

Behind the Scenes

A Commentary on the book of Revelation

By Norman Dodman

Chapter 1 Principles of biblical interpretation

Before the beginning of our study of Revelation, it is important that we keep certain principles in mind, important things which help us when we come to the more difficult parts. Of course, it is a good idea to read through the book in one sitting – it can be done in little over an hour – just to get the general ‘feel’ of it. Then later on it can be studied section by section. Before any detailed study is carried out there are a number of guidelines about which we need to be clear and we will attempt to discuss these now.

1. **Style of writing.** Every book that has ever been written adopts a particular style. The vast majority of books in the world today, for example, are what we call fiction; this means that we automatically interpret such books with this in mind and we do not accept what we read as being literal fact. On the other hand a history book is quite different in style; we expect the writers to have carried out sufficient research to ensure the accuracy of what they write; they do not set out to entertain us but to

present us with facts. We find something similar in the books of the Bible and the writers adopt different styles (while, of course, still controlled by the Holy Spirit.) The book of Revelation has a very special style called Apocalyptic. The writer suggests this in the very first verse by his use of the word ‘apokalupsis’ which is translated into English as Revelation. The word means, in general, the uncovering of something which was previously hidden and which we could not discover for ourselves, but apocalyptic writers do this in a special way; truth is revealed through the use of symbols. There is nothing particularly unusual about this for we do it in everyday language; no one who knows Kiswahili would interpret ‘kutia chumvi’ literally (‘to put in salt’ = to exaggerate.) Apocalyptic literature however goes further and uses strange symbols such as stars, monsters, complex numbers and so on. Obviously, if we do not realise this use of style we shall find the book impossible to understand.

2. **Study the book in large sections.** It would seem best, at the start, to get the general drift of a fairly large section rather than to get the exact meaning of every word, phrase or even sentence. Often the writer is not trying to work out a detailed argument as, for example, Paul does in Romans; rather, he is painting a picture and the important thing at the start is to get the message of the whole picture, even if some of the details escape us for the time being. (As a good example of this, try reading chapter 5 in this way.)

3. **Interpret Scripture by Scripture.** This is an important principle to keep in mind when reading any part of the Bible, but it is of special importance with this book. As we have seen, the symbols must be interpreted, but unless we have some guide we can make them mean whatever we want them to mean (which is what some people do!) If the same symbol is used elsewhere in the Bible we have a guide (an easy example of this is the use of '*lamb*' in chapter 5 and the Gospel of John 1:29.)
4. **Consider the circumstances under which the book was written.** The writer tells us his name was John and although that is all we are told about him there is a strong possibility that he is the same John who wrote the Gospel that goes by his name. We also learn from chapter 1:9 that he was exiled to the small island of Patmos, a few miles off the coast of what we now call Turkey. He was banished because of his preaching of the Word of God. The message of the book must therefore be of relevance to him in this very difficult situation. So a question we must constantly ask ourselves when trying to get to the meaning of any particular part is: What could it have meant to John in the situation in which he found himself? He is not simply a kind of 'telex' machine through which God conveyed a coded message to people living in some far distant age. The very first verse of the book tells us that it is a message to all of God's servants and John is

named as one of them. So, if I am one who serves him the book is for me.

If these four principles are kept in mind, a lot of confusion that often arises in connection with the meaning of the book will be dispelled. Yet there are still more questions to be answered in connection with the way we approach the book.

There are many references throughout Revelation, which have what we might call a 'historical' flavour. We are told that certain things will '*soon take place*', we read of '*one sitting on a throne*', there is a time when '*a great multitude*' will stand before the throne and some events will take place at the end of '*a thousand years*'. The big problem with such statements as these is, what period of history does the book refer to? The various answers that have been given can be summarised under the four headings:

- (1) The Preterist view.** Those who hold this view claim that the book was written for and about its own time; that the author has nothing in mind except what was happening during the period of his own lifetime. The ancient Roman Empire dominates the scene and the writer is concerned only with the church of his own day. It must be understood in relation to the history of its time and according to this view, it has nothing to say about future generations.

There is value in seeing the book in this way for it has the great merit of making the book say something to the people living at the time when it was written. Its defect is that it has little or nothing to say to generations coming afterwards, including our own generation today.

- (2) **The Futurist view.** This is almost the exact opposite of the view described above. Apart from the first few chapters, the book is said to refer to happenings at the end of the age. While, of course, there is some truth in this, it is surely defective in making the book to be of little or no value to those living at the time when it was written, or indeed to anyone else (including ourselves) until we come to the last generation of all.
- (3) **The Historicist view.** Those who follow this method of interpretation claim that the writer is giving a forecast of all the history right from the first coming of Christ until his second coming. It gives a broad outline of events right on to the end. This has the merit of teaching the important lesson that the whole of history is under God's control. But it cannot have meant very much to the first Christians who read it. Further, those who hold this view tend to identify the events they think are described in the book with events in the history of Western Europe, as if there is no important history outside of that area! This, of course, makes the theory quite untenable.
- (4) **The Idealist view.** This view assumes that the main purpose of the book, whether it is dealing with events at the time of writing, or future events, is to set out

principles and ideas and theological truths, *which apply for all time*. This ensures that the book speaks to all people no matter in what period of time they may be living. This certainly gives the book relevance for us today, while also ensuring that it spoke similarly to people in John's time. Provided the historical aspect, both past and future, is not lost sight of, it would seem in the opinion of many that this is the best method to follow. At the same time there is no denying the value of *some* aspects of the other three views described above.

Chapter 2 Introducing the book

In this chapter we shall look only at the first eight verses of chapter 1; this section presents no more difficulty than any other part of the Bible.

These verses form a kind of prologue and are relatively easy to interpret. Verses 1 – 3 give us an extended title and from these verses we learn that the book is addressed to Christian people in general, described as servants of Jesus Christ. It is a message from God by Jesus Christ and it describes things which must '*soon*' take place; this can mean that the various events, when they happen, will come suddenly, but more likely the word '*soon*' means the beginning of a series of events. The purpose of the book is to bring blessing (1:3) to all that read it. So, if we ignore it, as many do, because it is difficult, we shall miss the blessing, which God intends us to have.

As is common with most of the letters of the New Testament the writer begins with greetings and praise and this is what we have in the verses 4-8 of chapter 1. But this is no mere formality. In these few verses we are given a glorious statement of the Trinitarian basis of our faith; so much of our Christianity is weak and insecure because we have never grasped the reality of this. 'Grace and Peace' are not mere religious jargon but words with real content. This is so only if we realise the source from which these great qualities come.

John tells us that they are derived from God, the first person of the Trinity, the unchangeable one '*who is and who was and who is to come*'. We are reminded of the familiar words:

*“Change and decay in all around I see;
O thou who changes not, abide with me.”*

The references to the seven Spirits (or sevenfold Spirit) speaks of the Holy Spirit, who in all his perfection (seven is symbolic of perfection) is the one who can be described as the Executive of all the blessings God has for us. The Spirit is the one who opens our minds to receive the truth. The longest description is reserved for that other member of the Trinity, the Son Jesus Christ (1:5-8.) He has procured all these blessings for us. The verses describe him as Prophet, Priest and King. As Prophet he '*witnesses*'; he proclaims God's truth to us and his message

is authenticated by his resurrection, '*firstborn from the dead*'. As Priest he has secured forgiveness for us by his sacrificial death. As King, he rules over all and is in the process of forming his eternal Kingdom. One day, as verses 7 and 8 show, everyone will recognise him, either to mourn their tragic neglect of salvation (too late then to change) or to welcome him as the beginning and the end (the A to Z) of all that is worthwhile.

So in these opening verses John sets the scene for the message he wants to bring us through this remarkable book of the Bible, which when correctly interpreted speaks in its own unique way directly to you and me. Nothing could be more relevant to our twentieth century world, for its main theme is the theology of power.

Chapter 3 You are the light of the world.

The Bible never loses sight of the fact that the world in which we are living – whether we view it politically, geographically or socially – is God's world. The church (or the people of God) must live, work and witness within this present world. All people everywhere face the same type of problems, the same difficulties; we all have to find some way of obtaining food and shelter, to live more or less in harmony with other people and as far as possible ward off ill health. Eventually we all have to die. The Bible, of course, recognises this. Yet it does, at the same time, draw a distinction between the lives of the people of God and the rest of mankind. Our Lord himself made this

clear when he said: *'My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of the world.'* (John 17:15-16) In the particular section of the book of Revelation, which we are studying now, (1:9 to 3:22) we have a picture of the church in the world. If we belong to the church of Jesus Christ this section speaks to us, warning us of dangers, encouraging us not to give way under temptation, assuring us of the resources, which are at our disposal as we live our lives here in this world.

John is commanded to write letters to seven different churches (1:11) so what we have here is a direct message from God himself. These churches were undoubtedly in existence at the time and the order in which the seven names appear is the natural route, which a messenger would take if he were delivering the seven letters by hand. Travelling from the island of Patmos he would arrive on the mainland at Ephesus, then travel north to Smyrna and Pergamum and then take a southeasterly route to the remaining four, finishing up at Laodicea. Although it is important to see these churches as actually existing at the time of writing, we also need to keep in mind the important fact that what the letters contain is not merely of historical interest, they contain truths which are as important for us today as they were for the original readers. This is what God is saying to you and me today. Here is a message from God to his people in Nairobi and New York, just as much as Smyrna and Sardis long ago.

As an introduction to the seven letters, we are given (1:12-20) a very important description of the one who is the Head of all the churches, for all time, Jesus Christ. This is a very necessary beginning whenever we think of the church, with its problems, its failures, its responsibilities. At the time when John was writing, the people of God were a small-persecuted group facing the apparently unlimited power of the Roman Empire, an Empire that was doing its utmost to eliminate the church of Jesus Christ. In other words, the Christians were up against an all-powerful enemy and it seemed as if their position was quite hopeless. Their greatest need, as is our great need today, was to get their perspective right in relation to Jesus Christ. For them, as for us, the immensity of the task was overwhelming, whether viewed from the point of view of the church as an organisation, or as Christians individually. It is therefore vital to see things in their right proportions and the only way to do this is to begin with a clear view of our Lord Jesus Christ and to see everything else in relation to him and his mighty power. The churches are pictured as lamp stands and Jesus Christ, the one whom John describes, *'is among the lamp stands'* (1:13).

We cannot here attempt to interpret every detail, but the overall impression is important. He is *'like a son of man'*, a title taken from the book of Daniel (7:13). Reading that chapter from Daniel, we see that it refers to one who has absolute power. So, in this section of Revelation, as a development of the *'son of man'* in Daniel, a *'robe reaching down to his feet'* indicates a person of great

distinction; the *'white hair and blazing eyes'* conjure up a picture of wisdom, dignity and energy. This is exactly what John needed to know. The ultimate power is not political or military or economic, great and frightening and impressive as these things were in John's day and still are. The real power, for John and for us, lies elsewhere; it is in Jesus Christ and he holds his church firmly *'in his right hand'* (1:16). He can and will take action when it is needed for *'out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword'*.

So, against this terrifying background, its modern equivalent being nuclear power and all the other frightening things of this modern age, we see the majestic, all-powerful figure of Jesus Christ. Yet he is one who, for all his mighty power, is concerned for the individual: John tells us, *'He placed his right hand on me' and said: 'Do not be afraid'*. (1:17) Why? Because he, not the political powers, will have the last word, he is the supreme victor from beginning to end and over both life and death. A theology of power!

From such an author comes the message to the churches, reaching right down from the time of the Roman Empire to you and me and the churches to which we belong. We cannot here deal with each letter in full detail, but we will try to see what each of them is saying to us today.

First look at the seven letters as a whole: the pattern of each is more or less the same and can be divided into seven parts as follows:

- a) A greeting
- b) A description of Christ: with special reference to the existing needs of that particular church
- c) Praise for what is good (Laodicea excepted)
- d) Criticism as necessary (none for Smyrna and Philadelphia)
- e) A warning
- f) Something to be done
- g) A promise

Point (b) above is particularly noteworthy. From the general description already given of Jesus Christ (as we have outlined) one particular aspect of his character is selected as being of special importance for the church, which is being addressed. This is of tremendous value for us today, that we too adopt this principle and learn to apply to any and all circumstances of life the specific truth concerning our Lord, which meets that situation. For example, the church in Smyrna (2:8-11) was facing terrible persecution, and they needed to be reminded that their Lord himself had faced suffering and death and he was now the complete conqueror, *'the First and the Last'*, so nothing could ever separate them from him. In other words, faith has to be applied: what we believe about our Lord must be

focused on the particular thing that is troubling us at any given time.

