the last days. Here the last great characters or groups of people for good and evil appear in the book. They are eight in number — the woman, the rest of her offspring, Christ, the dragon, and Michael in chapter 12; the beast and the prophet in chapter 13; and Babylon, the mother of harlots, first mentioned in chapter 14 and more fully described in chapters 17 and 18. In these chapters we see very clearly the reasons for the terrible judgments God will send on the earth at the end of the age.

The woman

12:1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 And she was pregnant and about to give birth and cried out in pain. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: A great red dragon that had seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns on his heads. 4 And his tail dragged away a third part of the stars of heaven, and threw them down to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. 5 And she bore a male child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, and her child was caught up to God and his throne. 6 And the woman fled into a desolate area, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there for a thousand two hundred and sixty days.

There is possibly more disagreement about the identity of the woman than any of the other characters in these chapters. We can only begin to understand who she represents by carefully noting the things said of her.

(1) She appears as “a great sign”, or “symbol”. She is not a literal woman but represents something else.

(2) She appears in heaven, or “in the sky”, but does not remain there throughout the vision.

(3) She is marvelously arrayed. The sun is her garment, she stands over the moon and her head is adorned with a crown of 12 stars. She is obviously every inch a queen and born to reign.

(4) She is seen giving birth to a male child, a prince who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron.

(5) She is forced to flee on earth from some dread enemy called the dragon.

(6) She is preserved during a time of trial lasting 1260 days or a time, times and half a time.

(7) She is distinguished from a group of people called “the rest of her offspring” (v 17).

Any correct interpretation of the woman must take into account all of these facts.

Since she is not a literal woman, and since she is yet to be persecuted for three and one half years on earth, she cannot be Mary, the mother of Jesus, as some Roman Catholic writers have vainly imagined. Nor can she be a picture of the Holy Spirit as certain other writers have very rashly suggested. There are really only two views that deserve any consideration at all. Many writers think the woman is the true Church; others teach she is a symbol of Israel. Up until sometime in the 19th century, by far the most commonly held, indeed almost unanimous, opinion was that she represents the Church, although there was dispute concerning just what age of the Church is meant. A good many still believe that this scene is a picture of what they call the Church of the Old Testament bringing forth Christ, and later, as the New Testament Church, suffering at the hands of anti-Christian forces. A good many others, especially in modern times, have insisted that the Church had its beginning only at Pentecost, is a mystery revealed only in this age, and was completely unknown and non-existent in those other ages that preceded the birth of Christ. Arguments are advanced on both sides into which I cannot now enter. I will only give my opinion (which is in agreement with many other commentators) that the woman represents Israel. My reasons are as follows:

(1) The setting of this vision suggests that Israel is under consideration. In chapter 11 we are introduced to Jerusalem, chief

city of Palestine and sacred to the Jews. It was near there that the woman brought forth the male child, and it would be reasonable to think that it is from those parts that the woman flees in the time of persecution. So the whole scene suggests Palestine, the home of Israel. Perhaps another bit of evidence is seen in the last verse of chapter 11. There the “ark of the covenant” is mentioned. This calls to mind the Jewish tabernacle and the ark of the covenant which was placed in its Most Holy Place. In the ark were three things — a pot of manna, which was a symbol of God’s provision in the wilderness, Aaron’s rod that budded, symbolic of the Aaronic priesthood, and the table of law. Each of these is significantly related to Israel’s history but not directly to the Christian Church.

(2) The description of this woman recalls Joseph’s dream and its symbolism (Gen 37:9,10). In that dream Joseph saw the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing down to him. His father, Israel, understood the dream immediately — “Will I and your mother and your brothers really come to bow down to the earth before you?”

(3) Israel brought forth Christ. Jesus was born under the law, the offspring of David. He was, as to His human nature, a Jew.

(4) Israel shall certainly have a time of great persecution at the end of this age. We have already seen that time will be 3 1/2 years long. It is doubtless significant also that this time period will come after Michael the archangel stands up for the people of Israel (Dan 12:1; Rev 12:7).

(5) This woman is distinguished in 12:17 from another group called “the rest of her offspring”. Both she and this remnant are persecuted on earth. If she represents the Church who is represented by this other group?

So it is my opinion that the woman represents the elect nation of Israel. She is the “wife” of Jehovah in Old Testament days (See Jer 3:14; etc). Perhaps this is what is indicated by her splendid and exalted appearance in the sky in this vision. “Your fame went out among the nations for your beauty, for it was perfect through my splendour which I had put on you” (Ezek 16:14), is what God said of Jerusalem. Now she has rejected Christ and is in a fallen condition. But God has made promises to that nation and He will keep them. He has a future for her. She will again be a queen among earth’s nations. In the last days God will preserve her in the time of the Tribulation, and bring her back to Himself (Hosea 2:16-20).

The male child

There is some disagreement concerning him as well, though the language seems plain enough. Some think he represents both

Christ and His Church caught up just before the Tribulation begins. Others teach that he is a symbol of a select group of overcomers who are born of the woman, the true Church. According to this view, this select group is raptured before the Tribulation into which the rest of Christian believers must enter; they are the firstfruits of the resurrection and they alone will reign with Christ on earth. I have not been able to find either in the symbolism of this chapter, or anywhere else in the New Testament, a clear setting forth of this doctrine. I have found a good deal that seems to be against it.

In any case, it appears perfectly plain that the male child is our Lord Jesus Christ and none other. It is He who will "rule all nations with a rod of iron" (v 5. See also Ps 2: 9; Rev 19: 15). It is He whom the dragon sought to destroy at His birth. And it is He alone who is caught up to the very throne of God.¹

It might be wondered why in the vision the woman seems to flee into the wilderness immediately after the male child is caught up to the throne of God, and is then preserved for 1260 days. If these 1260 days refer to the Great Tribulation, everyone knows that that time did not occur during the first 3 1/2 years after Christ ascended to heaven in Acts chapter 1. The explanation is probably very simple. The thing said of the woman and the child in verses 1-5 are given to identify them, and in the case of the male child, to set before us one of the ultimate purposes of His birth as it relates to the rest of the Revelation. When these points are established, the next great event in the woman's history as it relates to end time events is set before us. Indeed she does not flee into the wilderness immediately after the ascension of Christ in the first century of this age. All the intervening centuries from that day to the time of the end are passed over in silence as having no direct bearing on the narrative and purpose of the Revelation. For the purpose of the Revelation is not to give us a history of Israel in the past but to reveal things to come in the future.

The dragon

12:7 And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought, 8 but could not *win*. And no longer was a place found for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown out, that old serpent called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world. He was

¹ Some Historicists would have us believe that the male child represents the Roman Emperor of Constantine who overcame the pagan Roman empire and made Christianity the state religion. I must confess that interpretations like this seem to me utterly without foundation either in reason or in the Holy Scriptures.

thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, "Now salvation and strength and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been thrown down.

11 And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they did not love their lives even to death. 12 Therefore rejoice, you heavens, and you who live in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that he has only a short time left."

13 And when the dragon saw that he was thrown to the earth, he persecuted the woman who brought forth the male *child*.

14 And the woman was given two wings of a great eagle that she might fly into the desolate area, into her place, from the presence of the serpent, to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. 15 And the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. 16 And the earth helped the woman. The earth opened its mouth, and swallowed up the flood that the dragon spewed out of his mouth.

There should be no mistake here. Verse 9 informs us who the dragon is in no uncertain terms. He is not the old pagan Roman empire, as some have taught, strangely enough. He is that old serpent, called the devil, and Satan, who deceives the whole world. Several things are said of him.

(1) He is a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns upon his seven heads. That is, he is huge and monstrous, murderous and bloodthirsty. He has perfection of devilish wisdom, and great power as ruler of the darkness of this world. In a sense, the kingdoms of earth are his (Luke 4:5,6), but his rule is hidden, indirect, and mysterious. The time will come when he will have a man, the man of sin, who will be a complete expression of himself and whom he will put forward to rule in an open, direct and plain manner over all the earth (chapter 13). But now or then Satan himself is the ruler, the god of this dark world (2 Cor 4:4).

What a contrast there is between this description of Satan as a great red dragon, and that description of him as he once was which is given in Ezekiel 28: 12-17. There he is seen as he was in Paradise before his fall. He was then “full of wisdom and perfect in beauty”, “the anointed cherub. . . on the holy mountain of God”. He was “perfect” in his ways — until iniquity was found in him. What changed that day star, that son of the morning (Isa 14:12), that one who was perfect in beauty, whose covering was every precious jewel, who was loud in the praises of God in heaven and who had a position of great responsibility in the univers — what made him into a hideous, blood-soaked, blood-glutted beast waiting to devour the Son of God at His birth? What brought t his ghastly transformation? Sin. The original sin of pride, self-sufficiency and rebellion — this was the ruin of Lucifer, and it is the ruin of mankind. Nothing could speak more powerfully of the terrible power of sin to curse and deform than this monstrous change in him who is now called Satan and the devil. Let all beware. For sin persisted in will work with the same distorting power in any creature, high or low, heavenly or earthly.

(2) His massive tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven after him and cast them to the earth. By this I judge that about a third of all God’s angels joined with Lucifer in his original rebellion against God and were cast out of heaven. But the suggestion of George E. Ladd is not impossible. He says this indicates merely that Satan is such a huge creature that with one sweep of his tail he can brush a third of the stars out of their natural position.

(3) He is first seen in this chapter with gaping jaws ready to destroy a seemingly defenseless infant. Always Satan knew of course that Christ would come, that earth’s future king would be born to put him down and take the kingship of earth, that the offspring of the woman would bruise his head. But, not knowing the time, he stood always ready to devour. How often he nearly succeeded in destroying the people of Israel and the kingly line of the Messiah. At times the future of Israel, and with her the future redemption of the world seemed to hang by a very slender thread. The baby Moses cried at the right moment. The infant Joash, the only remaining seed of David, was hidden just in time from the murderous Athaliah who sought to destroy all the royal seed (2 Chron 22:10,11). The heathen king, Ahasuerus, once spent a sleepless night that led to the foiling of Haman’s plot to destroy all the Jews (Esther 6:1 ff). The dragon was always there waiting and watching. At last Christ is born and those waiting jaws are seen dripping blood. They have torn all the male children of Bethlehem

two years of age and younger — but Joseph has dreamed a dream and the Messiah has been taken safely to Egypt. Yes, Satan knew that Christ was born to redeem the earth from his power and by every means at his command he sought to prevent Him.

(4) John next sees war in heaven. Although there is much mystery here, it appears that this war will take place at about the same time that the woman flees into the wilderness to be protected for the 1260 days of the Great Tribulation. That makes the war still in the future. Verse 12 seems to confirm this. When he is defeated there and finally cast out to the earth he comes with great wrath knowing “that he has but a short time”. Immediately he pursues the woman and attempts to destroy her but she is protected by God and he is defeated in this attempt. That is, his final descent to earth is the real source of the Great Tribulation. It is the time of the devil’s great wrath. The great red dragon, his rule nearly ended, in deadly anger and savage frustration, stalks the earth looking for blood.

But would Satan dare to press his war against God to heaven itself? Great indeed is the dragon. It will be the more humiliating to him when a mere angel is sent out to conquer him. Michael, who once was not permitted to bring “a railing accusation” against the devil (Jude 9), now stands up as head of the angelic armies and drives him from the celestial fields. No more will he have access to heaven as in Job’s day (1:6), and in ours.

(5) In verses 9 and 10 two present activities of Satan are brought before us.

He “deceives the whole world”. In the face of this plain statement how can anyone maintain (as some do) that he is now, in this age, chained and shut up in the Abyss that he “should deceive the nations no more” (20:1-3)? No. He is now neither chained nor imprisoned. He goes about as a roaring lion (1 Pet 5:8), and he is deceiving the whole world.

He also accuses the believers “before our God day and night”. He still has access to heaven and thus uses his opportunities. Let us learn from this:

(a) He has matter to accuse us with. None of us are yet beyond the range of his just accusations. He does not bring empty, false charges against us. He is the prosecuting attorney in the court of heaven who can, and apparently does, parade every one of our sins before God’s face.

(b) He has much matter to accuse us with, for he accuses us day and night. Material for accusation is never exhausted. He

knows all of the sins and failings of all God's people, and they are so many that there is never any enforced idleness on his part for want of something to make a case against them. It is not the unsaved he thus attacks but the "brethren".

(c) He apparently gains some end of his own in accusing God's people. It is not merely a game he is forced to play against his will. Perhaps he is thus able to continue in power a little longer. Perhaps he believes he can accomplish the destruction of believers (Job 2:3). Perhaps he is thus able to work evil on earth and satisfy his cruelty in persecuting mankind. Perhaps his whole delight is in seeing God suffer as the sad story of the sins and failures of His sons and daughters on earth is told in the midst of the congregation in heaven.

(d) He cannot ultimately gain the victory over the saints, through he may sometimes wear them out. For though he, the prosecuting attorney, is there, so is the counsel for the defense, our advocate Jesus Christ the Lord (1 John 2:1; Heb 7:25; Rom 5:9,10).

"Though the restless foe accuses,
Sins recounting like a flood;
Every charge our God refuses —
Christ has answered with His blood."

(e) Final salvation, the kingdom of God, the manifested power of Christ, will not come until he is cast out (v 10). Why he cannot now be cast out is a question that is not answered. It may be that each godly, prayerful life on earth swells the forces against him until he can withstand no more. It is sure that he will be cast out when God's mysterious purpose in permitting him access to heaven is fulfilled.

(f) We are told how to overcome the great red dragon. He is far more powerful, more clever, more determined than we. Still the victory can be always ours. The saints overcome by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of their testimony and by renouncing self (v 11). There is no victory but through the conscious appropriation of the power of the blood of Christ. His blood alone can cleanse our lives and purge our consciences from dead works. It is the only ground of all our hope and confidence of salvation. To overcome by His blood speaks of continually going for refuge from the might and wiles of Satan into the death, merit and righteousness of Jesus

Christ. It is knowing by faith that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). But even the blood of Christ by itself isn't enough for victory, if we neglect other means God has appointed. For victorious living a public witness is constantly necessary. The silent Christian is, in some measure, the defeated Christian. Moreover, there must be a spirit of true discipleship. The victorious Christian renounces his own life, takes up his cross and follows Christ. He is freed from a slavish fear of death. The Spirit of God enables him to courageously face every disaster and death itself with a sweet trust in the God whom he loves. This is perfect victory.

The devil is unable to kill the male child and is frustrated in his attempts to destroy the woman. Into some wilderness she flees and is fed there for 1260 days (v 6). The dragon casts a flood out of his mouth after her that she might be carried away but the earth opens and swallows up the flood. Satan, thus thwarted in his designs, turns on another group of people. They are described in verse 17.

The woman's offspring

12:17 And the dragon was angry with the woman and went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

(1) The woman is Israel. These spoken of here are the rest of the offspring of the woman. Who can these be? The only other offspring of the woman mentioned in this chapter is Christ. Christ came from the nation Israel. But did Israel bring forth any other offspring? It seems to me that she did. In a spiritual sense the Church, being one with Christ, has, with Him, sprung from Israel. Salvation is of the Jews. Christians are the spiritual offspring of Abraham the father of the people of Israel. In any case, if the woman is Israel the offspring of the woman must be other than Israel, and the Church is a reasonable possibility, and perhaps the only reasonable one. She may be called here "the rest of her offspring", because most of the offspring has departed from the earth during these past centuries.

(2) They keep the commandments of God and "have the testimony of Jesus Christ". If one who has the testimony of Jesus Christ is not a Christian, is not a member of the Church, then it is difficult to know what the meaning is.

I believe the remnant referred to here is the same as that vast multitude described in 7:9-17. They also appear in chapter 13 to which we will now turn our attention.

11 The beast and the false prophet

The beast

13:1 And I stood on the sand of the sea and saw a beast rise up out of the sea. It had seven heads and ten horns, and ten crowns on his horns, and a blasphemous name on his heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, and his feet were like a bear's feet, and his mouth like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne, and great authority. 3 And I saw one of his heads as if it had received a fatal wound, and his fatal wound had been healed. And the whole world was amazed and went after the beast. 4 And they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?"

5 And he was given a mouth speaking big things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. 6 And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme his name, and his tabernacle, and those who live in heaven. 7 And it was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and he was given authority over all tribes, and languages, and nations. 8 And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship him, those whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb, who was slain, from the beginning of the world.

9 If anyone has an ear, let him hear.

10 He who leads into captivity will go into captivity. He who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints.

John has watched in vision as the woman escaped into a desolate place, and he has seen the dragon who pursued her returning to make war with the rest of her offspring. Now suddenly he is transported to the sandy shore of the sea and sees a sinister monster rise up from the depths. It is not impossible that this sea is the Mediterranean and indicates the area where the beast will arise. Certainly the area seen in chapter 12 (Israel) is by the Mediterranean, and there is nothing here to suggest any sea other than that which washes the shores of Israel and Asia Minor, and surrounds the isle of Patmos. As used here "sea" probably represents peoples, nations, etc (as 17:15).

A great deal has been written about this strange beast which John saw. I will give my opinion straight away — this beast is the great anti-God political system of the last days headed up by the personal Antichrist. In the first twelve chapters of the Revelation he is referred to as the “beast” just once (11:7). But in the remaining chapters he is mentioned by this name 35 times. A careful study of all these references reveal the following things about this dominant evil power of the end time.

(1) The most obvious thing about the beast is its striking resemblance to Satan, the great red dragon. The beast is scarlet colored (17:3) and like the dragon has seven heads and ten horns. In plain words, what Satan is in the unseen world of spirits in relation to the earth, in the fullness of his power and authority and dominion, that the beast is visibly and materially on earth. It is as though the kingdom of Satan becomes the kingdom of man. The dragon in all his malicious power, his determined wickedness, his cruel tyranny, becomes embodied in the beast. “The dragon gave him his power, and his throne, and great authority” (v 2). This fact alone suggests that the beast will have universal dominion over the whole earth.

(2) The beast is a composite picture of a great empire that emerges from former kingdoms but comes to its final form at some time in the future. It will be a federation of ten nations. As John watches, the first thing that rises from the sea is ten horns. These are ten kings that had received no kingdoms yet in John’s day (17:12). The horns, though seen first, are the last to appear in history. Next he sees the seven heads that bear the horns. According to 17:9-11 these have a double meaning. They are seven hills. This points to the city built on seven hills — Rome. The heads also signify seven kings. Five of these existed before John’s day. One was then reigning. And one was still to come. We will examine these verses in detail when we come to chapter 17. It is enough to observe now that six of the beast’s heads existed many centuries ago. The beast has been developing through long ages. The leopard-like body next appears. It has the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion. For an understanding of these symbols we need to turn to Daniel, chapter 7.

In Babylon Daniel had visions of mighty empires which appeared as various wild beasts. God choose this method to disclose to Daniel something of the future of the world. The beasts that he saw were four. The first was like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth a strange beast different from all the beasts that were before it. None of these beasts

represented some indefinite persecuting power or some such thing. Each of them was a symbol of a specific kingdom with its specific ruler (Dan 7: 17,23). It is quite evident from a study of Daniel that the first beast symbolizes the empire of Babylon; the second, the kingdom of the Medes and Persians that conquered Babylon; and the third, the Greco-Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great. The fourth beast, in some ways indescribable, doubtless signifies the iron empire of Rome that succeeded these other empires. It would not be possible in a prophetic outline of history to make no reference to Rome, the greatest empire of them all.

But in this vision particular emphasis is placed on the ten horns and another little horn that rises from their midst. So the fourth beast is the Roman Empire, not merely as it was in its earliest form, and not as it was in John's day, but as it will appear in its final form. The ten horns are future rulers of kingdoms within the old Roman Empire, which includes much of the continent of Europe. The little horn with "eyes like the eyes of man and a mouth speaking big things" (Dan 7: 8,20) is also a king, and though he appears at first smaller in size than the ten he eventually gains power over them all (Rev 17: 17). There can be little question that he is the final world ruler, the Antichrist. Another indication that this fourth beast is the Roman Empire in the form it will assume at the end of the age is this — Daniel watches this beast until earthly thrones are thrown down, the judgment is set and the beast is given to the burning flame (Dan 7: 9-11). That is, the beast with its ten horns is in existence at the return of Christ, just as the beast of Revelation is there at His return. These two beasts must be one and the same kingdom, because it is not possible for two kingdoms to have universal authority, as these are said to have, at the same time.

Now the beast of Revelation appears with the characteristics of all four beasts of Daniel, though it is doubtless identical with the fourth beast in its final form. Its lion's mouth is like boastful Babylon. Its bear's feet suggests the destructive kingdom of the Medes and Persians. The leopard body speaks of the deadly swiftness of Alexander's empire. The heads and horns are Rome. That is, the future world empire ruled by Antichrist will partake of the features of all four of these former empires. This beast, though its final shape is still future, has been forming through the ages and each of those empires has contributed to its formation. All this is an expression of Satan's ages-long attempt to shape the world after his image and to rule it through men. It will not be surprising, then, to find in the history of the first century and throughout the succeeding ages of the church, types of him — the

malignant spirit of iniquity has been there all the time heaving and thrusting in repeated attempts to fulfill itself. In the coming Antichrist he will finally and fully succeed.

(3) The beast, however, is not an empire only — he is an emperor. Sometimes in Revelation the beast obviously means the federation of ten nations. But sometimes, just as obviously, it means the individual who heads the federation (as in Dan 7:17). Louis XIV of France said “I am the state”. In a more complete sense than ever before known the beast as an individual will be the state. He will embody in full measure the principles and characteristics of that final kingdom of man and Satan.

The man of sin

It is a very common teaching of Bible scholars that he is the same individual who is described by the apostle Paul in 2 Thess 2:3-12. Paul, on his first journey through Macedonia and Greece, came to Thessalonica and preached the Good News of Christ there. A number of people believed his message and a church was formed to which he committed the most fundamental and important teachings of the faith. This is all he had time for. Yet in that brief period, when dealing with the second coming of Christ, part of the burden of his preaching had to do with the revelation of Antichrist that would precede Christ's coming (2 Thess 2:5). From this we judge that this is not a relatively unimportant matter, but a basic teaching that should be given to churches even in a very early stage of development. It is something that vitally concerns not merely the Jew or the Gentile but the Church as well. Otherwise I cannot understand Paul's burden to carefully instruct new believers in this truth.

From this Thessalonian passage we learn the following concerning the names and character of the coming Antichrist.

(a) He will be the “man of sin” (v 3), the embodiment of all evil, the incarnation of utter wickedness. The seed of sin that Satan planted in the garden of Eden comes to full fruit in him.

(b) He will be the “son of perdition” (v 3). He will be hellish in character and disposition. Only Judas Iscariot in the whole of human history has had this name “son of perdition” (but this does not mean that Judas will be the beast, as some have thought). The beast ascends from the Abyss and goes into perdition (Rev 17:8). All the revolt and blasphemy and filth of the fallen world of evil spirits will find a home in his heart. He will feel that it is far better to reign under Satan than to serve under God.

c) He will “oppose. . . all that is called God” (v 4). He will be the greatest enemy both of God and man that the world has ever seen in human form, absolutely set against righteousness and truth.

(d) He will be the self-exalting one (v 4). All the desires of both Satan and man to be as God will meet together in him. “I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. . . I will be like the most high” (Isa 14: 13,14). This was Satan’s reckless ambition. “You will be like gods” (Gen 3:5) — this was the bait offered by Satan to lure man into sin. Now in the end of time a man will arise who denies Father and Son and Spirit and exalts himself above every name that is named. He will dare to sit in the temple dedicated to God and declare that he himself is the only God there is.

(e) He will be the “lawless one” (v 8). It is written of Christ that the law was in His heart. “I come to do your will, O God” expresses His continual desire as Man. Antichrist will reject all law and will think to be a law to himself. He will exalt his own will above all and impose that will on the whole world. All the lawlessness and moral anarchy abroad in the world today, are, no doubt, preparing the way for this lawless one.

(f) He will be Satan’s man (v 9). Energized by the devil, he will be the counterfeit king of kings. Some have thought that he will be an incarnation of Satan himself, as Christ was the incarnation of God. I see no clear evidence for this, but he will be totally possessed by Satan.

(g) He will be a miracle worker (v 9), who will convince the world of his supernatural power with signs and false wonders (see also Matt 24: 24)

(h) He will be “the lie” (v 11). Jesus Christ is “the Truth” (John 14:6). Men, by rejecting “the Truth”, because they have no love of truth, will be prepared to believe “the lie” when he is revealed.

Such is the character of the one who will sooner or later appear on the world’s stage. He it is who will reign over the earth and be worshiped as God. This is the end of man’s dream to create a utopian society, to make a new world of peace, prosperity, and justice without Jesus Christ.

But is it possible that men will be so blind that they will reject God and chose Satan, despise Christ and worship Antichrist, hate the truth and believe the lie? It is not merely possible, it is certain. Even now men believe what they want to believe, what is agreeable to their fallen natures, what is pleasing to their vain

imaginations, what will permit them to live their lives as they desire without God. In the world there is little regard for truth as truth. There is even less regard for what God's Word has to say. There is practically no awareness of the great responsibility involved in being a member of the human race. Any lie can be accepted by men if it comes with sufficient weight of tradition or if it is written in some so-called "holy" book, or if it seems to be to their advantage to believe it. Mankind will awaken too late to find that carelessness about the truth is man's greatest danger, and that trifling with the Bible, God's Holy Word, is inviting absolute disaster.

The lie

Let us return to Revelation 13 and see "the lie" in action. Though he is a lie and is the agent of the father of lies (John 8:44), he will convince a fallen, deluded world that he is the truth. Verse 3 indicates that a miracle will take place that will cause the whole world to be amazed by the beast. A sign will be given that will fill mankind with awe. One of the heads of the beast will be wounded to death and will then be healed. Revelation 17:10 informs us that the seven heads are seven kings. Five had fallen; one (the Roman emperor Domitian) was then reigning; one had not yet come. The beast is an eighth but is one of the seven. This suggests that one of the seven dies but is resurrected. That could easily be the truth taught in 13:3 as well. In 11:7 we are told that the beast is no ordinary mortal but "comes up out of the Abyss." This, too, if taken literally (and who can prove we must not take it literally?) teaches that the Antichrist will be a spirit brought back from the regions of the dead to re-inhabit a human body. This explanation of the wounded head is certainly sufficient to account for the world's amazement. And such a miracle would surely be a strong contributory cause for mankind's reception of "the lie". Moreover, is it not just like the devil to imitate the works of God? Christ, in His miracle of resurrection, thus becomes the model for Antichrist. An interpretation that gained wide acceptance in the early church was that Nero, one of the Roman emperors and a monster of iniquity, would be raised from the dead sometime in the future to become the beast of Revelation. As far as I know, there is no satisfactory evidence that the beast will be Nero.

But whether the miracle will be this or some other, we are sure that some striking sign will occur that will cause all the world to wonder and to worship the beast (v 4). Not only do they worship Antichrist, they worship the dragon, Satan himself, who has given such power to men. In those days of blasphemy and lawlessness this worship may be much more conscious than we at present think. Even today in many places on earth the devil is worshiped

in the place of God. This we know both from observation and from the Scriptures (1 Cor 10:20; Deut 32:17). And frequently this worship is paid with the full knowledge and consent of the worshippers. But if we have well learned our lessons on the true condition of man's heart and the ancient design of Satan to be as God, this will not surprise us. He who long ago said to our Lord Jesus (and in so saying forever laid bare his evil purpose), "All these things I will give you if you will fall down and worship me", will in the end of time find a man who will gladly do just that, and who will draw the whole world after him.

From the expression "who is able to make war with him" (v 4) we judge that the beast will be a mighty military power. This we have already seen when the first seal was opened. He will command forces so great that the whole world will submit to him for a time. This is several times emphasized in this one chapter: "The whole world was amazed. . . they worshiped" (vs 3,4); "He was given authority over all tribes, and languages and nations" (v 7); "all the inhabitants of the earth will worship him" (v 8); also verses 12, 15, 16, 17.

At present (in the year 2001) the greatest military power in the world is the United States of America, but Russia, China, and some other countries, have formidable military capabilities. How do they fit into the prophetic picture as revealed here? Do they eliminate one another in some future war and thus create a power vacuum into which the European beast rushes? Or should we look for a future alliance between Russia, Western Europe, and the U. S. A.? Or is the United States to be reckoned part of the empire of the future Antichrist (because its peoples have migrated for the most part from those territories occupied by the former Roman Empire) who will join forces with him to crush Russia and other nations which might oppose them? Possibly the last view is more likely.

The outstanding characteristic of the beast will be his blasphemous mouth. This is emphasized almost in all places where Antichrist is mentioned — three times in this chapter (vs 1,5,6); Daniel 7:8 (a verse that identifies the little horn with the beast as plainly as words can); 2 Thess. 2:4, etc.

The word indicates arrogant self-exaltation that rails against God and speaks evil of Christ, His people and His work. This the beast will do in a measure before unknown among men. During his brief reign of terror (forty-two months) he will pour out a constant stream of abuse and blasphemy against God, His tabernacle and those who dwell in heaven (vs 5,6). Verse 7 refers us again to the Great Tribulation.

That a man like this should receive power to make war with God's saints and overcome them may be an unfathomable mystery now, but all mysteries of pain and tribulation and death will be made clear when we stand before the Lamb.

“God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform:
He plants His footsteps on the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs,

And works His sovereign will.
Yet fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.”

W. Cowper

“All the inhabitants of the earth will worship him, those whose names are not written in the book of life.” It is true that some of the old Roman Emperors demanded and received worship. Not only in Rome but in all countries of the world there has been a tendency for a people to deify their kings and heroes. We think of Rama and Krishna and many others in India, and of the emperors of Japan who until very recent times received divine honors. It is likewise a fact of history that many of the popes of the Roman Catholic church have greatly exalted themselves and have at times received worship. But no man in the whole of human history has been so universally worshiped as the above verse declares the Antichrist will be.

The beast not the Pope

A good many able and learned Protestant commentators have tried to identify the beast of Revelation with a succession of popes of the church of Rome. But it seems clear that neither an individual pope, nor a succession of them, nor their Roman Catholic Church, fulfills the picture of the Antichrist as given in the Holy Bible.

(1) Antichrist denies both the Father and the Son (1 John 2:22). The popes, though they have denied many truths basic to the Christian faith, have never gone so far as to deny the Father or the Son (whatever their private beliefs may have been). The doctrine of the Trinity is a received doctrine of the Roman church.

(2) Antichrist exalts himself above all that is called God and attempts to show that there is no other God but himself (2 Thess 2:4), not even outwardly acknowledging that there is another God. No pope has ever gone so far.

(3) The ten horns of the beast unite with the Antichrist to destroy the harlot, the false church (17:16,17). Does history record that the popes have ever hated the false church and made her desolate and naked and eaten her flesh and burned her with fire? They are not likely to destroy the work of their own hands.

(4) The beast plainly has temporal political power over the whole earth at the time of Christ's return (19:19-21). The popes have never once had worldwide secular power, and what they once had in Europe was lost to them completely by the year 1870.

(5) The beast will have power for 42 months and will be destroyed at the end of it by Christ's coming. This is not true of a succession of popes no matter how the times of Revelation be reckoned.

(6) In the time of the beast all whose names are not in the book of life will worship him. But it has never happened in history that all who refused to submit to the pope were saints whose names are written in heaven. There have been many atheists and other evil men who rejected the pope and laughed at his claims. Are we to think their names appear in the Lamb's book of life because they did not worship the pope?

(7) The beast will lead a military expedition into Palestine in the end times (19:19). Certainly no pope has ever fulfilled this. Nor is one likely to do so in the future.

(8) As previously noted, the visions that occur under the seals, trumpets, and bowls are "the things which will take place after" the full development of things in the 7 churches. Though there may be hints and shadows of fulfillment in history, the primary interpretation is not to these.

(9) A succession of popes does not fulfill the prophetic picture of the beast (as we shall see) given in chapter 17.

But let anyone come to Revelation 13 with an unbiased mind, with no theory of interpretation to uphold, and let him believingly examine what is here related concerning the beast. It seems unlikely that such a person will see any pope, or any other figure in history that fulfills this detailed description. Never yet has there been such universal dominion, never has the whole earth been given over to such delusion, never has there been the miracles described in this chapter, or an image of the beast that all are compelled to worship, or a mark that all must receive or die. There has not been, but there will be. "If any man have an ear let him hear."

The saints of that day are overcome physically and temporally, yet by their faith and patience will overcome their foes spiritually and eternally. In every age there are some who are chosen by God. Always there are some who, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, will choose the fire rather than deny the Lord by evil actions. Their faith is this: that divine justice, though seemingly slow to operate, will at last overtake the ungodly. Truth will not be forever on the scaffold and wrong will not be forever on the throne. There is a law of retribution at work. One must reap what one sows. If one sows the sword and the captivity he will reap the sword and the captivity, and this law applies to all. Christianity is never to be defended by might of arms (Matt 26:51,52). Better far to suffer and to die in the knowledge that God is on the side of right and truth and will eventually defend His own cause.

The beast from the land

13:11 And I saw another beast, coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spoke like a dragon. 12 And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who live in it to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. 13 And he performs great signs. He even makes fire come down from heaven onto the earth in the sight of men. 14 And he deceives the inhabitants of the earth by those signs that he had been granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling earth's inhabitants to make an image of the beast who had the wound caused by a sword, and yet lived. 15 And it was granted to him to give life to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would both speak and cause all who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. 16 And he made all *people*, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave,

receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, 17 so that no one could buy or sell except he who had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

18 Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man.

His number is 666.

Verse 11 introduces us to this second most prominent human leader for evil in the end time. This beast comes up "out of the earth". The first beast rises up "out of the sea". The harlot of 17:1 sits "upon many waters". These waters are "people and multitudes and nations and languages" (17:15). It is possible that the sea in 13:1 has a similar meaning. In any case it is obvious that the phrase "out of the earth", which reveals the origin of the second beast, is put in contrast with "out of the sea", the origin of the first. Williams translates this "out of the land". If by "the sea" we are to understand the peoples and nations bordering the Mediterranean Sea, "the earth" or "land" could well signify the land of Israel. It is my opinion that it does point to the Holy Land and that the second beast is a false Messiah, a powerful Jewish leader in the last days who will be in league with Satan and Antichrist. I believe that various Scriptures teach that such a false shepherd is to be expected (John 5:43; Zech 11:15-17).

It is true that many Jews have given up the hope of a personal Messiah, the descendant of Abraham and the root and offspring of Jesse. Max Nordau, a prominent Jew, speaking in a conference many years ago before Israel was restored as a nation, spoke for a good many of his people when he said, "we are ready to welcome any man as our Messiah who will lead us back to our own land and establish us there in prosperity". Later, chief rabbi Marcus Melchior of Denmark had this to say, "Whether Messiah is a person or an assembly is of minor importance. I believe Messianic times would come if the United Nations were made Messiah". Melchior added that he hoped to experience the Messianic age in his own lifetime. While such men do not speak for all Jews they clearly reveal the mind of some of their leaders who would accept almost any Messiah, personal or impersonal, who would preserve Israel from the enemies that surround her and bring a time of peace and prosperity. In future days if the Arab nations unite again to try and drive Israel into the sea, and if Russia pushes at her from the north, perhaps any strong man with connections powerful enough to promise deliverance could be accepted as their Messiah.

This second beast has just the appearance of a false Messiah. He has “two horns like a lamb”, and he is a prophet (although a false one), and a miracle worker (19:20). It is only when he opens his mouth that his character is fully revealed, for he speaks “like a dragon”. His two horns speak of kingly power, perhaps indicating the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel now reunited. Some writers have connected him with the willful king described in Daniel 11:36ff who will arise at the time of the end. There are certain indications that that king will be a Jew and he may be this second beast of Revelation, though I do not positively affirm it. Let us look at the facts given concerning him.

(1) He will not regard “the God of his fathers” (Dan 11: 37). This phrase may refer to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

(2) He will not regard “the desire of women” — this has been understood as a reference to the Messiah and the desire of Israel’s women to have the honor of giving Him birth.

(3) He will “divide up the land for gain” (v 39). This is Israel as is indicated by the whole setting of the prophecy in Daniel 11 — see the concluding verses.

(4) He will “exalt himself and magnify himself above every god” (v 36). That is, he will come in his own name. There will be no reference in his dragon speech to the Father or the Son except to deny them.

(5) But he will have a god that he will honor beside himself. He is “a god of fortresses” (v 38), and “a strange god” or “a foreign god” (v 39 — NASB). It is not too much to say that his god will be a god of military power, of armaments, perhaps of nuclear bombs. The attribute of his god reminds one of the phrase used of the beast in Rev 13:4 — “Who is able to make war with the beast?”

(6) He will exalt this strange or foreign, that is, non-Jewish, god. He will increase his glory and cause the two of them to rule over many (v 39).

Judging from the whole picture as I see it given in the Bible I consider it very possible that the following may occur sometime in the not distant future. At about the same time that ten nations of the old Roman empire are uniting under the beast (Antichrist), a powerful Jew will gain the leadership of the nation Israel. He may pass himself off as their Messiah. In any event, he will exalt himself and speak against the most high God. Surrounded by enemies and threatened by disaster, he will see that it is to his advantage to seek

a powerful ally. This ally will be the Antichrist who will make a covenant with Israel for seven years (Daniel 9:27). Then the Jew, the second beast, begins to exalt the Gentile, the first beast, and deceive many people by the wonders and miracles that he will be permitted to do.

Yet I do not insist on this interpretation in every detail, knowing the great difficulties involved in understanding all that is written concerning end time events. And many teach that the willful king of Daniel 11:36-39 is Antichrist himself and not the second beast.

The great power of this lamb-like beast (whoever he may prove to be) and the miracles he will do are described in the remaining verses of Revelation 13. "He exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence" (v 12) and "he performs great signs" (v 13). Out of all the miracles that he may do, two are singled out for particular notice. He will call down fire from heaven in the sight of men. And he will do it in such a way that it will either be, or seem to be, entirely supernatural, for by it the people are deceived. But the greatest miracle of all will concern the image of the first beast which he causes the earth dwellers to make (vs 14,15). This image (and the beast himself from time to time) will doubtless stand in the holy place and be that abomination that will make desolate, spoken of by Daniel the prophet. The marvel will be that the image receives life (or "breath" or "spirit") and speaks. The people of earth will themselves make the image and will know it to be but an image. So when it is made, seemingly supernaturally, to talk, the more eagerly will they rush to believe "the lie" and to worship the beast.

