

Who Change the Grace of Our God into a License for Immorality

I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. –Jude 1:3-4

The church of Jesus has always had to fight hard, long and strong against legalism and the spirit of religion. But in the fight against legalism sometimes the pendulum swings to far the other way to what church historians have called libertinism. Jude warned against *certain men...who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality.*

The Random House Dictionary defines a libertine as someone who lacks moral restraint. Libertinism, its full-blown state, is the idea that “anything goes.” A libertine spirit in the church says, “I am no longer under the law so I don’t have to do anything that I don’t feel like doing.” For those familiar with church history, Libertinism was connected with Gnosticism.

Perhaps the best biblical example of a libertine spirit at work in a church is at Corinth. It was definitely a church where the motto was “Anything Goes.”

Jealousy and quarrelling; sexual immorality; division and disputing; inconsiderate behavior; lack of submission to proper authority; self-centered worship; misuse of spiritual gifts and the yoking together with unbelievers were the fruit of a libertine spirit which had come into the church. The Corinthians had plenty spiritual gifts but Paul said to them, “*I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly*” (1 Co 3:1).

Libertinism is not necessarily rebellion. Whereas the rebellious spirit will not submit to any authority, including God’s, the libertine spirit is an over-reaction against perceived legalism and loves to flaunt its freedom. The rebellious spirit says “Nobody is going to tell me what I can and can’t do,” while the libertine spirit says, “I am free from legalism and to prove it I will do such and such.” But Paul says, “*Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak*” (1 Co 8:9) and, “*Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love*” (Ga 5:13).

A person influenced by a libertine spirit will use their freedom in Christ as a cover-up for participation in the world and an excuse to indulge the flesh. Peter says, “*Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God*” (1 Pt 2:16). So, in our vigilance against legalism in the church, we also need to be aware of the threat of libertinism.

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Pray in the Holy Spirit

You, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. - Jude 1:20

I have been in some church gatherings where the person leading the service exhorted the people to begin to “pray in the Spirit.” They were asking those in the congregation who had a heavenly prayer language to begin to pray in tongues as a way of engendering the move of the Holy Spirit. While I don’t deny the efficacy and appropriateness of doing this, I would submit that to *pray in the Holy Spirit* is not limited to or even primarily defined by the practice of praying in tongues.

Many Charismatic/Pentecostals assume that when Jude wrote that we should *pray in the Holy Spirit* he was referring to the practice of praying in an *unknown tongue* (1 Co 14:2 KJV); that to pray in the Holy Spirit is to pray in tongues—no more and no less. But praying in the Holy Spirit is like worshipping in the Holy Spirit...or witnessing in the Holy Spirit...or ministering or preaching in the Holy Spirit. It is praying under the inspiration of the Spirit—which includes, but is not limited to, praying in tongues. One reason why Charismatic/Pentecostal persons equate praying in the Holy Spirit with praying in tongues is that they are Charismatic/Pentecostal. Their experience of speaking in tongues leads to the assumption that this is what it means to pray in the Holy Spirit. Another reason for the misunderstanding is that in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul equates praying in tongues to praying with his spirit. This is true. But Jude does not say, “Pray in your spirit,” he says, “Pray in the Holy Spirit”—and there is a difference.

Praying in tongues is praying in the Holy Spirit (hopefully) but praying in the Holy Spirit is not necessarily praying in tongues. What I mean is that in order to legitimately pray in tongues you should be praying under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit gives *utterance* (Ac 2:4 KJV). But not all Spirit inspired prayer is speaking in tongues. That’s why it can be confusing to ask people to “pray in the spirit” when what you really want them to do is to “pray in tongues.” If you want them to pray in tongues, ask them to pray in tongues. If you want them to pray under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, ask them to pray in the Holy Spirit. There will always be people in the congregation who have never spoken in tongues or received a heavenly prayer language from the Lord. It may be just fine to ask those who are able to do so to begin to pray in tongues as a spiritual exercise of praise, prayer or warfare but it is exclusive and not entirely helpful to intimate that this is the only way that someone can *pray in the Holy Spirit*.

To pray in the Holy Spirit is not limited to or even primarily defined by praying in tongues

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw--that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. -Revelation 1:1-2

There have been more commentaries written on the book of Revelation, than any other portion of the Bible. From Isaac Newton to Hal Lindsay to Edgar Cayce to Mary Baker Eddy... thousands have tried to explain the meaning of this last book of the Bible, also known as "The Apocalypse." By degree, most have missed the mark. What principles of study are we to apply so that we also do not misinterpret?

A number of years ago I was challenged to search out the meaning of the book for myself. I was dissatisfied with the North American pop-theology and dispensationalist interpretations that have gained ascendancy in our lifetime. The first three chapters were pretty straightforward but chapters four through twenty-two were more than enigmatic. They were bizarre yet beautiful; terrible yet tremendous. Concerning what he had written, John said, "*Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it*" (v3). How could I get in on this blessing? So, one year, I went away for a week to devote myself to study. Each of the next two years I also set aside a week. As a result, I felt I had gone from understanding about ten percent of the contents to maybe fifty percent. In the process, I discovered a number of interpretive keys that helped me immensely. Here are the top three:

***What principles of study
are we to apply so that we
do not misinterpret?***

-The Book of Revelation is a vision that John received. As with any dream or vision it must be interpreted. Most of the book is symbolic. For example, is Jesus literally returning to earth on a horse? No. The biggest mistake that we make is trying to interpret figurative symbols literally.

-This book cannot be correctly interpreted without a good working knowledge of the Old Testament. It is ironic, but this, the last of the New Testament writings is most like the Old Testament than any other New Testament book. Old Testament references abound. The more familiar you are with the Old Testament, the easier this book is to understand.

-Time and numbers are not literal. The time frame of one vision overlaps that of the others and numbers have significant symbolic meaning. Phrases like "ten days," "the 144,000" and "a thousand years" are better understood if they are taken symbolically rather than literally.

John's revelation is an exciting book to study. There is much to ponder and much to learn. It is well-worth the time and effort to do so.

Ephesus...You Have Forsaken Your First Love

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. -Revelation 2:4-5

In October, 1994, my wife and I attended the first "Catch the Fire" conference at, what was then, the Toronto Airport Vineyard Christian Fellowship. The first night of the conference the Lord clearly spoke to me and said, "You've hurt me." "How was it that I had hurt the Lord," I wondered? Part of the answer came in the Lord's reply: "You have not wanted to spend time in my presence." I knew it was true. It wasn't that I didn't pray or read the word—I did. But the joy that I once had in coming before the Lord was no longer part of who I was. As I received prayer ministry that week, nearly everyone who prayed for me gave me this message from the Lord: "Return to your first love."

***They were remaining
faithful but faithful wasn't
good enough***

The Lord Jesus praised the church in Ephesus for many things: Their *hard work*; their *perseverance*; their lack of tolerance for *wicked men*; their testing and exposing of false apostles; their endurance of hardships for the name of Jesus; and their disdain for the practices of an offensive cult known as *the Nicolaitans* (vs 2-3, 7). Despite all these commendations there was something very important missing in the collective life of the church at Ephesus. Jesus said to them, "*I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen!*" Evidently, the church of Ephesus was living below the level of the love that they once had for Jesus. They were remaining faithful but faithful wasn't good enough. They were working hard and standing for the truth but the Lord wanted more. He wanted them to remember what it was like when they were in a high place of fellowship with him. He wanted them to repent and return to that place of strong intimacy with him.