Now let us look at the seven letters separately, to see how they speak to us today. The **first** letter, addressed to the church in Ephesus, certainly has something to say to the church today. They are commended for their hard work, for their steadfastness and above all for correct teaching. They had the ability to recognise false teaching when they saw it, even if it was brought by people who made great claims for themselves: '*those who claim to be apostles*' (2:2). This, of course, does not refer to the twelve apostles, who were a unique and unrepeatable class of their own, but to the type of person referred to in 2 Corinthians 11:13. The important question for us to ask ourselves here is just this: Can we discern false teaching? The false teachers referred to here were not outside the church; they were professing Christians. Our only sure guide is the Word of God that is the Bible. Do we know our Bibles well enough to be able to spot false teaching elsewhere?

But despite this very high praise there was something vital missing: they are blamed for lack of love. Oh, how important this is! They put all the emphasis on correct teaching, but in the process they abandoned love. We need to hold fast to the truth: we need to make the truth known to all. But if we do not have love, all is useless. Note carefully the meaning of love in its New Testament sense. It is not merely a feeling, but a deep desire to do something to help other people. We speak the truth not to hurt, but to heal.

An interesting and instructive fact about Ephesus is that both the church and city eventually disappeared. Could this be a fulfilment of the warning given in 2:5? Whether or not this is the reason for the disappearance of Ephesus, it is certainly true that our witness will be totally ineffective unless it is carried out primarily because of love for Christ and for our fellow man.

The city of Smyrna, in which existed the church that received the **second** letter, had an interesting history. The Christians there would fully understand the idea of dying and coming to life again because their city had been completely destroyed in 590 BC and was rebuilt to a specific plan 290 years later. Here was a city, which had died and now lived once more, a good illustration of the death and resurrection of Christ (2:8) and of the new spiritual life, which the Christians in Smyrna enjoyed. At the time of writing, the church was passing through a time of terrible suffering and as a result they were extremely poor in material things. Yet they are described as rich! There is a richness in spiritual things, which has nothing to do with this world's wealth. Here is a message for all who are suffering for their faith and we should remember Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:13, '*Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*' Our responsibility is to remain faithful to Christ and his truth, knowing that we shall receive the reward of '*a crown of life*' and we cannot be ultimately harmed by anyone.

*“Fear Him, ye saints and you will then
have nothing else to fear.
Make you his service your delight;
he’ll make your wants his care.”*

The church at Pergamum, recipients of the **third** letter, needed to be reminded that there is a power greater than any political power. This city was a very important political and religious centre. It was the capital of the Roman province of Asia and it had many temples, some dedicated to the worship of the Roman Emperor and many others to the worship of heathen gods. In such a city where, like many modern cities, the forces of evil were especially evident, the Christians had a hard time in maintaining their faith; they were a city *‘where Satan lives’* (2:13). In such a situation they get full marks for their faithfulness. Could we be similarly commended, or do we give way when we find ourselves in a minority, or alone in home or office, where perhaps the majority reject the Christian faith?

Yet some of the Christians in Pergamum were failing. The references to Balaam (see the story in Numbers 22 – 24) and to the Nicolaitans (about whom very little is known) show that the danger into which they were falling was that of compromise with false teaching and consequent sexual immorality. These two very often go together and in that order! False teaching leads eventually to false living! Those who hold fast to the truth will be ‘fed’ by the Lord himself just as the people received ‘manna’ in the desert

(2:17.) The *‘white stone’* and the *‘new name’* (both phrases very difficult to interpret) indicate that those who do not give way to false teaching are assured of God’s blessings.

The **fourth** letter is addressed to Thyatira, the least important city of the seven. Yet it is the longest letter! God’s assessments are not always the same as ours! There is much in this church to be commended. We should check our lives alongside the list in 2:19, especially *‘you are now doing more than you did at first’*. For most of us it is the opposite way round. We begin with great enthusiasm and then cool off all too easily! But there is a long and serious warning in 2:20 – 24. Thyatira was a lively and progressing church and as so often happens, Satan attacked from within, not from outside (as at Pergamum.) There was a woman in the church named as *‘Jezebel’* (a symbolic name for wickedness) who claimed to be a *‘prophetess’* and to teach *‘deep things’* (2:24), but her activities are branded as *‘satanic’*. Always beware of those who make big claims for themselves even if they are spiritual *‘claims’*! From what is known of Thyatira it would seem that the church members were being encouraged to adopt practices which were common in the non-Christian society around them. Thyatira was a trading centre and the Christians were under pressure – from within the church itself – to follow the crowd. If you don’t, they argued, you will be forced out of business! Modern Christians are still under the same sort of pressure. But we cannot deceive the

Son of God, however clever our arguments are: he sees all and will in the end crush all that is evil (2:18 & 26).

The *fifth* letter addressed to the church in Sardis gives the impression (all too common today) of a church which was full of activity but had very little real life: *'you have a reputation of being alive but you are dead'* (3:1). As a city Sardis was active commercially and very wealthy and consequently tended to be slack and easy-going: twice because of its slackness it had been captured by invaders. Spiritually, this church was in the same danger and so are we today especially where crowds may attend our services and so give the impression of our church *'being alive'* (3:1). Those who could be called really alive were very few; the rest needed the life-giving Spirit. Those who have been born again of the Spirit and are thus alive, are at the same time put right with God and so can be described as *'dressed in white'*, those *'who walk with me'* and have their names indelibly inscribed in the *'book of life'* - they will be vouched for by Jesus Christ himself (3:4-5). What a glorious position to be in! Are we amongst them? Or are we amongst those who give the impression of being *'alive'* because of our association with and activity within the church and yet we know deep down in our hearts that we are spiritually dead?

The letter to the church in Philadelphia, the **sixth** in the series, presents a different picture. Here is a church numerically small but of good quality: *'I know you have little strength, yet you have kept my word'* (3:8). God has

no fault to find with this church! Do not be impressed by mere numbers; quality is what matters. This letter reminds us that the great promises given to the people of Israel in the Old Testament are now transferred to the Christian church. Such expressions as *'key of David'*, *'pillar'*, *'temple'*, *'city'*, *'New Jerusalem'* are all suggestive of the Old Testament and indicate that the Christian has entered into all that is offered to the people of God of Old Testament times. Although painfully aware of our weakness and failure (as were the best of those in Old Testament Israel) our assurance is that he has chosen us for himself and we belong to him. So we are eternally safe (v 10).

Finally, the **seventh** letter is addressed to Laodicea, in some ways the most needy church of all. Here surely is a message for us today. Like the city in which it was situated, the church seemed to have everything, yet it had nothing of real and lasting value. Laodicea as a city was famous for its banking system, its cloth manufacturing and its medical school. These three things formed a perfect background to the message for the church: it was poor, it was naked and it was blind! (3:17). Yet all the time the church members thought they possessed the spiritual counterpart of the wealth, fine cloth and cure for defective eyes, evident in the city. How easy it is for us today to fall into the same attitude, while in reality our spiritual strength is so poor, the shame of our sin so great and our insight into God's truth so lacking. The only remedy for this three-fold deficiency – spiritual poverty, nakedness, and

blindness – is to admit the excluded Christ. He alone can provide spiritual wealth, a covering for our sin and open our eyes to the truth (note that Revelation 3:20 is primarily addressed to a church, not to outsiders.) Here is a message to a church, which claims to have everything, and yet because its members have no real close fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ and are indeed lukewarm regarding him, they have nothing. To continue in this way is to bring ultimate rejection (3:16). What a warning to us all!

Chapter 4 The Indestructible Church

Have you ever wondered what are the future prospects for the church of Jesus Christ? This is the kind of question we ask regarding any other organisation. Will that new business enterprise survive? How long will this or that government last? Do you think their marriage will survive? In this section of Revelation (4:1 to 8:5) we have the answer to our question. In our previous study we saw how John describes the church in the world: he gives necessary warnings, threats of removal of this or that church (see 2:5). We need to take these warnings seriously. Spiritual failure can cause the removal of a *'lamp stand'* (church). On a wider scale, what about those countries where the church is being persecuted? Does this mean that the church can be completely obliterated? Are political forces stronger than the church of Jesus Christ? The question is easily answered – we have 2000 years of history to show that while empires, kingdoms and ideologies come and go, the church of Jesus Christ goes on.

But history is simply an illustration of a much deeper principle. It is this deeper aspect, which we find in this section of the book of Revelation. The church is indestructible. Why? Look at the picture John paints for us and we shall see why we can be so confident about this.

Looking at chapters 4 and 5 we are invited to join John as he is given a magnificent picture of what is taking place 'behind the scenes'. John is told to *'come up here'* (4:1) and he is given a glimpse into the heavenly sphere. He is taken into the throne room, into the supreme headquarters. What he sees there leaves him in no doubt about the final outcome and certainty of victory for the forces of Jesus Christ. What does he see? What do we see as we join him there?

There is a throne, the symbol of absolute power: the Lord God Almighty is on the throne. He is splendid in majesty, as the precious jewels indicate (4:3), terrible in judgement (lightening, rumblings, thunder) yet at the same time a God of mercy (rainbow). Think what this would mean to John and indeed to you and me. In his day it looked as if the Roman Empire had absolute power. That is not so, John! An Almighty God is on the throne and he will have the last word. The people of God, represented by the 4 elders (4:4) are associated with the almighty God: they share his power and therefore can never be ultimately defeated. The complete triumph of this great all-powerful God is reinforced by the picture of the four *'living creatures'* (4:6-8) representing the whole of the created world, God's

world: the picture includes nature (the lion is the king of the wild animals, the ox the greatest domestic animal, the eagle the greatest bird) together with one with the *'face of a man'*, human nature. What a glorious prospect! One day the whole creation will acknowledge the almighty God. Paul gives a moving description of this in Romans 8:19-21, the divine event to which the whole creation moves. It is almost as if God is saying to John and to us, "Are you bewildered, discouraged, depressed by what you see around you? Come up here and look at this picture. This is reality: this is what must take place" (4:1). Be gone, unbelief!

But that is only the first scene. It may well have created questions in John's mind – it certainly does in ours. All very well, but how can we really accept that this is true? Is it not just a lovely dream? What solid proof can we offer that God is really in control and that one day his purposes will be worked out? What evidence is there that even in the here and now God's power is active and available? These are important questions, which must be answered. Chapter 5 gives us the answer in a most dramatic way. We can summarise it like this. God is on the throne, as chapter 4 has shown. He has a plan for his world, *'a scroll with writing on both sides'* – a kind of blueprint. Still all very well, but a plan has to be put into operation and it does not always look as if God is doing that. This is exactly what the picture given in 5:2-4 tells us. No one could be found anywhere who could take the blueprint from the Architect and put it into operation. *'I wept and wept'*, says John: and

so do we, very often. Then the whole picture changes. *'Do not weep'* says one of the elders. Why? Someone has been found who can put God's plan into operation! Into the centre of the stage comes one who is described in a two-fold way – a Lion and a Lamb! It is all very dramatic. John is told to look for a Lion and he says: *'I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain'* (5:6). The Lion is all-powerful: *'He is able'* (5:5) but only because as sacrificial Lamb he has defeated the forces of evil which were making it impossible for God's plan to be worked out. In other words, the root cause of all our problems is sin and the only one in all creation who can deal with it is Jesus Christ. Notice how he does this. He looked as if he *'had been slain'*, past tense! He is very much alive! It is by the death and resurrection of Christ that sin is defeated, both on the cosmic and individual level! No wonder the scene ends with the whole company, people from every 'tribe and language and people and nation' giving praise to God the Redeemer. *'Worthy is the Lamb who is slain'* (5:12). Are we among the great and glorious company?

In these two chapters (excellent chapters to introduce us to the general style of the book) John paints pictures. The overall impression is that despite appearances to the contrary (for John the Roman Empire: for us anything which seems to be dominating our lives) God is in control. He is on the throne. He has a plan which is gradually being worked out and which will one day culminate in his taking absolute control of everything in the universe. For the time being, sin and evil seem to hold sway but the Lion/Lamb

has come and demonstrated his complete victory over all the powers of evil. He is forming a Kingdom, made up of people from every race, comprised of all who acknowledge him as Lord and Saviour.

One day, he and his people will be in full control of all things (5:10) and this reign will last forever (5:13). Read these two chapters again in the light of these great truths and apply them to your own situation, however difficult that may be. For those who acknowledge him, Christ is King here and now and we can begin to experience something of his power even today.

Chapters 6 and 7 take up the story again from the beginning. The scroll in the hand of the one on the throne had seven seals and now, one by one, the seals are opened. The things described in these next two chapters run parallel with the events described in a more general way in chapters 4 and 5. If we keep this scheme in mind the book takes on a much clearer meaning. So, we see chapters 6 and 7 as covering the whole course of human history, just as chapters 4 and 5 did, but now the perspective is different (just as a football match can be described from beginning to end from the perspective of the referee and then from the perspective of the players.)