In verses 16 and 17 a third great force impelling men to worship Antichrist appears. First there is military might — "who is able to make war with the beast?" and the threat to life (v 15). Then there are deceiving miracles — first, the head, wounded to death, is healed, then the miracles of the fire and the speaking image. Then will come the economic squeeze. The false prophet will cause all, rulers and ruled, rich and poor, slave and free man, to receive a mark either on the right hand or on the forehead. Without the mark none will be able to either buy or sell.

"Skin for skin, yes, all that a man has he will give for his life." This is Satan's estimate of man (Job 2:4), and he is now permitted to try out his theory on the whole human race. And it will prove very nearly correct. For the whole world will worship the beast when they feel the economic pinch. But there will be those in that future

day of tribulation who will not love their lives even to death, and who will gladly die even from starvation rather than worship the beast or his image or receive his name or his number. So Satan will be proved wrong once again.

The mark of the beast

What is the mark of the beast and what is the meaning of his number? It is not revealed what his mark may be. Enough to know that it will be some plain means of identification. We who live in India are used to the sight of people bearing marks on their foreheads, and we can know a worshiper of Vishnu or Shiva by the type of mark he wears. In that day there will be one mark and it will signify that the wearer is a worshiper of their god, the Antichrist. For all we know the mark may be the number of his name, 666.

There has always been considerable speculation about the meaning of this number. Attaching numerical values to the letters of the alphabet, it has been figured that 666 is the equivalent of the total value of all the letters in the word *Lateinos* — the Latin man. Others, using this same system, have pointed out this is also true of Nero Caesar, emperor of Rome in the first century and fierce enemy of Christians. As we have already said, some writers both ancient and modern have thought that Antichrist will be Nero raised from the dead to occupy the throne of a revived Roman empire.

The most satisfactory explanation, perhaps, is that one which sees 666 as the symbolic number of man reaching for divine honors. He can never reach the number 7, the number of completeness, though he stretches far after it. It is interesting to note that the number 6 is associated with certain men in Israel's history who exalted themselves against the true God. Goliath was 6 cubits and a span, and Nebuchadnezzar made an image to be worshiped that was 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide.

We might well expect that 666 is the final result of that wicked desire in the heart of man to exalt himself as God, and against God. Man's last god will be man himself. It has long been true of men that "professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man" (Rom 1:23). In the last days man's old love of idolatry, of hero worship, of self-deification will produce full and bitter fruit. When the beast appears, those who have spiritual wisdom through the knowledge of God will be able to identify him and refuse his mark. This is all we know about this number now. And all we need to know.

Samuel J. Andrews in his remarkable book, "Christianity and Anti-Christianity in Their Final Conflict", written in the 19th century, tried to show the forces in his day that were preparing the way for the world's reception of Antichrist. He recorded in it some striking quotations from philosophers and writers of that day. I give some of these below. Let no one think that the principal ideas here recorded have died away. Such thoughts will plague the earth as long as there is a devil to promote them. A Nobel prize winner for literature, John Steinbeck, once expressed the view that John 1:1 could well be re-written. His version: "In the end is the word, and the word is man, and the word is with man."

"Religion in its heart, its essence, believes in nothing else than the truth, the Divinity of man"; "Man, adoring a God, adores the goodness of his own nature"; "Man has his highest being, his God, in himself" (the German philosopher Feuerbach).

"From the dim dawn of history, and from the inmost depth of every soul, the face of our father Man looks out upon us with the fire of eternal youth in his eyes and says: `before Jehovah was, I am'" (Professor Clifford).

Andrews recorded another as saying, "Human history is the record or the process of the evolution of the Divinity out of the humanity"; and another, "Divinity is humanity raised to its nth power".

But humanity will never be raised to the nth power. It can get only into the sixes. Goliath 6; Nebuchadnezzar 66; maybe another 600 or 616; and at last 666 comes and man, energized by Satan, is fully his own god.

The poet of this blasphemous philosophy was Charles Algernon Swinburne. He wrote:

"But God, if a God there be, is the substance
of men which is man. . . .
Thou art smitten, thou God, thou art smitten;
thy death is upon thee, O Lord.
And the love song of earth as thou diest resounds
through the wind of her wings —
Glory to man in the highest! For man is
the master of things."

All this is the forerunner of that little horn in which appear eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth speaking great things.

In India the idea that man is divine is stated in ancient writings.

The so-called "great saying" of the Chandogya Upanishad is "thou art that." The usual interpretation of this is, in few words, man's spirit is the same as the divine essence in all things, the same as God's spirit.

The Kaivalya Upanishad teaches that each person can say "I am Brahman" (the Supreme Absolute).

The Mundaka Upanishad states that he who knows Brahman becomes Brahman.

The Bhagavadgita uses similar language.

This teaching is still common in India today. For example, the Nobel prize-winning poet, Rabindranath Tagore, wrote a book called "The Religion of Man" in which he informed us that its main subject is the humanity of God or the divinity of man. He very much liked phrases such as "The divine Humanity", and "Man the Eternal." He even spoke of the educational institution he founded in Bengal as a living temple which he had tried to build to his divinity.

The Indian philosophy known as Advaita Vedanta (this teaching that man's spirit and God's Spirit are the same spirit) in these modern times is being proclaimed in the West also. This may have, for all we can tell, some part in preparing the way for Antichrist.

12 Further Explanatory Visions

It is important to remember that this chapter does not stand alone or initiate a series of new visions unconnected with what has gone before. Chapters 12, 13 and 14 form a unit, an explanatory portion that comes in between the trumpets and the bowls, and looks back beyond the one and forward to the other of these series of judgments.

In chapter 12 we see Satan being thrown out of heaven and his persecution of the woman and her offspring. In chapter 13 we have a description of the two beasts that will ravage the earth in the last days. Here in chapter 14 we have events that follow the rise of the beasts. John sees a series of visions that relate to the activities of these beasts and moves forward in time until the main thread of narrative is taken up once again with the appearance of the seven angels in chapter 15 with the bowls of the wrath of God.

The vision of a 144,000

14:1 And I looked and there, on Mount Zion, stood a Lamb, and with him one hundred and forty-four thousand who had his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of great thunder, and I heard the sound of the harpists playing on their harps. 3 And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. And no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from earth. 4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These were redeemed from among men, the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. 5 And in their mouth no deceit was found, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

To understand all the details of this vision is no easy matter. Who are these 144,000, and where do they appear? Are they the same group seen in chapter 7? Do they represent the whole body of the redeemed or some special saints? Does Mount Zion mean the earthly mount or the heavenly? These questions are easier to ask than to answer.

It may be natural to assume that they are the same 144,000 described in 7:4-8 — 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel. As others have suggested, it would be a bit remarkable to introduce here a second company of 144,000 without some word of explanation. But if they are the same group it is strange that the definite article (*the* 144,000) is not used in this reference here in v 1. (This is the rule usually followed in the Revelation, but not always). Moreover, this group in chapter 14 appears to have broader origins than Israel's twelve tribes, being redeemed from among men (v 4). For these reasons I think it unwise to insist they must be the same. But whether the same as the 144,000 Israelites or different altogether, this is a remarkable group that sings the new song.

(1) They stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb of God. The question is, which Mount Zion is meant? It may be the earthly mount in Palestine on which part of Jerusalem is built. In that case the picture here gives us a glimpse of the coming millennium that will begin after the return of Jesus Christ. John in the previous visions recorded in chapter 13 was on the earth and appears to be there when he sees this one as well. He also records the fact that he heard "a voice from heaven" (v 2) suggesting that he sees the vision on earth. Still it is not impossible that the mount here is the heavenly Mount Zion associated with the greater Jerusalem, the city of the living God (Heb 12:22-24). Verse 3 gives this impression. But it is not clear who is singing the new song before the throne. It would seem to be someone other than the 144,000, for they "learn" it.

(2) They have the Father's name written in their foreheads (v 1). A similar (but not exact) expression is used concerning the 144,000 Israelites in chapter 7. A more exact parallel phrase is used of all the servants of God in 22:4. The mark these in chapter 14 receive is evidently in sharp contrast to the mark of the beast which his worshipers will wear in their foreheads (13:16). These partake of the nature and character of God and Christ; those of the nature and character of Satan and Antichrist. These have the mark of God's ownership; those of Satan's ownership.

(3) They are the cause of mighty rejoicings in heaven, and a new song is composed in their honor that only they can learn (v 2,3). It is a song of redemption (3b, 4b), and none but the redeemed can sing it. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents (Luke 15:10). What rejoicing then over this great company who have turned to God from every evil and have been kept pure through Jesus Christ!

(4) They are described as virgins who were not “defiled with women” (v 4). This cannot teach that marriage in itself is defiling, for this would contradict the whole teaching of the Bible on this subject. Marriage is an honorable institution (Heb 13:4), one ordained by God Himself for the good of mankind. So this phrase may mean that those 144,000 were unmarried people who kept themselves from the defilement of literal fornication. However, it seems more probable that here we have another example of the interweaving of literal and figurative language. This is the time when Babylon, the mother of prostitutes, is making the earth drunk with the wine of her fornication. This fallen woman is referred to in v 8. These 144,000 have kept themselves from this mother of false religions and her daughters. And they have kept themselves from spiritual adultery with the world (Jam 4:4). They are virgins in the sense of 2 Cor 11:2 — “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ”. This seems to me the best explanation of a difficult passage.

(5) They follow the Lamb wherever He goes (v 4). This is the way of the true sheep of Christ (John 10:27). It is their main concern on earth and it will be their eternal occupation in glory to be always walking in the footsteps of Jesus. Though the path on earth has led through many a sorrow and many a trial, it eventually leads to everlasting nearness to the Son of God, the great Shepherd of the sheep.

(6) They are guileless and faultless. The phrase “before the throne of God” seems to place the 144,000 in heaven, but possibly could simply mean something like “in the eyes of God”. “In their mouth was found no deceit” — in chapter 13 we see “the lie” in action with Satanic deceit abounding everywhere. Later we shall see that lying is referred to more than any other of the sins that keep men from the city of God (21:8; 21:27; 22:15). The 144,000, whoever they may be, have kept themselves from this soul-destroying and exceedingly prevalent sin.

(7) They are “firstfruits” to God and to the Lamb (v 4). The word firstfruits is used in the following ways in the Scriptures.

(a) The firstfruits of a harvest were offered to the Lord (Lev 23:10,11). This portion was, in a peculiar sense, His. The rest of the harvest was for the use of men.

(b) The whole nation of Israel was called the “firstfruits” (Jer 2:3). They were God’s special people among all the people of earth.

(c) Our Lord Jesus Christ is called the firstfruits as the first to rise from the dead (1 Cor 15:23).

(d) The first individuals to believe the Gospel in an area are called firstfruits (1 Cor 16:15).

(e) The whole body of believers in this age is called firstfruits (Jam 1:18).

In each of these references the idea is that there is more to follow. The firstfruits are an indication of the greater harvest to come. Israel as firstfruits spoke of the future gathering of Gentiles. The resurrection of Christ speaks of the coming resurrection of all the saints. The firstfruits who believe the Gospel in a certain area are but the first of many who shall later believe. And believers in this age are firstfruits of a great harvest to come in the millennium.

Now the question is, in what sense are these 144,000 firstfruits? If they are the same as the group in chapter 7 the question is answered. They would be the first large group in the nation Israel to turn to the Lord in the end time. Or, if they represent the whole of redeemed Israel, they would be firstfruits in the sense of first among many nations to thoroughly repent and receive Christ. If, on the other hand, these 144,000 represent the whole Church of this age they would be the firstfruits of the vast in-gatherings of the thousand-year reign.

We should take note of another theory that attempts to explain these 144,000 firstfruits. Some have taught that they are a special group of overcomers among the general body of believers who, as a reward for special faithfulness, are raised from the dead first and taken away to heaven before the rest. In this view they are the firstfruits of the coming resurrection and will be caught up before the Great Tribulation begins, the rest of believers following as a general harvest when the Tribulation is over. This theory is known as the Partial Rapture theory.

Now in this passage of Scripture there is no definite word about resurrection, and we have seen that the word firstfruits does not always include the idea of resurrection. There is some doubt whether these 144,000 are in heaven at all. But even assuming that they are, we cannot say with any certainty how they came to be there — whether they stand on Mount Zion in resurrected bodies or as the spirits of just men made perfect (Heb 12:23).

But quite apart from this I do not believe that the Partial Rapture theory rests on a solid Scriptural foundation. I have tried to show elsewhere (Appendix B) that the grace and power of God will enable all believers to overcome and so they will share in all the promises made to overcomers. Moreover, if we examine those Scriptures that directly refer to the Rapture of the Church we never get the

slightest hint that some believers will be raptured before others. Never are we told that a special rapture is a special reward for special spiritual attainments. In these Scriptures, as everywhere in the New Testament, the Church is recognized as an indivisible unity. There is one Body of Christ that will share with Him in resurrection and future glory. And this is not a reward of human effort, but a result of the indescribable grace of God.

Paul wrote, "We shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet" (1 Cor 15:51,52. See also 1 Cor 15:23). Here is no suggestion that some believers (even among the carnal Christians in Corinth) will be taken and others left, but rather the plainest declaration that we will all be changed together in the same moment, at the last trumpet. John 14:1-3 gives the same thought. Christ has gone to prepare a place for all of His people and will return for all of them. We gain the same impression from 1 Thess 4:13-18. The dead in Christ (does this not indicate all of them — children, ordinary believers, great men of God?) will first rise and then we who are alive (all of us, new believers, struggling and often failing saints, the mighty in the faith) will be caught up together, one body, one Church, to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Such, I believe, is the teaching of the Bible concerning the Rapture of the Church.

The flying angel

14:6 And I saw another angel flying in the upper sky, and he had the eternal gospel to preach to the inhabitants of the earth, and to every nation and tribe and language and people, 7 and he said with a loud voice, "Fear God, and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the universe and the earth and the sea and the springs of water."

These verses record a remarkable sight. An angel flies in the midst of the heavens preaching eternal good news, and every nation, tribe, language, and people are made to understand it. Is this angel to be taken any more literally than the woman in chapter 12, the beast in chapter 13, or the reference to Babylon that immediately follows? It would be remarkable indeed if a literal angel should be sent to do the work that Christ has committed to His people to do. It would be more remarkable still if God gave to a single angel the power and ability to reach all the peoples of earth in their own languages in a very brief space of time. I think this

vision is symbolic and represents the widespread preaching of the Gospel that will occur just before the age ends. "This Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt 24: 14. Remember that the word translated "angel" may also be translated "messenger"). The burden of that preaching will be that men should repent and turn from idols and false christs and false prophets, and worship the true and living God. There will evidently be conviction on the part of God's messengers at that time that the hour of God's judgment has drawn very near, and they will declare this and speak with the urgency that this assurance will produce.

Babylon

14:8 Another angel followed and said, "Babylon has fallen, has fallen! That great city! Because she made all nations drink of the inflaming wine of her adultery."

This is the first reference to Babylon in the Revelation, and she is described as already fallen. In chapters 17 and 18 she is more fully described and the reasons for, and method of, her downfall are given in detail. Here she is mentioned, it seems to me, to indicate the time of her fall. It will be after the Gospel is preached in all the world as a witness to all peoples. It will be (judging from the visions that follow) while the beast is being worshiped at the height of his power, and before the coming of the Son of Man.

Warning to beast worshipers

14:9 And a third angel followed them and said in a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, 10 he himself will drink of the wine of God's wrath which is poured out unmixed into the cup of his indignation, 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 rises for ever and ever. Day and night there is no rest for those who worship the beast and his image, and receive the mark of his name. 12 Here is the patience of the saints, here *are* those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."

If it be asked again how it can be that so many will worship the beast, another reason is given above. Babylon's wine has made

them drunk. All the nations of the earth have become stupified through the teaching of this immoral system. They are, spiritually speaking, doped, duped, drunken and thus an easy prey to the beast and his false worship. This is the reason why the warnings and promises of the Word of God affect them so little.

During that time, when there will be great and mounting pressures to worship the beast, God will not leave men without warning. Men will face two alternatives: refuse to submit to the beast and accept the consequences of suffering for a little time; or submit to the beast and accept the suffering that will go on to the end of time. Though the dangers involved in refusal are severe they appear as mere trifles compared to the dangers of submission.

The doctrine of the conscious suffering of the unsaved in hell throughout the ages to come has been frequently denied in the history of Christianity. Will not the Judge of the whole earth do right, and can it be right to punish anyone forever? Can a God of love and mercy ever condemn any of His creatures to suffering that goes on to the end of time? Questions like these are raised against this doctrine. Such questions have possibly occurred to every one of us. But the verses before us and others of like nature stand against such reasonings of our natural mind. Men may believe their feelings and sentiments or the arguments of mere human reason, if they like. But it is only wise and safe to believe the Word of God. We do not know enough about the nature and guilt of man, or the holiness and justice of God to be able to determine, apart from God's revelation in the Bible, the just punishment for man's sin. It is wisdom to submit our ignorance, our inadequate powers of reason, to the revelation God has been pleased to give us in His Word. All we know or can know in this life about the state of human beings in future ages is revealed there. Only if it can be proven from the Scriptures that the sufferings of the wicked will sometime cease will it be safe for anyone to believe this.

The following things are said concerning the fate of the worshipers of the beast.

(1) They will drink of "the wine of the wrath of God". This is evidently linked with the "wine of the wrath of her fornication" in verse 8. To drink of the one involves one in the necessity of drinking the other.

(2) They shall drink of it "without mixture", that is, pure wrath without any mercy or compassion whatever to relieve its effects.

(3) This wrath will cause them torment, the torment of fire and sulfur.

(4) They will be tormented in the presence of the angels and the Lamb. The Lamb (the symbol of the One gentle, meek, and harmless) looks on at the torment of doomed men and does nothing to prevent their suffering. This is a sure indication that whatever they may suffer, they suffer it in perfect justice, and it would not be right or lawful to relieve it in the slightest.

(5) The smoke of their torment rises for all the ages to come. Some have argued that it is not the torment that thus continues but merely the smoke of it, just as Sodom was utterly destroyed but the smoke went up as the smoke of a furnace. But the next phrase gives the unavoidable impression that the torment itself continues on as long as the smoke of it rises up. They have "no rest day or night". This is in agreement with the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ when he was on earth (Mark 9:42-48; Luke 16:19-31; etc).

This teaching is the most fearful in the Bible. No doubt it is a source of grief and pain to all true Christians. I personally would feel a great relief and joy if it could be clearly proved from the Scriptures that all the wicked would somehow escape so terrible a fate. But we dare not deny what God has revealed.¹ If God in some future age could annihilate the wicked and thus bring their sufferings to an end, and do it in conformity to His Word and to His justice, He will doubtless do so. But the evidence that we can gather from His Word now (if I understand it properly) should teach us that we have no right to expect that such a thing will ever happen. Moreover, it is a part of the patience of the saints and a holy motive to faith and obedience to know that evil will not always triumph, that perfect justice will at last be meted out whatever the results of that judgment will be (v 12).

The voice from heaven

14:13 Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "that they may rest from their labours. And their works follow them."

¹ Dr. O. Hallesby revealed my feelings on this subject when he wrote: "I admit openly that no thought is as painful to me as the thought of eternal perdition. I am not able to think of it very long at a time. . . .but the time is past in my life when I permit my thoughts and feelings to decide what is truth. . . .Jesus is my authority. . . .I believe in Jesus Christ. . . .also when He speaks of eternal perdition. No one reaches the place of eternal suffering because God has ceased to be merciful. He does so because he has taken an attitude toward the mercy of God in which not even a merciful God can save him from eternal woe".

Now, just after this warning to men not to worship the beast or receive his mark, comes a promise of blessing to the saints who will live and die in that terrible time. It is always true that the dead who die in the Lord are blessed. It will be especially true in that day. This verse (it appears to me) is given as a great encouragement particularly for those whose lives will be threatened under the reign of the beast. Blessed indeed are those who will stand firm against that great persecuting power and seal their testimony with their blood. Then they will sweetly rest from their labors (compare v 11), and their works of faith and love follow to crown their heavenly joys. John is specially commanded by a voice from heaven to write these promises — it is of great importance that God's people come to view these matters as He does. From that point of view to die in the Lord and for the Lord in times of persecution, even to be a martyr during the time of tribulation under Antichrist, is a blessed thing.

The harvest

14 And I looked and a white cloud appeared, and sitting on the cloud was one like the Son of man. He had a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 And another angel came out of the temple and called out in a loud voice to the one who was sitting on the cloud, "Thrust in your sickle and reap, for the time has come for you to reap, because the harvest of the earth is ripe." 16 And the one who was sitting on the cloud thrust his sickle onto the earth, and the earth was reaped.

This and the picture of the gathering of the vine of the earth that follows in verses 17-20 are obviously separate visions that signify two distinct harvests. In the first the Son of man Himself comes to reap the earth; in the second an angel prepares the earth for final judgment. The second vision looks forward to the wrath of God to be poured out under the bowls; the first, coming before the other, apparently represents a harvest that is fully finished before the other begins. The two harvests taken together might well be the fulfillment of Matthew 3:12.

Many have taught that both of these harvests depict scenes of judgment under different figures and that neither of them have anything to do with the gathering of the saints. But it may reasonably be asked just why two distinct visions of judgment should be given here when one would have sufficiently conveyed the idea. There is no question that the second of these visions

speaks of a terrible judgment on the wicked. But the first (so it seems to me) may well represent the gathering of the wheat into the garner. In plain words, it seems to me very possible that this vision sets forth the Rapture of the Church.

(1) In the vision, one "like the Son of Man" comes on a cloud. In 1:13 John uses this exact phrase to refer to Christ. It is never used of an angel. This really should be enough to identify Him as our Lord Jesus.

(2) In the vision the Son of man does not come to earth but comes on a cloud in the air and performs the act of harvest from there. At the time of the Rapture we will be "caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thess 4:17).

(3) This vision brings us up once again to the time of the end that immediately precedes the seven bowls, and the harvest of wrath that takes place under them. That is to say, it occurs at the sounding of the seventh trumpet. This is in perfect harmony with the time of the Rapture as given by the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 15:52).

(4) The vision is a picture of a harvest that comes before the bowls are poured out. The bowls contain the fullness of the wrath of God (15:1,7; 16:1) which the Church will never have to face. If the Rapture takes place here at the 7th trumpet and before the bowls are poured out, this would fulfill every promise made to the Church about escaping the wrath of God. It is significant that the wrath of God is not mentioned in the Revelation until the 6th seal is opened (6:16,17) — until the Great Tribulation is over — and then only in connection with the fear of the people of earth about a day of wrath still to come. It is not referred to again until after the seventh trumpet is blown (11:18). Under the seventh trumpet come the 7 bowls. Therefore it appears that the wrath of God only fully comes when the 7 angels pour out that which is specifically called "the bowls of the wrath of God" (16:1). The Great Tribulation, as far as I am able to discover in searching the Scriptures on the subject, is never called the wrath of God.

(5) This interpretation also appears to be in harmony with the parable of the tares and the wheat (Matt 13:24-30), and the explanation of the Lord Jesus (13:36-43). Both wheat and tares are to grow together until the harvest which is at the end of the age. It could be that the gathering of the tares to be burned is that gathering of all those on earth who reject Christ into the kingdom of Antichrist. They are bundled together by unseen forces and with the tremendous pressures of that day, and marked for the fire with

the seal of the beast. When all is ready at the seventh trumpet the wheat is harvested, the tares go into the fire of God's wrath. "The actual burning, or judgment, is not stated to occur before the gathering of the wheat and may, instead, occur afterward in the field" (Gundry, *Ibid.*, page 143).

I am not insisting that the Rapture must take place here. But the time of this vision and its symbolism suggest to me that final harvest of the saints. And this is the only vision in the Revelation that does so.

(6) Some have thought the fact that an angel tells the one on the cloud to put in his sickle and reap shows that he cannot be Christ. Why, they say, should an angel give an order to the Lord Himself? Jesus, speaking of His coming and of the gathering of the elect in Mark 13:32, said, "no one knows of that day and that hour, no, not even the angels who are in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." The angel here in Rev 14:15 comes "out of the temple" in heaven, out from the immediate presence of God. He comes, it seems, with instructions directly from the Father, and says, "the hour to reap has come." It may be that this is a symbol showing the day and hour will be conveyed to Jesus at the end of the age. Our Lord Himself never explained how it is that He, the Son of God, could be unaware of the exact hour of His coming to gather His people. We can only assume that He who knows all things if He wishes, can choose not to know something if He wishes.

The vintage

17 Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven. He also had a sharp sickle. 18 And another angel, who had authority over the fire, came from the altar, and called out in a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle and said, "Thrust in your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, for its grapes are fully ripe." 19 And the angel thrust his sickle onto the earth and gathered the earth's vine and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. 20 And the wine press was trampled outside the city and blood came out of the wine press up to the horse bridles for the distance of a thousand six hundred furlongs.

There is no question what is meant here. Wickedness is at last ripe for judgment. The grapes of the wild vine of earth are to be cast

into the winepress of the wrath of God. This looks forward to the return of Christ in wrath to meet and conquer His foes at Armageddon (16:16; 19:15ff). The center of that great maelstrom of wrath that shall crush the ungodly will be the land of Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular. "The winepress was trampled outside the city and blood came out of the wine press up to the horse bridles for the distance of a thousand six hundred furlongs." The city here referred to, in harmony with other prophetic passages, is Jerusalem. The distance of a thousand six hundred furlongs is 200 miles, the approximate length of the whole land of Israel from Dan to Beersheba. From a study of other Scriptures dealing with this same event it appears that this whole land and certain bordering lands as well will be involved in that final great conflict. See Joel 3:12-16; Isa 63:1-4; Zech 14:1-3.

15:1 And I saw another sign in heaven, great and marvelous: Seven angels having the seven last plagues, because with them the wrath of God is completed. 2 And I saw *something* like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had gotten the victory over the beast and over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass with harps from God. 3 And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, and say, "Great and marvelous are your works, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of saints. 4 Who will not fear you, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. For all nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed.

5 And after this I looked, and saw that the sanctuary of the tabernacle of the Testimony in heaven was opened. 6 And out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, *and they* were dressed in clean and bright linen, and with golden sashes tied 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 for ever and ever. 8 And the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no man was able to enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

John now sees another sign in heaven, great and marvelous (a thing said of no other symbol in the Revelation, an indication of the great significance of what follows), seven angels having the seven last plagues. "With them the wrath of God is completed". All that has gone before in the judgments that have fallen on the ungodly, indeed, all the plagues that have troubled men throughout human history, is an expression of that anger of God that abides on men because of their sins and sinfulness, their unbelief and disobedience (John 3:36; Ps 90:7-11). But here we have a completion of that wrath. Now is seen the full power of the day of the Lord, "cruel both with wrath and fierce anger" (Isa 13:9).

But before that wrath is poured out we have a bright picture that beams light and blessedness in the dark background that surrounds

it (15:2-4). On that heavenly sea first observed in chapter 4 now stands a group of people who have conquered the beast. Their victory is this: they meekly went to their death rather than submit to the Antichrist. In the eyes of men all the victory will seem to go to the beast, but fallen and unbelieving men are ignorant of eternal realities. For a brief time God's people suffered, now they sing forever. They have two songs to sing: the song of Moses, and the song of the Lamb. One hymn will be of the precious blood of Christ and the eternal redemption wrought by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God on Calvary; the other will speak of the overthrow of their enemies.

There are two songs of Moses recorded in the Old Testament -- Exodus 15:1-19 and Deuteronomy 31:30 - 32:44. Which will they sing? The scene here is certainly similar to the background of Exodus 15. There Israel has just escaped the wrath of Pharaoh. It is not unlikely that the Egypt of those days is a picture of the end of this age, and Pharaoh a type of Antichrist. When the waters of the Red Sea closed over Pharaoh and his pursuing armies the children of Israel stood safe on the further shore and sang of their deliverance.

"But when they reached the opposing shore,
As morning streaked the Eastern sky,
They saw the billows hurry o'er
The flower of Pharaoh's chivalry.

Then awful gladness filled the mind
Of Israel's mighty ransomed throng;
And while they gazed on all behind,
Their wonder burst into a song."

McCheyne

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex 15:1). How marvelous is Scripture! A song learned by a company of slaves delivered long ago from Egypt, and standing in the desert of the Sinai peninsula, becomes a song fit to be sung in heaven and appropriate at the time period of the outpouring of the bowls of wrath at the end of this age.

"Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" — these words take on added significance when one believes, as I do, that the white horse and rider under the first seal is none other than the beast the Antichrist. Now comes the hour for the destruction of that future

Pharaoh, and his kingdom is thrown back into the sea from whence it came (Rev 13:1). In the Exodus passage, at the conclusion of the song, Miriam, in her character of prophetess, repeats the substance of the song, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea" (15:20,21). Every passage of Scripture is weighted with meaning and, while having in the main one principal interpretation, has various applications.

If the song of Moses that these in Revelation sing is the one recorded in Deuteronomy chapter 32, that, too, is exceedingly appropriate to this context that describes the final overthrow of the ungodly (see Deut 32:6-19,22,32,35, 41-42, etc). This song closes with the words "rejoice, O you nations, with His people; for he will avenge the blood of His servants, and will take vengeance on His adversaries, and be merciful to his land and to his people."

So they sing of personal salvation through the Lamb and of God's righteous judgments upon an unrighteous world. Part of their song is recorded for us here in 15:3,4. The substance of it is the greatness and holiness of God and His works. At last God arises to justify His ways with men. His judgments will be manifest in the world and the nations will at last learn what righteousness is. "All nations will come and worship before you" (v 4). This prophecy, as yet unfulfilled, is often repeated in the prophets (Ps 66:4; Isa 66:23; Zeph 2:11; Zech 14:16,17; etc).

Their song surely has reference to the works of God shortly to be seen at the pouring out of the bowls. These works of wrath and judgment are "great and marvelous". God's ways in this, as in all else, are "just and true". This is the truth that the saints see. It is likewise the truth proclaimed by the angels — "You are righteous, O Lord, who are and were and will be, because you have judged like this" (16:5). Another witness to this same truth comes from the heavenly alter — "Yes, Lord God Almighty, your judgments are true and righteous" (16:7).

I suppose it is said three times to emphasize a truth that many people find difficult to believe. When wars, plagues and disasters come now on earth, men complain against God as though He were responsible for unjust dealings against innocent mankind. But when God pours out plagues, judgments, wrath and indignation more fearful than anything that has yet come, both angels and saints agree that in doing so He is great and marvelous, just, true, and righteous altogether.

The present prevalent opinion that God is unrighteous to deal so with men comes from an ignorance of two facts — the depravity and guilt of man that deserve judgment, and the holiness and justice of God that must mete out what man deserves. One thing we must learn or lose ourselves forever in rebellion and unbelief — “As for God, His way is perfect” (Ps 18:30).

And now the seven angels prepare for their righteous work of judgment (v 5-8). They come from the temple, the place of the atoning blood, of the mercy seat, of heavenly praise and worship. Now it becomes the center of judgment as the seat of holiness. When one of the four living creatures gives the seven bowls of wrath to the seven angels, the temple is filled with smoke from the awesome fire of God’s holy glory, from the splendor of His power. And from this moment until the judgments are over no one is able to enter the temple. No more intercessions for earth will be heard and no more supplications for mercy. No more chance for repentance, no more cries heard. God puts everything aside as He arises to do His work, His strange work, and to bring about His act, His strange act (Isa 28:21). The visions which follow and the events they predict will indeed be strange and unusual. The day of mercy is altogether past and we read hereafter of no one repenting or being saved until Christ returns in glory.

Bowl 1

16:1 And I heard a loud voice out of the sanctuary saying to the seven angels, “Go, and pour out the bowls of God’s wrath on the earth.”

2 And the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the ground, and harmful and painful sores came on those who had the mark of the beast, and on those who worshiped his image.

“Bowls” is a better translation than “vials” (KJV). The word indicates a shallow dish that can be swiftly, abruptly poured out by one quick motion of the hand. The first outpoured bowl results in “harmful and painful sores” on the beast worshipers. This reminds us of the sixth plague in Egypt when boils came upon the Egyptians. If God literally did so once, I know of no good reason to think He should not literally do so again.

Bowl 2

16:3 And the second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it became as the blood of a dead *man*, and every creature living in the sea died.

The sea (possibly the Mediterranean, the sea of the beast) becomes blood and every living thing in it dies. This is similar to the judgment that came under the second trumpet. But there only one-third of the sea and its life was affected. Some writers (for example, William Hendriksen), observing the similarities of these judgments under the bowls and the trumpets, have thought they referred to the same time and the same judgments. However, the differences are as great as the similarities. But when one is trying to prove a theory one can easily see the similarities and be blind to the differences.

The first trumpet and the first bowl are entirely different. The second trumpet affects only one-third of the sea, the second bowl all the sea. The third trumpet makes the waters bitter, the third bowl makes them blood. Under the fourth trumpet sun and moon shine less than usual, under the fourth bowl more than usual. The fifth trumpet brings demons from the abyss, the fifth bowl only a terrible darkness. Both the sixth trumpet and sixth bowl speak of the Euphrates river but then the descriptions vary. The seventh trumpet and seventh bowl are very different. Seeing all this one can only wonder how anyone could teach that trumpets and bowls speak of the exact same time and identical judgments.

Bowl 3

16:4 And the third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of waters, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel of the waters say, "You are righteous, O Lord, who are and were and will be, because you have judged like this. 6 For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink, for they deserve it."

7 And I heard another from the altar say, "Yes, Lord God Almighty, your judgments are true and righteous."

Not the sea only but the sources of drinking water, the rivers and fountains, become blood. If this is not to be understood as literally as the similar event in Egypt long ago then I do not know how to understand it at all. For here we have the law of retribution at work. The blood of saints and prophets shed by the ungodly is literal enough (v 6). So do we not have reason to think that the blood they will be given to drink will likewise be literal? "For they deserve it" — men receive nothing from heaven in the way of judgment that they do not completely deserve. Of course, they receive much good that they do not at all deserve, for which most men never think to thank God.

Bowl 4

16:8 And the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and power was given to it to scorch people with fire. 9 And people were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, who had power over these plagues, but they did not repent and give him glory.

Again the sun is affected, but not as under the fourth trumpet. There the sun was darkened for a third part of the day; here the sun blazes out with an excess of heat that scorches men with fire. In the progress of the judgments of the Revelation God seems reluctant to fulfill His strange act. He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). He begins His judgments only to pause again as though waiting for the slightest sign of repentance. He begins again, but does things by thirds as warnings and calls men to repentance before He does them totally. He waits to the last possible moment, until the last repentant man on earth has been gathered in, before His wrath is poured out without mixture. And when it is over there is a great voice (could we say almost of relief?) out of the temple, "It is done" (v 17). Marvelous is the mercy, the long-suffering love of God.

Verse nine reveals that men have now hardened themselves past repentance. Although they know that it is God who has power over these disasters, they blaspheme His name and will not repent to give Him glory — they are like a whole race of Pharaohs who see the hand of God in it all, but who harden their hearts in hatred against Him.

Bowl 5

16:10 And the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast. And his kingdom became full of darkness, and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain, 11 and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds.

Darkness falls on the throne and the kingdom of the beast, darkness no doubt as sinister as the darkness that frightened Egypt under the ninth plague, "even darkness which may be felt". Blasted and scorched under the fourth bowl they enter now with their sores into a supernatural blackness and gnaw their tongues with pain—but they will not repent. Their lives will have been spent in rebellion and wickedness. They will have lived as though there

were no God or as if they were gods themselves. At last they will take the beast and the dragon for their objects of worship. And when they are punished for their blasphemy, they curse the God of heaven for His just judgments. This is the fallen nature of human beings; this is the end of the so-called goodness of man. Do not be surprised at this. There is not an act of evil and blasphemy that men have not done, and will not yet do. And we are all from the same stock and all capable of the same deeds. It is only the grace of God that can change a person and lift him from the pit of corruption where the whole of mankind lives.

Bowl 6

16:12 And the sixth angel poured out his bowl upon the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up so that the way for the kings of the east might be prepared. 13 And I saw three foul spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. 14 They are the spirits of demons, performing signs, *which* go out to the kings of the earth, of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.

15 "Look, I come as a thief. Blessed is he who watches and keeps his clothes so that he does not walk naked and they see his shame."

16 And they gathered them together to a place called Armageddon in the Hebrew language.

The events here predicted are of special interest to us here in the East. At the time of the end God will gather all nations and bring them into the land of Palestine for a final great battle (Joel 3:2, 9-5). Among them will appear the kings of the East. From the boundary suggested in verse 12, the nations of the East are those lying on the eastern side of the Euphrates river. The Euphrates rises in the mountains of Armenia and, flowing through Turkey, Syria and Iraq, empties into the Persian gulf. To the east are Persia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, Japan, etc. When God dries up the Euphrates, one difficult barrier for large, swift movements of peoples and ground armaments from the East will disappear (and the drying up of that river may be representative of the removal of other such obstacles not named here in the text). The sixth trumpet also deals with the Euphrates, and the vision there discloses an immense and mysterious army of 200,000,000. Whether that indicates vast Eastern hordes of humanity pouring across the Euphrates, or some plague more supernatural, I am not prepared to say.

It is interesting to remember that at the birth of Jesus travelers from the East came to worship him (Matt 2:1). At His second coming also some from the East will be drawn to Palestine, but for a different reason altogether. Why will they come? We are not told the reasons that may occur to them. But we are given a glimpse behind the scenes that accounts for their behavior. Three unclean spirits, miracle-working demons, come out of the mouths of the three supremely evil personages of the last days —the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. These go forth to the kings of the whole earth to entice them to Palestine. "And the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab king of Israel to go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? . . . Then a spirit came and stood before the LORD, and said, 'I will entice him'. And the LORD said to him, 'How?' And he said, 'I will go and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets'" (2 Chron 18:19-21). By some such means the kings of all the earth will be drawn to Palestine and there they will fall in a great slaughter, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. And among them will be the kings of the East, marching together, unified in their evil purpose. This suggests that the differences that now divide many nations of the far East will be settled and that either some force or some agreement will unite them.

The final gathering place of earth's armies is said to be Armageddon (v 16) or "Har-magedon". In Hebrew "har" means mountain and the total word means the mountain of Megiddo. Megiddo appears at other times in Israel's history. It is a large plain in Palestine, some distance south of Nazareth, and east of mount Carmel, and is known also as the plain of Esdraelon. Napoleon once said that it would make an ideal battlefield for the armies of the world. It is here that one of the events in the final story of the age will take place.

"Look, I come as a thief" (v 15). This word coming here has caused some to think that Christ has not yet come for His Church when the sixth bowl is poured out. At least one commentator suggests that the Rapture occurs at this point. This seems most unlikely, since there is no mention of such a thing and no symbolism or vision which suggests it. However, though we should not read so much into this episode, it is interesting to compare the four other Scriptures that predict the coming of the Lord as a thief. They are Luke 12:39,40, addressed to the disciples, 1 Thess 5:2-4 and 2 Peter 3:10, which refer to the Day of the Lord, and Rev 3:3, given as a warning to the dead church at Sardis. He will come as a thief on those who are in a state of spiritual darkness. But the believer is in the light and, as he waits in expectation, His coming will not take him unaware.

