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West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
5/22/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part One: Prologue
Revelation 1:1-17

Play video #1

That was the super-dramatic introduction to a National Geographic Channel documentary on the book of Revelation. That seems like how a lot of us feel when we talk about the book of Revelation, doesn't it? Lots of drama, mystery, and plenty of Armageddon-type destruction. Or, if you've been around the church since the 1970's, the book of Revelation might make you think of this:

Play video #2

How many of you remember that? Believe it or not, that cheesy movie caused a lot of fear in people.

There was a recent attempt to create a movie from a best-selling series of books from around 20 years ago, called the "Left Behind Series." Unfortunately, not even Nicholas Cage could bring credibility to that storyline:

Play video #3

Despite having Nicholas Cage as an actor, that movie was roundly panned by critics. It was based on the first of a series of 8 books written from the mid-1990's to the early 2000's, that propagated the fear that we were in the end times. These books joined multiple other books that have been written to warn us that the end of the world was about to happen. These books have claimed the end of the World would happen in 1980, 1984, 1988, 1989, 1995, 2000, 2001 – on and on, all of which failed to predict the end and proved their falsehood – just like many other books written recently, books written about plasma-colored planetary satellites and omens, harbingers, and Indiana Jones style stories of Christian heroes in Iran.

Understanding the book of Revelation is a challenge for anyone, whether you are a casual reader or attempting to really dig into its truths. Most scholars agree that Revelation is "one of the most misunderstood"¹ of the books of the Bible. And by the way, it is titled "Revelation," not "Revelations." I don't mean to be a stickler but if you are going to use the book to predict the end of the world, at least get the title right. Revelation is much more than a "caboose" conclusion to the train that is the Bible. "The book stands on its own, and at the same time it complements and lives competently within the context of the over-arching story of God's redemption throughout the whole of (Scripture), Old and New. Read within the

¹ Rotz, *Why Revelation?*

context of the rest of Scripture, Revelation has a message (that) “The church must take...seriously.”²

In today’s popular Christianity, the original intent and messages that can be mined from within Revelation have been buried under the debris of alarmists, conspiracy theorists, self-proclaimed sooth-sayers and fiction-writing profiteers. With the proliferation and swiftness of communication and news reports in today’s culture, some are quick to see each headline-grabbing national or global crisis and catastrophe as a cataclysmic event that must be hidden within the harbingers of Revelation...When today’s reader carries that baggage into the interpretation, the result is that “Christians have lost its message of hope and encouragement, which is balanced by warning and responsibility.”³ To allow the Holy Spirit to speak through the text (means we will have to let go of) those presuppositions, and potentially misleading claims that (we’ve been told are) within, and (we’ve got to be) willing to do the hard work of understanding it’s (original) reader’s life, faith, religious and socio-political circumstances and challenges....Reading the book with an understanding of its (original) context will allow a more accurate application to (our) Christian life and to the church (today).

Revelation begins in (the style of a letter to the churches, like Paul’s, and it was) intended for circulation among the churches of its day to encourage and strengthen and correct believers facing intense evil and persecution. The narrative then swiftly moves to apocryphal and...cryptic descriptions and metaphors that are difficult to read at face value (today). However, “Revelation is not written in some secret code that only certain people can understand. *Its purpose is not to hide but to explain.*”⁴ (Here’s a key to this:) Revelation’s prophetic voice should be understood not so much as “foretelling,” or telling the future, but as “forth-telling,” or a declaration of the Word of God. That declaration gives an over-arching narrative of God’s working in humankind: (Revelation shows) the extent to which God will go to finish evil and its impairment and death against humans, and the unending (patience) and love that God expresses, through Christ, for the sake of nations and individuals – including (us today) – to repent and avoid ultimate punishment. Revelation reveals Christ Himself in great ways, accomplishing *that* far more than being any kind of mystical roadmap for predicting end-times events or their orders. “Revelation is not as concerned with the last things as with the One who is ‘the first and last’ (Rev 1:17; 2:8; 22:13).”⁵ (So if we read it) from this perspective (we allow) the Spirit to speak to (us today as Christ’s disciples).”⁶

We want Revelation to speak to us *today* – not a secret warning of some end-time events and dates, but as the living Word of God that can transform our lives to be more like Christ. So a big part of this series will be to help us learn how to read Revelation: how to find the truth in it for us today. Because despite the mysteries, despite the popular propaganda about it, Revelation will challenge us, teach us, inspire us, and encourage us – just like it did for the original readers in the first century church.

² Rotz, *Come, Lord Jesus: Thought on Interpreting Revelation*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Rotz, *Why Revelation?*

⁵ Rotz, lecture: *Come Lord Jesus: Thoughts on Interpreting Revelation*

⁶ Michael O’Neill, *Introduction to Revelation*

So this series is going to be an adventurous overview through the book of Revelation that we hope will help us understand it, know how to read it, how to shape our church by it, and how to be more like Christ as his followers by it.

I need to explain a couple more things about it, too. Most books of the Bible are written in a particular genre or style. For instance, Psalms and Song of Solomon are *poetry*. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are called *wisdom literature*. The Gospels are *narrative* and the letters of the New Testament are called *epistles* or letters. But Revelation actually has *three* different genres or styles. One style is called apocalyptic. We get that from the word that John uses in the first chapter, which is translated as “revelation” – which is where we get the title of the book. Apocalyptic literature is usually associated with heavenly visions and messages about God, and about his ultimate plan for the church and the world. This style of writing uses strange symbols and metaphors. In the Old Testament, the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Haggai, and some of Isaiah and Zechariah are written in an apocalyptic style. Revelation is the only book in the New Testament written in that style.

Because apocalyptic literature is often connected to God’s ultimate destination for people, the word has come to mean “catastrophic end-times events,” but that’s not what the word originally meant. It originally simply meant “vision” or “revelation.” The book has mysterious metaphors that we are going to do our best to deconstruct and explain – and this is important – we will seek to explain both what the metaphors *do* mean and what they do *not* mean.

But Revelation is also an “epistle;” it was written like a letter to be circulated and read from church to church (we’ll talk about that in a bit). So it is also “pastoral,” meaning it instructs the church. So Revelation has a message for West Valley Church; there will be challenges and corrections and encouragement that we will get from it.

Finally, Revelation is also “wisdom literature.” That means it has an ethical expectation for each of us. We are expected to act in certain ways because of what we read in it. Wisdom, according to the Bible, is basically *knowing the right thing to do, and then doing it*. Wisdom is not only “knowing the right thing” – that’s not enough. Wisdom is finding out the right way to live, and then doing it – living it out. Revelation is also written in the style of wisdom literature, so it will have a message for each of our lives personally. Apocalyptic, epistle, and wisdom literatures: each week we will unpack the apocalyptic, *and* we will allow it to speak to the culture of West Valley Church – who we are and who we are to be, *and* we will use it to change our lives – how we will live as followers of Christ today. That’s why we have given you the reading plan and asked you to read each week’s passage with those three questions in mind, so the Holy Spirit can begin the work in your mind and spirit in preparation for what God wants us to hear on Sundays. It’s also important for you to read with us because we won’t have time to read through each chapter on Sunday morning; it will help if you come already familiar with the passages. So can you agree to that part of the deal?

Great – then let’s start with chapter one. We’re going to look at some of the important parts of it and what they mean, discover what it says to us as a church, and then leave here with a call to action, whether today you are a Christian or not.

We need to start with the very first verse because this gives us some important perspective for reading Revelation:

“The revelation from Jesus Christ...” (Revelation 1:1a, niv, italics added)

See that word “from”? It can be translated “from,” “of,” or “by,” and all are correct. Here’s what it means: this book is from Jesus, by Jesus, and all about Jesus Christ. Christ is the revealer of what is in it, he is the source of what is in it, and what is in it is all about Jesus Christ. Everything we read in this is going to originate from Christ, be about Christ, and point us to Christ. You cannot read Revelation correctly without this understanding. You must always look for Christ in it.

Next it says:

*“The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants *what must soon take place.*”* (Revelation 1:1a, niv, italics added)

We need to unpack that phrase, “must soon take place.” At first glance you read that and think, “How soon is soon?” This was written almost two thousand years ago; exactly when is “soon?”

To understand it, I need to introduce you to a word that we will use a lot: *eschatology*. This is a word that describes the theology of last things; it is a part of our theology that studies Scriptural references to the last things or end of things. Eschatology. Not to be confused with scatology; which is the study of poop. There are scientists who do that in order to learn about the source of the scat; I’m not knocking them. I just wouldn’t want to be them – as important as they are! For our conversation here, it’s important that we put the “E” in front! *Eschatology*.

So (if we can recover!) the phrase “must soon take place” is setting the stage for the eschatological drama: it’s telling us that what we are about to read is God’s ultimate will and desire and commitment to the completion of his plans for creation. (*repeat*). Here is as good a place as any to point out something really important about Revelation: when you read this book, *you cannot read it chronologically!* You can NOT read this as if it is an unfolding timeline of events that happen one after the other from start to finish. Reading things that way is a modern method. We live in western culture in a modern world, and we think, talk, and read in facts and in timelines. But people from the eastern culture of the first century didn’t think, talk and read that way. Revelation is not written as a timeline. So you can’t read it that way. There is a non-linear nature of Biblical prophecy and timing. The phrase is not starting a timeline or countdown. Chronology is secondary to timeliness. That’s important: the timeline is not as important as the timing!

Also, when you read the phrase “what must soon take place,” understand that it is a relative term compared to eternity. “Soon” to us is not “soon” to God. Okay?

Now quickly let me point out a couple of other critical things: verse three says:

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.”
(Revelation 1:3, niv)

This is what is called a “blessing,” or a “beatitude.” There are seven of these in Revelation. That’s important: first, because it reminds us that this letter, sent to the churches, was intended to be read during worship services. This book is extremely worshipful; and why wouldn’t it be – it’s about Jesus Christ! But it also introduces an important number in Revelation: the number “7.” Seven represents completeness or fullness. So the fact that there are seven statements of worshipful “blessings” means that when we read this, our blessing is complete; we will be thoroughly blessed. That’s quite a bit different than the idea that we are reading a frightening, condemning book about some kind of zombie apocalypse.

You’ll also see in verse four that it says:

“To the seven churches in the province of Asia” (Revelation 1:4a, niv).

I’ll talk more about this next week, but remember what the number seven means? Fullness. That means this is intended for *all* churches.

Then it says:

“Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. ‘Look, he is coming with the clouds,’ and ‘every eye will see him, even those who pierced him’; and all peoples on earth ‘will mourn because of him.’ So shall it be! Amen. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Revelation 1:4b-8)

I point this out because you need to see that the Trinity of God is represented here: God, Spirit, and Son. And did you notice that it described the Holy Spirit as the “seven-fold Spirit of God”? Don’t let that confuse you and don’t look for something deeper; it simply means the fullness of the Spirit of God – that God’s Spirit is completely God, just as the Father and the Son are completely God.

There are some other things in here, but I want to focus on one last thing before we get our takeaways from this, and that is John’s description of Jesus. It is powerful and mysterious and can be confusing:

“I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” (Revelation 1:12-16, niv)

This is an amazing image and I need to explain it so we don't miss it. First of all, the lampstands represent the Church (capital "C") – the church universal. Then, John's descriptions of Jesus weave in descriptions of God from the Old Testament and applies them to Christ (Exodus 3:14; Psalm 89:27, 37; Daniel 3, 7, 10). But also in this description we have something that you don't want to miss that is also important to understanding Revelation: this image is *highly symbolic*. Like ALL of Revelation's metaphors, it should NOT be taken literally. In other words, this is not an actual description of how Jesus appears physically. The description points to a reality that is far greater than the image itself. That is true of ALL of the images and symbols in Revelation.

So let me give you quickly what the image of Jesus represents, and then let's get to our takeaways. These are important because right off the bat we are given a description of Jesus – the One who is revealed in this book, who the book is all about.

Like a son of man: human

It's interesting that we start with this; first and foremost it is important to remember that God loved us so much that he became one of us. If you are not a Christian, you need to know that the Jesus Christ we follow is a God who became one of us in order to show you how much he loves you.

Next is the...

Long robe: dignity, high office, priestly

Jesus is the King of all Kings and according to Scripture is our Great High Priest – the One who has gone before the Father on our behalf, making things right between us and God.

Next is the...

Sash: victorious warrior

This was like a belt worn across the chest – something that a great warrior would wear. This means that Jesus Christ himself goes into battle for us – and wins.

Next is the...

White hair: wisdom, respect

A person with white hair was someone who lived long, had gained wisdom and deserved great respect. This also calls to mind God's name of "Ancient of Days," (Daniel 7:9; Isaiah 43:13) which also represents God's grandfatherly love and tenderness toward sinners.

Next then is...

Blazing Fire: eyes of God

The mythology of the day was that the gods had eyes that were burning fire, so this is a representation of God.

Then there is...

Bare feet/Bronze: priestly/solid

The bare feet show that he is in the Holiest places, like Moses had to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. Everywhere Jesus stands is holy ground. That they are bronze represents purity and stability.

Then there is...

Voice: God's arrival

This is the first of three times in Revelation that Jesus' voice is described like this. Ezekiel 43:2 associates this sound as preceding the arrival of God, announcing his coming.

Next is his...

Right hand: power/blessing

In that culture, the right hand was symbolic of great power (warriors usually used their sword with their right hand) and also the source of blessing. Fathers placed their right hand on their children to bless them. Remember that the seven stars in his hand brought to mind the menorah – a lampstand with seven candles – which represented the Church (of all time and all places).

Next to last is the...

Sword: word

Jesus doesn't have an actual sword coming out of his mouth; the image communicates the power of Jesus' word – that with a word he will strike down his enemies. The description is of a soldier's fighting sword.

Finally is Jesus'...

Brilliance: divinity

This represents his beauty, sanctity, his transcendence above all things, his strength – in other words, it is one final and complete reminder that Jesus is God. (Daniel 10:6; Matthew 17:2)

Does that help you understand who Jesus is? He isn't just some peace-loving person in ancient history who offended the authorities and got himself killed. Jesus Christ is the human high priest wise warrior God with eyes of fire that sees all things, the One who is stable – solid through and through there is no moving or shaking with him – his arrival is like a tidal wave and his words alone can cut his enemies in half. He has given the church all his power and all his blessing and his brilliant, holy love is blinding in its purity and power. *That*, my friends, is your God.

Now, what can we take away from all this? I think we can find it in verses 5 and 6 of this chapter:

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” (Revelation 1:5b-6,niv)

First of all, remember that this is like Paul's letters, so Revelation is going to be *pastoral*; it has something to say to West Valley Church. For this day, it is this: our church is supposed to bring Glory to Jesus Christ. In everything we do, we are to proclaim Jesus, point to Jesus, prioritize Jesus, and praise Jesus. Everything we do is about Jesus Christ! If there is ever anything we are doing that no longer proclaims and praises Jesus, we need to stop doing it *immediately* – no matter how good it is, no matter how many people are involved, and no matter how much time or money we put into it. If it doesn't praise and point people to Jesus then what we are doing is worthless. You should be able to look at anything we are doing and quickly see the priority of Jesus; it should reflect him and his heart of love and his mission for people. Folks, Revelation is going to talk about the end of all things; we don't have time to waste even a minute of what we are doing at this church if it's not about and for Jesus Christ.

So what's the word out of this for our own lives personally? Remember, Revelation is also wisdom literature; it is telling us how to live.

First of all, if you are not a Christian today, there should be some very important things you have heard about God. One is that it is a fearful thing to be confronted with this God if you are an enemy of his. And I might remind you that Jesus said, “Whoever is not with me is against me,” (Matthew 12:30), so if you cannot say that you are “with him,” you will meet this Jesus one day at the end of your life and it will be a terrible thing for you. I can't sugar coat it. You might want to reconsider having your God be Jesus, and becoming one of his followers. Because when you come to him, you will find him to be the God who loves you deeply, not one who scares you. As you can see in this verse, he loves you! He wants you to be his, and he even spilled his own blood and allowed himself to be killed so that you could be his follower, so that your sins could be paid for and forgiven and you could be free. In a moment, I'm going to give you a chance to talk to Jesus himself about that.

Now if you *are* a Christian, this chapter makes it clear: you and I are high priests. We are the ones who are supposed to help people see and meet the loving God. We are the ones who represent Jesus to those who don't know him, so their sins can be forgiven. If nothing else, Revelation reminds you that there is an ultimate end to this world, and there is an ultimate purpose for your life until then: it is to help people meet the God who loves them, frees them

from their sins, and has shed his blood and died for them. You do that by loving people and telling them about your God who loves them. You *know* it is the right thing to do, but wisdom is *more* than knowing it – it is *doing* it. When will you do it? Will you commit to making this your priority, Christian?

Pray: You are before this very God that Revelation described for us. You've seen him – Revelation has shown him to you. Will you be his follower, his child, his disciple, or will you be his enemy? Things are going to get very tough in this life – you'll see that in the book of Revelation. Don't you want to be on the side of the One who wins? Don't you want the One who wins to be on your side? Pray to accept him.

Christian: time is short! We don't have time to waste! Think of three people you are close to who are not Christians. Pray for them right now. Ask God to help you THIS WEEK to introduce them to Jesus. If it doesn't happen this week, pray for it again next week. And the next. And the next.

Amen.

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
5/29/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Two: The Seven Churches⁷
Revelation 1:19-3:22

How many of you, like me, try to stay up to date with the news these days by reading the paper and watching the news, either on television or online or all of the above? If you've been watching, you've seen a steady decline in good things and a steady incline in some bad things.

In the political arena, we've seen a decline in civility as the lines between parties are getting drawn so deeply that debate is now filled with hatred, horrible language, and even violence. We've seen common decency give way to rudeness and vitriol. We've seen a rise in societal ills like the legalization of recreational drugs, increased violence, racism, abuse of power, human trafficking, and rampant abortion. We've seen the rise of violent religious extremism to the point of nations declaring war not against other nations but against radical groups.

Each election year we hope to get leaders who will have a plan to protect us, strengthen us, and lead the world. But this election year we seem to have stirred the political pot so much that the sludge at the bottom is rising to the top, so that instead of an election of leaders; we've got a reality TV show full of characters: one part Apprentice, another part America's Most Wanted, and one part "America's Got Socialists."

So as I was praying about what the sermon series should be for this summer, I had all of these things in mind. I wondered about addressing how we can live our lives as Christians in this culture. I wondered how we could stay faithful to Christ and grow as a church in this culture. As the pastoral team discussed this, we began to think of a time in history when the church faced far worse circumstances than we are today but still stood strong and emerged victorious. We thought of a time that is recorded for us in the book of Revelation.

How do we as individuals and the church live as devoted disciples of Christ in this turbulent culture? The Book of Revelation offers an answer to this question. Many avoid Revelation because it seems like a confusing book of cryptic messages that elude or even frighten us. However, when we read it as it was intended, it provides inspiration and application to our Christian lives.

⁷ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO), Peter Davids, *More Hard Sayings of the New Testament* (1991, IVP, Downer's Grove, IL) pp. 244-252. Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 2:12-17* (NNU, 2015), George Lyons, *Commentary on Revelation 2 & 3*, Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis), Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views* (2013, Thomas Nelson, Nashville), Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>)

Last week I spent a great deal of time laying out the groundwork for how we will approach this series and what our perspective is going to be throughout it. If you weren't with us, I'd encourage you to check it out. We said that there are three components of the book of Revelation (remember?) Apocalyptic, epistle, and wisdom. That means that we will unpack and explain what some of the mysterious symbols mean (and what they DON'T mean, according to today's popular theology), we will gain instruction for us as a church, and we will also be challenged to obey what it tells each of us individually.

You have a part in this journey; we are asking you to read the Scripture passages on your own beforehand, so we've given you a reading chart of the passages we will explore each week. We've asked you to spend time meditating on the passage by asking yourself the three questions listed – these will allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you in advance. We've also invited you to submit questions you have about Revelation, so we can try to answer them either in the sermons or in a Q&A Sunday at the very end.

Hopefully you have come prepared today to discuss the seven letters to the seven churches. If not, I'd encourage you to read through the passage when you get home.

There are seven churches listed specifically by name and each is given specific messages from Jesus. The listing of those seven churches is not haphazard; they are arranged so that a messenger could carry the scroll beginning with Ephesus, which was the leading city of the region, and then travel in a circular route north to Smyrna and Pergamum and then head south through Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Each of these churches had a long, complicated history, and there is no clear evidence why *these* specific seven churches were chosen (there were many more churches in the world by that time – near the end of the first century). None of the seven churches exist today. But one thing we know for sure: these churches represent ALL churches, including ours. We know this because there are (how many churches?) seven, and the number seven represents what? Completeness. The fact that the churches are listed in a circular route also tells us that they are intended to represent all churches, so they speak to us at West Valley Church. One other thing I should point out: within in the last few decades, some have suggested that these seven churches each represent an age in the history of churches, and that we are the last "age" – the age of Laodicea. There is nothing in the original language that gives any indication of that idea – at all.

The section starts out with the statement, "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." (Revelation 2:1, niv) Literally it is "these things says the Lord," which introduces a prophetic declaration. Remember last week that I said that Revelation is not so much "fore-telling," as in "telling the future," as it is about "forth-telling," which is "declaring God's Word." Revelation's primary purpose is to reveal God's love and his plans to restore creation, not to disguise hidden secrets about end times events. This section becomes with *that* declaration.

There are some common things that Jesus says to each church. One of those is "**I know**" as in, "I know your deeds," or "I know about you." The point is that Jesus knows each and every church personally and intimately, including West Valley Church – this one. He knows all about our church!

Also, each letter incorporates some element of **the description of Jesus in chapter one**. Each component of Jesus' description fits the strength or the weakness of each church.

There is also something else that each church is told, and that is a command to **hear the Spirit**. We can – and must – listen to the Spirit. Jesus Christ himself speaks to our church and to each of us individually through the Holy Spirit. This is an amazing reminder throughout this passage – that Jesus Christ, God himself, speaks to us through the Spirit in our church and our lives.

One of the fascinating questions about this passage is why each letter is addressed to **the “angel” of the particular churches**. Scholars have figured out that there are three possibilities:

- 1) The Greek word for “angel” is the same word for “messenger,” so it could mean that the letters are simply addressed to the messenger or pastor at each congregation. But this isn't a strong possibility, because the message in the letter is not addressed only to the leaders of the churches but to the whole church. So it's not that one.
- 2) A second possibility is that the angel is a spiritual entity that has either been assigned by God to care for each congregation (as in a guardian angel) or it's an evil entity that has taken control of each church (as in a demonic being). But that doesn't fit the context, and the term is never used that way anywhere else in Scripture.
- 3) So the majority of NT scholars offer a third alternative, which is much more likely. Remember, Revelation has many metaphors that mean things. The word “angel” is to be taken metaphorically as a way of describing the ‘ethos’ or ‘spirit’ or the ‘attitude’ of each church. A community of individuals takes on a unique “ethos” or spirit that is more than the sum of its parts. The letters are addressed to all of the people who make up the church at each place, but the Lord wants to address the “ethos” or spirit that is emerging from their life together.⁸ Does that make sense? So for instance, West Valley Church has a certain ethos, or spirit, that identifies our community. What do you think might be some of the words to describe our church's “ethos”?

(Allow time for people to come up with words)

Now let's look at each church as they are listed, we'll highlight what's most important, and clear up any mysteries as best we can, starting with...

1. Ephesus

This city was located at the mouth of a major river from the Aegean Sea, so it was an important commercial, political, and religious center. It had a population of about 250,000, which made it one of the largest in the known world. They were really big into the worship of Rome. The official religion of the Roman world was emperor worship, or the worship of Caesar. All the gods of mythology supported the idea that people should worship the emperor. That makes it convenient to enforce loyalty from the people if your king or president is also endorsed as a “god” by the “gods.” This is *all* through Revelation; we will see Emperor

⁸ Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>)

Worship lots of times. Ephesus had five temples dedicated to emperor worship. They also had a temple for the Roman goddess Diana. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. For Christians, Ephesus was important because the Apostle Paul himself started and strengthened the church, visiting there and teaching there several times.

Jesus tells them that he knows their **“deeds”** – this is a word that will appear often, so make note of this. By this, Jesus means their general behavior as a church, or the way they lived as a community of believers.

I’ll give you a head’s up here, too: Jesus follows a pattern; he commends each church for the good things they are doing (except for one that has no commendation), and then he corrects or rebukes them for the bad things they are doing (except for two). Then he tells them repent, to obey, and gives them a promise.

For Ephesus, Jesus knows that they work hard, they don’t tolerate evil people in the church, they don’t allow false teaching. They persevere in hardships and they haven’t grown weary.

Then he corrects or rebukes them because they have **“forsaken their first love.”** By this Jesus means they have forgotten their love for him. And because they don’t love Jesus as much as they used to, they don’t love each other as much as they used to. And so their witness to the culture around them has diminished because that’s how the world would know they are Christians – in the way they love each other, which comes from their love for the Lord (**John 13:34-35**). This is still a principle for the church today, too. Because they don’t love Jesus or each other, they have “fallen” – Jesus says that they are a moral and spiritual failure. Have you ever known a church that didn’t love Jesus or each other? Seems crazy, but there are many churches like that.

Jesus said that if they didn’t repent and change, he would remove their lampstand; in other words, they would no longer be a church. What is the purpose of a lamp on a lampstand? To give light! Ephesus was no longer the light of the world, because they stopped loving. Listen folks: our light is our love! No love, no light. No love, no church.

Then Jesus mentions a group of people that comes up a couple of times and might be sort of a mystery, so let me explain: I’m talking about the Nicolaitians. We don’t know much about them, other than that they followed some false teaching by someone named Nicolas. They claimed to have secret insight into God that no one else had. They claimed that they discovered certain mysteries that were hidden in the Bible that no one else had found. Whatever their teaching was, it included sexual immorality and compromise with the culture around them. As a result of their false teaching, they lured people away from the One True God. A church that compromises with the culture around them is a very big deal to Jesus.

Next is...

2. Smyrna

Smyrna as a city claimed to be “the first in Asia in both beauty and size.” They were about 100,000. They had the largest public theater and were the first city to erect a temple to Rome,

among other temples, including one to the head of the Roman Gods, Zeus. Their claim to be the “first” is probably why Jesus told them he was “the First and the Last.” The city was destroyed in 600 BC, and 300 years later was completely rebuilt. This is also why Jesus referred to himself as the one “who died and came to life again.” Whatever they took pride in as a city, Jesus reminded them of his sovereignty over them.

Jesus knows about the church in Smyrna; he knows that they are really poor. This isn’t a spiritual metaphor; they were actually destitute and had to beg for food and money. To be a citizen in Smyrna, you had to belong to a trade guild, and most of the trade guilds were centered around worship of Rome. The Christians would not do that, so the citizens would not let them have jobs. No work, no income. The Christians were hated by the society of the city. So Jesus recognized that even though they were poor materialistically, they were rich spiritually. And they’ve managed to stay faithful despite being next door to what Jesus called “the synagogue of Satan.”

Have you ever had a bad neighbor? Taylor Ostergaard and Linsey Zellitti wanted to bless their neighbors. On July 31, 2004, the two teenage girls decided to bake cookies for their neighbors rather than attend a school dance.

After baking the cookies, the girls set out late that evening. They left the fresh-baked goods only at houses with the lights on. It was 10:30 p.m. when they pounded on the door of one home. The 49-year-old woman inside didn’t answer the door, but she did experience an anxiety attack over the late-night visit. After a trip to the emergency room the next day, the woman decided to sue the girls. And she won.

The judge awarded the neighbor lady \$900 to cover the emergency room visit. The woman said she wanted the girls to learn a lesson, because they should not have been out late at night running from door to door. “Something bad could have happened to them,” she said (like getting sued!).

Thankfully, after the story was published in the *Denver Post*, hundreds of readers were outraged that the girls were sued for dropping off a plate of cookies and a paper heart for their neighbors. Thousands of dollars poured in to help the girls pay their fine. Their story was reported on national news programs, and the girls appeared on Good Morning America. As a result of the publicity, a fund was been set up for the girls' college expenses.⁹

I don’t know if you’ve had a “neighbor from hell,” but the church in Smyrna did – literally! Jesus mentions this with the next church, too. What is he talking about? He could mean the Temple to the Emperor, or the Temple to Zeus, or even the synagogue of the hostile Jews. We don’t know for sure, but what we do know is this: whatever it was, it claimed to be a rival to the Throne of Jesus Christ.

The church in Ephesus struggled also with a fear about the suffering that they were going to face. But Jesus reminded them that it would only be for “ten days.” We don’t know specifically what Jesus meant by that. It could mean either a short while, or for the short span

⁹ Mike Lundberg, *Montrose, Colorado*; source: *Electa Draper, Denver Post (2-4-05 and 2-6-05)*

that is our lifetime. Either way, Jesus is pointing out that it is only temporary in light of eternity.

I remember when I had my car accident, and my head was split open from front to back. It really started to hurt! I kept telling myself, “It’s alright – pain is only temporary. It’s only temporary. I can endure it.” Whether it was a few hours, days, or even the rest of my years, it wouldn’t be forever. That’s what Jesus is telling the church in Ephesus.

The third church is...

3. Pergamum

This city of Pergamum was not a commercial center like the other two, but it was a religious center. There was an altar to Zeus there. On that altar, the priests burned human sacrifices 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There were also temples to other main gods. Pergamum also boasted one of the greatest libraries in the world and was world famous for making books. Jesus probably emphasized his own words in direct opposition to their books and self-important knowledge.

Also, here again is a reference to Satan’s throne. There are plenty of obvious possibilities as to what this was, but the bottom line was it claimed to be a rival to Christ’s Throne.

The opposition to the church in Pergamum was so great that someone was martyred – a guy named Antipas. Revelation says a lot about martyrs, but he is the only one mentioned by name. It’s interesting that the word “martyr” didn’t come to mean “someone who dies” until about 200 years later. At the time Revelation was written, “martyr” meant someone who was a faithful witness, even to the death. This is a very important theme in Revelation, because all throughout it warns about the temptation to compromise or abandon their faith for the sake of physical or temporary comfort. We are encouraged to be faithful witnesses, even if it means to the death.

There is an interesting juxtaposition here: Antipas dies in Pergamum, and Satan “lives” in Pergamum. Jesus is pointing out that *true* life comes by dying to self – sometimes even physically if that’s what it takes to be a faithful witness.

There are also false teachers there (here come the Nicolaitans again). In Ephesus the false teachers were *outside* the church trying to get in; in Pergamum they are already *in*. Jesus also mentions another false teacher named Balaam – a reference to the Old Testament Balaam, which represents anyone who causes Christians to stumble and turn away (**2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Numbers 22:5-24:25, 31:16**). The person was probably not actually named Balaam; it was a metaphor for what the person was doing. *They* claimed to have hidden truth, but *Christ* offered “hidden manna,” referring to the bread in the Exodus story that was hidden in the Ark of the Covenant and placed in the Temple (**Exodus 16:33**).

Then Jesus said if the church in Pergamum stayed faithful, he’d give them a “white stone with a new name written on it.” This is one of those things that would’ve made sense to the original readers, but that has been lost to us – we just don’t know for sure what it means. This is going

to happen more than once as we go through Revelation, and we've got to learn to accept it. Here's our best guess: the stone could be like a type of token that was given as a ticket for admittance to something, like the theater. In this case, it would be admittance into the wedding banquet feast of the Lamb in heaven. The new name could either be the Christian's new name as a new creation, or it could be Jesus' "name that is above every name." (**Philippians 2:9**).

The fourth church is...

4. Thyatira

There's not much that's known today about the church. The city itself was known for its many trade guilds. They also had Temples to two of the gods who were sons of Zeus, which could be why Jesus refers to himself here as the Son of God.

This church is commended for their good deeds, which are listed specifically as love, faith, service, and perseverance. The word "service" meant literally, "serving at a table." They served each other. True Christian fellowship means mutual service! (*repeat*) I remember once as a brand new Christian, I went to a Christian bookstore, and I ran into a guy from my church that I sort of knew. He started chatting with me about the weather, sports, things like that. At the end, as he was leaving, he said, "It was nice fellowshiping with you." Even as a new Christian, I didn't think he was using that word right. And he wasn't. Fellowship is not just about talking or even worshipping together. True fellowship is about serving each other.

Jesus condemned the church for tolerating someone named "Jezebel." That probably wasn't her name, and she may not have even been a person, as much as she was a metaphor for false teaching that was luring them away from God. Jezebel was a woman in the Old Testament who did that to King Ahab (**1 Kings 16:31**). Because this false teaching included participating in sexual immorality, Jesus said she would be cast out on a bed of suffering – poetic justice for the type of sin she was guilty of. (Do I need to explain that more?) She would suffer, and so would her followers, as a consequence for a life turned against God.

Jesus' encouragement to the church in Thyatira is to "hold on," to be *faithful witnesses*. Jesus says he will give them the "morning star" as a reward – he is referring to himself. Those who persevere and remain faithful to Jesus will get to be with him now and forever!

Next is...

5. Sardis

This city was very rich, famous for its gold and silver. The city was overconfident and arrogant, but turned out to be very easily overthrown. They had temples to major gods, and also had the largest and richest Jewish synagogue.

I need to explain what Jesus meant when he said that he holds the seven spirits in his hand. This is not the same "seven-fold Spirit" from chapter one; this means the spirits, or angels, or

ethos, or attitudes of the seven churches. In other words, Jesus holds all the churches in his hand – including us.

The church in Sardis got *no* commendation; Jesus had nothing good to say and went straight to rebuking them. That’s how bad they were. He says that they have an attitude of overconfidence, just like the city. Their reputation was for being alive, but spiritually they were dead. Jesus told them to wake up – to be alert.

I’ve got to tell you a story that this reminds me of. One summer during college I was a youth ministry intern at a church in Lakewood, Colorado. The youth pastor I worked for wanted to take the teens to “Worlds of Fun” – an amusement park in Kansas City. We left right after the teens got out of school on a Friday, and drove the eight hours or so, got a few hours of sleep, and went the park all day. But the lead pastor said we had to be back for church on Sunday, so after a few hours of sleep and all day at the park in 100 degree weather and humidity, we had to drive all night to get back to church. I got back in town, showered, and went straight to church – after driving 16 hours, spending 8 hours running around in 100 degrees, and getting only four hours of sleep in the last 48 hours. At this church, they had all the chairs lined up on the platform, and all the staff had to sit in those chairs – like the pastor was the king and we were his court. So I had to sit up in front of the whole church – about 600 people. As you can guess, I fell asleep! I woke up to people laughing. The pastor was preaching with his back to me, and apparently, not knowing I had fallen asleep, he happened to say, “As Christians, we are people who need to be awake and alert!”

I was a living metaphor for the church of Sardis – they needed to be awake and alert! Jesus reminded them that he could return at any moment, so they needed to be ready. If they were faithful, he said they wouldn’t be “blotted out.” (Jesus was referring to the ancient practice of erasing the name of a condemned person from the city’s citizenship roster.) But Jesus said if they were faithful witnesses, he would “acknowledge” their name. This was like a public honor roll reading.

I remember as a high schooler, I played baseball, basketball, and football. In baseball and basketball, we had tryouts. That meant some would make it and some would get cut. On a certain day, the names were listed on a bulletin board, and we’d all crowd around. There was such shame if your name wasn’t listed, but there was great pride and honor if your name was listed. Jesus is giving us a word picture of him standing up in front of the crowd of all humanity, calling off the names of those who are his.

The bottom line is that they needed to hang on, strengthen what they had in their faith in Christ, and not allow the culture and false teaching to stain them and compromise their faithful witness.

The next church is...

6. Philadelphia

This city was destroyed by earthquakes in AD 17, and the aftershocks continued for years, so most people moved temporarily out of the city. On top of that, a nearby volcano destroyed Laodicea in 60 AD, and the earthquakes from *that* caused even *more* tension.

I remember being in my living room in Salem Oregon, the morning Mt. St. Helens erupted. I didn't know yet that it erupted, but I felt the earth shake, over 120 miles away. Remember the fear it caused, not only from all the ash that fell, but the fear that it would blow again? *That* was life in Philadelphia all the time. So it made sense that Jesus would say that those who remained faithful witnesses would be like solid pillars in His temple.

After earthquakes destroyed the city in 17 AD, it was rebuilt by Caesar, so its name was changed to "Neocaesarea." In the AD 70's it was renamed "Flavia," but people kept calling it Philadelphia. So again, it makes sense that Jesus refers to the name of God, the name of God's city, and the name of Christ – all permanent names for eternity, compared to the ever-changing name of the city of Philadelphia.

When Jesus addressed the church in this city, he had no rebukes – only good things to say! He acknowledged that they were tired from fighting off the culture of the city around them, and told them that he would open the door for them, since they were too weak to "open" it. So what is "the door?" The door represented a couple of things: it was the doorway to eternity or heaven. Jesus would make sure the door to heaven was open for them. But the door was also a doorway to missions. Jesus was saying that because they were faithful witnesses for him, they had an open doorway to witness to people. Their lives were a witness to those who didn't know Jesus, and Jesus himself would make sure that door stayed open.