If we take the first seals together (6:1-8) we have a description of the world in which John lived, politically powerful yet full of elements of unrest, danger and misery. This pattern constantly repeats itself in history and our 20th

century is no exception! These four seals reveal four aspects of life, which are as much with us as ever they were. It is a very dramatic representation, using four different coloured horses as symbols. Opinions differ as to the exact meaning of each horse but the following interpretation, taking the four as presenting a composite picture, at least makes sense, both for John's day and our own. The white horse represents conquest – nations involved in war against each other. The red horse could well represent civil war, men '*slay each other*'. The black horse is described in a way, which indicates scarcity of food; the necessities of life, wheat and barley, are in short supply (the prices quoted for these indicate a famine situation) but the luxuries, oil and wine, must not be damaged! Could anything be more relevant today? There is no doubt about the meaning of the pale horse – death.

The fifth seal (6:9-11) is now opened and gives us a different picture. God's people have to live in the type of world depicted by the first four seals and some of them will have to suffer martyrdom. The people of God have always had to face opposition from the '*inhabitants of the earth*' (i.e. unbelievers) and here there is a call for justice to be done, as indeed it will be done in due course. The words '*judge*' and '*avenge*' point to retribution, not to personal revenge.

The sixth seal takes the story a step further and gives a dramatic representation of the second coming of Christ. We may not take everything in a strictly literalistic way,

for as we have seen, this book is full of symbolic language. But there is no mistaking the fact that chapter 6:12-17 shows that the final day, the end of all things, will be a day of absolute terror for unbelievers, no matter what their social standing is, slaves or kings.

Before looking at chapter 7 let us recap a little. The first four seals represent conditions in the world; read your daily paper any day and you will soon find confirmation of all that is pictured by these horses – war, civil unrest, oppression, greed, famine, luxurious living by the few, the list is endless; and then there is the pale horse *‘whose rider was named death’*. Next we are given an assurance that justice will one day be done and the culmination is the second coming of Christ, described in the sixth seal. One more seal remains to be opened but before this is done we have an interlude and a very important interlude it is. Why is this necessary? Jumping ahead to chapter 8 we realise we are going to be given a rather terrifying description of judgement. Before the *‘winds of judgement’* are released John is given a wonderful picture of the absolute security of the church, the people of God.

So, as we begin to read chapter 7 we see the dramatic representation of this in that *‘four angels standing at the four corners of the earth’* are told to hold back the four winds of the earth in order that God’s people may be sealed, that is made safe and secure. What a reassuring picture for John, who saw himself as a kind of pawn moved around on the chessboard of life at the whim of the

political forces of the day – and similarly reassuring for us as we so often feel ourselves to be victims of circumstances beyond our control.

The question is, who are being *‘sealed’*? Who are these 144,000? Opinions differ on this and we can only give what seems to us to be the most reasonable interpretation in the light of the chapter and the book as a whole. We are surely given a clue in 7:3 where those who are sealed are described as the *‘servants of God’*. We have already seen this phrase right at the beginning of the book (1:1) and we have no reason to change the meaning from what we gave then. Can it mean anything other than all the servants of God? What justification have we for restricting it in any way? If you are a servant of God then this chapter with its reassuring message applies to you. You certainly do not need to be a member of the group called *‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’* before you are included. If this were the meaning why tell it to John, in his position of desperate need, 1800 years before any Jehovah’s Witnesses existed? God does not mock his faithful servant like that!

A more difficult question to answer is the identity of *‘all the tribes of Israel’* (7:4-8). Must we interpret this literally, to refer to actual Israelites? Since the vast majority of us are Gentiles it would not apply to us. Does this mean that exactly 12,000 from each of the listed tribes will be amongst the saved? Will no one from the tribe of Dan be included? This tribe is not mentioned: the number is made up to twelve by including one of Joseph’s sons, Manasseh, although Joseph himself is already in the list. The tribes of

Israel are best seen as symbolising the whole of the people of God, Jew and Gentile, just as James 1:1 refers to the church as the twelve tribes. The idea of the church as the 'new Israel' is amply supported in the New Testament, as Paul makes clear in Romans 2:29- '*a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly*' (see also Galatians 3:29, 6:16, Philippians 3:3, Matthew 19:28, Luke 22:30).

What of the group described from verse 9 onwards? Who are they? If our interpretation of the 144,000 is correct this is the same group as already referred to in the chapter, but looked at from another angle. They are certainly servants of God and if this is so they are sealed and if they are sealed they are the '144,000'. From God's point of view the number is exactly known, a truth symbolised by the 144,000 but from our point of view it is a great multitude that '*no one can count*' and they come from every nation. They are wearing '*white robes*', a symbol of being forgiven and accepted by God (Isaiah 1:18); in other words this great company are the saved and their salvation is entirely a gift of God (7:10).

How did this great company of people from every tribe and nation come to be in the presence of God? This is the question answered in 7:13-17. Two things are true of them and the same two things are true of everyone who is a member of the company of God's people. It is important to note exactly what is said about them, for the same two things can be applied to our lives today, either as a severe test of the reality of our claim to be saved, or as a

tremendous encouragement if we are truly among God's people. It is important to note exactly what is said about them, for the same two things can be applied to our lives today, either as a severe test of the reality of our claim to be saved, or as a tremendous encouragement if we are truly among God's people. The basic truth is that '*they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*'; the verbs used here indicate that this is something, which has happened once-for-all, a completed action. We cannot claim to be amongst the people of God unless we have been cleansed from our old life of sin by the death of Christ. The other fact about the people of God is expressed differently; the verb is in the present tense and verse 14 could be translated: '*those who are coming out of great tribulation*'. While '*the tribulation*' spoken of here may indicate some special period of trouble, it also includes the constant tribulations of life, which we all pass through as Christians. The point made here is that those who have been made clean by Christ have been given a new life and this new life cannot be destroyed by tribulation. They are coming through it (think what this would mean to John, exiled on Patmos.) In its own special way this section of Revelation is giving us a description of the genuine Christian believer (a description which is supported by many other sections of Scripture.) The idyllic state described in 7:15-17 is to some extent true of the Christian believer here and now: eternal life is a present experience which will simply be greatly intensified in the next life. We shall be happier in the next life, but we

cannot be more secure. The famous hymn-writer Isaac Watts expressed it like this:

*“The men of grace have found
glory begun below
celestial fruits on earthly ground
from faith and hope may grow.”*

There is still one more seal to open. The six already opened have revealed truths both frightening and yet tremendously reassuring. The seventh seal serves to introduce us to another series beginning in chapter 8 verse 6, but it also ushers in a period of silence (8:1). What is the significance of this silence? Perhaps we may see it as inculcating seriousness in view of the things which will be revealed in the next series of visions – visions of judgement. In the meantime there is an encouragement for prayer. We are given the great assurance that our prayers do reach the throne of God (8:4). The almost incredible truth we see here is that the two things which really count in world affairs – for it is world affairs that are dealt with in the next section – are the prayers of God’s people and the ‘fire’ of God’s judgement.

Theology of power? This is it!

Chapter 5 The Reality of God’s Judgement.

Do we really take the idea of God’s judgement seriously? Many of us do not. This is quite obvious by the things we do. Yet we have so much evidence that it is something to

take seriously and we would save ourselves a lot of trouble and unhappiness if we did.

This section of the book of Revelation (8:6 – 11:19) deals with the subject of judgement in a very dramatic and realistic way. You will recall from our last chapter that we were looking at a series of ‘seals’ (4:1 – 8:5). One by one these seals were opened and various truths made clear (like opening a sealed envelope and learning the truth of what was there under the seal.) There were seven seals in all and six of them were opened, tracing the story of the people of God (i.e. Christians) through the whole course of history from the first to the second coming of Christ. The great theme of that series was the indestructibility of God’s people. The seventh seal that remained to be opened (8:1-5) really formed an introduction to the series that would follow, this time not seven seals but seven trumpets. The trumpet, a musical instrument, is a symbol of warning: for centuries the trumpet has been used in this way in the army. A particular trumpet sound warns the soldiers to get out of bed in the morning, another warns them it is time to come for meals, yet another was used to inspire courage and warn that the time had come to attack the enemy. So here the trumpet is used as a symbol of warning. There are seven and they too, like the seals, cover the period stretching from the first to the second coming of Christ. The difference is that we are now invited to look at things during that period from a different point of view. The seven seals dealt with the position of the church and its guaranteed security. Now we see various pictures of God’s

judgement on the world; it is a serious and sobering thought. That, as we saw previously, is why chapter 8 begins with a period of silence, time for reflection, time for prayer.

The first four trumpets may be taken together; they are dramatic accounts of how God's judgements fall on various parts of the natural world. The first of the four speaks of *'hail and fire mixed with blood hurled down on the earth'* (8:7). Here we see a picture of anything which damages the earth, or our environment. The second trumpet could be taken as a reference to commerce; the sea, marine life, ships, are all referred to in 8:8-9. In the New Testament times the 'sea' meant the Mediterranean and this was the trade route for almost all commerce. The third trumpet could be taken as a reference to natural resources – *'rivers and ... springs of waters'*, symbols of the resources, which ought to sustain human life. Some of these are affected and made unfit for human consumption ('wormwood' speaks of bitterness.) The last of the four trumpets calls attention to the luminaries, sun, moon and stars (8:12). These are symbolic of those things which enable us to see, in other words our forward-looking vision. God's judgement falls on this.

Whatever view we take of the four trumpets there can be no doubt that the overall message is one of judgement but those partial judgements (note the recurrent phrase *'one third'*) which God is continually sending on our world in an attempt to warn people and bring them back to himself.

Who can deny that God does allow damage to be done to our environment, commerce, natural resources and vision? Does the world listen when he speaks in this way? Do we heed the warnings?

Because we so seldom listen, the message of 8:13 has to speak eloquently. An eagle in the heavens (a vulture perhaps?) warns of what will follow if the warning trumpets are consistently ignored. The judgements we have just described are indirect, but what is about to follow in the remaining three trumpets is direct judgement. The scene described in 9:1-2 is impossible to imagine and obviously cannot be taken literally. Remember, as we have said before, John is not giving step by step arguments; he is painting a picture and we might try to see and grasp the general impression he is trying to create. The question we must ask is not: 'how can there be such creatures as are described in these verses (locusts that looked like *'horses prepared for battle'* and so on)?' but the real question is: 'what do they mean?'

The picture surely speaks to us of the activity of all the forces of evil, led by the *'angel of the abyss'* or *'Apollyon'* or Satan the fallen star himself. When men turn away from God, when they ignore his constant warnings as seen in the message of the first four trumpets, then eventually the powers of evil are unleashed in all their fury. The message of trumpets 1 – 5 has been proved true time and again in the course of history. When individuals, nations and groups fail to listen to God's warning messages and God

often allows these to go on for a long time, disaster comes in the end. How we need to take these warnings seriously! God spoke for centuries to the Roman Empire; they needed to listen and at last the mighty Empire collapsed in ruins. God speaks in the conscience of that immoral person, maybe for years and in the end disaster strikes in the form of AIDS. No wonder the flying eagle (8:13) calls out *'Woe! Woe!' to the inhabitants of the earth*. This is the message of the first five trumpets and it includes you and me.

But we have seen only five trumpets so far – there are two more to come. What does the sixth trumpet tell us? God does not stop giving warnings, even yet. The sixth trumpet shows there is still time to repent. When the seventh trumpet sounds it will be too late! But we are still with the sixth. The horses and riders of 9:17-19 are symbolic of death and whatever causes death, whether it is weapons of war, disease, road accidents, malnutrition, terrorists or whatever. Through all of these God is still calling on *'the rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues'* to repent before it is too late. In a sense the trumpet is saying, in the words of Paul: *'We implore you, on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God'* (2 Corinthians 5:20). But John sadly records that they did not repent. No matter how loudly God speaks – through the troubles brought by pollution, inflation, dwindling natural resources and the blindness of leaders – we still will not listen to God. God goes even further and gives unmistakable messages through death, yet we take no heed. Sinful men and women resist to the limit,

no matter how much they get hurt in the process. If they will not hear there is no hope.

So we are led to the seventh and last trumpet – but not quite yet. The seventh message is to be the last in the series, the warnings are all ended, they have gone unheeded and the end is coming. John says he is about to write the last message but he heard a voice from heaven saying: *'Do not write it down'* (10:4). Why is this? It seems that before John gives the message of final doom he has something to say to the church, the people of God. During the period which has already been surveyed in the symbolism of the six trumpets, what should the church be doing, even right up to the end of all things? Chapter 10 tells us what the task of the church is throughout all ages. We are told what we should be doing throughout all the ups and downs of history and all the many warning judgements, which God continually gives to the world. The task of the church remains the same. John and all the people of God, receive the *'little scroll'* (10:8-11). This is the word of God, the gospel of salvation. It is at once sweet and sour: sweet because to the believer it brings the message of forgiveness and new life. Yet it has a bitter side: it is not pleasant to proclaim a message of doom for the unbeliever: it is not sweet to people of hell and wrath and judgement, yet it is an inevitable part of the message the church must proclaim.

