

## **THE BOOK OF REVELATION - A NO NONSENSE GUIDE**

### **SUCH GOOD THINGS AS PASS UNDERSTANDING**

#### **Notes to aid individual or group study**

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### **INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK**

#### **Its Nature.**

Even among Christians the Book of Revelation is a largely unknown book. To some it is a book of mumbo jumbo best avoided. Many more think of it as a sort of 'Curate's Egg' - good in parts, and the rest to be avoided. Most Christians will be familiar with the first three chapters and with the end of chapter 7, and then jump to chapter 21. At the other extreme are those who seem to live their whole life in it, building their theology from it rather than from the Gospels and Epistles.

Sadly it has often become the playground of extremists which has tarnished its reputation. A great Book cries out to be rediscovered in all its glory.

Many modern readers find it difficult to understand, because it is full of a type of symbolism that we do not use today, and understanding what those symbols represent does not come easily to us. The author could assume that the readers of his time would have that understanding and so he only occasionally gives any explanation. We might wish that he had explained more, but we have to do our best with such limited knowledge as we do possess, backed up with as much common sense as God has been pleased to give us.

The whole book comes in the category of literature that is called apocalyptic. The first word in the Book is the Greek word Apocalypse (translated into English as Revelation), it literally means 'lifting the veil', in other words it shows what is going on beneath the surface, explaining why things are happening and are going to happen; it often concentrates on things to come and especially the end-time but, as in this Book, is also about the underlying significance of what is going on in the here and now. There are other parts of the Bible that are of this type, for example, parts of Daniel and Matthew 24, but this is the only book in the Bible that is almost completely of this type. It is therefore unique and needs to be treated with care. This type of writing commonly seeks to convey things beyond our present comprehension by means of symbolic pictures, and taking these pictures too literally can destroy rather than aid that understanding. In some ways it is rather like Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of God - which tell us that it is like a pearl, like a tree, like a net etc. Take any one of these literally and you are in a mess, take them symbolically and you are enriched, with the different illustrations pointing us to something greater than all of them put together.

We may be alarmed at the thought of a whole Book of Scripture that is not to be taken literally, but the Bible is full of poetry as well as history and, as just said, we have the example of Jesus' parables. God uses these other forms of literature to point to truths that are greater than words taken literally can convey.

#### **Its Author**

It was written by someone called John, a very common name. It has been traditionally thought that it was John the Apostle, and that may well be correct, but in the Book he never makes that claim of himself, and the style of Greek is very different from either the Gospel or the Epistles that bear his name. It does not really

matter - if it is inspired by God it matters little who is the vehicle used to bring that inspiration to us. It is probably easiest to think of it as being by the beloved Apostle, but to recognise that this might not be correct.

### **When was it Written?**

It was clearly written during a time of persecution, and there are two periods that are thought to be the most likely - The persecution under Nero (54-68AD) and the persecution under Domitian (81-96AD). Some of the earliest Christian writers (Irenaeus and Eusebius) state categorically that it was written in the time of Domitian, and this seems to fit most closely with some things that are said in the Book itself, so it is probably best to take that line, while being aware that it might not be right, but also again, being aware that it matters little.

### **Its Place in the Canon of Scripture**

The Book had a somewhat mixed history in the early Church. Some places accepted it from the start; others rejected it partly because it was so different from the rest of the New Testament writings, partly because there was no proof of apostolic authorship or authority, and partly because some heretical teachers used it to support their unorthodox ideas. There are still some parts of the Christian Church that do not accept it, and others that do not read from it in their Services.

It would therefore be very unwise to use it alone as the basis for any doctrine, but as long as we do not conclude anything contrary to, or unsupported by, things plainly stated in other parts of the Bible, we will find it to be a uniquely inspired mine of striking illustrations that can deepen our understanding of the doctrines established from the rest of Scripture.

### **How are we to Approach it?**

If this Book is inspired by God then it will be consistent, consistent with the rest of the Bible, and consistent within itself. We need to treat the Book consistently.

There is one question to which we must get the right answer if we are not to go wildly astray, and that is: 'Are we to take it literally or is it symbolic?'

The nature of apocalyptic writing says that we must take it as symbolic. The Book itself says that it is a description of a vision, or possibly a series of visions. As we read through the book we will find great parts of it that everyone will agree can only be understood as symbolic, and this is what would normally be expected of a vision.