Now, I have to point something out here: Jesus says in verse ten that they will be kept from the "hour of trial" that everyone will face and be tested by. There are some people who believe that Jesus is saying that they will be "raptured" before any tribulation happens. But if you believe that, you will fail any beginning Greek language class. Jesus is *not* saying they will be "raptured" out of tribulation. Jesus says they will be "kept from the hour of trial." The word "kept" is also "protect." It means to be protected during a continual state of trial. It is the exact same word Jesus used in **John 17:15** when he prayed that we would not be taken out of the world but protected while *IN* the world. So what Jesus is saying here is they will be protected *through* trials, not prevented from trials!

The last church we have is...

7. Laodicea

Laodicea was a prosperous city with strong monetary banks – it was like the wall street of the ancient world. Something else that's interesting: they didn't have their own water supply. Their water had to be piped in from a spring that was 6 miles away, so by the time they got it, the water was lukewarm. Sound familiar?

Jesus has nothing good to say about this church – only rebuke. He says that they are lukewarm, like the water in the city. He wishes they were either hot or cold, but lukewarm makes him want to spit them out. The actual words are "vomit." I'm a sympathetic vomiter.

If someone barfs, the sight and smell of it makes me want to puke too. The thought of Jesus puking is just too much for me. And Jesus meant it that strongly!

Jesus is not using the analogy of water as a sort of spiritual temperature gauge, saying that we should only be spiritually hot. If so, why would he say that he wished they were hot OR cold? Here's the point: in a nearby city there was a hot springs that was considered medicinal to bathe in. In the other direction was a city that had ice cold pure springs – water that was cool and refreshing. The water of Laodicea was neither medicinal nor refreshing. Jesus was saying that as a church they were ineffective – not good for anything.

Like the city, they thought they were “rich” (like the rich farmer, **Luke 12:19**) but they were spiritually poor. They thought they had vision, but they were self-deluded and spiritually blind. The city had a famous medical school, and was also well known for having invented an eye salve that was supposed to treat blindness. Jesus is saying that in reality they were spiritually poor and blind. They needed to get their wealth and healing from him, not from their culture. Also, the city of Laodicea was famous for its textiles; Jesus said they were naked. The city was famous for its black cloth; Jesus said they needed to be dressed in white.

Jesus reminded them that he loves them – that's why he was rebuking them. Like a parent who disciplines a child to correct bad behavior, Jesus loves us too much to let us keep hurting ourselves, so he disciplines us in the hopes that we will straighten up. Then he invites the church to listen, to open the door to him, and to enjoy the closest of friendship with him – sharing a meal. The image is the same as our communion.

If you've been around the church, you've heard Rev. 3:20 before: “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 that person, and they with me.” (niv) You know that we often quote this to invite people to become Christians. But that is taking it out of context; it was not written to non-Christians; it was written to Christians who needed to get their act together before they fell away from the faith. But despite Jesus' harsh words, he loves them and longs for them to “open the door” and enjoy dinner with him. Even when he disciplines us, he loves us.

So there are the seven churches. You tell me: in all of that, what were some things you heard that could be a word to us at West Valley Church? (*Give them time to share.*)

Let me sum it up, and here's what's interesting: in each case, the church had taken on the attitudes and the culture of the world around them. In the case of the two churches that Jesus did *not* rebuke, he commended them for NOT taking on the characteristics of the church around them. In each case, he sets up himself as the opposite of the ethos or the attitude of the city each church was in.

Here's the word for us from Christ to all seven churches (listen carefully!): we are very worried these days about how America is becoming less and less Christian. But we should be *more* concerned about how *we* are becoming more and more American. Do you understand what I am saying? (*repeat*) In each case, the church became less Christian and more like the culture of their city. In each case, Jesus told them to become less like the culture of their city and become more like Jesus.

When you get concerned about the state of America, maybe you should not pray for them to be like us, maybe you should pray more for us to be like Jesus.

And that is the word for us as individuals, too: Be a faithful witness! Always remember that Jesus loves you! He died and rose from the dead to rescue from the fallen, evil systems of this world, of thinking, and of sin. Be vigilant! Be alert! Repent if you need to! Obey Jesus and be faithful witness for him, even if it costs you something...or even if it costs you everything. Because the church is YOU. The church is US. Let's be his witnesses to a world that needs to see him. And the way the culture sees Jesus is in the way we love him, the way we love and serve each other, and the way we love and serve the culture around us.

Pray

Invite worship team up, as they do: here's some homework: Write out what you think might be Jesus' letter to West Valley Church. It might challenge you. If you want to, you can give me a copy! The Holy Spirit might be speaking through you to our church!

Sing

West Valley Church
Pastor Jason Worthington
6/5/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Three: Our Response
Revelation 4:1-5:14

We have just sung words from Revelation 4 & 5, I didn't know if you realized that. That is our passage for today. I want to give you a head start in your Bibles to turn to Revelation chapter 4 & 5, because once I get into it there won't be any time for you to find it. It's at the end of your Bible, so look at the very last book and you should be good – chapter 4 and chapter 5.

It's an honor to be here and to be able to speak and be a part of this series. As we started as a pastoral team looking at what we could do this summer and what we might want to speak about, the subject of Revelation came up. It just seemed like the right thing to do because it is something that has been so overlooked. I have been raised in the church and I have heard very few sermons on Revelation, and those I heard were very fear-based. So to be able to come before you and to share from this book is a privilege. As we were getting together and thinking about what this series could look like, there were three things we knew we wanted to accomplish:

1. We wanted these sermons to not only showcase what Revelation was about, but how we can study the Bible, how we can learn to read the Bible and understand what it means to us today. Not just Revelation, but the entire Bible.
2. We wanted to get into the symbols and imagery that were known and would be understood by the first century church, to really talk about that and dive into that.
3. We wanted to showcase what that really means for us here, now, right here in America, right here in West Valley. What does this truth mean to us? What do we do with this truth?

I was reminded of a time in my life when I had a struggle with literature. It was my senior year of high school and I was taking an honors English class. It was an AP English class which was advanced placement and it was all these people who knew a lot more about literature than me. In that class, basically we were to read the assigned reading and come to the class ready to discuss. That was it – we were reading and discussing. That sounded like it could be a lot of fun. For the most part I finished my reading on time. I would come to class ready to discuss. When I would hear the teacher and some of the students talking, I felt like maybe I had read the wrong book. I had read the wrong story because I had read this adventure and I had been really entertained and the book had made me happy and I had enjoyed it. I had come to class to discuss the enjoyable book that I had read. The other people were saying: "The struggle between these two characters really represents the trouble between good and evil. The river in this story represents the journey of life and how we need to make the most of it and not just coast along and ride along on this river." And I was saying, "Why are you putting these words

into this author's mouth? He's telling a story and it's very entertaining and it's an adventure." I wasn't alone, but, that was my grasp of literature. I couldn't get past the face value of it being an entertaining story and I brought that along with me into my reading of the Bible.

I grew up in the church and I probably heard every Bible story and knew all the characters for the most part. I would say, "This is a hero and I want to be like him" or "This is not a hero and I don't want to be like him." The Bible can help you in those ways and you can go pretty far in them. I have heard the Bible is your manual for life, your blueprint for how you are to live your life. If you have a question, just go to the Bible. Alright. That's good when you are a child. As you begin to grow up and your problems become a little bit bigger or you get into those gray areas, it's really harder to find the answer to what you should really do. I start to see that this Gospel writer wrote it this way and it happened differently here. I don't understand why the timeline is not the same. Along with other things in my life I began to doubt the Bible and I rejected it. I rejected God and I went away from the path I had started with my family and my parents. This led to a dark place in my life, a place where there wasn't hope, there wasn't joy. I realized I had experienced something much better than where I was. I came to a place where I needed to experience God in my life again. I accepted Him and I knew that I had experienced Him in my life. I had joy and I had peace that I could not have had, which I tried to get on my own and I couldn't get. So the one thing I knew was that he was real and he was working again in my life.

So what was I to do with the Bible? I had to come to it humbly and as a learner. I knew I needed to get into the mind of the writer and of the audience of the text. Try to learn more about what was going on. I couldn't be ignorant. I read stories and with a work of fiction, if you take it at face value that's okay. You can just be entertained. But I knew the Bible is more than something to entertain me, so I could not be ignorant of what was going on inside. I had to put on my Indiana Jones hat. I don't know how many people understand that reference, "Put on my Indiana Jones hat." I had to become a Biblical archeologist – a studier of history. I had to become a Bible anthropologist – a studier of Biblical cultures. I had to study the original context and the meanings of the Bible.

So you say, "That's pretty easy for you. You went to seminary and studied with lots of different people and that is one of the levels of study." There are many levels of study. As a pastor and someone called into the ministry we go to colleges and universities and seminaries and studied under smart people who studied under really smart people who studied under Luther. Yes, there is something to that. As pastors we try to take in all that information and then present it to you. You have trusted us with this privilege to come before you with the Word and that is an honor in itself. That is a way to study, but not everyone here is going to sign up for some Bible classes at the online university. Some people do, and that's okay. But maybe there is something more like a college-like class. Maybe that's more your speed when it comes to studying the Bible. There are those available, even here in this church, if you want to get with me to really start studying things in a deeper way. Again, that is not for everybody, it's not on everyone's time schedule as well.

There's another type of study, a Bible study, a weekly gathering with people going over the Bible, a place where you have mentors who can guide the direction. We also have one-on-one

mentorship available to study what the core ideas in the Old Testament are, what the core ideas in the New Testament are, so we can have a solid foundation for knowing the Bible and understanding God.

And of course there are times like this, the weekly sermons. Every time we preach, hopefully we are showing you a way that you can understand the Bible. Not just for that passage but for the entire Bible, a general way you can approach the Bible, to hear God at work and speaking to you.

There is personal Bible study. I hope everyone would be involved in studying their Bible daily. Maybe sometimes you just don't know how to approach it, so look for someone to mentor you or we have classes here at the church. We have a Core Class coming up that you can be a part of. Our Core Classes are a great way to learn more about your walk and how to study your Bible. There are many different ways.

How do we approach the Bible today, especially as we are talking about Revelation? Because it's going to be a lot different than the first century audience; we come to it with that modern mind. We're very information driven. We're very scientific. We like to know the facts and understand exactly what is going on and how it works. And we tend to not have a lack of creativity, maybe. We're a video society. We have everything given to us and shot at us in little ten second versions or we have a screen in our pocket and a screen on our wall and a screen in our office. We have big screens and little screens, and they all have video just shooting at us. We don't have to use our imagination for much of anything.

What I was reading about and thinking about was apocalyptic genre, which is what the book of Revelation is. It is such a different thing than any genre out there. And really, the apocalyptic genre was to the people of the first century and earlier what computer generated imagery, or CGI is to us. You can put me on a green screen and I can be standing right beside a dragon or I can be flying through the air like a super hero or I can pretend I caught this big fish and I really didn't. We don't have to imagine it, it can be put up there for us and we can just see anything we want. But the apocalyptic genre, this was a way for the writer to paint a picture with great imagery, to have the person step inside of what they were writing, to experience it.

Before we dive into the symbolism of this passage, we need to understand the context. Pastor Mike did a great job last week of setting the stage for the major cities that this letter is addressed to and where they each were individually and corporately as well. I recommend throughout the summer, go to our website and listen to the podcasts if you have missed one of the sermons. It will be a great reference for you. Point your friends and family to it as well, it will be a great reference for the church. So if you weren't here last week, please go back. As you'll hear throughout the summer, "We can't go back and say what the last person said; we don't have time for that today."

Pastor Mike explained the context of the Roman Empire; what it meant to be a Roman citizen and about the persecution of Christians by Romans. There was an atmosphere of emperor worship where you would be required to worship the emperor as if he were a god. And there were also Jewish roots in the early church of course. Christ came out of the Jewish tradition, so there would be a familiarity of Jewish tradition and scripture to that church, and that's not just

for Revelation. When we are thinking about our Bible reading we can remember that there was Jewish knowledge that would have been known.

I want you to write these down in your notes so you can look at them later. There are three books in the Bible in three specific areas that would have been very familiar to the early church: Daniel 7, Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 & 2. I would love you to read these sometime this week. I'm going to allude to them, but these are images with which the early church would have been familiar. When you've read these and read the passages we are about to read, it's like you have a head start on what's going on. So please go back and take a look at those.

So we're here to look at Revelation chapter 4 and 5 today. The symbols and meanings, they are there for the first century church. As you see in verse 1, this is a very transitional language. We're being called to see things from a different point of view, from the point of view of heaven. This would be a great time to open up Revelation chapter 4 and follow along with me as we go through. So we are looking from the point of view of heaven and the tone is being set. The Jewish believers would have seen these similarities to the scenes in Daniel and Isaiah and Ezekiel. This is the heavenly throne room. We see that someone is being seated on the throne. This act of being seated talks to the deity of the one being seated being God. His appearance in verse 3 is of jasper and carnelian. And there was a rainbow or a halo around the throne with the appearance of emerald. This reflects God's grandeur, his beauty, his majesty, his glory, his magnificence. It's very similar to a scene in Ezekiel 1:27-28:

“From what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like gleaming amber, flickering like a fire. And from his waist down, he looked like a burning flame, shining with splendor. All around him was a glowing halo, like a rainbow shining in the clouds on a rainy day. This is what the glory of the LORD looked like to me. When I saw it, I fell face down on the ground, and I heard someone's voice speaking to me.” (Ezekiel 1:27-28, nlt)

Does this sound familiar? “And then we saw 24 thrones and seated on the thrones were 24 elders.” Now there are many ideas about what this could mean and we may not really know the original meaning. But in fact there may be many multiple levels of meaning. Even in our modern literature and in the movies we watch, we're okay with there being multiple levels of meaning, like a dream within a dream sequence. There are all kinds of things we can wrap our brains around, so we can wrap our brains around all sorts of multiple levels of meaning. The first one that would be very familiar to that audience would be with that of the Greek drama, held in a huge amphitheater that would hold thousands of people. In a Greek drama there would be a 24 member chorus of actors. These actors would be wearing elaborate costumes with grotesque masks. The first century audience would be setting the stage for them. They would be paying attention to what is about to happen. These 24 elders could also represent two sets of elders. They could be old Israel, the twelve tribes of Israel and the new Israel, the twelve apostles of Jesus. We are seeing here the possibility of God's redemptive plan for creation coming to completion, beginning to end. These elders were clothed in white garments with gold crowns on their heads. These garments represent purity and the crowns represent victory and purity and the status in their relationship with Christ.

We are victorious. We are pure and royal through Christ. There are many references to golden crowns in Revelation. Even those who are trying to deceive, wear imitation golden crowns.

Then we see the flashing of lightning and the rolling and rumbling of thunder. In Hebrew poetry, lightning and thunder represented power and glory to God. In Greek and Roman mythology we may all be aware that the thunder bolt was associated with Zeus or Jupiter.

Now today, we are still in awe when we see lightning across the sky or we feel the rumbling of the thunder in our bones. They still bring awe and wonder in the power to our lives.

So before the throne we see seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God. This is very familiar imagery from Ezekiel 1 – remember that is your homework, Ezekiel 1 – and the Jewish menorah, the candelabrum with seven candles that's used in Jewish worship.

Now remember when we see the number seven which symbolizes what? Completeness. The number seven symbolizes completeness. So here we have at the throne the complete and perfect manifestation of the Holy Spirit, before the throne, as if it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

We're reminded of the images from Ezekiel again or even the creation images from Genesis where God separates the sky and the sea. Those of us who have been to the sea or on the sea can testify to the vastness and the greatness, even on a calm day, the power that is underneath the water.

This is the setting of the magnificence of the throne room and the presence of God. Is John doing a pretty good job so far? So around the throne there were four living creatures. Now these creatures are very strange to us. It's a mash-up of the heavenly beings from Ezekiel 10 and Isaiah 6 put together. They are full of eyes, in front and behind. Eyes are a symbol of alertness and knowledge. It's really every parent's dream to have eyes in the back of your head. Think of alertness and knowledge. That's not too bad of an example.

Later on we see that there were six wings. These wings were full of eyes all around and within as well. This six-winged being is that of Isaiah 6 – same image. And this represents all these wings and eyes that represent constant vigilance. Sleepless vigilance. The eyes are penetrating eyes of knowledge and wisdom and of intelligence. Constant awareness. These creatures were like a lion, an ox, the face of a man and an eagle in flight. There are many ideas of what these creatures could represent, but more than likely it's like some sort of personality or trait. The lion being that of strength and the ox being that of service, the face of a man intelligence and the eagle in flight, swiftness. Whatever the meaning, we must look at what they are doing. We must look at their actions. Verse 8 says:

“Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,’ who was, and is, and is to come.” (Revelation 4:8, niv)

These are very familiar words to us in the church. It's part of our worship. These wise and vigilant creatures never stop worshipping. They proclaim, “Holy, holy, holy.” This three-time repetition intensifies and points to the greatness and the separateness and the purity of God. It's quite different from the emperor worship of the first century Roman culture. And the one who was and is and is to come. God is. God exists outside of the constraints of time. Nothing is beyond God's control. So we see the stage has been set. We have been given a rich and awesome picture of the throne room of heaven. And the 24 elders fall down in humility,

throwing down their crowns, giving away any authority of power they might have, in subject to the one who is seated on the throne, saying “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things and by your will they existed and were created.” Their worship proclaims that there is no other thing that is worthy of worship than Lord God, Creator of the universe. No person, no emperor, no thing is worthy of worship but God.

And so we see the new setting of a scene in chapter 5 with the words, “Then I saw.” We saw in his right hand there was a scroll. It was written within and on the back. It was sealed with seven seals. So the right hand emphasizes power and authority. And this scroll is important, it’s full and it’s been written on the front and the back and all over. And it is completely sealed. Remember the number seven. It is completely inaccessible. No unauthorized person could gain access to the scroll.

And the next several verses address this problem. “Who is worthy to open the scroll, to break the seals?” (Revelation 5:2b) No one! John begins to weep. These scrolls are important, and no one in heaven or earth is worthy to open them. In verse 5 we hear:

“Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” (Revelation 5:5, esv)

This is a clear image of the Messiah, the Savior of the world who was called the Lion of Judah. He was from the lineage or the root of David, known as one of the greatest kings of Israel. Jesus the Messiah is worthy. But it was not his lineage that made him worthy, but the fact that he had triumphed. He had won the victory. He had conquered. He had overcome the world. And we are reminded of his words in John 16 verse 33:

“In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (John 16:33, nrsv)

There was a lamb standing as though it had been slain. This stands in contrast to the picture of the victorious warrior-like Messiah that many of the Jewish people had been expecting would conquer the world. Jesus has conquered the world through his suffering servanthood. Just as a lamb was led to be slaughtered during Old Testament Jewish worship, so Jesus conquered the world, conquered sin and death through his suffering and death for us. The Lamb remains humble in silence throughout the book of Revelation.

Jesus redefines the meaning of power and conquest in his victory through sacrifice. A Lamb is standing in the presence of the throne, representing both his resurrection and his deity. The Lamb has seven horns, symbolizing power in the Old Testament, and seven the symbol of... complete power. With seven eyes, eyes being the symbol of knowledge and awareness. And seven the symbol of...completeness, with divine omniscience, with divine omnipresence, all knowledge, all presence, these eyes are being described as being the seven spirits of God, the complete spirit of God, the all present spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the comforter, the one who goes before us, through whom we have strength.

So the Lamb takes the scroll and the throne room of heaven rejoices. The creatures and elders fall down before the Lamb, giving the same worship to the Lamb as they did to the one on the

throne. There is music, there is prayer that fills the throne room like incense and they sing a new song. “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals for you were slain and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God and they shall reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:9, esv) A new song is sung. It’s something different and miraculous that has been accomplished by Christ. This celebrates the beginning of a new creation that happens through Christ. He has ransomed people for God through his blood. This is a picture of first century slaves being freed for a price. This ransom is not just for the first century, but for all people throughout all time. Salvation is for all to be kings and priests, to reign, to have power. This is a message of hope to those living under the Roman Empire.

Another scene of heavenly worship is being set for us in verse 11 with sights and sounds. Added to the creatures and the elders are the angels. In a translation you are reading the author could have said myriads of angels or millions of angels. When we look at the original language, the original Greek, he uses the number ten thousand, which to us doesn’t seem to be a lot. But ten thousand was the largest word they had for numbers. They didn’t have a word for anything larger than ten thousand. And to say ten thousand times ten thousand would be the largest amount that they could imagine, it’s beyond calculation. And this uncountable, unknowable number of angels was saved.

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12, niv)

The Lamb is worthy because he was slain. He is worthy to receive power and strength, the Almighty strength, the Sovereignty of God, worthy to receive wealth. Wealth is related to kingship throughout Revelation. Wisdom, in the Old Testament, is the gift from God to kings. Wisdom is attributed to God, coming from God. Honor, the respect given to a person of worth, glory and praise. These are things only to be given to God: power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and praise. The praise of the angels is sevenfold. Their praise is complete. Their praise is true. Their praise is perfect, every creature in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and in the sea. This is the final scene of worship in this passage and it is being set for us. Worship is not limited to one type of creature. All of creation, everywhere, will worship God, who says, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, blessing and honor and glory and power forever and ever.” (Revelation 5:13) The universal praise of all creatures will never end. It will last forever and ever. The Lamb, the Christ, Jesus, is exalted and given the same as the One seated on the throne, the Creator, part of the incomprehensible nature of God. God the Father, Creator, and God the Son, the Lamb who was slain are worshipped. And God the Spirit, the seven spirits, the complete spirit, the Holy Spirit is the very presence of God in the throne room providing us access to the throne. And these four living creatures said, “Amen”. We get this from the Jewish tradition of worship and it’s a combination of praise and it’s a statement of unity and it’s something we use here in our worship. Amen!

And so the elders represent the appropriate response. They fall down and worship. So what is our response to the heavenly scene that has been set before us? At the center of it all is the Lamb, Jesus.

Those of you here today who have experienced his saving love and grace, I challenge you to continue to grow and learn from prayer. The Bible, read the Gospels again and again, again and again. Through mentoring and teaching others, through serving others. Remember his example as the Suffering Servant. Through serving others, you will grow closer to him, through guiding others into a relationship with Jesus. When you do this you grow and learn more about Jesus as you see his grace and his freedom and hope at work in others.

Now those of you who have not experienced his saving love and grace, maybe you have not entered into a relationship with him and you have not cast down your crown and given him the proper authority and place in your life. You can begin this new journey with him today. There is no magical formula, there are no magical words, only believe he is what he says he is. Trust that the salvation and freedom he has brought to the world is for you too. Begin your life as a new creation.

Today we have heard a message of hope. Jesus has conquered the world. He has brought freedom to us all. Our response is to accept him. Accept his grace and worship him. In all of his power, in all of his wealth, in all of his wisdom, in all of his strength, in all of his honor, giving him glory and praise – let us respond to him today in worship.

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
6/19/16

**Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Four: Revelation 6
Under the Altar or Under a Rock?¹⁰**

Have you ever been in a corn maze? You know that the view from the ground can be pretty confusing and overwhelming. But if you were to go up in the air a couple hundred feet or so, you'd be able to see it all clearly. Then you could go back down into it, and having your perspective, you could navigate your way through it.

Like on many days as we work through the book of Revelation together, it will be tempting today to become overwhelmed by the confusingly large amount of stuff in chapter six – like being in the middle of a corn maze. So imagine we've got a large drone that we can climb on and fly up a couple hundred feet or so. That will give us our perspective **before** we dive back down into the cornfield and navigate our way through it. It's amazing the difference perspective makes. That's what we are going to do today with chapter six of Revelation. We'll go up high and get a look at it, then dive into it. When we are done, we will take to the air again to get one final overview so that we know how to apply it to our lives.

First of all, I hope you were able to read chapter six before you came in. We ask you to do that because we just don't have time to read the chapter for you on Sunday mornings. So we've given you a reading plan on our website so that you can read the passage in advance, and then we've given you three questions to ask yourself in order to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you ahead of time. And don't forget if something goes unanswered, or if you have other questions, there are cards you can fill out and submit and we'll do our best to answer them when we can, or at the Q&A Sunday at the end of the summer. Either way, you'll want to open your Bible to Revelation 6 and follow along.

But if you have already read Revelation 6, you might feel like you are in the thick of the cornfield; it can be overwhelming. Let's get up and get some perspective first.

It will be important to remember where we've been so far in chapters 1-5, because that gives us an important perspective with which to read this confusing and scary chapter. So far, everything we've read in the first five chapters has been about the Lamb's work on behalf of people, who he loves. The Lamb – the Son – is God. He loves us humans infinitely; he gave his life for us, and then, since he is God, he took his life back up for us, opening the way to spiritual, abundant, and eternal life. Everything happening in Revelation is filled with vivid descriptions of what God will do to completely finish off evil and death, and shows the lengths

¹⁰ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO), Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis), Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views* (2013, Thomas Nelson, Nashville), Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Pznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>)

God will go to in order to save people – any and all and every human that he can possibly save – whoever responds to the Gospel. The Gospel is the Good News that God loves us and will save us from sin and evil and death. So far chapters 1-5 have all been about the Lamb and what he has done and will do to end evil and rescue people. Well, as frightening as chapter six is, all of the previous themes are still present throughout. We *must* read chapter six with that perspective. Okay?

In chapter five, we left off from Pastor Jason’s moving description of worship in heaven, where we were in the great Throne Room of God. In chapter six, the things that start in Heaven will play out on earth. Then it takes us back to Heaven before ending up back on earth. Pastor Jason left us in the Great Throne Room with the Lamb being the only one worthy to open the scroll that has seven seals on it. This wasn’t one roll with seven seals going up the side of it; it was one large scroll in which you would open one seal, and could go so far until you hit another seal, which would be broken open and you could go farther until you reached another seal, and so on.

There are seven seals, and seven means what? Completeness. There are seven seals of judgment in the scroll, which means what kind of judgment? Complete judgment. We will see six of the seven seals opened today.

Now, when we read this, it’s kind of confusing. That’s partly because John was trying to describe with black ink on papyrus paper what he was seeing in hyper-color super-surround sound in Heaven. That wasn’t easy to do, so John chose an apocalyptic writing style of the first century Jews, which was highly symbolic. But ***when we read Revelation from our 21st century American perspective, we have some subtle influences that make it more difficult.***¹¹

One of those is ***the power problem.*** Revelation was written to people who were *not* in power, people who were being oppressed by those *in* power. Revelation was *not* to warn the Roman government and society about what was going to happen to it, even though it does that. It was written to encourage those who were being oppressed *by* Rome. In America, we are the ones in power. So we need to step out of our Americanness and read Revelation from our Christianity.

The next is ***the politics problem.*** In some ways, the whole book of Revelation could be said to be about the politics of the empire versus the politics of the Lamb. This applies to us especially these days in the election season. Dr. Scott Daniels writes about it this way: “Revelation continually critiques the way all human principalities and powers operate. Our problem is that the partisan politics of our own day have so deeply divided us that I fear we will automatically read and hear Revelation through those lenses. That means that people on the right will hear Revelation as a critique of the left, and visa versa. But the truth is that Revelation is inviting us to transcend the politics of right and left and learn to embody the

¹¹ Scott Daniels, *ibid*

politics of the Lamb. That is very difficult to do, however, because our imaginations are so shaped by right/left politics.”¹²

That leads us to the third thing that makes it difficult for us to read Revelation, and that’s ***the patriotic problem***. We have a hard time with the difference between being an American and being a part of the Church. John is not writing in order to help Rome be a better place to live, or to tell Caesar how to be a better ruler. John *is* writing to encourage believers to live as reflections of the Lamb *in the midst of Rome*. You see, we can’t read Revelation as American citizens; we must read this as people of the Lamb. And that’s hard for us to do! Our citizenship as Americans is so deeply woven into our identity, (and I’m afraid our understanding of what it means to be the Church isn’t very strong) so we have a hard time reading Revelation. But church – we are not first and foremost Americans; we are first and foremost *Christians who happen to live in America*. Our Christianity should shape how we live in America. I’m not saying we should stop being Americans or reject America. But as God’s people we are to view our country from the lens of our Christianity, not the other way around. We must identify as the people of the Lamb in Revelation! The judgments unleashed with the opening of the seals in chapter six are against Rome and against the people who reject Christ. Okay, we’ve got some perspective; now let’s dive back into the cornfield.

The first four seals that get opened will unleash four judgments that are popularly known as the four horsemen. These four horses and their riders have wreaked all kinds of havoc in the world. They’ve been interpreted as the evils of war, as symbols of events in Roman history, and even as constellations. So what do they represent? Remember that Revelation speaks *against* the false power and culture of Rome, so these four horsemen are intended to contrast Rome (and its equivalent in our day). *The horsemen will shatter the illusion that people can find true security and safety inside the borders of a nation or empire, in a strong economy, or even in their own health. (repeat)* Do the events described represent real, calendar events that are going to happen? Well, sort of. I think you will see that these four horses have been galloping their way through history already, and much of what they do has already been done many, many times over. So yes, it is very likely they will happen again, and it is likely they will happen in increasingly greater and more terrible ways. And *one* of these times that they ride – the ones described in chapter six – will be the last time.

Now we come to ***the first seal: the white horse***. We need to read what the chapter says about this horse and rider:

“I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.” (Revelation 6:1-2, niv)

As you read that, who usually rides a white horse and wears a crown? Jesus, right? You’d think this is Him, but that would be a mistake, and that is the point. This rider is *not* Jesus; it is *imitating* Jesus. Jesus warned about this in Mark 13 - Jesus said to them:

¹² Daniels, *ibid*

“Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.” (Mark 13:5-7, niv)

As we get closer to the end, it’s going to be more difficult to tell the difference between Christ and the imitations. But this guy is definitely *not* Jesus.

Even though Jesus is described in Revelation as riding a white horse and wearing a crown, there are two problems with the white-horse guy: one is that it is Jesus who opened the scroll for him in the first place. The second problem is the weapon that this rider has. What was it? It was a bow. The Parthians were a warring country and they rode white horses. They were also the only army that used mounted archers. They also were frequently attacking Rome. Do you remember what weapon Jesus has? A sword, which is the Word of God, right? Jesus always has a sword, never a bow. The weapon of Jesus is for instruction; the rider’s weapon is for destruction. Jesus’ weapon is to bring life, the rider’s weapon is to lay waste. The weapon of Christ is constructive; the weapon of the rider is destructive. The weapon of Christ is to revive; the weapon of the rider is to vaporize. The weapon of Christ is to germinate; the weapon of the rider is to exterminate. Get the difference?

Because of this horse and rider’s connection to the Parthians, it is a reminder of the “enemy at the gate;” a reminder of the limits of Roman authority and security (or the limits of American authority and security). Caesar (or today’s presidential candidates) might try to promise peace and security, but there will always be threats from the outside. We were reminded of this last week with that horrible terrorist attack in Orlando. An attack against human beings – people that Christ loves and died for.

The next seal is broken and we have ***the second seal: the red horse***. The color red in the original language could mean “blood” or “fire” – neither of which sounds very pleasant. This horse and rider were given power to take peace from the earth. It could represent the persecution of Christians. The word “slay” that describes what this rider causes people to do to each other is a very savage word. It is the same word that was used in reference to the death of Jesus and his followers (Revelation 5:6-9, 12; 6:9; 13:8; 18:24). The “large sword” the rider carries is a symbol of Roman emperors. This rider would have been easily recognized by the first century Christians as being the opposite of ***“Pax Romana”*** – this was a national propagandist slogan of Rome. It was like a national pledge that said, “In a strong Rome we find our prosperity, peace, and flourishing.”¹³ But that “peace” was at a high price – it was a false peace, gained by dominating and suppressing people. Despite their slogan of “Pax,” or “Peace,” there was *always* simmering civil disorder. Dr. Daniels writes, “In a single year, AD 68-69, Rome had been ruled by four different emperors. It is reported that in the thirty-year period before the reign of Herod the Great (67-37 BC), more than one hundred thousand insurgents died in revolutions and rebellions in Palestine alone.” That was in only one small part of Rome! There are *always* threats to peace both from inside and outside of our borders.

The next is ***the third seal: the black horse***. The color black, then like now, brought to mind thoughts of something sinister, terrible, unlucky, and was associated with mourning.

¹³ Daniels, *ibid.*

This rider represents famine. Famine, along with an unstable economy, comes right on the hooves of war and civil unrest. This horse reminds us of how deeply we rely on what the earth produces for us. What happens to an economy when famine hits? Inflation. That is the message in the scales that the rider is carrying. The scales were used to measure the price of food – how much food would be measured out for money. According to the passage in verse 6, “Two pounds of wheat would cost a day’s wages, and so would six pounds of barley.” This amount of food was a day’s food for a soldier and his horse, or five day’s food for a slave. Barley was food for the poor. The price described was 16 times higher than normal. That’s a 1500% inflation rate.

Then the passage says that the oil and wine were not to be damaged, even though there was famine. This is interesting. Oil and wine were luxuries. This points out the privileges of the rich, and that the divide between the rich and poor was going to get wider and wider. That distance is *not* what God wants! God is always on the side of the poor and oppressed. When war and inflation hit, who get hit the hardest? The poor. The rich usually keep doing okay. The point of the black horse is that the economic security of Caesar is *false* security; it is ultimately a myth.

The next is the last of the four horsemen: ***the fourth seal: the pale horse***. The actual description is “pale green,” which is the color of a person who is dead and whose flesh is decaying. If there really were going to be a zombie apocalypse, this would be the guy. This guy kills people, and then the grave coming along right behind, scoops up the dead. The passage tells us it kills a fourth of the earth – of all creation and humans, Christians included. The “fourth” that gets destroyed is not geographical, like a hemisphere – it’s the total. It kills in four ways: sword, famine, disease, and wild animals. These things happen in succession: war brings famine, which brings disease, and then the wild animals come in and clean up the weak and dying.

All of four of these horsemen reveal the false security of Rome. Rome thought it was strong and invincible. Here’s the deal: if we put our hope and faith in anything but the Lamb on the throne, we are in trouble.

What do you think those horsemen might look like today? Starting with the white horse, I imagine it would mean an empire or a nation constantly trying to protect its security. It might have to think about building fences or walls or border patrols to keep people out. It would probably have to spend enormous amounts of its money on national defense. The white horse could create a lot of chaos in a society, so the nation would have to figure out how to constantly monitor the white horse’s activity. They’d probably have to sacrifice some of their own conveniences and maybe even some of their own rights in order to be more secure.

The red-horse nation would have to be afraid of its own people. They might be so busy focusing on the white horse that a lot of terrible red-horse things would happen, like bombings and mass shootings. These would come from their own citizens who feel marginalized or disenfranchised and who sympathize with outside threat-groups. This nation would have to increase surveillance of their own people – listening to their phone calls, reading their emails and letters, even spying on their conversations. Most of their citizens would want to carry their own weapons because they’d be afraid of their own neighbors.

Modern, wealthy nations and empires wouldn't have to worry so much about the black horse though. The black horse would hit the poorer, agrarian countries hardest. Droughts, climate changes, and famines wouldn't hit the rich nations as hard, but the rich would still have to worry about unstable world economies and downturns. The wealthy would probably still be able to enjoy their favorite food and drink. But the rich nation's businesses would have to constantly restructure to protect their assets and take advantage of the poorer countries. The rich nation's government might have to create laws that would safeguard their financial institutions and even bail them out to protect against the black-horse threat.

A modern empire would be obsessed with the pale green horse and rider. They would invest huge dollars into health care, into treatments and surgeries and drugs that would keep the pale horse away. When the diseases of weaker poor countries became a threat to the wealthy empire, they would secure their borders and put out travel alerts in case any of their people were travelling in countries that would expose them to the pale horse. The empire's sense of security would also be rattled with every earthquake, volcano, tornado, tsunami, flood and blizzard.

Of course, these four horsemen were only a concern to *ancient Rome*; thankfully they don't apply to us in America today, do they?

These horsemen are a threat to *anyone* whose hope is in their empire. But on the other hand, these horsemen are also a warning and a reminder that the only real security anyone can have is in the Kingdom of the Lamb. Maybe you will want to think about where you are placing your hope. Maybe you want to take stock and get yourself ready, because these four horses are *always* galloping through. They've been here before, they are here in our day, and they are on their way in our future.

The first four seals show us how desperately we need to be in the Kingdom of the Lamb if we want to know ultimate security. My friend, if you are here and you are not a citizen of the Kingdom of the Lamb, I would strongly advise you to take serious stock of where you are putting your trust and security. Because God promises healing and victory and life to those who trust him and who persevere (**Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21**). God goes to great lengths in Revelation (actually through the entire Bible), and ultimately in the death and resurrection of his Son, to plainly show his Good News to you, and to the world. He loves you!