When Jesus talks about first love, does he mean the one we love the most or the love that we had initially with him? Both, I'm sure, but when he says to the Ephesians, "*Repent and do the things you did at first,*" it seems that he is referring to something that they had *at first*—that is, when they first came to know the Lord. It is an all too common thing for people to lose their fire, zeal and love for the Lord.

To forsake your first love is a serious matter. Jesus said to the Ephesians that if they did not repent and return to their first love that things could progress to the point they would no longer have a witness of the gospel or a designation as a church. So—is the Lord saying to you, as he did to the Ephesians and to me, to return to your first love?

Smyrna...Do Not Be Afraid of What You Are about to Suffer

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. -Revelation 2:10

The church in Smyrna was a suffering church. Jesus begins his exhortation to them by reminding them of his own suffering and subsequent victory. *“These are the words of him who...died and came to life again”* (v8). *“I know your afflictions,”* he assures them. He knows and can relate to their suffering—and he knows that more suffering lies ahead. They need to know the empathy of the Lord for their situation. The Lord Jesus will often let his disciples know beforehand some semblance of what they are about to face so that they are not surprised and unduly discouraged when the suffering and persecution come (see John 16:1-4; Acts 9:16; Acts 21:10-14; 1 Peter 4:12). As Paul said to some of the other churches in Asia Minor, *“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”* (Ac 14:22).

Suffering is transitory, has a higher purpose and will lead to a reward

It may seem counter-productive to say, *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”* For some, to know that suffering is coming will not alleviate but engender fear. But if we are aware of what it to come, we can mentally prepare for it. However, it takes more than knowing that hardships are coming to be able to handle them. We have to have some sense of hope that the suffering is transitory, has a higher purpose and will lead to a reward. And this, in fact, is Jesus’ message to the church in Smyrna.

“You will suffer persecution for ten days,” Jesus tells them. Obviously, *ten days* is not literal. In the Old Testament (which is the interpretive guide for the Book of Revelation), ten days represents a relatively short time of transition (see 1 Samuel 25:38; Jeremiah 42:7; Daniel 1:12-15). So the persecution is temporary. The suffering also has a higher purpose in that Jesus refers to the persecution as a *test*. As Peter so eloquently puts it, *“For a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith...may be proved genuine...”* (1 Pet 1:6-7). And as far as the reward, Jesus encourages them by saying, *“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

Of the seven churches of the Book of Revelation, Smyrna is the only one to which the Lord has nothing negative to say. Those who suffer for the Lord are rarely rebuked by him.

Pergamum...To Him Who Overcomes

To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it.... -Revelation 2:17

Perhaps the overriding theme of the entire Revelation of John is the statement, *“To him who overcomes.”* The Book of Revelation is addressed *to the seven churches in the province of Asia* (1:4) and Jesus has a message for each of the seven. Some of the churches are commended, some are rebuked, but they all receive this message: *To him who overcomes....* And as the cataclysmic vision of chapters 4-21 unfolds, you can’t help but realize that the message of the book is that the church is called to be victorious despite inevitable persecution and the approaching apocalypse.

Yes, the trials will be intense, but look at the phenomenal promises made to *him who overcomes*: *I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God* (Ephesus: 2:7) *...He will not be hurt at all by the second death* (Smyrna: 2:11) *...I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it* (Pergamum 2:17) *...I will give authority over the nations* (Thyatira: 2:26) *...He will be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels* (Sardis: 3:5) *...I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God...and I will also write on him my new name* (Philadelphia 3:12) *...I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne* (Laodicea: 3:21).

The overriding theme of the entire Revelation of John is the statement, “To him who overcomes.”

Pergamum was the place *where Satan has his throne*. According to the NIV Study Bible Notes, Pergamum was the official center of emperor worship in Asia. Whether it was because of this fact or some other, Jesus said that this was the city where Satan lived and the place where the first martyr in Asia, Antipas, was murdered (see v13). Jesus said, *“I know where you live.”* There would be a rich reward for overcoming Christians who lived where Satan lived.

The word “overcome” is the Greek word, “nikaō.” It is the root word for Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, from which the sporting goods company gets its name. I have heard that some Christians don’t like to use the word for fear of promoting Greek Mythology. Fair enough. But whenever I see that famous Nike swoosh, I prefer to let it remind me of all the supreme promises of heaven that will be given to *him who overcomes*.

Thyatira...You Tolerate that Woman Jezebel

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. - Revelation 2:20

Who was this Jezebel of Thyatira? Was she a real person? Was that her real name? Was “Jezebel” a euphemism for a type of person or group of persons or even a spirit? The answers to these questions, if they can be discerned, are relevant for the church today in the identification of false prophets and the prevention of false teaching and the spread of immorality.

Commentators are divided as to whether “Jezebel” was an actual person. Certainly there was a distinct vein of false teaching running through the church. Some think that it was perpetrated by a single person, a woman who claimed to be a prophet of the Lord. Others see “Jezebel” as the designation that the Lord used for those in the church who were guilty of spreading certain doctrines that were leading to sexual immorality and idolatry—the same sins that the wicked Queen Jezebel of the Old Testament had led Israel into. There are reasonable arguments for both. I tend to see Jezebel as one particular person responsible for spreading false teaching in the church but “Jezebel” was probably not her real name,

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Whether she was originally from the Thyatiran church or she found a home there as an itinerant prophet—this Jezebel claimed to speak with true prophetic authority. False prophets tend to come from the outside, looking for a people who don’t really know them and will more readily accept their claim to speak for God. But the most reliable prophetic voices for the local church come from within because they both know the church and are known by the church. Jezebel had gained a stronghold in the church at Thyatira and was leading people into *Satan’s so-called deep secrets* (v24). False prophets often claim to be able to lead people into deeper esoteric experiences that have no scriptural foundation. The fruit of Jezebel’s ministry was not intimacy with the Lord but sexual immorality and idolatry.

The main sin of the church of Thyatira was not the sexual immorality or the idolatry but that they tolerated Jezebel. Just like the evil Jezebel of the Old Testament who could only function because of the abdication of leadership by her husband, Ahab, the only way that a Jezebel or a Jezebel spirit can operate in the church is if she (or it) is “tolerated.” Leadership must have discernment and not allow false prophets to usurp authority and expose the sheep to harmful teaching and false claims of prophetic unction.

Sardis...I Have Not Found Your Deeds Complete in the Sight of God

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. -Revelation 3:1-2

The modern North American church can find something in each of the seven churches of the Book of Revelation to which it can relate. But of the seven messages that Jesus gave to these churches, the one that probably hits home the most is the message that he gave to the church in Sardis. Some would argue that we are most like the Laodicean church with its lukewarmness, financial security and false assurance but when he says to the church in Sardis, “*I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God,*” we have to admit that the Lord Jesus must have us in his sights as well.