The battle of Armageddon is called "the battle of that great day of God Almighty" (vs 14,16). It is the Day of the Lord and it is at that time that Christ comes as a thief to overthrow His enemies. So when this figure is used in the above Scriptures, it would not seem to refer to a secret rapture of the Church.

Bowl 7

16:17 And the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the sanctuary in heaven, from the throne, saying, "It is done." 18 And there were voices, and thunders, and lightning flashes, and an earthquake. An earthquake so mighty *and* so great had not occurred since men were on the earth. 19 And the great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and great Babylon was remembered before God, to give to her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. 20 And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. 21 And a great hail out of heaven fell on men, *each* stone weighing about fifty kilograms. And men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, because its plague was exceedingly great.

The great city (Jerusalem? or Rome?) will split into three parts, and Babylon at last will come up before God to receive the wine of the fierceness of His wrath. When God rises to shake terribly the earth, "The earth is violently broken up, the earth is splintered, the earth is shaken violently. The earth will reel to and fro like a drunkard, and will sway like a cottage" (Isa 24: 18-20). And men, those who remain in the midst of these devastations, defiant to the last, for the third time blaspheme God because of His judgments. So "it is done."

17:1 And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me. *He* said to me, "Come here. I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed adultery. And the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her adultery."

3 So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. 4 And the woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls, and had a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and the filthiness of her adultery. 5 And on her forehead a name was written:

MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH

17:6 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I was amazed, greatly amazed.

We come now to two of the most significant chapters in the Revelation and to a vision that filled John with amazement. Here we see the judgment of the great prostitute which sits upon many waters. It is of the utmost importance that we identify her and keep ourselves altogether from "the wine of her adultery".

The symbol of a woman is used in other passages of Scripture to designate a religious body. The nation Israel was known as the wife of Jehovah (Isa 54:5,6; Jer 3:1,14,20). The Church is the bride of Christ (Eph 5:23-33). In the Revelation we have women used symbolically at times. There is Jezebel, who corrupted the Church at Thyatira (2:20). There is the woman clothed with the sun (12:1). There is the Lamb's wife (19:7,8). And there is Babylon, the great harlot. There is no question that in the first three cases the symbol of a woman is used with religious significance. Is there good reason

to doubt that the case with Babylon is the same? Babylon is a city (17:18), but a city may be compared to a woman as representing the land, the people, the religious characteristics of a nation. Jerusalem is one example of this (Lam 1:1, 7, etc; Gal 4:25,26).

Another example is found in chapter 21:9,10. An angel tells John that he will show him “the bride the Lamb’s wife”. But what he actually shows him is the great city, the holy Jerusalem, the dwelling place of the redeemed. What is this but to say that a city reflects the character of its inhabitants and can be used as a symbol to represent something far more than buildings and towers and streets?

I do not hesitate to say in the light of this that the woman Babylon is a city that represents a vast religious system. We will see in due course that she represents a system of commerce as well (a prostitute is the fitting symbol for this also — see the description of Tyre in Isaiah 23:14-17). But first we will consider only the religious aspect of Babylon.

Jerusalem, a city that represented the religious life of the Jewish nation, became a prostitute (see Isa 1:21). Babylon is “the great prostitute”, and “the mother of prostitutes and abominations of the earth” (vs 1 and 5). In other Scriptures the symbol of a prostitute is used to indicate a people who have forsaken the true God. The nation Israel is the outstanding example of this. Of her it is said, “It happened through her thoughtless prostitution, that she defiled the land, and committed adultery with stones and wood”. The Lord said to her, “Surely as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with me, O house of Israel, says the Lord”. Read carefully Jeremiah chapter 3. This was the final condition of apostate Israel at the time of the Babylonian captivity. Is it then an impossible thing that Christendom will follow her path with the same result? If it happened once can it not happen again?

It has happened again, and will go on fully developing until the end. For the woman Babylon, in one aspect, is an apostate, degraded, defiled, desperately wicked system of religion that will be judged and destroyed at the end of this age. I believe she represents the false bride, the final form of apostate Christianity.¹

¹ She is the antichurch, as the beast is the Antichrist, and Satan the Antigod. And as Satan has worked his evil from the beginning of man’s history, and as the beast has his roots far in the past, so the woman began her adulterous behavior many centuries before Christ — as we shall see.

William Hendriksen rejects the interpretation that Babylon represents the false church, but he does so on very poor grounds. The principal reason he gives is that Babylon is the prostitute, not the adulteress — is not as a wife who commits adultery but as a whorish, unmarried woman. Truly what he takes to be an argument against this interpretation is a strong one for it. He seems to ignore the fact seen above that Israel, although married to Jehovah, is called not merely an adulteress but also a prostitute. And the truth her history illustrates is this: apostasy from God is like whoredom and prostitution, selling oneself to do evil. In one chapter (Jeremiah 3) she is called a prostitute four times. In another chapter (Ezekiel 16) the word prostitute is used in relation to Israel a total of seventeen times, and the words fornication and adultery four more!² Ezekiel 23 surpasses even this, using the words twenty-five times!

In any case, in giving the great characters for good and evil that will exist in the end time, it is most unlikely that the Lord would pass over in silence the final apostate Church. In the Revelation we see His judgments falling on all the wickedness of earth, and shall the pinnacle of wickedness — apostate Christendom — be ignored? Will the fall of “Jezebel” go unrecorded? The truth is that if the false church does not appear as this harlot woman it does not appear at all. But it is hardly conceivable that it would be left out of the record of judgment. We should note, too, that immediately after the description of her destruction the true bride is first mentioned (19:7,8) — as though God were saying, “You have seen the false bride and her destruction. Now I will show you the true”.

Let us observe very carefully the facts we are given concerning Babylon the great prostitute.

(1) She sits upon many waters (v 1). These waters, we are told in v 15, are “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages”. She is a woman who extends her power over large portions of the globe.

(2) She sits upon a scarlet colored beast having seven heads and ten horns (v 3). This beast, as we saw in chapter 13, is the Roman empire in its final form that will rule the world sometime in the

² Wordsworth in his *Lectures on the Apocalypse* wrote: “The original word, you will remember, which is used for harlot by St. John in the Apocalypse is *porne*. And you will find that this word (*porne*) is employed in the Septuagint Version of the Prophets of the Old Testament at least fifty times to describe the spiritual fornication of the Churches of Israel and Judah.”

future. The woman will eventually be destroyed by this beast (v 16), but first, she is seen riding it. She is where it is, and at first may be supported by that anti-God system of government and perhaps has a measure of control over it. This false system of Christianity will probably play a large part in the political struggles of the last days.

(3) The seven heads of the beast on which the woman sits are seven hills (v 9). This points to Rome, the city built on seven hills.³ In case anyone still remains in doubt about the symbol, an even plainer word is given in v 18, "The woman. . . is that great city which is reigning over the kings of the earth". When John heard this explanation there was only one city that was reigning over the kings of the earth, and that city was Rome. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that false and treacherous Christendom will have its capital in the city of Rome at the time of its destruction.

(4) The woman is gorgeously arrayed (v 4). She tries to hide her shame, her lewdness, by colors of royalty, by gold and rare jewels. This woman, being a prostitute, sells herself to the highest bidder and this is the wealth she gains, temporal riches and power. The wealth, the pomp, the splendor, and the colors worn by this woman, as so much else in this chapter, linked as all this is with the city of Rome, reminds us of the Roman Catholic church and no other religious body on earth. The material wealth, the treasures of art, the splendid architecture of Rome are famous. The best guesses of bankers about the Vatican's wealth put it at many billions of dollars. The Vatican has big investments in banking, insurance, chemicals, steel, construction, and real estate. Concerning the colors purple and scarlet it is well known that these are the colors worn by the cardinals of the Roman church. A cardinal is also, next to the Pope, the most privileged and the most powerful cleric in the Roman Catholic church. As one of the most spectacular dressers of Christendom, he has to spend several thousand dollars for his cassocks and skull caps of scarlet and purple, his white lace rochets, silk sashes, and the splendid cappa magna — a 15 feet long scarlet train worn on solemn liturgical occasions. We are told that the woman is dressed in purple and scarlet for purposes of identification. It is one of the marks that enable us to recognize her. And the Roman Church wears the mark. Let it be understood by all

³ The Church fathers Papias, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Jerome, Victorinus and others believed that Babylon meant Rome. Wordsworth wrote: "On the Imperial Medals of that age, which are still preserved, we see Rome figured as a woman on seven hills, precisely as she is represented in the Apocalypse."

who read this that the author of this commentary feels no enmity toward any individual Roman Catholic. However, I am opposed to the perversion of Christ's gospel, the false doctrine and the unscriptural practices of that Church, and feel it a Christian duty to warn others about these matters.

(5) She has a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and the filthiness of her adultery (v 4). In it is the wine she causes the nations to drink that they might be drunken. It results in moral, spiritual and even physical degradation and filthiness. Her doctrine, her delights have their source in sin and lead to sin. Her desire is intimate union with the world. She has forgotten the severe word of James: "You adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wants to be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (4:4).

(6) She is a mystery, but her character is written on her forehead. That is, she is a mystery that men would not discover the meaning of apart from God's revelation. Yet her nature is conspicuously marked when our eyes are opened to see it.

(7) Her mystery name is Babylon the Great. She is not the city of Babylon. She is Rome. But her character is the character of Babylon. To understand her we must understand Babylon.

The name Babylon is used over 250 times in the Bible, more than the name of any other city with the solitary exception of Jerusalem. The name appears 37 times in two chapters of Jeremiah (50 and 51). The discoveries of archaeology and the records of history also give us considerable information about this extremely important city.

(a) Babylon was first known as Babel and was built in defiance of God's word to mankind (Gen 9:1,7 with 11:1-4). Its founder was Nimrod, the mighty hunter — a hunter for the souls of men, according to the Jewish rabbis.

(b) Its foundation was laid in pride: "Let us make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4). Many centuries later the mighty city of Babylon was still a source of proud boasting: "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal residence by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty?" (Dan 4:30).

(c) It was guilty of blasphemous religious pretensions. They did not imagine that their material tower could be built to the stars, to God's heaven wherever it may be. Their city and their tower were

erected, high and mighty, as a symbol of their power and determination to oppose the true God, indeed to replace Him in the earth. The name they chose, Bab-el, means "Gate of God". But God had an altogether different view of their city. He confounded their language and the city became Babel, meaning confusion. In Babel there early developed a system of religion in opposition to the Word of God as handed down from Noah to succeeding generations. This religion was a corruption of God's revelation, a mingling of truth and error twisted into deadly substitute for the truth.

This false religion had certain well marked characteristics. It began to exalt human beings in the place of God. The first to be deified were Nimrod, Semiramis his wife, and Tammuz the son. Gradually the chief object of worship became, not Nimrod, but the mother with the child in her arms, the mother being rather the more important object of worship. This female goddess became known as "the queen of heaven" and was worshiped as such by the Jews of Jeremiah's day (Jer 44: 17-19). Tammuz, the son, was put forward as the offspring of the woman who was to bruise the serpent's head. He was worshiped by women of Israel in Ezekiel's day (Ezek 8: 14). This worship of the mother and child or sometimes the mother alone, became wedded to the most debasing forms of idolatry and rapidly spread through all the nations of earth. Phoenicia had its Ashtoreth and Tammuz (Ashtoreth was also worshiped by Israel at different periods in her history). Egypt had Isis and Horus. Greece worshiped Aphrodite and Eros. Rome called the pair Venus and Cupid. The names changed from place to place and from time to time. The Babylonian system remained the same. Everywhere the "virgin" goddess, the mother of all, the mother of the gods, was a favorite. There is reason to think that the idolatry of Greece, of Rome, of India had its original source in Babylon. God said through Jeremiah that Babylon "is the land of carved images, and they are mad about their idols" (Jer 50: 38). "Babylon has been a golden cup in the Lord's hand that made all the earth drunken; the nations have drunk of her wine, therefore the nations are mad" (Jer 51: 7).

Gradually in Babylon there evolved a vast religious system with mysteries of the faith, and a priesthood and a high priest as keepers of the mysteries. The priests professed to have the keys of heaven. They heard the confessions of the people and interceded for them. They introduced the confessional, the doctrine of regeneration of the soul by the sprinkling of holy water, justification by good deeds, festivals that took place at Easter and Christmas, the consecration of monks and nuns to their gods, something similar to the sacrifice

of the mass, the fiction of purgatory, prayers for the dead and other doctrines familiar to those who know Romanism.⁴ These teachings of the Roman Catholic Church do not come from the Bible. At the decline of Babylon, the high priest of this system, the Pontifex Maximus, as previously noted (in comments on the letter to Pergamos), migrated to Pergamos and later to Rome. In course of time that title was taken by the emperors of Rome. When the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as his religion, it became the religion of the empire and the Pontifex Maximus became the patron of the Church. The title eventually passed to the Bishop of Rome and then on to the popes of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus Rome, first pagan, then papal, became Babylon.⁵

It might profitably be inquired how such a system managed to take such firm root throughout the world. There are three reasons for this. It was a system that pleased Satan well for he is always happy to counterfeit the truth of God and to erect false objects of worship. It was a system that pleased the religious hierarchy well for it gave them wealth, a reputation for wisdom, and power over the masses of fallen humanity. And it was a system that pleased humanity well, for people have always wanted a religion that would permit them to follow their fallen natures, ignore the truth of God's Word, and still think they have a hope of forgiveness on earth and a heaven beyond.

(8) Let us return to the harlot woman of chapter 17. She is described as the mother of prostitutes and abominations of the earth (v 5). All perversions of the truth, all unfaithfulness to God, all abominable idols, all things hateful and detestable in religion, all false cults and apostate denominations, particularly all that has stained Christendom with blood and every other sort of crime, are laid to the account of this woman. (Rome prides herself on being the "Holy Mother Church". Indeed she is a mother, but look at her offspring). For Babylon was the original mother of all these things and now they are all charged to that city that has fully imbibed the spirit of Babylon.

⁴ A Hislop, *The Two Babylons*

⁵ Rome does not deny this connection with paganism. Cardinal Newman in his book *The Development of the Christian Religion* admitted this connection. He wrote "Temples, incense, oil lamps, votive offerings, holy water, holy days and seasons of devotion, processions, blessings of fields, sacerdotal vestments, the tonsure (of priests, monks, and nuns), images, etc. are all of pagan origin." He might have added other things, including some doctrines of the Roman Church.

(9) The woman is a great persecuting power, a murderess, who drinks the blood of her enemies like a cannibal (v 6). "And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who had been killed on the earth" (18: 24). Will it be asked, How can the last apostate system be guilty of all the blood of all the saints of all the ages? The answer is that by drinking in the whorish spirit of Babylon, the source of all this evil, it has not only piled high its own sin but has inherited the guilt of the past as well. (An illustration of this principle is found in Matthew 23: 34-36. Study it carefully). It has been truthfully written of Rome, "Has, then, the Church of Rome stained herself with the blood of Christians? Alas! Has she not erected the prisons, and prepared the rack, and lighted the fires of what she calls 'the Holy Office of the Inquisition' in Italy, Spain, America and India? Does she not at this day laud one of her canonized Popes, Pius the Fifth, in her Breviary as an inflexible Inquisitor? Has she not engraven the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day on her own coins, and represented it as a work done by an angel from heaven? Did not her Pontiff go publicly to church to return thanks to God for that savage and treacherous deed?" (Bishop Wordsworth, Lectures on the Apocalypse, p 388). For centuries the Roman Church was the great persecutor of the saints. She is guilty of inhuman tortures and murders times without number (read Foxe's Book of Martyrs). Someone has estimated the total number of those put to death by this Church as 50,000,000 (5 crores). Let this be remembered by all those who even think of union with Rome. To join with Rome is to become partaker of her sins and of her coming judgment.

(10) The great prostitute of our chapter is one woman. Does this not suggest one vast apostate system at the time of the end and not various and separate apostate groups, such as one Roman Catholic, one Protestant, and one Eastern Orthodox, etc? For my part, I believe it is possible, even likely, that she represents the apostasy of the whole of Christendom and the union, or at least the cooperation, of the Protestant and Orthodox churches with Rome. In any case I cannot imagine that all God's wrath will fall on Rome alone, and apostate Protestantism will go free. We have seen when studying the letter to the Laodiceans that a general apostasy is to be expected in the last days. What is this to say but that the bulk of the professing church will become whorish. This is what apostasy is. Apostate Protestant denominations thus become the daughters of the harlot mother Rome. It will be no surprising thing if mother and daughters are reunited sometime in the future, if blind and giddy Protestantism, drunk on the wine of the harlot's fornication, lurches and staggers toward her, and at last collapses in her arms.

Are you, as John was, filled with amazement that such a thing should ever be so? Many are the pressures of our day to create one great worldwide church under Rome's banner. And according to many prophecies a general apostasy will come.

So this is the end of Christianity (not the true church, Christ's bride, but Christendom). We look at Pentecost, a new wine of joy, and a bride in a new radiancy of love. Then we look through the centuries and behold a painted prostitute, false and cruel, drinking the blood of Christ's dear saints, and dispensing the wine of her adultery. And we, too, might well be amazed. And we may do more than express amazement — "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down; yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion" (Ps 137:1).

Take up a lamentation for Babylon, though she has a harlot's forehead and refuses to be ashamed. Even yet if she would turn to God and take with her words as the remnant of adulterous Israel will eventually do — "We lie down in our shame, and our confusion covers us, for we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God" (Jer 3:25). But, alas, she will not do so and her judgment is already written and hastens to be fulfilled.

"And the angel said to me, why were you amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carries her, that has the seven heads and ten horns" (v 7). What now follows in the rest of the chapter is an explanation of these mysteries which so perplexed John. We have seen those verses (9 and 18) which identify this woman with Rome. So let us turn our attention once more to another mystery.

The mystery of the beast

17:7 And the angel said to me, "Why were you amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carries her, that has the seven heads and ten horns. 8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth whose names were not written in the book of life from the beginning of the world will be amazed when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.

9 "Here a mind that has wisdom is needed. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. 10 There are also seven

kings: Five have fallen, one is, *and* the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain for a short time. 11 And the beast that was, and is not, he is the eighth *king*, and is one of the seven, and goes to destruction.

The woman Babylon is anti-God religion that began in man's first great city and culminates in the final apostasy of the Christianity with its headquarters at Rome. Similarly, the beast is anti-God Gentile world power that also began in Babylon, the first great world empire, and culminates in the final form of world government ruled by Antichrist with its headquarters in Rome (or at the very least somewhere in the former Roman Empire very closely associated with Rome).

The angel now explains the symbols John has seen in the vision of verses 1-6 — "I will tell you the mystery." So in what follows we are to look not for further symbolic language, but for literal explanations of symbols. If further symbols were given to explain previous ones the explanation would be no true explanation at all, but mysteries multiplied. It also seems perfectly clear that the explanation is given from the standpoint of John's day, not ours. In verses 8 through 11 we have several literal facts given concerning the seven heads of the beast. It is our part simply to believe and accept God's own interpretation of these symbols. If we will not, we cannot expect to understand what is here. Some writers tell us that the whole book is symbolic and so cannot at all be taken literally. But we have more than symbols in the Revelation. Here and there we have literal explanations of symbols, and these must not be taken symbolically. Such is the case here. Study these verses carefully.

(1) The beast existed before John's day. He "was" said the angel in explanation (v 8).

(2) He did not exist at the time John saw the vision. He "is not", the angel informed John (v 8).

(3) At some future time he will return to a period of existence on earth. He "will come up out of the Abyss" (v 8). This future appearance is evidently so miraculous that the whole world is amazed when they see the beast "that was, and is not and yet is" (or "will come". If he "yet is" he is only in the spirit world, in the Abyss, and not present in the body on earth in John's day).

(4) Five of the seven heads of the beast had already fallen by John's day (v 10).

(5) One of these heads was in existence at that time: "One is" (v 10).

(6) One was still to come and would continue only for a short time (v 10).

(7) The beast will be one of these seven kings, yet will succeed them all as an eighth king (v 11).

Observe carefully two seemingly conflicting statements. Twice in verse 8 and once in verse 11 we are told plainly that the beast "is not". But in verse 10 we are told just as plainly that of its seven heads "one is". The beast himself was not present on earth in John's day, but one of his heads was. How can a head exist without a body? How can a head of the beast be, if the beast itself "is not"? I believe the language here will continue to confuse us until we see one simple fact: sometimes the word "beast" refers to the whole empire with its roots in the past and its final form in the future, and sometimes the word "beast" refers to the individual emperor who will rule the world in the last days of that empire. As an individual he "was," remained no longer on earth in John's day, but will ascend out of the Abyss at some future day. The Abyss in the New Testament is always connected with the unseen realm of spirits. It is impossible to say of the Roman Empire that it was before John's day but was not then in existence. The exact opposite is true. In the form in which it will finally appear it had never existed before John's day. We are told this clearly in verse 12. But in the gradual development of the body and heads in a sense it was in existence then as the mighty empire of Rome. Likewise it is impossible that a pope or a succession of popes can be the beast for it certainly cannot be said of them in relation to John's day that he "was, and is not, and will come up out of the Abyss". There were no popes before John's day and not for a good many years afterwards. So the beast is seen here in v 8, as in chapter 13, as the individual Antichrist who is to come.

The seven heads

The seven heads (understood as an empire) are seven hills and seven kings. The seven hills, most are agreed, are the seven hills of Rome.⁶ There is, however, more dispute concerning the identify

⁶ "The city intended is undoubtedly Rome on the following evidence: as many as a dozen of the old Latin (Roman) authors speak of Rome as the city on seven hills; Roman coins (still preserved) bear the imprint of Rome as built on seven hills; Victorinus, the first commentator on Revelation, in his notes on the present verse, says, "that is, the city of Rome" (J. B. Smith)

of the seven kings. Three completely different explanations are offered by the commentators.

(1) Some teach that these seven kings are seven kingdoms. According to this view there will be a total of seven great empires that will have ruled the civilized world at the time of the end. Five had fallen in John's day: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia and Macedonia-Greece. One then existed — Rome. One was yet to come: Rome under Christian emperors or under the popes (depending on the point of view). In this view the beast is either the papacy or the future kingdom of Antichrist (again depending on the commentator). There is so much against this interpretation that we can say that it is extremely unlikely.

(a) John is told by the angel (in a literal, straightforward explanation of symbolic language) that the heads are kings, not kingdoms.

(b) In the prophecies of Daniel not seven world empires but four only are revealed. They each appear, as we saw when studying chapter 13, as four beasts — the lion, the bear, the leopard, and the strange fourth beast with ten horns. That only these four empires figure in the formation of the beast of Revelation is seen from its description in 13:1,2.

(c) It is also clear from the above that the appropriate symbol for a kingdom is not a head but a beast.

(d) Moreover, these seven kings are somehow intimately connected with the seven hills of Rome.

(e) If the above explanation be adopted, how can it be harmonized with what is said of the beast in verse 8 — that he was, and is not, and will come?

(f) And how could this seventh king be said to continue but "a short time"? (v 10).

(g) Also how could a kingdom ascend out of the Abyss?

(2) Another explanation sometimes given is that these seven heads are seven forms of government that ruled Rome at one time or another. Five had fallen: kings, consuls, dictators, decemvirs, and military tribunes. One then existed: emperors. One was to come: revived Roman power at the time of the end that would result in the rise of the last world dictator. This explanation (while having certain advantages over the other) is still not without weaknesses.

(a) It is open to the same objection as the above in that it takes a literal explanation and treats it as symbolic. The heads are said to be kings, not political systems.

(b) It makes heads to be symbols of various systems of government within one empire. And how can this be proved from the Scriptures?

(c) It would be difficult to see how a form of government could “come up out of the Abyss” as the beast is said to do.

(3) The third explanation also has its difficulties, but to me it is the most satisfactory one. It interprets these seven kings as seven individual rulers of the Roman Empire. Certainly in the language of the Bible a head indicates an individual ruler rather than a kingdom or political system. Five had fallen. This may mean deposed by violence. It is true that more than five emperors had ruled Rome before John’s day, but only five had fallen suddenly, violently either by murder or suicide. They were Julius Caesar, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. The one then ruling was Domitian who was later assassinated.⁷ The one to come will be the future head of the revived empire who will also fall — “of his heads I saw as if it had received a fatal wound” — 13:3), and whose place will be taken by Antichrist. The centuries between Domitian and the coming Emperor are passed over as having no direct bearing on the prophetic purpose of the Revelation. Once the background of the beast is sketched (to give us needed information), the thought leaps forward to the time of the end.

If this is the true interpretation, the spirit of one of these emperors, ascending out of the Abyss, will enter the dead body of that future seventh head. He will revive and again ascend the throne. It is not improbable that this is the way the word concerning Antichrist will be fulfilled, “the beast that was, and is not, he is the eighth king, and is one of the seven, and goes to destruction” (v11). Perhaps this is the best explanation of a difficult passage.

⁷ Of the six other Caesars who ruled before Domitian three of them died natural deaths (Augustus, Vespasian and Titus); three others (Galba, Otho, Vitellius) died violently but they were so insignificant and reigned so briefly that they are not counted among the seven heads.

The ten horns

17:12 "And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have as yet received no kingdom, but will receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour.

13 They *will* have one intention and will give their power and authority to the beast. 14 They will make war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with him are called and chosen and faithful."

15 And he said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. 16 And the ten horns that you saw on the beast, these will hate the prostitute and will make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. 17 For God has put it into their hearts to execute his will, to agree together and give their kingdom to the beast until God's words are fulfilled.

18 "And the woman that you saw is that great city which is reigning over the kings of the earth."

Concerning the ten horns also, we have the authoritative word of the angel of God. Verses 12-17 record the following facts concerning them:

(1) They are ten kings who, of course, are the heads of government of ten separate countries within the area where Antichrist will arise.

(2) They had received no kingdom in John's day.

(3) When they do appear their reign will be very brief — "one hour".

(4) They voluntarily unite to give their kingdoms to the beast. This is further evidence that the beast is spoken of here as an individual. He is a king like themselves. This is confirmed by the language of Dan 7:8. Antichrist will be a little horn that arises from the midst of the ten. Thus Antichrist is both a horn and a head — further indication that the heads, like the horns, are individual kings.

(5) They will make war with the Lamb but will be overcome by Him. This could mean two things. It could mean that they will

determine to blot out the truth of Christ from the earth. They will try to destroy all mention or reminder of the Lamb of God. And it could refer to the battle of Armageddon when the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gather themselves together to make war against Christ returning from heaven with His armies. In either case their "hour" with the beast will be the closing days of the age.

(6) They will hate the great prostitute and destroy her (v 16). They will not be able to tolerate Christianity even in its false forms and so, as part of their plan to destroy any surviving remnant of Christ's religion, they will fall on the apostate church and devastate her. "These will hate the prostitute." I can imagine that they will hate her greediness, her falseness; hate her desire for political power; hate her for trying to ride upon them, to control them; hate her as a rival and as an enemy. They will make her "desolate and naked". They will strip from her the finery, the art, take away the gold and precious stones and pearls, and leave her in shame and nakedness. They will "eat her flesh". That is, utterly destroy her and enrich themselves at her expense. They will "burn her with fire". Alas for this fiery judgment! The churches go down in flames. The great cathedrals, St Peter's, and St Paul's outside the city gates of Rome, and St John Lateran, and marvels of architecture and beauty all over Europe and beyond Europe will go. Stained glass windows, Gothic towers, marble altars, carpets and pews all will become ashes and rubble. So will God's fury fall on this woman, this imperious, whorish woman. And He will bring up this company against her, and they will stone her with stones and thrust her through with their swords so that all might know that the penalty of adultery and the reward of whoredoms is death and desolation (Compare Ezek 16: 39-41; 23: 46-49).

(7) They will be instruments in the hand of God to fulfill His will in the earth (v 17). The world even in that darkest of hours will be under the sovereign control of the Almighty and He will fulfill His revealed purposes of judgment. Notice the phrase, "until God's words are fulfilled". Not merely the "Word of God" in a general sense but the very "words" must be fulfilled. If the ten kings should not unite to give their kingdoms to the beast whole chapters in the Revelation, whole chapters in the books of the prophets would fall to the ground.

"And the woman that you saw is that great city which is reigning over the kings of the earth". This was given in explanation to John to identify the woman. If it did not mean Rome to him it could mean nothing at all. The explanation given to him is also given to us, and we have no right to try to interpret it in some other way.

In the last days, all roads seem to lead to Rome. The woman has her home there, and the beast as an empire is intimately connected with that city, being the last form of that secular power and carrying the woman on its back. The Antichrist arises somewhere within its dominions and captures control of the empire and eventually destroys the woman out of it. He is the coming ruler of the Roman Empire which destroyed Jerusalem centuries ago in A.D. 70 (Dan 9:26). And the ten kings also who will arise within the framework of the Empire are linked with Rome through the beast.

The fall of commercial Babylon (chapter 18)

Three of the greatest forces molding society are political systems, religion and commerce. We have already seen something of the last powerful political system that will rise on earth. And we have observed the final condition of apostate religion. A fuller picture of society as it will be just before the return of Christ must include something of the commercial aspect. That is what we have before us in the present chapter. Here the woman Babylon is seen to be not only the great center of religion in the last days but of commerce as well.

Some writers have taught that the Babylon of this chapter is different from the Babylon of the preceding chapter and refers to a city still to be rebuilt on the site of ancient Babylon on the banks of the Euphrates river. Others believe that both chapters describe the same rebuilt Babylon. Space does not allow a full discussion here of the arguments advanced for this view. I can only say that I believe, with the majority of writers I have consulted on the subject, that there is only one Babylon described here and that one is Rome. We have seen that the woman of chapter 17 is Rome. Compare 18:3 with 17:2; 18:12 with 17:4; 18:24 with 17:6; 18:8,16 with 17:16. 19:2 likewise shows that one mystery Babylon is under review in both chapters, for Babylon fallen in chapter 18 is there called "the great prostitute" of chapter 17.

Let us now examine more in detail the fall of what I understand to be the great commercial center of the empire of the beast.

The angelic messenger

18:1 After these things I saw another angel come down from heaven. He had great authority and the earth was lit up with his brightness. 2 And he cried out loudly in a strong voice and said, "Babylon the great has fallen, has fallen, and has become the home of demons, a stronghold for every foul spirit and for

every unclean and hateful bird. 3 For all nations have drunk of the inflaming wine of her adultery, and the kings of the earth have committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich through the power of her luxuries."

An angel in great power and glory descends from heaven in the sight of John to announce the final fall of Babylon. "Babylon is fallen, is fallen". This double reference to her fall may be merely emphatic, or it may, as many think, indicate a fall in two stages. She falls first from her religious pedestal under the combined attack of the ten horns and the beast, as we saw in chapter 17. She then falls from her high position as a center of business and trade. At her first fall the ten kings are glad to see her doom; at her fall as a commercial center the kings of the earth weep and lament for her (v 9). Is it not possible that what the beast begins to do, God himself finishes a little later on? This is probably the best explanation. However, it is possible that in destroying the religious aspect of Babylon the kings go too far and find that when those forces of hatred and destruction are unleashed the whole of society, and with it the world of commerce that they love, falls into ruin.

Babylon becomes "the home home of demons, a strong hold for every foul spirit and for every unclean and hateful bird". This she had already become in a moral and spiritual sense. For long she has listened to and taught the doctrines of demons and given heed to seducing spirits (1 Tim 4:1ff). But the time will come when this morally fallen creation of men will fall more literally and materially, and be overthrown like old Babylon on the Euphrates (Isa 13:19-22). The reason for her fall is three-fold. The nations, the kings, and the merchants on earth have all been corrupted by her behavior (v 3). She has dispensed riches and pleasure but all apart from truth and righteousness, all without God, and in opposition to God.

The voice from heaven

18:4 And I heard another voice from heaven say: "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not share in her sins and that you receive none of her plagues. 5 For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her wrongdoing. 6 Give her back just as she has given you and pay her back double for her deeds. Pour out for her a double *amount* in the cup that she poured. 7 In the measure she has honoured herself and lived luxuriously, give her torment and sorrow. For she says in her

heart, 'I sit as queen and am not a widow, and will not see grief.' 8 Therefore her plagues will come in one day: Death, mourning, and famine. And she will be consumed by fire, for the Lord God who judges her *is* mighty."

This voice from God's presence does not finish speaking until verse 20. The first call is to the people of God. "Come out of her my people, so that you do not share in her sins, and that you receive none of her plagues". From this we may learn the following:

(1) There will be, even in Babylon, and even at the time of the end, some true believers. This is evidence for that which few deny — namely, the false church, even in its darkest days, has contained some genuine Christians.

(2) God's will for His people is to forsake apostasy, at least when it has come to such a head.⁸ (See Rom 16:17; 1 Tim 6:3-5; 2 Tim 2:19-21; 2 Thess 3:6; 2 Cor 6:15,17). Some true believers stay in apostate groups with the hope that they will be able to stem the progress of apostasy and perhaps even bring about a reformation. And some seem sure that God has called them to witness and win souls in the midst of such groups. I do not think that any of us should ever condemn or despise such earnest brethren, even though we may be convinced from the Scriptures that their method is incorrect. Every true Christian must mourn when peoples or churches or whole Christian denominations are swept away from the fundamentals of the faith into a sea of unbelief. The prophet Jeremiah cried, "Babylon has suddenly fallen and been destroyed. Wail for her. Take balm for her pain; perhaps she may be healed. We would have healed Babylon, [yes, even Babylon] but she is not healed. Forsake her, and let each of us go to his own country, for her judgment reaches to heaven, and is lifted up to the skies" (Jer 51:8,9).

(3) To stay in an apostate group or any system of false religion is to be in danger; for it may involve participation in its sins. "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not share in her sins". There are subtle influences at work on believers who stay in the midst of apostasy, pressures toward compromise with sin and unbelief.

⁸ I do not pretend to be able to say what degree of apostasy in a religious organization requires a believer to forsake it. This must be, it seems to me, a matter for the individual to decide for himself before God. Yet I must say that I regret that many believers do not faithfully and earnestly examine this question in the light of Scripture.

“Let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven”, said Babel’s builders (Gen 11:4). Alas, at the end, it is their sins which “have reached to heaven”. Rome says in her false heart, “I sit a queen, and am not a widow, and will not see grief” (v 7). That is, she considers herself the favorite of God, one who is reigning now, and not a bride to be despised and persecuted by earth, but waiting for her Bridegroom from heaven.⁹ As a queen she “honoured herself and lived luxuriously” (v 6), supposing gain to be godliness and wealth to be almighty, but the end of such living is bitter beyond words. Her every sin is marked before God and she will receive full measure and running over of torment and anguish. Very suddenly she will be struck to the earth and terrible will be her plagues, the want of bread, the death and lamentation. Her end will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, for she will be utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judges her. The suddenness of her ruin is emphasized in vs 10,17 and 19 as well as here. She does not gradually waste away but is violently and swiftly overthrown.

Lamentation for Babylon

18:9 “And the kings of the earth who have committed adultery with her and lived luxuriously with her will weep and lament for her, when they see the smoke of her burning. 10 From fear of her torment they will stand far off, and will say, ‘Alas, alas, the great city Babylon! The mighty city! In one hour your judgment has come.’

11 “And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their merchandise any more, 12 the merchandise of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen and purple, silk and scarlet *cloth*, and every kind of citron wood, and every kind of article *made* of ivory, and every kind of article *made* of costly wood, of bronze, of iron, and of marble, 13 and cinnamon, perfumes, fragrant ointment, frankincense, and wine and oil, and fine flour and wheat, and cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and bodies and souls of men.

⁹One cannot help wondering how much of this attitude on the part of the Roman Church can be traced to the false teaching concerning the Church and the millenium popularized by Augustine in the 5th century.

14 "The fruit that your soul craved has gone from you, and your luxuries and splendors have gone from you, and you will never find them again.

15 "The merchants of these things who were made rich by her, will stand far off for the fear of her torment, weeping and wailing, 16 and say 'Alas! Alas! That great city, that was clothed in fine linen, and purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold, and precious stones, and pearls! 17 For in one hour such great wealth has come to nothing.'

"And every ship's captain, and all who travel by ship, and sailors, and all who trade by sea, stood far off, 18 when they saw the smoke of her burning, and cried out and said, 'What city was ever like this great city!' 19 And they threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and wailing, and said, 'Alas! Alas! That great city, where all who had ships on the sea were made wealthy through her riches! For in one hour she has been destroyed.'

The kings of the earth lament (vs 9,10). Are there no tears because the religious power of Babylon has been broken? Or is their concern more purely material? In either case Babylon has been a source of pleasure and pride to them and they loudly bewail her fall.

If the ten kings who are represented by the ten horns are among the mourners they will lament, not that the woman has been judged, for they co-operate in her destruction, but that too much has been destroyed at her fall. The merchants of the earth join in the lamentation (vs 11-17) — "for no man buys their merchandise any more". The destruction of Rome, that great city, will have a tremendously adverse effect on commerce. This clearly indicates that that city will be a great business and financial center with strong ties with merchants throughout the world. It represents a Common Market of very great proportions. When it falls it will make all previous stock market crashes seem as nothing. What a wail will go up from earth's businessmen. This has been their life. They have lived for material gain and now the end comes, and they are left with nothing but tears. "Go to now, you rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that will come on you. . . .you have heaped treasures together for the last days" (James 5: 1-3). They have piled together treasure, caring nothing for the method of its procurement or the effect of their greed on others. For their merchandise was "gold and silver, precious stones. . . .and bodies and souls of men" (vs 12,13).

The shipmasters and those who trade by sea unite with the other mourners to wail for Babylon (vs 17-19). For her goods were profitably carried to the ends of the earth and now the smoke of her burning announces the end of their profits.

Here we see that the seas are still open for trade and that the kings and merchants are concerned, not with the wrath of the Lamb, but the loss of their wealth. Also we saw that at least part of Babylon's destruction comes when the beast is at the zenith of his power (17:16). This is evidence that Babylon's fall occurs before the sixth seal is opened, before the trumpets are blown or the bowls are poured out. This is in agreement, too, with the chronological order of events given in chapter 14 which records her fall before the warning against the worship of the beast is given.

"Alas, alas, the great city Babylon!" weep the kings.

"Alas, alas, that great city!" cry the ship captains and sailors and travelers by sea.

Rejoice

18:20 "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for on your behalf God has executed judgment on her."