Next in chapter six things slow down. We are taken from earth to heaven and then back to earth again. We are now going to see a contrast between two different groups of people: the people we will see with the fifth seal and the people we will see with the sixth seal. The fifth-seal people are people who are fully committed to the Kingdom of the Lamb because, like him, they too have been slaughtered. But in the sixth seal we will see people who are so immersed in their empire that they are afraid of the horses and seals, and they will hide and cry out against what they call the wrath of the Lamb.

Next then is ***the fifth seal: the martyrs***. With this seal we see an interesting scene. We are back in the throne room, and it says that under the altar are the souls of those who have been killed for being faithful witnesses of the Jesus. This is hard for us to visualize but it would've been clear to the first century readers. "Under" does not mean "underneath" but

means “at the bottom,” or “below.” This powerful image is of the altar for blood sacrifice in the Jewish Temple. In the Temple practice, the sacrificial lambs would be killed to atone for people’s sins on that altar, and the blood would spill down to the bottom of, or under, the altar. John’s vision here is to communicate the deep and profound connection between the death of Jesus the Lamb, and the death of the martyrs. Both Jesus and the martyrs have wholeheartedly obeyed God – the One who sits on the throne.

But who exactly *are* the ones under the altar? John was probably thinking of those who had already been killed: like the prophets, and John the Baptist, and Stephen, and Paul, and other early Christians. But *we* know these also include *all* those who have been martyred, even the Christians in Iraq this year whose heads were savagely severed from their bodies by ISIS soldiers. The fifth seal is a reminder that *anyone* who sacrifices for the Kingdom of the Lamb will be known by and near to the Lamb, and they are in a sacred spot in the Throne Room.

They cry out, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” This is not a cry for revenge – it is a cry for the things that are wrong to be made right. It is their heart’s cry and prayer that God’s Kingdom would finally come on earth as it is heaven. It is not a cry for punishment, but for justice. “How long, O Lord, until everything that is wrong in this world would be made right, and those who have suffered for your sake would finally see your kingdom come?” The early church was living in Rome, facing persecution and death. John was in exile (which was fortunate, because others had been killed). “How much longer, O Lord?” they cry, like the psalmist in Psalm 79. The answer they get is first a white robe that symbolizes their purity and place of honor. When they ask, “How long?” God answers by basically saying, “Not yet, but in a little while. But until then: You are safe. You can rest. There are more faithful witnesses that will be added to your number before we are through.” Listen: this image of the fifth seal is a demonstration of God’s love and patience, that even though his people are being slaughtered, he wants all those who are rejecting Christ to *still* have an opportunity to step into the Kingdom of the Lamb. And remember: even though these seals are all judgments, they are all driven by love: the first four are warnings to people to change their lives and their kingdoms. The fifth seal is a glimpse into how far we as Christians should be willing to go to be witnesses to others for Jesus. The martyrs ask, “Is this finally the end?” Jesus says, “Not yet. There’s still more that can be reached; there’s more I can save.” Maybe that’s you.

Then ***the sixth seal*** (is opened): ***the day of wrath***. The focus returns to earth again. There is some cataclysmic stuff going on in this chapter, but it is all pretty common apocalyptic symbology from the Old Testament. There’s the earthquake (Haggai 2:6-7, 21-22), the sun turned black and the moon turned to blood (Isaiah 50:3; Joel 2:31), stars falling like figs from a tree (Isaiah 34:4) and the sky rolled back like a scroll (Isaiah 34:4; Hebrews 1:12). These are all associated with God’s arrival and with final judgment and destruction of the earth.

The cosmic judgments are listed in verses 12-14: 1) great earthquake, 2) sun darkens, 3) full moon becomes like blood, 4) stars fall from the sky, 5) the sky vanishes, 6) the mountains and islands are removed, and 7) the people of earth are deeply disturbed. How many judgment events? Seven, which means what? Complete. So the cataclysmic judgment is complete – it is as full as God intends it to be.

Then in verses 15-17 we see the other group of people who are affected by the judgments. They are in direct contrast to the martyrs of the fifth seal. It lists the people who have not accepted Christ: (1) Kings, (2) officials, (3) generals, (4) the rich, (5) the powerful, (6) the slaves, (7) the free. How many groups of people? Seven. Which means? Complete. The double-set of seven in these verses means that the destruction of creation and people is total. Nothing remains in place and no one, no matter how important or lowly, can escape God's vindication. Keep in mind that the ancient people put a lot of stock in stars and constellations; they thought the alignment of stars would determine the success of the world. They even consulted the stars and made their decisions by them, just like some people read horoscopes today (by the way, don't say it's different because it's not; it's *exactly* same thing). But the sixth seal tells us that even the stars themselves will fall down from the sky. If anything in the universe, we think the celestial bodies are permanent, right? Scientists tell us they go back billions and billions of years. And yet even the stars will fall like figs from a tree at God's command. People will be so afraid of God that they will try to crawl under rocks – risking being crushed rather than face the wrath of God. God – the very one who can save them, and they hide under rocks from him. But there is nowhere they can hide. For those who embrace the ways of Rome, for those who buy into its systems and economies and securities, those people will see the coming of Christ *as God's anger*, not as they *should* see it – *as God's salvation*. If they see the shaking of things through the four horsemen's actions and they don't wake up, if they see and hear the example and witness of Christ-followers and don't listen (and even kill the witnesses), then the sixth seal will happen to them. The first five seals are all about opportunities to join the Lamb's Kingdom. The sixth seal is an advanced warning of what's waiting for those who don't change kingdoms.

So let's get above the corn maze one last time. The horsemen have always have been around. And they have always served as warnings, that we can't put our trust in anything that this world claims is secure. Are the horsemen present today? Yes, this isn't the last time they will ride. But this might be *the next to the last* time. And that means there is *still* time: time for believers to be witnesses. There is still time for people to change allegiances. And there is still a seventh seal in the next chapter.

What does that mean to you and me? Ask yourself this, if you are a Christian: how willing are you to be a witness? Are you too caught up in this empire called America? Will you be a witness for the Lamb no matter what it costs you? If you will, it means that you will bring peace into this world, and bring help into this world, and bring healing into this world, and bring hope into this world. I want you to see the connection: you – with your life in this world – *you are a living contrast of the ongoing horse-riders who run roughshod over people*. The world is filled with people whom God loves and for whom Christ died. Be a peacemaker in the face of the white horse. Help those who are poor and alone in the face of the red horse. Bring comfort and healing to those who are sick in the face of the black horse. And live and speak *life* into those who face the death and hopelessness of the pale horse. Do these things so that people will see Christ in you. *That* is your faithful witness.

But if you are here and you are not a citizen of the Lamb's Kingdom, I hope you've been listening and taking stock of your life and citizenship. Chapter six ends with a question: "Who can withstand it?" You should know the answer by now: the ones who withstand all that

we've read about are only those who belong to the Kingdom of the Lamb. Will you step out of the ultimate insecurity of this world? Don't be fooled by it. Will you accept the price that Jesus paid so you could be a citizen of his kingdom? Whose side are you on? Will you identify with those under the altar, or will you crawl under a rock?

Pray

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
6/26/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Five: Revelation 7
These are They¹⁴

There's been a question hanging in the air since last Sunday. It is a pregnant question, really. Even the asking of it seemed like it was ripe for the answer; as if the answer would explode from the question before it was even finished being asked. It was a question being asked by those who we left last week crawling under rocks. They were afraid of God and the calamity brought about by the first six seals being opened. The results were chaos and destruction and even the persecution and murder of God's people. Those who chose to trust in themselves and their government saw the seals as judgment, not as warnings designed to get them to take stock of themselves and where their loyalty lay (whether in the false security of their nation or the Kingdom of the Lamb). They were being given yet another opportunity to change allegiances, but they chose instead to run and hide from God. In their running away from the very One who could and would save them, they cried out in their hopelessness the question that has been hanging for seven days in this room and in our hearts:

"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 withstand it?*"
(Revelation 6:16-17, niv)

They asked it as if it was rhetorical, as if the answer was obviously, "no one can!" But there was a second group to whom the answer was just as obvious – that there *are* people who can and will withstand it, and that answer is chapter seven.

Today we are in part five of our fifteen part summer sermon series through Revelation, called "Revealed." Many avoid Revelation because it seems like a book of cryptic messages that elude us and frighten us. It can be confusing, especially with the glut of contradictory and competing self-proclaimed expert authors. But when we read Revelation as it was intended, it provides inspiration and application to our Christian lives today.

So our goal is to help us learn how to read it (and the rest of the Bible, for that matter), to better understand what it says to us today (and what it does NOT say), and to allow the book to speak to us and transform us into Christlikeness, because that is after all, what God's Word is for. That's why we have given you a reading plan that goes along with the passages we will be looking at on each Sunday, and we've given you three questions to ask yourself and allow

¹⁴ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views* (2013, Thomas Nelson, Nashville); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Pazzaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); George Lyons, *Commentary on Revelation 7*; Michael W. O'Neill, *Revelation 7:9-17*

the Holy Spirit to speak to you and prepare you for our time together. You can find that on our website. We've also given you several ways to submit questions that you might have. We'll do our best to answer them as we can in our messages, or at the very end in our Q&A Sunday.

We left off last week with chapter six clearly showing the contrast between the arrogant and false power of Rome and the true power of the Kingdom of the Lamb. Four of the seals were the four horsemen, the fifth seal was the martyrs, and the sixth seal was the beginning of the cosmic collapse of the created order. The seals exposed the power of Rome for what it really was – built on the backs of others, exploiting the earth and the weak and powerless. We saw some not-so-subtle similarities between Rome and our own country.

We also saw the martyrs. Speaking of martyrs, let me make this clear: the book of Revelation never attempts to cover up the cost of following Jesus Christ; in fact, it assumes it. The book “presumes a conflict between the faithful and the world. Both belong to fundamentally different spiritual/social realities.”¹⁵ To be a true follower of Christ will cost you things in this life. It is a struggle that is real – our struggle is not against people whom God loves and Christ died for, but against ideologies and powers. The Apostle Paul said:

“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12, niv)

We *are* to fight against the systems and powers that oppress people, but we love the oppressors. In fact, the reason the martyrs died was because they dared to live a life of love and service to the very ones who killed them. Our fight is AGAINST oppressive powers and systems and spiritual forces. Our fight is always FOR *all* people, no matter what their attitude is toward Christ or us, no matter what their religion or lifestyle is. Christ died to save *all*, not just some. And Revelation assumes that being Christian will require us to suffer and to be servants, willing to love and serve God and people even if it is to the point of death. Revelation assumes that ultimately our faith will lead to death, especially if we are around at the end. Revelation also confidently declares that God, on his throne, will secure saving victory for people through the Lion of the tribe of Judah who is a slaughtered Lamb:

“They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.” (Revelation 17:14, niv).

Unlike the nations of our world, the Lamb does not wear the blood of others. The Lamb wears *his own* blood:

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True ... He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.” (Revelation 19:11-13, niv)

Dr. Carol Rotz, one of our denomination's leading scholars on Revelation, states, “Chapter 6 records the dramatic visions of upheaval on earth and in heaven and anticipates the end, but

¹⁵ George Lyons, *Commentary on Revelation 7*

chapter 7 pauses the frenetic action, builds suspense, and assures the church of God's protection."¹⁶

Chapter 7 answers the question left hanging from chapter 6: "Who can withstand (the wrath of God)?" The answer is: the church. The church will withstand it! We are going to get to see a glimpse into our own future, West Valley Church. We are also going to see what we are to do as a church until the end. And if you are with us this morning and you are not a Christian, the question from last week is weighing heavy on you: will you be able to withstand the wrath of God, or will you become a part of the Kingdom of the Lamb? You need to decide.

Chapter 7 is divided into two scenes. We'll start with the first scene...

1. A Vision of the Church on Earth

First we see four angels standing ready at the four corners of the earth. Ancient understandings were that the earth was flat and was divided into four quarters, like the four points of the compass, and so the image is likely that the angels had powers over the earth, air, water, and fire. Some scholars connect these four angels with the four horsemen that we talked about last week in chapter six. We don't know that for sure, but we do know for sure that they have been authorized by God to hold back or to let loose the destructive powers. In other words, no part of this world is outside of God's control and command, as he gives it to these angels. The angels are able to keep "the four winds of the earth" from "unraveling the fabric of the world."¹⁷

Then another angel, who we're told has the seal of God, tells the four angels that they can't turn loose the destruction until after a seal is placed on the foreheads of God's people.

Okay, these next verses (3-8) are going to take some explanations. The angel says that God's people need to have a seal placed on their foreheads, and that there are 144,000 of them. Then we are given a list of the twelve tribes of Israel, times twelve, and times a thousand. There're some images and numbers, and we need to understand both what they are and who they are.

First...

The "Seals"

These are not the same thing as the seals that held the scroll together that the Lamb opened and unleashed the judgments. They *do* share some physical imagery similarities, though. Both communicate the authority of the one doing the "sealing."

First, there is the idea of sealing a letter or contract. Usually a document would be rolled or folded, tied in some way, and then a piece of soft wax or clay was placed on it. The sender would press their signet ring or a stamp onto the wax or clay, and it would harden with that

¹⁶ Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary

¹⁷ Richard Eckley, *A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*

seal on it. If someone wrote a letter, the seal would both authorize whom it was from and keep it from being opened except by the person it was for. So more than a type of adhesive to keep a letter closed, it was a sign of ownership and authority. That is the kind of seal we read about in chapter six.

Slaves were also often “sealed” with a brand or a tattoo, sometimes on their forehead – just like a rancher today does to cows or sheep. So whether the seal was a written salutation or a living slave, a seal marked something or someone as belonging to a person in authority.

Next, we’re not told in this passage how the seals are put on the Christians’ foreheads, but we do have some compelling possibilities that all point to the same truth.

The New Testament refers to Christians being sealed by the act of baptism. This is how seriously God and his Word consider the ritual of baptism – that it is a type of “seal” that ritually and supernaturally marks a person as belonging to Christ. That’s why, at our last baptism service, I kind of got after us if there are people in our church who have been Christians but have not yet been baptized. In a very real way, you have not yet been marked with this seal.

Another seal or mark that the New Testament refers to is the filling of the Holy Spirit. To be sealed with the Spirit of Christ is to be marked as God’s possession. The Bible says, “You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” (Ephesians 1:13, niv) (2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30; Romans 4:11) Another possibility is that John is making a connection to Ezekiel 9:4 where the foreheads of those who mourned the polluting of the Temple were marked for protection from the coming destruction. In that case, it was the Hebrew letter *Taw*, which looks like an “X.” This is another reason why we have the ritual of marking an “X” on our foreheads with ashes of repentance on Ash Wednesday. It is our way of saying that we belong to God.

John’s vision could’ve been any or all of them, but the point is still the same: it is a mark of ownership that these people belong completely to God. Have you been marked as God’s? Will you?

This would be a good time to mention something else that’s really important. Revelation mentions several times how important the seal is that marks people as his own (9:4; 14:1; 22:4); showing how important it is that we are owned by God. However, Revelation shows that the Devil mimics God’s seal, and uses a mark for those who are faithful to the evil one, by taking “the mark of the beast” (15:2; 19:20). **Listen:** Revelation says *far more* about the “seal of God” than the infamous mark on the foreheads of the devil’s followers. So why is it we are so fascinated by the possibilities of the mark of the beast and always trying to figure out what it is? With all the advances in technology for credit card use, grocery store scanners, biotech scanners and implants, and even tattoos, we’ve been told by hucksters and fiction writing profiteers that we need to keep watch for whatever in our culture could be the “mark of the beast.” Let me say this as clearly as I can, church: **don’t be distracted.** *We should be more concerned and vigilant in making sure that we who say we are Christians are carrying the mark of God’s seal on our lives,* then being worried or concerned about what the mark of the beast

is. Don't be distracted by preachers and best-selling books; be disciplined in making sure you are marked by God. Quit the fascination with the mark of the beast.

Next is...

The "144,000"

The list we are given to account for this number is 12 squared times a thousand, and is a list of the twelve tribes of Israel. There are some interesting observations about the listing of the twelve tribes, but we just don't have time to go into all of it. By the way, that is true every Sunday. There is far more in these chapters each Sunday than we have time to cover, so part of my study is to decipher it all, then decide what's *most* important that is consistent with what God wants us to hear for the day.

Now, there have been a lot of different attempts at, and debates about, deciphering why there are 144,000 and who they are. Some have said the number is to be taken literally as the remnant of ethnic Israelites, or the literal Christian remnant of ethnic Jews. Others have offered that it is a metaphorical number for the faithful Christians who will be protected during the final tribulation, or Christian martyrs who will be kept safe so they can witness. Some have said that they are a messianic army of martyrs who will fight God's enemies in the last days. Many say it represents the church either as a remnant of the visible church or the whole Christian Community. We can safely say this: literal interpretations of this number have far too many problems than I have time to explain, so that leaves us with interpreting the number as symbolic. There are really two implications for what this number symbolizes that are the most compelling. One is that it is an idealized number of the twelve tribes of Israel times the twelve apostles, multiplied by one thousand. That means it represents the expansion of God's promise to Abraham that he would have numerous spiritual descendants (Genesis 22:17). It goes beyond Israel to those of us who have been "grafted in" through the New Testament twelve apostles, as Paul put it in **Romans 11:11-31**, (12 X 12), expanded by a large symbolic number (1000) to include *all* those who come to faith in Christ (144,000). It is not a literal number but a number that is all encompassing of everyone who is a part of God's family, whether Jew or Gentile.

The other implication about this number is this: the symbolic richness of the number shows how God is still the Good Shepherd who knows each of His sheep by name and has us each numbered, so that even the most seemingly insignificant believer is accounted for and watched over by God. Not one of God's faithful will be lost!

It's also important to note from this passage that **God would protect them *through*, but not *from*, these tribulations**. We know this in this passage because the biblical words for "tribulation" (*thlipsis*) and "wrath" (*orge*) are never used interchangeably in the Bible; they are distinct. So the people of God are expected to *go through tribulation*, but they are *excluded from the wrath* of God that is in store for the enemies of God and his church. Should I repeat that?

Now John's narrative takes us to the second scene...

2. A Vision of the Church in Heaven

Now we see from a heavenly perspective the 144,000 on earth. We are given a striking contrast between the specific number in the tribal census of the earthly scene just before and the vast multicultural crowd now. Not only does the scene shift, so does the chronology. Earlier we were looking at the sealing of the faithful to withstand tribulation. Here we are seeing the picture of a future, triumphant church, after the events of the first half of the chapter. There are some encouraging and instructive things we learn from this description, starting with the fact that it is a great multitude that no one can count (7:9):

* The Church is Expansive and Inclusive

The crowd that John sees is so large it can't even be counted. Think about what that meant to John. John had been exiled to the lonely, sparsely populated island of Patmos. He must have been so encouraged to see that he wasn't alone; that there were countless multitudes of Christians that would eventually come from his efforts, even from an isolated island. This encourages us, too. Our Christian culture gets so caught up in numbers. Tomorrow I leave for a meeting with several hundred other pastors from eight states in the Northwest. One thing pastors always ask each other is, "How big is your church?" I'm serious! It's very easy to get caught up in the numbers game, as if the attendance of your church determines your success as a pastor. Pastors aren't the only ones; attenders can become prideful of the numbers in their church. It's easy to do. I don't want to get caught up in that, and I don't want to, so I don't play that game. When they ask me, "How big is your church," I'll say, "We have a *great* church!" They'll say, "Good for you! How big is it?" And I'll say, "We have such *great people!*" "Okay. But how many?" "They are the best! I love our church. It has so many great people in it!" They finally give up. Our focus is not on numbers, it's on being committed believers and on Kingdom impact. But make no mistake: a healthy church grows! We are to love Jesus and to love and serve our neighbors, and then when they ask us, we introduce them to Jesus. And whatever the numbers, we have the assurance that we are contributing to an expansive church that includes everyone who will respond to the Good News of God's love and salvation.

Then John says the innumerable crowd is made up of people from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue (7:9)...

* The Church is Described Less by its Quantity than its Quality

Even though there are too many to count, we are given great detail about who they are. The succession of the words in the original Greek language is a beautiful way of wrapping our arms around the entire world: every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.

Globalization is a reality today more than ever before, whether we like it or not. We've been hearing a term used a lot these days to describe our world: that it's a "global village." Well that could easily be a modern day translation of this description in John's vision. God's Church

is global, not national. That's why our work in Victoria, Guyana, is so important to God and to our Kingdom work. That's also why our growing Spanish speaking church family is so treasured to us and so important. I've been praying since even before our first official day here six and a half years ago that we would become a church that is *missional*, not *missionary*. What I mean by that is that we would see our responsibility to reach out in love and service locally, regionally, and globally, not just seeing missions as only global. That means that we will serve our community just like a missionary in another culture would serve their community. That means our church must also reflect the cultural make-up of our community. The West Valley community is roughly 35% of Mexican descent. And yet for decades our church has been 99% white. And after years of prayer and years of service to our neighborhood through Upward Soccer and our partnership with Wide Hollow Elementary, our church is beginning to look more like the blended color of our community. I have to say to our Spanish speaking church family: thank you! How I thank God for you. You are courageous enough to come be a part of our church family, even though we are mostly English speaking vanilla ice cream people. I can only imagine how difficult it can be to sit in a church and worship and listen to preaching that is not your primary language. But you are doing it! Thank you! And let me tell you, we NEED you! We are not the church without you! We *can't* be West Valley Church without you!

And for the rest of us: thank you for welcoming them into the family of worship. Thank you for embracing them with hospitality. Thank you for not allowing differences to get in the way. Is it awkward? Sometimes. But keep getting over the awkward and thank them for being here. Are there some language challenges? Yes. But *they* are doing the hard work of overcoming that; shouldn't we do the same for them? I'm hoping that one day soon we will have an SSL class – Spanish as a Second Language. It's a beautiful language and I desperately need to learn it. Some people might wonder why we don't just have a Spanish-speaking church that meets somewhere else or at a different time. My answer is: Revelation 7:9. If you can show me where in Revelation 7:9 it says we should worship in our own separate groups, I'll consider it. But from what I see, we are a church that worships together, in unity, the same language of the Spirit, from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.

And that's the next description of the heavenly church...

* **The Church is Described as Unified**

Now I think we all know we need to be unified, but this passage describes it specifically: we are unified by what we go through together (we *will* all face tribulation), we are unified by the white robes we are given by God (our forgiveness and holiness. They are given to us from God through Christ's death and resurrection, and that we live it out through holy love of others), and we are unified by our worship (we are all given palm branches to wave).

We are unified in our worship in the Throne room of God. The Throne room is not some kind of "situation room" for war strategizing. It is not a "social services" office that tries to assist the persecuted church. There is not an attitude of anger, or anxiety, or impatience. The Throne room has one activity only: *worship*. It is calm, it is at peace, and it is powerful. It is a different picture than the turmoil, stress, and persecution that is happening on earth.

There is an amazing scene here: we, the church, gathered around God's throne, sing in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."
(Revelation 7:10, niv)

We sing about salvation because we are the only ones gathered in the Throne room who have experienced it. We are the only ones for whom Christ died. He did not die for the angels or the four living creatures. Only *we* can genuinely worship God from the experience of salvation!

Then, all the elders and the four living creatures that were described earlier fall down on their faces and worship both in agreement with our worship and in response to our worship:

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (Revelation 7:12, niv)

How many attributes are offered to God in worship? Seven. There's that seven again.

I want to share with you a story that I haven't shared before. Not long ago, we were worshipping together on a Sunday morning, and as we were singing, I thought I heard something else. I quit singing and began to listen to your voices. But I still heard something *else*. It is difficult to describe. When I tried to listen for it, it disappeared. But when I quit listening for it and just listened to your voices offering praise to God, I could hear it. It took me awhile to figure out what it was. I am confident that what I was hearing was heaven singing responsively along with you. I'm sure of it. Now, you can doubt me if you want; I can't prove it. I don't care if you think I'm making this up. I know what I heard. And whether I heard it or not, it doesn't matter – we just keep worshipping God through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. But I'm telling you I heard what this chapter describes. And I believe it happens *every* time we gather to wholeheartedly worship God, whether we ever hear it again this side of heaven or not.

Then, finally, we get an explanation of who the crowd is. It comes as a sort of rhetorical question from one of the elders to John: "Who do you think these people are?" and John says, "You ought to know! You tell me!" And he says: "These are they. These are they who have come through the Great Tribulation: the Tribulation to end all Tribulations that the church has gone through forever. Their robes have been washed white by the red blood of the Lamb." Then, the elder recites who they are and what they now experience. And he does it as a poem; a sort of angelic spoken word. Listen to it:

"They are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.
'Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on 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 7:15-17, niv)

This is our future, through all the trials and struggles and tribulations we have and will ever face, *this is our future*, from the vast, innumerable crowd around the throne in worship to the most intimate relationship in worship. "Even though the multitude is so great that it cannot be numbered, still, in their worship, the Lamb Himself has become their Shepherd, caring for them, leading them in a life that is as fresh as a swift moving stream, even stooping down to personally wipe away every individual's tears. Of course, the center of all this is God Himself. Unlike the one-directional audience structured worship settings of our churches, this church is gathered completely encircling the throne. The Throne, or rather the One upon it, is the central focal point of this entire heavenly scene.

What a different image than the one we see in today's churches. While we focus on tempo, time schedules, and types of music, the focus of this vision is God. While we wonder about thermostats and sound levels and how people are feeling, God Himself sets the atmosphere that surrounds His people. What might happen if we were to focus more on God than on song styles? Could our 'elders' teach the person next to them, (at least by example), even as the multitude sing and shout (yes, shout) their praises? Could the very lives of the multicultural worshipers become an illustration of the amazing salvation victory of the Lamb?"¹⁸

We must continue to be the church on earth, but never lose sight of who we are as the church in heaven. We must both reflect that church in heaven and in our community, reaching as many as we possibly can to gather with us one day around the throne.

In conclusion, I want to share a song with you that was written over 40 years ago. It's not in a style that those of us who are younger would like, but just focus on the worship. It summarizes well what we've seen in this chapter. These are they.

Play video.

Pray

¹⁸ Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 7:9-17, assignment 3.1*

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
7/3/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Six: Revelation 8-9
Silence and Noise¹⁹

Lead brief discussion on the silence experienced earlier. Focus on themes of nervousness, anticipation, heaviness.

Six seals have been broken open and four horses and their riders have been unleashed, resulting in chaos and plagues and wars and death. No less than 144,000 saints have been sealed for God; they are countless multitudes of every nation and tribe and people and tongue, soon to be gathered around the creatures and angels that are surrounding the Throne of God, shouting and singing praises. As the action of chapter seven climaxes, the seventh seal is broken open and there is...silence: a half hour of silence, deafening in its stillness, pregnant with God's presence and anticipation. Then seven angels are prepared with trumpets. Before they can sound the alarms, another angel, carrying a golden bowl filled with incense and prayers, which waft up around the Throne, adds fire from the altar and then hurls it to the earth. Sound resumes once more in all its fury.

This is the scene of the seventh seal in Revelation 8:1-6. The silence is not just a brief rest, nor is it a heavenly "reboot;" it is important and unique - ("only in 8:1 [of Revelation] is there silence."²⁰) Like much of Revelation, the original reader would've understood this passage, but like much of Revelation; it is somewhat mysterious to us today. Still, the silence of this passage, along with the rest of chapters 8 and 9, speaks to us today."²¹

I hope that you've spent time in this passage this week, asking yourself the three questions we've provided on our website and allowing the Holy Spirit to pre-speak to you before you arrived today. If so, I think you will find that much of what the Spirit has been impressing on your heart this week will be confirmed by what he speaks to you today out of God's Word.

Let's get into it, starting with...

¹⁹ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Steve Gregg, *Revelation: Four Views* (2013, Thomas Nelson, Nashville); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); George Lyons, *Commentary on Revelation 7*; Michael W. O'Neill, *The Shouting Silence of the Apocalypse: An Examination of Revelation 8:1-6*; Lewis Foster, *Revelation: Unlocking the Scriptures for You*

²⁰ Wick, (p. 512)

²¹ Michael W. O'Neill, *The Shouting Silence of the Apocalypse: An Examination of Revelation 8:1-6*

1. The Seventh Seal: Silence (Revelation 8:1-6)

This is the last of the seven seals that were broken open that we've been talking about. Seven means what? So the seventh seal is opened, and there is silence. Not nothing – silence. This silence is so unique and so powerful that it requires us to spend some time understanding it. In verse two we are given a picture of the seven angels with trumpets ready, and in verse 6 they are preparing to “blow them.”²² These seven angels could be identified as the seven angel guardians of the seven churches (Revelation 2-3), or, most likely, the seven archangels that are common in Jewish apocalyptic literature.²³ They stand – in respect of God's presence – at the ready, prepared to carry out the instructions that God gives them. These seven angels with seven trumpets will “announce God's judgments (Revelation 8:7–12; 9:1–21) and victory (11:15). Of course, the number **seven** (see 1:1–20) signifies the eschatological fulfillment of God's purposes.”²⁴

So, the silence...First of all, one scholar, Dr. Carol Rotz, states that the silence “allows a look back through the interval of chapter 7 to the punishments brought by the Four Horsemen, the cry of the martyrs, and the great earthquake of chapter 6. It also anticipates the trumpets of chapters 8 and 9 and beyond.”²⁵

“There is little debate over the silence itself. The word describes ‘the absence of all noise, whether made by speaking or by anything else; *silence, quiet.*’”²⁶ Exactly what the silence *is*, however, has been a source of differing opinions. Some have suggested that the silence [is] a momentary pause in God's revelation,²⁷ sort of like God is taking a divine break. Some have suggested there is an intentional similarity between the silence at (the seventh day of) creation and the imminent new creation.²⁸ I think there is something to this.

But a big clue to the significance of the silence can be found in the description of its length: thirty minutes. Some dismiss it as John's way of saying “for a few minutes.” But I agree with Dr. Rotz who says this: “the use of *half* as a time designation in Revelation (11:9, 11; 12:14) and Daniel (7:25; 9:27; 12:7) indicates a time of crisis and judgment.”²⁹ More than a dramatic pause, the silence is pregnant with God's message³⁰ of impending judgment.³¹ By the way, if you are interested in studying this more deeply, there are references and notes that are in my printed manuscript posted online.

I remember a time early in my ministry that I attended my first district assembly in Colorado (a meeting for all the pastors and represented in each church in Colorado). I guess there was a

²² Peterson, *The Message Bible*, Revelation 8:6

²³ Beale, *ibid* (p. 454)

²⁴ Rotz, C. *ibid* (p. 134)

²⁵ Rotz, C. (2012). *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (p. 132)

²⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F.W., & Bauer, W., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (p. 992)

²⁷ Beale, *ibid* (p. 445)

²⁸ O'Neill, pg 3

²⁹ Rotz, C. *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (p. 133)

³⁰ O'Neill, pg 4

³¹ Barry, *ibid*: “In the OT, silence is indicative of God's impending judgment (see Hab 3:3-6; Zech 2:13-3:2)” (Revelation 8:1) and Beale, *ibid*: “The Old Testament also associates silence with divine judgment.” (p. 446)

pastor in the previous year who had some pretty serious conflict with some people in his church, to the point that legal steps needed to be taken against them – some people in his church were disrupting services and threatening him. Somehow it became a discussion at assembly. And some older folks got up and made horrible statements about that pastor. I'd never heard the word "polecat" before, but that was one name they called him. Surprisingly, the presiding general superintendent let this go on. Then, off to the right of the auditorium, Dr. Don Wellman stood up and slowly walked to the podium. He was a tall, imposing man, and he was the pastor of Denver First Church, the largest church in our denomination at that time – about 5,000 people. This meeting was taking place in that church. Everyone grew silent and we all watched him purposefully walk to the front. He took his place behind the podium, sort of "settled" in, and then didn't say anything. Nothing. Silence. It seemed like forever, but it was probably only a minute or so. Everyone hung on the silence. There was anticipation in the room of over five hundred people. We could feel his displeasure, even though he didn't say anything yet. Finally, he said something like this: "I have met with this pastor, counseled this pastor, prayed and wept with this pastor. I know the story and I know that many of you making accusations are not near this story. Not only is this entire conversation out of order, the spirit of it grieves the Holy Spirit. I make a motion that this entire discussion be stricken from the record and that we repent." There was an immediate "second!" They voted, and it was *unanimous* – even the enemies were silenced! The General Superintendent led in prayer. I'll never forget that day. And I think that silence was something like what is going on with God's silence in this passage. Even God's *silence* has authority, so everyone else is silent – even God's enemies.

But there is more to this silence than a sort of "pregnant pause," and it has to do with what also happens in this silence with the prayers, the golden bowl, the incense, and the fire. Let me explain: John, who was seeing this vision, was a Jew who had become a follower of Jesus and an apostle. That means that John was very familiar with the Jewish practices of worship in the Temple. These images would have been very clear to him and to the Jewish Christian readers in the churches.

These verses describe clearly the sacrifice of the incense offering. Incense was a common part of Old Testament ritual that acknowledged God as supreme (Malachi 1:11). In this instance, the incense is given for the Lamb who was slain (5:6) and for those who have washed their robes by the blood of the Lamb (7:14). The silence, then, is for the incense offering. The angels have been given their trumpets, but they do not blow them until *after* this sacrifice has been offered; they stand at silent attention while the other angel (8:3-5) offers it before the throne. In Jewish worship at the temple, God's people would offer their prayers during the incense offering, believing it to be the most favorable time to do so. The incense and sacrifice were supposed to be offered in silence in the Temple. "The silence, then, portrayed their sense of awe of the God to whom the offering was made, and in anticipation of the answer – judgment – that was about to arrive."³² Then the angel arrives and prepares the golden bowl. Golden bowls were an important part of their worship (Exodus 27:3; 1 Kings 7:50). The combination of the incense and prayers is like David's prayer in Psalm 141...

³² O'Neill

“May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice. Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.” (Psalm 141:2-3, niv)

You might wonder *whose* prayers are being offered up in this passage. For sure the prayers of the martyrs that we read about earlier, but the language indicates the prayers of *all the saints* – all Christians through time who have been asking God to make all the wrong things in the world right.

It’s also important to see what the altar is that the prayers are brought to: it’s called the golden altar.

The golden altar is the Ark of the Covenant. (Revelation 11:19)

The *Ark of the Covenant* was really an *altar* – a place to meet God. And it was also *golden*. According to Leviticus 16:12...the offering of incense was, on the great Day of Atonement, made over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of holies.³³ In Jewish tradition, the Ark of the Covenant was also called “**the mercy seat**” – the place God’s presence was seated and would extend mercy to the people whose prayers were brought to him.

The imagery of the prayers of God’s people being offered on the altar of God (which was the very presence of God) reinforces the silent awe that surrounds this scene as well as giving force to God’s response: “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.”³⁴ God is going to answer in *full power*. The throwing of the censer to the earth initiates the judgment in answer to the prayers, ending the silence, and cueing the angels to blow their trumpets heralding God’s work.

Let’s not miss the lessons in this first point. This part of the passage teaches us the importance of silence, gives an awe-inspiring picture of God’s presence, it shows us the significant and real impact of believers’ prayers, and the timely and powerful response of God. Silence, whether in personal or during community worship, reminds the worshiper whose presence he or she is in.

It would do us good to seek silence. Our lives are far too noisy, far too busy. We have a hard time being silent in the presence of God. Maybe the Holy Spirit is not as evident in many churches today because people are not silent long enough; silent in awe and respect of the One in whose presence they stand, and silent in watching as God’s answer is carried out.

Do you know that in the history of the Church, there have been religious orders that take a vow of silence? Whether monks or nuns or spiritualists, they seek silence as a spiritual discipline to quiet their own spirits and to be in awe of the always-present God. But isn’t it interesting that there has never in the history of the church been anyone who has taken a vow of noisemaking or a vow of talking? “Silence is a spiritual discipline because it so unnatural to

³³ Lange, J. P., Schaff, P., Moore, E., Craven, E. R., & Woods, J. H. (2008). *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (p. 203). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

³⁴ *The New International Version*. (2011). (Re 8:5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

the human tongue.”³⁵ In fact, the tongue is identified in the Bible as a source of evil. James says:

“Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.” (James 3:5-6, niv)

Silence truly is golden, as they say.

Next then let’s see the...

2. Trumpets and Woes

(Revelation 8:7-9:21)

After the seven seals come seven trumpets, the last three of which include “woes.” The trumpet is used in the Bible for warning, for military attack, a cry of help to God, a signal for retreat, and a sign of judgment. In apocalyptic literature, the trumpet is used a lot because its glaring sound cuts into the hearer’s noisy life and demands immediate attention.

I’ll never forget one time when I was a youth pastor that my friend, Pastor Mark Pounds and I were directing a junior high camp in Oregon. At that campground, the girls slept in teepees and the boys in Conestoga wagons. The tent on the wagon was open at both ends. One morning, an entire group of boys over slept and were missing breakfast. So while the rest of the kids ate, my friend Mark and I crept up to the wagon. I had a megaphone that had a siren feature. Did I mention that my friend Mark played the trumpet and bugle? We got on each end of the wagon, looking over those sleeping cherubs. Silently we motioned one, two, three...and I pulled the trigger on the siren and my friend played revile on his bugle. Those boys jumped bolt upright, scrambling around trying to figure out what was going on and how to stop the noise.