Chapter 11 gives a description of the activity of the church and the fierce opposition she will face during the period of

her witness, stretching from the first to the second coming of Christ. This chapter is interpreted by some in a literal way but it seems best to take it as symbolic. The references in 11:1-2 must be taken symbolically because John speaks of the temple and the holy city and when he wrote they both lay in ruins and were not available to be measured in a literalistic way.

The 'temple' can be taken to represent the people of God, the church and the 'great city' (11:8) stands for the world (i.e. those outside the people of God). The 'temple' is safe, despite all that is happening around her and the idea of being 'measured' (11:2) indicates that all in the church are known to God and are under his care.

The church witnesses to the world – the idea of two witnesses may refer, as in Deuteronomy 17:6 to the adequacy of the testimony – throughout the whole period (42 months indicates a set period). John needed to be reassured, for he lived in a time when it looked as if the church was about to be wiped out and the inhabitants of the world were gloating over him (11:10). We too need to be reassured for it so often looks as if our witness is achieving little. This reassurance is exactly what is given in 11:4-6. The church's light is inextinguishable for the oil supply for the 'lamp' will never fail (11:4). It will survive despite opposition (11:5) for no one can ultimately harm God's witnesses before their mission has been completed. God will demonstrate his power through his people just as he did in the past through Elijah and Moses (11:6). So the

church of Jesus Christ and that includes you and me if we belong to him, is encouraged in her continuing task and assured that nothing can defeat her.

We now come to the seventh and last trumpet, the last message in this particular series. We have seen the four trumpets giving their message of partial judgements, those acts of God which are meant to alert us to our real condition and which continually take place throughout the whole course of history. The fifth trumpet, preceded by the eagle's warning (8:13) tells us that if we consistently ignore God's warnings a more serious judgement will fall. God is still reluctant to give us up and the sixth trumpet, with its horses of death, represent his speaking in unmistakable terms. But still men will not listen. So, with the seventh trumpet we have a brief picture of the end of all things. This is total triumph for God and his people. *'The Kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and his Christ and he will reign for ever and ever'* (11:15). The twenty-four elders, representing the whole of the company of God's people, praise him for bringing final victory and final judgement (11:16-17). No one can complain (despite the fact that the 'nations were angry' 11:18) for all have had ample warning, which they failed to heed. The punishment fits the crime. For God's people, *'prophets ... saints and those who reverence your name both small and great,'* the way is now wide open into the presence of God. The climax of the work of Christ in making the way into God's presence has now been reached. His people are with him for ever.

Chapter 6 Behind the Scenes

Things which take place behind the scenes, are interesting and important. Any film we see has a director who never appears visibly on the screen; the play on the stage has a large group of people active back-stage and in the ‘wings’, that part of the stage, which the audience never sees. The visible action is vitally dependent on the hidden group and neither could function without the other.

In this section of Revelation, chapters 12:1 – 14:20, we are taken behind the scenes – note the recurring phrase: ‘*in heaven*’ (12:1,3,7,10). In our previous studies we have seen the church in the world (1:9 – 3:22) then in the next section we saw how the assurance is given that this church – the people of God active in the world – is indestructible (4:1 – 8:5) and in our last study (8:6 – 11:19) the warnings of judgement on the world. All of these sections of the book of Revelation centre on the ‘stage’ of the world.

Now we are shown something equally important, if not even more important, that is taking place behind the scenes. Or, to change the picture slightly, the battle in which we are engaged here and now in our world against the forces of evil has its counterpart in the unseen heavenly realms. The spiritual warfare is being directed from the unseen Supreme Headquarters. This is vital knowledge. If we do not see these things from their perspective we shall more easily fail in the fight. This is why; when Paul tells us we must ‘*put on the full armour of*

God’ (Ephesians 6:10-18) he introduces it with a reminder that we are struggling against ‘*the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*’. So, we see once again that the book of Revelation has a powerful message for us today just as much as to John in his day.

Right at the start of this section (12:1-6) we have a symbolic picture given in terms of a woman, a dragon and a child. The woman may be taken as symbolic of the church (people of God): both Isaiah (54:1, 66:7) and Hosea (2:2) use this symbolism. The dragon, Satan, waits to devour the child (Christ) to which the woman gives birth, right at the moment of his birth until he is ‘*snatched up to God*’ (his ascension). All of the dragon’s attacks fail, as the gospels clearly show, whether it is Herod right at the time of his birth, or the final attempt when they crucified him. The ‘woman’ continues her witness under God’s control and protection, just as he protected and provided for his people during their wandering in the desert. He will do this for the whole of the time of the church’s activity in the world (we may take the 1260 days as symbolic of this, as in 11:2-3).

In the next paragraph (12:7-12) we have a more specific description of the ‘war in heaven’ (behind the scenes). Michael, the leader of the spiritual forces on the side of the people of God, is constantly fighting against the dragon and his angels. How are we to view this struggle? The real situation is graphically depicted for us and to grasp this truth is to be equipped in a most powerful way to fight

against evil, however this may come to us. The basic truth is that the dragon has already been defeated (12:9) and his power is now strictly limited. Salvation has come, through the inability of the 'dragon' to defeat the 'child' and as a result the real power lies with the kingdom of God and the authority of his Christ (12:11). This is what is true in the heavenly realm and to know this is to receive untold power. When we face temptation we are able to face the tempter and remind him that he has already been defeated and therefore has no real claim on us: we no longer belong to him. When he brings his accusations against us, as he so often does, reminding us of past sins and trying to persuade us that God will not listen to such sinners as we are, we are to remind him that 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Romans 8:1). So, although as 12:12 indicates, the devil attacks furiously, if we keep in mind the real situation 'behind the scenes', that Satan is a defeated enemy, we need not fear and can indeed rejoice! This is a theology of power.

The battle between the dragon (Satan) and the woman (Christ) is always in progress, as described in 12:13-17. This reminds us that the attack made on the people of God, whether on the individual or collective level, is not primarily a human affair, but is instigated by Satan. How valuable it is to see things this way. When we are opposed, ridiculed, persecuted for our faith, it is not at the instigation of people; it is Satan using others to attack us, not primarily because of you and me, but as a way of attacking God through us. Satan is so furious because of his defeat by the

woman's offspring, he tries to get his own back by attacking the '*rest of her offspring*' (12:17). But he cannot ultimately succeed for she is constantly under the protection of God.

Chapter 13 describes various methods which the forces of evil use to attack the people of God. Verses 1-10 of this chapter may have a special reference for the writer, John on the island of Patmos, for he uses terminology reminiscent of Daniel 7, which clearly seems to have a historical reference. In John's time, as we have seen in previous studies, the Roman Empire was persecuting the church and Emperor worship was enforced (13:4). The general picture, however, is one of civil governments taking to themselves the power which belongs only to God (e.g. demanding worship). Many in John's day and in ours, are mesmerised by political power (13:7). But the real power lies with those '*whose names have been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb*'. Here is something quite different from the rising and falling political regimes. They all come and go, but the victory of the Lamb is eternal for '*he was slain from the foundation of the world*'. What was demonstrated on the stage of the world at a certain point in history – the cross and resurrection – is timeless in its effect. Power politics come and go, as they have always done and always will, but the cross of Christ, viewed from 'behind the scenes' is completely unaffected by time. So the saints of God are able to persevere (13:10).

The *'beast from the earth'* whose activity is described in 13:11-17 is very difficult to interpret. Perhaps, without trying to interpret the symbols in detail, we may learn from the overall impression which these verses give. The beast seems to have a Christ-like appearance (13:11) but a satanic message. Perhaps here we are warned against any ideology, whether it is religious or political, which appears to be very powerful and seems to offer life-giving solutions to the world's problems. The impression these ideologies often give is that it is impossible to survive without them (13:15) and they grip both the thought (mark on the forehead) and the action (mark on the right hand) of their adherents. Is this not abundantly true today? How many millions of people are dominated both in what they think and what they do by false ideologies, whether it is communism or capitalism or any of the ideologies, which are popular today. Let us make no mistake about it, these things happen now as much as ever and many people, for example, are being forced into unemployment because they will not take the mark of the beast (i.e. identify themselves in thought and action with what they know to be false or immoral). This was the case in John's time and it is equally so today.

Endless controversy has raged over the meaning of 666 (13:18). None of the attempts to work out the meaning of these figures in a literal way is satisfactory and surely this is as it should be. In a book, which is full of symbols, we may take 666 as symbolic (as indeed the verse itself indicates). *'It is a human number'* or *'it is the number of a*

man'. So, rather than do what some interpreters have done and make it stand for Emperor Nero, Mohammed, Cromwell, Napoleon, Martin Luther or one of the Popes, it is much more meaningful to interpret it symbolically as that which always falls short of perfection (seven was the perfect number). The 'beast' in all his activities together with all who follow him (i.e. all whose *'names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain'* 13:8) will persistently miss the mark. To put it in a more general way, only faith in Christ is able to bring anyone up to the mark. If 666 is 'man's number' we are all there in that category from birth simply by virtue of the fact that we are born in that category: it needs the power of the super-human Christ to lift us out of it.

Chapter 13 has concentrated on the forces of evil; now in the next chapter John describes the forces of good. The picture he paints here is a vivid one, the Lamb standing on mount Zion and the 144,000 with him. Here again we are taken behind the scenes to see the complete number of the people of God. As we saw in our study of chapter 7:4 the 144,000 is best taken as symbolic of the whole company of the people of God. There is nothing here to make us alter that conclusion for they are described as being named with the names of Christ and of God; they are redeemed and know the song of the redeemed. Further, they are characterised by total commitment: the statement *'those who did not defile themselves with women'* (14:4) is best taken as symbolising the fact that they have kept themselves from intercourse with the pagan world system.

This whole paragraph (14:1-5) is a very wonderful and indeed challenging description of those who are truly disciples of the Lamb and we should check ourselves alongside it.

The remaining verses of chapter 14 give us a picture, again from behind the scenes, of the *'final harvest'*. It begins with a three-fold message delivered by three angels (angel means messenger). The first message shows that there is still time to submit to the Lord God: in a sense it is the basic gospel, for to recognise him as the be-all and end-all of our existence is to be saved. Here we have the last appeal for repentance from those about to face judgement. This is the *'eternal gospel'* (14:6). The second message is an announcement of impending doom, a message, as much needed today as ever, for so many treat these things lightly. 'Babylon' (14:8) about which much more will be heard in later chapters, represents the world-system, which sets itself up in opposition to God. This attitude, which dominates so much of our world today in its materialism, permissiveness, self-centeredness, is doomed to be destroyed despite its seeming greatness. The third message (14:9-13) presents a personal challenge to all who will hear, a challenge based on what has just been said by the previous two angels. Those who identify themselves with the 'beast' (i.e. Babylon) are under God's wrath and at the end of the day will suffer the same fate as the *'beast'*. On the other hand those who identify themselves with the Christ of the eternal gospel will be safe. This third message is supplemented by a fourth, with special

emphasis on the death of *'those who die in the Lord'*. We normally think of blessings as things we receive in this life (as indeed we do) but for the Christian and remember John was writing in a situation where many were facing persecution and possible death, there are things more important even than life. For the believer, death is the gateway into the realm where all *'labour'* (and this word labour is a strong one including weariness and pain) is ended. In addition, all work, which perhaps went unrecognised in this life, will go with us into the life beyond the grave. Ultimately no real Christian work goes unrewarded.

The final message of this section is given in terms of a harvest. To city-dwellers this picture may not have much significance but to the majority of people it means the climax; when the harvester's sharp sickle is swung over the corn, that is the end, the final act of all. So it is here, for the sickle is mentioned six times in these last few verses (14:14-20). It is a very vivid way of speaking of the end of the world.

The command for reaping to begin comes *'out of the temple'*, in other words from God himself. This reminds us that he alone knows when the end will come: he knows when the time is ripe, but we do not. Therefore we must be ready all the time. If we feel impatient at the apparent delay it is because from God's point of view, which of course is always correct, the *'hour'* has not yet come. God is 'behind the scenes', outside of time; he is not controlled

by clocks and calendars. *'But the day of the Lord will come'* (2 Peter 3:10).

The *'harvest'* described here undoubtedly includes the righteous as well as the unrighteous but the emphasis falls on the judgement of the wicked. The whole idea of final judgement is seen to some extent, as the ultimate answer to the prayers of God's suffering saints (see 14:8); justice will be done and we can safely leave that to God.