21 And a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, and said, "In this way that great city Babylon will be violently thrown down and will never be found again. 22 And the sound of harpists, and musicians, and flutists, and trumpeters will never again be heard in you. And no workman of any kind of work will ever again be found in you. And the sound of a millstone will never again be heard in you. 23 And lamplight will never again shine in you. And the voice of bridegroom and of bride will never again be heard in you. For your merchants were the world's great men and all nations were deceived through your sorceries. 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who had been killed on the earth."

"Rejoice over her, O heaven", "Rejoice. . . you holy apostles and prophets", comes the voice from heaven (v 20). Oh, the heavenly view of things is far different from the earthly. That which is foul and disgusting and detestable to heaven is highly esteemed among men. "On your behalf God has executed judgment on her". The fall of Babylon avenges the holy apostles and prophets. This is more evidence that Rome is meant. It was pagan Rome which

killed Paul and possibly Peter and other apostles, and countless believers, and at that very hour had persecuted John to Patmos.

See the destruction of "the Eternal City" (vs 21-24). Thus Rome calls herself. But with violence she will be hurled down like a millstone cast into the sea, and will "never be found again" (v 21); "never again" (v 22); "never again" (v 23a); "never again" (v 23b).

This is the end of Vanity Fair (as John Bunyan called the economic world in Pilgrim's Progress), the end of covetousness, the end of greed for gain, the end of self-exaltation and love of luxury, the end of materialism in or out of the church. Let us be very careful to keep ourselves from such idols. This was Sodom's sin -- "this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness" (Ezek 16:49). It was the sin of Balaam who "loved the wages of unrighteousness". It was the sin of the rich young ruler who lost his soul because of it. It was the sin of Judas who was a covetous man and a thief. Judas truly thought, as someone has said, that everything in the world was for sale. It has been the sin of popery, which has carried on a big business selling indulgences or masses or bishoprics or preferments or influence. Luther said, "In Rome they sell everything. They would sell the Father and sell the Son and sell the Holy Ghost." It was the sin of the money changers who made the temple a place of merchandise and a den of thieves. Christ twice drove them from the temple. This time He will drive them from the earth.

Man from the beginning has tried to build a world without God that will still be a world of pleasure and satisfaction to his fallen nature. His commerce, his luxuries, his greed for wealth, and doubtless much of his music and literature and art and religion are expressions of this desire. Mystery Babylon is the full fruit of what centuries of greed has developed. The apostle Paul through the inspiration of the Spirit of God has given us our instructions, "Having food and clothing let us be content with that. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful desires which drown men in destruction and ruin. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some while coveting it have gone astray from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee from these things" (1 Tim 6:8-11). Thus the call to come out of Babylon (v 4) refers not merely to separation from fallen religion but from the world of greed and love of money.

This chapter divides into two more or less equal parts: The rejoicing in heaven — vs 1-10, and the return of Christ in glory — vs 11-21.

19:1 After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven saying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and honour and power *belong* to the Lord our God, 2 for his judgments are true and righteous, because he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adultery and has taken vengeance on her for the blood of his servants she shed."

3 And again they said, "Hallelujah! And smoke from her rises up for ever and ever."

4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures prostrated themselves and worshipped God, who was seated on the throne, and said, "Amen, Hallelujah!"

5 And a voice came from the throne, saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great."

6 And I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters, like the sound of mighty thunders, saying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord God omnipotent reigns! 7 Let us be glad and rejoice, and give him honour, for the wedding of the Lamb has come and his wife has made herself ready. 8 To wear she was given fine linen, clean and bright; for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints."

9 And he said to me, "Write: Blessed *are* those who are called to the wedding supper of the Lamb." He also said to me, "These are the true words of God."

10 And I prostrated myself at his feet to worship him. And he said to me, "Beware! Do not do that! I am a servant together with you and your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God. Because the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

The rejoicing

Babylon is fallen, is fallen and four mighty hallelujahs fill the courts of heaven with triumphant praise. "Hallelujah" derives from

two Hebrew words — hallel, meaning praise, and Jah (more accurately, Yah), a shortened form of Jehovah (Yahveh). The word appears many times in the Hebrew Psalms. The last five open and close with this word, translated "Praise the LORD". But only here does the word appear in the whole New Testament, and now in a brief space it is used four times.

"Hallelujah" (v 1). Cause: God has manifested His salvation and glory and honor and power in His righteous judgment of the great prostitute. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord, "I will repay." Now in the end of time He arises to avenge His servants. So when the vast commercial and religious system represented by Rome crashes to earth, when her treasures are looted and her institutions go up in flames, there is no dismay in heaven but rather exulting joy and praise. This is in response to the word of the Lord in 18:20 — "Rejoice over her, O heaven." See Ps 104:35.

"Hallelujah" (v 3). Again the great cry of praise rings out. Cause: the smoke of Babylon goes up forever and ever. That is, her ruin is permanent. Never will she revive to counterfeit true religion, to oppose the truth of God, or to trouble the saints.

"Hallelujah" (v 4). A new voice is added to the song of praise before the throne. The four living creatures prostrate themselves to worship Him who lives for ever and ever saying, "Amen". Cause: they delight in the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. On earth dark and terrible days have come but God has worked His purpose out in spite of all, though it means judgment and desolation to Babylon. Whatever God does they sound the Amen of perfect acceptance and worship. Notice the order of the words: first Amen, then and only then, Hallelujah. So with us. Worship, praise and true rejoicing of heart come to those who continually in all circumstances, perplexing and difficult though they may be, can say Amen to all God's works and ways. Heaven itself is summed up in these two words which speak of full rejoicing in the will of God. Its hallelujahs are perfect for its amens are perfect too. And God's people will eternally say Amen and Hallelujah to all that God does.

"Hallelujah" (v 6). Now a voice from the throne exhorts all the servants of God to praise the Lord Almighty. In response the voice of a great multitude like the voice of many waters and like the voice of mighty thunderings swell the heavenly strains of this hallelujah chorus. Cause: the sovereignty of God which now completely manifests itself to heaven and earth. Earth, the sick man of the universe, a scene of rebellion, unbelief and wickedness for several thousands of years, has at last been judged, and God casts out the

devil who is the god of this world, and the beast who receives power over all nations for 42 months, and the great prostitute who sits as a queen, and He openly takes the reins of government Himself.

Verses 7 to 9 record another cause of this rejoicing: "The wedding of the Lamb has come and his wife has made herself ready". A. B. Simpson wrote, "The special reason for this sublime spectacle of triumph and rejoicing is given in the next verse. It was the undertone of the great organ of the skies thundering forth the notes of the wedding march of the Bride of the Lamb and the chorus ends with the overture, Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His wife hath made herself ready".

Only the briefest description is given us of this event which is one of the greatest climactic scenes of all time. In these short phrases the whole fruit of redemption opens to our view. For this joy that was set before Him, Jesus endured the cross, despising the shame. "The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son" (Matt 22:2). Yes, but think what it cost the Son to gain His bride. There were the years of rejection, and the fearful agonies of Calvary. Through the centuries the Bride has been His love, His constant care. He gave Himself for her and ever lives that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the Word (Eph 5:25ff). The Bible is one long story of redemption and love, the love of Christ for His own, and the Scriptures abound with types and shadows that speak of this future marriage feast of love and joy.

Adam and his bride taken from his side and presented to him in Paradise, the seeking and finding of Rebecca in a far country for Isaac, the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, the extolling of love in the Song of Solomon, the references to the figure of marriage in the Psalms and prophets, all suggest that future day. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, all sing of the yearning love of Jehovah for His people.

"Your Maker is your husband" (Isa 54:5).

"Return, O backsliding children, says the LORD, for I am married to you" (Jer 3:14).

"Yes, I gave my oath to you, and entered into a covenant with you, says the LORD God, and you became mine" (Ezek 16:8).

"I will betroth you to me forever; yes, I will betroth you to me in righteousness, and in justice, and in loving kindness, and in mercies" says the Lord (Hosea 2:19).

This perfect and eternally blissful union of saved human beings with God in Christ is the purpose of redemption, and the official celebration of it is the marriage feast of the Lamb.

The bridegroom

We know who He is. He is the Lamb, the Redeemer and Saviour, the Son for whom the Father arranged a marriage. He came to earth to woo and to win His bride. He revealed His character and His love. He showed the treasures of His grace. He gave Himself in dying love for her and rose from the dead that He might claim her forever. And the bride has heard the question, eternal in its wonder and significance, "Will you have this Man to be your lawfully wedded husband to love, to honor and to obey?" and with full heart and trembling lips has answered, "I will."

The bride

Her identity is a matter of some dispute.

(1) Some have thought her to be composed of faithful adherents to a particular doctrine or sect or denomination.

(2) Some have taught that she is composed of a select group of overcomers from among the saved of all ages. Others will be saved but will not have the exalted position and privileges of the bride.

(3) Some narrow the meaning of the bride down to overcomers of the present age of grace and exclude all Old Testament saints.

(4) Some teach that the bride is composed of all the saved of all the ages.

(5) And some hold that she is the Church of the New Testament, the Body of Christ, all the saved of this age.

The first of these views is not even worthy of discussion. The second and third views seem most unlikely to me. It is evident from the Scriptures that some will have a higher, others a lower place in the world to come. But it is nowhere taught that one of the rewards for service is the privilege of becoming a part of the bride. On the contrary, that appears to be a result of pure grace. I believe the bride is the same as the Body of Christ, and that in this Body all believers (among them even carnal believers like some in the church at Corinth) have a place. This is plainly taught in 1 Cor 12:12ff. Romans 7:1-6 teaches that every believer is already married to Christ: "Therefore, my brethren, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you might be married to another, to him who was raised from the dead, that we might

bear fruit to God" (7:4). The marriage supper of the Lamb above is simply the official celebration of something that has already taken place on earth countless times as individuals have received the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Moreover, in the great passage on Christ and His wife, the Church (Eph 5:24-33), there is no hint that any real believer is excluded. I believe it is very unwise to try to divide the true Church into two portions, bride and non-bride.

It is true that the garment given to her to wear is "the righteous deeds of the saints". We might expect this to read "the righteousness of Christ" instead. But this does not at all mean the saints are there as the bride because of their righteous acts. This garment is *given* to the bride. It is provided by God and is given as a gift to believers. And the righteous acts surely testify to something beyond themselves. They are linked with the righteousness of Christ which is given to all believers. The saints could not have the one without the other. It is only by having the righteousness of Christ that they are able to do righteous deeds. And the deficiencies in their righteous acts are made up by His righteousness, and their spots are cleansed away by Him.

But why are the righteous acts of the saints mentioned here at all in connection with the bride? To show, I think, that they are overcomers, the true believers, those who actually served God, in contrast to nominal Christians who do not overcome, who do not serve God, and who are not true believers. Their righteous acts are mentioned here because this is the evidence that distinguishes between these two classes of people. And this will be the basis of the final judgment of both the saints and the rest of humanity. All will be judged according to their works (Rom 2:5-11). (See Appendix B on overcomers and overcoming.)

It is possible, of course, that the individual believer is not referred to at all in this passage. The wife of the Lamb is believers viewed collectively. So their "righteous deeds" could be all the righteous deeds of all the saints viewed collectively. In any case, there is no teaching here that a believer who does righteous deeds is rewarded by being made a part of Christ's bride. He is already a part of the bride, and so does righteous deeds.

The fourth view given above (that the bride is composed of all the saved of all the ages) has some evidence for it. The bride is revealed to John as a city with twelve gates and twelve foundations. On the gates are the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and on the foundations the names of the twelve apostles

appear. This could signify that the saved of both dispensations of law and grace will reign in that city as the Lamb's wife. On the other hand, John the Baptist, than whom there had been no greater born of woman, seemed to exclude himself with these words, "He who has the bride is the bridegroom. But the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and listens to him, greatly rejoices because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine is complete" (John 3:29). If he excluded himself, by implication he is excluding all those with him under the old dispensation. The language of the Lord Jesus concerning him reflects the same thought. "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist. But he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt 11:11). If John and Jesus did exclude John (and Old Testament saints in general) then the fifth view given above would be the correct one.

To me the problem seems a very difficult one to decide (it is not easy for me to believe that only God's people in this age of grace make up the bride and that Abraham, for example, who is the "father" of all believers now — Rom 4:16 — is excluded). But perhaps it is not necessary that we should decide it. It may be enough to know that we, even we, by obedience to the Gospel, by true faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, may have the unspeakable honor of being married to the King of kings and Lord of lords. When the Father would choose a bride for His Son, He did not seek among the angels or any other of the glorious inhabitants of heaven, but among fallen humanity. He sought the guilty, the weak, the depraved, the ugly, and put His own beauty upon them and His own transforming power within them. In this way a bride is formed and we can be members of that bride. Our Creator will be our husband and we will live forever in His palace in eternal peace and harmony, in love and mutual sharing that will make life in that future world an unceasing wonder and delight.

Surely the day is near at hand when the cry will ring out "Look, the Bridegroom comes!" Soon the tables will be spread in the divine banquet hall and the bride, arrayed not in purple and scarlet, not with gold and precious stones and pearls, but in fine linen bright and clean, in the royal robes of purity and righteousness that is the dress of the true saints of God, will appear leaning on the arm of her Beloved.

“The sands of time are sinking,
The dawn of heaven breaks,
The summer morn I’ve sighed for,
The fair sweet morn awakes:
Dark, dark hath been the midnight,
But day-spring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Immanuel’s land.

Oh, I am my Beloved’s,
And my Beloved’s mine:
He brings a poor vile sinner
Into His house of wine.
I stand upon His merit;
I know no other stand,
Not e’en where glory dwelleth
In Immanuel’s land.

The Bride eyes not her garment,
. But her dear Bridegroom’s face;
I will not gaze at glory,
But on my King of Grace:
Not at the crown He giveth,
But on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Immanuel’s land.”

Mrs Cousin

Blessed indeed are all those who are called to the wedding supper of the Lamb (v 9). And who are they but those who have heard the call of the Gospel and responded to it? (Matt 22:2-10). I think that those who compose the bride and those invited to the feast are the same redeemed people — the one figure views them collectively, the other individually. This is the way with metaphors. Christ is a Lamb, but also the Shepherd of the sheep, etc. Being one does not preclude Him being the other. Richard Chenevix Trench, writing on the parable of the marriage of the King’s Son, suggests that “the members of the church are at once the guests

invited to the feast, and in their collective capacity constitute the bride at whose espousals the feast is given."

John is overcome by these visions (v 10). He prostrates himself to worship the angel who has revealed these things to him. But the angels of God have no Satanic desire to receive the worship due to God only. "Beware! Do not do that. . . .Worship God" is the word to the apostle. "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." He who gives true testimony concerning Jesus Christ, be he angel or man, gives a testimony that is truly prophetic. For true testimony involves the truth of Christ's glorious return to earth and His ultimate victory over evil.

The return of Christ in glory

19:11 Then I saw heaven opened, and *there* appeared a white horse and he who sat on him. *He is* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns. He had a name written that no man knew, except he himself. 13 He was dressed in a garment dipped in blood. And his name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies of heaven followed him on white horses, dressed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 And out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which he should strike the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod. And he tramples the wine press of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And on his robe and on his thigh he has a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

17 And I saw an angel standing in the sun. He shouted in a loud voice and said to all the birds that fly through the sky, "Come, gather together at the supper of the great God, 18 so that you may eat of the flesh of kings and the flesh of captains and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of their riders and the flesh of all *kinds of people*, both free and slave, both small and great."

The great prostitute has been judged. False Christianity allied to commercialism and materialism has fallen never to rise again. Now the trinity of wickedness — the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet — must be dealt with to redeem the earth from its enslavement to evil. That is the picture before us now. Heaven

opens and the King rides forth from the battlements of heaven with the banners of His armies blazing with the light of the rising sun. The day of "the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13) has come at last. The Christian expectation is at last to be realized.

(1) Once before He rode as a king. Into Jerusalem He came "lowly and riding on a donkey, and on a colt the foal of a donkey" (Zech 9:9; Matt 21:1ff). But now He comes to that same Jerusalem on a white charger. For at Jerusalem the armies of the earth will be gathered to do battle (Zech 14:1-4).

(2) He comes forth to fight. "In righteousness he judges and makes war" (v 11). His eyes do not weep for Jerusalem as before, but now blaze with fire. His brow no longer bears the mocking crown of thorns but many diadems (v 12). He has a name known only to Himself and a garment dipped in blood. His name is "the Word of God". He is the full expression of God's mind and character, and can be fully understood only by Deity. "No man knows the Son, but the Father" (Matt 11:27).

(3) He is not alone. The armies of heaven follow Him (v 14). The Lord comes with "ten thousands of His saints to execute judgment on all" (Jude 14,15). "When the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels" (2 Thess 1:7).

(4) The weapons of His warfare are not of the flesh, not physical. The sword goes out of His mouth (v 15). He has but to speak and His will is immediately accomplished on His enemies. His word it is that will "strike the nations". He will destroy the wicked one with the "breath of His mouth" (2 Thess 2:8).

(5) He comes as King to reign. "He will rule them with an iron rod" (v 15). Words could hardly be plainer. His rule over the nations is after His coming. He comes to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords (v 16). The false queen is dead, and He now ascends the throne with the true queen, His own bride.

(6) At His coming He tramples "the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (v 15). This is Armageddon (16:14-16). This is the harvest of the earth (14:18-20). This is the destruction of the kings of the east and their armies, and the destruction of the kings of the earth and their armies, and the destruction of every high thing that exalts itself before God. "The

Lord of hosts has planned it to stain the pride of all glory, and to bring into contempt all those honoured in the earth" (Isa 23:9). And the Lord Himself will be exalted in that day.

An angel standing in the sun depicts the result of the slaughter of that great war that ends the age. He issues an invitation to come to the supper of the great God. What a contrast is this supper with the marriage supper of the Lamb! Those who have refused the invitation to the one now become the food for the other. The invited are the vultures of the air; the banquet is the flesh of kings and captains and mighty men and ordinary men and small and great men. Flesh is five times repeated in verse 18, indicating that these have fallen physically in a literal battle.

The doom of the beast and the false prophet

19:19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against him who sat on the horse and against his army. 20 And the beast was captured and with him the false prophet who performed *miraculous* signs in his presence, with which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. Both of them were thrown alive into a lake of fire burning with sulfur. 21 And the rest of *them* were killed by *the sword* that came out of his mouth. And all the birds were filled with their flesh.

As an individual at the head of his great armies the beast comes riding into Palestine. His aim and the aim of the other kings who are found there with their armies is this: to make war with the Son of God and His armies (v 19).

How are we to understand this? Will they consciously, with literal weapons of war, try to fight with Christ and His holy ones coming from heaven? We are not told whether they know it is the Lord Himself they fight against. For all we know they may think it is an invasion from outer space. We are not told their state of mind. We are given no details of the process by which this fight is brought about. Only the bare fact is stated. To think they will knowingly make war with the returning Son of God seems fantastic. Will puny human arms be raised against the King of kings whose word alone destroys? Will the armies of earth be so mad, so filled with folly? I do not insist that this is the best explanation of this passage, but let us not underestimate the depravity of human nature and the power of Satan to arouse and deceive.

Sin is a kind of insanity, and when fully developed, as it will be in Antichrist, may attempt anything. Did not Satan think to overthrow God Himself? Has not heaven known war? Can Satan not see his end revealed in the Bible? He sees this, but still pursues vain war with heaven. And is it not true that many of his slaves and victims know too, but in spite of knowing continue in their rebellion? "Knowing the judgment of God, that those who commit such things are worthy of death, they not only do them, but take pleasure in those who do them" (Rom 1:32). This is the nature of sin. It dares to go on in the face of known consequences. It is so perverse and so depraved that knowledge of hell and damnation does not turn it from its course. Sin is aimed at the destruction of God, and the heart of sin is black with murder and deadly enmity against God. This was fully revealed when God in Christ came and walked among men. Sinful men determined that He was not fit to live on earth. Let an angel or a man fully yield to pride, unbelief, lust, greed, or other sin, and he will end trying to destroy the knowledge of God, even against his better judgment. This explains so much that goes on in the universe.

However, verse 19 may be explained in another way. Perhaps the beast will come into Palestine with the aim of completely destroying Israel and so defeating God's purpose for that nation and the earth. In this way he and his armies would be fighting against the Son of God. This seems to be the pictured in Zech 12:2-9; 14:1-4.

The beast and the false prophet who has joined him are taken and cast alive into a lake of fire burning with sulfur. This is the final destination of every soul of man whose name will be absent from the book of life at the final judgment (20:15). It can only happen to individuals. The beast and the false prophet are individual men and their doom is the doom of men who continue in rebellion against the Almighty. But where is the dragon? Has he escaped out of Christ's hand? No. He is not yet to be cast into the fire, but imprisoned for one thousand years. After which there is work he will do.

In this way the King will clear the earth in preparation for His reign. This is the end of man's foolish endeavor to build a world without God and in opposition to God.

20:1 And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key to the Abyss and a great chain in his hand. 2 And he seized the dragon, that old serpent, who is the Devil, that is, Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him into the Abyss and locked him up and put a seal on him, so that he could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years were finished. And after that he must be let loose *for* a little while.

4 And I saw thrones and those who were sitting on them. And authority to judge was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the witness of Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or in their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. 5 But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is he who will have a part in the first resurrection. On such *people* the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him a thousand years.

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be let loose from his prison, 8 and will go out to deceive the nations that are in the four quarters of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for battle. The number of them is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they proceeded across earth's wide expanse and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. Then fire came down from God out of heaven and consumed them. 10 And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

This chapter divides into two portions: The millennium (vs 1-10), and the final judgment (vs 11-15).

The word millennium is the name given to the thousand year reign of Christ and His saints described in the opening verses of this chapter. It comes from two Latin words — mille, which means a thousand, and annus, a year. The words "thousand years" are used

six times in the first seven verses — a thing very remarkable and emphatic . I believe these years are to be taken literally. There is nothing in the context to suggest that this time period should be regarded symbolically, nor is there any parallel passage in the Bible that indicates such a thing. I believe also that this reign of Christ and His saints will occur after His second coming and will be over this present earth. A number of writers on prophetic subjects deny this. They teach that the reign of Christ and His saints is going on now, that Satan is bound now, and that when Christ comes there will be the final judgment and both the saved and the lost will enter into the eternal state.

However, this reign of Christ in chapter 20 follows directly after the coming of Christ and the destruction of the beast and his armies described in chapter 19. There is not the slightest suggestion that the events in these chapters do not follow each other in perfect succession in time. In fact, verse 4 of chapter 20 clearly shows that the millennium occurs after the beast has come to power and made martyrs. As we have seen, the beast is the personal Antichrist who will arise at the end of this age. This fact alone surely indicates that the thousand-year reign of Christ is still in the future. And we must not ignore clues like this if we hope to understand this portion. Also let us remind ourselves again that all the events of both of these chapters belong to the third great division of the Revelation — “the things which shall be after these things” (the development of things in the churches). The reign of Christ revealed in chapter 20 was not something that was going on when John was given the Revelation.

For a further discussion of the millennium and reasons why I think the reign of Christ on this earth is future, see Appendix E.

Now let us examine some of the details of this chapter.

The binding of Satan

Some writers teach that this binding of Satan took place at Christ's first coming. I think it is clear that this description refers to the future. It is true, of course, that Christ's sacrifice on Calvary is the source of this binding. He then redeemed the earth and laid the foundation for Satan's final overthrow (John 16: 11; Col 2: 15; Heb 2: 14; 1 John 3: 8). He could say “Now the ruler of this world is cast out” (John 12: 31) — even though Satan continues to this day as the god of this world (2 Cor 4: 4), and the “ruler of the power of the air” who still works in the children of disobedience (Eph 2: 2). But Satan's complete binding is still in the future, just as some other blessings Christ made possible on Calvary are still in the future

(such as the saints' perfection in resurrected and transformed bodies, and a creation released from bondage — Rom 8:20-23). The language used of Satan's binding here in chapter 20 makes it plain that it will be in the future.

(1) He is to be bound by an angel with a great chain. Would such language be used if the binding referred to Christ's work during His first coming? What did an angel have to do with that? Some suggest this angel must be Christ at His first coming, but there is nothing whatever in the text to indicate this. The symbol of a "great chain" also seems to suggest something more than simply interfering with his activities during this age.

(2) Also Satan is to be "loosed" at the end of the millennium for "a little season" (v 3). If the binding here referred only to the victory of Christ at the cross or at His resurrection, Satan could never be loosed at all, not even for "a little season". The work of Christ on the Cross can never be undone or reversed, no, not for a moment.

(3) Satan will be shut up in the Abyss. This is the realm of the dead and the prison house of spirits (see pages 151,152). In the act of the angel in this verse we see a large advance over the scene in 12:9. There the devil is cast out of heaven to this earth where he is permitted to persecute the people of God. Here he is cast from the earth (the angel came down from heaven to lay hold on him) into the Abyss where he will be inactive. That is why in v 7 the Abyss is called Satan's "prison". The angel will "lock him up" and "set a seal on him". This language surely indicates, if any language can, that he is to be completely immobilized as far as the earth is concerned. One who is in prison is not free to walk about outside the walls. The devil is not to be somewhat bound — he is to be completely bound.

Now we know that in this Church age Satan is not in the Abyss, not in prison, not completely bound. We know this because it is revealed in the Bible. "Be sober-minded, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil, walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Satan is still able to hinder Christian workers (1 Thess 2:18), takes foolish people captive at his will (2 Tim 2:26), puts lies into peoples' hearts (Acts 5:3), tempts believers (1 Cor 7:5), and blinds the minds of unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4). Paul in Rom 16:20 says "The God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly" — thereby signifying that he had not yet been crushed under their feet. But why a hundred references?

Everywhere in the New Testament we see Satan active on earth, and not bound and sealed in the Abyss.

(4) Also during the 1,000 years reign of Christ Satan will have no more opportunity to “deceive the nations”. This is a thing he does throughout this age and will continue to do till the end of the age. We know this because God has revealed it to us — “the devil, and Satan, who deceives the whole world” (Rev 12:9). The nations are certainly included in the world. Other references such as 2 Cor 4:4; 11:14, and 2 Thess 2:9 teach the same thing. Of course he cannot deceive the elect of God so as to keep them from the truth that saves them. But this he never was able to do either before the cross or after it. But the nations as a whole he continues to deceive. It is true that the message of salvation is now sent into all the world to be preached among all nations in a way not seen before Christ’s death on the cross. But this is not because Satan is now bound, but because in the plan of God the fullness of time has come to do this (Eph 3:1-10).

It certainly seems very clear, therefore, that Satan is not yet in his prison. It is perhaps surprising that some writers teach that he is. Even the context would suggest otherwise. In chapter 19 we see Christ coming and conquering His enemies, the beast and the false prophet. But where is the greatest enemy of all, the one who has given power to the two beasts? This passage answers this question. He will not escape, but will be taken and imprisoned until the end of the millennium.

The reign of the saints

John saw “thrones and those who were sitting on them”. Some have taught that these thrones are in heaven. For example, Hendriksen says that according to the Revelation the throne of Christ and His people is always in heaven. He then gives these references — 1:4; 3:21; 4:2ff. However, 1:4 speaks of the throne of God the Father. 3:21 shows that the Father’s throne and Christ’s throne are different thrones and says nothing about where the throne of Christ and His people will be. And 4:2ff again speaks only of the Father’s throne. There is not a single reference in the Revelation or in the Bible (that I have been able to find) that the throne of Christ’s people will be in heaven.

Hendriksen says again that it is safe to say that the thousand-year reign takes place in heaven. But it is never safe to say something that the text does not say, and the text here says not a word about heaven. Both the text and the context indicate that this reign of Christ and His people will be on earth.

(1) In 19 Christ is seen returning with His saints to the earth. His throne will be set up here, according to Matt 25: 31,32:

“When the Son of man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of His glory, and all nations will be gathered to his presence”.

This should be connected with Rev 3:21. At that time the promise of the Lord Jesus to His disciples will be fulfilled: “In the renewal when the Son of man sits on the throne of His glory, you also will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28). The return of Christ with His saints is to the earth (1 Thess 3: 13; 4: 14), and His throne will be on earth, and on the earth He will reign and His saints with Him. And I think it is something wonderfully fitting that our Lord Jesus should reign in glory in the same earth that once despised, rejected, and murdered Him.

(2) The nations that Satan has been deceiving, the Abyss where he is to be bound, the nations that he will be permitted no longer to deceive are all connected with this present earth. It would be a very strange thing if the thrones were not here as well.

(3) The nations that Satan manages to deceive after the thousand-year reign are certainly on the earth, and they go up and surround “the camp of the saints and the beloved city”, and “fire came down from God out of heaven and consumed them” (vs 8,9). The language used here is further proof that the camp of the saints, is on earth, because fire comes down from God out of heaven to destroy their enemies.¹

The first Resurrection

In verse 4 John also saw “the souls of those who had been beheaded. . . .And they came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years”. When he says that he saw these souls and they

¹ Some, using 2 Pet. 3:10-13, have taught that at the return of Christ the present earth will be destroyed and the new earth created — thus leaving no room for a millennium. However, that passage does not give the exact time of earth’s destruction — it is merely placed sometime in “the day of the Lord”. The Day of the Lord can mean much more than that period of wrath that ends this present age. It may mean the entire time of Christ’s manifestation and glory to this present earth. In this way it may, for all we know, refer to the complete future thousand year reign. For it is in that same chapter of 2 Peter that we have the phrase (remarkably) “one day is with the Lord as a thousand years” (3:8).

came to life, he is not saying merely that souls which leave the body are alive somewhere. He has amply recorded this truth throughout the Revelation and there is no point in saying it here. Nor is he saying that they have spiritually regenerated or resurrected from spiritual death. That is plain enough if they have become martyrs for Jesus. Surely the evidence indicates that the souls of these believers are reunited with their bodies to live on the earth again.

Some teach that because only “souls” are referred to here that we must not think of the resurrection of bodies, even though verse 5 calls it the “first resurrection”. According to this view these verses mean either the resurrection of souls from death in sin to spiritual life (regeneration), or to the death of the body when the soul “rises up” to heaven (!) (Lenski). They think the thousand years are symbolic of this whole present age of grace. One by one people are regenerated. One by one they die physically and go to heaven where they now reign with Christ. R. C. H. Lenski says, “The souls of the saints in heaven thus rule in the whole heavenly fullness of their exaltation”. He even includes the saints on earth now in this reign — “God’s saints here on earth begin this rule because they have the Word which contains the divine will and its verdicts. Every one of us who believes and confesses this Word, who preaches, teaches, supports, and lives this Word, by this Word now already judges the world and thus rules in royalty” (The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation, page 584).

If John spoke of “souls” in v 4 and stopped there, we might possibly think of a reign of disembodied souls sometime in the future. But he goes on to say “they come to life”, and then in verse 5 defines what he means by this coming to life. Let us carefully observe the following points about the first resurrection.

(1) This first resurrection takes place after the death of some at the hands of “the beast”. They refuse to worship him or receive his mark and so meet death at his hands. As we have already seen, “the beast” is none other than the Antichrist who will come at the end of this age. Since this is true the first resurrection simply cannot refer to any event whatever during these past centuries.

(2) This first resurrection seemingly takes place after the second coming of Christ in chapter 19, after the armies of the beast and false prophet have been defeated and they themselves have been cast into the lake of fire. We should not be led astray by the chapter division here. There is nothing whatever to show that the events in chapter 20 do not follow on immediately after the events in chapter 19. There is no indication at all in the text that 20:1-6 jumps clear

back to the beginning of this age of grace. I think it is straining the natural way of reading and understanding chapters 19 and 20.

(3) There is elsewhere nothing in Scripture (that I have found) about the saints sitting on thrones in heaven and reigning now. When Lenski (and others) says that the souls of the saints who have died now sit on thrones and rule in heaven he does not find it in this text. Verses 4 to 6 say nothing at all about heaven. It simply states that the saints will reign. The context indicates, as I have shown above, that the reign will be on earth. The book of the Revelation elsewhere pictures the saints in heaven but they are not sitting on thrones or reigning. If anything, quite the opposite (see 6:9-11). It is also an interesting fact that believers are not promised anywhere in the Bible that they will sit on thrones in heaven or reign there.

In any case, how can the saints be judged, rewarded, and reigning now before the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of their bodies? The Bible teaches, as far as I am able to see, that the rewarding and reigning of saints is at the time of the second coming, not before it. See Matt 19:28 in connection with Matt 25:31,32; Matt 16:27; 1 Cor 3:13-15. In the Revelation it is after the sounding of the seventh trump — 11:15-18, at the return of Christ — 22:12.

(4) Verse 4 speaks also of “judgment” being given to the saints. The saints will indeed judge the world (1 Cor 6:2,3). But is there any verse that clearly teaches they are doing so now? Judging is reserved for the day of judgment after the return of Christ. Paul in the above reference puts the judgment in the future, not in the present. Daniel 7:22 ff depicts it as coming after the appearance of the “Ancient of days” to destroy Antichrist.

(5) There is nothing in these verses (20:4-6) about people one by one believing, dying, and going to heaven to reign throughout the thousand year period, as this interpretation would have it. On the contrary, the language seems to suggest that all of the saints begin their reign together with Christ at the start of the thousand years.

(6) Verse 5 makes very clear John’s meaning when he says he saw souls and “they came to life”. For here he calls it “the first resurrection” and speaks of another group of people whom he calls “the rest of the dead”. Lenski declares who they are — “all those who died in unbelief”. This is true. They do not share in the first resurrection because they have not put their trust in Jesus Christ.

These people do not come to life again until the thousand years are over. In other words, those who do not “live” at the beginning of the thousand years do “come to life again” when the thousand years are finished. We must observe this. In the way John uses the word resurrection here none of those dead partakes of it for the whole one thousand year period, but afterwards they do. This is the force of the word “until”. The rest of the dead live “again” after the thousand years in exactly the same way that the others did before. (The same Greek word is used for both groups — *ezesan*). And before they come to life both groups are dead in exactly the same way, for the second group is called the rest of the dead.

So the “first resurrection” cannot refer to the regeneration of souls in this present age or to their going to heaven to reign. For what is true of the first group at the beginning of the thousand years will be true of the second group after the thousand years are over. And we must not think that those who have died in unbelief will either be born again or go to heaven at some future time. Their future will be just the opposite (see 20:12-15).

Therefore the phrase “the first resurrection” means simply what the plain usual sense of the word indicates — dead bodies being raised and reunited with souls. This passage of Scripture clearly teaches that there will be two resurrections, separated by a period of time. John 5:28,29 is not at variance with this. John 5:25 speaks of an hour that has now lasted nearly 2000 years. So it would not be impossible for the hour mentioned in v 28 to span 1000 years. Both verses obviously refer to a general truth without pin-pointing the time or manner of fulfillment. When Christ returns, the dead in Christ will rise to reign with Him for one thousand years. At the end of that time there will be another resurrection that will include all those who have not been raised before. This, it seems to me, is the inescapable meaning of this passage of Scripture.²

Spurgeon in one of his sermons says, “Brethren, cannot you perceive at a glance that this first resurrection is a resurrection

² “The text undoubtedly reads that there are to be two resurrections” (A. Kuyper). The well-known words of Dean Alford are always worth quoting: ‘If, in a passage where two resurrections are mentioned, where certain *psychai ezesan* at the first, and the rest of the *nekroi ezesan* only at the end of a specified period after the first, — if in such a passage the first resurrection may be understood to mean *spiritual* rising with Christ, while the second means *literal* rising from the grave, — then there is an end of all significance in language, and Scripture is wiped out as a definite testimony to anything” (Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*).

of men? And is it not a literal resurrection too?" Again, "The fact is, in reading this passage with unbiased judgment, having no theory to defend — and I assure you I have none, for I know but very little about the mysteries to come — I could not help seeing there are two literal resurrections here spoken of". The trouble is that some do come to this passage with theories to defend and so refuse the plain meaning of it.

(7) There are other Scriptures besides Revelation 20 which at least suggest two literal resurrections. Luke 20: 35 speaks of some who will be accounted worthy of a resurrection from the dead. This use of the Greek word "ek" here implies, in the words of Alfred Plummer, that "some from among the dead are raised, while others as yet are not". Moreover, if there is to be a general resurrection of all men at the same time how can Jesus speak of some being accounted worthy of the resurrection? Philippians 3: 11 suggests the same thing. If all men are to be raised in one general resurrection why should Paul earnestly strive to attain it? 1 Cor 15: 23,24 seems to teach that resurrection is in three stages — first Christ; second, those who are His at His coming; third, the end (when it would seem the remainder are raised). Luke 14: 14 seems to distinguish a special resurrection of "the just".

(8) In verse 6 we are told that the second death has no power over the ones who take part in the first resurrection. Never will they be in separated from the presence of God. Blessed and holy indeed are they!

The exact time of the first resurrection is not recorded, but it is evident that it occurs before the millennium begins and sometime after the beast has come to power, for some of those who share in this first resurrection are beheaded by the beast. If the Rapture of the Church and the first resurrection are identical (and is it not reasonable and Scriptural to believe this?) this would mean that the rapture occurs after at least a part (and apparently all) of the Tribulation under Antichrist.

Those who insist that the Rapture comes before the Tribulation are really saying that there are three resurrections. But if this is true how can the one here in chapter 20 be called "the first" if another one precedes it? And how can the last one, which occurs after the millenium, be called the "second" if it is actually the third?

We have referred several times in this book to the rapture of the Church, but have not placed it definitely at any time or season. This is not because I do not have opinion on the matter, but that I will not try to make my opinion a doctrine that everyone else must

believe. It may be that it is not possible to know beyond doubt just where the Rapture will occur in the chronology of the end times. Nothing is lost by not knowing the exact time or sequence of events. We are waiting patiently, expectantly for our Lord from heaven, wanting to be prepared for tribulation if it is His good will that we go through tribulation, and willing to escape it if it is His good pleasure for us to escape it. Yes, and I believe we should be content not to know how to perfectly decide this question if it is His good pleasure for us not to know.³

The millennium draws to a close. The nations have had one thousand years of peace and prosperity, and perfect government. Surely now, even if Satan were to be loosed, he would find it hard going to deceive people anymore. Not at all! He goes out and quickly gathers a multitude the number of whom is “like the sand of the sea” (v 8). Fallen man in all ages including the millennium is no different.

But how is it possible that so many will rebel against Christ after a rule of universal righteousness, peace and prosperity? We have no reason to think that everyone in the millennium will be regenerated, will inwardly receive Christ as their Lord and gladly do His will. Even in the millennium there will be judgments of drought and other punishments, sin and death (see Appendix E). People then as now will be born into the world with sinful natures, and as they grow to adulthood will have to be taught the truth and will personally have to decide for it or against it in their hearts. We are told that Christ will rule with “a rod of iron”. This suggests that not everyone will joyfully accept His rule. Their sinful hearts will long, perhaps subconsciously, for what they will think of as “freedom” to express themselves. Outwardly they will be compelled to submit, but inwardly they will not have the disposition to do so gladly. At the end of the 1000 years many will reveal this mind of the flesh when Satan is released once more and stirs them up to rebellion.