The purpose of these trumpets in Revelation is to do exactly that: to wake up people who are deep in sin and get them to realize that things need to change. And please keep this important thing in mind as we quickly look at each of these: as awful as these judgments are, they *still* come from God’s heart of love for people and his desperate desire to see them change their ways. That’s why the judgments get progressively worse: because each time people don’t wake up, God turns up the volume.

Unfortunately, as you will see, rather than change their ways and turn to God, the people only get more hard-hearted, just like Pharaoh did when God brought the plagues on Egypt. In fact, that is *exactly* the point that is being made in this passage; because the trumpet judgments parallel the plagues on Egypt:

Trumpet

1st (8:7)

2nd/3rd (8:8-11)

4th (8:12)

5th (9:1-11)

Plague

Exodus 9:22-25

Exodus 7:20-25

Exodus 10:21-23

Exodus 10:12-15

³⁵ Eckley, *ibid* (pp. 116-117)

Just as the plagues were used to try to get Pharaoh to soften his hardened heart toward God's enslaved people, these judgments are poured out on the earth to warn the people who are persecuting Christians to stop their actions and start following God.³⁶

When will these judgments happen? Well, they were happening at the time of John's vision, and they have happened all down through the ages – God has always been trying to get people's attention. But as you can see in this passage, it will happen one last, cataclysmic time before it's all over.

You've probably figured out that I put no stock into trying to predict dates and times with these things. But I think we can all say we are closer today than we were when Revelation was written. I just read in yesterday's paper that the most persecuted group in the world today, according to researchers, is Christians, both by society and by governments, recorded in some 108 out of 198 countries in the world. Interestingly, Muslims came in second place, with 100. 8000 Christians are martyred every year – that's one Christian every hour of every day.³⁷ The martyrs of Revelation are real today. So with all that in perspective let's quickly look at the trumpets and woes.

- **The First Trumpet (8:6-7):** This first trumpet brings destruction on a third of certain areas of nature. It's interesting that we are told this is mixed with blood, but it doesn't say anything about there being any loss of human life. The blood could refer to the blood of the sins of people being brought back on their own heads. The use of "third" is generally used to describe the horrible extent of the destruction. But keep in mind God's mercy – if a third of things are destroyed, there are still two-thirds that are *not* (except for the grass), which means the earth is livable but it is no longer hospitable. I might as well quit worrying about watering my lawn! As bad as these judgments are, they are limited. All of these are aimed at "the inhabitants of the earth" (vs. 13), which seems to indicate the unbelievers of the world. The Christians were marked in the last chapter so that these destructions don't kill them, like in the Exodus when God's people put the blood of the sacrificed lamb over their doorposts and they were spared the death angel's plague. Remember the obvious comparison to the plagues in Egypt. It appears the Christians feel the impact of the first four trumpets, and then those who are marked by Christ are spared the 5th through 7th trumpets.

- **The Second Trumpet (8:8-9):** The picture of a huge, fiery mountain being thrown into the sea might have brought to the original readers' minds the enormous volcanic eruption of Vesuvius in Pompeii in AD 79. But also, in the Old Testament, a great mountain was compared to a great kingdom. The prophet Jeremiah described Babylon that way (Jeremiah 51:25). Whether the mountain is real or metaphorical of Babylon, The bottom line is that only God can move mountains, so this awesome, destructive display is clearly only by God's authority. The mountain does far more damage than an Exxon or BP oil spill; it destroys a third of all life in the sea – its water, its fish, even ships – and turns a third of the sea blood red.

- **The Third Trumpet (8:10-11):** The first two destroyed a third of the land and sea, now a third of the fresh water is destroyed by a huge falling star. Of course, we've been told for years that

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³⁷ Yakima Herald-Republic, Saturday, July 2, 2016, Page 8B

we've had near misses from massive comets, but this one hits its target. It is given a name – wormwood – which is a bitter herb mentioned a few times in the Bible in connection to idolatry (Deuteronomy 29:18; Jeremiah 9:15; 23:15) that, if put in water would turn it bitter and poisonous.

- **The Fourth Trumpet (8:12-13):** With this cataclysmic trumpet blast, a third of the cosmos are struck (stars, sun, and moon) so that a third of light is removed from the world. Light in the Bible is always a picture of God's goodness, his direction, and his Word (1 Corinthians 2:6-13; Psalm 116:130; 119:105; Genesis 1:3). When God created the world, he first created light. This means that people will be living in diminished "light," which means the presence of God. There will be much less of a moral quality to this world than even there is now. At this point, the warning is that soon people will lose God's presence altogether if they don't turn around.

The next three trumpets are even more severe, and a screaming eagle warns us about them. The actual word that is used is a "vulture," circling between heaven and earth, which makes the picture more ominous. It screams three "woes" – making it an emphatic, horrible warning. "What John has been watching crash down on the natural order is now about to fall on humanity directly. The whole of creation is coming apart at the seams."³⁸

- **The Fifth Trumpet/First Woe (9:1-12):** There is some crazy stuff going on here with this. There is a star falling from the sky with a key to something called "the abyss." Isaiah talked about a fallen morning star (called Lucifer), possibly also referring to the king of Babylon (Isaiah 14:12). Jesus said he saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18). Here, the star falls and has a key to what is commonly known as Hell. The clear common connection is the devil, our enemy of old, Satan. This event unlocks Hell and releases all kinds of evil from it. The smoke that comes out of it darkens the sun and sky. Demonic locusts flow out of the smoke, but instead of normal locusts that eat plants, these don't touch plant life at all, instead exclusively seeking to torment humans – all those without the mark of Christ. As I said last week: forget about the mark of the beast; make sure you have the mark of Christ!

We're told these demons are given free reign over people for five months. Five months is the life span of a normal scorpion. Again, even this terror is limited.

The description of these locusts is horrifying and graphic and gruesome. If you've read Hal Lindsay's book, it's hard not to think about modern Apache helicopters and chemical warfare. Some preachers a few years back tried to say these were the "killer bees" invading the United States and Mexican border. The mix of human war machines and demonic animals creates a dreaded and invincible opponent.

You don't even have to use modern war machinery to see the destructive possibilities of evil in the world. Some hybrid of the locust, a feared destroyer of the crops, with the scorpion, a venomous creature of the region, conjures up a nightmare for those living in *any* age.

Their leader is Satan. The Hebrew name (Abaddon) and the Greek name (Apollyon) for the angel are given, both meaning "destroyer" (Job 26:6; 28:22; and 31:12; Proverbs 15:11; 27:20; Psalm 88:11) and connected to death and hell. The Greek name is similar to the Greek god

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Apollo. Apollo was the favorite god of Domitian, who was the Greek emperor at the time. Domitian claimed he was a reincarnation of Apollo. John is making sure that the Christians aren't confused: the true source of Domitian's persecution of Christians comes from Satan.

- ***The Sixth Trumpet/Second Woe (9:13-19)***: This one is even more severe. People suffered terribly in the last one but they weren't killed. Now a third of humanity dies. The four angels that we read about before are turned loose from "the four horns of the altar." These are not trumpet horns but horned projections on the altar of covenant – the mercy seat that we talked about earlier. That's important! It tells us that even during judgment and destruction, God is calling out in mercy to those who will turn to him.

The death caused by this judgment comes by an enormous number of fearsome looking mounted troops (200 million). Demonic forces drive them, which reminds us that the actions of people can turn loose real demonic forces.

As we've said before, the first century reader would've thought about the Parthians. Over the last 75 years, we might think of modern bombers with gunners and bombs at the front and rear. Seventy-five years from now, it will describe some war machine or enormous army that we can't even imagine today. But the message is plain: humans will suffer by demonically driven forces to the point that a third of all mankind will be killed. And yet people still won't turn to God and instead become even more hard-hearted.

What does all this mean to us today? To answer that, we have to ask...

3. What about Judgment?

I think everyone, no matter who they are, knows that judgment is inevitable. We all have an innate sense of that. We are born with a sense of conscience and fairness. Along with this sense of right and wrong is an understanding that there are consequences for our actions (Unless a person is brainwashed or is a sociopath). The Bible warns us not to ignore our consciences or else we will get to the point that we don't have one anymore:

"These people are hypocrites and liars, and their consciences are dead." (1 Timothy 4:2, nlt)

But even with the person for whom that's true, even they can remember a time when they had a conscience. It is natural to have a sense of judgment.

Not only is it natural, justice demands that there will be a time of judgment. In the name of justice, we all feel the unfair things in life need to be weighed in the scales. There has to be someone with authority to judge and bring justice to this world. Our country's criminal justice system is one of the best in the world, even though we often hear of how it is broken. That's why we have checks and balances and an appeal process, in the hopes that eventually justice can be clearly determined. But our experiences on earth have brought us to the conclusion that the wicked have sometimes prospered. The whole "Occupy Wall Street" protest was based on this idea of justice; they just wrongly concluded that all who prosper are wicked. But if you think about it, every form of protest is driven by some sense of injustice, whether they

are right or wrong about it. We can all look around and see that good people unfairly suffer hardships in this world. We all want to see judgment. *Nature* expects it and *justice* demands it.

More important, and this is what we learn from Revelation (and the rest of the Bible): God declares justice. We can and should expect that there is an ultimate day of judgment.

Now, there are different types of judgment according to the Bible:

One is *Immediate*. Some judgments come as direct consequences of sin, either right after the sin or shortly after. This comes as a warning, giving the person an opportunity to repent.

Another is *Partial*. Some justice is delayed; which means is God giving more opportunity for repentance before full judgment is demanded – the final verdict is still pending.

Another is *Corporate*. Some justice is taken toward entire nations or groups of people. Even those who are associated with those nations or groups suffer their consequences.

Another kind of judgment that the Bible talks a lot about is *Personal*. Every person receives this as soon as they die, so that he or she will be going either to a place of peace and joy called heaven or to a place of agony called. There is only heaven or hell. Every individual will know his or her fate immediately after death.

Finally, the kind of judgment that Revelation deals with is *Final judgment*. This is the official and public recognition of every person in the general judgment at the Great Throne. The Bible assures us:

“For God shall bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.” (Ecclesiastes 12:14, niv).

The Bible also says:

“For God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:31, niv)

Of course, that man is Jesus Christ.

Already in Revelation we’ve seen that Jesus has the authority to bring about this kind of judgment:

“Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” (Hebrews 9:27-28, niv)

My friends, everyone will face judgment. Everyone. You have likely experienced one of the first three I mentioned, or maybe you are currently experiencing it. But you will, without a doubt, face the last two. *Everyone* will. What will you do about it? Don’t put off your decision! Just as Christ is authorized to judge you, he is also authorized to save you from judgment. You can come to him now and accept his free gift of new life for you. If you wait too late, you will be among those in this chapter who face it, but by then your conscience will

be so dead you won't be able to respond. You need to respond to Christ *now*, while your conscience is still alive. What you are feeling right now, even if it is very small, what you are feeling is your conscience doing its job. There's a reason why the Bible says:

"Since we work together with him, we are also begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain. He says, *I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation*. Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6:1-2, ceb)

Today is the day! Every day you put it off, your conscience dies a little more.

Pray for salvation

If you are already a Christian, don't mentally check out of what's going on here. If the person near you accepted Christ, part of your job is to help them – welcome them, pray for them, encourage them, and even disciple them. That IS your job. And you have another job – a job you are to do for the people who are NOT here today:

"God commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that Jesus is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead." (Acts 10:42, niv)

That is our COMMAND, Christian. When you read Revelation, you should realize you are in one of two camps, one of two countries, one of two kingdoms. If you are in the Kingdom of the world, you should be severely concerned about getting into Christ's Kingdom. If you are in Christ's Kingdom, you should be severely concerned about everyone who *is not*. Christian: if we get through this entire summer series and you are not motivated to start seeing your lost friends saved, to start sharing the Good News with others, then I'm afraid it is *your* conscience that is dead – and that is dangerous.

Pray

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
7/10/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Seven: Revelation 10-11:14
All in a Woe³⁹

The statue of a man stood over 100 feet tall. It was so large that if you tried to wrap your arms around the thumb, you wouldn't be able to reach your own hands.

It was one of the wonders of the ancient world, a colossus standing watch over the entrance to the bay on the island of Rhodes, an island in the Mediterranean off the coast of modern Turkey. It was erected in 280 BC as a tribute to their favorite god, Helios and stood watch over the bay for only 54 years until the earthquake of 226 BC destroyed it. Its ruins remained on the ground for over 800 years and continued as a tourist attraction. Legend says that it stood across both sides of the harbor, but historians say it was actually alongside the harbor. It was the subject for many artists through the centuries, and is said to be the inspiration for French sculptor, Auguste Bartholdi, best known by his famous work, the 'Statue of Liberty' that stands today in New York. There are currently a group of architects, artists, engineers and scientists from Italy, Spain, and Greece who are attempting to gain enough support to rebuild The Colossus of Rhodes today, except they intend it to be five times as tall at 500 feet and will have a museum in it and a revolving restaurant on top.

Even with a newly rebuilt "Colossus" at 500 feet tall, it still would not be as large as the angel that John saw in his vision described in Revelation 10! If you've read the passage for today in advance, you are probably scratching your head wondering what in the world is going on?! We've gone from the silence in heaven in the first part of chapter 8 to this crazy, chaotic collection of actions and images that are chapters 10 and 11.

So today, at the half way point in our series, we will do what we've been attempting to do all throughout our time in Revelation: we'll try to understand what all the apocalyptic images are (and what they are not), we'll try to learn what they have to say to us as West Valley Church, and we'll learn how God wants us to apply it to our lives so that we can be the kind of Christians he intends for us to be. In the process, hopefully you will learn how better to read Revelation as well as the rest of the Bible.

³⁹ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Pazzaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, ed. E Ray Clendenen, vol. 39, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 228-251; John Yeatts, *Revelation*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 181-200; Lewis Foster, *Revelation: Unlocking the Scriptures for You*, Standard Bible Studies (Cincinnati, OH: Standar, 1989), 137-156

From the beginning of chapter four through the end of chapter nine, John has been watching the activity of God almost entirely from the perspective of heaven. But in chapter ten John is back on earth watching the purpose of God as it is carried out among humanity. John sees coming from heaven...

1. The Angel (Revelation 10:1-7)

...that is so great he has one foot on a continent and another in the ocean. The angel's size represents the fact that the message he holds is *universal*; it covers the entire globe. This mighty angel could very well be Gabriel himself (Daniel 8:16-26; 9:20-27; 10:4-6; 12:6-7), but he's not identified by name. Not only is he enormous, but also John's description of him is highly symbolic:

“He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand.”
(Revelation 10:1-2, niv)

There are some clear implications with these images. Remember in the last chapter we noticed that the trumpet judgments reflected the plagues that God brought on Egypt? One scholar, Dr. Scott Daniels explains this angel image in light of the Exodus event: “It is very likely that John is continuing to paint with the colors of the Old Testament, in particular the Exodus story. The (rain)bow may recall God's promise through Noah, the pillars of fire God's presence in the wilderness, and the scroll the Law on tablets of stone.”⁴⁰ Daniels is not alone in that interpretation – most scholars agree. The description of this angel also has similarities to descriptions of Christ in the Bible (Daniel 7:13; Revelation 1; Acts 1:9). But it is very clear that the angel is *not* Christ. The reason this angel has similarities with Christ is because his message and actions come directly from Christ Himself. His message is fully authorized and dictated from the Lion who is the Lamb. That's why we're told:

“He gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion.” (Revelation 10:3, niv)

He has come directly from the throne-room presence of the Lion-Lamb Himself, Jesus Christ.

The angel's roar is so great that we are told it awakens the “seven thunders.” This is a curious thing. The seven thunders “awaken” and say something. John begins to write down what they say, but John is told by a voice from heaven not to write it down and instead to seal it up. So why are we even told it happened, if we're not allowed to know what they said? And who are “they,” anyway? (No really; I'm asking you!)

Whatever “they” are, the way John uses the word “the” in the original language means the first century readers knew what he meant by “seven thunders.” Unfortunately, that meaning has been lost to us. We *can* get some hint, though, from Psalm 29. That Psalm praises the power and awesomeness and glory of God. It says that God's voice is over the waters and that his glory “thunders.” That phrase “the Lord's voice” is repeated seven times in the Psalm, so it very well could be that the “seven thunders” John is describing is the voice of God.

⁴⁰ Daniels

So why is John told not to write it down? For one thing, this is a familiar motif all through Revelation: it reveals, while at the same time it withholds. The reason Revelation does that a lot is to constantly remind us that, for as much as we know about God and his ways, there is much to God that is, and always will be, a mystery to us. His ways are beyond our ways, as Isaiah told us (55:8-9). So God's whole plan in human history, especially the end, is going to be a mystery to us, and we'd better get used to that.

There is also a strong suggestion that the "seven thunders" is a series of seven warnings that God has decided to withhold and *not* carry out. Remember last week we saw that people will be so hard-hearted that they are not willing to repent? So it could very well be that God is saying that there is no point in carrying out these "seven thunder" judgments – people won't respond anyway.

Isn't that a horribly sad picture?! That we would stop listening to God, and be so unwilling to listen to him and to turn to him, that he finally gives up on trying to get our attention?

At any rate, then this mighty angel raises his right hand to heaven and solemnly swears that the answer to the prayers of God's people is about to take place (remember we've been hearing about those prayers since chapter six). The time of the delay in God's ultimate redemption of people and creation is over. God's mysterious purposes will be brought to completion. The end, when everything that is wrong is made right and everyone who is going to turn to God will do so, the end is all going to take place after the next trumpet blast. For the early church, this would've been good news. The seven thunders would've delayed the end even longer, but now the time for the end has arrived.

I need to remind you at this point that, as has been the case so far, John is not trying to give us a chronology of events. He is not interested in a sequence of historical events as much as the certainty of the final act. In other words, he isn't describing things with a sense of one thing happening right after another, nor is he indicating any dates or sequences in which these things are going to happen. He is more interested in *timeliness* than *timelines*. He is *describing what* God is doing more than *prescribing when* God will do it. *Revelation is descriptive more than predictive.*⁴¹ So from this point on, John is really focusing his narrative on "his inspired understanding of the nature of God's ultimate redemption."⁴²

Following the declaration from the angel, the attention in the scene turns to...

2. A Little Scroll (Revelation 10:8-11)

Unlike the scroll in chapter five, this scroll is already opened. The original language points out that the scroll was small, or little. John was able to take it in his hand, so it probably appeared *very small* in the giant angel's hand! But it could also be that it is a small part of the larger scroll with seven seals that was in the hand of the One seated on the throne. This small scroll then would symbolize *John's story*, and *the story of the church*, as they – *and we* – live into the

⁴¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* (NY, Crown Publishing Co., 2015) 58

⁴² Daniels

greater story that is God's purposes in the world.⁴³ In other words, we have a part in the story!

The angel instructs John to take the scroll and eat it. There is some strange imagery if you are not familiar with what it refers to. This refers back to what happened with the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel (2:8-3:3). Ezekiel was instructed to take a scroll and eat it, and when he ate the scroll, it tasted as sweet as honey to him. It tasted that way for John, too – at first. Then it turned sour in John's stomach. So what does that mean? In both cases, God wants his spokesperson to ingest God's Word. By consuming the scroll, the message is assimilated into John's life; it has become a part of John. This is similar to why we share communion – we want the death of Christ to become *our* story, to become the fabric of our very lives. We can't get enough of it. We consume the Good News of God's love for us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

So if the Gospel message is sweet, why did it turn sour? The Good News is exactly that – it tastes good! And as we consume God's Word, it is sweet because it is part of God's will and purpose. Anyone who has trusted Christ's death and resurrection to save them and change them knows how wonderful it feels to be forgiven and set free from sin; to have the voice of God and the presence of the Spirit in their lives. But at the same time it is hard to digest because the purposes of God for John and for the early church and us included walking through terrible tribulation, persecutions, suffering, and even death. It is hard for *us* to digest because the truth is, being a Christian means we must sacrifice and at least be willing to go through persecutions and tribulation, whether we ever have to face it to that extreme or not. Being a Christian also means we are expected to set aside our own selfish desires and determine to spend our lives living for Christ, serving others, and introducing others to Jesus. It is a sacrifice, and it means we might also be rejected or persecuted by the very people we are loving and serving.

I remember my first experience with some of that after I became a Christian in high school. I had a group of friends that I would hang out with and party with. After I got saved, naturally I quit partying and all that wild life and language. But I still liked my friends and wanted to hang out with them, and I especially didn't want them to miss out on what I was experiencing. So I continued to hang out with them. I went to parties with them, but I didn't drink or do any of the other things. Then it dawned on me one day that for three weeks in a row, after the Friday night football games, all my friends said they had to go to work the next morning or that they were tired, so they either dropped me off at home or just left without me. I found out that they were going to parties without me. It hurt me, so I asked them about it. They said, "We're really glad you found Jesus, but you keep talking about Him. And it kills our buzz. We feel guilty getting drunk and stoned with you around." It was then, as a brand new Christian only a few months old, that I realized that being a Christian meant there were going to be times that the world rejected me, because they rejected Christ. I didn't get a persecution complex, I just realized that whether I wanted it or not, people were going to treat me differently than they had before.

⁴³ Daniels

But let me say this: some overzealous Christians think that unless they get rejected they aren't being real witnesses, so they get more and more obnoxious about it. And the more obnoxious they get, of course the more they get rejected. And the more they get rejected, the more pride they take in that and the more obnoxious they get. That's *not* sharing the Good News, that's being obnoxious and stupid. We are supposed to *love* people. The Bible says:

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But *do this with gentleness and respect.*” (1 Peter 3:15, niv)

So we need to be loving and respectful, but at the same time, we need to be willing to make significant sacrifices in our comfort levels if we are going to follow Jesus.

When John ate the scroll, he was no longer *writing down* the message; he was now *part of* the message. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has often said, “The Church does not just bear the message of Christ, the Church is the message of Christ.”⁴⁴

This is the point of the entire passage, and I think you'll see that by the time we are done. “The early church as they walk through the challenges set before them do not just proclaim the message of God's redemption, they embody that redemption in their life together and in the way they treat their enemies.”⁴⁵

When the angel declared, “there will be no more delay,” the early church didn't decide it was time to hole up and hunker down and huddle together and wait for the end. They knew the end meant they needed to go out and be witnesses *all the more*. The gift of the Gospel and the consuming mandate of the Word of God sent them out into the world of peoples, nations, languages, and kings. The time was short; so they ramped up their efforts. They consumed God's purpose; it oozed from their pores. John's eating the scroll is a sign of the church's mission to carry the gospel into the world around us: to both speak and show witness of the Gospel, introducing others to Jesus with our lives and words. *This is vital to the message of Revelation.*

If you believe we are getting close to the end, prove it: be a bolder messenger of the Gospel. For those who are so busy trying to pinpoint years and days of events in Revelation, let me just ask: “Why are you doing that? What is your motivation? Are you hoping that knowing dates will tell you when to let off the gas and coast home? So you know how much longer to hunker down in an apocalypse shelter with your rations and ammo? If you are really reading Revelation honestly, you will easily see that the clear challenge is *to get out and show Christ to others*. If you really think the date is fast approaching, you will quadruple your efforts to see your friends saved. Quit trying to find a hidden meaning and read what's in plain sight. I beg you! The time is short friends. We've got to care enough to personally see people saved around us.

Well, the scene shifts to...

⁴⁴ Daniels

⁴⁵ Daniels

3. The Range of a Reed (Revelation 11:1-2)

There is a brief and unusual scene where John is given a reed, which is a weedy stick that grows near rivers. It actually grew in predictable segments and was used for measuring, so it's like the passage is saying he was handed a ruler. Then John is told to measure the Temple with it. These two verses could be considered a sort of "acted out parable"⁴⁶ or an object lesson. Some people read this and think it is talking about the literal Temple, either of their time or when it might be rebuilt in our day. But there are problems with that. For one, the Temple was completely destroyed over 20 years *before* John's vision, so there's no way it was that Temple. So what about a new physical temple? Well, what does the New Testament say the Temple is: is it a building, or the people of God? It is the Church, right? So John's measuring of "the Temple" is really about measuring the *church* – the people of God. John is told that all those "inside" the measurement will be protected, but those "outside" won't be. It uses the metaphor of the "court of the Jews" and the court of the Gentiles," but don't be confused – it's not making statements about Jews and Gentiles. It's making statements about Christians and non-Christians. What we are being told here is that no matter how intense the persecution gets (and every indication is that there *will* be intense tribulation), even if and when we are killed for following Christ, we *still* have the ultimate, eternal Temple – Heaven – that we will live in forever. For the same reasons, these verses are not speaking of the specific geographic city of Jerusalem, but it is a metaphor for the people of God.

John's told that those who attack the Temple will be able to do so for "42 months." There has been a lot of debate about this between those who take Revelation too literally and those who take it too figuratively. The literalists say these two little verses point to a rebuilding of the Temple and that this is the first half of a specific number of days that you can set your calendar by. The figurativists say it is not anything specific, just a reminder that we will all face trials in this life. Both camps are pretty entrenched, which makes an important point:

We don't know without a doubt how these things are going to play out, so we need to learn the lessons from what we do know for sure.

If you haven't already figured it out, we are going to have to become comfortable with what we *don't* know, and start being obedient to what we *do* know. So what *do* we really know? Well, we already know the Temple reference is the Church, so we can't get a physical Temple being rebuilt, at least not from these two verses. What about the time frame? Forty two months, or three and a half years, or 1260 days (11:3; 12:6) is also referred to in Revelation as "a time, times, and half a time" (12:14). Most scholars agree that it is *not* literal. In the Old Testament, forty-two months is always associated with violent death (2 Kings 2:23–24; 10:14).

The term also recalls the time frame of Daniel's prophecies of tribulation (Daniel 7:25; 9:27; 12:7, 11, 12). The initial fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy occurred during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes from 175 to 164 B.C. (as recorded in 1 Macc 1–3; 2 Macc 5). The Jews suffered horrible persecution and the desecration of their Temple from 168-165 B.C. – a period of three and a half years. That amount of time became synonymous with suffering in their collective memory, so that it signified "violent useless killing". In the Gospels (Matthew 24:15 and Mark

⁴⁶ Rotz

13:14), the fulfillment of Daniel 9:27 (the dividing of the seventieth “seven”) is related to the Roman siege of Jerusalem in AD 70, which lasted about three and a half years.⁴⁷ So there was plenty of biblical and corporate memory for the early Christians to hear the time frame and understand it meant *at least* that they’d better buckle up and prepare for more intense tribulation, persecution, and suffering.

So there’s not really any specific calendar date that is a peg here that you can hang a hat on – there’s not even nail sticking out of some wood. But we do know that we must endure any and all kinds of personal sacrifice, hardship and suffering as we introduce people to Jesus Christ, and that it’s going to get more and more intense to the final point before the end.

Now what about...

4. The Two Witnesses (Revelation 11:3-14)

This section is what’s called “narrative prophecy.” The main emphasis we see is more of the continual example for us to be faithful witnesses. The unfolding drama is very different from the previous vision of the angel and scroll eating. Two cryptic characters are introduced who witness, are killed, and then are resurrected. There are a whole lot of different interpretations on who they are and how this will be fulfilled, but here’s what I can tell you: it’s best not to get too caught up in the details, and let’s make sure we hear the message to the church through the symbolic actions of these two witnesses.⁴⁸

Their role is as prophets, or to declare the Word of God to people. There are two of them, which is what it took to validate a witness’s testimony as “true” in their culture. They are dressed in typical prophet’s clothing, which represented mourning. They mourned because they grieved about what will happen to people who don’t listen to God’s offer of hope and salvation. Does that make you and I grieve? We’re told they are two olive trees and lampstands. John is referring back to the message of the prophet Zechariah (4:2-6, 11-14). The lampstand for Zechariah represents God’s people, the temple, and God’s presence among the people. Sounds like the Church again, doesn’t it? The two olive trees in Zechariah represent the religious and political leaders of Israel at that time, and is meant to show that God works through people in spite of their weaknesses. Sounds like the church again, doesn’t it?

The description of the abilities of the two witnesses tells us that they are models of Moses and Elijah. Like Elijah they have the power to consume enemies with fire (2 Kings 1:10 ff.); prevent rain (1 Kings 17:1); and ascend to heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Like Moses they turn waters to blood (Exodus 7:14–18) and strike the earth with plagues (Exodus 8:16). (We are told they have the power to kill anyone who opposes them at any time, but we are not told they actually do it. This means they have the full authority of their message. Rejection of the prophetic witness results in spiritual death by the very words that are meant to bring eternal life.) There was an

⁴⁷ Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), 163.

⁴⁸ Rotz

expectation among the Jews that one or both of Moses and Elijah would return (see Malachi 4:5; Deuteronomy 18:18) and remember both appeared at Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17:3-4; Mark 9:4-5; Luke 9:30-33).⁴⁹

The length of their ministry happens at the same time as the period of violence spoken of earlier – the “three and a half years” period of intense persecution: 1) persecution, 2) witnessing, 3) the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). So clearly, in the midst of violent persecution, we have the law and the prophets to give authority to our witness. What is our witness? Jesus said that *all* of the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled in the twin command to love God and love people (Matthew 22:37-40).

The witnesses are then martyred. Their faithful witness results in death, and they are faithful witnesses with their death. But the language indicates that they were killed only when their ministry was completed. Their lives were not cut short; they had completed their mission. When you wholeheartedly witness for Christ you will not die before your time.

The one who kills them is the beast. This is the first mention of the beast, and I'd love to go into detail about who this is, but we'll save that for his next appearance. (Sorry!) One thing is clear: he gets his marching orders from hell itself.

The bodies of the two martyrs remain in public view, which for Jews was the ultimate disgrace (Isaiah 5:25). We're told that happens in “the Great City.” What's that? So far, that term has been used for both Jerusalem and Babylon (which to the original reader meant Rome). It's called “Sodom” and “Egypt,” representing both the degree of its sin and its desire to enslave God's people, whether spiritually or literally. So...that could be anywhere! Their bodies are exposed for “3 ½ days.” This emphasizes the disparity of their humiliation against the “years” of their ministry, meaning it doesn't come close to undoing their impact. It also reminds us that they are just like the one they serve – Christ – who was dead and buried for three days.

“Every people, tribe, language, and nation” of the world views their bodies. This is a direct opposite of the “people, tribe, language, and nation” that made up the Church in chapter seven. This is telling us that the rejection of Christ's message is worldwide. The unsaved world was so tormented by the truth of God's message through the witnesses, that they all celebrated and even exchanged gifts at the deaths of the witnesses like some sort of morbid Christmas party.

But after the witnesses are dead and decomposing, God brings them back to full life and health, and they are taken up to heaven in a cloud. The cloud represents God's acceptance of them into heaven. Remember that the Old Testament indicates that both Elijah and Moses were simply taken into heaven, and of course Jesus ascended into a cloud. This is such a powerful display that there is an earthquake, which represented a sign of divine judgment, and also tied back to the earthquake when Jesus died and was resurrected. A tenth of the “Great city” is destroyed in the earthquake. There isn't anything in the original language to indicate that this is a specific number; it just means “a lot.” And then we are told the number of people who are killed is 7,000. Seven means what? So 7 – complete – and a thousand – a whole lot –

⁴⁹ Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2012), 174.

means that God knows exactly the complete number who die in their sins. But finally, the resurrection of the witnesses and the devastating earthquake scares everyone else! There is an indication that it literally scares the “hell” out of the people who remain, because they are so terrified that they finally praise God. Literally it can mean “they acknowledge the truth” or it can mean “conversion.” Finally!

Then, we are told, comes the time for the third “woe” – the end. The *very last* thing that happens before the end: a bunch of people in the world get saved! So don’t ever give up witnessing!

So let me summarize all this if I can by helping us make sure we don’t miss...

5. The Word for Us

We could spend a lot of energy attempting to identify specific locations and people from these passages. You can do that if you want – I can give you the resources because I’ve read through pages and pages and pages of research. There are several opinions among scholars, and there are way, way more opinions from people who are nowhere near being scholars. Will there be literally two witnesses? Maybe. But *we know for sure* that they represent the church, because they are faithful witnesses in the midst of persecution and they have the authority of the Law and the Prophets behind them. Will there be a literal earthquake? Maybe, but *we know for sure* that there will be divine judgment against those who don’t accept the message. Is there a literal city? Maybe, but *we know for sure* it could be any city in the world that rejects God’s message and life and people. Will there be tribulation for three and a half years? Well, *we know for sure* there’s been tribulation for the entire history of the church. Of course *we also know for sure* it’s going to get worse.

So we *must* focus on what *we know for sure*, what the images tell us, and how we are supposed to live as Christians because of it. That means, like John, **we have a part in the story. We have a message of the Good News of God for the entire world, that we can share by introducing people to Jesus – telling them who he is and what how much he loves them.** We have a front row seat to see what will happen to people who reject Christ, and it is horrible. There will come a time when God stops trying to reach people. There is not anyone I love that is not a Christian that I want to see go through that. I don’t even want to see the people I don’t love go through that!

We have the vivid example that we are to remain faithful witnesses even though we get rejected, persecuted, or even killed. We know we’ve got to make it our *number one priority* to tell people about Christ regardless of what they do to us, because we have been “measured” – we have the promise of heaven forever. We will not die before our time.

So, as usual my friends, if you are hearing this and you are not a Christian, you have just gotten a sneak preview of what’s ahead for you. I beg you: take seriously what God wants to save you from and let him save you.

Christian: our calling is clear: we must take our part of the story and not only *tell* the message, but **BE** the message, everywhere we go, on purpose, in the hopes that others will

respond. Because Revelation 11 tells that even at the very last minute of history, before the end, there will still be people who will respond to the Gospel. Don't give up; in fact, turn it up. Introduce people to the Jesus you know.

Pray

West Valley Church
Pastor James Lounsberry
7/17/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Eight: The Seventh Trumpet
Revelation 11:15-19

So I am going to get the opportunity to do a little introduction to our message this morning. If you are new to us, or if you are bad with names like I am, my name is Bethany and I just happen to be attached to our preacher this morning. James is our youth pastor, and he just happens to be my husband.

We are going to be celebrating in September, 11 years of marriage, which is not a lot, but we are excited about how much time that is. We are really blessed to be in this community of faith where there are such long-standing marriages. We get to be blessed by all the marriages around us. Last year for our 10 year anniversary we were able to go to Maui. We've been able to do that a couple of times. We did it for our five year and we loved it so much we said, "Let's do it again in five years." So we planned on our 10 year anniversary and we did it again. Thank you for letting me steal him and take him to the beach, because I know it meant he missed being with you a couple of those Sundays.

We discovered on our vacations together we just like to be simple and laid back and relax and have no agenda. So we eat well, and we sleep well, and then we plan out activities as the day rolls out. One of our favorite things that we have started to do on these trips, because we're planning on doing it again in four more years, is to go to the beach every morning. There is a beach that essentially, in the early morning, has nobody there. We have our very own private beach; so we do that every morning. When the crowds start to flood in we leave and then plan the rest of our day. One of those days we wanted to plan a hike and I said, "Okay", so I started to look up some stuff. We knew there would be some hiking but we didn't want to do something that would be a whole day because we had already spent half the day at the beach. The whole day hike, you know, pack your stuff and be out all day. But we did know we wanted to do a little bit longer, or at least a little bit more than just a flat walk. We wanted to do a little bit of a hike and have some views so I started doing some research, I saw a hike that I thought looked perfect for us and set some expectations, and then I found the Waihee Ridge Trail. I set expectations for James as I looked and did my trail guide stuff to the best of my ability. Yeah, I know how to read this; I know what to look for. I took a look at what we were going to be doing and said, "Okay, it's going to be a couple miles (that's about as much detail as he needed). It's going to be up, there's going to be some elevation, there's going to be some challenging, and there's going to be some beautiful views. It's probably going to be about an hour, maybe a little more than an hour roundtrip."