Here indeed is a very dramatic picture of God's final judgement as seen from his point of view. The last verse presents a frightening prospect for all who fall under God's wrath. That this judgement will be complete and comprehensive is suggested by the '1600 stadias' (about 300 kilometres) for this was the distance from Dan to Beersheba, the northern and southern extremities of the land of Israel. All are thrown into *'the great winepress of God's wrath'* (14:19). But the way of escape from wrath has already been made clear in 12:10-12 and the question we must ask is whether we have availed ourselves of the deliverance that is freely offered in Christ.

Chapter 7 God's wrath

The subject, which is dealt with in this section of the book of Revelation (chapters 15 and 16) is rather controversial: this is not surprising since it is somewhat frightening when taken seriously. We are told in the opening verse of chapter 15 that *'God's wrath is completed'*, in other words the writer is warning us that he is about to give details of

the final judgement on the world. John tells us that what he is describing is a *'great and marvellous sign'* and these adjectives are repeated in verse 3 and applied to 'God's deeds'. The subject of these two chapters is indeed awe-inspiring. We are given a graphic description of what will happen when God ushers in the end.

First we will attempt a description of what we are told here regarding the final judgement and then we will take a more general look and consider some of the strong objections raised against this whole concept of the wrath of God.

Before coming to the details of final judgement (given in chapter 16) there is an introductory section in chapter 15 which makes two points clear: God's judgement is certain but God's people are safe. The concept of judgement is introduced under the symbolism of *'plagues'*; this is reminiscent of the ten plagues described in Exodus chapters 7 – 12, prior to the release from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The word 'plague' is used in Revelation of misfortunes in general. Here, however, as 15:1 makes clear, there is an air of finality; these are the 'seven last plagues', last because with them *'God's wrath is completed'*. We also learn that these final judgements have the full divine approval (15:5-6) for angels bring the plagues and they come from the presence of God (*'out of the temple'*).

Right in the middle of this general description of the final outpouring of God's wrath there is a group of people who

are singing! The song they sing has a double title: *'the song of Moses ... and the song of the Lamb'*, but it is one and the same song. Here is a group of people who have been *'victorious over the beast'*. Who are they? From the description given and the words of the song they sing, it seems that here we have a picture of the whole company of God's people, whether they lived before or after the coming of Christ into the world, in Old Testament times or New Testament. This one single group reminds us of the fact that the people of God are the same whether they can be described as *'of Moses'* or *'of the Lamb'*; the deliverance brought about under Moses is a kind of pattern for the great deliverance brought by the Lamb.

We may wonder why this group is described here in a section which is dealing with final judgement. It may well be that because the judgement is described as falling on those who *'had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image'* (for our comment on the meaning of the beast see chapter 5) John wants to make it clear that judgement will not fall on those who *'had been victorious over the beast and his image'* (15:2). This group is victorious all along the line and John wants his readers to know this. The theme of the song (15:3-4) is the sovereignty of God, shown both in power and in justice, in salvation and in wrath. This is a theme, which, to our loss, we think little of today.

The impression given of the final judgement is that it will be universal and it is inevitable. Nothing can stop it

because the *'God who lives for ever and ever'* executes it and *'no one could enter the temple (i.e. the presence of God) until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed'* (15:7-8).

In chapter 16 we have a seven-fold picture of this final judgement. Note how the symbol which is used differentiates this judgement from the warning judgements given in chapters 8-11. Trumpets warn, but bowls are poured out. The language here, as elsewhere in the book, is symbolic and some of the symbolism has its origin in the plagues which came on Pharaoh and his people (Exodus 7-11) because of their opposition to God and persistent refusal to repent.

The first five of these bowls may be taken together and rather than trying to interpret each one separately it is more instructive to see the general lessons which we may learn from the group as a whole. Rather more is said about the sixth and seventh bowls and we will look at these separately.

What do we learn about the final judgement from these five *'bowls'* (16:1-11)? Perhaps we can list certain lessons, which seem to be clearly taught:

- Those who receive this judgement are those who are followers of the *'beast'*. It is this, which marks them off from all others (16:2): they have refused the

persistent warnings and now must take the consequences.

- The third bowl (16:47) teaches that the judgement is perfectly *'true and just'*; those who have *'shed blood'* are given *'blood to drink as they deserve'*. This judgement comes from *'the Lord God Almighty'* and all that he does is exactly right. The punishment fits the crime.
- The point of distinction between the warnings given previously by the *'trumpets'* and the final judgement symbolised by poured out bowls is again indicated in the fourth bowl (16:8-9). We also learn here that the whole process of judgement is completely under the control of God – *'the sun was given power'*. The sun has been used symbolically before (6:12, 8:12, 9:2) but this time it is given power to *'scorch with fire'*. The warning signs previously symbolised by the sun have been ignored for *'they refused to repent'*, now it is too late.
- In the fifth bowl we learn yet another lesson about this final judgement: here we are taken to the very centre of things. Judgement will come to the *'throne of the beast'*. The forces of evil have invaded the whole structure of society. As we have seen before, the *'beast'* represents human society organised on the purely human level (remember 666 is man's number). Secular humanism, *'the world'*, godlessness – call it what you will, life organised without reference to God, this group has set itself up against the people of God.

This great elaborate edifice, seemingly so powerful and invincible, will be the object of God's final judgment. At the end of the day it will be *'plunged into darkness'* (16:10-11).

- The sixth and seventh bowls take us right to the end of final judgement. The symbolism is by no means easy to interpret but some general principles become clear. As we consider the sixth bowl (16:12-16) first we must ask what the strange references to the river Euphrates, kings from the east, Armageddon, could possibly mean to John and his contemporaries. The Euphrates (a river which flowed into the northern end of the Persian Gulf) was an area largely mysterious and unknown in John's times; it was an area from which an invader might come. Armageddon, possibly meaning the hill of Meggido or the mound on which the Israelite city of Meggido stood, would bring to mind the area where the battles were fought in Old Testament times (e.g. Judges 5:19) and where Israel gained some of her greatest victories. So Armageddon could be symbolic of the end of all things, the last punishment bringing total defeat to all the revolting (16:13-14) and deceptive (even to the point of performing miracles) forces of evil. The powers of the *'world'* find themselves confronted by the almighty God; the rejected Lord suddenly surprises them by his presence: *'Behold I come like a thief'*. So it will be at the last day; the people of God may appear to be few and small, just as at Meggido (Judges 5:8) but this is the last battle and God will win the day. This section constitutes a most serious warning for those

who remain outside the people of God and we should remember that for some the 'last day' will not be the final coming of Christ, for death can usher us into that final scene at any time. Our 'last day' can come today.

The seventh bowl is the climax: '*It is done!*' (16:17-21). It is a frightening spectacle for those who have allied themselves with '*the great city*' or in other worlds, life organised without God (Babylon). The imagery of thunder, lightning, earthquakes and colossal hailstones all combine to create a picture of final doom and complete destruction for all that is opposed to God and his Christ. Time and history are no more; eternity is ushered in. The unrepentant can do nothing now except curse God.

Make no mistake about it; this doctrine of final judgement and irrevocable loss for the unbeliever is terrifying. So much so that many even sincere Christians have tried to get rid of it one way or another. There are not lacking those who object strongly to the whole idea of the wrath of God and speak powerfully against it. Some tell us that it is simply a relic of the primitive state of man. People then were naturally frightened of the unknown and there was an in-built fear of offending whatever gods there might be, so every attempt had to be made to placate them. These ideas, it is said, have been carried over into the Bible and that is why we find such teaching there. Others tell us that it is simply a psychological projection from our mind: on the human level we feel that justice should be done and this

idea is projected from our minds onto an imaginary God; so it is claimed.

Another powerful objection is based on somewhat higher ideas. We all believe that God is love, if we believe in God at all, and so the question is raised as to how an all-loving God can ever bring final and absolute punishment to anyone. Those who hold these views would accept the idea of warning punishment (i.e. that of the trumpets) but reject any thought of final judgement and ultimate condemnation. In an attempt to give some explanation of the '*wrath of God*', which is so clearly taught in Scripture, it is suggested that this has nothing to do with a personal God other than believing that he set up life in such a way that we automatically suffer in this life the consequences of sin. The idea of final wrath, with God passing final judgement on each individual and excluding from this presence those who are condemned, is entirely rejected.

How do we respond to these objections? First let us look at it in a practical way and ask what have been the consequences of this total rejection of ultimate condemnation. In the first place it leads to the view that the gospel is simply an appeal for people to respond to the call of love. The cross of Christ is reduced to nothing but a demonstration of love. When we ask how the cross, thus viewed demonstrates love, no clear answer is given. Everything is left vague and somewhat sentimental. The truth surely is that we cannot really see the love of God in the cross unless Christ is dying in our place: this has

concrete meaning only when we see that he is taking on himself the punishment due to us for our sin. Without this the doctrine of substitutionary atonement is meaningless and we can no longer sing:

*“Bearing shame and scoffing rude
in my place condemned he stood;
sealed my pardon with his blood;
hallelujah, what a Saviour!”*

Such great truths as are expressed in this verse are gone unless there is a final condemnation from which we need to be saved.

Another practical result of a denial of final punishment is that there are repercussions in all levels of society with regard to discipline. In the family, for example, a man who does not believe that there is a higher authority to whom he is responsible and who will one day call him to account for his behaviour, soon ceases to be concerned that his own children should obey him. The same principle applies not only in the parent-child relationship but also in almost every other area where law and order should prevail and where discipline and punishment should be administered. The theory that we, as human beings, have grown beyond the idea of the wrath of God is exploded by a simple consideration of the facts. Our modern world, with its breakdown of discipline in so many areas of life, surely demonstrates that we need this basic controlling truth as much as ever.

For the Christian believer there are yet more powerful reasons for belief in the idea of punishment. There is no doubt at all that it is clearly taught in the Bible. In the Old Testament it is to be found everywhere and there is no important section where it can be said that the wrath of God is unknown; the writers constantly call for repentance because the day of judgement and the day of doom is at hand. The same idea is prominent right from the beginning of the New Testament. *‘Flee from the coming wrath’*, says John the Baptist (Matthew 3:7). No one warned more seriously or more consistently of the coming judgement and the danger of hell than our Lord himself (e.g. Matthew 25:31-46, Mark 9:42-48, Luke 16:19-31).

One final point should be noted. There is nothing more dangerous or more arrogant than to argue that we should not believe anything regarding God, which we cannot believe of man. This argument is based on fallacious ideas both of the concept of wrath and of the nature of God. God is absolutely holy and is therefore totally different from us: in him wrath is not uncontrolled anger but it is his settled attitude towards sin. Anything else is inconceivable. He must, by his very nature, punish all sin. In fact it is his utter hatred of sin and his condemnation of it, which really demonstrates his love. At tremendous cost he has provided the way for forgiveness and escape from condemnation. So, in the light of the truth of the gospel, all objections disappear. The way of escape is wide open. There is no need for anyone to remain under the wrath of God. As we

have seen, the description of final punishment in this section of revelation is clear and frightening but the same book, indeed this very section, tells us of these who *'sing the song of the Lamb'*. For those who can sing that song, there is no condemnation.

Chapter 8 Evil Overthrown.

One of the most depressing things about our modern world is that evil seems to flourish and go unpunished. Recently a man who is involved in business said, as we were discussing someone just setting up his own company and who was involved in corrupt dealings: *'It's a rather foolish way to begin a business, with a name for corruption,'* then added, *'but these days it doesn't matter whether you're corrupt or not, as far as prospering is concerned.'* That is a rather sad but all too true comment on life in our world today, in practically every country. But will this always be so?

When John first wrote the book of Revelation it certainly seemed as if evil had the upper hand and there didn't appear to be any prospect of reversing the process. So it seems today. But this section of the book teaches a different lesson: evil will not and cannot have the last word. Those who align themselves with evil are on the closing side whatever temporary gains they may appear to get.

The section we are looking at (17:1 – 19:10) begins with a symbolic description of the evil forces at work in our

world, the symbols being a woman, a beast and a city (Babylon). All three are combined to present the full picture but in the section as a whole the city of Babylon takes prominence. Babylon, of course, was once a very famous city and the ruins which have come to light in recent years show that it certainly deserved to be called *'Babylon the Great'* (17:5). But eventually, as both Isaiah (13:19-20) and Jeremiah (51:37,53,58) prophesied, it collapsed and the once magnificent city fell into decay and ruin. No wonder John is inspired to use it as a symbol of evil!