We will be judged on the basis of our works

Part of the problem is that the North American church, at least the Evangelical and the Pentecostal/Charismatic branches, de-emphasizes the importance of good works. We have wanted to rightly communicate the nature of salvation—that the heavenly gift cannot be earned by good works. But, in doing so, we have been found wanting as the Lord has come to look for the fruit of that salvation— *good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do* (Eph 2:10). The church at Sardis had *a reputation of being alive*. “*But you are dead,*” the Lord Jesus said to them. Their reputation did not square with the reality that their works left much to be desired. Just because a church has the reputation of being alive does not mean that it is.

To five of the seven churches of Asia, Jesus said, “*I know your deeds.*” The Scriptures are clear that we will be judged on the basis of our works (see 1 Corinthians 3:12-15; Ephesians 6:8; Revelation 20:12-13). “*I know your deeds,*” Jesus says and *we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad* (2 Co 5:10; see also Romans 14:12 and Hebrews 4:13). By the time we get to that judgment seat it will be too late to do anything about it but, as he did with the Sardis church, Jesus gives us the opportunity to *wake up, strengthen what remains...remember what we have received and...repent*.

It is not a pleasant thing for our deeds to found wanting in the sight of God. We have too many excuses for not doing the will of God. Who cares if we have a reputation of being alive when we are dead? “*I know your deeds,*” Jesus says to the Sardis church—and to us. Has he found our deeds complete in the sight of his God?

Philadelphia...I Have Placed Before You an Open Door

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. -Revelation 3:7-8

Typically, when Jesus' words, "See, I have placed before you an open door" are quoted, the reference is to an opportunity that the Lord is offering to someone in life or ministry—an open door to a new place of service, a new career, new relationships or the like. Such an application is appropriate, but when you understand the context of his letter to the church in Philadelphia and the Old Testament reference from which these words are taken you will find that Jesus is speaking about something more specific.

In Isaiah 22:20, 22 it says, "In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim...I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open." Jesus quotes directly from Isaiah 22 to communicate to the Philadelphians the message that he wants them to hear. To understand that message, one has to look into what was going on in Isaiah's day and the prophetic message that was given concerning this man named Eliakim.

Eliakim was an administrator in the royal palace in the days of King Hezekiah. He was under the authority of a man named Shebna who was in charge of the entire palace. But the Lord was not pleased with Shebna and the word of the Lord came to him through the prophet, Isaiah: "I will depose you from your office, and you will be ousted from your position" (v19). The Lord would replace Shebna with a man who would be *a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah* (v21). That man was Eliakim, who would be given the literal key to the house of David (the royal palace) so that *what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open*.

So, when Jesus says that he is the possessor of the *key of David* and that what he opens no one can shut and what he shuts, no one can open, he is speaking about the house of the heavenly king. He is the one with the authority to open or close the entrance to heaven. He is the only one with that key so that what he opens no one can shut and what he shuts no one can open. When he says to the church at Philadelphia, "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut," his main message to them, and to us, is that he has opened the door of salvation and there is nothing or no one that can close to us that entrance into the celestial palace of the King.

Jesus is the one with the authority to open or close the entrance to heaven

Laodicea...I Stand at the Door and Knock

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. - Revelation 3:19-20

The greatest rebuke the Lord Jesus had for any of the seven churches of Asia was for the church in Laodicea. He called them *wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked* (3:17). He said, "Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth." His mercy, however, is seen in the message which he leaves with them—and us—as he assures them of his love and offers them his fellowship. He says, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."

Jesus' attitude is not new. It was depicted time and time again as the Lord God dealt with his people, Israel. His rebuke and his discipline were born out of his love for his people and his kindness was meant to lead them to repentance. "Here I am," he seemed to always be saying to his people. "I am standing at the door and knocking. Is anybody listening? *Be earnest and repent*. I am once again ready to renew my fellowship with my people."

So Jesus, after giving the church at Laodicea a grim warning, gives them a warm invitation. He offers them the renewal of his presence and his fellowship. He tells them that he is standing at their door and knocking and if anyone hears his voice and opens the door in response to his call, he would come in and they would eat together. We all know and have experienced a thousand times over what sharing a meal adds to fellowship. Restaurants and coffee shops exist more for facilitating fellowship than for serving food and drinks. Eating together is a sign of friendship and fellowship. And this is what Jesus is offering the Laodiceans—and us. Even after we have been wretched and pitiful.

Most artistic renderings of this scene of Jesus knocking at the door, including Warner Salaman's famous painting, show no door handle on the outside where Jesus stands. It is a theologically insightful detail. Jesus knocks and he calls but only we can open the door from the inside. It is up to us to hear his voice and open the door. He will not come in unless he knows that he is truly wanted. And if we really want him to come in, we will *be earnest and repent*. And his merciful discipline will result in the restoration of our intimate fellowship with him.

After giving the church at Laodicea a grim warning, Jesus gives them a warm invitation

Come Up Here

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” At once I was in the Spirit... -Revelation 4:1-2

As our church was in worship one Sunday, I saw the heavens open and there was a stairway that led into the throne room of God. I heard a voice that said “Come up here” and in this vision I saw myself suddenly at the top of the stairs, wanting the rest of the church to come up as well. I then saw myself reaching down to help others up the stairway as I was telling the church to “come up here.” Many came, but not all—and that is where the vision ended. The next day, I was listening to a Jason Upton CD and heard, for the first time, a powerful song entitled, “Come Up Here.” That same day, a brochure came in the mail for a conference entitled, “Come Up Here,” using Revelation 4:1 as the theme. As you can imagine, I was taken by what the Lord was speaking.

***He invites us to come up in
the Spirit to worship him
where he is seated in
heavenly glory***

John’s apocalyptic vision hits high gear in Revelation 4. After recording the Lord’s messages to the seven churches of Asia, he looked and saw a door standing open in heaven. The Lord Jesus said to him, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” At once he was in the Spirit and the great panoramic vision of the book of Revelation begins to unfold. And how does it begin? With John experiencing the glory of the heavenly realm and getting a taste of the magnificent worship at the throne of God. The door of heaven opens and he hears a voice saying, “Come up here.” Can you imagine? What an experience. How would you like to see an open portal of heaven with the invitation to partake in heavenly glory? You can.

What do you think that the Lord was trying to say to me and to the church when he gave the vision and the subsequent confirmations? The conclusion that I came to was that, in our worship, we not only invite the Lord to come down to visit and inhabit our praises but there are times when he invites us to come up in the Spirit to worship him where he is seated in heavenly glory. The word says that *God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus* (Eph 2:6). This is what the torn curtain is all about. It is one thing to witness the manifest presence of the Lord in a divine visitation on the earth—this is the essence of revival; it is another thing to be invited into the Holy of Holies and, by the enabling power of the Spirit, come into his very presence—this is the essence of worship.

Who Is Worthy to Break the Seals and Open the Scroll?