Well, somehow, it really came to fruition that what I knew about reading trail guides was different than what actually happens in the real world. My base knowledge of what it means,

cause I've been actively running and I've been doing like seven miles, and this wasn't that long. I knew I could do four or five miles walking in an hour or so. I thought, okay, it's going to be about an hour. That's why I said, "It's going to be about an hour, and it's going to be an hour roundtrip. So that means it's going to be about 30 minutes up and 30 minutes down and there's going to be some elevation. So it means we are going to be going up quite a bit in that 30 minutes. Okay, so are we ready for that?" He said, "Yeah, we are ready for that." We started on the trail and got going. I realized that I have done a lot of little hikes and not a lot of ridges, there is something different about that. It's not that it is more difficult or that it is easier, it's that my perception was off. Because what happens on a ridge is that you go up and up, and you see sky and you say, "We're almost there. Nope, nope, we're not almost there. Okay we're almost there, we're almost there. Nope, nope, we're not almost there. Okay we're almost there, we're almost there. No we're not." So the phrase, "Oh it's just over that rise," became really important because James said, "How much farther?" And I said, "This has got to be it and it's just over this rise, we're going to hit the end right here. We've got to do this little climb and that's it." So I think we've got a picture. Here is one point in the hike. This is one of them. So that clearly is the top, absolutely. Like any doubt when you're looking at that, there's nowhere else to go? That's the top. So that's what we proceeded to do and well over an hour, not at the top yet. James was (I'm sure none of you guys have ever done this to your wife), done with this little fun hike. He's like, well, let's just turn around. I said, "No, we're not at the top yet. We gotta keep doing it; we've got to muscle through it. Let's get through it, let's do the hard work." Not to mention that our path was kinda funky. There was this muddy dirt stuff. You could tell it had rained previously and people had come and tromped – there were these huge foot indents. And you didn't want to step in them because then your foot was here so you kinda – I don't know, the footing was crazy. But at that point, well over an hour, we're still not to the top. I'm still just trying to enjoy the elevation. Just so you know what the real stats are, if you are a real trail person, this might mean more to you than to me at that moment, so it was 4 ½ miles round trip. I think that is about what I said. It actually said one to three hours roundtrip and I just read the one hour and a 1500 foot incline gain during that time. So that didn't mean anything to me in the real world. It just meant we were going to go up. And it's not 10,000 feet like Denver. It's just 1500 feet – like how hard could that be? So what ended up happening is I needed to take some breaks and I proceeded to take some pictures. I took this picture. James was done and he didn't want to give up on me, so he just went on ahead, faster, harder, not as happy, but he went. So in this next picture you can see a little red circle – that's him way up there. He was going to make it, because I assured him, it's got to be time. That's got to be the top. So this has got to be our last rise. He said, "I'm going to get there." And I said, "I'll catch up with you." He vaulted on ahead of me, and I hate to say it, but that wasn't the top. But it did end up being the top for us.

So if we're thinking about Revelation and this mountain of a sermon series we've had this summer, I don't know what your expectations have been. A little bit of my expectation has been, because I am a PK (pastor's kid), religion major, PW (pastor's wife) – Revelation did not thrill me because I knew what that was going to mean. It was going to be a lot of hard work. There is going to be a lot of interpretation. There was going to be a lot of digging. There is going to be a lot diffusing all this other stuff that was going on. And it was probably going to be

confusing and I wasn't all that excited about it. I don't know what expectation you've got, but maybe you're like James on that trail, not really having any content or any knowledge about what this book has for us, what God's message is for our life today. So if you just put it in the hands of the pastors, you can say, "Okay, I don't know anything about this. I'm just along for the ride, discovering it as it unfolds." Maybe you are like me with knowledge, but it's not applicable to the world. For me, some of Revelation has just been hard to figure out. In my life, how does this apply to me today? Okay, I can read it and there are words and I understand those words, but it doesn't have any meaning for what I need to do about it today. It doesn't have that 1500 foot elevation gain in two miles kind of meaning. I think our pastors have done an incredible job of helping us dissect and really look at the important parts, to really pick all this really confusing message out.

But I will tell you, on a hike, there's something else. At the top of each one of those rises there's a plateau, which is why you can't see the next rise. You get to do this little plateau and you get to see these beautiful clearings, beautiful views and it's calm. It's not an elevation; it's this nice plateau. Here's a picture of them. This opening where the sky is just open and it's clear with no confusion, no hard work, just the beauty of it.

So I have good news, today's message from Revelation, we're on the clearing; we're on a little plateau. We've been doing a lot of hard work. I hope you felt it was a lot of hard work because it's supposed to feel like hard work. This isn't an easy message, straightforward. Today we have something to look forward to in a clear, straightforward message. We can take a deep breath; we can rest in what God has for us. It's not that it's easy to hear God's voice, but this one he has made a lot clearer for us. Let's get on this journey, let's keep moving forward knowing that we are going to have another rise. Let's move forward together.

Bethany Lounsberry prayed.

Pastor James Lounsberry:

I did not put this on Bethany – she volunteered to do the intro. I told her that if she wanted to do that – sure!

Last week I shared at the end of the sermon about how I have been gone a lot these last few weeks. In fact I have been home for a whole week, which has been great. Life has been very busy and chaotic, so I wanted to share a little bit about what has been going on these last few weeks. Back on June 17, I had the joy of heading out of town and meeting up with Bethany's family in Yellowstone. I have a slide with these beautiful pictures of Yellowstone that we got to be a part of. It was really awesome. I will tell you in these last three weeks, until last week, I drove a total of 3400 miles and went through six different states. It wasn't that I clipped through a state, I went THROUGH the state. So I have done a lot of driving, I've sat in a lot of cars and vans and lots of stuff. But in the midst of it, this was part of that experience. I got to spend about a week with her family in Yellowstone. I never realized all that's there. You hear about Old Faithful, that kind of thing. We got to see Old Faithful and we were really impressed, but I was not as impressed as I was with some of the other things we got to see. We got to see

a lot of animals and it was also just a great time with family and just spending time together. That was one phase of my time away.

Then I got home on Sunday night the 26th. In two days I had to do my laundry, repack, make sure I had all the final details, and then get ready to take six adults and 40 students to Los Angeles. So that is the next set of pictures. You see in the Happenings we had an awesome time of working and serving in the city of Los Angeles. We got to learn a lot about the city, the needs there, and being a part of that experience there. There is something to be said about going on a trip like that and getting to watch students give of themselves and do this work and be the hands and feet of Christ in all sorts of different kinds of opportunities. It was such a blessing, a lot of fun; it was a lot of work, a lot of driving, a lot of me trying to keep everyone together. Unfortunately, Grandview brought about 14 of those 40 kids and their youth pastor had some family things come up and he could not go. So it became not us together working on this but it became me running the whole thing. So this gives you a perspective of what my life has been like the last few weeks, but there is something to be said in all of this about getting to see God's kingdom in these different aspects of life. And that's why I wanted to share these things with you, it really does tie in this morning with the message and where we are going.

To start off I want to read a passage out of Matthew. Jesus commands us to do this when we pray:

“This then is how you should pray, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”
(Matthew 6:9-10, niv)

I'm sure many of you have recited that prayer. You have reflected on it, we have done sermons on it, we've mentioned it, we've talked about it. It is a big part and Jesus commands us to do it. Jesus tells the disciples to do it. The reason behind it is that we want to see God's kingdom on earth. So we need to be praying that prayer. Pray that his kingdom will come and his will will be done here in this place.

There is something to be said as we come into the second half of chapter 11. Pastor Mike shared last week the first half of chapter 11 and as we were going through that he was talking about the two witnesses, their death and them being there as a sight to see and their resurrection and the earthquake that comes and wipes out a large group of people. Then, the many who come to repentance of God. That's what we finished off with last week, with verse 14 of chapter 11.

I want to read one part that Pastor Mike emphasized at the end of that message last week. He said, “We have a part in that story, we have a message of the good news of God for the entire world that we can share by introducing people to Jesus, telling them who he is and how much he loves them.” I want you to be thinking about that because it really does tie into this morning's message in Revelation. It is a call to us and what God wants to do here in this place.

So let's go on. We're going to start at verse 15 of Revelation chapter 11, and it says this:

“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 Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small—and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe hailstorm.” (Revelation 11:15-19, niv)

A few weeks ago Pastor led us through the six trumpets. He talked about each of those trumpets and the different things that came with those. They brought different plagues and woes and different things that happened all the way to this point. Then last week we had this interlude, this break in the six trumpets. Every single one of those trumpets has been God’s “call to action” for his people. With all the sin and evil that has been in this world, God has been trying through these trumpets to call us back to repentance. So each one of these trumpets represented that, all the way to this final one.

But there is something different about this trumpet. This trumpet comes with a heavenly announcement. It is joy, it’s a celebration. It’s different than the other ones because the other ones brought ugly things into the world. It’s interesting that when God tends to do this and calls us and calls for us, a lot of times we tend not to listen. If you think about it, God is trying to call us to action, to call our attention to him. Oftentimes we are not very good at wanting to listen. Even when we know we are doing the wrong thing, being willing to follow he calls us out on it.

I like how Dr. Carol Rotz puts it. She puts it this way: “Each of the seven trumpets was God’s voice calling his fallen creation to repentance. The announcement of good news to John’s readers meant ‘woe to the rebellious world order.’” So the seventh trumpet is a little different because it is that celebration because it is God’s coming. It’s not a plague, it’s a joy and we get to see this hymn and the elders singing the praise chorus, singing out to God. It’s a lot like we read earlier at the beginning of Revelation. John talks about his encounter with Christ, and when he does that for the first time in his vision, it comes with this loud announcement, this voice calling out to Christ. The same thing is happening here; John is experiencing these majestic voices singing praises and bringing this announcement of God’s coming to the earth.

As we think about that seventh trumpet, maybe some of you have thought about it, so I’m going to make you aware of it. There have been within these trumpets these woes. In chapter 9 we heard about a woe and last week it refers to another woe. There’s been two, but there’s supposed to be a third. So where is the woe in this celebration and this announcement? Where is the woe? Well the woe is the seventh trumpet. Think about it, if you look at life and you look at God calling out to us, there is going to be a time when God is going to be done. And so oftentimes we think, what’s the next thing, what’s that thing that’s going to happen next. There’s going to be the point when God is going to say, “It’s done.” And so the calling of the seventh trumpet, that celebration, is also the end. God’s done calling out trying to bring us

home. There's a point when it is all said and done. So the woe really does come just because of that declaration. God's not doing anything more.

There's going to be a lot more stuff we're going to be reading in the next few weeks, but that is what that seventh trumpet really is. It's us realizing that it's complete. Remember, what is seven? Complete. It's that idea that it is complete. So here's the seventh trumpet and it's done. There's nothing more going on beyond this in the sense that God is trying to grab us and trying to get our attention. And so that is a reflection of that third woe. So when we think about that, we think about trying to live life and do the things we're trying to do.

One of the things I couldn't help but think about was why do we think that waiting until the right time to change to go to God or finally repent is the right approach to living life with God? So often I think a lot of us tend to think, well, I like this idea of having a relationship with God. I want this opportunity to be in heaven. But you know what; I'm going to live life. There's too many things in life I'm going to miss out on if I choose to follow God and just do what God wants me to do and not do what I want to do. So often we get to this place that we play this game where we want to try to do it our way, not realizing that we're missing out on a whole lot more. And so reflecting back on life, some of you might have this feeling at times where you think, if I would have just chosen to follow God earlier on, think of all the things I could have experienced and the things I could have done and how God could have used me. Now I don't want you to think, you're missing out, because God still wants to use you now. But the truth is that sometimes we get caught up in this thought – that we'll just play the game. I'll play the game, I'll do the church thing, I'll learn, but I'm still going to live life my way. And God is trying to call us to him and call us home and we're willing to play the game of, God, you know I hear you, I really don't want to do this yet. And that's what's happening here is that God keeps calling out to his people and the people are not responding. Just look around us. The world is still dealing with this today. God is trying to call out to us. He is trying to call us to repentance and call us to this relationship with him. And we say... "I'll wait. I still want to live my life. I've still got things I want to do and the fun that I want to have. But when the time is right, I'll make it happen." Well just think of it this way, what happens when it is done? What happens when the trumpet blows and you weren't there listening and ready? God wants to do a great thing in each and every one of us and all we have to do is trust him and follow. We don't want to do it yet. I want to do it my way. I want to do it in my time. Well, maybe God's time is better than yours.

So as we go through I want to break the next few verses down. I want to reread Revelation 11:16 and it says this:

"And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God." (Revelation 11:16, niv)

Now we come back to this place with the 24 elders. If you look back in chapter 4 we encountered these same people. They're all there worshipping God. And now they are falling on their faces. And what this is reminding us of is that John is in the throne room. He is there in the presence of God, in the throne room watching all that is happening. This is where the reminder of the 24 elders comes from, the reminder to us that we are in the throne room as

we are reading this vision. And then they all bowed down and worshiped God, singing this hymn.

Bethany mentioned earlier about maybe getting me to sing. I could have been creative. There's really not a song for the words that I could find. I could just make up a hymn for you but I'm not going to do that because that would really do a disservice to the Word of God. So I'm just going to let you know that I made the decision not to do that, and bless you with my beautiful voice. It's beautiful, trust me.

But all that to say, they bring this hymn and this chorus and proclaim God and his coming. I'm just going to read the first part to you and we'll keep breaking it down from there. In the first part they say,

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty.” (Revelation 11:17a, niv)

I'm just going to stop there because there is something important to that phrase, “Lord God Almighty.” As I was going through the time of studying and working through this passage this week, one of the things that stood out to me was that one of the writers was talking about the Greek word for Almighty that is used here. The Greek word is *Pantokrator*. *Pantokrator* is the word that is used for this term, Almighty. The Lord God Almighty phrase is used seven times throughout the book of Revelation and it is always the Greek term *Pantokrator*. What that phrase means is, and it is also used in the Old Testament, is this reflection of our God, Yahweh of Hosts, God of Hosts. So this phrase which is used throughout Revelation is basically stating this God of military implications. Every time you read it, it involves military implications. It is basically implying that God is coming for the battle. He is coming for war. He is coming to fight the battle. That's what we are experiencing here when we read this passage, God is coming and he is ready to do battle with evil. We get to see God come and begin the process of reclaiming what is rightfully his.

And then it goes on to say in verse 17...

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.” (Revelation 11:17, niv)

So we can begin to see that God is reclaiming what is rightfully his, what he has created. And if you know the One who is and who was, we've read that before back in Revelation 1:8. It says:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Revelation 1:8, niv)

There is a phrase missing out of that part where the 24 elders proclaim, right? Did they say “who is?” Did they say “who was?” But there is no “to come”. Why? Because the “to come” is now, “the is”. He is there, it is now, it is happening, there is no more to come, it is coming now. That is why it just “is”. This “is” and “who was”. There is no more “to come”. We're not waiting anymore, God is now! And that is the very cool thing if you think about it. There is nothing else. God is now. God is saying, I am here! It's mine.

And so we get to proclaim it, celebrate the fact that God is coming and that He will be the “is”. The “is” is all that matters from here on out. So we get to reflect on that knowing that there is going to be a point in time when God is going to say, “Now it is, it's time.”

As we think about the relationship we have with God, we reflect that God is having to reclaim. Well, why is he having to reclaim? Throughout Scripture we read in so many places where Satan is referenced as one who has power on this earth. One of the passages that stood out to me that I thought would be good to share is out of Matthew chapter 4 when Jesus is facing temptation. It says this:

“Again, The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’” (Matthew 4:8-9, niv)

This is just one of the few places we can find throughout scriptures where Satan really shows this power of what he can do to manipulate. We face this every day. We go through life and we live our life and we face temptation. Satan has this power to guide us away from truly seeing God and his glory. So Satan has this grasp of things and so really what is happening here is that God is coming and saying, “It’s done. Whatever you had is no more because it is mine. It is my creation, I made this and I am going to reclaim it. I am here to reign.”

So we get to celebrate with the elders with the idea that God is going to come and it is going to be no more. Satan and his evil ways will not have any power because of what God is about to do.

Then we go on, Revelation 11:18 says:

“The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small—and for destroying those who destroy the earth.” (Revelation 11:18, niv)

So God’s judgment in this is saying that, it is coming. As he comes he is going to bring judgment on those who have brought evil, on those who have brought destruction. And in the middle of that, we are going to find that God is going to reward those who have chosen to really love and follow and proclaim his name and his glory.

So here we are in life as we do these things and as we seek him out. God really wants this relationship. As we live it out, it doesn’t matter how big we are or no matter where we have been and no matter what we have done, as long as we have trusted in him and accepted him into our life, he is going to bless us.

I love what the writer in Hebrews says:

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6, niv)

As we choose to seek God, as we choose to have this relationship with him, we will be rewarded. It doesn’t matter how big or how small, how great we are, as long as we have trusted him and accepted him into our life, we get to be rewarded. Amen!

And so we get to be excited about the fact that God, when this time comes, the seventh trumpet blows, and God comes to reclaim what is rightfully his and casts out all that is evil in

this world, and we know we get to be in his presence. That is going to be so powerful and so amazing that we won't know what else to do but bow down as well and give him praise.

And then it goes on in verse 19 and says this:

“Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe hailstorm.” (Revelation 11:19, niv)

Now remember at the beginning of this chapter we find John is measuring the temple. So he is doing his work, measuring the temple. He's doing all that. And what that reflection is, especially as we get into the end of this chapter, is that we are beginning to see the presence of God that comes through his temple. The opening of the Ark of the Covenant, as you read in the Old Testament, played a key role because that is where God's presence was. And as they moved the Ark, God's presence would go. That was the connection. So as the temple was opened and revealed you could see the Ark, and that is the reminder to us, God's presence is here, in this place, in this temple. And now we are in that everlasting presence of God. And so now all of a sudden we have this connection with him that we get to have and it's awesome because we don't have to just get little glimpses of it, we get to have it all the time. There is something to what is going on here. It's really exciting and powerful. I hope you realize there will be a point where even things that we are talking about this morning, the evil world, will be no more. We will get to be in the presence of God, the everlasting presence of God, where we will be filled with his love and encouragement. We will not have to worry about the destruction going on around us. We will just be in this beautiful place worshipping God – something amazing to think about when we reflect on that.

So, all said and done, what do we take from this? There's a lot, I think, we can take away from this. You know as I shared at the beginning, there is something to be said about getting to have kingdom experiences as we pray the Lord's Prayer, Your kingdom come, Your will be done. We've read in this passage, this is the moment when it is all happening. God's kingdom is coming, and now he is going to reclaim all that is his. But when we think about life, I think for some of you in this room, you may have prayed that prayer and you are wondering, I don't see God's kingdom come very often, or I don't know if I have really experienced it. Well I can tell you, in my own personal life, in my own moments, it's when I've been able to be in his creation. Today I would encourage you, if you need to have that feeling of his kingdom, drive up on the hill. Go sit on the top of the hill and look into the valley. Look at the orchards, look at the city. It will be really peaceful. Look around, it's really hard to not be awestruck by his kingdom and his creation. To have those feelings is overwhelming. And so if you haven't had that experience, I'd say just go up there and ask God, “God, reveal yourself in this moment as I sit up here and I just see what you have done.” You might be surprised what you will see and what you will experience. When we were in Yellowstone, I was blown away with the beauty. I had no clue what I was walking into, seeing the geysers and the different things that we got to go and see. Seeing the sights, I was just in awe. And I get this privilege of being a youth pastor, taking teenagers on mission trips and opportunities where we can go serve or even just an experience of watching them just worship God in youth group. And let me tell you, there is nothing cooler than seeing God's kingdom in those moments when I get to walk hand

in hand with these students, serving with them and worshipping with them and thinking, “look what God is doing with young people”. There’s something powerful to that, and it’s moving. It’s those moments when we ask God to fill us with his presence and we just say, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah”. This is what it is going to be like in heaven.

A lot of our students went to NYC last year, and there were glimpses of heaven just sitting in an arena of over 6,000 other teenagers, all praising God. Something cool about his kingdom and that encounter we got to have with God in that moment.

So we look at this passage and we think about life. I would encourage you to be thinking about where you are in this relationship with God. You know the seventh trumpet is this reminder to us that, guess what, it’s going to be done. So where are you? Are you playing this game of, God, I want to do my thing, and I know you are there, and why do you keep doing that. Are you going to miss out on something more? Really? I think God has bigger things for you than you realize if you are playing that game. I would encourage you to be praying about where you need to be. There needs to be some change within you because the seventh trumpet may blow and you may not realize it came. And it’s all done. So where is that for you?

So here is the next thing for you to think about out of these passages. There’s going to be a moment when he is going to be here and it’s going to be over. All this stuff that we think about and worry about and stress about and are fearful of, it’s going to be done. We get to celebrate with him. We need to praise him and worship him and not have to worry about all that other garbage that’s going on in our world today, because he is going to reclaim it all. There’s something pretty cool about that. Right? It’s exciting! Something we get to walk away with is the calm that will be the “is”. We get that.

So, I’m going to pick on Joey. He brought a phrase to the youth group that gets used a lot. What is it? “Jesus tingles!” He brought the phrase, he coined it. I’m going to put a stamp on it – it’s his quote. But it’s kinda cool. We went on a mission trip and one of our students said, “I got to serve today.” They shared about getting to serve at the rescue mission, and they said, I had “Jesus tingles”. Those kingdom moments get us excited about what God is doing within us and through us and around us. What are you doing to seek for those moments? Are you feeling them? Whether that is in worship, whether that is in the message you hear, or your devotions. Here it is, God, we don’t know if we are going to be there when the time comes and he is here blowing the trumpet – or the final trumpet blows – and we see God’s kingdom coming. We don’t know if we are going to be here for that. But you do have moments when you are going to have the “Jesus tingles”. If you seek God, you will have “Jesus tingle” moments. I know I am using this a lot, but it’s good stuff. God wants to do that with each and every one of you. So what are you doing to seek those moments, to see his kingdom here on this earth? Do it now, don’t wait for all of this stuff to happen.

This week was the clearing. Next week we are going to turn the corner. We’re going to see the ridge. It’s going to be a lot more to go through. So I hope you are ready for it. I hope you got a chance to breathe today, a little bit easier. Go out, have a good week and come back ready to see what God has to reveal to us as we finish out the book of Revelation.

West Valley Church
Pastor Casey Wilkerson
7/24/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Nine: Revelation 12:1-17
The Woman, Dragon, and Child

Intro:

Hey everyone, we continue through the book of Revelation and today we are going to read through chapter 12. Thank you for asking questions the last few weeks, please continue to ask them. At the end of the series, we are going to have a Q and A time that you won't want to miss. Last week we heard Pastor James share with us about the third woe, the seventh trumpet, the consummation, the end. Are you excited to find out what happens after "the end"? Well what takes place in the Scripture today does not happen after "the end". Remember, Revelation was not written chronologically. Some TV shows you have to watch starting from the beginning in order to enjoy it the most; like the Bachelorette. Other shows, you can watch one episode from one year, and watch another from a different year, and you can still enjoy the show and follow what is happening – like Storage Wars, The Price is Right, and Wheel of Fortune. Chapter 12 is written like a drama production, or a show. There are characters, and fighting, and good vs evil. In order for us to best understand "the end," John is backing up the camera on the production so we can see everything in its entirety from beginning to end, similar to these two pictures (show two pictures). We can see great detail when up close to the coin, but today we are backing up so we can see more of everything but in less detail. Today you are getting a kind of heavenly history lesson of the ages; the theme is the ongoing conflict between God's people and the devil.

Pray

1. The Birth (1-6)

Let's read:

"A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth." (Revelation 12:1-2, niv)

The first three words are important, "great spectacle," (Greek *semeion mega*) this phrase only occurs twice in Revelation (12:1; 15:1). The word *spectacle* in the NIV is translated as "sign," but other versions use "miracle," or "wonder," which is telling us that this event is filled with meaning beyond itself.

Our first character to be seen is a woman, wearing a crown (Greek *stephanoi*), of victory. The victory she has is important and will come up later in the chapter. This woman symbolizes Eve, the mother of humanity, Mary, the mother of Jesus, Israel, the mother of Christianity, and the

Church, the bride of Christ. Most scholars agree that this superhuman woman is not actually Eve or Mary despite having some similarities. Most scholars also agree that the mother is either Israel or the Church or both. The twelve stars could represent the tribes of Israel, or if the woman is the Church, the stars could represent the twelve apostles. There are commentaries supporting one or both, so it is probably best to think of the woman as representing the people of God.

“Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.”
(Revelation 12:3-4, niv)

In comes the dragon which appears in the New Testament only in Revelation. Here the color red represents evil and is symbolizing the murderous work of the dragon. Spoiler alert – as we will read in verse 9, the dragon is the devil. The seven heads suggest complete wisdom; the seven crowns point to a blasphemous kingly claim. The crowns the dragon wears comes from the root word diadem, which is different than the crown the woman wears. This crown is a symbol of worldly royalty, not a crown of victory (stephanoi), like the woman wears. Horns signify power. A sweep of the tail gives the dragon followers, represented by the stars falling to the earth, meaning he was easily able to take 1/3 away. That is a lot of evil in our world today, but still not enough compared to God’s army.

“She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.” (Revelation 12:5-6, niv)

The verb translated “rule” literally means “shepherd”. Jesus is the one who will rule all nations; he is the good shepherd, so the child is Jesus. Immediately after Jesus’ birth we read about his ascension being represented by his being snatched up to God and to his throne. The snatched up word is also used by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, describing the Christian being “caught up” to meet the Lord in the air. Remember, we are looking at this through a wide angle lens, and throughout Revelation, John doesn’t spend time talking about the human side to Jesus, or the life of Jesus. John focuses on the divine side, the exalted Christ, the one who will come and rescue his people in the time of our distress.

Next we read about the woman fleeing the dragon into the wilderness. Traditionally wilderness is a place of refuge in times of trouble. The emphasis is on God’s provision since the woman goes to a place prepared for her by God, which is similar to the phrase of Jesus promising to prepare a place for his disciples (John 14:1-3). Fleeing is a familiar apocalyptic theme, historically referring to the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus from King Herod (Matthew 2:13), or the exodus of the Israelites (Exodus). These verses that parallel chapter 12 are in your notes. Whether I refer to them or quote them, the references are in your notes so you can check it out yourself.

The number 1260 is a symbolic apocalyptic number for a divinely restricted period of time of

3.5 years. You may remember Pastor Mike explaining this number a few weeks ago. This number represents a time of intense suffering, but the woman (or what she stands for) will be protected by God during that time. This verse is also connected to another verse later in this chapter, so we will talk more about it in a minute. I will say that the 1260 days is expressed a few other ways in the Bible: as 42 months, 3.5 years, or time, times, and half a time.

2. The War in Heaven (7-12)

“Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.” (Revelation 12:7-9. niv)

I found it interesting that Michael the archangel leads the army and defeats the dragon, not Jesus. This scene shows us the power angels have, especially the angels on God’s side. Verse 9 begins and ends with the dragon’s defeat and banishment. I love watching fight scenes and I can only imagine how amazing this one would have been. How incredible it would have been to watch Michael lead God’s army against the dragon. When you watch a fight scene there is usually a pretty obvious bad guy who the viewer is rooting against. Had we seen the dragon lose and thrown out of heaven for not being strong enough, or smart enough or worthy enough to even fight Michael, it would be time for a victory dance, time for a fight song, which leads us to verse 10

“Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over 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. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.’” (Revelation 12:10-12, niv)

These three verses are like the victory song – or the fight song heard after winning a game. A hymn of praises heard from heaven in response to their defeat of satan. John hears a loud voice in heaven – which is debated in commentaries to be either God, Jesus, angels, the 24 elders, saints in heaven or all of above. Most do agree that while we don’t know for sure who said it, the exact identity of the voice is not important, but the message is vital.

The words “NOW HAVE COME” signify the establishment that God’s kingdom is a present reality related to the expulsion of satan that in turn reflects Christ’s victory on the cross. Despite evil in the world, God’s salvation, power, and kingdom are present realities. Salvation is not just about getting to heaven (although that’s nice too). Salvation includes protection, preservation, healing and wholeness that “NOW HAVE COME” through Jesus. You can have those things now, and we really need them, because the devil lost the war in heaven, was expelled and thrown down to earth, wages war against those on earth, is angry, and he knows

that his time is short. All that combined is bad news for us, or at least it could be. Going on to verse 13, it says:

3. The War on Earth (13-17)

“When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.” (Revelation 12:13-17, niv)

The woman was protected during the time of suffering. She was given wings, a place was prepared for her, and she was helped by the earth.

The reference to **the two wings of a great eagle** suggests swift and powerful protection. The same figure described ancient Israel’s preservation and ultimate escape from Pharaoh:

“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” (Exodus 19:4, niv)

Unexpectedly, the earth helps the woman escape. There’s not much the commentaries I read agree on concerning this flood and the earth swallowing it. The one common theme is that the writer, John, is expressing the idea that the Church is preserved in a wonderful and even miraculous way from the efforts of the devil.

The mention of **time, times and half a time** is the only instance that Revelation uses the phrase. This is the fourth and final reference to a three and a half year period of intense suffering, otherwise called “42 months” (Revelation 11:2) or earlier in verse 6, John refers to the time period as “1,260 days” (11:3; 12:6). The Book of Daniel also used the time, times, and half a time phrase to identify a coming intense time of trouble (Daniel 7:25; 12:7). And in 168 BC, the Jews suffered horrible persecution and the desecration of their temple, for a period of 3.5 years. This means the original readers of Revelation understood instantly when they read these numbers that John was referring to the same thing Daniel had in mind, “a limited time of great suffering.” Many scholars agree that because John is inconsistent in the way he describes the time period, John, like Daniel, is not necessarily describing a literal 3.5 years’ time frame. Whether it’s literal or figurative, whatever the time frame is, the woman is protected during that time, and because of that the dragon takes out his anger on her offspring.

Closing

The bad news is, we are the offspring, and we are living on earth during the time of the dragon. Not just the dragon, but thousands of demons at his disposal. They are pursuing us. 1 Peter 5:8-9 tells us to...

“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.”

The enemy might be trying to persuade you in believing that God doesn't love you, or that God doesn't have time for you, or maybe that you don't have time for God. Too busy for God, maybe even too busy doing good things. The enemy accuses us of being evil, or not good enough for God. Too often, the enemy wins too. Do you love Jesus? Do you believe the eyewitness accounts we read in the Gospels? Do you follow God's commands? If you do, then before you walk out that door, you better be ready for battle, because the dragon is coming for you. Now is not the time to be afraid. We are commanded from Joshua to...

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9. niv)

Yes, we live in the time of the dragon. But we aren't fighting him alone. Everyone in this world, who is a follower of Jesus, is fighting the same dragon.

No chapter of the entire Bible has a broader or more timeless sweep than this one. These are events that keep happening throughout the ages. The woman exists wherever people are committed to God; the dragon always fights against the woman, her son, and other children. God always protects his people, despite the fierce satanic onslaughts they must endure.

As God's people today, we are to see ourselves as living out the end of the drama played in chapter 12. When the “dragon went off to wage war against those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus,” we are there. We are the characters in this part of the production. This is our fight too. A war God wins! As God's Church, we win.

Prayer

Jesus' last words were:

“I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20)

Knowing Jesus is with you till the end of the age, go, and slay the dragon.

West Valley Church
Pastor Casey Wilkerson
7/31/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Ten: Revelation 13:1-18
Vision of the Two Beasts

Intro

Last week in chapter 12 we heard about the cosmic drama production of good versus evil, where the dragon (devil) loses the war in heaven against God's army, so he's thrown to earth and takes out his anger on God's children (us). All the past sermons are online if you have been gone or you know you will miss one. Check it out on westvalleychurch.com. Chapter 13 is like part two of the fight scene between God and the devil that started in chapter 12. Chapter 13 shares with us the dragon's strategy for continuing to wage war on God's children. The dragon is comparable to a suicide bomber or a kamikaze pilot. He has a mission to defeat God and his children. He won't win, he can't win, and has already lost that war. So in the meantime he is going to make things as bad for God's children as possible. He's going to lie to us, accuse us, and do whatever he can to keep us from trusting and obeying God. He is going to be destroyed, but in the meantime he's hoping to take us with him.

Revelation 13 is also one of the more famous passages in Revelation because it references the mark of the beast. Throughout history, people have tried to name the beast and determine the meaning of the "mark," which by itself is an interesting study and we will spend some time discussing it in more detail a little later. If you are interested in studying chapter 13 beyond what we have time for today, study the Book of Daniel. About two-thirds of all the Old Testament references in Revelation 13, come from the Book of Daniel.

Today is going to seem like "opposite day". In your notes you can write down certain things you hear that are distinguished as being opposite of God. It's on purpose that you have more space in your notes to write about the devil, than God, because the Scripture today focuses mainly on the devil. You don't typically take notes in church on the devil, but it is important for us to understand who we are fighting against, and how he is trying to draw us away from God. As you see opposites, or paradoxes, write them down. Hopefully that will help as we head into battle when we leave here today.

Prayer

Revelation 13 has two beasts connected to the dragon that we will study today. You will notice as we read that the dragon, the sea beast, and the land beast form a competing trinity with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As the Son receives authority from the Father (Revelation 2:27; 3:21), so the first beast receives authority from the dragon, and as the Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:14), so the second beast does with respect to the first beast (Revelation 13:12–15). Though the satanic beasts appear to fake the truth successfully in their attempts to deceive, they remain evil and never achieve the divine character that they mimic.

Beast 1

Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, and there was a crown on each horn. A name against God was written on each head. This beast looked like a leopard, with feet like a bear's feet and a mouth like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave the beast all of his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast looked as if it had been killed by a wound, but this death wound was healed. Then the whole world was amazed and followed the beast. People worshiped the dragon because he had given his power to the beast. And they also worshiped the beast, asking, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against it?" (Revelation 13:1-4, ncv)

For John, the beast called up from the sea by the dragon combines Daniel's four beasts into one; part leopard, part bear, part lion, with ten horns and seven heads. Like the plagues of Revelation 9 that were super-sized versions of the plagues of Moses on Egypt, this new beast is not just a new animal, but it is the greatest combination of powers the world had ever seen.

The beast from the sea is the paradox of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. The name alone is opposite-beast and Lamb. Christ and antichrist. Christ came from heaven – the beast from the sea. Jesus suffers for the sake of others – the beast causes people to suffer. The Lamb shares the authority and is a reflection of the One who is seated on the throne – the beast shares the authority and is the reflection of the dragon. The purpose of the Lamb is to set people free – the mission of the beast is to place people into deeper bondage. The beast has a deadly wound that was healed, which compares to Jesus and his death and resurrection.

Most commentators think it is clear that the beast for John and his readers is Rome, which describes a dark power of a pagan empire claiming to be eternal, its ruler claiming to be a god, and demanding complete allegiance from its citizens. In John's eyes, Rome rose up as a reflection of the beast. The Roman emperors in the first century claimed to be gods and were given honorific titles and declared "divine" at their deaths. Does being declared "divine" at their death, sound silly to anyone else? The "blasphemous names" that appear on the heads of the beast could be referring to previous Roman emperors – Julius Caesar, Augustus, Claudius, etc. For John and the early Christians, Rome was the beast, but this vision is bigger than that. Last week we started this vision with the word *semeion mega*, or a great spectacle in Revelation 12:1, telling us that this vision has meaning beyond itself. Rome isn't a huge threat to us now, so what; ignore this passage till they are? No. This vision encompasses all anti-God forces throughout history. The Roman Empire represents both past wicked kingdoms and potential future manifestations of evil.

If the heads do represent Roman emperors, the head with the wound is most likely symbolizing the past emperor Nero. It is likely that much of this chapter hints at the most dangerous emperor the early church had faced – Nero. We know from other ancient sources the hideous and violent ways that he persecuted the church. Although he had died, everyone lived in fear that he would be back to carry out satan's plan. The reference to the death wound being healed is likely a direct reference to Nero and the rumors that he had raised to life. Many rulers like Nero, Stalin, or Hitler would be prime historical examples of people that are

expressions of this beast. The healed wound also would represent the resilience of evil that is defeated but continues to make war.

Satan is seen as the authoritative source behind the Roman Empire. Though it is true that God is ultimately the Sovereign that gives all kings and rulers their power (Romans 13:1–7), those who would pour out such wrath and fury on God’s innocent children have no other source than satan. John understood that when one worshiped the emperor, they were worshiping satan (the dragon) who gave the beast his power. We live in a time where Rome is not the evil power it once was. For us, this first beast could be anything concerning religious, economic, and social aspects of the idolatrous culture we live in.

The adoring public was enamored with the beast’s power and lusted after the empire’s war machine and impressionable might. The people who worship the beast ask “Who is like the beast?” which compares to the Old Testament question of praise, “Who is like God?” The public worshipped the beast and his power. “Who can make war against Him?” they would ask. These rhetorical questions are interesting when we know what previously happened in chapter 12. Michael led God’s army into battle and beat the dragon who later gave power to the beast. Michael’s name means “Who is like God?” Can you imagine Michael hearing these questions being asked? All through history powerful civilizations have had such questions asked of them. Michael and all of God’s army are probably baffled that the earth has forgotten how the dragon lost the war. It shouldn’t totally surprise us when we remember how often the nation of Israel forgets what God did for them or led them through, when they face trials. How often do we forget what God has helped us through the minute we face trials?

Verse 11 tells us about the second beast.

Beast 2

Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. This beast stands before the first beast and uses the same power the first beast has. By this power it makes everyone living on earth worship the first beast, who had the death wound that was healed. And the second beast does great miracles so that it even makes fire come down from heaven to earth while people are watching. (Revelation 13:11-13, ncv)

This beast tries to look like the Lamb, but it speaks like the dragon (Revelation 13:11). It is the beast that offers people life, yet it turns out to bring death, compared to the Spirit of God who invites and gives people eternal life of the kingdom. Looks can be deceiving. This second beast is a false prophet. True prophecy moves people to worship the true God, not deceiving them to worship a false god. Anything in life that entices us to idolize our humanity or the things of earth can be an expression of this beastly power that wants to appear Lamb-like.