In 17:1-6 we have a description of this city, with the added symbolism of the beast and the prostitute woman. Note what we are told there. Verses 1 and 2 tell us that she is influential for *'she sits on many waters'*. The literal city of Babylon was on the river Euphrates at the northern end of the Persian Gulf and was the centre of a network of canals. The *'waters'* stand for the people, as 17:15 makes clear, so John is using Babylon as a symbol of the extensive influence of evil. Verse 3 shows that the woman is carried by the red beast - a further representation of the power of evil (see 12:3). The woman is dressed very attractively; purple and scarlet are the colours of magnificence: further, she is described as *'glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls'*. Evil so often presents itself to us as extremely attractive. Yet at the same time it is repulsive; the woman in all her splendour is described as *'the mother of prostitutes and of the abomination of the earth'* (17:5). Could anything be more up to date than this description of

evil? Here is a perfect picture of life organised apart from God. This is what Babylon stands for; this is what so much of life is like in our modern world. Although John describes the woman (or Babylon) in terms of sexual immorality (note that the Greek root ‘porn’ is the root from which both ‘prostitution’ and ‘fornication’ are derived) her evil extends much wider than this. Sexual immorality is only one aspect of ‘Babylon’. Significantly the Old Testament often uses the picture of adultery as life lived in separation from and opposition to God. Taken together, Babylon, the woman and beast, combine to make what the Bible sometimes calls ‘*the world*’ of human society organised independently of God.

John at first finds the pictures difficult to understand and he is ‘*greatly astonished*’ (17:6). Who wouldn’t be? Then the angel volunteers to give him more information: ‘*I will explain to you the mystery*’. In Scripture a ‘*mystery*’ does not mean something mysterious as in our modern use of the word, but something we could not fathom for ourselves, but which is made known by God. John is unable to understand what the pictures he had just seem meant, but the angel is about to explain it to him more fully. So we have the increasingly detailed description of the woman and the beast and what they signify, not only for John but also for us today, as we shall see.

The beast seems to disappear but always returns – ‘*once was, now is not, and yet will come*’ (17:8). Evil does this constantly; the description is so true to life. It does not

remain constant in its intensity, it comes and goes. There is a kind of pattern of life, death, resurrection, even in evil; this is part of the subtlety of Satan and he succeeds in deceiving people into thinking that by some means or other – economic reform, more education, some sort of humanistic reformation or revolution – things can be put right and just when we thought a particular evil which ‘once was, now is not’ we find it is back again in some other form. Those whose ‘*names have not been written in the book of life*’ are easily deceived by this and they do not realise that it is only by the power of the ‘*Lamb*’ that the ‘*beast*’ will go to his destruction.

This ultimate destruction is described in 17:9-14. Indeed, the beast has great power and this is now described in another way: whatever may be the precise meaning of ‘*seven heads ... seven hills, ten horns ... ten kings*’ the picture is designed to show authority, durability and political power. All of these were evident in John’s day in the Roman Empire, which was setting itself in opposition to the ‘*Lamb*’. The Emperor had absolute authority; the system looked as if it would last forever and it wielded immense power. But look at verse 14! Who is the ultimate victor? Eventually the mighty Roman Empire, which in John’s time seemed to be invincible, collapsed in complete disorder. But the ‘*Lamb*’ and his people did not. Similar systems have come and gone throughout the whole course of history, not simply in the political realm, but in many others as well. In more recent times we could substitute science for politics; a century ago many assumed that

Science (spelt with a capital S!) had all authority and power. Even the church fell under its spell and wrote hymns with words such as:

*“These things shall be! A loftier race
than e’er the world has known shall rise
with flame of freedom on their face;
a light of Science in their eyes.”*

Very few people believe that sort of thing about science now. Not that there is anything wrong either with politics or science as such, but neither of them has anything absolute about it. Only the ‘Lamb’ has this because he is ‘Lord of lords and King of kings’. The important thing therefore is to see politics, science and everything else in that category, as valuable only so far and at the same time ensuring that we are among those who can be described as ‘his called, chosen and faithful followers’. This is the group that will win the day.

John gives us yet another interesting fact about the woman and the beast (i.e. the forces of evil) in 17:15-18. Basically they are not united despite the outward façade of unity. They wield power over vast numbers of people, ‘multitudes, nations and languages’, yet jealousy and hatred exist amongst them. This is such a common phenomenon – ‘dog eats dog’, ‘thieves fall out’ and the whole system collapses. We are reminded of the words of our Lord: ‘If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand’ (Mark 3:22-26). The suggestion

is given here (17:17) that God himself allows this and uses it as one of the means by which he brings about the destruction of evil. God is in control, even over Satan’s kingdom!

Moving into chapter 18 we find that John gives a dramatic and moving description of the fall of ‘Babylon’. As we have already seen, Babylon combined with the ‘beast’ and the prostitute ‘woman’ is a picture of all that is opposed to God and his Kingdom. All three symbols are now combined in the one – ‘Babylon’ and this great ‘city’ is finally overthrown. John is not merely describing the fall of a city although he does use terminology similar to that used by both Ezekiel as he describes the fall of Tyre (Ezekiel 26 – 28) and Jeremiah as he tells of the fall of the literal city of Babylon (Jeremiah 50). John is not concerned about any literal city; he is describing the fall of all that sets itself up in opposition to God. Seen in this way chapter 18 speaks to us today, for what he describes here in such lurid terms is what will happen to any group or individual outside the Kingdom of God. The judgement of ‘Babylon’ means the overthrow of all that opposes God.

The message is ‘shouted’ as indeed it needs to be, for, as we have seen, the ‘purple and scarlet and glittering gold, precious stones and pearls’ (17:4) are attractive. It does need a ‘mighty’ voice (18:2) to turn our attention from the lure of evil and to warn us that such things are doomed to destruction. But we find it so hard to listen. We all say we disapprove of such things as are described in 18:2-3, ‘evil

spirits, *'adultery'* and *'excessive luxuries'*, but we are easily drawn in to them in practice. Here the warning is given loud and clear. God's people must *'come out of her'* for compromise with any form of evil is fatal (18:4-5).

Judgement falls on the city in proportion to what she has done: the punishment will be the exact double (replica) of what she has done (18:6-7). This section reminds us so vividly that although evil may flourish for a while, retribution comes sooner or later. How foolish it is to play with evil. How careful we should be not to let the *'glittering gold'* lure us in. Indeed, to do so is to set ourselves in opposition to God himself *'for mighty is the Lord God who judges her'* (18:8).

Three groups of people stand and watch in amazement as the great city of Babylon falls. It all happens so quickly, *'in one hour'* (18:10,17,19). Things, which have taken long years to build, are lost in a few brief moments. Here surely is a warning against putting our hopes in anything other than the City of God. Yet this is what so many are doing today. Take the three groups mentioned in this section and we shall see immediately how relevant all this is to our present world. None of them is wrong in and of itself, indeed each is essential for life – politics (18:9), commerce (18:11), travel (18:17), all are needed. So, we may ask, why are *'woes'* pronounced on them all? It is simply because they so often take the place of God and to some extent become gods in themselves. They are made absolutes, ends in themselves. When this is done with

anything, apart from God, its doom is certain. Even the way in which the various groups express their dismay is instructive. None of them is really concerned about the city of Babylon itself; their one regret is that *'no one buys their cargoes any more'* (18:11). They are all in it for what they can get out of it. Self-advancement is at the root of all their endeavours and when this is the case, then the enterprise is destined for destruction. Like it or not, God will not entertain anything – politics, commerce, exciting enterprises or whatever – which does not have him at the centre. Here we are told this in no uncertain terms. For *'fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great'*.

The final section of the chapter (18:20-24) shows how complete is the destruction of the city. It will be like the throwing of a great stone into the sea, a big splash and some turbulence then the waters close over it as if it had never been there. Their music, their craftsmanship, their food purveyors, their bright light, and their marriages – all are gone! Again note that the writer describes things all of which are good in themselves, yet if pursued in a godless context they are totally valueless in any ultimate sense. What is said here applies to all people of all time: 18:24 shows that this cannot apply to any particular city past, present or future. The message is to you and me today.

If the final doom of 'Babylon' were all there is to say we might well despair. But it is not all, and the first ten verses of chapter 19 take us into a quite different scene. The silence with which the scene ended, Babylon gone like a

great millstone disappearing into the sea and the water settling back, is contrasted with the *'roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting'* (19:1). The complete people of God (twenty-four elders of 19:4) and the whole of God's created world (the four living creatures) join in a great song of praise for the downfall of evil at the hand of God. Justice will be done and now it has been done. God's moral law cannot ultimately be broken for judgement must come (19:2-3).

Finally we are taken beyond the end of history into a scene which is a complete contrast with the previous one depicting the destruction of Babylon. We are now given a glimpse into a banqueting hall and the *'wedding supper of the Lamb'* (19:9). Music, food, bright lights, marriage – all are here just as we would expect them to be at a marriage feast. But the scene is highly attractive and indeed demands that we ask some important questions. Who are the participants? Why are they here? How have they escaped from the condemnation of 'Babylon'? Why are they shouting *'Hallelujah'* and not *'Woe, woe, woe'*? If this is a real scene then we want to know the answers to these questions and they are all given here.

The great rejoicing multitude is described as the *'bride of Christ'*. In other words these are those who have responded to the call of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ (for a fuller description of this relationship see Ephesians 5:25-33). The Bridegroom is called the Lamb, as we have seen before, because he gave his life as a sacrifice for the sin of

his people, his bride. These are those who have repented of their sin and have accepted his offer of cleansing (i.e. righteousness). They are clothed in *'fine linen, bright and clean'* – but note that the bride did not buy her own dress, *'it was given to her'* (19:8). There is some doubt about the exact meaning of the last sentence of 19:8 but even if, as most versions of the Bible indicate, it does mean 'righteous acts' it would simply be saying what the New Testament says in many places, that those who have received the free gift of righteousness (in this section symbolised by the bride's dress which was given to her) will prove that they have really received it by the way in which they behave. Their actions will be a true reflection of the righteousness which has been given to them.

Looking at this whole section (17:1 – 19:10) we are presented, in a most dramatic way, with the Bible's universal message: 'Babylon' representing human life – organised, competent, attractive, powerful, yet totally divorced from any real commitment to Jesus Christ is doomed and will one day fall under the absolute judgement of God. The group that wins the day is the *'bride'* of the *'Lamb'*, those who have submitted to him. These are the ones who can truly be called *'blessed'*, congratulated, for they will one day 'be invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb'.

Will you be there?

Chapter 9 Ultimate truth.

What is the real truth of the matter? We so often ask that question. We meet a friend and they tell us something about another person, something that seems rather difficult to believe. So, we ask ourselves, what is the real position? We read a report in the daily paper and again we sometimes find ourselves trying to get behind what we read to the real truth. This sort of thing happens all the time. How much happier we are if we get at the real truth.

In this section of the book of Revelation (chapters 19:11 – 20:15) it seems as if John is taking us behind the appearance of things to the real truth, the ultimate reality. Nothing could be more important in connection with our Christian faith. Appearances, as we often say, are deceptive. The Word of God from time to time lets us see what the real position is. Even in the ordinary day-to-day things of life we are so happy if someone who seems to be ‘in the know’ can really tell us the true situation about something which is causing us concern. How much more is this true when the Word of God is the source of our ‘inside information’?

Notice how this section of the book is introduced to us: *‘I saw heaven standing open ...’* (19:11). This immediately suggests that we are being shown something from the position of ultimate reality; heaven, the source of absolute truth, is opened to us. Perhaps the best way of considering this is to concentrate on the various characters which are described for us, first the Lord Jesus Christ, then the devil and then the people of God (those who *‘had not*

worshipped the beast’ (20:4). Let us look at the ultimate reality regarding these.

First we have a glorious description of the present position of our Lord Jesus Christ (19:11-21). He is the rider on the white horse and his identity is not left in any doubt. One of his titles is *‘Faithful and true’* and this has already been said of our Lord in chapter 3:14. The many other titles applied to him in this section, not least that he is the Word of God, leave us in no doubt about his identity. Think what this description would mean to John with all the trouble facing him, all the ridicule, all the powerful opposition of the Roman Emperor. But that is only the appearance of things: the real position is that he is the leader of a mighty army, King of kings and Lord of lords. He judges with absolute justice (no corrupt judiciary there). He has blazing eyes (no truths can be hidden, no important evidence withheld). He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, a reminder that by his death on the cross he won the victory over Satan and all evil. No one has power over him; this great truth is stated in a most interesting way in 19:12; those who practised magic in New Testament times believed that to know a name gave you power over a person. This person’s name is known only to himself; in other words no one has power over Christ.

This thought of Christ’s absolute power is further elaborated in 19:17-18. A very important message is about to be given, so the spotlight falls on the angel who is to give it. It is a rather gruesome picture, which the angel

gives but the content of the message is clear. The '*great supper of God*' is about to take place and it is in contrast with the marriage supper of the Lamb spoken of in 19:9. Here we have a picture of the final destruction of all God's enemies no matter what may be their rank in society, from kings to slaves. The result of the war against God is already decided: the overthrow of evil is total. The picture is not a pleasant one; it conjures up in the mind large numbers of vultures (*'birds flying in mid-air'*) and they descend to *'eat the flesh'*. This is the final and total overthrow of evil (19:18).