And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Revelation 5:2-4

More than any other book of the Bible, John’s Revelation is filled with symbolic imagery. Playing a leading role on the bill is the scroll...sealed with seven seals (5:1). Chapters 5-7 deal with the scroll and the opening of its seals—without which none of the other events of the book of Revelation could unfold. After John describes the worship in heaven (chapter 4), the scroll takes center-stage. Its significance is evident in that when we first see it, it is in the right hand of God. “Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals” (5:1). The scroll must be important if God is holding it in his possession—and holding it in the hand that represents his authority. The importance of the scroll is then amplified as John sees and hears a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” Does anyone have the ability or the authority to reveal the contents of the scroll of God—a scroll that, if written by God, must contain information and reveal mysteries of historic proportion? Who is able to reveal the mysteries of God? Who is able to unfold history?

***Jesus is the only one who
has been found worthy to
reveal the mysteries of God
and to unfold history***

So the call of the mighty angel goes out to all the living and the dead; to all of heaven and earth and hell; to every human, angelic and demonic being who ever existed. *But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.* Can you understand John’s distress? “I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.” The scroll that unfolds history and reveals the events of the end has been written but cannot be revealed. Even John’s revelation cannot continue without the breaking of these seals and the opening of the scroll. But alas, there could be found no one worthy to open the scroll or to look inside.

Of course, you know of the dramatic turn of events as one of the heavenly elders says to John, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David...is able to open the scroll and its seven seals (v5). Jesus is the one—the only one—who has been found worthy, and to have the authority, to reveal the mysteries of God and to unfold the history of mankind. He *has triumphed* (v5) and he will be the one to break the seals of the scroll and reveal the end.

How Long until You Avenge Our Blood?

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out...“How long...until you...avenge our blood?” Then...they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed. -Revelation 6:9-11

As Jesus begins to open the seven seals of the scroll of God to reveal the progression of end-time events, the first four seals reveal the approach of the four horsemen of the apocalypse who symbolize different cataclysms to come on the earth (see also Matthew 24; Luke 21). When Jesus opens the fifth seal, John sees the Martyrs: *Those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.* A Martyr is defined as one who is killed because of their faith. The Christian church near the end of John’s life was under intense persecution which resulted in the martyrdom of many. When John received this Revelation from the Lord, he was in exile on the island of Patmos *because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus* (Rev 1:9) and would eventually die for the faith—as all the original apostles were destined to do.

More Christians have been killed for their faith in our generation than in all previous generations combined

So this was the backdrop for the recording of the book of Revelation. Persecution, suffering and martyrdom are referenced in 1:9; 2:10; 6:9-11; 11:7-12; 12:11; 13:15-16; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; and 20:4. A great Roman persecution had broken out against the church and the book of Revelation is written to the church during this time. John saw the martyrs under the altar (where the blood of the sacrifice flowed) calling out in a loud voice, *“How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”* That same call would have been on the lips and hearts of the entire church of John’s day.

Today, the same cry goes up. According to “Voice of the Martyrs,” more Christians have been killed for their faith in our generation than in all previous generations combined. This has a lot to do with the greater population of the church today but the cry of the martyr remains—“How long until the blood of the martyrs is avenged?”

The question is answered in John’s vision: *“A little longer.”* They would have to wait until the full number of martyrs had come in. Later in the book of Revelation the promise for the martyrs is that they would come to life and *reign with Christ a thousand years* (thousand representing infinity). When that reign begins, the “little while” will be over, the blood of the martyrs will have been avenged, and the message and hope of the book of Revelation will be fulfilled.

God Will Wipe Away Every Tear from Their Eyes

“Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” -Revelation 7:16-17

We have it on good authority that we will see trouble in this world. Jesus said, *“In the world ye shall have tribulation...”* (Jn 16:33 KJV). The hope of the Christian, however, is that there will soon come another time and another place where there will be no more trouble and the everlasting joy and comfort of the Lord will be ours. There is no book of the Bible where this hope is more pronounced than the book of Revelation.

As we have seen, the Revelation of John has many references to suffering, persecution and martyrdom. This is only natural considering that the two main audiences for the book are the suffering church of John’s day and the church of the end times. As the sixth seal of the scroll of God is opened, the great and terrible day of the Lord commences (see also 2 Peter 3:10-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; Amos 5:18-19; Zephaniah 1:14ff...). This is the cataclysmic day of reckoning when the inhabitants of the earth call *to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”* (Rev 6:16-17). We don’t often think about the *wrath of the Lamb*—but there it is. As the Day of the Lord recedes, John sees *a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands* (7:9). They are worshiping at the throne of God with all that they are. It could be the most compelling scene in all of John’s vision; and for the suffering church, it is the most encouraging. For John learns that these are *they that have come out of the great tribulation* (7:14)...*Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

Heaven is the great consolation

For those who have experienced the trouble that comes with living in the world, heaven is the great consolation. No more hunger; no more thirst; no more suffering. We will be together with Jesus and our tears will be wiped away by the very hand of God. This is not just “pie in the sky.” This is the eternal reality for those who remain faithful through their suffering.

The Prayers of the Saints

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. - Revelation 8:3-4

No one fully understands the workings of prayer. Through prayer we can touch heaven and change earth. It is the universal religious expression—it is rare to find a soul who does not pray, but a high percentage of prayer is just that—religious expression that neither touches heaven nor changes anything on the earth. The simplest and the youngest among us can pray. It is they who often do it best. Everyone can pray but few know the deeper life of prayer that mark the great saints of God. As a commodity, prayer is as common as the morning paper but, in its purest form, can be more valuable than all the gold in Fort Knox.

In the Scriptures, prayer is likened to fragrant incense that comes up before the throne of God. In the Tabernacle of Moses, there was erected an *altar of incense* on which fragrant incense would be burnt as an offering to the Lord (see Exodus 30:7ff). Depending on the state of the people's hearts, the incense offering would come up to the Lord as sweet fragrance or a stench in his nostrils (i.e., Exodus 30:34ff; Isaiah 1:14-15). David likened prayer to incense when he said, "*May my prayer be set before you like incense*" (Ps 141:2). When the angel appeared to Cornelius he said, "*Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God*" (Acts 10:4). And in the book of Revelation, the *prayers of the saints* are seen as fragrant and valuable to the Lord: *The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints* (Rev 5:8); *Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God.*

Prayer is the commodity of heaven. You may not have a lot of money but you can pray. Be assured that God will not let the prayers of his people go unnoticed or unanswered. In some fashion, whether figuratively or literally, the prayers of the saints are accumulated in heaven, not only as a sweet fragrance for the Lord but as deposits to be used for heavenly purposes.

*Prayer is the commodity
of heaven*

Locusts Like Scorpions

And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. -Revelation 9:3-4

John's revelation is full of bizarre and frightening imagery, not the least of which is the fifth trumpet of judgment on the earth. Was what John saw real?