The role of this second beast was to support the first beast and deceive people by making everyone on earth worship the first beast (Revelation 13:12). This second beast, the false prophet, draws people towards the first beast, similar to the relationship between Jesus and

the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-27). As the Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus, the second beast draws others to the first beast. And if you are drawn to the beast, you will get the mark.

The Mark

The second beast also forced all people, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to have a mark on their right hand or on their forehead. 17 No one could buy or sell without this mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. 18 This takes wisdom. Let the one who has understanding find the meaning of the number, which is the number of a person. Its number is 666. (Revelation 13:16-18, ncv)

The number 666 first appears in the Scripture in 1 Kings 10:14-15. Each year 666 talents was the weight of the gold Solomon brought into the kingdom. The point of the Kings' narrative is that Solomon was moving the heart of the people away from the Lord and toward wealth and idolatry. This narrative shows how a number can symbolize the perversion of kingship through idolatry and economic evil. The number 666 is an intensive symbolic expression of incompleteness, idolatry, judgment, non-fulfillment, and evil itself raised to the third power.

Because the mark, we are told, is actually the name of the beast (Revelation 13:17) via a number, many have attempted to calculate the name. Verse 18 tells the reader they will need wisdom to figure out who the beast is, so I'll share what I have learned and you can decide if you have enough wisdom or not to figure it out. Scholars go in two basic directions when trying to solve this mystery: (1) finding a formula that when applied to a person or name derives the number 666, or (2) understanding the number 666 to be a symbol in and of itself.

The first approach is related to the ancient practice of *Gematria*, a type of riddle where letters of the alphabet are assigned a number in order, and then all of the letters of the name are added together. In this case, the Greek letters in Nero Caesar add up to the number 666. If this was to be a mere coincidence, it should be noted that some manuscripts were found with the number 616, the sum of all letters if Nero's name is written in the Latin alphabet. This lends great support to the beast of Revelation being thought of as Nero Caesar. Nero, as the Church's first imperial persecutor, had an infamous reputation for horror and bloodshed. Nero becomes the prototype for all subsequent evil rulers.

Attempts to identify 666 with the literal calculation of an individual's name encounter difficulty because of the metaphorical manner in which language and numbers are used in Apocalyptic writings. Gematria is questionable because there are so many names, ancient and modern, that total 666. I found three rules if you want to make a particular name equal 666: (1), if the proper name by itself will not work, add a title; (2), if the sum cannot be found in Greek, try Hebrew, or Latin or any other language; (3) when all else fails, do not be too particular about the spelling. See the difficulty? Sounds silly, but this is how people could get the answer they were hoping for.

The other complication, is that there is no evidence of any other number in the book of Revelation being subject to gematriac calculations. (e.g., twenty-four elders, seven seals, the 144,000, three and a half years, two witnesses, seven heads, ten horns). If a Hebrew or Greek

gematriac system of literal calculation were being used here, then John would have likely alerted his readers by writing something like “and the number of his name *in Hebrew* (or *Greek*) is 666.” This is what he does other places in Revelation when he needs to specify a particular language “in Hebrew” or “in Greek” (see in Revelation 9:11 and 16:16).

You can search the internet and find lots of people and places that equal 666. One website, said that because the Hebrew “w” represents 6, www equals 666....as in the World Wide Web. Ironic that I found that on the internet itself. Someone created a webpage saying webpages are evil? Therefore, scholars say, that because the numbers can be stretched to mean just about anyone in particular, the concept of literally calculating to identify only one historical individual must be rejected.

The number six is incomplete and imperfect, just shy of seven. This means, if we are taking the second approach that 666 is to be a symbol, the number represents a type of false God, or antichrist. This would still give room for Nero, Hitler, or many other evil powers in the history of mankind who attempted to draw people to them and away from God.

Importantly, in the end, we are told that the number of the beast is the number of a person (Revelation 13:18), meaning, it is a “human” number. The beast is discernable to human beings through human processes because the beast will never obtain the divine status that it seeks. The beast’s power will always remain in the province of human activities and human failures.

One interpretation is that because the number six is one less than the perfect number seven, the threefold repetition of the six would indicate that for all their pretensions to deity, satan and the two beasts were just creatures and not the Creator. That six is **man’s number** is illustrated in many instances in the Bible, including that man should work six days and rest the seventh, and that we were created on the sixth day.

The beast as an oppressive and unjust force has been historicized throughout the years as it was in the first century. It symbolizes anyone or any power that seeks absolute allegiance, oppresses the church, or introduces theological error, or ethical compromise. Sadly, many individuals throughout history could be correctly identified, even partially, as the “beast”.

The mark being put on everyone suggests branding or tattooing which was often used as a way of marking prisoners, criminals, or slaves. To be identified with someone’s name is equivalent to partaking of that person’s character. Earlier in Revelation [7:2-4; 14:1], we hear of God’s Seal on their foreheads which is in contrast to the mark of the beast. Those who belong to the Lamb were marked by his life (through baptism). This is God’s mark on our lives, the mark we want. Now John sees those who belong to the beast as marked by its life. There is no in-between for John, you are marked by and belong to one entity or another; the beast or the Kingdom of God. The bad news, is you have to choose. The good news, is you get to choose. God or the beast. By not choosing, you have made your choice.

Closing

All of this raises the question of how we think about the beasts today. If the power of ancient Rome is gone and the cultic worship practices with it, do these two beasts still exist today?

Sadly for us, YES. The first beast still lives in various aspects of empire, culture, principalities and powers that destroy and enslave people.

And the beast that looks like the Lamb but speaks like the dragon is the constant barrage of anything that tricks people into believing that real life can be found in the values, purposes, and goals of the culture. God is looking for a people who in the midst of the empire, in the midst of this battle against the dragon, live as people marked by the Lamb. How do we fight against this dragon and his beasts? Love Jesus, love others. Live as people with purpose.

Live with God's Mark.

West Valley Church
Pastor Jason Worthington
8/7/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Eleven: You Can Be Free
Revelation 14: 1-20

Thank you for being patient with us as a pastoral staff and allowing us to share. It has really been a growth opportunity as I have had the opportunity to dig into the Word and into Revelation.

While I was in Guyana I had the opportunity and privilege to preach at Mahaicony Church. It is more of a church plant that they call a preaching point. I preached from Revelation. It was a different type of group. There were about 10 people, and the majority of them were teens, so it's like preaching to you guys here. They had just gotten back from camp, which is interesting; our teens just came back from camp. They were at a very spiritually high place and had just made some really important decisions. They were searching God for his will and how they could live this lifestyle of holiness, this lifestyle we are called to live as followers of Christ. The sermon became how to read the Bible and how we can see the Bible as nourishment for us when we're not in that really high place and we're in the normal day-to-day, when we can see the Bible as nourishment for us and for our souls. I feel here, even in this place, we have during this sermon series on Revelation, been discovering more than this book. Our eyes have been opened to the richness of the Word and maybe you're like me and have fallen in love with the Bible all over again. Your love for the Bible has been rejuvenated. Hopefully you have been inspired to do a little digging to try to look at the culture and the context around the passage that you're reading. Maybe you have been encouraged to ask other people, like a pastor or a small group leader, when you have questions about a certain passage. I hope you have been encouraged to pray for understanding while you are reading the Word. "Lord, how do I understand this, what does it mean?" I say that a lot when I read Leviticus and Numbers. Lord, what does this mean? How do I understand it? He shows me inside Leviticus and Numbers things I never would have thought, so that's your challenge, read those two books and pray every day.

Another thing I hope you have been encouraged to ask, "How does this passage fit with my experience with God?" If you're here, I hope you have had some kind of experience with God where he has worked in your life and you know him to be true and you know him to be good. And so how does this passage that I am reading relate and fit with what I know without a shadow of a doubt about God? Because it should.

Another question you learn to ask is, "How does this passage fit with the message of the church throughout the ages?" For centuries there have been traditions of the church and a belief that has not changed. How does this passage that I am reading fit within that tradition?

And so as we begin looking at Revelation, some things that we have learned is that this book is not a code to predict the future. This book is not to be ignored as maybe we have in the past. We've pushed it aside and ignored the book of Revelation. But if anything we have learned now not to ignore this book.

This is a relevant message for us today, to be strong and to stay true, to stay pure, to live free, to have hope that we can have peace, a hope that we can find rest. What a relevant message.

Last week Pastor Casey shared with us from chapter 13 and we learned about the two beasts and how they joined with the dragon to form this unholy trinity. It showed the power and the allure and the pull of evil. There was an army to challenge the church, to take the church's allegiance away from God, placing the comforts of our short time on earth ahead of our hope and trust in God.

Today we look at chapter 14 of Revelation. I recommend you turn there and keep it out as we go back and forth to it. It opens with a reminder of God's victory over evil.

"Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless." (Revelation 14:1-5, ESV)

This section of Revelation is one of four main sections of chapter 14. Here we see the Lamb and the 144,000. This image stands in stark contrast to the beasts of chapter 13. The Lamb and his followers are on Mount Zion. Mount Zion is an important location; it is the place of a victorious king. Psalm 2:6-12 says...

"As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.' I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.' Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Psalm 2:6-12, ESV)

Mount Zion is a place of victory! We can take refuge in the King! The Lamb there is standing victorious with a commanding presence. The Lamb is not alone, there are 144,000 followers. Remember the power of numbers we talked about in apocalyptic genre? 144,000 is 12 squared times 1000. I put a nice mathematical equation here for you. A little bit of math for you, for all the mathematicians out there. 144,000 is 12 squared times 1000. Now 12 is an important number from the Old Testament and the New Testament; the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 disciples of Jesus. This is the complete story of God's plan for redemption, the complete story

of God's love for us. Multiplying by 1000 communicates the enormity of the object being multiplied, numbers beyond comprehension. Now there are some religious sects and denominations that try to point to a literal numbered group of people, but the overall use of numbers in apocalyptic genre rules out any literal translation of the 144,000 and points us to a numerical symbol that refers to the complete and entire church.

Also, a huge contrast here to the followers of the beast, marked by the number of the beast, the 144,000 are marked by the name of the Father, the mark of divine ownership, the mark of protection. It's a testimony of allegiance and empowerment to be a faithful witness of God's love, to endure hardship and protection and persecution. From this setting, we begin to hear a great and thundering voice from heaven, roaring waters and loud thunder like the sound of harpists.

Now we are going to stop here and we're going to go on a little rabbit trail. One of these things is not like the other: roaring waters, loud thunder...harps. Now scholars believe that the reference to harps points to the musical nature of this loud and thundering voice, and this makes sense, but...my mind wanders and I begin to see a picture of harps plink, plink, plinking in the arms of cherubs. Imagine how many harps it would take to be that loud. I am reminded of a conversation I had with Joe Robbins, our electric guitarist. Professor Robbins believes that what John is really describing here is a chorus of electric guitars, roaring like waters, as loud as thunder, and as melodic as harps. I think that is a good translation.

This voice was singing a new song in the heavenly court before the throne, before the four living creatures, before the elders. This is that picture of the heavenly throne room that was described to us and painted for us in chapters 4 and 5.

In the Old Testament a new song was often sung to praise God for victory over enemies. And so we see in Psalm 96:1-6

“Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. (Psalm 96:1-6, ESV)

This new song is a song of victory! The Lamb, Jesus, is victorious over sin, death, over oppression, hopelessness. He is victorious over the beast and his temptations! He is victorious over the pressures this world places on us to conform! We can stay strong!

In Revelation 14:3 we see that only the 144,000 can learn this new song of victory! Now remember that the 144,000 represents the church, those who are marked by their allegiance to Jesus.

In verse 4 we see that the Church is defined in four ways. First as those who remain pure. Now remember, we were talking about the importance of numbers, the 144,000 cannot be understood as a literal group, but as a symbolic, metaphorical group. And so in the same way, this is not a verse about abstinence, this is a verse about purity. To be able to sing this song,

the victory song of Jesus, we must be pure. We must live holy lives, lives that reflect the goodness, the love and the holiness of Jesus.

Second, the Church is defined as those who follow Jesus. The Greek word for follow used here is in the present form and this indicates an ongoing lifestyle of commitment. It is not a one-time commitment to follow Jesus; it is an ongoing, daily commitment to follow Jesus, no matter what the cost.

Third, the Church is defined as those who are redeemed. In verse 3 we read: "Who have been redeemed from the earth". And in verse 4: "These have been redeemed from mankind". Redeemed people have been freed from slavery. Redeemed people have had their chains of oppression destroyed. Redeemed people have had an innocent party pay the price on their behalf.

And fourth, the Church is defined as firstfruits. In our agricultural society, we can understand the importance of the first fruit of a harvest. It tells us to get ready, more is coming. In Old Testament worship, as well as in our modern Christian worship, we give the "firstfruits" of our labor. As a communication of our love and trust we say, "Thank you for your provision, Lord, we give back to you so that we may continue to trust in you and not in ourselves."

And so in verse 4, the firstfruits are, in the end, all those who choose the true God over the unholy, false and copycat grouping of the dragon and his beasts. They are those who receive the DIVINE seal, and adopt a lifestyle of following the Lamb. Now it is important for us to understand where we fit in to this story as believers, as the Church and if you are not a follower of Jesus, this may be a good time to start.

The second section of chapter 14 is not nearly as cheery. Here we have the messages of the three angels in verses 6-12:

"Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. And he said with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgement has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.' Another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.' And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.' Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus."
(Revelation 14:6-12, ESV)

These messages from the Three Angels stand in stark contrast to the previous passage. The destiny of the unredeemed is quite different than that of the redeemed – the followers of Jesus. Each angel brings a specific message. The first is a message of repentance. The angel is

directly overhead, in the center of the sky with the message of the eternal gospel, the good news for all ages for everyone who dwells on the earth, every nation, tribe, language, and people. This is a final warning, "Act now, before it is too late!" It is not too late to accept the love of God, the creator of the heavens and earth, the creator of the sea, the creator of the beginning of all life, the creator of the universe. God does not want you to experience the fate of those who reject his love and sacrifice. Don't worship the things of this world; the things the beast would have you believe are important.

The second angel brings the message that the enemy will be defeated. "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great." This reminds the first century church of Isaiah's prediction in Isaiah 21:9 of the fall of the historical Babylon. The city of Babylon has long been the code that the first century church used to refer to the oppressive Roman regime. It symbolizes any oppressive regime throughout time. Oppressive regimes force people to drink of their lies of immorality. This enemy will be defeated. The angels warn us not align with them or we will suffer the same defeat.

This is the message of the third angel (the Wrath of God). God will bring his wrath on all who align themselves with the beast, with Babylon, with the path of sin. This wrath will not be diluted, it will be full strength! There will be no mercy mixed with God's wrath! Whether this torment represents a physical agony, a spiritual agony, or a psychological agony, there will be torment, there will be agony, and the Lamb will oversee this punishment. This is both ironic and tragic because of all the Lamb did to make blessing possible for all. And ironically, the torment goes on and on, forever and ever, in contrast to the continuous worship of God by the redeemed.

Just when we think we can't take any more talk of unbelievers being tormented forever and ever...there is another opportunity for the followers of the beast, the rejecters of God, to repent, avoid eternal torment, and be free from the wrath of God. Obey the Commandments from the Old Testament, follow the teachings of Jesus.

This is the God we read about throughout the Bible. He loves his people, they reject him, they deserve his wrath, and he gives them another chance. Over and over again, we see this cycle in the Old Testament and Jesus comes to free us from God's wrath once and for all. Here in the midst of the proclamation of God's wrath upon those who have rejected him there is a call to repent, to come back to your Creator, to be free, to know love.

And John brings us a Beatitude, the second of seven Beatitudes in Revelation. Now many of us think of Matthew 5 and the Sermon on the Mount when we hear the word "beatitude". These are blessings, messages of blessings. This one starts out a little morbid, but it is a blessing none the less:

"And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'" (Revelation 14:13, ESV)

This is an important message! John has been commanded from heaven. The reason for this blessing is found in the words, "in the Lord". This is a phrase coined by the apostle Paul in his many letters to the first century church and it occurs only here in Revelation. The reason for

blessing is one's relationship to Christ! And after a long or short life in relationship with and in alignment with Jesus, death will not be the end. We are to remember the resurrection of Jesus and his power over death. And again the importance of this blessing is shown through the heavenly confirmation from the Spirit. There will be rest from the persecution due to our lifestyle of faith in Christ, our faithfulness to Christ, and our lifelong relationship with him results in blessed rest.

And so we come to the fourth and final section of our passage:

“Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, ‘Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.’ So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped. “Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, ‘Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.’ So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse's bridle, for 1600 stadia.” (Revelation 14:14-20)

This final section of Revelation 14, The Harvest of the Earth, does not end well for those who do not follow Jesus. In verse 14, we see the image of Jesus on the heavenly throne as a judge. The white cloud is a symbol used to represent God's pure and holy throne. The gold crown as we have talked about in the past and seen in other passages represents the victory of Christ over sin and death and the sickle represents and symbolizes Jesus' role as judge. The term, Son of Man, combined with all of the other symbols in this verse leaves little doubt that this being is indeed Jesus, the Messiah.

The angels in this section emerge from the temple and from the altar in the temple. These angels are from the very presence of God. In Old Testament Jewish worship, God's presence resided in the temple and these angels, these messengers emerge from His very presence.

The messages of the angels are similar to the message in Joel 3:13...

“Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great.” (Joel 3:13, ESV)

In both cases, the writer is calling for justice for the oppressors, Babylon and Rome, to get what they deserve.

The second part of this section paints a brutal picture of what judgement for the followers of the beast will look like. This image recalls Isaiah's account (Isaiah 63:1-6) of God as a warrior trampling on the nations, as one would trample on grapes. And again, in contrast to the victorious act of Jesus' death on a cross, this harvest from the earth is trampled on just outside the city. The place of the cross was just outside Jerusalem.

And we end with the picture of a river of blood, flowing from the winepress in huge amounts. There are many ideas about what the number 1600 means in this verse, all of which point to an amount that will cover vast amounts of the earth. This picture of judgement is similar to ancient stories of war and the blood that flowed as a result.

This is a heavy message. We cannot simply say amen, and dismiss for the day. We must respond to this passage, we must take action.

While this passage ends with eternal suffering and a bloody massacre for all who align themselves with the beast, for all who do not align themselves with Christ and his cross we must remember that this time has not yet come! There is still time! We can turn away from the distractions in our lives, the things we put before God, the things that cause us to worry, the things that bring us glory, the things that bring us honor, all the busy work, the keeping up with the Jones'. It is not too late to wipe these marks of the beast off of our foreheads, to cast them aside into the sulfuric fire of eternal damnation, to unpack these burdens that are weighing us down, that are causing us pain, that are causing us suffering. It is not too late to throw them down, to turn away from the evil that has taken over our lives. It is not too late to turn away from the beast. It is not too late to stop this lifestyle of oppression, to stop this lifestyle of hate, this lifestyle of fear, this lifestyle of selfishness. It's not too late...

There is hope... We can align ourselves with the Cross, we can align ourselves with Jesus, we can align ourselves with the way of servanthood, the way of selflessness, the way of love, the way of hope, the way of truth, the way of life, the way of freedom.

Through the suffering of Christ on the cross you have been made free, you have been redeemed. Jesus took your place of death and you are no longer a slave to sin. You are no longer a slave to the way of the beast.

You can live a lifestyle of love. You can live a lifestyle of peace, a lifestyle of purity, a lifestyle of holiness, a lifestyle of joy. You Can Be Free!

For the majority of us here who know this joy and have experienced Christ's love and forgiveness, this is a call to go. This is a call to go into our neighborhoods and into our city and into the world to share this message of hope and this message of freedom. There is still time.

Maybe you haven't experienced the forgiveness of Jesus, but you'd like to. The consequences of not is sounding pretty bad. Again, for you, the time is now.

Pray

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
8/14/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Twelve: Revelation 15-16⁵⁰
The Seven Last Plagues

I have to start by saying that I am so thankful to be a part of a pastoral team that is a true team. I love these guys and their families, and I literally cannot imagine doing ministry without being able to do it together with Arden, Jason, James, and Casey (notice I named them according to descending age. I did not mean to imply level of maturity). When we talked about doing this series, I asked them to consider taking a couple of the sermons each, so they've combined to do five of them and I will end up doing ten. And each of them have preached in a way and from a perspective that I would not have thought about – but I am grateful for, because they've taught me from the passages they preached on, and they did it in a way that was thorough and well-researched and yet at the same time meaningful, personal, and applicable. So I'm going to try to reach the bar that they set!

We only have a few more sermons left in this series that has attempted to cover the expanse of Revelation, but do it in a way that debunks myths, that points out truths, that teaches us how to read the Bible and that convicts us to bring our lives into alignment with what it says. We've asked you to allow and enlist the help of the Holy Spirit in the process by giving you the passages in advance for each Sunday, and invited you to meditate on three important questions that deal with the three types of literature Revelation is: it is apocalyptic, it's pastoral, and it's wisdom literature. That means there are strange images and metaphors and symbols that mean something else, that it holds instruction for us as the church together, and it expects us to think and act in certain ways because of what it says. We've also asked you to give input to the series by letting us know if you have questions that have not been answered or if our answers were sort of confusing, and we will conclude this series with a panel discussion and do our best to answer those questions at that time. So if you do have a question, please fill out that white card and give it to one of us, or to someone in Guest Services and they'll make sure we get it.

⁵⁰ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, ed. E Ray Clendenen, vol. 39, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 228-251; John Yeatts, *Revelation*, *Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 181-200; Lewis Foster, *Revelation: Unlocking the Scriptures for You*, *Standard Bible Studies* (Cincinnati, OH: Standar, 1989), 137-156; George Lyons, "Songs in the Night;" John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

Before we jump into today's passage, let me just remind us of an important priority as we read Revelation (by the way, *not* Revelations! It is a singular revelation, not multiple ones!): the term "revelation" only appears once in the book, even though that's its title. The title comes from chapter one and verse one. Most of what you read and hear these days about Revelation is focused on deciphering the vision – especially in popular culture, whether it is on Facebook or in Christian fiction (by the way, most of what is written about Revelation in Christian books is fiction, whether it claims to be or not!). But Revelation is not primarily about the *vision* as much as it is on *WHO* the vision is about: Jesus, the Christ, the Lion/Lamb of God. The word "revelation" only appears once in the entire book.⁵¹ Jesus Christ is referred to 33 times in the book in all different ways and names. That's one and a half times in every chapter of the book. Despite everything else that makes Revelation difficult to understand, "this much is clear: Since the first coming of Christ, God reigns unchallenged in Heaven. And despite appearances to the contrary on earth, (Christ will return) and God wins in the end."⁵² This is a book about Jesus Christ, and He is about God the Father's work of redeeming His world: people and creation. And Revelation shows how merciful and patient God is and how far God will go in the hopes that we will wise up and turn to him and trust in him, as the Bible says:

"The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent." (2 Peter 3:9, nlt)

I want to make sure you heard what I just said, because that's going to be a key perspective to keep while we look at these two chapters; so I'll repeat myself: This is a book about Jesus Christ, who is about God the Father's work of redeeming His world – people and creation. And it shows how merciful and patient God is and how far God will go in the hopes that we will wise up and turn to him and trust in him.

The passage for today starts out with a song. Worship and praise songs are frequent in Revelation, as you've seen. This is what chapter 15 says:

"Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

'Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!

Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.'

⁵¹ George Lyons, "Songs in the Night"

⁵² Lyons, *ibid.*

After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.” (Revelation 15:1-8, esv)

So there is a beautiful song and then the preparations are made for the last set of judgments. I like what Dr. Scott Daniels says about this: “John has been painting his apocalyptic masterpiece with the colors of the great prophets Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, etc. But in this brief interlude before he describes the final fall of Babylon he goes back to his favorite colors – the colors of the Exile from Egypt.”⁵³ You remember that the plagues listed in previous chapters reflected the plagues brought on Egypt during the great Exodus. The lyrics to the song in this passage that John records are a combination of two songs: one is the song of Moses that was sung when the Israelites were on the other side of the Red Sea, after it had parted and they were delivered from Pharaoh’s armies (Exodus 15). But there is a new element of a second song – the song of the Lamb. That’s because “the victory over the dragon has come not with the staff of Moses but through the blood of the Lamb.”⁵⁴ Another difference, too, is that the Israelites sang about their victory over Pharaoh, and here the song is a celebration of God’s reign over the nations; it’s not a song that praises destruction of enemies, it is a song that praises God. That’s because God does *not* want the nations to be destroyed. “God’s desire is for the *conversion* of the nations, so that they join in the cosmic chorus of praise that is his will for the world.”⁵⁵ In this song is the consummation of God’s plan to save people. It is a story whose arc runs from the great saving event in Exodus to the greatest saving event of all time: Christ’s death and resurrection. The story line runs through the history of all of God’s dealings with people to the very end of time. It does not exult in the death of people; it exults in God’s justice and holiness, and in the destruction of evil. Maybe you remember the question that was asked all the way back in Revelation 6 by the martyrs who were being protected under the altar (remember them?):

“How long will it be before you judge the people of the earth for what they’ve done to us? When will you avenge our blood against those living on the earth?”
(Revelation 6:10, tlb)

These are the same people who are now singing the salvation song of the Lamb and his defeat of the Dragon. God, in his mercy and justice, has answered their question.

And that brings us to the points of these chapters. Remember, we are seeing God’s mercy in doing all he possibly can to see people repent and become part of his family. So with that in mind, these chapters start off being about...

⁵³ Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation*
(<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>)

⁵⁴ Daniels, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Daniels, *ibid.*

1. Judgment

Now I understand that this is a difficult topic today; we don't like to talk about judgment. It's uncomfortable and it's depressing. Our culture accuses those of us in the church of always being too judgmental of them. They are often right, unfortunately. Some churches and Christians forget that their job is to love others and it is God's job to judge others. But I think sometimes the reason the unchurched feel guilty is not because we are judging them, but their own conscience is; we just get blamed for it. But I think that the church has acted out of fear of coming across judgmental, so we've avoided conversations about judgment. But if you've read *any* of the chapters so far and especially the chapters for today you'll see that Revelation is not shy when talking about judgment. There *is* judgment coming whether we like it or not. There *will* be a judgment. We don't like it, and let me tell you our enemy the devil wants us to believe it doesn't exist. I came across a pretty powerful statement the other day from John MacArthur: "Satan continues his efforts to make sin less offensive, heaven less appealing, hell less horrific and the Gospel less urgent." We don't like judgment, but the one who is pleased that we don't want to talk about judgment is the Dragon himself. (Pastor Casey helped introduce us to him in his two sermons.)

When I think of judgment, I think of a time when I was a kid that I got in really bad trouble. Of course, there was only *one* time in my life when that happened, so I don't have a lot of examples to choose from. My parents bought their home when I was around 2 or 3. There were only three houses on our street and a few on the adjacent street, so a lot of the block was a construction area – which is great for little boys! When I was around four I remember watching the big tractors and backhoes working away. I loved going there. One day while I was there, I noticed a little boy who was across the way and he was watching too. I called to him but he couldn't hear me because of the machinery. So I picked up a piece of wood and threw it toward him. I must have been an incredibly gifted young athlete because not only did I get his attention, I hit him in the head with it. He immediately started crying, so being the compassionate yet pragmatic four year old that I was, I ran home.

I thought about whether I should tell my mother about this event, but I knew that she didn't take things like that very well; she really wasn't very mature about those things. So I decided to spare her the stress and not tell her. My plan worked brilliantly; she was having a happy afternoon and no one knew about my assault with a piece of pine. The next morning was great – my mother was in a good mood. She asked me if after breakfast I would like to go grocery shopping with her. I loved getting out of the house, and keeping her company while shopping often meant I would get one of those one-cent candy sticks from the jars up front in the store. So we got to the grocery store and we began making our way up the aisles when my mom ran into some woman she knew; sounded like a neighbor. I wasn't really paying attention until I heard something that caused me a rush of panic and adrenaline and suddenly I heard every word: this woman, this busy body, said, "Did your son tell you that he hit my son in the head with a two-by-four?" My mother was a good multi-tasker because at the same time that she said, "No, he did not," she also reached out behind her back without even looking and grabbed me by the arm before I could slip away. Then my mother actually *thanked* this woman for telling her this! I told you she didn't know how to handle those things.

I recall that there was a great deal of really loud silence in the car on the way home. I didn't even get my candy stick! The silence was deafening. When we got home I got reacquainted with the wooden spoon from our kitchen (I can't believe she cooked with that thing after it had been on my behind! I told you she didn't handle these things well!). Then she forcefully held me by my arm and marched me down to this boy's house and made me apologize – of all things!

I could *feel* my mother's disappointment and anger in both the silence and in the business end of a wooden spoon. I was forced to take responsibility for my actions. I'm thankful for that lesson...*now*. So when I think of God's judgment and wrath, I think of my mother.⁵⁶ Actually, that lesson taught me early on that there are consequences for actions, and as in the words of the Bible...

“You may be sure that your sin will find you out.” (Numbers 32:23, niv)

That is what is about to happen here in Revelation; God can wait no longer. People's sins have accumulated to the point that their “chickens have come home to roost” (are you familiar with that phrase? It means that the consequences have finally caught up with them).

“The wrath of God consists of two things: First, he allows human wickedness to work itself out, to reap its own destruction. Second, he steps in more directly to stop it, to call ‘time’ on it, when it has gotten out of hand. (Scholar N.T. Wright says,) ‘If we knew our business, we would thank God for both of these, even though both can appear harsh. They need to be. If they were any less than harsh, the wickedness in question would merely pause, furrow its brow for a moment, and then carry on as before.’”⁵⁷

There are a few images that are worth pointing out here: one is the glassy sea around the throne. This is a powerful image of juxtaposition – contrasting the chaos of the plagues with this incredibly calm sea around God's throne. God is never ruffled by anything! God is always completely calm! And although the believers in Jesus have had to face many, many rough waters and stormy seas in life and through the end times persecution and tribulation, they are finally at smooth sailing. Whatever you are facing is temporary. Even if it lasts a lifetime it is temporary. Keep faithfully following Jesus and introducing him to others because any hardship or pain is temporary.

Another image is the Golden bowls. These were used in Old Testament temple worship, and they tell us that these judgments come straight from God himself. The wrath that was in the seals and in the trumpets was limited, but these are the final and complete judgments.

I also want to point out the smoke and thunder in the throne room. This tells us a couple of things. This brought to mind several key images of the presence of God in the Old Testament (Isaiah 6:4; Ezekiel 10:2-4; Exodus 19:16-18; 40:34-35; Numbers 14:10; Ezekiel 11:23). The point of that is to leave no doubt that these ultimate judgments come from God himself. It also points out that while the “Ark of the Testimony” contained the Ten Commandments in the

⁵⁶ While the illustration is my own, the idea to use it this way is borrowed from Scott Daniels.

⁵⁷ Daniels, *ibid*

Holy of Holies of the temple – the place of God’s presence, so does the testimony of the Lamb, which is the Word of God, which is Jesus Christ.⁵⁸

The point of the first four plagues appears to be fairly straightforward. The ancients believed that everything was composed of the four elements: earth, fire, water, and sky, and these judgments cover all of them – speaking loudly to the Greeks and Romans that their entire world was going to be judged. God will allow the natural elements themselves (earth, sea, rivers, and sun) to pass judgment on the human beings who have so grievously abused their position as God’s imagers within creation. Humankind is supposed to be looking after God’s world and caring for one another. But as he did in the Noah story, God will call on the natural elements to turn in upon themselves and judge humankind for its wickedness.⁵⁹ Unlike the other judgments that were partially destructive, these are complete. There will be no more to follow. And yet, they are still designed to get people to realize their sin and repent.

Next in these judgments that I want us to see is that we learn about...

2. Armageddon

The previous bowls were the culmination of our sins against the natural world; the remaining judgments are a full-on frontal assault on evil.⁶⁰ This results in a kind of showdown between God and his enemies. People are weakened by plague and then the river Euphrates dries up; this is either natural or man-made, but these two clear the way for access to invading kings and armies from the East. The armies of the kings are recruited by demonic forces that are symbolized by the frogs. The frogs are authorized by the dragon and the beasts, who are using people that are so wrapped up in their sin that they don’t even realize it. These people, in the ignorance that comes with sin, are allowing themselves to be pawns in this cosmic battle against God.

Who the kings are have had many interpretations, including Persian kings or Parthian rulers being led by “Nero Redivivus” – the myth of Nero returned from the dead (Pastor Casey explained that to us in his messages). Much more highly likely is that “Babylon epitomizes any and all unjust world systems, the waters of the Euphrates drying up represents people becoming disenchanted with it (17:16-18; 20:8), and the kings symbolize unjust and oppressive world forces preparing to attack God’s people.”⁶¹

The final showdown is in Armageddon.

John says that “Armageddon” is a Hebrew term, and it seems to be based on the Hebrew word “har” for “mountain” and the name “Megiddo,” which is a place in Northern Israel. I’ve been to Megiddo – it is a huge valley, not unlike the Yakima Valley. The name “Har-Megiddo” or Armageddon is contradictory because Megiddo is located on a plain rather than on a

⁵⁸ Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO)

⁵⁹ Daniels, *ibid*

⁶⁰ John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

⁶¹ Rotz, *ibid*

mountain. It's like he's calling it "The Mountain-Plain." So what is John getting at? It seems clear given the abundance of symbolism in Revelation – especially John's tendency to use Hebrew words and names as key *symbolic* references – that Armageddon is to be taken symbolically and *not* literally. A strong reason for that is because Old Testament references to Megiddo often link it to battles in which the adversaries of Israel are defeated. In Judges 5:19 Megiddo is associated with Deborah's victory over Israel's foes. In 2 Chronicles 35:22 (and 2 Kings 9:27), King Josiah of Judah was killed near Megiddo because he would not listen to the word of the Lord. Finally, Zechariah 12:11 announces the coming day of the Lord's victory, mentioning Megiddo as the place where worshipers of a pagan god mourn. So if we take all of this together, the associations suggest that Armageddon is a *symbolic* place name that is a sign or symbol of the coming destruction of the adversaries of God.

And this is it. There is no more. Things have gone on long enough. Christ is returned to earth. In verse five it says...

"Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments."
(Revelation 16:5, esv)

What's missing from that description of God? He is the one who is and who was...but *not* "is to come." That's because he *has* come. This is it. Pastor James pointed that out in his sermon, too. Christ has returned. No more warnings; it is finished. He is the God who was and is and has now come.

But remember that Revelation is about God wanting to give everyone every single opportunity that he can for them to repent and return to a relationship with him because he loves us so much? It's even found in these chapters as one last final warning:

3. Stay Awake!

On the verge of this terrible end of the World War, the third beatitude is given. It's like right before this cataclysmic war breaks out, God can't help himself – he's going to give us one more reminder that we don't need to experience this war, that we can be among those gathered around the serene scene of the throne room. In fact, in some Bibles, this beatitude is in parentheses:

“(Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!) And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.”
(Revelation 16:15-16, esv)

In that culture, the thought of being caught “exposed” represented the utmost public shame. Whatever you may have done in private and thought you could get away with, well, your mother will be told about it in the grocery aisle!

But we've heard this voice before; its sounds very familiar, doesn't it? That's because Jesus said a similar thing before:

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matt. 24:42-44, niv)

Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 25:1-13 with the story of the women awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom and then missing it because they weren't ready. This is what Pastor James warned us about in his sermon too. Have you given up looking for Jesus to return? Do you think it is all a myth? Have you grown lax? Wake up! It's the same warning Jesus gave to the church in Sardis way back in Revelation 3:

“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.” (Revelation 3:3, niv)

In the midst of final judgment, there still is a warning of grace. The final three plagues are terrible, but they also reveal how easy it is to give allegiance to the systems that fall under judgment. At this point there is no chance or time for further repentance. Vigilance and faithfulness is serious business in this book.⁶²

You and I are going to be held accountable one day for the way we've taken care of each other and of God's creation. We are going to have to account for whether or not we have been faithful witnesses for Christ, being his presence in this world and introducing others to Jesus.

Because one day we are going to face judgment. And we can either be afraid of that day, or we can be around the throne and the calmness of the glassy sea. We can either know we are loved by God or be afraid of being judged by God. Which will it be?

The Bible tells us,

“God is love. (This is even demonstrated in his continued pleas for us to repent, even when creation is crashing down around us because of our sin!) Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the Day of Judgment: In this world we are like Jesus (Christian: are you being like Jesus? Are you loving and serving the people around you, not judging them? Are you caring for the creation that God has entrusted to you? This is how we can have confidence on the Day of Judgment!). There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:16-18, niv)

When all this breaks down that we read about, you will either be perfected in love or petrified in fear. Either option is in front of you. The choice is yours. But let me warn you: there will come a time when it's all done and there will be no more choosing. The choice you make right now might be the last one.