The last three verses of chapter 19 give a description of the climax of the war between the forces of evil and the forces of good. Once again we should try to get the overall picture rather than attempt to interpret every detail. All that is symbolised by the '*beast*' (i.e. everything that is set up in opposition to God and his Kingdom) is destroyed completely. Note the reference again to *'the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs'* (see also 16:14). The performance of miracles is not necessarily a sign of the activity of God; they are part of Satan's plan (see the words of our Lord in Mark 13:22). Those who have the '*the mark of the beast*', i.e. all who follow the ways of the '*beast*' are ultimately destroyed by the Word, *'the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse'*. The same word, which offers salvation, also declares that those who reject it are doomed. All that the beast represents is ended.

As we move into the opening of chapter 20 the problem of interpretation becomes very acute. We will follow the line which seems most satisfactory as a whole. All ways of interpreting this section have difficulties. We will adopt the method, which, to us, seems to fit in more easily with the rest of Scripture.

Satan is here described as *'bound for a thousand years'*. Similar language is used in the Gospels (Luke 11:21-22, Mark 3:27, Matthew 12:29). These references appear to speak of something, which was accomplished by Christ during his incarnation. By his death on the cross he defeated Satan once and for all as Paul makes clear in Colossians 2:15. While it is of course true that Satan seems to be very much 'alive and well' and certainly very active, we cannot override the clear statements of Scripture. Also we must remember that we are being shown things as they are 'behind the scenes', the ultimate reality. It is at least possible to take these opening verses of chapter 20 as a symbolic description of things as they really are from God's point of view.

The 'millennium', on this view, would not be a literal thousand years but is symbolic of the period stretching from the first coming of our Lord to the time of his second coming. When he came the first time he '*bound*' Satan by his death on the Cross so that he no longer '*deceives the nations*' in that the gospel is not confined to one particular group but is for all people. This picture of Satan as '*bound*' is well confirmed in 1 John 5:18 where we read

regarding those who are *'born of God'* that *'the evil one does not touch him'*. The word *'touch'* here does not mean touch in the normal sense of the word but indicates the idea of getting a grip of. In other words, Satan can make every attempt to attract us, to lure us off the end of a chain. It may be a long chain, but it is none-the-less a chain. He has been bound. In line with other New Testament teaching there may well be a time immediately before the second coming of Christ (i.e. the end of the *'millennium'*) when Satan will be especially active, when he is *'set free for a short time'* but this is only a temporary resurgence of power permitted by God. Satan's final overthrow when all his power will be gone forever is beyond doubt.

As this scene continues (20:4-10) we are given a description of the position of the people of God, or in other words the church. This is a notoriously difficult section and no one can be dogmatic about its meaning, but our interpretation here fits in with other parts of scripture for Christ and his people can be described as reigning here and now; we are already kings and priests (1:6 describes it thus). The distinctive thing about this group is that *'they had not worshipped the beast of his image'*, whether they are already dead or not. It is possible to take the *'first resurrection'* of verse 6 as a reference to the new birth, since unbelievers are often described as being *'dead'* (see Ephesians 2:1-6, John 5:25), or it could refer to those, martyrs and others, who have died physically but are now with Christ in heaven. If we have not been made alive in Christ we shall remain *'dead'* for the rest of this age; at the

end even the wicked will *'rise to be condemned'* (John 5:29).

As we have noted already (from verse 3) there does appear to be a suggestion that at the end of the millennium period Satan will make a final furious attack; this is described in 20:7-10. All the forces of evil are gathered together in one final onslaught: note that they come from all corners of the earth so it can hardly be a reference to one particular political power. This worldwide aspect of the final battle is confirmed by the reference to Gog and Magog, for in Jewish apocalyptic writings these are often used to symbolise the forces of evil. So, in vivid symbolic language John describes the last battle - a battle which is going on all the time, but which reaches greater proportions just before the end. The battle then as now, is worldwide, but the point the writer wants to make clear is that the result is a foregone conclusion. God and his people live forever; Satan and those with him will die forever. Think again of what this reassuring message would mean to John in exile on the isle of Patmos. This is the message that has sustained the people of God throughout all ages. So it is for us today.

We are aware of course, that the interpretation we are following is not the only one. The above view is generally called *'amillennialist'* (not an altogether suitable title perhaps): we interpret the millennium not as a literal 1000 years but the period, known to God but not to us, which stretches, as stated above, from the first to the second

coming of Christ. The 'premillennialist' view follows a different line of interpretation and takes the 1000 years as being a literal period (if it began in 1988 it would end in the year 2988). There are variations in the details but broadly this view teaches that Christ will return in power, deprive Satan of all his power and set up a literal kingdom here in this present world. Christ, together with all his people will rule this Kingdom for 1000 years. Then Satan will be released and in his attempt to destroy Christ's Kingdom he will himself be destroyed. The final judgement of all people then takes place. A third view is called 'post-millennial' and teaches that there will be a special period, distinguished from all other periods of history; this may or may not be a literal thousand years but at the end of it and it is usually envisaged as a period of great spiritual and social progress (i.e. things getting better and better). Christ will come and set up his Kingdom and the final judgement will take place. Throughout the whole course of the history of the church there have been equally sincere Christians holding one or other of these views. All of them have some support from Scripture; all have their difficulties as far as biblical interpretation is concerned. We should respect the views of others even if we cannot share them. We have opted for the 'amillennialist' view here because it seems to fit more easily into other New Testament teaching regarding the second coming. Also it is timeless in its spiritual significance, in that it would speak as powerfully to John when he first received it as it does to Christians living today and throughout the whole Christian era.

Our final section (20:11-15) deals with the last judgement. It is a sobering scene to contemplate for it makes us ask which side we are on. The created world, '*earth and sky*', is brought to an end. Final judgement is passed on all. Some interpret the '*dead*' in verse 12 as being the 'spiritually dead' (i.e. those who have not been born again) but it seems better to take it as referring to all the dead, both small and great. No one is exempt from this. The basis of judgement is the record contained in '*the books*'. Some already have their names in the '*book of life*'; these are those who belong to the Lamb (see 13:8). It is common New Testament teaching that each person will be judged '*according to what he has done*'. How does this fit in with the clear New Testament teaching that we are saved not by works but by grace (Ephesians 2:8-9)? The answer, of course, is that our '*works*' or our actions are the test of whether we have genuinely been saved by grace. Our Lord himself describes this aspect of salvation in Matthew 12:33-37. If the 'tree' has been made good (i.e. a conversion has taken place) then the 'tree' will be good and it is by '*their fruits*' that you can tell whether the tree has been made good or not.

Another aspect of this final judgement is that '*death and Hades*' are destroyed once and for all. Hades does not mean 'hell'; it refers to the realm of the dead. Verse 14 indicates that what we now call 'death', or the separation between body and soul, will no longer take place. Hades therefore no longer is relevant.

So the section ends with an indication of the sharp and clear-cut division, which will take place at the end. The difficulties of interpretation should not blind us to this all-important fact, which stands out with crystal clarity and urges us to examine ourselves in case, as Jesus himself warns, *'that day close on you unexpectedly like a trap'* (Luke 21:34).

Chapter 10 Making Everything New

I am making everything new! In the many pictures John has painted for us in the previous sections of Revelation, we have seen vivid portrayals of what the forces of evil have done and are doing in our world. Everywhere we look, whether it is in the life of nations or individuals, in the world or in the church, we see so much we wish could be different. Now John tells us that one-day it will be different. In fact, for those with eyes to see, it is already taking place. God says: *'I am making everything new'*. The process has already begun but it will be completed only at the end. It is this 'end' to which our attention is mainly called in this section of the book of Revelation (21:1-22:5).

But the present aspect is also important. The process has already begun: the Kingdom of God *'came'* with the first coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and those who have entered the Kingdom are already made new (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). The fact of the final renewal of all things (and it is a fact, because the message comes from the

one *'seated on the Throne'* 21:5) is important for it is this that gives us the inspiration we need to work for God and for good in the here and now. Again we see that Revelation speaks to us today; it also spoke to John in his day and it will continue to speak until the end finally comes and everything is new.

John continues to speak in symbolic language in order to let us see something of the renewal, which is to take place.

First he speaks of a *'new heaven and a new earth'* (21:1). In a quite remarkable way John now expands the brief glimpses he has given of the future in previous chapters and develops them into a scene of unsurpassed glory. We remind ourselves again that John is painting a picture and he wants us to get the general overall impression even if the details escape us and even if we find some of the things he says to be beyond our limited imagination. We can to some extent visualise the passing away of this present earth but we find it difficult to think of 'heaven' also passing away. How can heaven be renewed?

One way of looking at this renewal is to see the change in terms of nearness to God. The heaven which John has so far described has to some extent symbolised the separateness of God (e.g. 4:6 where the sea of glass symbolises separation.) Now things are changed and the separation has gone completely for *'the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them'*. To some extent, of course, this is true here and now. God is present even now with his people but this will be perfected and realised in all

its fullness in the new heaven. What a mind-stretching thought! Another difficult statement in verse 1 is that there was *'no longer any sea'*. This must certainly be interpreted symbolically; in Isaiah 57:20 the sea is a symbol of restless humanity and in the ancient world it was an area characterised by storms and danger, difficult to cope with. In the renewed world this will be gone completely.

So, in the first eight verses of chapter 21 we are given an overall picture of the final state. The people of God are pictured as citizens of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem. The spiritual condition is the main thing and we should not try to visualise this in any geographical way. The final position of the people of God, is in a sense, the perfecting of what we experience in part here and now. We are already citizens of the heavenly Kingdom, (Ephesians 2:6 and 19) but when the final state is brought in we shall enjoy to the full all the privileges of citizenship which we now know only in part, for life so often brings *'mourning, crying and pain'*. In the new order, ushered in with the return of Christ, all this will be gone; there is a combination of heaven and earth, and life as we know it now will be completely replaced by the new order (21:5) not as a result of mere human effort but by the mighty power of God *'coming down out of heaven'*.

Another point made clear in these verses (21:1-8) is that God is in complete control. To John, who first received the message and to all subsequent Christians right down to the present day, the future seems full of problems. We often

wonder how we can survive. The sure Word of God here gives reassurance he is the beginning and the end (the A to Z) in absolute control and everything will end just as he wants. This is the one who promises to satisfy fully every need we have (21:6). On the other hand those who persist in evil, those who put anything else in the place of the one true God, will be cast into the *'fiery lake of burning sulphur'*. At the end there will be a final separation and those on the wrong side will suffer interminable loss. Just as it can be said that those in the Kingdom of God begin even here and now to experience some of the benefits, so those outside the Kingdom suffer even now something of the consequences of sin. These preliminary warnings should not be ignored: when the end comes it will be too late to change; there is no escape from the *'fiery lake'*.

The major part of chapter 21, from verse 9 to 21, gives a detailed description of the Holy City. In symbolic terms we are told what will be the condition of those who are citizens. These people are also described as the *'bride of the Lamb'* for one picture is not sufficient to convey all that God wants us to know. The *'bride'* symbolism is a familiar one in the New Testament (see Mark 2:19, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:25-27) and it contains at least two important truths. Those who belong to Christ (or, those who are citizens of the new Jerusalem) are greatly privileged to be called *'his bride'*, unworthy people raised to such an incredible height! But a bride also has responsibilities; there must be no unfaithfulness and on the

positive side, careful preparation for the great day when the *'Lamb'* will come to claim his *'bride'*.

Now the symbolism moves from that of a *'bride'* to a *'city'* and we can only stand back in amazed wonder at the superb description which is given. At the very centre of the picture is God in all his glory, far beyond anything we can imagine. It has high walls and gates, symbols of security: the walls are absolutely inviolable and to dispel any doubts about this we are told that the walls are 65 metres thick (21:17)! The gates which face in all directions – we have already seen that the citizens of the Kingdom come from every tribe and nation – bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. This fact, combined with the names of the twelve apostles on the foundations, shows that the *'city'* is the culmination of God's activity in both Old and New Testament periods. As we have seen before, God's Kingdom is one and the same, the New Testament church is the continuation of Old Testament Israel and at the end of the day the one city is complete, made up of the people of God from all periods of the world's history. Entrance to the Kingdom is the same for all and all will share the same privileges at the end. The size of the city is difficult to imagine in literal terms but the symbolism conveys the idea of splendour and there is room for all! The 12,000 stadia of 21:16 are about 2,200 kilometres and it is a cube of these incredible proportions. What does this say to us? When something is measured as the city is said to be, it indicates that every part, every centimetre, is known to God and under his care. This is true for us even in the

here-and-now if we are members of the city of God: in the final state of the city, so wonderfully described here, we shall be more happy but not more secure than we are now (security is available NOW!). Even though the main emphasis of this section of the book is on the future perfection of the Kingdom, it is already partially true now.