There may be a number of reasons for the millennial reign of Christ and the release of Satan at the end, about which we know nothing. George E. Ladd suggests one purpose may be this: God will reveal more clearly His justice in the condemnation of sinners.

³ But what a day that will be whenever it is! Historicists, and Preterists, and Idealists, and Futurists who truly love Christ; and Post-millennialists, A millennialists, and Pre-millennialists who have trusted in the Son of God; and Post-tribulationists, Pre-tribulationists, Mid-tribulationists, and Partial Rapturists who are cleansed and renewed by the grace of God — all caught up to live forever joyously and harmoniously together!

He writes in his commentary: "Even after Christ Himself has reigned over men during the millennium, when the deceiver is set free from his prison he finds the hearts of men still responsive to his seductions. This makes it plain that the ultimate root of sin is not poverty or inadequate social conditions or an unfortunate environment; it is the rebelliousness of the human heart. The millennium and the subsequent rebellion of men will prove that men cannot blame their sinfulness on their environment or unfortunate circumstances; in the final judgment, the decrees of God will be shown to be just and righteous" (page 269).

Others may have conceived of different reasons for Christ's reign and Satan's final effort. But truly it is not necessary to think of any reasons at all. If God has decreed it He certainly has good reasons for it, though He might not tell us a single one of them. And from the evidence available to us we should see that He has decreed it.

This last rebellion closes the 1000 year reign and once again God rains fire out of heaven to devour His enemies (v 9). Now at last comes the final doom of the dragon, that old serpent, called the devil and Satan. He is cast into the lake of fire where the beast and the false prophet are and shall be tormented forever and ever (v 10).

The great white throne

20:11 And I saw a great white throne and him who was sitting on it. From his face earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them. 12 Then I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the book of life*. And the dead were judged by the things written in the books, according to their works. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and everyone was judged according to his deeds. 14 And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 And whoever was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

Now we come to God's final judgment of men, and the final dissolution of the heavens and earth as we know them.

John sees a great white throne. It is great, large, majestic, perfectly suitable to Him who sits on it. It is white, which speaks of the spotless purity, the holy judgment of the One who sits there. It is a throne, which speaks of His sovereign power. The great King of the ages, the Ruler of the worlds sits there. From other Scriptures it becomes clear that this One is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ.

“For the Father judges no man, but has committed all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22. See also Acts 17:31).

The Judge is not described but the power of His face is recorded. His face must appear as John saw it in chapter one, “like the sun shining in its strength”. From that awful brightness, that holy splendor, the heaven and earth flee away. They will shudder and collapse at His glance, shall shrink from that fiery countenance and utterly dissolve. “And no place was found for them”. In that future age these present familiar things of time will have no part. God will have done with it, roll it up like the scroll of a finished story and put it away forever.

Who are these who stand before this great, white throne? They are the dead. Men and women who have lived and died in their sins. Dead but not unconscious, dead but not annihilated, dead but come forth from their graves to experience that which is called “the second death”, eternal separation from God. They are all classes of people from all ages of the world, the small and the great. None will be too great to excuse himself, none too small to be passed over — Pilate no longer able to wash his hands of the matter; Judas greeting the Son of God again, but not with a kiss; Caiaphas, not judging this time but judged. Modern mass murderers like Hitler and Stalin will be there. Adolph Eichmann, largely responsible for the murder of millions of Jews during World War II, will stand there — he who said, “I will jump into my grave laughing, for to know that I have six million people on my conscience will be a source of extraordinary satisfaction”.

But not only they; all who have died without Christ, all the dead in trespasses and sins, will be called to this judgment. They do not come by choice. How gladly would they cling to their graves! How gladly flee away with the vanishing earth and dissolving heavens! But they are there because God has appointed it (John 5:28,29; Heb 9:27), and with what wildly beating hearts they come, with what paleness on every face, with what shrinking from the gaze of God!

The books

The books (notice the plural) are not described but we know from other Scriptures what they will contain.

(1) Every idle word (Matt 12:36). Every word men have spoken — every lie, every curse, every slander, every foolish remark, all idle gossip, all hard things spoken against God and man — everything will come out. Even men have devised ways of recording the voices of others. Has God not been able to do the same?

(2) The secrets of men (Rom 2:16; Luke 12:2). What men have done and thought and said hiddenly, what they have been ashamed to do openly, all this will be laid naked and bare.

(3) “According to their works” (v 12). All the deeds a man has ever done will come with him to the throne of judgment. Men have devised ways to carefully record the acts of others. Has God been unable to do the same?

These books will contain the biography of every man who stands there. That record will be measured against the Word of God. The Lord Jesus said, “He who rejects me, and does not receive my words, has one who judges him. The word that I have spoken, the same will judge him in the last day” (John 12:48). If the Word of God is against us now, it will be against us then; if we do not measure up to its requirements now, we will fail then.

This judgment will be in perfect accord with the conscience and the memory of the person judged. Things in that day will seem exactly as they are. No hiding, no excuses, no possibility of deceit, no putting up a good front, no defense, no bribe, no probation, no appeal will be possible. The consciences and memories of those there will compel them to admit the truth of the records. “Every mouth stopped” (Rom 3:19) is God’s purpose now that they might be saved; then that they might be condemned who now refuse His offer of salvation.

Will some try to defend themselves? “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? And in your name cast out devils? And in your name done many wonderful works?” (Matt 7:22). There will be another book that will be the final word on such matters. It is the book of life. “And whoever was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire”. This is the end of the judgment of the great white throne.

Believe the Word of God. This is not the opinion of some man, the distorted vision of a religious fanatic. This is the Revelation of Jesus Christ which the eternal God gave to Him. These are the true sayings of God. Who are these who are thus thrown into fire? The unbelieving, the sinful, the worldly, they who have rejected Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

“How they deserve the deepest hell
That slight the joys above;
What chains of vengeance must they feel
Who break the bonds of love.”

The sea, the grave and Hades (not hell) will all give up their dead, and death and Hades themselves will be thrown with their dead into the lake of fire. And so the last enemy, death, will be destroyed (1 Cor 15:25,26).

The second death does not (anymore than the first) imply annihilation of the person suffering it. Death is not the extinction of one's being. It is the separation of the spirit from the body and the separation of the person from other living beings. The second death is separation of a worse kind. It is eternal separation of the sinner from God who is the source of life and joy and blessedness. The man or woman who rejects Christ here cannot have Him there. Instead, such people will be punished with “everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power” (2 Thess 2:9).

There is no hope after death. As a tree falls so will it lie. There is no salvation, no repentance in the grave. But there is hope for the living. We can have the record of our past blotted out. We can have an end made to the whole sad story of our rebellion and failure (Acts 3:19; 1 John 1:7-9). But if we would avoid the throne of judgment we must come now to the throne of grace. The Lord Jesus said: “Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes in him who sent me, has everlasting life and will not be condemned, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24).

John stands in vision now beyond the millennium, beyond the judgment of the great white throne, and sees a new order of things appear before his wondering eyes.

21:1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And a sea no longer existed. 2 And I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven which said, "Look, God's dwelling place is with men, and he will live with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them, and be their God. 4 And God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. And no longer will there be death, or sorrow, or crying. And no longer will there be pain, for the former things have passed away."

5 And he who sat on the throne said, "See, I make all things new." And he said to me, "Write *this*, for these words are true and faithful."

6 And he said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will freely give from the fountain of the water of life. 7 He who overcomes will inherit all things. I will be his God, and he will be my son. 8 But the cowardly, and the unbelieving, and the vile, and murderers, and sexually immoral persons, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, will have their part in the lake which burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Some have thought that there will be altogether a fresh and new creation that will be formed only after the utter destruction of the old. Others seem sure that it will be but the old creation purified by fire and restored. The language suggests that it will be completely new. 20:11 states that the old earth and heaven will flee away and no place will be found for them. And 21:5 says "See, I make all things new". There is no value in making this a matter of dispute. However God may be pleased to bring it about it is clear that there will be vast changes from the world that we know now.

It is impossible to conceive clearly what beauty will adorn that new world. How fair and beautiful the present creation is with its snow-capped mountains, wooded hills, blue lakes and sparkling streams, glowing sunsets, and clear night skies. If the earth under a curse and defiled by its inhabitants can be so lovely, what pictures can suggest to our minds the beauty of that new earth untouched by sin and lovingly made by the Almighty Creator as the future home for Himself and His redeemed people?

He next sees the city of God, the new Jerusalem, the central dwelling place of God in that new heaven and earth throughout those eternal ages of the future. And he hears a great voice from heaven proclaiming in words true and faithful one of the most glorious truths that ever entered the mind of man: "God's dwelling place is with men, and he will live with them". This verse, together with the similar verses, 22:3-5, is the glorious climax of the Revelation and the whole Bible.

God's delight has ever been with the sons of men (Prov 8:31), and from the beginning of man's creation till now He has sought the fellowship of human creatures. This is a very sweet theme on which to meditate. We see God coming to Adam in the garden of Eden and communing with him there. It was God who gave him instruction concerning the trees of the garden and it was in God's presence that Adam gave names to all the beasts of the fields and to all the birds of the air. It was God also who came to Adam to create for him a wife.

After the fall God, instead of forsaking the guilty pair, came calling them to Himself. "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8).

Sin made this marvelous desire for fellowship with man more difficult (if I may so speak) for God to fulfill. But even after mankind had greatly corrupted itself He still sought that individual here and there who would walk with Him. So it is written, "Enoch walked with God; then he was not seen *again*, for God took him". And thus God came to Noah and to Abraham and to Moses. But God desired a nation, a whole people with whom He could dwell. He chose Israel and gave them a plan for a tabernacle — "I will dwell among the children of Israel and be their God. And they will know that I am the Lord their God who brought them up out of the land of Egypt, so that I might may dwell among them" (Ex 29:45,46). So when the tabernacle was finished we read, "Then a cloud covered the

tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex 40:34).

Afterwards, when Israel was in the land, Solomon built a temple for the glory of God. He had God's promise that if they obeyed His laws He would dwell among the children of Israel and would not forsake them (1 Kings 6:13). So when the king of Israel had finished that magnificent structure, God came to take up His dwelling in it. "The cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord" (1 Kings 8:10,11).

Later in Israel's history, in a time of great apostasy and rebellion, Ezekiel the prophet saw that glory slowly, reluctantly depart — God sorrowful to the last to withdraw His presence from Israel (Ezek 9:3; 10:4,18; 11:23).

But no rebuff, no rebellion could destroy the desire of our God to dwell with them. "Love is strong as death. . . many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it" (Song of Songs 8:6,7). Again God came down in love to walk in the midst of His people: "The Word was made flesh, and lived [or tabernacled] among us. . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Yes, in Christ God's delight was with the sons of men and with them He lived and ate and talked and walked until the day that they rejected Him and crucified Him.

Even then the unwearied love of God had devised another way to dwell with man. At Pentecost there came "a sound from heaven like a rushing, mighty wind. . . and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:2-4). God came rushing, swift to fill His house once it was prepared.

"He came sweet influence to impart,
A gracious, willing Guest,
While He can find one humble heart
Wherein to rest".

H. Auber

And now the Church is the temple of God and His dwelling place on earth, "As God has said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them" (2 Cor 6:16). The saints are "being built together for a

dwelling place of God through the Spirit" (Eph 2:22), and individual believers are to know the presence of Christ living in them, and their hearts are to be His home (Eph 3:17).

Oh, this strange and wonderful desire of God, this remarkable delight with the children of men! But even yet the arrangement is not ideal. Sin interrupts, the flesh retards this fellowship of believers with their heavenly Father. They see but darkly as in a glass, and enjoy His presence but poorly and intermittently.

But at the end the God of glory will satisfy all His desire, and will live manifestly, continuously, eternally with men redeemed and made forever sinless and blissfully happy. With His own hand God will wipe away all tears from their eyes and will forever abolish all pain and sorrow and crying and death. All these are the result of sin, and sin will never have place in that new heaven and new earth.

This is the believer's prospect. Lest any should think that these things are visionary and imaginary and not eternal realities, that great voice from Him who sits in heaven assures John and all who will listen to Him, "These words are true and faithful". To Him who is Alpha and Omega it is all the same as finished, "It is done". Nor can that gracious One announce such glories without once more sending out a loving invitation to all — "To him who is thirsty I will freely give from the fountain of the water of life" (v 6). Let the person thirsty for truth, thirsty for eternal satisfaction, thirsty for God, let him come and take this water of life without money and without price; let him drink and live forever.

In verses 7 and 8 we see the whole of mankind divided into two general classes — the saved and the lost, those who take the water of life and those who do not, the overcomers and the overcome. There seems to be further evidence here that overcomers are nothing more or less than genuine Christians.

(a) He who thirsts and takes the water of life in verse 6 and the overcomer in verse 7 seem to be identical.

(b) That which is promised to the overcomer here is elsewhere promised to all believers; "He who overcomes will inherit all things". A similar declaration is given to even the carnal believers at Corinth (see 1 Cor 3:21-23). "I will be his God, and he will be my son". This is one of the great blessings of the new covenant in which all true believers participate (Heb 8:10; 2 Cor 6:16:18).

(c) The overcomer is not distinguished here from any other type of believer but only from the lost. The language leaves the

impression that if one is not an overcomer who inherits all things, then he is among the unsaved who will have their inheritance in the lake of fire.

In closing this section, once again the terrible fate of the wicked is brought before us. Observe that to be fearful and unbelieving is to be partner with the vile, the murderers and the sexually immoral, and that a liar shares the same doom as the sorcerer and idolater. To be cowardly in spiritual matters, to be afraid to believe and confess Christ before one's friends and neighbors is to be as worthy of condemnation as though one killed a man or spent his living with harlots. And to remain unbelieving is to commit a sin that God cannot forgive — a sin that denies the veracity of God's Word and refuses His offer of mercy through Christ. Let no one speak of these sins as though they were less than murder and idolatry. Liars have a foremost place among the lost. They are pointed out here, in 21:27 and in 22:15.

The new Jerusalem

21:9 And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, came to me and talked with me. He said, "Come here. I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. And her light was like a very precious gemstone, like a crystal-clear jasper. 12 *The city* had a great, high wall with twelve gates. Twelve angels were at the gates, and names were written on *the gates, the names* of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel. 13 Three gates were on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15 He who talked with me had a gold rod to measure the city, its gates and its wall. 16 The city is laid out like a square, and its length is the same as its breadth. And he measured the city with the rod, twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth and height are equal. 17 And he measured its wall, a hundred and forty-four cubits, *according to man's measurement and that of the angel.* 18 The wall was built of jasper, and the city was pure gold as clear

as glass. 19 And the foundations of the wall of the city were embellished with all kinds of precious stones. The first foundation was *with* jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprasus, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold like transparent glass.

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 And the city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it and the Lamb is its light. 24 And the nations of the saved will walk in its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory and honour into it. 25 And its gates will never be shut by day (for there will be no night there), 26 and they will bring the glory and honour of the nations into it. 27 And no defiling thing will ever enter it, or *anyone* who practices abomination or lying, but *only* those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

22:1 And he showed me a pure river of *the* water of life, clear as crystal, issuing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, 2 in the middle of the *city's* street. On each side of the river *there* was the tree of life, producing twelve *kinds* of fruits and yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there will be no curse whatever, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city. And his servants will serve him, 4 and they will see his face, and his name *will be* in their foreheads. 5 And there will be no night there, and they will need no lamp or light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

We come now to the final vision of the book and one of the most glorious of all. The city of God and eternal life in that city — these are the grand subjects now brought to John's attention. They have also been the great objects of the believer's hope from the beginning until this present day. No doubt this is the city mentioned in other Scriptures. Abraham "looked for a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:10). Now the spiritual offspring of Abraham long for a better country,

that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city" (Heb 11:16). See also Heb 12:22 and 13:14. At last the city is described which mortal eyes had never seen.

(1) It seems evident that a literal city is meant. It was a literal city that believers of old sought, as we see from the above Scriptures. The Lord Jesus has promised His people "In my Father's house are many rooms. If this were not so, I would have told you" (John 14:2). But we should note what the angel said to John here in v 9, "Come here, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." The city is the Lamb's wife in the same sense that Rome is the harlot women of chapters 17, 18. Rome is a literal city that represents the false church. The New Jerusalem is a literal city that represents the true Church. When we speak of New Delhi or Tokyo or Washington we may be thinking of the literal cities and nothing else. But we usually mean more than that. We may mean the whole government of their respective countries, and all the peoples they represent. Likewise, when we say "Mecca" we may be thinking of the whole religion of Islam and its followers. So the description John gives suggests the future glory and splendor of the true Church as well as the literal city.¹

(2) It is a city of tremendous proportions (vs 16,17). Lying foursquare its length and breadth and height are equal. It is not altogether clear whether the measurement of 12,000 furlongs refers to the length of one side only or the total circumference of the city. In the one case the city would extend 1500 miles in each direction and its base would cover an area double the entire area occupied by India today. In the other case the dimensions would be 375 miles in each direction — still a mighty city.

It is also difficult to determine from the few facts given whether the city is in the form of a cube or a pyramid. It is perhaps easier to envision a perfect pyramid or an inverted cone lifting its mighty summit into the new heavens as high as the city is long. Winding down the golden mountain is the golden street and the river of God. However, it is true that the symbolism of a perfect cube is found in the Scriptures in relation to God's dwelling place (for

¹ When I say a "literal city" I do not mean that it must be "material" as we understand the word now. Heaven is without question a literal place and yet may be, for all we know, composed of elements vastly unlike those that make up the rude and solid materials with which we build on earth.

example, the holy of holies in the temple was a cube — 1 Kings 6:20), and the city may be in that form, even though it is very difficult to form a picture of such a city in our minds.

(3) It is a city the brightness and splendor of which are almost indescribable. Its glory is the very glory of God, and its light as the brilliant reflection of a crystal (v 11). The city is built of pure gold like clear glass and the wall of 216 feet (whether this is the height or width of the wall is not clear), is a brilliant diamond-like jasper. The gates are like massive pearls and the foundations are garnished with all kinds of precious stones — sapphires, emeralds, amethysts — blue, green, purple, red, clear and alive with light and glory. How the pure light catches in these lovely gems, refracts and reflects all the colors of the rainbow! This is a part of the glory which God has given His people; this is the dwelling place that God has prepared for Himself and for those who trust in Him before the children of men.

(4) It is the capital city of the new creation, the eternal home of God and the saints (22:3-5). There is the throne of God and of the Lamb. There the saints of the ages will serve Him. There they shall reign through all ages to come. There the name of God will be written on their foreheads — that is, the character of God will be fully manifest in them and they will belong to Him forever. And there they shall see the face of God.

Verses 21:24-26 and 22:2 speak of the nations of those who are saved. Some, thinking that there could be no nations in the ages of eternity, have taken this as proof that conditions prevailing during the millennium are described here. It is no easy matter to speak with certainty on the relation of the millennium to the eternal ages, or to determine the exact meaning of each Scripture that refers to these two periods. In chapters 21 and 22 there may be certain descriptions that have a double reference and apply both to the thousand years reign and to that which follows. There certainly will be nations in the millennium, and that which defiles and works abomination or makes a lie (v 27) will be excluded from the city of God. But it is not impossible that there will be nations in the eternal ages on the new earth — that is, saints formed into various groups and inhabiting celestial lands surrounding the new Jerusalem. It is my opinion that this is the correct explanation. We read in 22:5, “they will reign forever and ever” — indicating that the eternal state is in view.

“Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God” (Ps 87:3) — things of glory beyond our ability to describe or envision. In that

new creation, in that city of God, there will be no temple (21:22), no natural light of sun or moon (21:23), no night (21:25), no sin (21:27), no disease (22:2), no curse (22:3), no rebellion (22:3), no imperfection, no coming short of the glory of God (22:4), no hiding of God's face (22:4), no separation (22:5).

The activities of the saints can be summed up in four words.

(a) They will sing. "The ransomed of the Lord will return, and come to Zion with songs, and everlasting joy on their heads. They will obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isa 35:10). Forever the saints will joyfully hymn their Creator and Father, and their Saviour the Lord Jesus Christ. Can we doubt that this will be with perfect harmonies and with songs of endless variety?

(b) They will serve. Even now the greatest joy that earth affords is found in the hearty service of God. Our joy will be perfect then when we shall serve Him perfectly, without weariness and without fault. We are not told what that service will involve.

(c) They will see. "I pray you, show me your glory"; "You cannot see my face, for there no man will see me, and live" (Ex 33:18-20). But what man in the flesh cannot do, man redeemed, perfected and glorified will be able to do (Matt 5:8; Heb 12:14). Truly "your eyes will see the King in His beauty; they will see the land of far distances" (Isa 33:17).

(d) They will sit enthroned and reign to the ages of the ages.

Who are these who dare to boldly approach the throne and sit as kings forever? Previously they groveled in the dirt, full of sin, disease and death, under the curse of the law and the wrath of God. What has made this vast, this eternal difference? The grace of God, the Lamb of God — He has made all the difference.

"No condemnation now I dread;
 Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
 Alive in Him, my living Head,
 And clothed in righteousness divine,
 Bold I approach the eternal throne,
 And claim the crown, through Christ, my own".

C. Wesley

22:6 And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show to his servants the things which must quickly take place."

7 "Look, I am coming quickly. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

8 And I, John, saw these things and heard *them*. And when I had heard and seen *them*, I prostrated myself to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things. 9 But he said to me, "Beware! Do not do that, for I am a fellow servant with you, and with your brethren 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 at hand. 11 He who is unjust, let him still be unjust, and he who is vile, let him still be vile, and he who is righteous, let him still be righteous, and he who is holy, let him still be holy."

12 "Look, I am coming quickly, and my reward *will be* with me to give every man according to his work. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, *the Beginning and the End*, the First and the Last. 14 Blessed are those who do *according to his commandments*, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. 15 For outside *are dogs*, and sorcerers, and sexually immoral *persons*, and murderers, and idolaters, and whoever loves lies or makes them up. 16 I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify these things to you in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the bright and morning Star."

We have come to the closing portion of this grand book, the Revelation of Jesus Christ. It is likewise the closing words of the whole Bible and so is of great interest and importance. Here we have the very last recorded things God has to say to man.

John has seen in vision the new heaven and the new earth. For a time the city of God in all its radiancy of glory has passed before his astonished and admiring gaze. His hands could almost have handled its celestial substance, his heart has felt the throb of its triumphant life, and his ears have caught the joyful sound of its

inhabitants. Now these vanish as suddenly as they appeared and are gone as a dream in the night, and he is left standing on Patmos' rocky isle in the presence of an angel, and a voice is sounding in his ears. "These sayings are trustworthy and true, and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show to his servants the things which must quickly take place" (v 6).

Thus the Almighty puts His stamp on His book. From chapter one onwards to this closing section there are, as we have seen, striking declarations concerning the faithfulness of God and the truth of this part of His Word. God, knowing from the beginning that it would be neglected, misunderstood, and scorned, has taken this way to arrest the attention of men and impress us with the solemn truth of these holy writings.

I do not doubt that this is also a testimony to the inspiration of the whole Bible. The Revelation is inextricably intertwined with all other portions of holy Scripture and what is true of it is true of them.

John adds his emphatic testimony to the voice of the angel — "I, John, saw these things and heard them". This is the same John who wrote in similar fashion in his first epistle to the Churches — "that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked on, and our hands have handled, of the word of life. . . .that which we have seen and heard we declare to you" (1 John 1:1-3). And the meaning here is the same there. John is a faithful and true witness to the revelations committed to him by his Lord and Saviour.

Here these revelations have so charmed and overcome him that for the second time he falls down to worship the angel who reveals them, and is quickly rebuked for his error. Thus we learn the nature of angels and the nature of demons. Satan and his followers solicit worship, angels reject it. Then flee for your life from any person or group that teaches the veneration or worship of any angel, or spirit, or person, or object, or image other than the Lord God. It is devilish.

John is commanded not to seal the sayings of the prophecy of this book (v 10). This is in contrast with the command given him in chapter 10 when the seven thunders uttered their voices. There the word was "seal up those things which the seven thunders spoke, and do not write them down". Thus the command not to seal the book means that it is to be written and published with nothing concealed.

There is also a striking contrast here with the command given to Daniel, “But you, Daniel, shut away the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end” (Dan 12:4). This meant that the prophecies of Daniel were given in such a way that they could not be understood until a later time. Even Daniel was perplexed by them (12:8,9). But the prophecies revealed to John were to be unsealed. That is, they were given that the servants of God might understand them.

The reason given for this unsealing was this: “The time is at hand.” We won’t repeat here the remarks we made on verse 3 of chapter one. It would seem that these things are always near, always ready to suddenly take place, already prepared for the sudden hour of fulfillment. God wants His people to be ready for them in every generation. For this reason the book is unsealed — in God’s eyes it is wise and needful that each generation of saints, from the writing of the Revelation until this present day, should have the truths of this book plainly before them for their understanding. They are to be occupied with these ultimate realities. The end of all things is to be ever before them. They are to draw inspiration for service, and comfort in suffering from the deep wells of unsealed prophecy. Needless to say “the time is at hand” cannot mean that all the events John saw in vision were to be fulfilled in his generation. This word here comes just after the description of the return of Christ, the millennial kingdom which follows that, and the new heavens and new earth — things, of course, still unfulfilled, but still “at hand.”

Meanwhile, “He who is unjust, let him still be unjust, and he who is vile let him still be vile”, etc (v 11). Does not God desire the repentance and salvation of all? We know that He does. What, then, is the meaning of this verse? It has been suggested that the eternal state is in view — as a man has lived in this life so will he be forever. No doubt this is true, except where grace has canceled the past of the believer; but I doubt if it’s the truth meant here. This statement follows the reference to the unsealing of the book, and precedes the reference to Christ’s second coming as a judge of both the righteous and the evil. The meaning seems to be this: if, in the face of this unsealed book with its descriptions of future glory and its warnings of future punishment, a man chooses to be unjust, if his life choice is to be vile, then let it be. No compulsion will be brought to bear upon him to move him from his determined course. His punishment will be the terrible one of being left to his injustice and vileness, as Pharaoh’s deliberate and willful

hardening of heart was justly punished with further hardening. But let all such know assuredly that the Lord is at the door to punish all those who practice unrighteousness. Yes, “tribulation and anguish *will* come to every soul of man who does evil, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile” (Rom 2:9).

“But glory, honour, and peace, to every person who does good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile. For there is no favoritism with God.” This is the truth again brought to our attention here in the closing chapter of the Bible. This is not the way of salvation — it is the principle of judgment that will underlie God’s final verdict on every human being. Each will receive what he has earned. And this principle is enunciated by Him who is the “the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last”. His judgment will determine the final, eternal position of every person.

In the final analysis, though there will be degrees both of glory and of punishment, all of mankind will be in one of two groups. One group will have the right to “enter in through the gates into the city” (v 14); the other group will be “outside” (v 15). The one group will have the right to enter in because they have done “according to his commandments.” Compare 1 John 2:3-6 and James 2:14-26. Such people have experienced the new birth, have been transformed by the grace of God, and so prove their faith by deeds. They have received the Lord Jesus as their own Lord, and so set out to obey Him. Entering the city will be by grace alone, but by the grace which causes believers to “do according to his commandments”.

All others will be outside. A new word is found in this list of the excluded (v 15), that does not appear in 21:8: “dogs” — persons like the filthy scavengers of the streets of villages in the Orient. In Deut 23:18 the word “dog” indicates a male prostitute. This word connects with v 11 above — “he who is vile let him still be vile.”

For the third time the great sin and danger of either believing or making a lie is emphasized. It thus takes first place among the sins that will bar men from the city of God. Only the truth can make men free (John 8:32), and lies are Satan’s greatest instrument to hold men in bondage. It is only by disbelief or denial of truth that men are lost, and only by belief and acceptance of the truth that they are saved.

So important are the truths just recorded that the Lord Jesus attests them by a personal witness: “I Jesus have sent my angel to testify these things to you in the churches”. This appears the more emphatic by the use of “I Jesus” — the only place in the Bible where

it is found. "These things" — a phrase that surely includes all the visions that make up the book — are to be testified in the churches. So it is plain that the teachings that refer to Antichrist, the Tribulation, and kindred subjects vitally concern Christians now.

The Bible's last Invitation

22:17 "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let him who hears say 'Come.' And let him who is thirsty come. And whoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

Some think that the first two cries of "come" are directed to Christ, the Bright and Morning Star, and express the longing of the Spirit and the Bride for the coming of Christ, and only the last half of the verse is to be properly understood as an appeal to men to come and believe the Gospel. It seems more likely to me that the verse is to be taken as a unit and as an expression of the great invitations that continually sound out to men everywhere from the Spirit of God and the Bride, the true Church.

Here in the last chapter of the Bible we have the last mention of the Spirit. The first is found in the first chapter (Gen 1:2). There He is seen brooding upon the face of the waters. Here He is calling, "Come". This is a part of His ministry through all the ages — to prepare the earth as a dwelling place for God and man, and to call individuals to dwell with God in His habitation.

The Bride also says, "Come". This is the unique ministry of the Church throughout this age. Without hypocrisy or doubting, we can proclaim to all the world that God freely offers life in Christ and that He wants all men to come. Let all who hear the Good News repeat the joyful sound. Let all say "Come" until the whole round world is ringed about with this blessed invitation. Let all men know that whoever is thirsty, whoever is longing for true and abiding and satisfying life, may come and drink freely and deeply at Christ's fountain (John 4:14). None are excluded from the invitation. No blind fate, no binding predestination, can keep you from Him if you will but come. Without money and without price, without hindrance of any kind, the peoples of earth are called to come to Christ and live.

The last warning

22:18 "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book. 19 And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take

away his part from the book of life, and from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.”

Particular emphasis is laid here upon the details of the Revelation and not merely upon its general principles or teachings. The warning is against adding to “these things” (v 18), and taking away from “the words” (v 19) of the book of this prophecy. Such a warning was given to emphasize the importance of the book and to safeguard it against irreverently changing its contents. Surely such a warning is sufficient to deter any genuine believer from falling into this error.

In the light of this warning it is surprising to read in a commentary on the Revelation the following remarks on these verses: “It is not to be interpreted with absolute literalness. It does not refer to each and every individual word of the Revelation. It so happens that the text of the Revelation is, in fact, in a bad condition, and we do not know for certain what the actual wording is. What it does warn against is tampering, interfering with, distorting the teaching which the book contains. . . .it is the truth, and not the wording of the truth which must not be changed.”¹

This remark, and others he makes like it, indicate a low view of Biblical inspiration.

The obvious fact is that we cannot know what the truth is if we do not have the correct wording for it. When words are changed, the meaning is changed. If words are not chosen with great care and if they are not definite in meaning it is impossible to convey written truth exactly. That is why throughout the Scriptures stress is laid upon the very words God has spoken (Ex 4:11-15; Deut 6:6; Ps 12:6; Jer 1:9; Matt 4:4; 5:18; John 10:35; 14:26; 1 Cor 2:13). And that is why the warning is here given against interfering with “the words”. To take away words is to take away truth. Beware of loose views on the inspiration of Bible. For my part I agree perfectly with C.H. Spurgeon: “We contend for every word of the Bible and believe in the verbal, literal inspiration of Holy Scriptures. Indeed, we believe there can be no other kind of inspiration. If the words are taken from us, the exact meaning is of itself lost.”

The last doctrine of the Bible

22:20 He who testifies these things says, “Surely I am coming quickly.”

¹ W. Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, Vol. 2.

The last truth testified by the author of all the Bible is Christ's second coming, "Surely I am coming quickly". This is a doctrine referred to in one out of every 25 verses of the New Testament. This is the blessed hope of all believers. Jesus Christ will come personally, visibly, triumphantly, suddenly. The suddenness, the swiftness of His coming is recorded three times in this last chapter (v 7,12,20). As pointed out in chapter one, this does not necessarily mean soon.

The last prayer of the Bible

"Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

This prayer is echoed by every true believing heart. Long has earth groaned for that hour, long have the hearts of God's own waited for the fulfillment of the promise. All of our hopes are in Him. His is the glory we desire to see. To know Him face to face and walk with Him fully, this is eternal joy. The final realization of all our best and highest dreams we have seen afar off. We have been persuaded of their reality, and have embraced them and confessed that we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth. At the shout of our descending King the pilgrimage will end and we will live forever at home with Him. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

The last blessing of the Bible

22:21 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you all.

Genesis ends with Joseph dead and in a coffin in Egypt. The Old Testament ends with the threat, "lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Mal 4:6). But the whole Bible fitly concludes with a benediction of grace — grace that overcomes death and removes the curse. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all."

The last word of the Bible

Amen.

Yes, the last word of the Bible is "Amen". So be it. "Amen" to all of it, every word, every jot and tittle, to all the Revelation and to all the Bible. Blessed indeed is the person who can from the heart say "amen" to all that God has said.

This is also known as the Spiritual or Poetic Interpretation. None of these names is really satisfactory, but we will use the name "Idealist" hereafter. Those who adopt this system of interpretation believe that the visions and symbols of Revelation chapters 4 to 20, give us only principles and pictures and lessons valid from John's day to ours. For example, William Hendriksen in his commentary clearly states that the visions under the seals, trumpets, and bowls of wrath, do not refer to definite events or specific happenings. To him they speak only of principles that operate throughout the history of the world, especially throughout this present age. Some other commentators take a similar view.

This interpretation seems to me to be at a great distance from the true one, clearly contrary to the primary meaning of the Revelation. No one can object to the idea that the Revelation contains spiritual lessons and principles. That it does so is very obvious. But I do seriously object to the view that it does not refer to definite events or specific happenings. For this clashes with the opening verses of the Revelation, where we are told in literal language that the Revelation is a prophecy and that it concerns things which must take place sometime after John wrote them. The Idealist view is also in conflict with other facts, as we shall see.

There are two reasons most often stated by its supporters for adopting this view. First the Revelation is a symbolic book, they say, and so we must not think of literal and specific fulfillment. Second, the Revelation had to be related in meaningful ways to believers of the first century to whom it was written, and for each succeeding generation until now. If chapters 4 to 20 are a prophecy of end-time events, as the Futurists hold, they argue, they could not have had this relevance.

These reasons are not valid. Let us look at the second one first.

(1) Is it really true that prophecy of far-off events cannot be related in meaningful ways to those who live many centuries before their fulfillment? If so, why do we have prophecy of such things at all in the Revelation? How could the prophecy of the second coming of Christ and connected events have been relevant to the people of the first century? And the prophecy of the final destruction of the world, and the complete overthrow of Satan? And the prophecy of the new heaven and new earth? Everyone who believes the

Revelation at all will agree that these things will have specific, definite, and future fulfillment. And I think no one is so rash as to say they must be interpreted so as to eliminate a specific future fulfillment because they could have no relevance otherwise. But if there can be some prophecy of far-off events which is relevant to believers in the first century, the question naturally follows, if some, why not more? Where is the rule that states we may have some but not much? In fact, what real objection could there be if most of the Revelation has to do with far-off events? For if some prophecy of these events can be meaningful to first century believers, then so can a great deal of such prophecy.

(2) Again, we must ask, how do real and specific events in the far distant past have any relevance for us today? Much of the Bible is history and prophecy fulfilled a great many centuries ago. Can it have no meaning for us merely because we are separated from those events by a long period of time? This would certainly be a false why of looking at it.

(3) Still further, did the far-off events prophesied in many, many chapters of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, etc have any relevance for the people of their day? If they had no relevance how can the Idealists explain the fact that these things were written for them? If they did have relevance, then, in the same way, the Revelation with its many prophecies of far-off events could be relevant to people of the first century, and to every century since then.

(4) It should be plain that the relevance of Bible prophecy does not depend on the time of its fulfillment. That fulfillment may be in the distant past; it may be in the far-off future. In neither case is it robbed of relevance.

(5) Also we must insist that this relevance is not less when prophecy speaks of definite events and specific happenings in the far-off future. It was not so with the prophecies of the Old Testament. It is not so with those of the New Testament. There is not a spiritual lesson or principle the Idealists see in the Revelation that those who believe in a plain future fulfillment cannot see and emphasize equally well. We too know that there are already many antichrists in the world. But we believe there will be a specific Antichrist at the end of the age. We too are aware that in every generation there is false religion, and anti-Christian propaganda. But we believe this will be headed up in one person in the last days. We all know that Jesus Christ is the Victor and that God is working His purposes out now in the earth, that His throne is over all. But

we believe He will reveal this in the future through special judgments in the earth and then openly manifest His reign. We all can see in the Revelation the way God works, and the way the devil works, and the way man works, and we can learn very valuable moral lessons and spiritual principles. And we are sure that believing in a definite future fulfillment of these prophecies does not at all weaken these lessons and principles.

(6) We should consider now the meaning and relevance of prophecy for those who live long before its fulfillment. Some suggestions are given on pages 7 to 9 of this commentary. One obvious and important reason prophecy is always relevant, even if it speaks of far-off events in this — no one can be sure just how far-off the events may be! Believers in the first century had no way of knowing that 2000 years might elapse before the end came. They could think (and probably did think), that most of the events prophesied in the Revelation would happen in their generation. Each succeeding generation of believers had reason to think the same thing, even as we do today. The time is “at hand” to every generation. The end is always ready to come, as far as believers know, and none can say when it will come. No doubt God inspired the words of Revelation in just such a way that each generation of His children should be expectantly looking for the fulfillment of its prophecies. They should all listen to the warnings, apply the lessons, prepare themselves in every way. This can have, and does have, a profound effect on the lives, attitudes, and character of God's believing people. In other words, it is relevant. It is significant and meaningful.

Relevance of prophecy

In some ways, the relevance of prophecy is similar to the relevance of history. God reveals in prophecy, as in history, spiritual and moral lessons. His people in every generation are to learn them and apply them (1:3). God reveals in prophecy, as in history, trials and tribulations His people must face. We are to be prepared. God reveals in prophecy, as in history, things to be avoided. We are to avoid them. God reveals in prophecy, as in history, what man really is like, and how much he needs God and His grace. I think I have learned as much about the true nature and condition of man by a study of the Revelation as by the study of any other book in the Bible. God reveals in prophecy, as in history, something of His plan and program for earth and for His people. We are to understand and get in line with God's program. God reveals in prophecy as in history, Himself. We are to respond to this revelation. In this way, our minds are instructed, our hearts and consciences are influenced, our spiritual lives are edified. And all

this is true even though prophecy, as history, may deal with very specific events. Living in the light of future things is very important.