Pray

⁶² Daniels, *ibid*

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
8/21/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Thirteen: Revelation 17-20⁶³
Judgment

One of my many fond memories of college was a time in the spring when, for our class, our professor decided it was just too good outside to be stuck inside, so our class went out on the lawn for that day. I remember where we were on the campus lawn, I remember how good the breeze felt, how warm the sun was on my shoulders, I even remember the direction I was facing. It was so nice and so different to be outside. But I don't remember a thing about the class itself. I can't remember anything about the content of the information.

I tell you that story to say that I recognize the risk we face having this service outside. You will likely remember that we were outside, but you may not remember much about the message! And I don't blame you – there are many wonderful distractions all around us. But that is also very unfortunate, because when we scheduled this day, it ended up happening to fall on the largest chunk of Revelation – four chapters – and one of the most controversial. So I'm left with the challenge of trying to make the largest, most difficult passage as brief as possible. I've committed to doing that for you as I speak, so will you commit to being as focused as you can as you listen and engage?

I am hoping you read these chapters in advance, because that is one of the ways I'm going to save us time is by not re-reading them. I'm also going to encourage you to dig deeper on your own to compensate for what we just don't have time to talk about. You can download the manuscript from our website, which has Scripture references embedded in it, and you will see an article that I posted on there as well that will give you some really worthwhile things to consider. But for today, I'm going to have to give you what you might call a "thirty thousand foot fly over" – a view from way above – and we'll need to skip some of the details. And that's unfortunate because there are a lot of details. So please fasten your seat belts, put your tray tables up and locked, and bring your seat to its full and upright position, because we are taking off! Hopefully we'll avoid any turbulence...

We are going to begin by seeing that these chapters start with a view of the...

⁶³ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 19:1-8*, Biblical Theology BIBL7560, Northwest Nazarene University, June 3, 2014; George Lyons, *Revelation 20:1-10*, Northwest Nazarene University Chapel, January 12, 2000; John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

1. Judgment of “*Babylon*”

John gives us a metaphorical picture of Babylon. If you haven't been with us for the other messages in this series, I'll tell you now: for John and his first century readers, Babylon of the Old Testament is Rome of Revelation. Remember that, because if Babylon is representational, it can represent something else for us today. The metaphor that John uses is that Babylon is a harlot or a prostitute. Your translation of the Bible might use a more harsh word, but you get the picture. And the woman is riding on a beast. And the beast has seven heads and ten horns. And the woman's all dressed up and her clothes have writing all over them with blasphemous names. She's got loads of expensive jewelry; she's slurping from a golden cup.

Okay, that all makes sense, so let's move on...just kidding! Thankfully, the angel explains things to John a little bit later.

Babylon is a city – in this case, Rome. To characterize a city as a woman – especially a prostitute – was a familiar metaphor from Old Testament writing (*For example: Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 57:7-13; 1;21; Jeremiah 3:2; Ezekiel 16, 23; Exodus 34:16; Leviticus 17:7, 20:5; Numbers 14:33; Deut. 31:16; Judges 2:17, 8:27; 2 Kings 9:22; 1 Chronicles 5:15; 2 Chronicles 21:11, 13*)⁶⁴. That wasn't an anti-feminine statement, but it used the image of an unfaithful wife or a loose woman as an example of a community or city who was unfaithful to God. The idea of the city being a prostitute makes sense actually – regardless of whether it is a male or female. Prostitution is the selling off of one's self – one's identity – for material gain. Right? So these cities or communities traded their value in Christ for selfish gain – political power and wealth. So Babylon in this passage could mean any city or cities in any age or time that the church reads this passage. Anytime there is a city or a nation that lures people into materialism, selfishness, greed, sexual immorality, and sensual pleasure – especially at the expense of the poor and outcast and homeless – that city or nation is Babylon. Eventually, that city or nation will turn against those who act on God's Love and represent his selfless service and Truth, because they don't want to be reminded of how godless and sinful they are. The very presence of loving, serving, grace-filled people becomes a source of guilt for them, so they try to eradicate it by killing the Christians.

What about the beast? We've already been introduced to the beast during Pastor Casey's preaching, so go back and reread those sermons. The seven heads on the beast are the seven hills that Rome was famously built upon. The ten crowns are different kings, whether living, dead, or even rumored to come back from the dead, like Nero was, but who all come to the prostitute for her “favors.”

Her expensive clothes and jewelry represented her wealth and opulence and luxury, even while her people suffered in poverty. The cup she is getting drunk on is the blood of Christians that she has tortured and killed.

And what ends up happening to her is that the beast and the kings of the earth turn on her and actually become the ones who destroy her. There came a time when all those other kings or nations resented her wealth and power, and became disillusioned with her promises, and so

⁶⁴ Carol Rotz points out that the image of a city or community being an unfaithful wife or prostitute is used in the prophetic books of the OT, the Pentateuch, and the history books, as well as throughout Revelation.

they turned on her. The result of her destruction is complete, and it turns out that these godless kings and nations are the very ones that God uses to bring out his punishment against Babylon.

Got it? The destruction doesn't take long – John says it lasts “an hour.” John doesn't mean an actual 60 minutes – as with every other instance of numbers of people or time in Revelation – it is symbolic. “An hour” is symbolic of a very short time.

There are three groups of people: kings, merchants, and seafarers who all do business with Babylon, who stand back and watch Babylon's destruction. They stand a long ways away in order to avoid getting pulled into her destruction – and they sing songs that mourn how complete her destruction is. These sinful people mourn the loss of their trade inventory – everything from money to jewels to people (that's right – people were merely property to them; they even mourned the loss of slaves.). Their grief is not so much sadness for Babylon's destruction as it is sadness over having lost the pleasures and wealth that came from being in bed with her, if you know what I mean. They didn't care about Babylon; they cared about what they lost in her destruction.

The previous church we pastored was in a small town, which often meant that I would be asked to perform funerals for people in the community who had no church of their own. I always make it a practice, whenever possible, to meet with key family members in order to get their perspective of the deceased, which helps me plan the funeral service. So there were times that it resulted in my working in family situations that were less than ideal. One time I met with a family to plan the service for a woman who was the matriarch of the family; she was quite old but she controlled the family while acquiring a great deal of wealth. Most of the meeting with her family went back and forth between their opportunities to vent their disgust for her and positioning themselves for whatever of her wealth might be left for them to get their hands on. I wasn't sure that they were grieving her passing as much as grieving the loss of their opportunities to benefit from her wealth. They hated her but maintained a phony relationship with her in order to hopefully get some of her money. That's exactly what was going on with the people of the world in Revelation who are mourning the passing of Babylon the great prostitute. Once they knew they weren't going to get anything more from her, they turned on her and didn't hide their hatred anymore.

John's description of Babylon and her relationship with these kings and merchants is a weaving together of several dimensions: sexual, economic, political, social, spiritual, and cult-like patriotism. John's description is one of idol-worship – of people being drawn into idol worship of Babylon through her sexual immorality, wealth, and power.

Can you think of any parallels today? Can you think of a nation who is incredibly wealthy but corrupt? Whose wealth is built on the backs of its own poor and the poor of other countries? Can you think of a nation who exports sexual immorality, say through movies or the internet? Can you think of a nation that other nations do business with, but are beginning to turn against it? Can you think of a nation whose leaders are consumed with power and wealth, which treat its people as mere pawns for votes for power, or worse yet treats children and women as slaves for human trafficking?

Any nation who exploits people, who thirsts for power and wealth and who rejects God, is a Babylon. There have been many, many Babylons down through the ages, and I'm afraid we live in one right now. I like what Scott Daniels, one of our theologians and a pastor said: "America is another Babylon. Now, don't get me wrong – it's my *favorite* Babylon! Of all the Babylons, America is my favorite! But it is still a Babylon." If that's true (and I believe it is becoming more true every day!), what should we do about it? I'll talk about that in a few minutes.

After the great prostitute Babylon is completely destroyed, there is a scene shift from earth to heaven, and we read about an amazing...

2. Hallelujah Chorus

We get a glimpse of the amazing worship service around the throne, with angels and Christians alike singing great songs of praise. I think it's important to say that they are not singing praises because people have been killed and destroyed in Babylon's destruction. Think of it this way: when Nazi Germany was finally overthrown, no right thinking person rejoiced over how many people were killed to finally stop Hitler. Certainly no Christian should ever have been happy to see the loss of human life. It didn't matter if those lives were Jews, Germans, Americans, Italians, Russians – on and on. No one celebrated the loss of 60 million lives no matter what country those lives lived in. But every right thinking person – Christian included – celebrated the destruction of an evil system of government, right? Well, that's what they are celebrating in Heaven in chapter 19 – that God has brought about salvation for people by putting an end to an evil, idolatrous, perverse, destructive, nation. For the first century readers, Babylon was Rome. And ever since then, Babylon has been any other evil nation.

Some nations may even start out good but end up selling their identity in exchange for money, power, and pleasure. Are you following me?

At the end of the celebration in chapter 19, we see Christ himself and the armies of heaven prepared for battle. Then the scene shifts again to the...

3. Final Defeat of God's Enemies

So now we come to one of the most popular chapters of Revelation and one that has caused the most confusion. In chapter 19 Christ the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, whose robe is dipped in his own sacrificial blood and who is riding a great white horse, has struck down the warring kings of the earth with the sword that comes from his mouth, which is the Word of God. Now in chapter 20 an angel appears, holding a key to the abyss and he has a great chain. He seizes the dragon, or Satan, binds him with the chain, and throws him into the Abyss and locks it for a thousand years so that Satan does not have the same seductive power over nations that he used to have. But, we're told, he is going to be set free for a short time after the thousand years. Then those who were killed for their faith in Christ – John says those who were beheaded, but it can mean anyone killed for their faith – they are raised to life and reign

with Christ for that thousand years. The rest of the dead don't come to life until the end of the thousand years.

Then the thousand years are up, and Satan is released and given power to go out and deceive the nations *again*. He's learned nothing from his incarceration. Satan gathers an army that John calls "Gog" and "Magog" who march against God's people. God himself dramatically protects them and condemns Satan and the beast and the false prophet to Hell forever. Then we skip to the judgment scene, where people are judged whether they have taken the mark of the beast – which means they have taken on Satan's character and nature – *or* they have taken the mark of the Lamb. Only two groups. Then names are read from two books: one is the book of life, the other is a recording of what people have done; in other words, you could call it a book of works. Everyone is judged by the book of works, but those who are also in the book of life are spared. They stay in heaven. Those who are not in the Lamb's book of life are sent to their eternal punishment in hell, along with Death, and there they will be tormented by Satan and death forever and ever. Those in the book of life live forever, and we will see what that's about next Sunday.

First of all, let me strongly encourage you to check something out: we have posted on the sermons page a manuscript of a sermon that one of my professors and a leading theologian, Dr. George Lyons preached back in 2000, after everyone had survived the end of the world with the Y2K scare. This is one of the most succinct and yet thorough treatments of chapter 20 that you will ever read. Please: go to the website and download it and read it. It will give you a great deal to think about and if you want to, we can talk about it some more. What I'm going to share briefly is taken from Dr. Lyon's writing and from Dr. Scott Daniels.

Okay, very quickly: if you want to hold to some kind of teaching about a rapture that happens before Christ returns, you are going to have to reject chapter 20, because clearly it shows that believers are still on earth. (Actually, you have to reject pretty much all of Scripture if you want to believe in a secret rapture event.)

What's the business about tying up Satan for a thousand years? The thousand years – what is referred to as the "millennium" – has been debated for centuries. There are four major interpretations of the millennium: one is called "Historic Premillennialism." Those who hold to this view believe that Christ will come again to establish an earthly kingdom of a literal 1000 years, *before* the eternal order begins. Then there is "Postmillennialism" which believes that the Church will succeed in establishing the lordship of Christ on earth before Jesus returns to inaugurate the eternal order. Then there is what's called "Amillennialism" – the idea that Christ's first coming began a spiritual kingdom over which he will reign until his Second Coming brings in the uncontested, eternal Kingdom of God. Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism. Both Post and Amillennialists believe the number 1,000 is figurative, not literal.

These three perspectives have been around since John wrote Revelation.⁶⁵

In the Church of the Nazarene, we don't commit to any one of those three; we just don't think it is that critical. You can decide which of those three you want to hold to. But here's what we

⁶⁵ Lyons

believe is most important: Jesus will return again! And when he does, the saints who are dead will rise first and then those who are alive will be caught up in the air to meet him. He will judge the living and the dead, and people will face their eternal destiny depending on whether they've believed him, and then what they've done about it.

But in the last 150 years or so, there is another viewpoint that is called "Dispensationalism." This is a viewpoint that takes Revelation's symbols literally, believes that Revelation pinpoints specific nations and world events in our day, and that there is a secret rapture that takes place before Christ ever returns. I really, really encourage you to read that article that we've posted. I will also say this: we in the Church of the Nazarene do not lean very well toward extreme dispensationalism; it's mostly sensationalism.

Let me just say this (start listening now if you haven't yet!): John's purpose in writing Revelation is *theological* more than it is *historical*. John knows that Satan is real and that Satan is the source and power of evil in this world. John is not saying that Satan has the body of a dragon, or that a physical chain can be used to bind him. John does not want us to speculate on where the abyss is. We should not use John's powerful spiritual images to represent physical or temporal realities.

John uses time frames and physical images to *represent* spiritual realities. When John said that the destruction of Babylon will take "an hour" he didn't mean 60 minutes. He meant a short time. Up to this point in Revelation, John has never used numbers to represent specific times or actual counts of people. Why would he start doing that now? You can't find the millennium on a calendar. You can't find the Abyss on a map. You won't reach heaven by climbing in a rocket to space and you won't reach the abyss by digging a hole. John's reference to time is to point us to a reality that is *beyond* time!⁶⁶ A thousand years is ten cubed – which means a full and complete amount of time. So John's millennium means that Satan's powers are limited for a time that God has determined. Then Satan is allowed to be unleashed, and he gathers people from all over the world – which is what the nations of "Gog and Magog" symbolize, as they did for Ezekiel (38-39, see also 1 Chronicles 1:5, 5:4; Genesis 10:2). And these newly deceived people try to wipe Christians off the map, but God finishes it all. You'll want to go to our website and download this manuscript, and Dr. Lyons' manuscript, and read them.

So let me wrap this up: what difference does it make for you today? Well, if you are not a Christian, you are in luck! Actually you are in Grace, because God has allowed you a sneak peek into the future – the good and the bad. He's shown you how to avoid the bad and be a part of the good. But let me tell you as emphatically as I can: Christ WILL come again. You need to prepare yourself for that. You need to accept who Jesus is, or at least start seriously exploring who he is.

Whether you are not a Christian, or you are, there is a warning here. It is in 18:4 – "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."

God is warning us today about the Babylon we live in. He's not saying we should leave the United States for Canada or something. Remember, Jesus prayed in John 17:15 that we

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wouldn't be taken out of the world, but that we would be his presence IN this world. So what *are* we to do? The same thing Jesus has been saying all throughout Revelation: don't be seduced by Babylon's idol worship. Don't get distracted by material wealth and comfort. Stay a faithful witness in this world for Christ but stay out of Babylon's seductive trap.

Is the US a Babylon? Yes. It IS my favorite Babylon, but it is not the Kingdom of God. It is a man-made government that is getting worse rather than better. It will never be the Kingdom of God. YOU and I are the Kingdom of God! Here's the point: I'm not saying we should withdraw or abandon our country. We should be very involved in trying to preserve what is right and what is true in our country. We should fight for those who are oppressed by the systems we have and for those who can't fight for themselves. We should love everyone and not judge anyone, and do all we can to offer a loving hand out and hand up to anyone that we can. We must tell people how much God loves them through Christ. But we must be very careful not to be lulled to spiritual sleep by Babylon, nor should we have a sleepover with Babylon, if you know what I mean. Does this make sense? If you have questions, email them to us please so we can answer them in two weeks.

Revelation 20:1-10

George Lyons

Chapel: Northwest Nazarene University

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Nearly two weeks after our celebration of the supposed beginning of the new millennium, "the lights are still on, the faucets are still running and the ATMs are still giving out cash." This is "good news for everyone but the Y2K doomsayers, who . . . have a lot of explaining to do." The "nation's computers hit the '00s without mishap." Now, "thousands of disillusioned preparers seethe . . ." — Why did they waste "their time, their faith and their money getting ready for an apocalypse that never materialized?" (Hanna Rosin, "Y2K DOOMSAYERS HAVE SOME EXPLAINING TO DO," January 6, 2000 *Washington Post*).

For those of you who missed it in hardback, the paperback edition of Ed Yourdon's book, *Time Bomb 2000*, will soon appear on bargain tables. More than 250,000 copies were sold over the past two years, thanks in part to its now-infamous back-cover inscription: "Saturday, January 1, 2000. Suddenly, nothing works. Not your phones, not the cash machine, not even your fancy new VCR" (quoted in Rosin). Convinced by such doomsayers, Gary North, of the Institute for Christian Economics, urged people to do what he did: Flee to a mountain hideaway to prepare for the inevitable Y2K disaster.

Those responsible for sounding false alarms included both secular and religious writers. The problem is, of course, that Christian, so-called prophetic writers associated their predictions of Y2K disaster with their vision of the End Times, the Second Coming of Christ, and their interpretation of the Millennium.

If you tell your friends that you are coming to see them on Friday, and you don't show up, they may think that **YOU** are a liar. But tell them that Jesus is coming on Friday, and when he doesn't show up, they may be tempted to think that **GOD** is a liar, and that his Word is a farce! It is bad enough to make people skeptical of your own honesty, but when you make them doubt God's veracity, it is much worse! (Duane V. Maxey).

Overly confident preachers and popular writers, who have attempted to interpret the "signs of the times" by holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand, while looking toward the Middle East out of the corners of both eyes, have not only developed crossed eyes; they have always been wrong. As a result of their false alarms, they have shattered the faith of countless gullible souls, who have failed to distinguish supposedly authoritarian pronouncements based on purely human speculations from the simple truths clearly taught by Scripture.

Perhaps, "the most shocking and unexpected thing Jesus ever said about the end times is reported in" Mark 13:32 and 33 (*Robert K. Jewett, Jesus Against the Rapture*):

"But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come."

The obvious point of this teaching is that only God the Father knows when the end will come, and he's not telling. Perhaps even God himself does not know, if he has not decided yet. There are some biblical passages that seem to suggest that God's decision depends on the outcome of certain plans he has set in motion, the outcome of which are not yet determined.

Following Jesus' resurrection, the disciples asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:6, 7; NRSV). Thus, it is not only futile, it is misguided to attempt to know God's mind on this subject. So far, all who have claimed to know have been wrong. Our task is to bear witness to what God has already done in Christ, not to speculate about future events (Acts 1:8). Of the dozens of examples of false alarms I could cite, I will mention just a few.

When I arrived on the campus of Olivet Nazarene College as a first-year professor in 1977, apocalyptic fever was in the air. In the Spring Revival of the previous school year Evangelist Chuck Millhuff had predicted that the "Rapture" might well occur on September 15, 1977. The frequency and intensity of special prayer-meetings, of course, subsided as the day came and went uneventfully.

In 1988, Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA scientist, predicted that the "Rapture" would certainly occur on September 11, 12, or 13, 1988. After those dates passed, he reissued his book — *88 Reasons Why Jesus Will Come Again in 1988* — under a new title and claimed, "The Rapture must occur . . . before" May 14, 1989. And here we are more than a decade later. Wrong again! It is remarkable that people imagine they may know what Jesus does not and angels cannot know.

The contrast between Jesus' reticence and the bold pronouncements of those who allege to speak for him is particularly obvious when you consider the claims made in the writings of one of the most popular and prolific writers on End Times in the past thirty years — Hal Lindsey. His first book, *Late Great Planet Earth*, revised several times, has sold more copies than any religious book in history, other than the Bible.

The first edition of *Late Great Planet Earth* appeared in 1970. In it Lindsey claimed that the world would come to an end by destruction in thermonuclear war, "within 40 years or so of [May 14,] 1948" — the date of the establishment of the modern nation of Israel (p. 43). Here we are, more than ten years past 1988, and Hal, now 70 and old enough to know better, has not yet learned his lesson.

In his recent books, Lindsey has stressed the importance of the 1967 "Six-Day [Arab-Israeli] War." Although he now refuses to set precise dates, he hints that 2007 is the likely year for the Second Coming, with the "Rapture" occurring in 2000. When Lindsay appeared on Art Bell's

Radio Program on February 9, 1999, he insisted that Jesus would definitely come again within the lifetime of those who witnessed Israel's statehood in 1948. He also speculated that Y2K chaos would make a particularly good time for the appearance of the Anti-Christ, whom he believes to be now alive and living in Europe. Wait and see.

The latest multimillion copy bestsellers in Christian bookstores are Tim LaHaye's and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* series. Although fiction, they are written on the questionable premises of the mistaken end-time views made popular by Hal Lindsay and other dispensational writers like him. Why do Christians read such things? For the same reasons that non-Christians read horoscopes, call psychic hot-lines, and love to be scared to death by horror movies. They want to know what is unknowable. Despite all that Jesus taught, modern prophetic writers insist that there are knowable signs that allow us to know when the end is drawing near. And such claims sell books and magazines, even *Newsweek*.

The year 2000 is, by no means, the first, nor is it likely to be the last, "prophetic" date set by convinced, but misguided, souls. Overly confident prophecies are nothing new. Jesus warned his disciples that "false prophets" would misinterpret the signs of the times, deceive, and alarm believers (Matt. 24:4-25). So he urged his followers to be properly skeptical: "If anyone tells you . . . [they know how to interpret the signs of the end], do not believe it!" (Matt. 24:26-27; NIV). But too many Christians have ignored Jesus' warning.

Eschatological Calculus

The fact that we number this year as 2000 is in itself a testimony to earlier failed attempts to know the unknowable. Our calendar is a completely arbitrary means for doing end-times calculations. The calendar we now use did not become generally accepted until the eighth century. The Roman calendar dated years from the founding of the city of Rome. The Jewish calendar, a fairly late creation, attempted to date events from the creation of the world (*Annus Mundi*, AM). When the Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian (of sorts) during the early fourth century, the Church adopted the Jewish calendar. But as the supposed seventh millennium since the world's creation drew near — our AD 500 — the Christian populace became preoccupied with predictions of the end. In response to this problem, the Western Church revised its estimate of the world's age downward by several centuries. But this only delayed the problem. As our year 800 — 5999 by their calendar — drew near, eschatological hysteria again ran rampant. In response, the Church adopted the *Annus Domini* (BC / AD) calendar, still in use. It employs the Incarnation rather than the Creation as its starting point. But the calendar makers miscalculated the date of Jesus' birth by at least four years.

The reminder in 2 Peter (3:8-15) should have been sufficient: The Lord does not use our calendar. For him, a day is as a thousand years; and a thousand years as a day. Delay in the fulfillment of his promises is not a sign of his failure, but of his patience. Delay gives more people more time to repent, so they can be saved.

Allow me to introduce you briefly to a Wesleyan approach to the doctrine of Last Things. The official position of the Church of the Nazarene on the subject of the Second Coming of Jesus

Christ stands fully within the historic mainstream of Christian thought. All of the classic, ecumenical Christian creeds have been brief and concise on this subject. One line adequately summarizes all we can say with confidence about eschatology based on the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene: Jesus will come again.

The reason for our Church's reticence to offer detailed elaborations on the Second Coming are simple and sound. Dr. H. Orton Wiley, the first president of Northwest Nazarene University and the leading theologian of our denomination for its first half century explained our brief statement as the result of studied silence, not as a license to speculate freely. In his *Christian Theology*, which was for forty years required reading for all ministers in the Church of the Nazarene, he wrote: "The fact of the second coming and the order of events connected with it are separable questions" (3: 245). Thus, he urged that one should speak on the details of this subject with "considerable hesitancy . . . cautiously . . . [and] with becoming modesty" (3: 306-307). Dr. Wiley aptly described the Second Coming as "one of the most delicate and controversial fields of theology" and a theme "which has periodically agitated the church" (3: 243).

If I say more than that Jesus will come again, I risk offending you. If I say no more, you might mistake my silence to suggest that any interpretation is as good as any other. I do not believe that for a moment. I agree with Dr. Wiley that the details are "not vital to Christian experience," but merely matters of "peculiar fascination for the curious minded" (3: 245). And we all know what curiosity did to the cat!

There are at least two other reasons why I risk saying more. (1) Inadequate attention has been given to the practical implications of our hope in the Second Coming. And (2) many sincere Christians have been needlessly confused by overly confident — and, therefore, mistaken — interpretations of the Second Coming.

Since the early 19th century the Millennium has been an obsessive preoccupation of conservative Christianity. Unfortunately, those who have written and preached most extensively on the subject of eschatology have generally been advocates of bizarre views. Those who have held saner interpretations — including me, of course — have often been reluctant to enter the discussion.

I have no interest whatsoever in creating unnecessary controversy by making an issue of a subject that is speculative by its very nature. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that a Wesleyan interpretation of the Millennium is more adequate than that of popular, evangelical Christianity, simply because it is more faithful to Scripture and not dependent on preconceived ideas with little or no biblical foundation. I also believe that Wesleyan views are more adequate, because they are more dependent on ancient Christian tradition, not innovations introduced first only during the 19th century. You may decide for yourself, if these views are also reasonable and consistent with Christian experience.

For nineteen centuries Revelation 20 has been the most disputed chapter in this most difficult book of the Bible. The controversy centers around the meaning of the thousand-year reign of Christ reported in Revelation 20:4-6. Four major schools of interpretation of the **Millennium** — Latin for "thousand-years" — have arisen. Equally devout Christians have espoused the first three views since the earliest centuries of the church.

Historic Premillennialism assumes that Christ will come again to establish an earthly kingdom of 1,000 years before the eternal order begins. **Postmillennialism** assumes that the Church will succeed in establishing the lordship of Christ on earth before he personally returns to inaugurate the eternal order. **Amillennialism** assumes that Christ's first coming began a spiritual kingdom over which he will reign until his Second Coming brings in the uncontested, eternal kingdom of God. Both Post- and Amillennialism understand the number 1,000 in a figurative sense.

You can find examples of **historic premillennialism**, **postmillennialism**, and **amillennialism** in the eclectic writings of 18th century Wesleyans — John Wesley and his Methodists. Most early Wesleyans of the Holiness Movement during the 19th century were **postmillennialists**. But only since World War I has the fourth view crept in to Wesleyan circles.

Dispensationalism, the fourth view, is definitely a latter-day doctrine, appearing for the first time in the early nineteenth century — in the 1830s to be exact. The first person to espouse dispensational views was Margaret Macdonald, a 14-year old Scottish lassie. She attended the Catholic Apostolic Church, pastored by Edward Irving, who is remembered both for several failed predictions of the date of the Second Coming and as one of the founders of modern Pentecostalism. The Rapture-idea came in the form of a nightmare — or revelation, if you will — that Margaret shared frequently in her public testimonies. It was adopted and disseminated by a visitor to her church, the Reverend J. N. Darby, founder of the Plymouth Brethren. It was popularized in Calvinist circles by the notes in C. I. Scofield's Reference Bible and gained a wide audience in the preaching of evangelist Dwight L. Moody.

Dispensationalism is a distinctive kind of premillennialism with a number of novel views. Perhaps its most controversial innovation, which distinguishes it from all three classical millennial theories, is the separation of the Second Coming into a two-part event — a secret Rapture that is to precede the public Revelation by as many as seven years.

This doctrine of a secret Rapture belongs exclusively to dispensational premillennialism. Although it originated in a post-biblical "revelation" to a teenager, evangelical advocates ever since have attempted to secure it on the basis of biblical interpretation. An unprejudiced reading of the evidence, however, persuades most serious students of the Bible that the doctrine does not have a single exegetical leg to stand on.

The only biblical passage that comes even remotely close to mentioning the term "rapture" is 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17. There the "catching up" of living believers is not pictured as an event distinguishable from the Second Coming of Christ. On the contrary, the Rapture is the

counterpart of the Parousia. When Christ **comes down**, living Christians are **caught up**.

Whatever the "Rapture" may involve, the Bible does not present it as an eschatological event that is distinct from the Second Coming — that is, separated from it in time — by three and one-half or seven years, as in the speculations of dispensationalists. It is what will happen to living Christians when Christ returns, just as resurrection is what will happen to dead believers. It is certainly not a secret coming of Christ in advance of a public coming. And it certainly does not prepare for a period of tribulation during which time rebellious humanity has a second chance to repent in advance of "the real thing."

In an obviously parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul discusses the Second Coming without reference to the term Rapture at all. There instead of spatial imagery, he uses the imagery of biology, and writes of a transformation — metamorphosis — of living believers — a dramatic change from mortality to immortality that will enable them to enter into the eternal kingdom of God. For when Christ comes again, the end comes immediately thereafter — no second chance, no intermediate period. When Christ comes again, "that's all she wrote!" Dispensationalists generally presume that an eschatological event described in the so-called "Little Apocalypse" in Matthew 24—25; Mark 13; and Luke 21 is to be identified as "the Rapture."

Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left (Matt 24:40).

Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left (Matt 24:41; cf. Luke 17:41).

. . . Two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left (Luke 24:40).

Against the dispensationalist assumptions stands this evidence. The Greek term that may be translated as "Rapture" in 1 Thessalonians 4 nowhere appears in these passages. Nor does the passage say who is taken and who is left. In the preceding verses the point is that the coming of the Son of Man will be like the coming of the flood in the days of Jonah. When the flood came, the wicked were taken away in judgment; only Noah and his family were left behind. So if these Gospel passages are to be associated with the Rapture, you may want to reconsider whether you want to be taken away or left behind.

Enough on dispensationalism. Let us return to our reflections on the **Millennium**. It is not my intention to persuade those of you who hold other views to abandon yours in favor of mine. My goal is not to **change** your minds, but to encourage you to **use** them. I am not prepared to disparage either the intelligence or Christian character of those who disagree. I hope they extend me the same consideration.

In **Revelation 20:1-3** John's vision turns from the grisly judgment scene that concludes chapter 19. He witnesses a heavenly angel descending, carrying two objects.

The first is the key to the Abyss, "the bottomless pit," the "gloomy dungeons" where fallen angels are "held for judgment" according to 2 Peter (2:4), ruled by an "angel . . . whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon" — "Destruction" (Rev. 9:11). Earlier chapters in Revelation describe the Abyss as the origin of "the beast" (11:7; 17:8).

The second object carried by the angel is an enormous chain. Holding the chain, the angel seizes the dragon with his free hand, overpowers him, and chains him up for a thousand years — a Millennium.

Revelation 12 describes the dragon as a hideous, red monster with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads (12:3). There, as here, it is clear that this is not intended literally. The dragon is the devil, or Satan (as in 12:9), the source of the authority wielded by "the Beast" (13:2, 4), whose capture and destruction John reports in Revelation 19 (v. 20).

Satan's supposed "power" must be a part of his deception (v. 3). For his arrest requires, not an elite angelic SWAT-team, but only a nameless angel. What kind of literal chain would bind a spiritual being like Satan? The binding of Satan on any interpretation must mean that Satan's ability to carry out his sinister designs is severely limited (see v. 3).

Revelation's frequent use of symbolic numbers suggests that 1,000 was never intended to refer to a literal period — exactly one year more than 999 and one less than 1,001. 1,000 is ten cubed just as 144,000 (see Revelation 7 and 14) is 12 squared times ten cubed. If 144,000 does not limit the future residents of Heaven to this exact number, why should the thousand-years not also be taken figuratively?

Within the symbolic thought world of Revelation, the 1,000-years — the Millennium — refers to the entire period of human history between Christ's first and second comings. Thus, the "millennium" would be an indefinite, comparatively long, but limited period of time known and determined by God alone (see v. 3). If so, the binding of the dragon must refer symbolically to the partial, but genuine, defeat of Satan accomplished in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Once the angel has captured and bound Satan, he throws him into the Abyss (v. 1) and locks its door. The angel then seals the entrance to the pit to assure that the lock is not opened by unauthorized parties. The purpose of the angel's actions is to keep Satan from deceiving the nations anymore — to prevent him from leading "the whole world astray" (12:9). This curbing of Satan's activity is to continue until the Millennium is ended.

This implies that there are people on earth throughout "the Millennium" whom Satan might attack, were he not confined. Neither Satan's alleged cleverness, the failure of the chains, nor the breaking of the lock release the devil. He is set free by God's inscrutable decision — let out on parole for a short time (see 12:12).

Revelation 20:7-10. For the moment, let's skip over verses 4 through 6 and turn to verses 7 through 10, where we read the end of Satan's story. After the Millennium, God releases ancient "Adversary" from his prison in the Abyss (see 20:3), for reasons we are never told.

Not at all reformed by his long imprisonment, Satan returns to his old ways (see Rev. 12:9 and 20:3). Once again, he goes out to deceive the nations. The purpose of his deception is to renew their rebellion against God. He has learned nothing from the earlier defeat of the beast and the false prophet and their anti-God forces (see Rev. 19:19-21). And so he gathers from the nations an innumerable force to do battle against God.

This passage is difficult to reconcile with any *literal* interpretation of the book. If all unbelievers have already been destroyed, as Revelation 19 reports, who does Satan deceive? If the Millennium refers to some future age, after the Second Coming, is the eternal destiny of resurrected believers still in jeopardy even after the Second Coming? Or are we to presume that dead **unbelievers** are raised following the Millennium only to be deceived again by the devil, to resume again the rebellion that led to their first death (cf. 20:5-6), to be killed and raised again (20:5, 13), then face "the second [?] death" (20:14)? Or, are these nations actually demonic powers? Or, does this vision simply repeat in new imagery the message related in earlier visions in the book? John does not say. This much is certain: John affirms that evil is tenacious despite the repeated warnings of judgment throughout history, and yet he insists that Satan's rebellion against God will ultimately fail.

John pictures Satan's final war against God as a military maneuver against the camp of God's people. This Old Testament imagery refers to the Church as a pilgrim people. But then the imagery changes: Satan's forces march across the breadth of the earth and surround the city he loves. This reference to Jerusalem refers symbolically to the Church. John presumes the presence on earth of the holy city New Jerusalem, that he does not describe in detail until chapters 21 and 22. As in the battle in chapter 19, God single-handedly defeats his foes.

With the defeat of his army of nations, the devil, who deceived them, is thrown into the lake of burning sulfur. He is consigned to Hell, where he joins his cohorts, the beast and the false prophet (see the notes on 19:20). There, the evil trinity will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Each of the verses of **Revelation 20:4-6** mentions the Millennium — the thousand years. The context of these verses between Rev. 20:2-3 and 7 leads to the conclusion that the period of Satan's confinement and the reign of Christ coincide.

Little of what is popularly assumed about the so-called "Millennial Reign of Christ" is found in Revelation 20. And yet this is the only biblical passage that explicitly mentions it. John's obvious motive in presenting this vision is not information but inspiration — to encourage the Christians of Asia to remain faithful until death. We certainly misinterpret the book if we fail to accept the same encouragement.

John sees thrones as he had in his earlier visions (Rev. 4:4; 11:16). Although he says the raised saints reign with Christ, the authority with which God entrusts them is judgment (cf. Dan. 7:22; Rom. 5:17; 1 Cor. 6:2-3). If we are intended to read the book sequentially, and all of unbelieving humanity has been destroyed in the judgment of Revelation 19, who do these saints judge? In what does their judgment consist?

And who precisely are these who reign? According to Revelation 1 (vv. 5-6) and 5 (v. 10), Christians already in this present age serve as "a kingdom and priests . . . on the earth." In chapter 3, the risen Christ promises those who overcome "the right to sit with [him] on his throne" (3:21).

But according to Revelation 20, the "people sitting" on the judgment thrones are resurrected Christian martyrs — literally, those who have been beheaded. Some translations paraphrase this freely by referring to those "executed" (*Today's English Version*) or "killed" (*New Century Version*) for their faith.

Revelation 6 has already described the beheaded saints coming to life to receive (Rev. 6:9) the "white robe" of immortality (3:5; 6:11; 7:15). Does Revelation 20 describe the same event from another perspective, or is this a new event? John does not say. Nor does he explain where they came to life — in heaven or on earth — despite the assumptions of Dispensational interpreters.

What John explains is why they were beheaded — because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God (see the notes on 1:2, 9; 12:11; 19:10). Their witness involved a refusal to worship "the Beast" or his image or to receive his mark on their foreheads or their hands (see 11:7; 13:8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2). They refused to compromise with the anti-God world system and its consumer economy.

John distinguishes beheaded believers who are already raised and the rest of the dead who do not come to life until the Millennium is ended. This distinction might be between ordinary believers and beheaded martyrs. Other apocalyptic literature encourages steadfastness in the face of mortal threats by assuring potential martyrs of a resurrection in advance of the eschaton. But more likely, "the rest of the dead" refers to the rebellious masses slain in the judgment described in Revelation 19. In this case the distinction is between a resurrection of the just for reward and a later resurrection of the wicked for judgment.