Ezekiel was taken up out of his body and shown the spiritual realities of what was happening and what was going to happen in Jerusalem and the temple (see Ezekiel 8 and 9). What he saw was not literal reality but, in a sense, it was more real than real. He was seeing the truth of what was happening in the realm *between earth and heaven* (Ez 8:3). He saw the second heaven where angelic and demonic beings operate and the purposes of God are enacted in a greater way. I believe that John's experience was much like Ezekiel's. What he is seeing cannot all be literally true and we should not think it to be. Nor should we, as do many commentators on the book of Revelation, think that John is seeing twentieth-century realities such as nuclear bombs, fighter jets and armored tanks and does his best to describe what he is seeing in reference to first-century knowledge and vocabulary. What John is seeing is the reality of the spiritual realm—most of it future tense. And just like Ezekiel, some of what he sees is descriptive of what is happening in the physical realm and most is descriptive of what is happening in the spiritual realm.

*What John is seeing is the
reality of the spiritual
realm*

So when John sees locusts that look like horses with the heads of men and the tails of scorpions that sting people he is not seeing strange mutant last-days creatures or twenty-first-century fighting machines but, in all probability, demonic beings. It is a lot easier to believe that what he is seeing is purely symbolic—but symbolic of what? It is fine to say that what he sees is not literal but what does the figure stand for? If John's experience is anything like Ezekiel's (who saw many of the same things that John saw and uses much of the same imagery) then it is plausible to think that he is not just viewing a science-fiction thriller produced in heaven. When John was called to "*come up here*" (Rev 4:1) his eyes were opened to the realities of the "heavenly" realms. He could now see things, bizarre and as frightening as they were, occurring in the realm of the angelic and demonic. How the work of these and other freakish creatures literally manifest themselves on the earth is not seen by John. Rather, he sees what is going on in the spiritual realm—the second heaven.

I Took the Little Scroll and Ate It

So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it..." I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." Revelation 10:9-11

We don't often think of John, the beloved, as a prophet, but this is exactly what he is as Bible comes to a close with his Revelation. Just like Ezekiel, John is taken up in the Spirit and shown things that are and are to come. Ezekiel's experience is again mirrored when John takes the scroll of the word of God and eats it. Ezekiel recounts his own experience: *"And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, 'Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.' So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth"* (Eze 3:1-3). The similarities between John's and Ezekiel's experiences are striking. Both are offered a scroll to eat by the hand of a heavenly being. Both take it and eat it and they both say that it tastes *"as sweet as honey in my mouth."* Then they are both told to go and prophesy. The scroll turns John's stomach sour and, although Ezekiel does not complain of a stomach ache, he does say that the scroll he ate was full of *lament, mourning and woe* (2:10). So we see another example of how a working knowledge of the Old Testament is invaluable in understanding what is going on in John's Revelation.

So what is going on? The word of the Lord being given to prophesy. Until this juncture, John has been writing down everything that he sees and hears. It is amazing that he can conduct the physical act of writing while taken up in the Spirit—but that is his task. Thirteen times in his revelation he is told to write down what he sees. In a sense, he is merely an apocalyptic scribe. But that changes here in chapter ten when, just as he was about to write what he is seeing a voice from heaven thundered and said, *"Do not write it down"* (v4). He is not to be a scribe at this point—he is to be a prophet. And to confirm his prophetic role, he is given the same experience as the prophet, Ezekiel—whose experience he was surely familiar with. After he eats the scroll, the word is *"nigh unto his mouth"* (see Romans 10:8 KJV) and he is told, *"You must prophesy..."*

John calls the book of Revelation a *book of prophecy* (22:19). John not only wrote it on a scroll, he ate a scroll and spoke about *many peoples, nations, languages and kings* (v11) and he, like Ezekiel, fulfilled the role of prophet.

John, like Ezekiel, fulfilled the role of prophet.

The Kingdom of the World Has Become the Kingdom of Our Lord

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." - Revelation 11:15

Perhaps you are most familiar with this verse because it is so powerfully used by George Frideric Handel in the composition of his great oratorio, "Messiah." In the climactic "Hallelujah Chorus," Handel quotes Revelation 11:15 which says, *The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.* Not only does this verse bring climax to Handel's great "Messiah," it is the proclamation that brings finality to the world and the age as we know it.

I have often heard preachers encourage the faithful by saying, "I have read the end of the book and guess what? ...We win!" The only reason that we "win" is because Jesus reigns. At the end of the age, the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of God and of the Messiah. The consummation of the age is rendered when everything is amalgamated under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Make no mistake—Jesus Christ will be crowned Lord of All and the faithful will reign with him. This is exactly why we win in the end.

The entire history of the earth can be summarized in terms of who reigns—not just in geo-political terms but, more fundamentally, in the realm of spiritual authority. When God created the planet he gave dominion of the earth to us, but we lost it when we sinned. Satan became *the prince of this world* (Jn 14:30) and *the ruler of the kingdom of the air* (Eph 2:2) but was defeated by the Lord Jesus at the cross who, as a result, has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. The day that John foresaw and that inspired Handel will come. At the present time, Satan still reigns in many places on the earth—but wherever the kingdom of God is established, Satan is displaced and we are given a foretaste of the future and final consummation of the government of Christ.

The Bible is replete with references to the authority, rule and reign of the Messiah. Isaiah tells us *the government will be upon his shoulders* (Handel liked this one, too) and *of its increase...there will be no end* (Is 9:6-7). Paul tells us that *the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign...* (1 Co 15:24-25). Yes, he must reign. He, in fact, does already and a day will come when all the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Hallelujah!

The consummation of the age is rendered when everything is amalgamated under the Lordship of Jesus Christ

They Overcame Him

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. -Revelation 12:11

In one of the “Back to the Future” movies, a guy named “Biff” is given a magazine from the future. It is an almanac containing the results from sporting events that, for Biff and the time in which he lives, are yet to occur. Biff makes a fortune from betting on events about which he already knows the outcome. As you can imagine, it would be quite an advantage to be able to go into the future and see the outcome of events that are yet to take place. This advantageous perspective actually is ours as John records the outcome the greatest contest of all time.

***We get to see how we did it
so that we can do it***

As John looks into the future he sees the great battle between Satan and the church. The devil, *the accuser of our brothers...has been hurled down* (12:10) to the earth and *he is filled with fury* (v12) and *he went off to make war against...those who hold to the testimony of Jesus* (v17). But John hears a voice from heaven—a post-game commentary if you will—telling, not only of the victory of the saints but how the victory was accomplished. It’s kind of like someone coming into your locker-room before the big game and saying, “I actually saw the end of the game and this is how you guys won. So go out and do this and you will be sure to win.”

So how did the church beat the devil? *They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.* Here they are; the three things that the church used to beat the devil. We get to see how we did it so that we can do it. First, it is *by the blood of the Lamb*. The devil is defeated by the power of the atoning blood of Jesus. The blood of the Lamb is the basis for our standing with God and covers every indictment that *the accuser* would bring against us. Second, it is *by the word of their testimony*. If you *confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord”... you will be saved*” (Ro 10:9). The gospel is the power of God for salvation and the word of your testimony cuts the enemy’s kingdom to shreds. Third, it is because *they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death*. Jesus said, *“The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life”* (Jn 12:25). The devil, who comes to steal, kill and destroy (see John 10:10) is defeated by those who will not be intimidated by him—even to the point of death.