The apostle Peter, as clearly as anyone in the Bible, has shown one way that prophecy of specific future events is relevant to every one of God's people in every generation. "But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. In that day the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fiery heat. The earth also and the works that are in it will be burned up. Since then all these things will be dissolved, what kind of people you ought to be in holy conduct and godliness, as you look for and speed the coming of the Day of God, in which the heavens will be on fire and dissolve, and the elements will melt with fiery heat! Nevertheless, in accordance with His promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. Therefore, dearly loved ones, since you look for such things, make every effort to be found by him in peace, without spot, and blameless" (2 Peter 3:10-14).

This tells us that because we see what God will do in the future, we should have strong motives for holiness of life now. As in all Scripture, so in prophecy, there is a moral and ethical element which is exceedingly important. There are principles of righteousness which have nothing to do with the time of fulfillment. This moral element has a profound effect on those who respond in obedience to these revealed principles of righteousness. This is true even though the giving of the prophecy may be separated from its fulfillment by many centuries. The Bible itself declares that all Scripture — history of long-past events, prophecy of far-off events, or whatever — is "profitable", is useful for the full development of the man of God (2 Tim 3:16,17). So it is quite in vain for anyone to say that any portion that relates to the far-off future can have no relevance for those who first receive it.

Beyond all doubt, prophecy of far-off events can be relevant to people of every generation, no matter how specific the prophecy, and no matter how far removed in time is the fulfillment. The passage from Peter is one example that shows this clearly.

Symbols

Let us now turn our attention to the other reason Idealists give for holding their views. They insist that the Revelation is a book of symbols and therefore we are not to look for specific events and

definite happenings, or for literal persons and times. This reason can bear no more examination than the one we looked at above.

(1) No one imagines (at least I do not) that the Revelation has no symbols. It uses many symbols — vivid, beautiful, powerful symbols. We all know that the seven stars in Jesus' hand in chapter 1 do not mean literal heavenly bodies. We all understand the "lampstands" there symbolize the seven churches. None of us expects to see a literal wild beast gain power at the end of the age and rule the world, or that a literal prostitute with a literal gold cup in her hand will be seen riding it. Symbols? Of course. Who would dream of denying it? When we say that prophecy will be fulfilled in literal events, we are not at all suggesting that there is no poetical element, no metaphor, no symbol.

(2) But it is not accurate to call the Revelation a book of symbols. It is a book of prophecy that uses symbols. And this is a different matter altogether. It is a book that foretells specific literal events which must take place after John wrote them down in language sometimes not at all literal. We are clearly told this in 1:1-3. It is hard to see, then, how these things refer merely to principles already in operation before John wrote.

The Revelation often uses symbolic language to convey these prophecies of specific future events. In 19:11-16 we have a vision of the second coming of Christ. But does anyone think that because some symbols are used there, it cannot be a specific event? All who believe the Bible are quite sure that it will literally happen, even though some of the language that describes it is symbolic. In exactly the same way, we can say that other visions of the Revelation are real prophecies of specific events which must occur. If we have one such vision, why not many? I dare say that even if there were nothing but symbols in all the Revelation and no literal passages whatever, this could still be maintained.

(3) Other parts of the Bible which use symbolic language speak of literal persons and events which must take place. The prophecy might have come in visions or dreams, and be pictured completely in symbols, but I cannot find that they ever give only principles and spiritual lessons.

This is true in the opening book of the Bible, where visions and dreams are first given and explained. See Genesis 15:7-21; 37:5-11; 40:5-22; 41:17-32. And this is unmistakably true of that book of the Bible most like the Revelation — the prophecy of Daniel. There we read of visions and dreams, of a symbolic image (2:31-45), of a symbolic tree (4:10-28), and of symbolic beasts (7:1-27; 8:1-27). These all set forth specific persons or kingdoms, and literal events. We know this from the

interpretations given in the book itself. So it is certainly reasonable to think that the visions of the Revelation also speak of specific persons, kingdoms and events. The interpretation of the symbolic language of visions, given by God Himself in other parts of His Word, leads us to expect it.

Literal language

(4) And some of the Revelation is in plain literal language. This is admitted by those who think most of it is symbolic. R.C.H. Lenski has this comment concerning 20: 11-15: "This vision presents the last judgment. Practically all symbolism is dropped. The dead stand before the throne, both the small and great, and 'judged they were, each one according to their works' language that is literal as can be written" (The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation, page 599). Abraham Kuyper (who was no Idealist in the mold of Hendriksen and Lenski, but who did think a great deal of the Revelation is symbolic) says of another portion: "In chapter 6 which marks the beginning of these prophecies, the state of the world is so radically affected as to put an end to all ordinary history. Hence these six verses must be taken literally, lest we be misled by appearance." (Revelation of St. John, pages 25,26).

Then it seems there are at least two passages in the revelation we can safely take literally! Actually there are many others where "practically all symbolism is dropped", which must be understood literally "lest we be misled by appearance". For example, 17: 7-18, given by the angel to John, is a literal explanation of the symbols used earlier in the chapter. This is a very important literal passage because it has to do with some of the leading persons and events of the Revelation and teaches us how we should understand them. Here and there are other comments in literal language which are placed in the narrative to help us understand the symbols used. For example 12:9-12; 13:7-10,18; 16:14-16; 17:7-18; etc. Other portions as well are more or less literal, and even the most symbolic portions have literal gleams. We must not try to get rid of everything in the Revelation that is contrary to our views of what it should contain by calling it symbolic and then putting on it any interpretation we please.

Mixture of literal and symbolic

(5) There is very often a mixture of literal and symbolic language. This is an outstanding feature of the Revelation. We must not think that because some symbols are used in a passage, everything in it is symbolic. For example, in 19: 11-16, the "heaven opened" is the

literal appearance of Christ from the unseen spiritual world where he has been these hundreds of years. The second coming of Christ is literal. "The white horse" is no doubt symbolical: Christ is coming in battle to crush His enemies. His names, "Faithful and True", "The Word of God" and "King of kings, and Lord of lords" are literal, but I don't suppose the last one will be literally written on His thigh. The purpose for which He comes is given in literal language—"He should strike the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod", but He will not strike them with a literal sword of steel, or rule them with a literal iron rod. He will indeed come with fierceness and wrath on the enemies of God, but He will not trample a literal winepress. The total picture gives a specific event, revealed in a vision, and recorded for us in a mixture of literal and symbolic language. I think this is true also of many other visions of the Revelation.

In this mingling of symbolic and literal language that we have nearly everywhere in the Revelation, I do not mean to say it is always easy to know what is literal and what is symbolic. But the total picture may be clear, even when we can't decide about each detail. Probably the best rule to follow is to take literally that which cannot be proved to be symbolic. But above all, we must not deny that specific events are meant because symbols are used.

Explanations of symbols

(6) The Revelation also gives us literal explanations of symbols. Here is a list of some of them. (J.B.Smith has a list of 46 explained symbols in his commentary).

The 7 stars are the 7 angels or messengers (1:20)

The 7 lampstands are the 7 churches (1:20)

The Morning Star is Jesus (2:28; 22:16)

The great city spiritually called Sodom and Egypt is Jerusalem (11:8)

The male child is Christ (12:5; 19:15)

The great dragon is Satan (12:9)

Time, times, and half a time are 1260 days (12:6,14)

The beast out of the earth is the false prophet (13:11; 19:20)

The prostitute is Rome (17:5,9,18)

The waters are people, etc (17:15)

The beast is the 8th king (17:11), and will ascend out of the abyss (11:7)

The 10 horns are 10 kings who will reign at the same time (17:12,17)

From these examples we see that each symbol refers to something very definite and specific. The harlot woman does not mean any city or all cities; she is one specific city — Rome. The beast out of the earth is not every false prophecy ever uttered, but the false prophet who will arise at the end of the age and be punished at Christ's coming. The 7 heads of the first beast are not all the kingdoms of man, but 7 specific kings, connected with the 7 hills, which again points to Rome. The beast in its personal aspect is an 8th king who is one of the 7.

(7) Other symbols can be understood by comparing them with other Scriptures. I think we can say that every symbol is either explained in the Revelation, or can be understood by comparison with other Scripture, or can be detected by the language of the context. I am not suggesting it is always easy to recognize the meaning of a symbol — only that it may be possible. Understanding fully the Revelation requires, of course, much prayer and study.

A rule for interpretation

(8) If we are not careful to follow the guidance of Scripture, especially if we ignore or misunderstand the literal explanation of symbols given in the Revelation, we will fall into disastrous errors in interpretation. "An important rule of interpretation is that what is literal must explain the figurative and never should the figurative be used to explain the literal. Faith believes the literal and understands what is figurative if elsewhere explained, either expressly or by implication, but the interpretation that is necessarily based only upon reason is in all probability erroneous" (A Revelation of Jesus Christ by J.B. Smith, page 16). If we are not careful with symbols, we will try to make them mean only what we want them to mean in order to harmonize them with our system of interpretation.

Strange interpretation

In the light of all the above, some interpretations of symbols make strange reading. For example, Hendriksen says the first beast of chapter 13 means the persecuting power of the devil working through nations and governments throughout this whole age, and the second beast means the false religions and philosophies of the world during the same period. Lenski's view is

similar — “The wild beast = the whole antichristian power set in motion by Satan as the prince of this world” (Ibid, page 394). When he says “whole antichristian power” he means throughout this whole age from Christ’s first coming to His second, as his comments make clear. Again, “This second beast = the whole antichristian propaganda in the whole world” (page 413). This too throughout this age.

But the question must be asked, How do they know this? Where in the whole Bible is there any such explanation of these symbols, or similar symbols? Another important question is this: how would the ordinary believer of the first century (or in any century) who read the Revelation ever discover that this was the proper interpretation? And we must remember that this prophecy was written for all the children of God — not just for the best guessers.

But we are not left to such guesses. The Bible itself gives us the clue we need to understand these symbols. We have already noted that in the Book of Daniel the prophet there are several beasts seen in visions. None of these beasts represent an indefinite or collective persecuting power. In chapter 8 there is a vision of a ram and a goat. The vision is explained. The ram is Medo-Persia; the goat is Greece. In chapter 7 there are 4 beasts seen in vision. In each case the beast refers to a specific kingdom headed up by a literal king. Daniel 7:17 gives the explanation “kings”, 7:23 gives the word “kingdom”. So when we come to Revelation and read of similar beasts in chapter 13, if we allow the Word of God to teach us in this matter, we will interpret the beasts there in the same way — literal rulers with specific kingdoms. And we will be the more confident to do this because a comparison of Daniel 7 with Revelation 13 reveals that the 4th beast of Daniel and the 1st beast of Revelation 13 are the same beast.

So I believe it is perfectly Scriptural and in harmony with a sound interpretation of symbols to say that the first beast in the Revelation is a literal ruler who comes to power at the end of this age and will reign over a specific empire strong enough to subdue the whole earth, as chapter 13 plainly says. And the second beast is a lying prophet who joins forces with the first beast. Together they will be the final manifestation of all the antichristian power and propaganda that have been in the world all through this age. To say more than this is, it seems to me, to go far beyond Scripture. The view expressed by Hendriksen, Lenski, and others, ignores the analogy of Scripture. It disregards the clues the Bible itself gives for interpretation.

Another example of Idealist interpretation concerns the identity of the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel (7: 1-8). Lenski says they cannot be literal Jews. In his view, "the 144,000 are all of God's people" (Ibid, page 252). Again, "This is the Church Militant viewed in its completeness" (page 245). Hendriksen agrees that it is wrong to say that the "symbol" indicates Israel according to the flesh. To him it seems safer to teach that the 144,000 represent the entire church on earth throughout the centuries. Both think that ten tribes of Israel have been lost in history long ago, and will not reappear. Lenski writes, "Long ago, when the ten tribes of the northern kingdom had been deported into Assyria, these ten disappeared completely; they were absorbed by paganism" (Ibid, page 253).

Their explanation of the 144,000 is extremely unlikely.

(a) We are not told that the 12 tribes of Israel are symbolic. If the list there of 12 tribes is not literal language, there is no way of knowing it.

(b) The literal nation Israel, according to more than one prophecy in the Word of God, will turn to Christ at the end of this age, and be converted. See Rom 11:25-29; Jer 23:5-8; 32:37-40; Ezek 20:40-44; 37:21-28; Dan 12:1; Hos 3:4,5; Zech 10:10-12; 12:9-14; etc. The vision in Revelation 7 could easily be linked with that. (For a fuller discussion of the future conversion of Israel as a nation, see the author's book, "Storm Over Israel"). There is no Scriptural proof at all that the Church is the "new Israel", and that old, literal Israel is cast off forever.

(c) When God wishes to signify people other than the literal Israel, He does so very clearly. In the same chapter He speaks of a great multitude "of all nations and tribes and people and languages" (v 9). The 144,000 are obviously contrasted with this group in two important ways — number and race, or national connections. If we ignore this we shall necessarily fail to understand who the 144,000 are.

(d) The Bible nowhere teaches that ten of the tribes of Israel disappeared during the captivity in Assyria, and were absorbed into paganism. In Acts (no symbolical book) Paul spoke of the 12 tribes as then existing, more than 700 years after the Assyrian captivity (Acts 26: 7). James likewise spoke of the 12 tribes (1: 1). There are other references which show that the 10 tribes did not disappear. See Ezra 6:16,17; Isa 11:11-13; Jer 3:18; Ezek 37:15-22; Matt 19:28.

(e) The time the vision speaks of must be carefully noted. It is after the 6th seal has been opened at the end of the age. The

144,000 are sealed after the Great Tribulation and just before great trouble for the whole world. This is one more reason for saying they cannot represent all the children of God in this whole age.

If the 12 tribes listed in Revelation 7 do not indicate literal Jews, there is no way of knowing what they do indicate. To me it makes no more sense to say these 12 tribes signify the whole church on earth made up of people from all nations and tribes and people and languages than to say people from all nations and tribes and nations and people and languages signify literal Jews!

But are we to think that the number 144,000 is also literal? Perhaps ordinary believers reading it would think so. We have already seen what Lenski and Hendriksen think — 144,000 is certainly symbolic and represents the total number of the saved in this whole age. Lenski writes, “only people such as the Russellites take this 144,000 literally” (Ibid, page 251). However, William Newell, a godly Bible teacher for many years, was as far as possible from being a “Russellite” (Jehovah Witness) and he says, “The 12,000 of each tribe means, of course, simply 12,000. In Elijah’s day God had left for Himself seven thousand (1 Kings 19 and Romans 11). We believe that these were exactly seven thousand persons. Inasmuch as there is no hint of the 144,000 being ‘a symbolic number’ — that is, a sign or indication of some other number, we shall and must receive God’s words concerning the future as literally as we do concerning the past. They are 12,000 from each tribe” (The Book of The Revelation, by William R. Newell, page 111).

Walter Scott, who took the Futurist view as Newell did, disagrees. He writes “The number of the sealed is of course symbolic, and simply denotes that God has appropriated a certain, complete, yet limited number of Israel for Himself” (Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, by Walter Scott, page 166).

G. H. Lang explains it somewhat differently. He says of the number 12 as it appears in 144,000 “in this place it is both literal and symbolic, the twelve tribes being the literal number, but 12,000 being symbolic” (The Revelation of Jesus Christ, by G. H. Lang, page 22).

William Barclay has his own view on the 144,000: “It is quite certain that that number does not stand for the number of the faithful in every day and generation”. He thinks it is symbolic of people “who in the time of John are sealed and preserved from the great tribulation which at that moment was coming upon them” (The Revelation of John, by William Barclay, Volume 2, page 29).

Abraham Kuyper wrote: "The 144,000 which in the 12 x 12 x 1000 mystically indicated a very great host". But God expresses a very great host in entirely different language in the Revelation, a thing which Kuyper and Hendriksen and Lenski do not take into account sufficiently. In 5:11 we have — "The number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands"; in 7:9 — "a great multitude, which no man could number"; 9:16 — "the number of the army of the horsemen was two hundred thousand thousand, and I heard the number of them". So how can 144,000 mean more or less the same thing? The lesser numbers of the Revelation are often in contrast to the larger, and certainly in this case, for we have the contrast in the same chapter.

If we take the 144,000 symbolically, I think it is far safer to say with Scott that they indicate a "certain, complete, yet limited number". The 12 tribes are of course literal tribes of Israel. The naming of the tribes, and the time the vision speaks of, and the contrast with the second group in the chapter are the only sure clues we have to the identity of this group.

Twelve may be the number of witness. "Twelve is used as the number of those who in every age have been called out to witness for some truth which the world needed" (The Revelation, by W. Boyd Carpenter, page 97). Also 1000 may be 10 x 10 x 10 (as some suggest) — the perfect cube, indicating completeness. The 144,000 would thus mean that God in the end of the age will turn the whole nation of Israel (such as will still be remaining at that time) back to Himself to be a witness in the earth in the age to come. This would be in agreement with His Word in Rom 11:26 — "All Israel will be saved". This number is still much smaller than, and in contrast to, "the great multitude which no man could number" of the saved of every tribe and nation which we read of later in the chapter. The total of the nation Israel to be saved in the end of the age will be much less than the saved from among "all nations, and tribes, and people, and languages." It will be a "complete, yet limited number".

Interpretation of numbers

In passing we should note that the Idealists interpret the numbers of quantity in Revelation as follows:

The 144,000 represent a vast multitude

The 24 elders (in the view of most of them) represent a vast multitude

The 4 living creatures (in the view of some) also represent a vast multitude

200,000,000 (9:16) are also a vast multitude

10,000 times 10,000 plus thousands of thousands (5:11) also are a vast multitude

We sometimes see this same lack of discrimination when it comes to interpreting numbers that indicate time periods. In revelation chapters 4 to 20, we have “about half an hour” (8:1), “one hour” (17:12), 3 1/2 days (11:9), 5 months 9:10), 42 months or 1260 days or “time, times and half a time” (11:2,3; 12:6,14; 13:5), and 1000 years (12:1-6).

It is obvious that “about one half hour” is a very short period of time, and probably is to be taken literally. At least there is no clue that it means anything else. Also there is no reason why 3 1/2 days and 5 months cannot be taken literally. “One hour” (17:12) is obviously not to be taken literally — it gives the time period of the reign of the 10 kings with the beast, and what is said of them in the rest of the chapter can hardly be done in one literal hour. It is the context that leads us to this conclusion. So one hour there means a comparatively brief period of time. This one hour is actually 42 months. This we learn by referring to 13:5 — the beast with 10 horns continues in power for 42 months or 1260 days. This in turn is called “a short time” (see 12:6 and 12:12).

A comparison of all these above references gives the following equation: time, times, and half a time = 1260 days = 42 months = a short time = “one hour” (most emphatically a short time).

It will strike many readers as a strange fact that the Idealists say these 42 months refer to this entire age from Christ’s first coming to the end. Lenski confesses that he doesn’t understand the exact symbolic meaning of these numbers — “why the time is first designated ‘months’, and why the symbolic number is ‘forty-two’, we are unable to say”; “Why the time is first designated in ‘months’, secondly in ‘days’, thirdly in ‘seasons’, I do not know. Their number seems to express the same duration of time” (Ibid, page 332).

Still he insists that this time period signifies this whole New Testament age of grace — “For forty-two months’, the whole time until the end. . . .over the entire world and for all time until the end” (page 398).

Hendriksen agrees that this period represents this whole age, the complete New Testament era.

But neither of them explains how this can be, or offers any proof. Actually there is no reason at all in the context for thinking this time period is symbolic, let alone symbolic of this whole age. I think the reason it is referred to in different ways — months, days, times, a short time, one hour — is that we might clearly understand that a short, literal time period is meant. After all, if God wanted to indicate a literal time of 42 months in a book that uses a mixture of literal and symbolic language, how could He do it more plainly? Would any way God used have satisfied the Idealists that a literal time period was meant?

The 1000 year period of 20: 1-6 is treated in the same peculiar manner by many Idealists. To them the 1000 years mean the same time period as the 42 months! “The 1000 years are the complete New Testament era. John was in it; you and I are in it now” (Lenski, *Ibid*, page 576). Hendriksen’s view is the same.

We now have the complete equation of the time periods of Revelation as we would have to make it for the Idealist interpretation —

3 1/2 years = 42 months = 1260 days = a short time = one hour
= 1000 years = more than 1900 years to the present!

Some readers of this, I fear, will be sure to think this is not explaining numbers, but ignoring them! Among other things, they utterly fail to explain why, if the reign of the beast in chapter 13 and the reign of the saints in chapter 20 cover the same time period, God did not indicate it somehow. It would have been easy enough to have used “1000 years” in chapter 13, or 42 months, 3 1/2 years, or 1260 days in chapter 20. The fact that entirely different figures are used is one fact among several which suggest they are completely different time periods.

According to the Idealists almost all numbers, it seems, should be reduced to two — nearly all numbers of duration mean this entire age, and all numbers of quantity mean a vast multitude!

Abraham Kuyper also insists that most of the numbers of the Revelation are symbolic, but he thinks an interpretation like that adopted by Lenski and Hendriksen is utterly unacceptable. “These Apocalyptic prophecies do not refer to the past, they are no history of the past twenty centuries, but forecast what is to come at the beginning of the end. When this will be, how many years it will take the Seals, the Trumpets, and the Vials to fulfill themselves, we do not know. Nothing prevents the quick succession of one upon the

other. It might not cover more than the space of a single year" (Ibid, page 23).

So apparently he thinks the 42 months are not literal but do indicate a very brief period, indeed perhaps only a year. He similarly interprets the 1000 years of 20:1-6! "We cannot reckon here with years, yet if for one moment we might indulge in a play of imagination, we might readily picture to ourselves that binding and incarceration of Satan were to last but a few days" (page 292). "In Revelation the idea 'thousand' is never taken literally" (page 277). I fear that the Idealists in general "indulge in a play of imagination"!

Here we have three commentators who are sure the numbers in the Revelation are symbolic and cannot be literally interpreted. But there is considerable disagreement about what the symbols mean. Lenski and Hendriksen teach that both the 42 months and the 1000 years mean this whole age, already more than 1900 years. Kuyper is sure that we simply cannot understand the Revelation this way. To him both the 42 months and 1000 years mean very brief periods of time, the first just before Christ returns, the second just after. And who can prove which interpretation is right? If numbers are taken as symbols, and there is no proof what the symbols may mean, then one man's guess or "play of imagination" is as good as another's.¹

I think both interpretations are wrong. There is nothing in the context of 20:1-6 that indicates the 1000 years are the same as 42 months, or are a very brief period, or are even symbolic at all. A period of time repeated six times in seven verses should cause us to stop and consider the possibility at least that it might be literal. Especially since there is no suggestion in the context that it is symbolic, and no parallel passage in the Bible that requires it. Certainly to say that the saints lived and reigned with Christ for a few days, is to say a great deal less that this passage would lead us to expect.

¹ Another who insisted on an entirely symbolical or spiritual interpretation of the Revelation, and was the farthest thing possible from a literalist, Patrick Fairbairn, wrote about the 1000 years reign in these words, "That the things written concerning this belong to the still undeveloped future, we entertain not the remotest doubt, and regard as utterly futile all the attempts that have been made to accommodate the terms of the description to any period of the past". He looked for a millennial reign of glory still in the future, but *before* the literal bodily return of Christ. He thought the millennial age might be a very long one indeed.

I see no reason at all why the 42 months should not be taken literally. As we have seen, we are told in so many words that 42 months = 1260 days = 3 1/2 years, and that it is a short time. Also the context and language of chapters 4 to 20 indicate that these visions relate to the end of the age.

They come after “the things which are” — after the churches of this whole age reach complete development according to chapters 2 and 3.

In 1: 19 Christ Himself gives the outline which points to this same truth.

Chapters 4 and 5 indicate a great and new thing is about to happen.

We are told in 1: 1-3 that these things are prophecy to be fulfilled sometime after John wrote. In 1: 7 these things are directly linked with Christ’s second coming.

Under the seals, trumpets, and bowls we see terrible destructions that carry away a large part of mankind (a “fourth part of the earth” — 6: 8; “a third part” of them who remain — 9: 18).

There are spectacular signs in the heavenly bodies (6: 12-14; 8: 12; 16: 8,9).

There are other tremendous events, plagues, etc, the description of which is very much like the literal plagues in Old Testament days (8: 7-11; 11: 6; 16: 3,4).

There is mention of “the great tribulation” in 7: 14, which Jesus revealed would be at the end of the age (Matt 24: 21,29).

There are details given concerning the activities of the beast and the false prophet in chapters 13 and 17 that have never been fulfilled (13: 7,8,15-17; 17: 8-17. Also 11: 7).

And we have seen these symbols must have specific fulfilment — and there is simply no way we can have specific fulfilment stretched over 2000 years.

In fact, everywhere in these chapters we have an overwhelming impression of the end of the age which is not easy to evade. It has always seemed to me that it would be plain as day to any believer who read these things without prejudice, without a view to defend, that they simply have not happened yet.

To sum up (with charity toward all I must state the case as I see it): the Idealist interpretation of the Revelation is uncertain, unwise, unnecessary, and unsafe. It is uncertain (to say as little

as could be said). As we have seen, the explanation of numbers and symbols by those who adopt this system leaves much to be desired. It seems to me that they often arrive at their interpretation by ignoring the clues of the context, the analogy of Scripture in parallel passages, and the explanations given in the Revelation itself. Much of what they say by way of interpreting these numbers and symbols is mere assertion without proof of any kind.

Their interpretation is unwise also. To heap so heavy a weight of explanation on such a feeble foundation is surely not wise. Their interpretation of the above numbers and symbols is not an insignificant part of their scheme — it is absolutely basic to it. And because that interpretation is so uncertain, their whole view of the Revelation is equally uncertain.

Their interpretation is also unnecessary. To emphasize principles and spiritual lessons one does not need to deny that we have in the Revelation specific events which must be fulfilled. There is another system that can emphasize all the spiritual lessons and principles, and at the same time explain the Revelation far more successfully. This is the Futurist system of interpretation. The Idealists no doubt think their interpretation is necessary to make the Revelation fit into their entire scheme of theology. If they have no place in their theology for the conversion of the literal nation of Israel, or for a future reign of Christ on earth, then, of course, when they come to the Revelation they must try to explain in some other way what seems to me to be plain prophecies of these things. But it is the business of the commentator to set forth what is really in the text, not what he wants to see there. Pre-suppositions can blind us to the true meaning of any Scripture, especially perhaps to the meaning of the Revelation. If we are not very careful, instead of explaining the prophecies of this book, we will be explaining them away.

And their interpretation is unsafe. To deny a specific fulfilment of that which the Word of God calls a prophecy of things which must come to pass, does not seem safe to me. I fear it tends to obscure the “more sure word of prophecy; to which you do well to take heed as to a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawn and the day star arises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:19).

Wonderful things are promised to overcomers in the seven letters to the churches. Here are future blessings that all believers long to receive. The question is, Who will receive them? Who are the overcomers?

The word "overcome" itself presents no great difficulty. It simply means to conquer, to gain the victory. But although the meaning of the word is plain enough, there is considerable disagreement about the relationship between overcoming and the Christian life. In general there are three distinct views on who these overcomers are. Each of these views depends in large measure on how the Bible as a whole is interpreted. These views are as follows:

(1) Some teach that overcomers are believers who keep their salvation to the end. They fight the good fight of faith, get the victory in trials and temptations and at last enter into eternal life. Non-overcomers, according to this view, would perish even though they may once have been truly saved. They lose their salvation by failing to overcome.

(2) Some teach that overcomers are those who gain a measure of victory in the Christian life that not all true Christians attain. The overcomer will receive the great rewards promised in these letters; others may truly be saved but by failing to overcome will lose these rewards. G. H. Lang was of this opinion. He wrote, "The assertion that all believers are overcomers is so plainly contrary to fact and to Scripture that one wonders it ever has been made." (The Revelation of Jesus Christ, Oliphants Ltd, pages 91,92)).

(3) Yet others teach that overcomers are all true Christians, all real believers, and that all real believers are overcomers. According to this view, those who fail to overcome were never true Christians, never really born again. This last view may seem the most unlikely one to some people, but I am persuaded that it is more than likely the truth.

Let us carefully consider this question with an open mind and a prayerful heart.

Things promised to overcomers

The things promised to overcomers in these letters would certainly seem to belong to all of God's children without exception.

(a) "To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (2: 7). Do any

of us imagine that some real Christians will be barred from this tree? Will there be a flaming sword in that future Paradise to keep some of God's own away? Is it not plain that all who trust in Christ for salvation and arrive in the Paradise of God will have the privilege of eating of this heavenly fruit?

(b) "He who overcomes will not be hurt of the second death" (2: 11). The second death is described in 20: 14, 15. All unbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire which is the second death. Are we to think that any true Christians will be among them?

(c) "To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat, and will give him a white stone" (2: 17). The hidden manna is Christ Himself, the eternal sustenance of all of His people without distinction. The white stone is linked with the manna. He who receives the one receives the other.

(d) "He who overcomes and keeps my works to the end, to him I will give authority over the nations. . . .and I will give him the Morning Star" (2: 26-28). The Morning Star is Christ (22: 16) whom all believers will enjoy forever. The promise of ruling the nations is similar to 3: 21 below.

(e) "He who overcomes will be clothed in white clothing, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name in the presence of my Father and before his angels" (3: 5). Are we to think that these are promises made only to a select band of Christians who have reached a higher level of victory and spirituality than their brethren? Or to all real believers without exception? Surely the latter. We know that all who trust Christ and confess Him here below will be confessed in heaven, and will walk with Him in the white garments of heaven, and will have their names kept in the book of life.

(f) "Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never go out. And I will write on him", etc (3: 12). Can we imagine that some real Christians will fail to be permanently built into God's eternal dwelling place? (None fail of it now — Eph 2: 19-22; 1 Cor 12: 12, 13. And will not all partake of the nature of Christ and the Father and the heavenly city?

(g) "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with me on my throne" (3: 21). No doubt this will be for the purpose expressed in 2: 27 — "he will rule them with a rod of iron. As the vessels of a potter they will be broken to pieces". According to Ps 149: 6-9

“All his saints have this honour.” I find it very difficult to imagine that the Body of Christ will be divided, part to be received with Him to reign and part rejected. As it is written, “If we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12). Let it not be thought that the word about enduring narrows this last promise. It is plainly indicated in the Scriptures that all true believers continue in the faith to the end (John 10:27,28; Heb 10:36-39; etc).

(h) “He who overcomes will inherit all things [21:7, including all the things described in the preceding verses]. I will be his God, and he will be my son”. God dwelling with men and wiping all tears from their eyes, the enjoyment of a land where there is no death or sorrow or crying or pain, the privilege of living forever in the new heaven and earth — the overcomer will inherit these things. And will anyone dare to say that some true believers will not? Rev 21:7,8 describes only two classes of people — overcomers who inherit all these things, and unbelievers who inherit the lake of fire.

Thus it appears that all these promises made to overcomers concern things that all genuine believers will possess, and not merely a lesser number of very spiritual believers.

Heirs of God

We know that all true Christians are heirs of God. Romans 8:17 tells us that we are joint heirs with Christ if we suffer with Him. But we see everywhere in Scripture that suffering is an unavoidable part of the life of faith. It is not something that may or may not come. It is bound to come if we are united to Christ by faith, if we are children of God (see Acts 14:22; John 16:33; etc). “And if children, then heirs” — not, mind you, “if exceptionally victorious children, then heirs”. Galatians 4:7 teaches the same truth. “If a son, then an heir of God through Christ”. Some have taught that there is a difference in Scripture between a son and a new-born child, that if the child refuses to grow up he does not become a son and so does not inherit the promises. But Gal 4:5,6 makes sonship, not a matter of attainment, but a matter of redemption and receiving the Holy Spirit. Each child, each believer, is a son; and if a son, then an heir of God.

1 Peter 1:3-5 teaches this same truth. All who are “begotten again” are “kept by the power of God to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, reserved in heaven”.

To the struggling, sometimes defeated and frequently carnal believers at Corinth, Paul wrote these blessed words concerning

their inheritance: "All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours. And you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God" (1 Cor 3:21-23).

What shall we say of Abraham and his inheritance? Was the promise that he would be the heir of the world based on some process of growth in him, or his spiritual attainments? This is what is written: "For the promise that he would be the heir of the world, did not come to Abraham, or to his offspring, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of no effect. . . .therefore , the promise comes by faith so that it might be by grace, and be certain to all of Abraham's offspring, not only to those who are of the law but to those also who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (Rom 4:13-16).

Inheritance is entirely of grace apart from law, or works, or attainments (see also Col 1:12). It is received simply by faith. Only thus can the promise "be certain to all of Abraham's offspring". Yes, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32).

Whoever is born of God

John teaches us elsewhere, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that "Whoever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4,5). Words could hardly be plainer. It would not be inconsistent with Scripture, then, to substitute "born of God" for "overcomes" in these promises given to the seven churches. Nor is this an isolated statement in John's writings. It is at the heart of his doctrine (1 John 3:2,3,9; 4:4). There is a power, a principle of life in every child of God that tends to triumph over the world, sin, and Satan. The power within is greater than that without and thus he is enabled to overcome. "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because greater is he who is in you, than he who is in the world".

True Christianity

Overcoming is what the Christian life is all about. God is at work in all believers to enable them to persevere in the faith to the end.

Christianity that does not overcome is not true Christianity at all. Christianity is Christ — Christ living in the believer both to will and to do of his good pleasure. And Christ is at the right hand of God continually interceding for all believers (Heb 7:25). Because of this true Christians do not fall into unbelieving, lifeless apostasy. On the contrary, they seek for glory, honor and immortality (Rom 2:7), and if people do not do this they will not receive them at all.

Believers hear the Shepherd's voice and follow Him (John 10:27), and if people do not do so they are not true sheep all. They follow peace and holiness (Heb 12:14). They have been freed from sin and made servants of righteousness (Rom 6:18), and sin will not have dominion over them (6:14). Everyone of them, who has a living hope at all, purifies himself (1 John 3:3), and cannot be continually living in sin because he is born of God (3:9). God gives them the victory through Christ (1 Cor 15:57), and they are more than conquerors through Him who loved them (Rom 8:37). One of the chief blessings of the new covenant is just this: "I will put my laws in their mind, and write them in their hearts" (Heb 8:10). That is, God creates a kind of people whose inward desire is to keep the Word of God and who are given power to do it. "He who says, I know him, and does not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in Him" (1 John 2:4). Truly anywhere we look in the New Testament a believer is seen to be a new creation. And because he is a new creation in whom the Spirit of God lives, he strives to overcome. This is how God brings "many sons into glory" (Heb 2:10). The true Christian is "not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul" (Heb 10:39).

Persevering faith

The overcomer is one who has persevering faith, which alone is true, saving faith. (This seems to me to be one of the leading messages of the book of Hebrews.) And overcoming is the perseverance of the saints. All believers fail in many ways and some fall into grievous sin. But still, if they are true believers at all, the general tendency of their lives is to overcome (Prov 24:16). Overcoming is just to live a genuine Christian life no matter what the opposition or difficulty may be.

What unbelievers might consider marks of fanaticism, what some Christians consider to be badges of a select group of overcomers, I consider to be the marks of true Christianity.

Objections

I know that some will bring objections to this view from their experience with professing Christians. It will be said that we have all known real Christians who, as a matter of fact, have gone back and spent the remainder of their days in sin. To this I will say two things. First, I do not think it is wise or safe to set our experience with professing Christians against the plain statements of the Word of God. Let God be true regardless of our experiences. The man who gets his doctrine, not from the Bible, but from his experience is certain to fall into serious error. Second, I do not think it is possible for us to determine with certainty the true state of others who make a profession of faith in Christ. Some weeds have much the same appearance as wheat. It is possible to come very close to true saving faith, to persuade oneself and others that one is saved, and yet to be still unregenerate and lost. If the reader would know how closely the false may resemble the true, let him obtain and study Jonathan Edwards' Treatise on the Religious Affections.

I am not contending for mere doctrine, but for God's power and grace and faithfulness towards His people on the one hand, and for a pure, overcoming Christianity on the other. The process of bringing many sons into glory is no easy one (1 Pet 4: 16-19). The believer still has a tendency to evil, and he must be kept from a life of sin. He has a tendency to shrink from suffering, and he must be brought through much suffering. His faith is often weak and has a tendency to falter, and he must be kept believing to the end (Heb 3: 6, 14; Col 1: 23). God will save the righteous, all of them, but they must be brought through many trials, and kept in the faith to the end. From the believer's point of view, the process whereby this is accomplished is overcoming, patient endurance in the faith. And when at last he stands in glory, having kept the faith in spite of all enemies and all obstacles, it is a tremendous victory. It is conquering in the face of terrible opposing forces.

And we should live our Christian lives in the expectation that we will be overcomers, "Let us expect to be preserved. If we go out anticipating failure we shall have it. . . . It is the prestige of an army that secures its victory; it is the quickening assurance that it has never been defeated that carries it irresistibly against the foe" (A. B. Simpson).

There are further remarks that must be added to make this view of overcoming clear.

Why warnings?

If all true believers overcome we may wonder why God gives warnings and exhortations and promises to the churches

concerning them. One answer may be this (apart from the possibility that the warnings are for those who have made a profession without being really born again): this is part of God's method of making overcomers. He does not work in His people ignoring their wills, their motives, or their minds. He provides them with powerful incentives to overcome, not because He is afraid they will not, but because this is one way of making sure they will. Danger signs or detour signs are not placed on a road under repair in order that motorists might think they are certain to have an accident. They are there to prevent accidents. Those who take heed to the signs are safe. They are not to think that because a warning sign is there they are probably going to have an accident. God has placed many danger signs in His Word. The unbeliever, the mere professor of religion ignores these signs and goes on to destruction. The believer believes them and avoids the dangers.

The Father has arranged matters so as to keep His children on earth from falling into a carnal, unbelieving sense of security, or apostasy. There are several checks to this and warnings are one.

(a) God's discipline is another. He will not permit believers to have their own way without troubling them. He chastens them that they might be partakers of His holiness. When they sin His hand is heavy on them until their "moisture is turned into the drought of summer" (Ps 32:3,4).

(b) God's Spirit inwardly constrains His people. He stirs them up to renounce themselves and seek God. He speaks the convicting word to their inmost souls and works continually to form them into Christ's image.

(c) If, as may be, in too large a measure His warnings are unheeded, His chastening resisted, the voice of His Spirit ignored, He will remove His children from earth. Sometimes Christians "sleep" because they would not keep themselves from certain sins (1 Cor 11:30). All His warnings, constraining, and acts of discipline are for the same purpose: "We are disciplined by the Lord, so that we will not be condemned with the world" (1 Cor 11:32).