Human language is stretched to its utmost in order to describe the final state of the city; gold as pure as glass, every kind of precious stones, pearls, transparent glass, all combined to create an unimaginable scene of glittering splendour. This is our destiny! Those who know where they are going, travel confidently. Those who know what they are going to, begin to prepare for it here and now (see 1 John 3:2-3).

Although in this section the emphasis is mainly on the future aspect of the Kingdom of God, it is best seen as a culmination of what the genuine believer enjoys here and now. The future will bring to perfection what we can experience in the present. We have seen this before in our interpretation of Revelation and it is brought out clearly in 21:22-27. These verses present us with some very wonderful truths, the very heart of the gospel. God's presence is not confined to any one place, those who are members of the City of God have access to him all the time. Note how the Lord God (i.e. Jehovah) and the Lamb (Jesus Christ) are spoken of in terms which make them fully equal. If Jesus is not God how can he be put on the same level as *'the Lord'* in providing light for the city

(21:23)? Those who know Jesus Christ in a personal way also know God and have constant access to him and walk in the light which he provides. Since everything depends on him and not on us, no discrimination can possibly occur; the gates are always open (21:25 – unlike cities in New Testament times, this one does not shut its gates when darkness falls; it cannot because it is always light.) The only thing that makes entry impossible is sin and the only qualification for entry is that our names are in the Lamb's book of life. This is the gospel, stated in a nutshell; we are sinners and so by nature we are all excluded from the city, but a response of repentance and faith means that our names are written in the Lamb's book and we are in the city.

Think what these things would mean to John and to Christians today in a similarly troubled world. We are already members of the eternal city (in John's day Rome seemed to be the eternal city but its 'eternal' nature was soon shown to be an utter fallacy.) The light of this city will never be put out, no nuclear explosion will ever plunge it into darkness, neither will there ever be a power failure! This is the city to which we already belong, the God-made city for John saw it *'coming down out of heaven from God'* (21:2). Every other 'city' however rich, impressive or powerful, will disappear. At the end of the day only the *'City of God'* will remain.

The final verse of chapter 21 is worthy of careful study for it takes us right to the centre of the Christian gospel. The

first half of the verse reminds us that it is a gospel of holiness for *'nothing impure'* will ever enter the city and from this we might go on to argue that if we do our best not to be impure we shall qualify for entrance. But this is not so; the only qualification for entry is that *'our names are written in the Lamb's book of life'*. We have already seen this *'book of life'* (3:5, 13:8, 20:15) and one's name can be written there only as a result of the grace of God, through faith. So we cannot become registered members of the city through any good works of our own. Why then this insistence on right living? The answer, of course, is that there is nothing fictional about having your names in the *'book of life'*. It is real, it means that we possess new life and the surest evidence of this new life is that we show it in our daily behaviour and no longer persist in doing things *'shameful or deceitful'*.

Chapter 22:1-5 continues the description of the city and here the future aspect dominates. Using symbolic language from many parts of the scripture, John describes in vivid terms what life will be like in the future *'city'*: the final judgement has taken place, sin has been put away once and for all and God's servants are now in his presence and *'see his face'* (22:4). Note again how *'God and the Lamb'* are brought together in perfect equality for both are on the one throne (22:3).

The history of salvation, the story of redemption, has now reached its climax. It is fascinating to compare these verses with the opening chapter of Genesis. This is the

renewal of which our Lord speaks in Matthew 19:28 (literally he spoke of a new ‘genesis’). This is exactly what we have here. The curse spoken of in Genesis (e.g. Genesis 3:14-15), which was pronounced on the world as a result of sin, is now removed once and for all (22:3). Man and woman once banished from the garden and the tree of life (Genesis 3:22) now have free and full access to it and all its perpetual fruit (22:3). The tragic consequences of evil have been fully overcome and there is ‘healing’ for all (22:2) and there will be no more night!

So the biblical story comes full circle: it is one story right from Genesis to Revelation. God states his plan at the start of human history and then in his own time and way works steadily through to the end. What a confidence this inspires in dark days! He does not change; he has no need to. In Genesis 3:15 he says what he will do and now in this last chapter in the book of Revelation, he has done it. Paradise lost! Paradise regained.

Do you believe this? Are you among those here described as ‘his servants’? If not, can you possibly remain outside, alienated? Or, are you rejoicing in your citizenship of God’s Kingdom? Do you have that inner security which no external change can shake? This is LIFE. There is no other.

*“Believing, we rejoice
to feel the curse remove,
and bless the Lamb with cheerful voice*

and trust his bleeding love.”

Chapter 11 The message is for today

The closing verses of the book of Revelation (22:6-21) provide a quite remarkable climax to the whole book. In particular, verse 10 tells us that the message is for today. ‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book for the time is near.’ As we have tried to show, the message of Revelation is right up to date. In a world, which is dominated by power – economic power, political power, it gives us what has been called a ‘theology of power’. This is something we need to keep in the very centre of our thinking. The Christian gospel is so often pushed aside as being somewhat irrelevant as far as the problems of our modern world are concerned; even at best it is considered to be remote from the power politics of today. It is seen as something quite separate from the harsh realities of 20th century life, dominated by coups and counter-coups, displays of military power, famines, riots and apartheid. We need therefore to get our sights adjusted and the message of Revelation does just that ‘Do not seal up the words’, do not keep them hidden.

Our final section can be seen as a gathering together of the main themes dealt with throughout the book. Verses 6 – 10 remind us of certain facts regarding the way in which God reveals his truth to us. God has chosen to speak through selected people (in the Old Testament they are called prophets, in the New, the apostles). Two important points

become clear, things we should always keep in mind when reading the Bible; one is that God controlled the ‘spirits’ of the writer (v 6), in other words they wrote what he wanted them to write. Yet, as the whole book of Revelation so clearly demonstrates, the writers are given full liberty to use their own literary skills and to adopt a variety of literary styles. As we have seen so often in our study of this book, we are not given many new truths; instead we have a presentation of old truths in a dramatic style – apocalyptic style. God is in control of the ‘spirits’ of the writers but the truth comes home to us more powerfully when presented, as it is here, in this somewhat striking and unusual way. This is as it should be. The words are ‘trustworthy and true’, make no mistake about that; the Word of God is not given to us for our assessment as to whether it is true or not, but for our obedience and to create an attitude of worship (v 9). If our reading of the scriptures does not do these things for us (inculcate obedience and worship) then we are not reading it correctly.

We should take these verses (6-10) very seriously for they are dealing with matters absolutely vital for our spiritual well being. The Bible is no dead book; Revelation in particular is not merely for experts, nor is it given to satisfy morbid curiosity about the future. It is God speaking, demanding our careful attention (for this is the implication of the word ‘keeping’ in verse 7; it means to accept, obey and stand guard over). The end result of a correct reading of Scripture is that we are compelled to worship God!

Verses 11 – 15 take up another theme which is dealt with extensively throughout the book; in a concise way these verses sum up what will happen at the end, the ‘*last things*’. We should remember that the word ‘let’ has two meanings: it can be used as a positive exhortation, for example, ‘Let us work hard’. But it also has another use, what is called the let of ‘withdrawal’, as for example when we say, ‘Let him alone’. It would seem that this second meaning is the one intended in verse 11. As we have said, this particular section is dealing with what will happen at the end, when Christ returns (v 12). When that great event occurs there will be no possibility of change. ‘*Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong*’. C.S. Lewis in his book ‘Mere Christianity’ puts it like this:

“It will be too late to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realised it before or not.”

The finality of things at the second coming of Christ emphasises the seriousness of this present life: if there is no second chance and the emphatic statements of verse 11 seem to make this quite clear, then the here-and-now assumes tremendous importance. It is not at all surprising that John goes on in verses 12 – 15, to show what it is in this present life that determines our final state. The central figure in these four verses is Jesus Christ, he is the first as

well as the last; he is both the beginning and the end (v 13). Everything depends on our relationship with him. Those who have a right to enter *'the city'* are those *'who wash their robes'* (v 14). The present tense is used here to indicate that the blessing of a clean character is a continuous truth. John has already made it clear in chapter 7:14 that there is a sense in which we can say that Christ's people are washed clean once and for all – it is a complete event. It is also true to say that such people have continuous access to Christ's cleansing power (see 1 John 1:7). Outside the city are those who know nothing of the *'clean robe'* and show it by their behaviour (v 15).

John's warning is therefore clear for all to see: there is only one way to be received into God's presence at the end of the day, that is through what has been provided by the death of Christ. Individual acceptance of this offer means that a full and complete covering ('robe') has been provided for all sin; this is something which God himself does for us, (the theological word for it is *'justification'*). The evidence that this has taken place is that we no longer live lives characterised by the things listed in verse 15. In the New Testament times the *'dogs'* referred to here were not pets (a different word is used for little pets as in Matthew 15:26-27); they were scavengers, considered to be unclean and potentially carriers of disease. The word *'dogs'* is thus symbolic of those whose character is evil; those who have not had their robes washed and are therefore outside the Kingdom.

Yet another great theme of the book is referred to in verse 16, in fact we could say that this is the greatest theme of all – **Jesus Christ**. He dominates the book from beginning to end. Look at the three words applied to him here; taken together they tell us that he embraces the whole of history. His coming into the world is not an afterthought when all else failed; he is part of God's purpose of salvation from beginning to end. Using David, Israel's greatest king, as a focal point John tells us that Jesus Christ is the *'roof'*, in other words he leads up to David just as he precedes Abraham (John 8:58). But he surpasses David for he is also the *'offspring'*. The Messiah is the fulfilment of the promise of David. The third phrase applied to him, *'bright and morning star'*, indicates that he is the one who ushers in the dawn of eternity, just as the morning star in the still dark sky heralds the dawn of a new day. So, in this final description of Jesus Christ, given indeed by himself, we see this mighty Person standing astride the whole drama of human history, salvation history, from beginning to end. Now he is waiting to usher in the final state, that which will last for eternity, and to which this present life is only a prelude.

But who acknowledges this to be so? There is a group that knows it to be true; there are those who wait in urgent expectation for the Christ to demonstrate his ultimate power. Here, and elsewhere, they are called the *'bride'* – the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ; they are eagerly awaiting the *'bridegroom'*. This group can be seen as a unit, the bride, because they have one thing in

common, they are indwelt with the 'Spirit' (v 17). The Spirit and the bride speak with one voice. Who can become a member of the group? Whoever is thirsty! Whoever feels the need to enter. All who have been conscious of their need, these are invited to come. Entrance is free!

Next comes a solemn warning (vs 18-19). To add or to subtract from the message of this book has serious consequences. It sets out clearly the way we become members of the City of God. So, if we add to it we are claiming that something needs to be added to the gospel; or, if we subtract from it we are claiming that we know better than God himself. To do either of these things is to put ourselves in an extremely dangerous position; we are obscuring and tampering with the gospel itself and this is a matter of life and death. The book has made it perfectly clear that there is only one way of entry (for example see 5:9, 7:14, 14:4, 21:27) and if we turn aside from this either by addition or subtraction, we shall remain outside.

The final message (vs 20-21) is one of glorious hope, a fitting climax to a book, which is full of hope. Not a vague wishful thinking but a certainty regarding the future, certain because it is based on the action of God in human history, action put into effect by Jesus Christ. This hope is created in us when he 'comes' into our life and it will become a realised hope when he 'comes' to renew all things. *'Amen, come Lord Jesus.'*

This is the only faith that can hold its own in our atomic age. This is a theology of power. The church of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God, stands over against ideologies, materialism, power politics and above all the satanic power, by which we are all surrounded in our modern world. Let us take the message of this book to heart. It is written not for close analysis but for spiritual enjoyment, not for the distant future but for now, not for the specialist but for every Christian, not a cryptic puzzle to be solved, but a word from God to strengthen faith.

The book ends as it began, with a reference to grace (1:4) and everything in between the opening and closing of John's message is a demonstration of the amazing grace of God. Of course it isn't really John's message, it is God's message to John and indeed to you and me, tossed up and down as we are by the circumstances of life, facing what appear to be overwhelming forces of evil, discouragement, fear of the future, a world in political turmoil, the people of God facing opposition outside and failure within. John in his day faced all these things and so do we in our day. The message of God is the same to us as to him, it is a message of his sovereign grace; the Lamb is on the throne. In the light of all the great truths brought to us in this wonderful book of Revelation, we can joyfully sing:

*"Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far;
and grace will lead me home."*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with God's people. Amen!

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