Whatever John's intent, he identifies the return to life that precedes the end of the 1,000-years as the first resurrection. According to Rev. 14:13, all "the dead who die in the Lord from now on" are "blessed . . . , for their deeds will follow them." This might imply that "for a faithful Christian death is resurrection" [Harrington, p. 200]. That is, deceased Christians are raised immediately to share in the heavenly reign of Christ. Unbelievers, however, are not raised until the Last Judgment.

Thus, "the first resurrection" refers not to a single moment, but to repeated "resurrections" throughout the present age. John nowhere refers explicitly to "the second resurrection" (but see 20:13). Nor does he make any reference to the status of living Christians at the time of the Second Coming.

Those who may expect to participate in the first resurrection are not only happy, they are also holy. Personal holiness is a necessary requisite for all who would share in the resurrection to eternal life.

The basis for the blessing is stated negatively and positively. First, the second death has no power over them (see the notes on 2:11). Although they may die physically, they will never experience the death of eternal damnation (cf. John 11:25-26). Second, the risen dead will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him throughout the Millennium (see the notes on 1:5 and 20:4) as they await the final resurrection.

Revelation 20's description of the Millennium is John's picture of the situation of the present age — between the first and second coming of Christ — tribulation on earth, but triumph in heaven. Satan's power has been curbed by the paradoxical victory of the slain Lamb, who is nonetheless the strong Lion. God overcomes the power of evil by self-sacrificing love. Death continues in this age, but those who remain faithful until death will share in Christ's heavenly reign.

Eschatology is important, not primarily for the answers it provides for our curiosity about the future. Our vision of the future shapes our sense of mission in the present. And so we turn in conclusion to Revelation 21.

Revelation 21 (v. 16) describes the heavenly city that will descend to earth to become the dwelling place of the redeemed of all ages as a perfect cube that is 1,500 miles on each side. For the time being, let's ignore the engineering problem related to the height of this gigantic cube. This nearly 800,000 story apartment building will present a serious challenge for those residents who live above the 800th floor. Forget the elevator for now. Above 8,000 feet residents are going to need oxygen and pressurization. Let's ignore what such a massive structure might do to the earth's rotation on its axis, etc. Keep in mind that this *city* is called New Jerusalem. But the entire *nation* of Israel is only 150 miles long and 70 miles wide. This *city* has a surface area more than 200 times that. In fact, this city would cover the entire Mediterranean world from Palestine to Rome. And perhaps that's precisely the point of this enormous structure. The new order God has in mind will one day unite people of all nations and cover the entire known world. Does that give you any clues as to what we ought to be doing in the meantime?

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
8/28/16

Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Fourteen: Revelation 21-22⁶⁷
The New Heaven and Earth

Just a couple of years ago here in town, a local developer purchased a strip mall and some adjacent property on Nob Hill between 24th and 28th and began to develop it. You'll remember, first they moved the Red Robin just a little ways over, then they began to remodel the old Red Robin space, they cleaned up the existing structures at the back, and then they began building new buildings that would hold new restaurants and businesses. I know that for years, everyone had hoped that the space would be developed since the old Montgomery Wards store closed back in 2000. The excitement grew each week as rumors flew about what stores might occupy the spaces that were being constructed. The developers started a Facebook page with updated pictures and hints of what companies might be signing lease agreements. The "likes" on the page continued to rise as opening day became inevitable. Now we've got some great new restaurants, some new businesses, and there's still speculation about what will go into the large retail space where the old Ward's building used to be. I tell you that as a comparison because the community excitement that grew with the approach of opening day with Rainier Square pales tremendously in comparison to the excitement that Revelation 21 and 22 holds for us as we see the newly built...

"New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." (Revelation 21:2, nlt)

This is going to be incredible, and I pray the Spirit will give us the eyes to see it.

Today we are closing in on the completion of our summer long series looking at the chapters of Revelation. Our goal has been to engage you in reading the Scripture, inviting you to ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you in preparation for our times together in the book. We wanted to help you learn how to read not only Revelation, but the Bible as well, and we wanted to point out clear teaching while dispelling the rumors and myths about the book. We've tried to anticipate your questions, but we've also reserved a time to answer any questions you may still have or that we couldn't answer. In two weeks we will conclude with a panel discussion of the pastors, answering questions you've submitted. Please – if you have any questions, fill

⁶⁷Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 21:9-14*, Biblical Theology BIBL7560, Northwest Nazarene University; George Lyons, *Revelation 21-22*; John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

them out on the card provided, or email them to us so that we can answer them for you in two weeks.

Has this series been helpful? I pray so. Let's take a look at the chapters for today. Once again, I'm going to assume that you have read the chapters, which will save us some time. If you haven't, you'll want to go home and read them and then re-read this sermon from the manuscript posted on our westvalleychurch.com site or listen to it again. Embedded in the manuscript I've got many Scripture references listed that we won't have time to discuss, so you can do a deeper study of your own. Whether you've read it or not, you might want to open your Bibles to Revelation 21 and 22.

Also, if you weren't with us last week, I need to encourage you to read last week's message, and the accompanying transcript of a message from Dr. George Lyons that we've posted. Those four chapters are some of the most controversial chapters in the entire book, and we had to cover them very quickly last week. Many of you weren't with us, so you'll need to read it because today's reading refers back to that narrative in several key areas.

There is no doubt that in these last two chapters is the grand finale; all that we've read about, been warned about, all that we've seen and heard and tried hard to figure out and understand has been leading us to this. John's intent was to make his readers homesick for a place they'd never been.⁶⁸ He wanted to show them that it was going to be worth it to turn their backs on Rome and the idol worshipping systems of this world. This image is incredible; it is breathtaking to read about; and I can't imagine what it was like for John to see it and try to write it down. Dr. Carol Rotz, one of our leading New Testament scholars, says this:

"John struggles to express the immensity, perfect proportions, and magnificent other-worldly beauty of the 'New Jerusalem.' This perfection represents the glory of God's eternal, intimate relationship with humanity."⁶⁹ "In the face of a world in which men and women sell their souls for money, John portrayed a world in which gold was so insignificant they paved the streets with it (Revelation 21:21)."⁷⁰

There's something there that I want you to realize and understand, because it is vital to interpreting the vision of the New City. John describes New Jerusalem as a city that is a giant cube, descending from heaven and landing on earth.

Now, we've said all along that we can't take the apocalyptic imagery and symbolism in Revelation literally, but I'll say it again: we can't take these symbols literally! Let me repeat what I said last week: "John's purpose in writing Revelation is *theological* more than it is *historical*. John knows that Satan is real and that Satan is the source and power of evil in this world. John is *not* saying that Satan has the body of a dragon, or that a physical chain can be used to bind him. John does not want us to speculate on where the abyss is. We should not use John's powerful spiritual images to represent physical or temporal realities.

John uses time frames and physical images to represent *spiritual* realities. When John said that the destruction of Babylon will take 'an hour' he didn't mean 60 minutes. He meant a

⁶⁸ Lyons

⁶⁹ Rotz, pg 306

⁷⁰ Lyons

short time...You can't find the millennium on a calendar. You can't find the Abyss on a map. You won't reach heaven by climbing in a rocket to space and you won't reach the abyss by digging a hole. John's reference to time is to point us to a reality that is *beyond* time!"⁷¹ Well, the same thing is true here: when John talks about the City of the New Jerusalem, it cannot be taken literally "by any stretch of the imagination."⁷² In a minute I'll explain what everything means, but let me just say this: think about the dimensions that John gives us of this new city. It is a cube (like a giant Rubik's cube [a reference for all you nerds] or the Borg space cube from Star Trek Next Generation [a reference for all you sci-fi nerds. And might I say, while I have your attention, thanks for coming out of your parents' basement and being at church!]). According to John's description, the New Jerusalem is massive: 1,500 miles long by 1,500 miles wide by 1,500 miles high. To put that in perspective, it would look like this (picture of the globe with a cube on it). As Dr. George Lyons has said, "Let's ignore what such a massive structure might do to the earth's rotation on its axis"! "This nearly 800,000 story apartment building will present serious challenges for those residents who live above the 800th floor. Forget the elevator... At the 8,000 feet level residents are going to need oxygen and pressurization,"⁷³ and the top floor of this structure is over 1300 *miles* above *that* level! Imagine a 1500 mile cubed cube. By the way, it is about 1500 miles from Jerusalem to Rome, and remember that Rome – Babylon – represents evil in the world. There is likely some significance in that distance that speaks to the authority of God's city.



So here's a key that's going to help you as we spend our time together discussing this. Forget the literal interpretations. John is not describing this so that we would "break out our calculators," as Dr. Lyons puts it, "but to contemplate the magnitude and attractiveness of the Church God has in mind."⁷⁴ In other words...

The City is the Church

"The understanding that the city *represents* the (church or the) saints and their relationship to God influences the interpretation of its depiction, including the (internal and) external description, which we shall explore. So caution should be expressed to not consider John's explanation to be a literal physical dimension of the city. (One scholar states,) 'Symbolical descriptions ... should not be pushed beyond the idea which they are designed to convey.'⁷⁵⁷⁶

⁷¹ Daniels

⁷² Lyons

⁷³ Lyons

⁷⁴ Lyons

⁷⁵ Lange, pg 385

⁷⁶ O'Neill

So John is taken to a high mountain to see the New City. This is a direct contrast to the chapters we looked at last week when John was taken to the desert to see the destruction of the city of Babylon, the great harlot. John sees a new heaven and a new earth. The word “new” applies to quality and not chronology; in other words it is new in the sense that it is different, not that it is “next.”

We’re told there is no more sea, or ocean. The lack of any ocean is a powerful symbol. The sea represents chaos. In the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis, it says,

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was *formless and empty*, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2, niv)

The darkness represents chaos and evil. So the absence of the sea in the New Order may signify God’s victory over all that the sea represented in ancient thought, including death, grieving, crying, and pain.⁷⁷ The fact that the city comes *down from God*, out of heaven, directly contrasts it with the city of Babylon, made by humans under the influence of the dragon. It is also important to compare the size of the New City, built by God, with the Tower of Babel, which was in Babylon (Genesis 11:1-9). Remember that story? The Tower of Babel was mankind’s attempt to achieve God status, so they built a tower that scholars say was close to a mile high. The City of God is 1500 times that in height, depth, and length. The comparison is intentional. Remember from last week, Babylon is a city and a prostitute, while here the New Jerusalem is a city and a bride. Babylon is clothed in gaudy dress that represents her evil deeds. The New Jerusalem is dressed in her righteous acts. Babylon is a prostitute riding the beast; the New Jerusalem is prepared in her wedding dress for her groom, Jesus Christ, ready for the wedding banquet. Are you seeing the intentional contrast between sinful humans following the dragon, and saved believers who are followers of Christ? *The New Jerusalem represents the Church.*

And don’t let it slip by you that the City comes from heaven; what that’s telling us is that *God brings his dwelling place to earth, among his people*. Being here, among us was where God was before Adam and Eve sinned. Ever since then God has always promised to restore us, and come back to us (Numbers 10:11, 17:7; Ezekiel 37:27; Leviticus 26:11-12; Zechariah 2:11, 8:8). When it says in verse 3 that “God himself will be with them,” the literal translation is actually “God himself with them will be their God.” The phrase “God himself with them” should sound familiar to you, Christian. That’s because it is one of the names used for Jesus: “Emmanuel, God with us.” (Isaiah 7; Matthew 1:23) A better way to translate it would be to say, “God-with-Them himself shall be their God.”⁷⁸

Here’s something beautiful and poignant: the ever-present presence of the tender and loving God means that he will personally wipe away your tears; not that God is some kind of divine Kleenex-dispensing nose-wiper, but it means this: that once God wipes away a tear of grief or loss or sadness or hurt, *it is gone forever*. Because of his presence, *everything* associated with the evil and chaos of sin is *gone*; there will be *no more* death or mourning or crying or pain.

⁷⁷ Rotz

⁷⁸ Rotz

In the midst of this amazing image is yet another call for people to forsake their wicked ways, or in other words, if you don't leave your life of sin and selfishness and turn to Christ, you won't be able to experience the loving presence of your tender creator and savior God.

Then God declares that, "I am making everything new." He's repeating himself from what he said through the prophet Isaiah (43:18-19, 65:16-17). Again, not "new" in the sense that there is a *next* phase or sequence, but "new" in the sense that there is an entirely *different* quality of life than you've ever known before.

Then again Jesus reiterates that he is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega in the Greek alphabet or the "A" and the "Z" in ours. The end is not an event, folks, the end is a *person*. That's why the Bible says,

"For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." (Romans 11:36, niv)

(See also 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16)

And God identifies what we all know, deep down – that is that he is the object of all that our spirits strive for:

"To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life."
(Revelation 21:6, niv)

(See also Isaiah 55:1; John 4:10-14, 7:37-38; Revelation 7:17, 22:1, 17)

Ultimately, the "reward" that we seek isn't material wealth, but it is God himself. He will be with us, and we will be with him forever, and he will satisfy every deep longing of our hearts like water slakes our thirst.

Finally, before we get a tour of the city, we are reminded that those who sin will not be allowed in. John gives a list of types of sinners. The list isn't inclusive as much as it is representational; it's not that those who only do certain sins are kept out. *No* sin is allowed in heaven. There are a couple of types that are worth noting, though:

"The cowardly" – The reason this is mentioned is because it took courage to stand against the popular emperor worship, especially when you could be killed for standing up for Jesus. All through Revelation is the call to be faithful witnesses for Christ; to be willing to introduce others to Jesus. Not standing up for Christ is a sin. (*Did you see the 20/20 show about Kayla Mueller?*)

Another sin in the list that is interesting is "sorcery." The Greek word for that is "pharmakos," which is where we get the word "pharmacy" from. It referred to those who used drugs to induce magic spells; those who did this were idol worshippers. Interesting; ask any recovering drug addict if alcohol or their drug was their idol.

Okay, so now we get to see...

1. The Outside of the city.

John tries to capture the brilliance of the city by describing it in terms of precious jewels, but even that falls short. But that is how beautiful the church is to God; that is how beautiful *you are* to him.

What's interesting is that there is a wall around it. When you are talking about a city that is 1500 miles high and wide and deep, why would it be surrounded by a wall that is only about 200 feet high? Walls were often used for security, but that is not an issue now that the enemies of God have been judged. There are twelve gates in the wall – three on each side, so beautiful that they look like they were each made out of a single giant pearl. And the gates never close – there are no doors. So why is the wall there? When we think of walls, they are either to keep people in (as in prisons) or to keep people out (as in Donald Trump's border wall). But this wall only communicates two things: one is spiritual security. The other is that the Gospel, the Good News of God's Love to us through Jesus Christ, is open to all nations, in all directions.

Now let's talk a look at...

2. The Inside

There is some clear imagery that holds similarities to the Bible's description of the Garden of Eden, and that emphasizes what I said earlier about God wanting to completely restore his original relationship to us – the relationship that we rejected in the Garden. And, I might add, that we reject every time we sin.

There is an amazing river that runs through the city, originating from the throne of God and the Lamb. The water is crystal clear – pure in every way – that satisfies our thirst, providing living water to us. The water symbolizes the Holy Spirit who flows from the presence of God to us, also the grace of God in Christ that flows to us, and it symbolizes immortality and abundant life. It flows right down main street. The fact that it is a source of life is demonstrated by the trees that live along its sides. The trees miraculously provide twelve kinds of fruit or twelve crops. Imagine that! We have orchards and orchards that produce millions of apples, or pears, or cherries – all to keep up with the market demands. These twelve trees provide all the fruit we will need, forever. There is fresh fruit every month. Even the leaves from it provide healing for all the nations of the world. Doesn't that sound incredible: the healing of the nations. Boy if we don't live in a world whose nations need healing I don't know what we need. The "twelves" that are a continual theme in the city (it's dimensions, foundation stones, its gates, the tribes, the angels, the apostles, the trees, for example), all indicate God's power and authority. The number twelve appears 22 times in Revelation, 187 times in the entire Bible.

The throne of God is in the center of the city. Not on the top floor of the executive suite, not off in a throne room somewhere, but right in the middle among us. And we will worship and serve him and each other forever.

It is mentioned that all those who are in that place have Christ's "mark" on their foreheads. All throughout Revelation, this has symbolized that a person has accepted the character of the

name they bear. If the beast's mark is on your forehead, that means you have taken on the lifestyle, and attitudes, and behaviors of the world around you. How do you get the mark of the beast? Simple: you don't have to do anything – just live like the world and you've already got the mark of the beast. But those who have the mark of Christ have accepted his death on the cross as the only payment that will bail them out of the prison and dungeon of sin. They've allowed the Holy Spirit to fill them, to give them the character and nature of Christ.

There is no temple in the city – God Himself and the Lamb are the temple. His presence permeates all of it. Scholar Dr. Lyons points out that “transcendence has been replaced by immanence.”⁷⁹ The entire city is a place of worship. And because of the brilliance of God's glory, there is no sun, nor moon, nor lamp to light the night. All is light in God's presence. There is no night to be afraid of or to be lost in. You will always have clear direction and perspective. No more stumbling.

And I want us to see that all of this is for...

3. The Eternity

The Bible says that “they will reign forever and ever.” The words of this book would have brought incredible encouragement to the original readers. They were facing exclusion from society; unless they renounced their faith, they wouldn't be able to find work, to buy things in the market, and would most likely be tortured and killed – even beheaded. The message of God's final victory and a life of eternity in the presence of the One they were giving their lives for brought them incredible hope and encouraged them to hold fast to their faith and to live for Christ in the face of death and in the light of eternity. Pain, hardships, persecution, and death were only temporary. Their abundant life here on earth and one day forever in heaven was permanent.

Let me just admit something to you: the message of this book will mean very little to you in days of comfort, security, ease and wealth. But in times of trouble, of difficulties, of uncertainty, and persecution, this message means more than the world. Perhaps if you fail to find hope in this description of the New City, you are too comfortable in Babylon. My friends, you've just seen a glimpse of eternity. Everything you see here around you (except the people) is temporary.

We live in times of growing uncertainty. We've given our national leaders a great deal of power and it has only taken them two centuries to get to this place of irreversible corruption. Don't put your hope in their promises; they will buy your vote and sell your soul to the beast himself.

If you are not a Christian, you are living below the spiritual poverty level. You look around at this world and you think this is all there is, but this is all *temporary*. There is an eternity that outweighs, outshines, out lives it all. You can live in and for that city.

⁷⁹ Lyons

If you are a Christian, your citizenship is in that city, not *this* one. Live in this one *for* that city. The only thing that lasts in this world is the people around you. You can populate that New City with the people you know. Time is running out, eternity is getting nearer all the time. Don't let anyone miss out on it! Introduce them to the one that Revelation is all about: Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain for them before the world was made. The New City is a reality! Live as if you are already there. Love and serve God, love and serve people. Introduce people to Jesus!

Next week we will conclude this series, and we will see that the end of the book says...

“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life...Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” (Revelation 22:17, 20 niv)

That phrase, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” is one of the earliest recorded prayers. From the very beginning, Jesus people have been anticipating his return. The Apostle Paul wrote it in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, saying “Maranatha!” (1 Corinthians 16:22, kjv) Come quickly, Lord. It was a prayer that was repeated whenever Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper. It was a constant reminder of his saving death, his living presence, and the sure promise of his return and the certainty of heaven forever with him.

And that is what we are going to do together this morning. We are going to say, “Maranatha; come quickly Lord.” You died for us, we will live for you until you return, no matter how bad things get, even if it means we die for it.

That's why Paul wrote...

“Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death *until he comes again (repeat).*” (1 Corinthians 11:26, nlt)

Pray, give instructions. By coming, you are proclaiming you will live for him because he died for you, and you will proclaim him – with your life and words – until he returns. And he will return! It can be your confession of faith. Maybe for the first time, but for sure every time.

West Valley Church
Pastor Michael O'Neill
9/04/16

**Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Fifteen: Revelation 22:12-21⁸⁰
“Epilogue”**

The human mind is a wonderfully complex part of the machine that is our bodies. Our brains can actually process a group of words, even if the words themselves are spelled totally incorrectly. For example, see if you can read the following:

The hman mnid is a wndoreullfy cpoemlx oargn. You see? It deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod aearpr, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is that the frist and lsat ltteer are in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the human mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Amzanig isn't it?

Did you finish it? Everyone done? Isn't it amazing how your mind can read that? It's like life: oftentimes our lives, and the world around us, don't seem to make sense. There are even times when everything seems to be totally out of order. But when we take a step back and remember that God is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last we can make sense of things and rest assured that one day it will all be put back in order. That's what Revelation does for us, and that's kind of how we read the book of Revelation. When we look at it closely, seeing every image and number and symbol, it is hard to decipher. But when we step back and read it as a whole, there begin to be patterns that form and we begin to understand what it is saying. That's what we've been hoping to help all of us do in this series in Revelation.

Today we are in the last part of our fifteen part summer sermon series through Revelation, called “Revealed.” Many avoid Revelation because it seems like a book of cryptic messages that elude us and frighten us. It can be confusing, especially with all of the contradictory and competing self-proclaimed experts. But when we read Revelation as it was intended, it provides inspiration and application to our Christian lives today.

So our goal has been to help us learn how to read it, to better understand what it says to us today (and what it does NOT say), and to allow the book to speak to us and transform us into Christlikeness, because that is, after all, what God's Word is for. That's why on the website we have given you a reading plan that goes along with the passages we've been looking at each

⁸⁰Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 21:9-14*, Biblical Theology BIBL7560, Northwest Nazarene University; George Lyons, *Revelation 21-22*; John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

Sunday, and we've given you three questions to ask yourself, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak to you and prepare you for our time together. We've also given you several ways to submit questions that you have about Revelation that we haven't answered for you. Next Sunday during our pastors' panel discussion we'll answer the questions you've submitted.

I'd encourage you to open your Bibles or your iPhones or iPads or digital Bible to Revelation 22 starting in verse six. We are going to go through the verses to try and explain the apocalyptic parts; we are going to see what it has to say to us as a church, and then what it says to us as Christians.

So let's start with...

1. Exegesis

Exegesis is a word that means, "to explain." In theology, it is the process of gaining and then explaining, the *meaning* of a passage of Scripture. This involves understanding the original language, the original context in which it was written, who wrote it, to whom it was written, and what for. A good theologian or Bible student will do diligent exegesis. Exegesis is a careful study of all those things in order to get the meaning out of the passage. What you do *not* want to do, and what you must be very careful *never* to do, is *eisegesis* (eye-suh-jee-sus). If exegesis is getting the meaning out of a passage, eisegesis means to "add meaning to" the passage; to add meaning that is not in the original passage, to insert meaning into it that isn't already there. Cult leaders do it in order to twist Scripture and control people. Bad pastors commit eisegesis because they are lazy, if not worse. Unfortunately Revelation is a book of the Bible that a lot of people commit eisegesis with all the time! They'll add meanings to times and dates and numbers and symbols that were never intended. So we've been, and always are, extremely careful to exegete Scripture properly for you. Now that you've had your theology lesson, let's exegete this passage for today. I'll only hit the significant issues because of the time we have.

First of all, I want you to see that this passage is an epilogue. An epilogue is a section or speech at the end of a book or play that serves as a comment on or a conclusion to what has happened. And if your memory is good you'll recognize that this passage ties the beginning (or the prologue) and the end (or the epilogue) of Revelation together, like tying a knot around it or like bookends on it. It repeats some of the same form and content material. We don't have time to run through the comparisons, but if you download the manuscript of this message, you'll see some of them in the footnotes.⁸¹

Three times in this epilogue Jesus declares emphatically, "I am coming soon!" There are a couple of reasons why Jesus tells us this three times: first, to declare something three times meant it was certain – it was for sure. "Three" is one of four numbers that represent

⁸¹ Rotz writes: "The Apocalypse is genuine prophecy (1:3; 22:6, 9–10, 18–19) that comes from God (1:1; 22:6) by a true prophet (1:1, 9–10; 22:8–10) through an angel (1:1; 22:6, 16). It is for God's slaves (1:1; 22:6) to be read in the churches (1:3, 11; 22:18) as a blessing for all who read and obey it (1:3; 22:7), with a curse for those who attempt to seal up or change its words (1:2; 22:10). It comes from a man named John (1:1, 4; 22:8) for the encouragement of the faithful (1:3; 22:7, 12, 14)." Pg 309

certainty in the Bible (3, 7, 10, 12). Remember that Jesus prayed *three* times in the Garden that God would allow the cup of his suffering to pass (Matthew 26:36-56), and Paul prayed *three* times that God would heal him (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). There are many other examples in Scripture (for instance, Jesus died at 3pm, was in the grave for 3 days...), but here, there is one story specifically that John wants to remind us of and connect this to. John penned Revelation, but John also penned the Gospel of ... John (along with 1, 2, 3 John). In John's Gospel account, he recorded the story when Peter denied that he even knew Jesus...*three* times (John 18:13-27). John ended the Gospel story with the account of Jesus *restoring* Peter by asking him...*three* times... "Peter, do you love me?" (John 21:15-25). John ended the Gospel story and *also* Revelation with these "threes." In the Gospel, Peter wrestled with the uncertainty of his relationship with Jesus, but then Jesus assures Peter that he loves him. In Revelation, we wrestle with our uncertainty of whether or not Jesus has abandoned us, whether we are left alone, whether he will return, but then Jesus reassures us that he still loves us. Jesus says to us three times with certainty, "I DO love you and I WILL return for you." Jesus, through John, connected these two stories intentionally for you and I, for the Church. When Jesus says, "I am coming soon," he means "I AM, coming," as in, "I did, I am, and I will. The I AM is coming." He is always present with us and will one day come back for us. This doesn't just refer to Jesus' final advent, but *all* of his arrivals in our lives and throughout history. He is always present, the I AM. His intimate presence is real for *every* generation, but every generation also waits for his final return and eternal presence in the New Jerusalem (that we saw last week).

In verse seven we are given the sixth of seven "beatitudes" that are found in Revelation (they too are in the footnotes of the manuscript online).⁸² Jesus says...

"Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll." (Revelation 22:7, niv)

"Blessed is the one who *keeps*..." Your Bible might say, "heeds" or "obeys." What does it mean to "keep the words" of Revelation? To "keep" this message is not just to believe it, or accept it, or protect it, or even to cherish it. It does *not* mean simply to believe that Christ will come again along with the rest of what Revelation says. It means to *adhere* to it, to *obey* it, to *live* it. "It is to constantly be ready for Christ's return by repenting of known sin, living a holy life (of love for God and others), resisting the pressure to compromise with the world's (sinful and) perverse value system, and worshipping God alone."⁸³

That is what the next section of this passage is about: worship. We are called to live lives of worship: constantly repenting of known sin, living a holy life of love for God and others, resisting the pressure to compromise with the world's (sinful and) perverse value system, and worshipping God alone. We are reminded of that in this passage because of John's temptation to worship the angel who is delivering the message: once again, John fell at the angel's feet to worship him. You might wonder why John fell for that again (as he did in Revelation 19:9-10).

⁸² 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; and the seventh is later in this chapter: 22:14

⁸³ Lyons

John is willing to be an object lesson for us in order to help us keep our priorities straight, and that priority is given to us from the angel:

“Worship God!” (Revelation 22:9, niv)

This is fitting that it is given to us in the epilogue – the summary of the book of Revelation, because there is worship all throughout the book. And *that’s* because the book is all about God’s work in the world and for people through lion-Lamb Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. God deserves the worship; there is none higher. And the appropriate response from us is worship. But, again, just like we said about “keeping the words of this prophecy,” worship is about more than simply acknowledging whom Jesus is. Worship is far more than simply coming to church and singing a few songs. Worship is *a way of life*; we live our lives for Christ, loving God and loving people enough to introduce them to Jesus – *that* is worship. The Bible says...

“I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—*this is your true and proper worship*. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:1-2a, niv, *italics added*).

Do you see that? Live your lives for Christ, and don’t allow the world around you to conform you into its self-seeking way of life. I love how the Message Bible says it:

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.” (Romans 12:1-2, tmt)

So when we are told in this epilogue to “keep the words” and to “worship,” it is about living our *entire* life, every moment we are awake and while we sleep life, living it entirely for Jesus Christ, not allowing ourselves to be seduced by the prostitute that is this world’s culture.

Then John is told in verse ten not to seal up the words of this book. This is interesting, because it is the opposite of what Daniel was told to do in the Old Testament when he was dealing with this prophecy (Daniel 8:26; 12:4-13). Why would Daniel, in the Old Testament, be told specifically to seal it up, but John in the New Testament be told specifically *not* to seal it up here? Here’s why: because Daniel’s prophecy could not be fully understood at the time, but Jesus has inaugurated it and will continue to fulfill God’s plan until the final consummation. Jesus *opened* it (remember: only Jesus could open the scroll – Revelation 5:4-5). The reason John needs to keep it open is because the time is near. This is both a call for us to be watchful and an encouragement for us to continue to be hopeful and faithful.⁸⁴

Then we see something interesting in verses 10 and eleven; it says:

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“Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy.” (Revelation 22:10-11, niv)

Now this seems strange; think about it: up until now, we have seen repeated warnings for people to repent and to avoid all the plagues and disasters and death and hell, and to turn to God. But here it sounds like its saying, “Don’t repent. Just keep on sinning.” But that would be inconsistent, and that’s not what it means. It is *not* saying, “You aren’t going to change anyway, so just keep on sinning.” It is actually a warning to those who keep putting it off. It is a warning that over time, behaviors become habits, habits become patterns that become permanent, and permanent patterns become a formed character that becomes virtually impossible to change. And once Christ returns, the opportunity to repent is over. (Matthew 25:10; Luke 13:25; 2 Peter 3:9-15). That’s why this says “the time is near.” The time for you to change your ways is almost over; you are almost out of time.

Stop, pray, repent before behavior becomes habit, pattern, character.

The time for you to change your ways is almost over; you are almost out of time. Christ is coming soon:

“Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” (Revelation 22:12-13, niv)

The combination of these three different all-comprehensive names of Jesus make the statement that Jesus is God, with an exclamation point! Jesus says what he means and he does what he says; Jesus is coming soon!

In verses fourteen and fifteen we get the final beatitude of Revelation, and yet *another* warning to those who have not repented and turned to God – a reminder that those who don’t will not be allowed into the New Jerusalem – but it says those who wash their robes will. “Washing their robes” means that they have repented of their sins and accepted Christ’s forgiveness, and then they *keep* their robes clean. In the original language, when it says “Those who wash their robes,” it is written with what’s called a “present participle,” which means it is a continual activity; they *continue* to keep their robes clean. The one who is a Christian is not just saved, but is in a *continual* state of being saved. The Christian is not just sanctified, but is in a *continual* state of being sanctified. Christians aren’t perfect; they are simply forgiven and getting better.

Then, in verse 16, Jesus bookends his messages here at the end with the beginning of Revelation and his messages to the seven churches, by reminding them that this *entire* message of Revelation has been from him. It is all from him and about him.

And then we get this amazing call to *everyone*:

“The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.” (Revelation 22:17, niv)

In verses 12 and 16 Jesus promised to return, so there are two people who respond to His promises: 1) the Holy Spirit, and 2) the bride (or the Church). They both say, “Yes, please come quickly, Jesus!” Then the Spirit and the Church invite *everyone* who can hear them to answer the call to come to Jesus. That’s our job, West Valley Church: we partner with the Spirit, to invite *everyone* to come to Jesus, and we are to do that until Jesus returns.

In verses 18-19 Jesus gives a warning that no one should add or subtract from this book. Some people think that this is a warning about the entire Bible. While it is true for the entire Bible that is *not* what is meant here; here it refers specifically to the book of Revelation. This is important for a couple of reasons: one is, for all those who add meaning to the book of Revelation by claiming it means things about specific events, who try to pinpoint it to a specific time on the calendar, you are already violating this command! But it also means something else: Jesus is saying that the words of this book are *already* true. You don’t get to decide if they are true or not; your opinion about Revelation will not change the truth of it. You do not get to decide if it’s true, but you *do* get to decide if you will believe and accept it. Because...

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’” (Revelation 22:20, niv)

He is coming soon. When? We don’t know for sure. But we know it’s sooner than it used to be! You see it is true. So you’d better decide if you’re going to accept it and live it.

Now, remember that we said that this book is not only apocalyptic literature, it is also an...

2. Epistle

There was a little boy in Children’s Church who was asked what an epistle was, and he said it was a wife of an apostle. Well, an epistle is a sacred letter written to a church, from an apostle. And Revelation is an epistle. That means it was written with instructions for the church – for us together at West Valley Church, as well as all the churches and the Church altogether. Does Revelation still hold meaning for us today in the 21st century? Absolutely it does! What is the Spirit saying to us today?⁸⁵

Well, for one thing, we are called to be a holy people together – a people who are like Christ. And our call to holiness comes from our vision of the holy God who is seated on the throne. It is God, and his holy and just character and not any human standard that gives us both the example and the motivation to be holy. We are to be like Christ.

It also means when we come together to worship Christ, *he* must be the central focus of our time together, and we must remind ourselves during these times that he is to be the central focus of our *entire* lives. Jesus is on the Throne! We must not take our gathering together lightly, and this worship means we put Christ before anything the world has to offer.

It means we are the Lamb’s community. So a significant part of Christ-likeness only happens when we are worshiping him and loving and serving each other. You cannot be holy all by yourself and you will not be standing before the throne all by yourself.

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Revelation also tells us, West Valley Church, that since we are the bride of Christ, we are one with him, which means we are to be like him here on earth. That means that our focus is the same as his: to love people sacrificially and to seek and save the lost. All that we do as a church must be done with the deepest desire that our unchurched friends find out about Jesus. There is no higher ambition for a holy, Revelation Church. Every event we plan, every action we take until Jesus returns, is to introduce people to Jesus. Everything!

As a Revelation church we are also relentlessly called to come out of Babylon, to stay out of Babylon, to not be like Babylon. But our Christianity is not a long list of rules and don'ts; it is about what we DO. (*repeat*) We are to love the people around us without being seduced by the world's systems and priorities and pleasures.

Revelation gives us our hope. We don't just hunker down and circle the wagons and protect the women and children until Jesus and the cavalry come. We have the certain hope of the One on the Throne and the New Jerusalem. We uncircle the wagon and we walk confidently *into* this world, standing up as faithful witnesses for Christ all of the time, everywhere we go, even if they kill us for it. We will never be ashamed that we love Jesus! We will not deny it or make excuses for it or downplay it. We love Jesus.

Church, Revelation gives us our hope and our mission.

But Revelation's message is for you, individually, too. God loves you as if you were the only one in all the world to love. God would have given this incredible vision to John if you were the only one to read it. That means that it not only has something to *say* to you, it also has something for you to *do about it*. It expects a response from you, an action from you. Revelation gives you an...

3. Ethic

An "ethic" is a moral principle that results in a moral action. You and I cannot have gone through the book of Revelation over these last 15 weeks and still act the same way we did before.

So how should our lives be different?

Well for one, if you haven't accepted Christ yet, I have no idea why not. How long have you been sitting here, seeing your future? You have two futures in front of you. You don't get to decide if it's true; it already is. You get to decide which side you will be on. The side of God or the dragon? Of Christ or the beast? Of plague or of blessing? Of disastrous ruin or divine rule? Of hell and death or heaven and life? Of the slaughtered hordes before the beast or the 144,000 before the throne? Of the great harlot Babylon or the Great Church, the New Jerusalem? You *do* get to choose which side. You don't need me to wait for you. Choose *now* because Jesus is coming back soon.

While you do that, let me turn to you, church – the ones who are continually seeking forgiveness and cleansing. We are expected to focus every bit of our lives on Christ. The warnings to the churches in Revelation 2 & 3 should be ringing in our ears, too. The

commitment to be faithful witnesses for Christ is our priority. We are to live every day for him, every moment with him in mind, living lives of worship for him. We expect him to return any moment, so we should have a profound urgency for our friends, neighbors, and family members who don't know Jesus. If we don't have that, we should pray and ask the Spirit for it. We live today as citizens of the New Jerusalem tomorrow (*repeat*).

We have a hope, a certainty, that is more real than this place we are sitting in. Everything around us is temporary – *except people*. Everything around us pales in comparison to the reality that will be ours. So we live for *that* place (Hebrews 11:10, 13-15). Our hope is more than a wish; our hope is a reality that simply hasn't happened yet. We live for a home we haven't seen. And we live for that home until we die or until it arrives, whichever comes first. And we will endure anything and everything in order to get there.

If you are the Church, whether you've been in the church for only a few minutes or all your life so far, stand with me church. (Worship team; join me up here, please.)

I want us to respond like the early church did. So we are going to repeat these closing verses – I'll read part of it and you'll respond with your part. You'll read the part that follows where it says in parentheses, "everyone" okay?

"The Spirit and the bride say,

(*everyone:*) "*Come!*"

And let the one who hears say,

(*everyone:*) "*Come!*"

Let the one who is thirsty:

(*everyone:*) "*Come!*"

and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

(*everyone:*) "*Come!*"

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

(*everyone:*) Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people.

(*everyone:*) Amen!