Degrees of overcoming

There are obviously degrees of overcoming. Many fail in many ways and are still classed as overcomers. And some believers are a good deal more triumphant than others. This is where the teaching about rewards comes in. There is no doubt whatever that there will be special crowns for special services, special prizes for special labors. There are some promises for things in the future

that all real Christians, all overcomers will receive, but there will also be rewards that only those who earn them will receive (1 Cor 3:11-15). Thus all overcomers will reign with Christ (Rev 3:21), but there will be different places allotted in the kingdom according to service done now in the world (Luke 19:11-27). The challenges to overcomers are not to be confused with the rewards believers might win.

The important question

Lastly, let us consider this — one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves as professing Christians is this: am I actually overcoming? For if we are not in fact overcomers we will not inherit these things no matter what our theory of overcoming may be.

So let us be sure that no doctrine or doctrinal disagreement obscures the purpose for which these letters to the churches were written. In them the Holy Spirit is portraying a background of conditions in the midst of which His children have found themselves all down through the ages — conditions which tend to drag them down and dim their witness, conditions of temptation to compromise, conditions which sometimes demand either yielding or death. To His tried people in such conditions God gives these glowing promises to remind them of their great future in glory, to inspire them to right choices and godly living in the present. The Spirit is emphasizing the need for living an overcoming life, and urging all who call themselves Christians to search themselves as to whether they truly love Christ.

The work of the Spirit in the heart of every believer goes on in this way — He gives a constant inspiration to holiness. Again and again He calls and warns Christians who are tempted by the fleshpots of Egypt to remember that they are pilgrims and strangers on the earth. He points their eyes and hearts to their glorious inheritance above. The true doctrine of the Bible does not encourage a life of carnal, unbelieving, sinning security. The only eternal security the Bible teaches is the security of the overcomer.

May God grant that we may search our own hearts. The tendency these days is to worldliness and self-seeking, to spiritual complacency and self-sufficiency. If there is no striving of the Spirit in our hearts toward holiness, no yearning to overcome, no self-sacrifice, no committal to God's will, no abandonment of ourselves to His loving hands, we may well question ourselves whether we are in the faith (2 Cor 13:5).

“He who overcomes will inherit all things. And I will be his God, and he will be my Son” (Rev 21:7).

Here are some objections to the view that the 7-sealed scroll has to do with the history of this entire Church age. Some of these objections apply equally well to some of the interpretations of the Idealist school.

(1) The 7-sealed book contains “The things which will take place after these things” — that is, the things that will occur after the churches have come to their full development as described in the letters to the seven churches. They occur at the end of the age and from John’s standpoint were far in the future.

(2) It is clear that the taking of the 7-sealed scroll by the Lord Jesus from the hand of God, described in chapter 5, is a climax of tremendous significance. Very evidently it indicates that a new beginning is at hand that will usher in a state of things different from that which has gone before. But we will search in vain for any such crisis, any such new beginning from the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost until this present day. Nor can it be sound teaching to assert that Christ received the 7-sealed scroll at His ascension and began to open the seals at Pentecost when this Church age began. It need hardly be pointed out that those events took place, not after “the things which are” (the seven churches of Asia) but many years before.

(3) Moreover, Church history required no unsealing of a scroll to enable it to run its course. It was set in motion, as seen above, many years before the writing of this book of the Revelation in 96 A.D. It was already in process of fulfillment when John was caught up to heaven to behold visions of things to come. Its nature, the principles of its development, and its end had already been given in other portions of the New Testament.

(4) The language of these remaining chapters (chapter four onwards) never, in itself, suggests the history of the Church throughout these long centuries. Such a view must be read into the language; it does not come out of it naturally. The ordinary servant of God (for whom the book was written) of John’s day, simply by reading these chapters would never guess that there were anything here about the future centuries of the Church. It was possible for such a person to understand this book only on the assumption that it does not contain a pre-written Church history. Likewise, that servant of God, were he living in this day, simply by a study of the language of the book itself, could never imagine that there were anything here concerning the past centuries of the Church. We turn

from books about the Revelation to the Revelation itself. And when we do, we see no Goths and Vandals, no Turks and Saracens, no Constantine, no individual pope, or Luther — unless our minds have been pre-conditioned to try to see them and desire to see them.

(5) If Revelation gives us a symbolic summing up of the history of this age, who will interpret it for us? It is plain that, in such a case, we would be too much at the mercy of the historians with their various and sometimes contradictory interpretations. It is not surprising that those who hold the Historicist View depend a good deal on Edward Gibbon and other writers of ancient and medieval histories. I find it extremely difficult to believe that God requires a profound study of history in order that His book should be understood by His ordinary believers. Christ is the Revealer, the book is unsealed, and the Revelation is to “his servants”, all His believing sons and daughters. It is there open and intelligible for them to read and understand. If a thorough knowledge of the history of Europe and western Asia is required, then it is a sealed book still to the majority of God’s servants. Not a university education, not a searching of the secular histories of the world, but faith and obedience, and a searching of the Scriptures are required if we would grasp the teachings of this book.

(6) There are many other prophecies in the Bible that relate to literal events to come in the end time. When the language and symbols of these chapters of Revelation are compared with these prophecies it is seen that they refer to the same time and the same events. Scripture must be its own interpreter, and it is only by carefully examining the words which the Holy Spirit has taught that we can hope to arrive at the truth. In the Revelation it is usually not left to us to determine what a certain symbol means. Here and there we have the meaning of symbols given, words of explanation in plain and literal language. We also have references and allusions to other Scriptures that help us to understand the symbols. These aids to understanding, if accepted and believed, point us to the end of the age and not to a long history of the Church on earth.

(7) In any case, the Historicists see in the Revelation, not the history of the Church throughout the world, but that small part of the world that was within the boundaries of the old Roman Empire. It is hard to believe that an interpretation so confined that ignores a large part of the Church and the world can be that culmination of all the threads of Scripture, of all the history of the earth that we might well expect to find in this final book of the Bible.

(8) One of the leading characters in the Revelation is an individual at the head of a powerful empire. He is called the “beast”.

From the time that he appears by this name in a position of power until his utter defeat by the Lord Jesus Christ at His coming he rules 42 months (13:5), which is 3 1/2 years or 1260 days. If this time period is understood literally (and no satisfactory reason has been advanced why it should not be) the matter is settled once for all. If it is not taken literally we are involved in endless difficulties. The Historicist says that each day of this time period should be understood as a year, and that 1260 days actually mean 1260 years. There certainly is no proof for this position found in the Revelation itself and very little (if anything) to even suggest such an interpretation anywhere in the Scriptures. The Historicists do this because they wish to identify the beast with the long succession of Roman Catholic popes. In the comments on chapter 13, I have given reasons to show that the beast of the Revelation cannot be the pope. But even if the pope were the beast (which he is not) and if we could admit that 1260 days are 1260 years (which we cannot) it would still not be possible to work the time period of the beast's reign into the history of this age. The beginning of the pope's power is generally placed at either one of two dates — 533 or 607 A. D. Whichever one of these dates we take, the result is the same. There is no possible way to stretch the 1260 years to reach to the time of Christ's return. It comes only to 1793 or 1867. As far as I am concerned, the fact that Christ did not return to destroy the beast at either of these dates is one of many insurmountable obstacles to believing that the Historicists are right.

A false charge

Before closing this subject we should take note of a charge the Historicists sometimes make against the Futurist view. Some of them have said that theirs is the truly Protestant interpretation, held by the Reformers, and that the Futurist interpretation was devised by the Jesuit Ribera just before 1600 to keep Christians from identifying the "beast" of the Revelation with the pope. They say we should suspect the Futurist view because of its origin, and they imply that those who adopt it are falling into Ribera's Roman Catholic trap. This is nonsense. Futurists who believe their Bible may hold as strongly as anyone else to all the essential doctrines of the Protestant Reformation.

As for the origin of the Futurist view — I am profoundly convinced that an ordinary believer who knew something of history and had never heard of any system of interpretation, by reading and rereading the Revelation, would never become an Historicist but might well become a Futurist. Perhaps he would not call himself that, but he should be able to see that the things revealed there

have simply not happened yet, and so will happen sometime in the future just before the return of Christ. I mean to say that the origin of the Futurist view is to be found in the Bible itself and not in a Roman Catholic commentator who came many centuries after the Bible was written.

However this may be, there were certainly Futurists long before Ribera. The writings of Irenaeus are among the most precious writings of the early Church which remain. Irenaeus (who lived sometime between 120 - 202 A. D.) was a pupil of Polycarp. Ancient tradition says that Polycarp (born about 65 A.D.) was a disciple of the apostle John, the recorder of the Revelation. If this is true (and there is no evidence against it, as far as I know), then Irenaeus was linked to John by a common friend and brother in Christ.

We have no commentary by Irenaeus on the Revelation, but in his masterpiece, *Against Heresies*, he made comments on various Biblical prophecies. He did not always write clearly, but we can see from his comments in general what he believed. He wrote of a personal Antichrist who would appear at the end of this age and rule three years and six months, and sit in a literal temple in Jerusalem. He wrote that there would be great tribulation at the end such as there had never been before, and that Antichrist was connected with this. He wrote that the resurrection of the just would take place after the coming of Antichrist and the destruction of the armies under his rule. He wrote of a temporal and earthly kingdom of the saints after the resurrection and that this could not be understood in reference to "super-celestial" matters. He mentioned that the judgment of the great white throne would be after this kingdom.

In other words, he was a Futurist.

His comments on these matters can be found in pages 553-567 in the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Mich, U.S.A., 1956 edition. The writings of Irenaeus were republished by Erasmus and others during the time of the Reformation, many years before Ribera wrote.

Will the Church go through the great tribulation?

The question, of course, refers only to that part of the true Church which is Christ's Body that is remaining on earth at the close of the age. The large part of the Church has, through the centuries, already gone on to glory (and often through much tribulation).

This problem is much more complicated than it appears at first glance. The answer one gives to it depends to some extent on one's system of interpretation of the Scriptures as a whole. Those who hold to a rigid dispensational interpretation of the Bible (for example, the position of the Scofield Reference Bible) usually teach that the Church will be caught away from earth before the Tribulation begins. Those who reject the dispensational interpretation teach that the Church will go through the Tribulation (if they admit there will be a Great Tribulation at the end of this age, which many of them do not). However there is a more moderate view of dispensationalism that teaches the Church will go through the Tribulation.

To examine this question thoroughly involves looking at many of prophecies in the Bible. Those who are persuaded that pre-tribulation dispensationalism is the best possible interpretation of end-time events seem sure that this doctrine is interwoven into the very text of Scripture. Those who oppose this interpretation seem equally sure that the idea of a pre-tribulation Rapture is a fiction, an incorrect interpretation imposed on the Scriptures from without.

It is not possible here to go into great detail regarding the reasons given on either side of this question. I can only list them here with a few comments that seem in order.

I have endeavored to answer in some measure the arguments usually advanced for pre-tribulationism, but have included the arguments for post-tribulationism unopposed. This is not because I am convinced beyond all possibility of doubting that the Church will go through the Tribulation. I do so because in certain evangelical circles all the teaching, both in the pulpit and in books dealing with the Revelation and the Lord's return, is on the side of pre-tribulationism, and the strong case for post-tribulationism is either ignored or unfairly presented. Also the advocates of pre-tribulationism habitually use certain arguments that are weak and very answerable.

For several years of my early Christian life I personally heard and read nothing on the subject of the Lord's return but that

produced from the viewpoint of pre-tribulationism. I was convinced it was true without ever having examined the arguments on the other side. When I finally had the time and opportunity to investigate the case for post-tribulationism I found much more to be said for that interpretation than I had ever been led to believe.

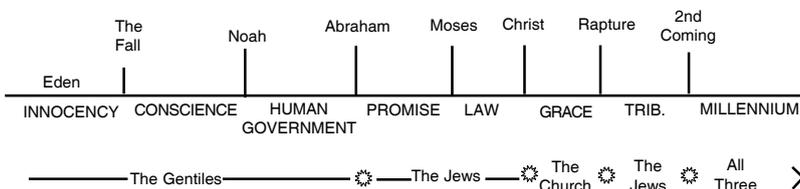
It may seem to some of my many pre-tribulationist friends that I have been unfair in my own presentation of this controversial subject. This is to be regretted. I do not love controversy and do not wish to offend. I could not be persuaded to include this Appendix at all without being convinced that it is in the best interest of the truth to do so. I am concerned for the Church. I fear lest she will be lulled into a sense of false security in these perilous times. If the Church must face the Tribulation she should be warned and prepared for that time of terrible trouble. So I would stir up the saints to rethink this whole matter. If a profound and unbiased study proves pre-tribulationism to be the true doctrine of Scripture, I will not be at all dismayed. It is not the opinion of man I wish to be established, but the truth of God.

Let the arguments here presented on this question be carefully and prayerfully considered. And may the Spirit of God guide us all into the truth.

Now let us turn to the arguments themselves. First, the reasons usually offered to convince us that the Church will not go into the Tribulation. Many and varied are the arguments presented for pre-tribulationism by such men as H. A. Ironside, William Newell, John Walvoord and others of more recent times. Dwight Pentecost in his book, Things to Come, lists 28 reasons, and John Walvoord in his writings still more, but some of these can easily be grouped together to form a less impressive number. I give below those that seem to me to be the most weighty.

Dispensationalism

(1) The dispensational interpretation of the Bible is the principal bulwark of pre-tribulationism. Reject the dispensational interpretation and the question loses much of its meaning. Dispensationalism divides man's history into different ages or dispensations. Thus:



It emphasizes the fact that God has dealt differently with man in different ages. It particularly stresses the difference between Israel and the Church, and insists that the Church began at Pentecost and had no existence in former dispensations. It teaches that the Church is a mystery revealed in this age only, a parenthesis in God's dealing with Israel.

According to this view, when Israel, as a nation, rejected their Messiah, God laid them aside and brought a new thing into being — the Church of Jesus Christ. When the Church is completed it will be caught away to heaven. Then God will begin to deal with Israel again as in former days, bring that nation back to Himself, and use it as a mighty instrument for the evangelization of the world. Through their efforts the multitude of saints referred to in Revelation chapter 7 are brought to Christ. But neither the saved Israelites who evangelize them, nor the great number of people who are supposed to be saved through their witness in that day will be members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

Dwight Pentecost lists 24 differences between Israel and the Church, and suggests that these distinctions make it very unlikely that these two separate groups of people could be in a program together even for as brief a time as the Tribulation.

Comment: Whatever we may think of dispensationalism (and a great many conservative Christians reject it),¹ this argument when applied to the Tribulation loses its force when it is seen that, as a matter of fact, God has dealt with both Israel and the Church together in the same time period. In the days when Christ lived on earth He lived in Israel and dealt directly with Israel. Yet at the same time He was beginning the training of the apostles, the human instruments in the founding of the New Testament Church. And, of course, God went right on dealing with Israel long after the Church age began (Luke 21:20-24; Romans chapter 11; etc.), and is dealing with them to this day in a way that is fulfilling His Word concerning them. Speaking of their dispersion throughout the world in the Church age, Robert Gundry has written, "Dispensationally speaking, if the Church presently occupies the predicted time of Israel's dispersion, she may also occupy the predicted time of Israel's final tribulation". And on the destruction

¹ I believe that, on the whole, in some measure, dispensationalism may be a help in understanding God's varied *outward* ways of dealing with mankind from the beginning. But we must be careful not to let it obscure the unity of the Bible and of God's purpose throughout the ages.

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of Jerusalem he wrote, "If an event such as the destruction of Jerusalem prophesied in the OT (Dan 9:26), fell within the Church age (A. D. 70), from the dispensational standpoint other events foretold in the OT and relating to Israel, such as tribulational events, might equally well fall within the Church age" (The Church and the Tribulation, pages 14,15).

True, the Church and Israel were not then, and are not now, in a "program together" in the sense of being two separate groups of saved people. But neither will they be such in the Tribulation. If the Church goes through the Tribulation, there will be only one group of saved people during that time, but God will at the same time be preparing Israel to receive their Messiah, Jesus Christ, at the end of it.

It seems clear from Scripture that Israel will not be saved until the Tribulation is over (Zech 12:10-14; 13:1,2; Rom 11:25,26). Certainly the Bible nowhere teaches that they will be saved before the Tribulation and become an evangelizing agency during the Tribulation. So if Israel is saved after the Tribulation there will not be two distinct saved groups before that time.

It is possible to over-emphasize dispensational distinctions and make them teach something God never intended. There is not always the clear-cut line separating ages that dispensationalists sometimes insist on. Conscience did not come to an end with the establishment of human government. Government did not end with the coming of the ages of promise and law. Something new was added, but the old was not removed. And there was certainly an overlapping of the dispensations when the old age of Israel gave way to the new age of the Church. It is possible to believe that there will be an overlapping at the end of this age when it in turn gives way to the millennial age. One could believe this without giving up any truly essential feature of dispensationalism. In the Tribulation period, God may continue to deal with the Church as well as with Israel and the nations, and bring them all through the closing days of the age.

Daniel's 70th week

(2) The scope and the nature of the 70th week of Daniel's prophecy make it very unlikely that the Church will be in it — so the pre-tribulationist argues.

Daniel's prophecy of the 70 weeks is found in Dan 9:24-27. Seventy "weeks" (or more literally, seventy "sevens") are appointed by God to fulfill His purpose toward Israel and their holy city, Jerusalem. These "weeks" (or "sevens") are obviously weeks of years. They are divided into three periods.

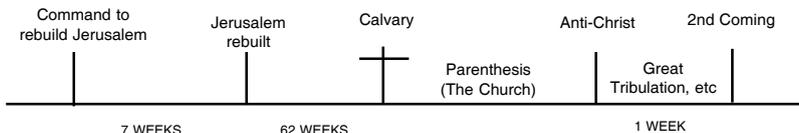
7 “weeks” — from the time of the order to rebuilt Jerusalem until that task was completed — 49 years.

62 “weeks” — from the completion of the street and wall of Jerusalem until Messiah is cut off — 434 years.

This gives a total of 69 weeks from the command to restore and build Jerusalem until the crucifixion of Christ.

After Messiah is “cut off”, 1 “seven”, or 7 years, remains for the complete fulfillment of God’s determined purpose as revealed in 9:24. This last “week” was not fulfilled during Christ’s lifetime or by His death, for it must occur after these. The question is, when was the 70th “seven” fulfilled? Or, if it is not yet fulfilled, when will it be?

The dispensationalists say that the fulfillment of the 70th week is still in the future; that when Israel rejected and crucified the Messiah the prophetic time clock regarding them was stopped, and God turned from them to the Church. At the end of the age He will turn to Israel again, start the clock once more, and cause the 70th week to run its course. Thus:



The above explanation has not been proved beyond possibility of doubting, but may be, on the whole, the best view of this difficult passage. In any case, Dan 9:27 does seem to clearly suggest a close connection between the 70th week and the rise of Antichrist at the end of this age. No doubt that wicked person himself will be the abomination that makes desolate (see my comments on Revelation chapters 11 and 13). And it is he who will cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease (compare Dan 11:31).

Concerning this future 70th “seven” the pre-tribulationist teaches the following:

(a) Its scope is entirely Jewish and has no reference to the Church at all. Dan 9:24 refers it to “your people” (Daniel’s people — the Jews) and “your holy city” (Jerusalem). Just as the Church had no part in the first 69 “seven” so it can have no part in the 70th.

Comment: Some, of course, will not at all agree that the Church had no share in the 69 weeks. They are sure that the Church was in Israel in Old Testament days, and that believers then were as much a part of it as believers now. But even if we say the Church

began at Pentecost and had no part in the 69 “seven”, it would not necessarily follow that it could have no part in the 70th “seven”. For if it had no existence during the 69 it obviously could not have had a part in them, but being in existence now it may have a part in the 70th. The words “your people” and “your holy city” in Dan 9:24 do not necessarily exclude everyone but Jews. There are other things said to Israel in the Old Testament that have application to the Church now — for example, Jer 31:31-34 (Heb 8:7-13), and Joel 2:28,29 (Acts 2:16-18). See also Acts 3:24 and 1 Peter 1:12. In any case, it is perfectly plain from Rev 7:9-17 that a great multitude of Gentile believers of some sort do have a prominent part in the so-called 70th “seven”. So this time has purposes that reach far beyond the borders of Israel. Also, as we have seen, as the 69 “seven” were drawing to a close and the dispensation was giving way to the new age of grace, there was an overlapping of dispensations.

(b) The nature of the 70th “week” is a strong indication that the Church cannot be on earth at that time. According to the pre-tribulationist, it is a time of wrath (Zeph 1:15,18; Rev 6:16,17; 11:18; 15:1), judgment (Rev 14:7), indignation and punishment (Isa 26:20,21), trouble (Jer 30:7), destruction (Joel 1:15), and darkness (Joel 2:2). The Church is the Bride of Christ and the special object of His love. It is the temple He inhabits, His very Body. God has not appointed the Church to wrath. She will not come into judgment, will never be punished for her sins, and will not face destruction from the Almighty. Her members are children of light and not of darkness. How, then, is it possible for the Church to go through the Tribulation? Pentecost writes in *Prophecy For Today*, “This view (post-tribulationism) holds that the Church is going through the seven years of the Tribulation period, will endure the judgment of the wrath of God, and then will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air to return immediately with Him to the earth”.

Comment: The mistake made by Mr Pentecost is a very common one and terrible confusing. It confuses the Tribulation with the Day of the Lord which follows it. These two times are quite distinct (see my comments on chapter 6, pages 124-129) and must be recognized as such if we are to properly understand end-time events. These two time periods are separated by clear signs in the sun, moon and stars. The Day of the Lord is the wrath of God. The tribulation is the wrath of Satan and ungodly men. The Church will certainly never have to endure the judgment of the wrath of God — no more than Israel in the land of Egypt endured the judgments that fell on the Egyptians.

Moreover, it is clear as daylight that many saints will be in the Tribulation. Whatever its nature may be, it will be such that some of God's dear people will be called upon to face it. (See 7:9-17; 12:17; 13:7; etc). If some may be, then we in the Church may be. For my part I find it difficult to believe that the Tribulation saints will be any less the object of God's love and care than believers are now, or that they will be called on to face something that is impossible for the Church to face. If the Tribulation is the wrath of God, how can there be saints of any kind in it? If pre-tribulationists cannot answer this question, they should stop using this argument. See the note in this commentary on page 139-143.

The Restrainer

(3) The work of a restrainer in 2 Thess 2:3-7 is offered in evidence that the Church will not be in the Tribulation. Some teach that the one who holds back the full apostasy of the Church and the rise of the Antichrist (vs 6,7) is the Holy Spirit. As long as the true Church is on earth indwelt by the Holy Spirit the "mystery of iniquity [or lawlessness]" is restrained. When (according to them) the Spirit is removed at the Rapture of the Church there will be no longer a check to the floods of ungodliness in the apostate church which remains in the world.

Comment: There is no mention of either the Rapture or the Holy Spirit in 2 Thess 2:6,7. That the Holy Spirit is the restrainer is only a guess. Other possibilities have been suggested. For all we know it may refer to angelic power operating in a fashion similar to that recorded in Rev 7:1 and 9:14,15. All we can say for certain is, Paul told the Thessalonians "what is restraining", but he has not told us. Even if the restrainer is the Holy Spirit, "taken out of the way" does not necessarily mean removed from earth in the Church at the time of the Rapture. That is reading into the passage something that is not stated.

Moreover, it is my conviction that the Holy Spirit is much more likely to be poured out in a wonderful way during the Tribulation than He is to be withdrawn from the earth (Acts 2:17-21). I believe that He will strive with men up until the very hour when the Day of the Lord is ushered in, after the Tribulation. I find it very hard to believe that the saints who will actually be in the Tribulation (Revelation chapter 7; etc) will become believers without the Holy Spirit and stand victoriously against Antichrist without the Holy Spirit. How can this be thought possible?

Actually this whole passage in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 is evidence against the pre-tribulation rapture theory, rather than evidence for it. Gundry put it like this: "Paul, correcting false

impressions concerning the day of the Lord, does not deny that Christians will meet that day, but rather gives them two signaling events by which they may recognize its approach — the apostasy and the revelation of the man of lawlessness. If pretribulationism be true, Paul should have quieted the agitation of the Thessalonians by telling them that a pretribulation rapture will absent them long before the arrival of the day of the Lord. Instead, he informs them of harbingers within the tribulation by which they will see the approach of the day beforehand" (ibid, page 96).

Coming "with," coming "for"

(4) A distinction is made in the Scriptures between Christ's coming for His saints and His coming with His saints (compare 1 Thess 4:16,17 with 3:13). Pretribulationists say that the coming for the saints refers to the Rapture before the 70th "week" begins, the coming with His saints refers to His revelation in glory at the end of the 70th "week".

Comment: For all we can prove, the coming with His saints may refer to a coming with the spirits of believers (who have gone on before — as in 1 Thess 4:14) at the same time He comes for the saints who are still living on earth. Even if the times of these comings are entirely distinct, it is not necessary to assume that they are separated by a period of seven years or more. Could not the language be as easily fulfilled if the interval were seven months, or even less? If the Rapture occurs at the seventh trumpet of the Revelation there will be an interval of some days or weeks before Christ's appearance on a white horse to destroy His enemies. During this time the wrath of God will be poured out in the bowl judgments.

Rapture & Revelation

(5) The Scriptures, we are told, make a distinction between the Rapture of the Church and the Revelation of Christ in glory — which means, in fact, two second comings, or at least two entirely separate aspects of one second coming. Pre-tribulationists teach

At the Rapture all believers are removed from earth.

At the Revelation Christ and believers return to earth.

At the Rapture the Church, the Bride, is removed.

At the Revelation the Bride returns and the millennial kingdom is established

The Rapture is imminent and without signs.

The Revelation is preceded by a multitude of signs.

The Rapture is a message of hope.

The Revelation is a message of judgment.

The Rapture is related only to the Church.

The Revelation is related to Israel and the world.

The Rapture is a mystery not prophesied in the Old Testament.

The Revelation is predicted in both Testaments.

At the Rapture believers are judged.

At the Revelation Gentiles are judged.

Comment: Some scholars will not at all admit that the Scriptures teach that there is a difference between the Rapture and the Revelation. They insist that they are but two sides of the same event and that the believer's true hope in this age is the Revelation of Christ in glory (as we have it in Titus 2:13). But even if it be admitted that they are distinct events it does not follow that they are separated by seven or more years. For all we know, they may follow one another in fairly rapid succession and be separated by only a few weeks or even days.

An interval needed

(6) The pre-tribulationist points out that there is the necessity of an interval between the Rapture and the Revelation in order for the Church to be judged and rewarded, and for the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Comment: It might reasonably be asked, How much of an interval is necessary? Why seven years? Would seven months be sufficient, or seven weeks? Who can say? In any case, God's revelation to us clearly says that the judgment and the giving of rewards will occur at the 7th trumpet, which occurs when the Tribulation is over.

The place prepared

(7) It appears from the Scriptures that the Church when raptured will be taken to heaven and not immediately into the millennium on earth (John 14:1-3). Someone has even gone so far as to suggest that if the Rapture takes place after the Tribulation, the place Jesus is preparing for Christians will never be used. For then the Church would immediately enter with Christ into the millennium on earth.

Comment: Is the prepared place, then, only intended for a brief seven-years occupancy by the Church? Will the Church at the end of that period vacate those heavenly mansions never to return?

If this strange thing were true then that fleeting visit might just as well be seven weeks as seven years. Neither time is of any consequence compared with eternity. It seems to me that an argument like the one above shows to what absurd lengths pre-tribulationists are willing to go to prop up their theory.

Peace & safety

(8) The Scriptures declare, we are told, that peace and safety will prevail just before Christ's coming (1 Thess 5: 3 — "When they shall say, 'Peace and safety', then sudden destruction will come on them"). This must refer to a Rapture before the Tribulation, for the Tribulation itself will be a time of war, wrath, and trouble.

Comment: The passage in question refers to the Day of the Lord (5:2) when the Tribulation is over and not to the Tribulation itself. During the Tribulation period the Antichrist will have put down all other authority and will reign supreme. He will be so much the master of things that men will say, "Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?" It will seem to the ungodly that peace and safety have come at last after a period of war and rumors of war. Actually verse 4 in that passage seems to suggest that true Christians will be on earth just before the Day of the Lord — and we must remember that the Day of the Lord comes after the Tribulation. Also the language of 1 Thess 5: 1,2 seems to place the Rapture (described in the closing verses of chapter 4) at the beginning of the Day of the Lord. This is further evidence that the Church will be in the Tribulation. Gundry has written, "Since the day of the Lord will begin after the tribulation and since Christians will not be taken by surprise at the arrival of that day, the Church will have come through the tribulation" (Ibid, page 96).

Great Tribulation on epistles

(9) The epistles written by the Apostles to teach Christian doctrine to believers of this dispensation do not contain any reference to the Great Tribulation, and no attempt is made to prepare believers for it. This would be unthinkable, we are told, if the Church must go through that terrible time of trouble.

Comment: The Great Tribulation is not referred to by that exact name in the letters of the Apostles. But there are solemn warnings of fiery tribulations and that, too, in connection with the second coming of Christ (2 Thess 1: 4-7; 1 Pet 4: 12,13). And great care is taken in more than one of the epistles to inform and prepare believers for such times. And Paul very definitely warned of the coming of Antichrist in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2—the one who will

be the active human agent in the Great Tribulation. In any case, an argument from silence may mean little or nothing. To give only one example, Paul never mentions in his writing, by name, the virgin birth of Christ — which is not to say he did not believe in it, or that it has no importance in Christian doctrine.

Promises

(10) The Pre-tribulationists inform us that there are certain promises made to the Church that she will not go through the Tribulation. The promises referred to are Rev 3:10, 1 Thess 1:10 and 5:4,9 and sometimes Luke 21:36.

Comment: I have a note on Rev 3:10 at the close of the letter to Philadelphia and will not repeat those remarks here. 1 Thess 5:4 refers to the Day of the Lord and not to the Tribulation. 1 Thess 1:10 and 5:9 may refer to the same time, or it could refer to the eternal wrath of God that will come upon the sinner and from which the believer has been delivered through the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. The contrast there is not between wrath and Rapture, but between wrath and salvation. In any case, there is no promise in these verses of escape from wrath by a rapture. Luke 21:36 likewise seems to refer to the Day of the Lord. “All these things” are listed in verses 25ff and include signs that indicate that Day. It is my firm conviction that there is not in the whole Bible one clear, unambiguous promise made to Christians or believers of any sort that they will escape the Great Tribulation. If there were, the matter would be settled. Since there is not, one might well wonder, why not?

Old Testament types

(11) We are told that the Old Testament types are in agreement with the teaching of pre-tribulationism. Enoch, taken away by God from the earth before the flood, is a picture of the Church raptured before the Tribulation, they say. Lot, too, escaped from Sodom before the fire of God’s wrath fell.

Comment: It seems to me that the flood that destroyed the world, and the fire that consumed Sodom are not pictures of the Tribulation at all but of the Day of the Lord that follows it. And from this the Church will doubtless be delivered by one means or another. In any case, the amount of time that must elapse between the Rapture and the Revelation of Christ in glory is not at all suggested by these types. There is not the slightest indication that it will be seven years. More on this subject later.

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Literal interpretation

(12) Some say that the literal method of interpreting the book of the Revelation must carry with it the doctrine of a pre-tribulation Rapture, and that post-tribulationists must spiritualize it.

Comment: This is not true. Post-tribulationists are no more compelled to spiritualize the obviously literal statements of the Revelation than pre-tribulationists. This should be clear from the method of interpretation adopted by a number of post-tribulationists.

Division of the Revelation

(13) The logical division of the Revelation as given in 1:19 supports the theory of a pre-tribulation Rapture.

Comment: That it does not do so I have tried to show in my comments on chapter 4. In fact, I think quite the reverse is true.

Unmentioned Church

(14) The Church is not mentioned from chapter 4 until the Revelation is finished.

24 Elders

(15) The twenty-four elders of chapter 4 represent the Church, judged, rewarded, crowned and enthroned in heaven before the Tribulation begins.

Comment: These two arguments are also taken up in my comments on chapter 4.

144,000 Israelites

(16) Pre-tribulationists point out that the 144,000 Israelites of chapter 7 are sealed to a special relationship apart from the Church — a thing impossible were the Church still on earth.

Comment: This company of 144,000, it seems clear, are sealed after the Great Tribulation is over. Their sealing has to do with protection in the time of the events that take place under the trumpets. Their sealing marks them out for some special purpose future to that time, but does not necessarily mean that they are saved during the Tribulation when the Church (it may be) is still on earth. It is my opinion that Israel will be brought back to God when the Tribulation is over. In any case, we are not told the exact function of these 144,000 or their relationship, if any, to the Church.

Object of attack

(17) Judging from Revelation chapter 12, the great object of Satan's attack in the Tribulation is the woman, which symbolizes

Israel. If the Church were on earth surely Satan's chief attack would be aimed at her.

Comment: In chapter 12 there are two objects of Satan's attack — the woman and the rest of her offspring. This last group may, without violence to the symbolism of that chapter, signify the Church on earth at that time. See my comments on that chapter.

Church's prayers

(18) Some draw an argument from the relationship of the Church to human governments. The Church is to pray for, and to submit to, those in authority. This would not be possible under the Antichrist. The Jews, on the other hand, in accordance with certain of their psalms, could call down wrath and judgment upon him and his allies.

Comment: In commenting on the fifth seal I have tried to show that when God at last rises to set in motion those events that eventually result in the judgment of the world, all His saved creatures, both earthly and heavenly, will be in perfect harmony with the decision. But concerning submission to the authorities, the New Testament teaching is that believers must obey only God when there is a conflict between His will and the will of human authorities — Acts 4G18-20; 5G27-29. There have been other antichrists since then who have ruled nations inhabited by true Christians when such a choice had to be made. In the nature of things it is not impossible that it should happen again.

Time needed

(19) Pre-tribulationists teach that the Church must be raptured before the Tribulation in order to leave time for God to produce a saved earthly people to enter the millennium. If all believers are raptured after the Tribulation is over there would be none left on earth for this purpose. The destiny of the Church is heavenly, but the Scriptures speak of an earthly company of believers who will be here when Christ returns (Matt 25: 31ff).

Comment: I do not think we know enough about the inauguration of the millennium, who will be in it, or excluded from it, what type of people will be spared, or how God will produce them, or how long it will take, to be able to pass judgment on the matter. Only one thing seems clear to me — all Israel will be saved just before the millennium and Christ will reign over them and they will be an instrument in His hands to publish His glory to the ends of the earth (Isa 66: 15-21). This reference indicates that there will be unsaved peoples on earth at the beginning of the millennium. There will be some who have not heard of the Lord's fame or seen His glory. In

fact, the vast majority of earth's people at the beginning of the millenium may be in an unsaved condition. However, it is more than likely that very early on in Christ's reign there will be a great turning to the Lord among the Gentiles who remain on earth and a great transformation of individuals and societies.

Imminency

(20) The doctrine of the pre-tribulation Rapture is the only one consistent with the idea of the imminent return of Christ. If Christ may return at any moment then the Church is not to look for the rise of Antichrist or for the Tribulation or for any other signs or events. For it is not possible both that His coming is imminent and that other predicted events must precede it.

Comment: J. Barton Payne in his book *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* denies even this. He is a post-tribulationist but also believes in Christ's imminent coming. However, I think his position is hardly defensible. If the Rapture is imminent, if Christ may come today for His Church, then, as far as I am concerned, the question is settled. It is hardly possible to live in the daily expectation of Christ's immediate return if one believes that Christ will not return until the Tribulation is over, unless one has peculiar views about the prophecies of Antichrist and the Tribulation. However, the arguments for an imminent return of Christ are not altogether convincing.

"watch", "wait for"

a. We are told that such expressions as are used in Matt 24:42, Luke 12:36, Phil 3:20, Titus 2:13, etc ("watch", "wait for", and "look for") indicate an imminent return of Christ. George Ladd in his book *The Blessed Hope* has convincingly demonstrated otherwise. For example, the word used in Luke 12:36 "like men who wait (prosdechomai) for their lord" is from the same root as the word used in 2 Pet 3:13 — "We, according to his promise, look for (prosdokao) new heavens and a new earth". We look for, or wait for the new heavens and new earth although their creation is not imminent — other predicted events must occur before their creation. Just so, it is possible to eagerly await, to longingly watch for events that we know cannot take place at any moment. James 5:7 compares our waiting for the Lord to the farmer waiting for his crops. Certainly the farmer does not expect an any moment harvest, but waits patiently for the process of nature to be completed. In the above Scriptures it seems to me the Lord is teaching the proper state of heart of His people in regard to His coming rather than imminency. We are taught to wait patiently for Christ even if His coming should be long delayed. We are to be

spiritually awake and alert as to what is going on and how it points to His return.

“at hand”

b. We are told that Christ's coming is “at hand” and will be as a “thief in the night”, and so must be imminent. However, both of these expressions are used of the Day of the Lord (1 Thess 5:2; Joel 1:15) which, coming as it does after the Tribulation (which the Scriptures clearly teach, as I have shown on page 128), is not imminent in the sense that it can happen at any moment without any intervening prophesied events. If the Day of the Lord can be “at hand” and come as “a thief in the night” and yet not be imminent in this sense, so then Christ's coming for His Church may be also. In any case, 1 Thess 5:4 says that that day will not come as a thief to believers. For the man who is awake there are signs of the thief's coming — the creak of the gate, or the noise of his footsteps, or his sound at the window. See also the remarks on this subject in the first chapter of this book, pages 20-22.

No signs?

c. We are told that such expressions as are used in Matt 24:36,42 indicate an any moment coming, and show that no signs precede it. If His coming were at the end of the Tribulation, they say, we would be able to tell almost the exact time of His coming. However, Matt 24:36,42 does not teach that it will be impossible to know the year of His coming, only that the hour and the day will not be known. I believe there is a time period of some weeks or months between the end of the Tribulation and the revelation of Christ in Revelation 19. Those in the Tribulation, if they know their Bibles well, will also know the general time of Christ's coming, will perhaps be able to understand the very year of it (Matt 24:33). But they will not know the day or the hour. Of course, this was possible at His first coming as well. In fact, Christ rebuked the Jews for failing to understand the times (Matt 16:1-3).

No comfort?

d. We are told that if the coming of Christ is not imminent, and if the Church must go through the Tribulation, then she loses all the comfort of the promise of His coming. The truth of His coming is meant to be a hope that quiets our fears. The hope of the Christian, the pre-tribulationist insists, is Rapture, not tribulation. Pentecost, writing of the hope of the believer in the imminent return of Christ, says: “The answer to this question vitally affects the daily life of the believer”. The inference is (and this is plainly stated by some writers) that those who believe Christ's return is

imminent have in this view itself an aid to holiness and comfort that the post-tribulationist cannot have.