The Mark...of the Beast

He also forced everyone...to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666. -Revelation 13:17-18

This is the stuff that great movies (or really bad movies) are made of. There is a lot of Christian hoopla regarding the mark of the beast. The most common theory these days is that when the antichrist comes, he will set up a world order and exercise societal control by forcing everyone who wants to participate in economic activity to receive implanted computer chips that will not only act as debit accounts for a cashless society but will also track the whereabouts and activity of everyone who has the chip. And now, with animals and children receiving implants of chips that will help them to be found if ever they become lost, and with the threat of terrorism and the greater need for “homeland security,” the theory becomes that much more plausible. The advice that I was given as a young Christian was, “Whatever you do, do not receive the mark of the beast.” The irony is that while people are looking for and avoiding the introduction of computer chips in their hands and foreheads, they may well already be bearing the mark of the beast.

***You don't need a special
implant to have the
mark of the beast***

Can you imagine any modern government trying to institute a wholesale move toward a cashless society and implanted computer chips? The Evangelical Christian community would be in a frenzy. I, personally, wouldn’t be freaked out by the idea of doing the computer chip thing. Sure, there would be a “big brother” issue but how would getting a debit/security chip cause me to lose my salvation or suddenly be on the devil’s side? Is my current use of debit and credit cards which already track my economic activity and whereabouts leading me to perdition?

I am not saying that there aren’t any personal security or end-times issues that are important to consider. I am saying that the mark of the beast is much more and different from a bar code under your skin. You don’t need a special implant to have the mark of the beast. Your identification with the devil and your love for the things of the world is the mark of the beast that should concern you. Even now, you are either marked by the name and blood of Jesus and sealed with the Holy Spirit or you are marked as belonging to the world, the flesh and the devil. It’s not so much a chip under your skin that should concern you as much as who has ownership of your soul.

The 144,000

There before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.... -Revelation 14:1

Of the key principles that need to be applied to properly understand the book of Revelation, one of the most important is to know that numbers are to be interpreted symbolically and not literally. It is fascinating to study the meaning of various numbers in the Scriptures—especially here in the last book. One of the numbers that is especially significant is 144,000.

Twice in John's vision, he sees 144,000 *servants of our God* (7:3) *who had been redeemed from the earth* (14:3) marked and sealed with the name of Jesus (see 7:3; 14:1). When people read the book of Revelation they naturally ask, "Who are the 144,000?" But that is actually the wrong question—unless, of course, you think that there is literally a group of exactly 144,000 made up of exactly 12,000 celibate male Jews from 12 make-shift tribes of Israel (see 7:5-8; 14:4). The better question is "Who do the 144,000 represent?" When you ask this question, you are applying a much more solid biblical hermeneutic and avoid wild speculations and narrow theologies. For instance, the Jehovah Witnesses have been taught by the Watchtower Society that there will be only, and literally, 144,000 of the best J.W.'s who will make it to heaven—the rest will have to rely on a not-so-sure hope that they will be part of Christ's earthly millennium. To top it off—only the 144,000 have the green light to participate in the Lord's Supper which explains the very strange specter of nobody taking the Lord's Supper at the once-a-year offering of the bread and the wine at the Kingdom Hall.

So, who do the 144,000 represent? The people of God are represented by the twelve tribes of Israel, right? The number "one-thousand" represents totality in the Scriptures (see Psalm 50:10). So 12,000 represents all the people of God from a particular "tribe." Add up all the people of God from all the different tribes and you have 144,000—the number representing the totality of all the holy *servants of our God...who had been redeemed from the earth...purchased from among men* (14:4) *who had Jesus' name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.*

So if you want to know who the 144,000 are, look no further than the pew you sit in. We are the 144,000.

***"Who are the 144,000?"
...that is actually
the wrong question***

Bowls Filled with the Wrath of God

Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. -Revelation 15:7-8

Hellfire preaching has become old-fashioned. Overhearing a conversation the other day made me reflect on whether or not this is such a good thing. A fellow pastor was talking about a friend of his who had just passed away. He described him (in positive terms) as a passionate "hellfire and brimstone preacher." Would his brand of preaching have made people uncomfortable? How could it not? There is nothing that affronts our comfortableness as much as the thought of hell and the wrath of God. Post-modern sensibilities are sorely offended by the concept. But maybe that is an indication that a good dose of hellfire awareness is what we need.

***Most of our evangelistic
efforts are resulting in
spurious conversions***

One of the major themes of John's revelation is the wrath of God. The *revelation of Jesus Christ* (Rev 1:1) to John communicates vivid imagery of the New Testament truth that *the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness* (Ro 1:18) and that *it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God* (He 10:31). Angels are given *bowls filled with the wrath of God* and all kinds of terrible judgments are poured out on the earth and its inhabitants.

The judgments of the Lord should be part of well-rounded theology and preaching. And while it may be part of our theology, it is lacking in our preaching—which explains, in good measure, why most of our evangelistic efforts are resulting in spurious conversions. If you read the testimonies of Jonathan Edwards and Charles Finney you will find that the vast majority of the thousands converted during the First and Second Great Awakenings (where there was plenty of hellfire and brimstone preaching) were still serving the Lord five years later. Our success at making solid converts is woefully less. "Revival's Golden Key," as L.A. street preacher Ray Comfort has noted, is making sure that you are not preaching a gospel where God's judgment, conviction of sin and repentance are soft-peddled.

The reason that hellfire and brimstone preaching is old-fashioned is simply that nobody does it anymore. That needs to change.

You Are Just in These Judgments

Then I heard the angel...say: "You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve." And I heard the altar respond: "Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments." -Revelation 16:5-7

Some see the concept of the wrath of God and his judgments as an unenlightened hindrance to the evolution of a kinder and gentler humanity. I suppose those who think that way should take up their case with God. I don't mean to be smug about the issue. I am just making the same point that the angels and the martyrs make when they see the devastating judgments of God on the earth. They know the harshness of the judgments and they know that there would be those who would question the justice of such severity. But their response is "You are just in these judgments....Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments."

I have heard people say that God wouldn't do such and such—as if they were somehow God's appointed press secretary

If God really is God (this is actually the crux of the matter) then his judgments must be true because in order to be God he has to be all-knowing and completely just. Throughout the Scriptures when God is in conversation with his prophets and asks them questions their response is, "Thou knowest" (i.e., Eze 37:3). Western society doesn't seem to have the same attitude. We think that we know and that our thinking is best—despite overwhelming scriptural and historical evidence to the contrary. Many times I have heard people say that God wouldn't do such and such—as if they were somehow God's appointed press secretary. We can speak from Divine authority and inspiration but only on God's terms and not our own.

And that is the problem. Most of our statements are on our own authority and not on God's. We speak according to what we think is right (or preferable) and rarely attempt any thoughts from God's point of view. Western society is immoderately anthropocentric. We think our human viewpoint is the end all—but God may have something to say after all.

The angels and the martyrs saw God's recompense for the shed blood of the saints and the prophets. Who are we to say that God is not just in his judgments? God is God and his judgments will always be true and just. This thought should bring us both fear and comfort.

The Mystery of the Woman and of the Beast She Rides

"Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters..." I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns... "I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides" - Revelation 17:1, 3, 7

Commentators are agreed that if you can understand the symbolism of Revelation 17 regarding the identity of the great prostitute and the beast on which she sits you will have done much to understand the rest of John's panoramic vision. Where commentators are not agreed, however, is just who or what the prostitute and the beast represent. Modern-day disciples of J.N. Darby and C.I. Scofield including Hal Lindsay, Tim LaHaye and Jack Van Impe see the beast as a political figure who will become "the antichrist." Many, including Matthew Henry, Dave Hunt and John Hagee, see the beast as the Roman Catholic Church, others as a one world government. Historical/critical commentators make a credible case for Nero being the beast. As far as *the great prostitute* of Revelation 17, she has been identified by various commentators as Roman Catholicism, Jerusalem, global religion, the USA, the apostate church....the list goes on and on.

The great prostitute represents idolatrous worldliness and the beast represents worldly-friendly and anti-God authority systems

It seems to me that conjecture plays a major role in the formation of most of the above mentioned theories. Instead of concentrating on context and appropriate biblical cross-references, most of the apocalyptic detectives begin with their eschatological assumptions and take stabs in the dark concerning specifically who the prostitute and the beast might be.

Just who do the great prostitute and the beast represent? The angel in John's revelation identifies *the great prostitute* as *Babylon*. In the biblical context, alignment with Babylon most often represents friendship or spiritual adultery with the world. In the cultural context, you must remember that the church was being severely persecuted by the Roman Empire—the cultural and political vehicle by which spiritual prostitution was delivered. Generally speaking then, the great prostitute represents idolatrous worldliness and the beast represents worldly-friendly and anti-God authority systems.

Not only does this understanding make sense in the biblical and cultural context, it goes past conjecture and helps to expose *the great prostitute* and *the beast* of our own day.

Come out of Her, My People

Fallen is Babylon the Great.... "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues..." -Revelation 18:2, 4

The identification of *the great prostitute* known as *Babylon the Great* (17:1, 5) as "idoltrous worldliness" (see previous article) makes sense in the light of Revelation 18 which records the fall of Babylon the Great. Babylon the Great is the world system of ungodliness where *the kings of the earth committed adultery and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries* (v3); *her sins are piled up to heaven* (v5); *by [her] magic spell, all the nations were led astray* (v23) and *who corrupted the earth by her adulteries* (19:2). This is why John heard a voice from heaven say, "*Come out of her, my people.*"

All through the Scriptures, the people of God are commanded to give their affection to God alone and to separate themselves from those things which would draw their devotion away from the Lord their God. The children of Israel were repeatedly warned to stay separate from foreign nations and their Gods lest they be drawn away from their sincere devotion to the Lord. Paul warns the Corinthians not be *yoked together with unbelievers* (2 Cor 6:14) and quotes Isaiah, saying, "*Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you*" (2 Cor 6:17 from Is 52:11). What John hears from heaven concerning separation from Babylon the Great is just another of the many warnings to the people of God concerning the spiritual adultery and enmity with God that comes from the love of the things of the world (see James 4:4 and 1 John 2:15-17): "*Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.*"

The call to come out from Babylon is a call to holiness. Holiness means to be separated to God and his purposes. As God's holy people we do not want to share in the sins of the world or to receive any her plagues. The world will be judged. That is what Revelation 18 is all about. And that judgment will come quickly, for three times in Revelation 18 we hear that *in one hour* the doom, destruction and ruin of Babylon the Great will come (vs 10, 17, 19).

The voice from heaven calls, "*Come out of her, my people.*" Heed the call that you will not share in the sins or plagues of Babylon the Great.

The call to come out from Babylon is a call to holiness

The Testimony of Jesus Is the Spirit of Prophecy

I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." -Revelation 19:10

There are different ways to interpret Revelation 19:10, when it says *The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*, depending on how you use the preposition, "of." *The testimony of Jesus* could be referring to Jesus' own testimony—the words that he spoke as he testified concerning the kingdom of God and his role in it. Jesus spoke the very words of God, so when you talk about prophecy, which in essence is the spoken word of God, the testimony (or words) of Jesus is the essential spirit of prophecy. To say it another way, if it is true prophecy, it must be Jesus speaking. Jesus said, "*The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life*" (Jn 6:63). Jesus was the quintessential prophet because every word that came out of his mouth was from God. The essence of prophecy is WWJS (What Would Jesus Say?). This interpretation is supported by Revelation 1:2 when John says that he was about to tell about everything he saw "*—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*"

However, if you understand *the testimony of Jesus* to be the testimony about Jesus then you have a different interpretation. In this case, if the testimony about Jesus is the spirit of prophecy, then you saying that the true essence of prophecy is the gospel of Jesus Christ. You are saying that any true prophetic word has to agree with the gospel and that whenever you hear or give a prophetic word, it must line up with the witness that we have concerning the truth about Jesus. In addition, when the gospel is preached it becomes the prophetic word of the Lord. The gospel, in its purest form, is purely prophetic. It is the word of God. No authentic word from the Lord will deviate from the truth of the gospel. This second interpretation is supported by Revelation 1:9 when John says that he was in exile *because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.*

As my wife, Sherry, has observed, if any prophetic word doesn't point to Jesus, it is not the right spirit. Prophecy must, in its essence, come from Jesus and enhance the gospel. In this way, *the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.*

Prophecy must, in its essence, come from Jesus and enhance the gospel

They Will Reign with Him for a Thousand Years

Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. -Revelation 20:6

The Millennium. Most Christians that I know believe—based on Revelation 20:1-10—that Christ will return to set up a thousand year reign on the earth. There are about a thousand reasons to believe that this is an incorrect interpretation of Revelation 20. Let me share a few.

-As with most dreams and visions, John's revelation recorded in chapters 4-22, represents symbolic, not literal, truth. The scene immediately preceding the millennium passage portrays the return of Jesus with a sword in his mouth, wearing a robe dipped in blood and riding on a white horse. Are we to interpret that literally? Why then the next scene?

-The rest of the biblical witness regarding what happens when Jesus comes back does not even hint at Jesus establishing a thousand year kingdom on the earth. The matter is not established by a testimony of two biblical witnesses. The passages that we can confidently take much more literally than Revelation 20, such as 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Matthew 16:27; 1 Corinthians 15:23-24, 52; 1 John 3:2; and 2 Peter 3:10 suggest just the opposite of Jesus establishing an earthly kingdom when he returns. A literal interpretation of Revelation 20 has no other witness in the Scriptures and is supported only by conjecture regarding other apocalyptic and symbolic passages in Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah.

-A literal interpretation of Revelation 20:4-5 means that only those who have been beheaded for their faith in Christ will reign with Jesus for the thousand years. That leaves out everyone I know, at least.

-Most millennialists believe that Jewish temple worship and sacrifices will be re-established during the millennial reign and it will end with a time of sin and rebellion where Satan will be unleashed. Why would Jesus want bring the saints, who have been perfected to heavenly glory, back to earth to establish an imperfect kingdom where sin is possible and the old covenant practice of animal sacrifice is re-instituted?