However, in all fairness, it must be admitted that the second coming of Christ is a glorious hope and comfort to all believers regardless of their view concerning the Tribulation. That hope is glorious, not because it means escape from three and one half years or seven years of trouble, but because it means that we will ever be with the Lord and be like Him for we will see Him as He is. Nothing can destroy the comfort of this. In the Revelation Jesus said to the church at Smyrna that they would have tribulation for ten days. So they could know that before Christ's return they would have to face that trouble. And He gave comforting words to them to help them endure that time. While still on earth Jesus told His disciples very clearly that "in the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33), but He also said to them, "Let not your heart be troubled" (John 14:1). So they could know that they were going to face tribulation of some kind or other before He returned, but they could still have comfort through the promise of His return for them and the heavenly home which awaited them. All believers, whatever their views on the Tribulation, may know that our light affliction which is but for a moment works for us a far more exceeding weight of eternal glory. It should be added that the holy lives of such godly post-tribulationists as George Mueller, Henry Frost, Roland Bingham, and many others, both before and after these men, rebuke the suggestion that they were deprived by their views of an aid to holiness which pre-tribulationists have.

For further remarks on the subject of imminency see under 12 following.

Such are the arguments generally advanced for pre-tribulationism. They do not seem to me to establish that view beyond doubt. If others are satisfied with these arguments I can only assume that either they are more easily satisfied than myself, or they see more in them than I have been given to see.

Let us now turn our attention to arguments on the other side of the question. I will ignore here all arguments against the dispensational interpretation of Scripture. These of course, if true, would tend to destroy pre-tribulationism. But this would involve us in by-paths not necessary to the present discussion. But even if one believes in dispensationalism one may still reject the theory of a pre-tribulation Rapture. It is possible to be a dispensationalist without counting a seven year period at the end of this age as a special dispensation all its won — a sort of dispensation of the Antichrist.

The following arguments are offered in support of post-tribulationism. Some of them are more fully discussed in the body of this commentary and so will be only briefly listed here.

Before we proceed it should be noted that answers can be given to all the arguments for pre-tribulationism, and alternate possible explanations can be given for the Bible references upon which these arguments are based. Of course, this does not destroy that position, nor does it prove post-tribulationism. But it does at least make the case doubtful.

Old verses New

(1) Some have drawn an argument for post-tribulationism and against pre-tribulationism from the fact that the former seems to have been the received interpretation of the early Church fathers, while the latter theory was devised less than 200 years ago. George Ladd in *The Blessed Hope* says, "Every church father who deals with the subject expects the church to suffer at the hands of Antichrist". He then goes through the list — The Didache (early 2nd century), the Epistle of Barnabas (early 2nd century), Tertullian (late 2nd and 3rd centuries), Lactantius (late 3rd and early 4th centuries), Hippolytus (3rd century) — to prove the point. It is common knowledge that pre-tribulationism is comparatively a recent doctrine that can be traced back no further than the time of the beginnings of the Brethren movement in England in the 19th century. Even then it was resisted by godly Brethren such as George Mueller, S.P.Tregelles and B. W. Newton. Charles Spurgeon once said (in another connection), and not without reason, "Rest assured that there is nothing new in theology except that which is false". The very newness of the pre-tribulation Rapture theory causes many to view it with suspicion.

"The possibility of a pre-tribulational rapture seems never to have occurred to anyone in the early Church." It was "neither mentioned nor considered" (Gundry, *Ibid*, page 173).

A task to be finished

(2) The preaching of the Gospel by the Church must go on to the end of the age (Matt 24: 14; 28: 19,20). The Church must finish this task of evangelizing before Christ returns. "The end of the age" can hardly mean seven years before the end. It can hardly see the Church removed while a vast multitude (Revelation 7) of all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages are still to be won. The end cannot come until the Gospel is preached in all the world as a witness.

Parables

(3) The teaching of the parables of the tares and the wheat, and the net of fishes (Matt 13:28-30, 38-43,49,50) confirms this view. The wheat (and the good fish) signifies believers, the tares (and the bad fish) signifies unbelievers. The harvest is "the end of the world". The tares are gathered first (13:30,41), and then the wheat. This is in complete opposition to the view of pre-tribulationists who teach that the wheat that has been growing throughout this age (the Church) is first gathered, after which wrath is poured out upon the wicked tares.

Olive tree

(4) The teaching of the olive tree in Romans chapter 11 is in harmony with post-tribulationism. Verses 25,26 teach us the following:

a. Blindness in Israel continues until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in. That is, Israel will not be saved until God's program toward the Gentiles with the Gospel of this age is fulfilled. Then, and only then, will unbelieving Gentile peoples be broken off and Israel, brought back to God, grafted back into the olive tree.

b. This does not happen at the beginning of the 70th "week" of Daniel, but at the close of it as shown by v 26. It is at the time of the appearance of Christ out of Zion that "all Israel will be saved". Until then the Lord continues to carry on His present program with the Gentiles.

c. This is confirmed by the fact that a great multitude of saved Gentiles are in the Tribulation — showing that God will still be carrying on His present program among them at that time, and that Israel is not then grafted into the olive tree.

Nature of the Tribulation

(5) The nature of the Tribulation suggests the possibility (rather, probability) of the Church being in it. It is not to be confounded with the day of God's wrath that comes after it. It is Satan's wrath (Rev 12:12-17) and Antichrist's wrath (13:7ff) — the same sort of wrath that the Church has often endured before. As I have shown elsewhere, the Day of the Lord does not begin until the Tribulation is over. God's wrath is preceded by man's wrath (Ps 2:1-5). The Church escaping the one, may yet face the other. God's wrath does not fully come on the guilty world until the seven bowls of wrath are poured out (Revelation chapters 15,16). Thus in order for true Christians to escape the wrath of God it is not necessary for the Church to be raptured at the beginning of the Tribulation. A Rapture at the 7th trumpet would do (11:15-18) for this is just before the bowls are poured out (14:15,16).

Warnings

(6) The Holy Spirit throughout the Scriptures repeatedly warns believers of tribulation and prepares them for it. I have tried to show elsewhere (in a note on chapter 7) that such tribulations may well include the Great one.

Coming in glory

(7) The Scriptures seem to teach that the hope of true Christians concerning deliverance from tribulation is the coming of Christ in glory at the end of a period of tribulation and not a Rapture before it. 2 Thess 1:6,7 puts it this way: "It is a righteous thing for God to repay tribulation to those who trouble you, and rest to you who are being troubled, along with us, when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels".

According to Titus 2:13 the blessed hope is the glorious appearing of Christ: "Looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ".

Signs given

(8) There are many signs given concerning the last days that precede the coming of Christ that must be fulfilled before He comes. Dr. Oswald J. Smith in his book "Prophecy — What Lies Ahead" lists 16 such signs. Others suggest a greater or lesser number. And some, no doubt, put things forward as signs that are not signs at all. But on the whole it certainly does not seem Scriptural to state dogmatically, as some do, that there will be no signs of Christ's coming for the Church. The Bible does not state there will be no signs, so we have no authority to do so.

If there are clear signs that must be fulfilled before Christ's coming, then than coming cannot be imminent, cannot occur at any moment. It seems to me that Paul plainly gave a sign that must take place before Christ's coming. The believers at Thessalonica were in a state of confusion about the Lord's return. Someone had been troubling them by false reports (2 Thess 2:2). They thought that "the day of Christ is at hand". Perhaps they feared that they were actually in that day of wrath.

What did Paul say to set them straight? If he held to the doctrine of a pre-tribulation Rapture, surely then if ever, was the time to emphasize it. In such case he might have said, "What, my dearly beloved brethren, do you not realize that we cannot be in the day of the Lord, because Christ has not come to rapture His Church? See, I Paul am still here on earth. And you believers are still here at Thessalonica. Do you not understand that the Rapture will

precede the Day of the Lord by several years?" Instead of this the apostle gave them a sign whereby they could know of the near approach of the Day of the Lord when it did come. "Let no one deceive you by any means. For that day will not come, unless the apostasy comes first, and that man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition" (2 Thess 2:3 ff). Was not this telling believers in no uncertain words that they would see a widespread apostasy in the Church and the appearance of Antichrist before the return of Christ? If the appearance of Antichrist will not vitally affect the Church I cannot fathom why Paul took such pains to warn them of his coming.

Matthew 24

(9) Matthew 24 certainly gives the impression that believers of this age are to look for certain signs, including the Great Tribulation and the rise of Antichrist, before the return of Christ. There are some teachers who insist that Matt 24 was spoken not to Christians but to Jews. They seem to think that the mention of "Judaea" in v 16 and "the Sabbath day" in v 20 is sufficient ground for this. So then the question arises, For whom was Matt 24 written? Was its purpose to warn the Jews or Christians of coming tribulation, or both group of people?

(a) These things were addressed to the disciples of Jesus Christ who, although Jews, were the first Christians and human founders of the Church. If these things were addressed to them not as Christians but as Jews how were they to know it? How could they departmentalize the sayings of the Lord? What magic key did they have that might unlock these mysteries? How could they say, "Ah, this is for us as Jews, but not for us as Christians?" And how can we? These same disciples are addressed in John chapters 14-16 and in Matt 26:26-29. As Payne points out, if they represent the Church in Matthew 26 on Thursday, there can be no reason to think they represent anything else in Matthew 24 on Tuesday. Also when Matthew 24 was spoken, Israel had already been rejected as the elect nation for this age.

(b) The Lord Jesus plainly said to them, "Then they will deliver you up to be afflicted, and will kill you. And you will be hated of all nations for my name's sake" (v 9). The phrase "for my name's sake" indicates that He was addressing them in their relationship to Him as Christians who went forth in His name and for His name's sake. Christians in this age do bear Christ's name before the world but the same cannot be said for the Jews.

(c) The references to Judaea and the Sabbath do not overthrow this. It merely indicates that the center of that great

storm of tribulation will be in the midst of the land of Palestine. And this may well be intended as a special warning to Christians who are living in that area at the time of the Tribulation. Christians living there in 70 A. D. at the destruction of Jerusalem thought it was a warning to them, and many of them escaped. This is a fact of history. Do Christians living 19 centuries later have information these early Christians did not have?

(d) It is also strange that some of those who say that these things were written for Jews, yet seize upon such statements as Matt 24:36 and 42, apply them to Christians, and try to use them to prove that the coming of Christ is imminent. But it is plain that the command to watch, the promise of a sudden coming, and the statement that no one knows the day or the hour are given to the same people to whom the signs and the warnings of the Tribulation are given.

Taking away scriptures

(10) Some strongly object to pre-tribulationism on the grounds that it must deny the application to Christians of several important portions of the New Testament. Matthew 24, Mark 13, parts of Luke 21, Revelation chapters 4 to 19, and any other Scriptures that contains warnings or statements that seem contrary to their view of imminency, they say apply to others and not to the Church. There are not lacking teachers who fear that this is mutilating the Scriptures rather than rightly dividing them. Also by doing so they are taking away from that future group of believers the possibility of belief in the imminent, any moment coming of Christ which they think is so valuable for believers now. And they fail to answer this question: if it is not important for believers during the Tribulation to believe in imminency, why is it so important for believers now? Do the Scriptures lead us to believe in a double standard, one for saints now, another for saints in the Tribulation?

Imminency

(11) We must take up again the subject of imminency. Are those who take these Scriptures from the Church in order to maintain their doctrine of an any moment coming of Christ correct in doing so? Or are they wrong in their view that Christ's return may be literally at any moment? It is not enough to merely assume that Christ's return is imminent and then base our arguments on that assumption. It must be first proved from the Scriptures, or such arguments can have no validity. But real proof may not be easy to come by. In fact, it would seem that the Apostles did not at all believe in an any moment return of Christ. An evangelical writer on prophecy in another generation, Patrick Fairbairn, stated

this very strongly — “It is difficult to express one’s astonishment at the confidence with which it is still often affirmed of the apostles, that they looked for the return of Christ before their own death. If so, they must have been at once the most impracticable of learners, and the most inconsistent of writers.”

Gundry states flatly, “The early Church did not hold to the doctrine of imminence.” Again, “although watching for the Lord’s coming implies immanence to some people, it does not to the minds of others, and did not do so to the early church” (Ibid, page 180).

G. H. Lang in his commentary on the Revelation, George Ladd in *The Blessed Hope* and others offer strong arguments to show that an any moment coming of Christ was not the expectation or teaching of the Apostles.

(a) The predicted desolation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple had to occur before Christ’s return (Luke 21:20-24).

(b) The growing old and the death of Peter was foretold by the Lord (John 21:18,19). So believers who were familiar with this prophecy had no right to expect the return of Christ until Peter aged and died. As the time of his death drew near Peter wrote of it in perfectly clear terms, showing that he was expecting that rather than the return of Christ (2 Pet 1:14,15).

(c) The apostle Paul was told plainly that he must preach in Rome (Acts 23:11), which he did not do until 2 or 3 years afterwards. From Rome he later wrote to Timothy that his death was near (2 Tim 4:6,7). Thus both Peter and Paul were expecting to die rather than to be raptured.

(d) In the Revelation, the church at Smyrna was clearly told to expect tribulation “ten days”. They had no reason, therefore, to expect the Lord to return at any moment.

(e) The Lord Jesus Himself used language that suggests a long passage of time before His coming. There is the phrase that occurs in the parable of the talents “after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them” (Matt 25:19). And the parable of the pounds recorded in Luke 19:12-27 was spoken to the disciples to correct their false notion that “the kingdom of God would immediately appear” (v 11). So the disciples were later told to wait and watch for something that was not imminent.

(f) The commission given to the Apostles by the Lord Jesus is familiar to us all — “Go therefore, and make disciples of all

nations" (Matt 28: 19), "Go into all the world" (Mark 16: 15). This was His command and plan for His Church, to be fulfilled before He returned from heaven. What grounds, then, had they for believing that He would return at any moment before they had fulfilled the task He gave them to do?

(g) Then there is the word spoken to the Lord Jesus by the Father — "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool". How could they expect Him to rise and come before it was time for the final destruction of His enemies? That is, before the rise of the worse human enemy of all, the predicted Antichrist, etc.

From these Scripture it appears that the Apostles had no reason to believe that Christ would come at any moment or even very soon. Now if the apostles did not expect an any moment second coming of Christ, had they any right to try to teach other believers to expect it? As far as I can see, they did not. And never do we find in their writings a direct statement that Christ may come at any moment, or that there was nothing that remained to be fulfilled before He comes. What seems to be imminent in their teaching is not the Rapture, but the whole of end-time events, including the rise of Antichrist, the Tribulation, the Rapture, etc. All this can happen rapidly, in the lifetime of any generation.

If the idea of an any moment second coming is given up, one of the most common arguments for pre-tribulationism is gone, and the Scriptures which speak of the many events that precede His coming are restored to the Church. I cannot see that it is Scriptural to state dogmatically, as some do, that there will be no signs that precede the coming of Christ for His Church. The Bible itself nowhere plainly says there will be no signs that precede this coming. So how can we state it and claim the Bible as our authority in this matter? It is useless to merely assume Christ's coming for His Church is imminent (by misinterpreting certain Scriptures), then assume because of this there can be no signs. This is not explaining Scripture, it is only multiplying assumptions.

No doubt the thought that Christ may come at any moment for His people and suddenly deliver them from all their troubles is a delightful prospect, and one which pleases me well. And it is a doctrine strongly held as the only true and orthodox one by many believers. But our views of what is true are not to be determined by what delights us, or by what many believers hold to be orthodox. The question is, what do the Scriptures teach?

Resurrection of believers

(12) The resurrection of believers is never said to be before the Tribulation. As a matter of fact, the impression generally given when the resurrection is referred to in the Bible is that it will occur after the Tribulation is over. So Daniel 12:1,2 and Revelation 20:4-6. The latter reference proves that there is a resurrection of saints that includes those who have suffered and died under the Antichrist. It is called the first resurrection. Now it must be confessed by all that the Rapture involves the resurrection of the saints (1 Thess 4:16). A question, then, must be answered — how could the resurrection that takes place after the Tribulation be called the first if there is another mighty resurrection that precedes it by at least 7 years? Moreover, where is there the slightest hint in Scripture that there will be two resurrections of the saints at the end of the age, one of those believers who die before the Tribulation, the second of those who die during it?

The last trumpet

(13) 1 Cor 15:51,52 is the only place in the New Testament, as far as I can see, that definitely tells us the time of the resurrection and transformation of believers. It will occur very suddenly “at the last trumpet”. In Revelation 8-11 we have the sounding of seven trumpets. Matt 24:31 also speaks of a trumpet (perhaps the last of these seven). The question naturally arises, how can the Rapture, which is at the last trumpet, occur before the Tribulation begins when there are at least seven trumpets which follow later? Thus to be a pre-tribulationist one must believe that the “last” trumpet is followed by several others, and the “first” resurrection is preceded by another!

Rewarding the saints

(14) The giving of rewards to the saints also occurs when the Tribulation is over. This is the plain meaning of Rev 11:15,18. The last of the trumpets blows and the saints are called into the presence of the Lord to receive according to their works. How then can it be taught with such confidence that believers of this age are raptured, judged, and rewarded several years before this 7th trumpet?

Old Testament types

(15) The types seen in the Old Testament can also be used to argue that the Church must go through the Tribulation. Noah was preserved safely through the flood, not removed from it. Lot was taken out of Sodom only immediately before the fire fell — just as the Church may be raptured just before the bowls of wrath are poured out. Israel in Egypt was preserved through the tribulation under Pharaoh and was taken out just before the destruction of the

Egyptians. Nowhere in the New Testament are we told that Enoch is a type of the Church. Even if he were, his history would not give us the interval that must occur between the Rapture and the Revelation. On the other hand, both Noah and Lot are mentioned by the Lord Jesus in connection with His coming (Luke 17:26-30). The destruction at the end of this age will be as in the time of Lot — “the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and sulfur from heaven, and destroyed them all”. Notice the words “the same day”. Thus will the Day of the Lord be a sudden destruction after the Tribulation is over. If Israel is used as a type of the Church (and there is foundation for this in 1 Cor 10:11) the meaning of their tribulation in Egypt as it relates to the last days of the Church is clear. They were preserved in it and only escaped at the time of Pharaoh’s actual destruction. They suffered tribulation under Pharaoh but escaped the wrath of God which came on Pharaoh (possibly a picture of the Day of the Lord)

Church in the Revelation

(16) In the Book of Revelation the Church is on earth the last times it is mentioned by name in chapters 2 and 3. We are not told it went anywhere, so many assume it is still there in the chapters that follow. See page 121.

The great multitude

(17) In Revelation 7 we are introduced to a great multitude of saints who come out of the Great Tribulation. Pre-tribulationists cannot satisfactorily account for these. They teach that the Jews will be saved during that time and that many of them will become flaming evangelists to the Gentiles. Yet it seems that the Jews will not be saved until they see Christ at the end of the age (Zech 12:10-14; 13:1,2). In any case, the Scriptures have nothing to say about the evangelizing work of Jews during the Tribulation that would produce such tremendous results. It is a fiction. Pre-tribulationists teach us that the Holy Spirit is taken out of the world in the Church before the Tribulation and then expect us to believe that this vast multitude of Gentiles from every nation, people, and tongue are saved in the short space of seven years by converted Jews without the Spirit as servants of God have Him in this age. And this at a time when the Jews are under fierce attack by Satan and Antichrist and have to hide somewhere (Revelation chapter 12). See other remarks about this in the comments on chapter 7.

Great Tribulation saints

(18) The calling and privileges of those slain in the Great Tribulation seem to be the same high calling and heavenly privileges of the Church (see Rev 7:15-17 and 20:4,6).

The Holy Spirit

(19) The relationship of the Holy Spirit to the last days of this age is worthy of study. Scripture seems to teach that instead of being taken up out of the world in the Church at the beginning of the Tribulation He is to be poured out upon all flesh as at Pentecost right up to the beginnings of the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:28-31 and Acts 2:17-21). If He is poured out during the Tribulation He can hardly be the restrainer referred to in 2 Thess 2:7 who must be taken "out of the way". The Holy Spirit cannot be both taken away and poured out at one and the same time.

A strange thing

(20) We are told in Rev 1:1 that the purpose of the book is "to show to His servants things which must quickly take place". This is the New Testament book of prophecy, giving to the Church the great future events which will affect her most closely. And yet in the Revelation there is no pre-tribulation rapture revealed. John Walvoord, one of the champions of the theory of a pre-tribulation rapture, seems to admit this. He states, "the Rapture as a doctrine is not a part of the prophetic foreview of the Revelation". But if true this is certainly a very strange thing. As Gundry² points out, if there really is such a thing as a pre-tribulation Rapture it is by far the most important event to affect the Church among those events which must shortly take place. John records many details of the tribulation, the Day of the Lord, and the coming of Christ after the Tribulation. But not a word about any coming of Christ before the Tribulation (by the way, the same can be said for the Olivet discourse of Jesus in Matthew 24 where He gave us a prophetic outline of coming events). In a book (rather, the book) of prophecy addressed to the Church, and giving the leading events of the future, why this strange silence about a doctrine that some count so important, if it really is a true doctrine? Actually the Rapture is depicted in the Revelation, I believe. See 14:14-16 and the notes there.

Such are the arguments that might be advanced on the two sides of the question of the relationship of the Church to the Tribulation. No doubt others could be added to either side but these are sufficient to clarify the issue. What shall we say to these things? What conclusions may we justly draw?

1. Although a pre-tribulation rapture of the Church might seem possible in spite of the weaknesses in the arguments for it, and in

² For a clear presentation of Post-tribulationsim I recommend *The Church and the Tribulation* by Robert H. Gundry published by Zondervan Publishing House.

spite of all the arguments against it, we can hardly say that it is certain beyond doubt. Many have not had the time, or patience, or desire to study this through carefully for themselves., examining both sides of the question. Yet they tend to speak dogmatically on the subject and pass along the opinions of other men as if they were the Word of God.

2. And it may not be possible to prove with absolute certainty that the Church must endure that time of trouble, although I personally am of the opinion that the evidence strongly points that way.

3. Let us then obey the words of Christ. Let us watch. Let us stay in the light. Let us wait for our Lord from heaven. Let us be ready for anything — ready for His coming before the Tribulation if that is His will, and ready to endure the Tribulation if that is His will. It seems to me a fact that the writers of the New Testament, inspired by the Holy Spirit, continually tried to prepare the believers to whom they wrote for two things — tribulation and the Lord's return. They often warned of the one and promised the other. And it was done in such a way as to keep believers in a state of suspense as to times and seasons. I do not think we can improve on this method now.

4. Let us love one another — and not the less because we cannot agree on all the details of interpretation of end-time events. To make one's views on the Tribulation a test of fellowship or a qualification for church membership is no doubt foolish and harmful. This is not a major doctrine as the virgin birth, the true deity of Jesus Christ, Christ's substitutionary death for sinners, His bodily resurrection from the dead, His second coming in power and glory are major doctrines. And we must not behave as if it were. If we cannot love those who differ with us about the Tribulation, and work with them, and have close fellowship with them, then we are going astray from some very important Bible teaching, and our error is much worse than we think theirs to be.

5. And while we watch and wait and love one another, let us be about the main business committed to us — preaching the Gospel to all the world and making disciples of all nations.

There has been considerable dispute concerning the meaning of Revelation 20: 1-10 (and related passages of Scripture), and these verses have been variously interpreted. It is not easy to strictly classify all the conflicting opinions that have been advanced to explain the reign of Christ, but in general there are three more or less well-defined views.

(1) **Pre-millennialism** teaches that Christ will return before the millennium and that He will literally reign on earth for one thousand years. This is a very common belief among evangelicals in all lands. It was the common belief (perhaps the almost universal one) among the fathers of the early church. G.T. Manley in *The Return of Jesus Christ* (IVF, — London) wrote: "The expectation of a millennial reign on earth following Christ's return was the prevailing view of the Christian writers of the first three centuries." The question is, how did this view come to prevail so early and how did it retain its place for the first three centuries if the apostles themselves did not teach it?

(2) **A-millennialism** teaches that there will be no literal reign of Christ on earth at all ("a" is a negative prefix). According to this theory, when Christ returns the world ends and the eternal state begins. These questions then arise: What becomes of the promises of earthly blessing foretold by the prophets? What does the binding of the devil mean? What is the first resurrection? What does it mean to reign with Christ? Two different theories within this camp have been taught to answer these difficult questions.

(a) The first of these goes back to Augustine, bishop of Hippo and famous theologian and writer, 15 centuries ago. According to him the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are being fulfilled in the church of this age; Satan is now bound; the saints now reign with Christ; the glories foretold by the prophets are visible now in the worldwide church of Christ on earth.

(b) The second theory is of recent origin. Kliefoth (1874) taught that the blessings of the millennium do not refer to the world at all and do not describe earthly blessings, but rather the reign and glory and blessings of the saints in heaven.¹

(3) **Post-millennialism** is the name given to the teaching that Christ will come after the millennium. Those who hold this view teach that the truth of the Gospel will permeate the whole of society

¹ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*

and produce such changes in the world that the glories spoken of by the prophets will become a blessed, literal fact before Christ returns. According to this theory the majority of men will be converted, the nations will be transformed by the preaching of the cross, and the church will triumph over the world — all before Christ's second coming. This teaching was once popular even among some conservative Christians. But it has proved to be contrary both to the Scriptures, and to the facts and trends of recent history. Today few believers would be so bold as to defend it.

To enter into all the questions raised by this very involved subject is beyond the purpose of this book. Enough to say that I am fully convinced that pre-millennialism alone is consistent with the teaching of the Bible. I believe that Revelation 20:1-6 describes a literal reign of Christ and the saints on this present earth (but with many changes in it) after His return in glory. The following reasons, together with those given in the comments on those verses (pages 253-261), seem sufficient for me to believe this.

Old Testament prophecy

(1) Such a reign is necessary to fulfill the words of the prophets concerning this earth. The prophets sang of a time when "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11:1-9) — full knowledge of the Lord penetrating every city and village and hamlet. What a contrast to the present state of things when many, many thousands of villages in India alone are without a single resident witness to the truth!

It will be a time of universal peace such as the earth has never experienced (Zech 9:10): "Nation will not lift up sword against nation, nor will they learn war any more" (Micah 4:3). The words of the Lord Jesus describing the course of this present age are in stark contrast with this prophecy — "But when you hear of wars and disturbances, do not be terrified; for these things must first take place. . . .nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Luke 21:9,10).

It will be a time of justice and righteousness (Isa 9:7; Jer 23:5), health and length of life (Isa 65:20-23). What a contrast to this age of disease and early death, of injustice and corruption!

It will be a time when nature will be delivered from the curse (Rom 8:19-22). What a contrast to the present, when the whole creation groans and travails in pain!

It will be a time when the proud will be put down and the meek will inherit the earth (Isa 2:11; Matt 5:5). What a contrast to our day when the wicked are exalted to high places, and the proud rule the nations!

All these prophecies and others like them relate, not to heaven, and not to one people only, but to the whole wide earth. And no past or present fulfillment of them can be found. They never will be fulfilled until the Lord Himself comes whom "heaven must receive until the times of the restitution of all things, which God has spoken through the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:21).

Some think these prophecies may be fulfilled, not in any millennium, but in the eternal kingdom of Christ in the new heavens and new earth. But none of the above references speak of the new heavens and earth, and their language seems to indicate this present earth.

The nation Israel

(2) A future millennial reign of Christ is necessary to fulfill the prophecies concerning the nation of Israel. According to the Scriptures, that ancient nation, regathered to the land of Palestine (Isa 11:11ff; Ezek 37:11,12; Amos 9:14,15), will yet be converted to Christ (Isa 60:15; Rom 11:26; Zech 12:10-13). The two kingdoms, Judah and Israel, will be united as one kingdom and live safely in the land of Palestine with one King ruling over them (Ezek 37:16-22; 39:25-29). The covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob promising them and their descendants the land of Israel cannot be revoked; it is an eternal covenant (Gen 13:14, 15; 15:18-21; 17:8; 28:13). Also the covenant made with David that he will always have a son to reign upon his throne is as steadfast as the sure word of Jehovah. He will not cast away the offspring of Jacob, but will cause their captivity to return and have mercy on them (Jer 33:17-26).

Many prophecies concerning the Jews have already been literally and exactly fulfilled. There is much reason to think that these also, and many others like them will be fulfilled likewise.

This truth the apostles of our Lord perfectly understood. After Christ's resurrection from the dead, He was with them for forty days, "speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). At that time He opened their understanding "that they might understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). At the end of that time, fully instructed by the Lord Himself, and enlightened as to the meaning

of the Old Testament, they asked a question that revealed what they had been taught concerning the future of the nation Israel. The Holy Spirit has recorded their question and Jesus' answer that we might understand something of what He had taught them. "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1: 6). They knew full well that the kingdom would be restored to Israel, but they did not know when. The Lord Jesus did not rebuke them for this question, which thing He surely would have done had it been a foolish one. He merely said that they could not know the times when the Father would fulfill His word. Now the question is this: how can these things refer to the eternal kingdom in the new earth and heavens? What does the gathering of Israel to Palestine have to do with that? Or the reuniting of their two kingdoms? Or the promises concerning the land of Israel? Or the restoration of the kingdom to Israel? The language certainly suggests that these things will happen on this present earth.

Now it is evident from the Scriptures that the future blessing of Israel, and the future glory of the world will come about by one process — the personal reign of Jesus Christ on earth (Isa 2: 1-5; 11: 1ff; Zech 14: 9; Dan 7: 13,14). This is in agreement with His own promise to His twelve disciples. "Truly I say to you, you who have followed me, in the renewal when the Son of man sits on the throne of his glory, you also will sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt 19: 28). A great body of Scripture bears upon that future time when Christ sits on the throne of glory (Isa 9: 6,7; Luke 1: 31-33; Jer 23: 5-8; Zech 14: 9; etc.).

A problem?

But here a problem may arise in the minds of some. The kingdom of Christ is referred to in the prophets as an eternal kingdom and not a kingdom of a mere one thousand years. In fact Rev 20: 1-7 is the only passage in the Bible that actually states that the length of Christ's reign on this present earth will be one thousand years. (Of course, as we have seen, it is by no means the only place that speaks of His reign on this earth). For this reason, some say, we must not take it literally but interpret it in harmony with the rest of the Scriptures. To this I answer as follows:

(a) Though God has disclosed that Christ's reign on this earth will be 1000 years in only one Scripture, that one should be enough for us. A number of important prophecies concerning details of Christ's first coming (for example, the virgin birth and Bethlehem as His birthplace) were given only once in the Old Testament prophets yet were fulfilled to the very letter. Would it have been right and

wise for the scribes of Jesus' day to argue that Messiah could not be born of a virgin or could not be born in Bethlehem because it was foretold only once? I am in perfect agreement with the words of Erich Sauer, "For ourselves this one reference of Holy Scripture suffices. We have no right to require from God that He must repeat a statement five or ten times before we can believe Him". Moreover, should we not expect that there would be new revelation of truth in a book specifically named The Revelation of Jesus Christ?

The fact is that there is this new revelation of 1000 years, whether we like it or not, whether we take it literally or symbolically, whether we think it relates to the future or to the present. No place else in Scripture do we have this phrase in connection with the reign of Christ, and those who take it literally and relate it to the future are in no more difficulty with it than anyone else.

(b) Though God has disclosed that this time period will be 1000 years in only one Scripture, that one is in perfect harmony with the great number of Scriptures that refer to Christ's reign. No one suppose that Christ's reign will end at the close of the millennium. Truly "He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever". The millennium is only the beginning of His reign, and doubtless only a type of that greater rule which will be to the ages of the ages. It seems clear that the future kingdom is divided into two parts — the millennium (20:4), and eternity (22:5). Now the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of both of these, but they did not always clearly distinguish between them. Of course this is the nature of prophecy. It looks through the years and sees the great peaks of God's future program for earth. Yet it does not systematically divide peak from peak, or always speak of the valleys between. Before Jesus first coming there was a great body of prophecy in the Old Testament regarding Him. Some prophecies spoke of a coming that would be followed by suffering, humiliation, and death. Others spoke of a coming that would be followed by great glory. There was no indication that these were two completely separate comings which would be divided by many centuries. These two mountain peaks of prophecy seemed, at a distance, to be almost two features of one great event.

This principle applies equally well to the future reign of Christ. There are prophecies that refer to the millennium, and there are those that refer to the eternal reign of Christ. And it is not an easy matter to determine the exact relationship of the millennium to the eternal ages that follow, or to discover which Scriptures refer to

which state.² But one thing appears evident — some of these prophecies can relate only to a future reign on this earth, and not to eternal ages when God will dwell with men in the new earth. For example, Zechariah chapter 14 concerns the future reign of Christ on earth and speaks of physical changes in Palestine (v 10), nations that remain after the destructions of the Day of the Lord (v 16), and drought and plague (vs 17-19). Isaiah, writing of Christ's reign, speaks of certain specific nations, and other geographical changes (11:9-16), and of death and sin (65:20).

It is perfectly clear that drought and plague, death and sin, will have no place in the life of eternity (Rev 21:4; 22:3). Ezekiel writes in great detail of a future temple and its services (chapters 41-46). He is so specific in the exact measurements and other details of description that it is hardly possible to spiritualize his prophecy and find it all fulfilled in the Church of this age. Those closing chapters of Ezekiel are some of the most difficult in the Bible, and I have seen no exposition of them that is fully satisfying. But, judging from the context and language of those chapters, they certainly seem to be related to the actual future reign of Christ on earth. They cannot be related to the eternal kingdom, because there will be no temple in the eternal kingdom, except Christ Himself (Rev 21:22).

There is only one time (as far as we can tell from the Scriptures) when these prophecies can be fulfilled, if they are to have a fulfillment at all, and that time is the thousand year reign of Christ on earth.

Christ's second coming

(3) The millennium is necessary to fulfill the prophetic picture of Christ's second coming given in the prophets. For in them we read many times of His second coming followed immediately by an earthly reign. And again I say, it seems clear that this present earth is in view and not the new earth which comes afterward. For example Zechariah 14:1-7, speaks of the Day of the Lord, the battle of Armageddon, and the return of Christ to triumph over His enemies. Immediately following, in verse 9, we read "the Lord will be king over all the earth". Joel 3:9-21 gives the same picture — the final harvest and the Day of the Lord followed by the living

² It may well be, as Sauer suggests (*From Eternity to Eternity*) that the Old Testament prophecies of the kingdom have fourfold reference: (a) to the historical circumstances of the prophet himself; (b) to a spiritual or typical fulfillment in the Church; (c) to a literal fulfillment in the millenium; (d) to an eternal fulfillment in the new heavens and new earth.

presence of God in Jerusalem and a reign of peace in Judah. Isaiah 24 describes those future judgments that will fall on the earth at the end of the age. The closing verse again speaks of the reign of the Lord: "Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign in Mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before His elders gloriously". This is followed by the praise of Israel in chapters 25 and 26.

Daniel the prophet likewise clearly spoke of these things. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream in which a great image appeared. The head was of gold, the breast and arms of silver, the belly and thighs of brass, the legs of iron, the feet partly of iron and partly of clay. Daniel explained the dream (Dan 2:31-45). The image represents four great kingdoms. They are the same four that he later saw as four beasts — Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greco-Macedonia, and Rome (7:3-14). The feet of the image with its ten toes come in for special notice (it is true that the number ten is not mentioned — but do we need to be told how many toes are on two feet?). The legs were iron, representing the Old Roman empire at the height of its power (as it was in Christ's day and for some time afterwards). But the feet and toes were iron mixed with clay. This is Rome as it eventually becomes. Then a stone fell from heaven and struck the image on its feet and broke them to pieces, and the whole image became as chaff and vanished away. But the stone "became a great mountain and filled with whole earth" (2:35). The stone is Christ and His kingdom (2:44). The picture of the stone striking the image was not fulfilled at His first coming. The whole of man's government was not shattered then, (and this is required by the vision). There was no sudden destruction as of a falling stone. He did not strike then, He was struck. Moreover, the ten kingdoms represented by the ten toes (and the ten horns of the beast) were not in existence at the time of Christ's first coming (Rev 17:12), and the stone in Daniel's description falls on the feet — the last part of all the image in time. But at His second coming, with the sword that comes out of His mouth, He will "strike the nations" (Rev 19:15). The feet — the final form of Rome's iron empire — will be crushed, and "in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed" (Dan 2:44).

This is exactly the picture when Daniel has visions of the four beasts. It is only after the ten horns are in existence and the little horn arises (Antichrist) that we read of the coming of the Son of Man with the clouds of heaven "and dominion, and glory, and a kingdom were given to him, so that all peoples, and nations and those of all languages would serve him" (Dan 7:14).

So in Revelation 19 we see the stone striking the image. It is no surprising thing, therefore, that we read immediately after, in chapter 20, of a kingdom that fills the whole earth.

The Revelation

(4) Such a kingdom rule is necessary to fulfill the language of the book of the Revelation. We have seen Christ uncrowned in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. We have seen Him still uncrowned as the Lamb in heaven. This does not mean that He is not now a king — indeed, He is the King of the universe. It means that He has not yet manifested His kingship as a Man in relation to the earth. When He is ready to do so He appears with many crowns, for all the kingdoms of the earth become His. In perfect agreement with this is the word at the last trumpet in 11:15: “The kingdoms of the world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ”.

Further evidence of this same truth is found in 19:15, “He will rule them [the nations] with a rod of iron”. This puts His reign, not during the Church age, but in a time after His second coming. (At His coming it is not “He did rule with a rod of iron”, but “He will”). The fact that He will rule with a rod of iron shows again that the reference cannot be to the eternal kingdom. There will be no sin, no rebellion, no restless nations then that will require a rod of iron to subdue (compare Isa 2:3,4 — in eternity there will be no need of such an exhortation as that found in verse 3, or to judge and rebuke nations as seen in verse 4).

In Revelation 2:26 and 3:21 believers are promised a share in this reign of Christ. The first of these promises states that the overcomer, “will rule them [the nations] with a rod of iron”. This phase is identical with the one in 19:15 and shows that the reign of the overcomers also comes after Christ's second coming. This truth is repeated in 5:10 which speaks of a future reign “on the earth”.

Thus when we come to chapter 20 we should be fully prepared to read of a reign of Christ and His people on earth, and that is just what we do read.

We are plainly told in 20:5 that some of those who reign with Christ will have suffered under the “beast”. The beast is the personal Antichrist who will arise at the end of this age and be destroyed by Christ at His coming. This is positive evidence that the reign of Christ spoken of in chapter 20, is not going on now, but is still in the future. If obvious facts like this are ignored what hope of a proper interpretation of this passage can there be?

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