The Scriptures are clear that when Jesus returns we will be instantaneously changed from earthly mortality to heavenly glory (see 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 John 3:2). Judgment will be immediate for the unsaved (see 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10) and a great cataclysm will destroy the heavens and the earth as we know them (see 2 Peter 3:10). The millennium is a wonderful Holy Spirit inspired metaphor—and no more.

The millennium is a metaphor—and no more

The Cowardly

He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death. -Revelation 21:7-8

Revelation 21:8 gives a litany of persons who will face the judgment of the “second death” in *the fiery lake of burning sulfur*. As you read through the list you come across the characteristics of those whom you would typically suppose to be liable to the judgment of the Lord: *Liars, idolaters, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, murderers....* But included in the list are those whom you would not necessarily think would suffer the wrath of God: *The cowardly*. Why are the cowardly included in this list of infamy?

Where the King James Version of the Bible talks about “the fearful” in this passage, the NIV and the NASB are more specific in translating the word, “cowardly.” The Greek word is “deilos,” which means timid. It is the same word Paul uses in 2 Timothy 1:7 when he says that “*God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.*”

That the timid are listed among the terrible evildoers of Revelation 21 gives you an idea what God must think about cowards. Hebrews 10:38 says, “*My righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.*” God hates timidity. His people are to be nothing but. They are to be bold and full of faith. God honors those who have initiative and take action. Jacob was blessed for his tenacity despite his duplicity. Joab was no angel, but got to be general of David's army because he didn't have a timid bone in his body. And despite his impulsiveness, Peter was given the honor of being the lead apostle. Why? ‘Cause he was the kind of guy who was willing to step out and walk on water.

Nobody likes a coward—especially not God. God gives grace to the humble but none to the timid. Timidity is not a virtue. Humility, yes; timidity, no. *The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it* (Mt 11:12). Despite the overzealousness of a very few, the church is generally much too passive. And that's got to change because heaven wasn't made for the cowardly.

God gives grace to the humble but none to the timid

And He Showed Me the Holy City, Jerusalem

“Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. -Revelation 21:9-10

As I was leading a Bible study one night, a lady in our church shared something that she thought was quite profound and relevant to our discussion. She had been watching a Christian television program where it was reported that powerful telescopes had spotted the New Jerusalem hurtling through space. Yes, indeed, Bible fans, there it was in all its muted glory (it looked kind of like a rock). It was 1,400 miles square, making its way toward the earth for its end-time appointment. They were even able to calculate the time of its arrival so that we could know when the end would come. The well-meaning lady wanted to let us know so that we could rejoice and be ready.

It was reported that powerful telescopes had spotted the New Jerusalem hurtling through space

This is just another example, albeit extreme, of how a literal interpretation of John’s Revelation leaves much to be desired in doing justice to the meaning of Scripture. Sure, John describes *the new Jerusalem, coming down out the heaven from God* in terms of physicality: A shining city with great walls, twelve pearly gates, a street of gold and a twelve-layer foundation made of precious jewels. Nice place. Would make quite the tourist attraction. What would impress me the most would be the height of its walls: 1,400 miles (that would be about 5400 World Trade Center Towers). It’s not that such a place would be impossible for God to construct. After all, he made the heavens and the earth and a mega-starcity would be no problem.

But in actuality, what John describes in Revelation is much more glorious than a 27 million cubic square mile city coming out of the sky. He is talking about *the bride, the wife of the Lamb* (v9), *beautifully dressed for her husband* (v2) being revealed in all her glory. He is talking about the old order of things passing away and the dwelling place of God being forever established with his people (vs 3-4, 22). He is talking about the glory of Zion—the people of God—whose gates are established by the patriarchs and whose foundation is built on the apostles (see vs 12 and 14) wherein the glory of God will reside forever (see v13). This is *the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God*.

No Longer Will There Be Any Curse

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. - Revelation 22:3-5

Last night we were doing an outreach on the busy strip outside our new church location. I ended up in a saloon down the street and was invited to sit with a group of people who were there to drink and hear a local country band. One of the gals, Sandra, told me that she believed in God but that her teenage son didn’t because his auntie had died at such a young age (when someone had gone to her death bed to talk to her about God she cursed God and the one who had come to talk to her). Naturally, Sandra’s son’s concern led me to refer to the problem of sin which has brought sickness, death and all manner of horrid stuff. Sandra agreed that the world was a messed-up place (most saloon-goers would). The curses that beset the world are evident and many, but the good news is that there will come a place and time when there *no longer will be any curse*.

Never again will we experience the effect of any curse

As John describes our heavenly destiny and eternal life with God, part of the specialness of his description is the fact that in the city of God where we will see the face of God, experience his glory and serve him forever, never again will we experience the effect of any curse for *no longer will there be any curse*. In one sense, it goes without saying that no curse could survive in the presence of God. How could there be any curse in the eternal dwelling place of God? But, in another sense, for us earth dwellers who have lived in a sin-cursed world all our lives, it bears repeating again and again that we are going to live in a place where no longer—never, ever again—will there ever be any curse or resulting effect thereof. Can you imagine such an existence? I can. Are you looking forward to such a time and place? I am.

Jesus came to redeem us from the curse of the law, sin and death. Even though we will have to wait to experience heavenly perfection, we have been given every spiritual blessing in Christ and, even now, can reverse the effects of the curse of sin over ourselves and our loved ones. And we look forward to the day when *no longer will there be any curse*.

Blessed Are Those Who...Go Through the Gates of the City

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. -Revelation 22:14

Chances are that at one time or another you have heard a joke about Peter keeping watch over the entrance at the pearly gates of heaven. Did you hear the one about the pastor, the priest and the rabbi...well, never mind. These jokes are very popular simply because the theme is very important. When all of life's experience and knowledge is distilled to the essential, nothing is more fundamentally vital than where you will spend eternity. We may joke about entrance through those pearly gates but to actually go through those gates into the city of God will be the most exhilarating experience of eternity.

Now, I know that I have been stressing the importance of interpreting the book of Revelation as figurative and symbolic. But even if we don't have a literal parade where all "The Saints go Marching in," the illustration that is painted for us is powerful, nonetheless. For those who have *washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* (Rev 14:8), they will have the right to do two things. First, they will be allowed to eat from *the tree of life*. This was the tree in the Garden of Eden that represented eternal life. We lost the right to eat from that tree when Adam sinned. Secondly, those who have washed their robes in the cleansing forgiveness of Jesus will be allowed to *go through the gates into the city*. I am stirred by the thought.

To go through those gates into the city of God will be the most exhilarating experience of eternity

We all have experienced, to some degree, the release of excitement or relief as we were allowed entrance into a place which we wanted to go. Maybe it was coming through immigration into a new country. Maybe it was gaining entrance into an exclusive club or party. Maybe it was your name being called at a try-out as one chosen as a team or cast member. If a prospective contestant on "American Idol" can go ballistic when told, "You are going to L.A.," how much more exhilarating will it be for us when we walk through those heavenly gates and the dream of gaining permanent entrance to eternal paradise becomes reality.

If Peter really did stand at the entrance to the gates of heaven his focus would not be checking credentials. It would be, rather, on the glorious faces of those who are allowed to go through the gates into the city.