If there are parts that are meant to be taken literally we would expect there to be some indication of when we move from symbolism to literal and back again, but there is no such indication. The complete narrative is treated as though it is a coherent whole to be understood as all literal or all symbolic, not part this and part that. The natural conclusion is that the whole Book is to be understood as symbolic.

The only parts that could make any sort of valid claim to be taken literally are the Letters to the 7 Churches, but even these are full of symbolism and are being used to symbolise wider truths.

The Church has been bedevilled down the ages by people who have plucked out some particular part, or parts, and taken them literally. They may not always have realised what they have done, but it always leads to chaotic teaching.

There is nothing to commend such subjective decisions and to do this is to treat the book inconsistently.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly, that this Book deals in symbolism and so is not to be used to 'create' doctrines, but to illustrate and enrich the teaching that has been given in other parts of Scripture.

### **God's Word in full Technicolour!**

A non-technical way of viewing the Book of Revelation would be to see it as God's Book of Pictures given as a special appendix at the end of the Bible - a Book of Illustrations that help us to see beyond where words alone can lead us. 'It reaches the parts other means cannot reach.'

This may sound rather trite, but is actually very profound. If we take any part of the Book literally and use it to establish doctrines we are likely to end up with chaos, but if we take it symbolically and use it to deepen our understanding of doctrines established from the rest of the Bible we will find it enriching, stretching our understanding beyond the limits to which plain words can take us.

### **Method of Interpretation**

Most books of the Bible can be simply read as they are and clear teaching will be received; but this Book of Revelation needs a framework if we are to understand it correctly. We may use the illustration of a series of pictures in an art gallery - our understanding of the artist's work will be greatly helped if we know whether it is a series looking at different places, or looking at the same place at different times, or looking at the same place but from different viewpoints, etc. This Book is largely the descriptions of a series of visions, or of one vision with several subsections; we therefore need to sort out whether the pictures are a series going through time, or whether they are a number of overlapping pictures, showing us different aspects of the same time, and if so, what time this is, etc.

If we just read through this Book without a clear framework, we will be all at sea, and after the first few chapters will be completely lost. This largely explains why so many Christians only read, or know, certain parts - they have nothing to help them understand how the other parts fit together.

Unfortunately there have been many widely different frameworks suggested, and these have led to widely differing understandings of what certain parts are about.

Some have seen it as being all about the time when it was written, though this is very much a minority view and is generally agreed to be very inadequate.

Some have sought to find in it a grand sweep through history, one continuous story from start to finish. In practice this is impossible to follow completely and so all sorts of variations have been devised, but still seeking to follow that basic idea. Those who take this line tend to produce almost endless literature claiming that their understanding is right, but all disagreeing with each other. It needs to be said that all these ideas together are still in fact a minority view in the church as a whole.

As neither of these two approaches do justice to the Book, various forms of what have been given the cumbersome names of the Parallelistic System or Progressive Parallelism have been proposed. These see the different sections as running largely parallel, but looking at things from different viewpoints. The variations are mainly to do with details such as where the different sections start and finish. The obvious overlapping of some sections, the seven sections with seven subdivisions, and many other points seem to indicate that this approach is along the right lines.

These notes will be based on this kind of approach; conscious that God can never be tied down to any particular scheme, but also conscious that without a clear scheme we humans will flounder.

In more detail, the scheme we will follow is that, between an introduction and an ending, there are 7 main sections, each of which in their own particular way cover the whole of history from the start of the Gospel age to the end of time, though one of them is only named and not revealed. These sections generally have 7 subdivisions,

However what may be called the 'centre of gravity' of the sections moves forward as we go through the Book, so that the first section is almost entirely about the Gospel age; the second section moves towards the last days but has nothing about the final judgment; later sections have increasing amounts about the last days and the final judgment; and the last section summarises the earlier ages and concentrates on the final judgment and then moves right on into eternity.

The general pattern is that in each section the first 5 subdivisions are about things that happen in the Gospel Age, though the 5th sometimes merges into the great tribulation; the 6th subdivision is about the final stages of history, in some sections it majors on that great tribulation, and in other sections it is more about God stepping in to sort things out; and the 7th is about the final battle and the judgment; but consistent with the moving forward of the 'centre of gravity', in the first main section all 7 subdivisions are about this Gospel Age, and in the last section the first 5 subdivisions are amalgamated in a short summary, and after equally short 6th and 7th subdivisions, it then, as already said, looks on right into eternity.

This scheme will be found to work remarkably well, though reiterating what has been already said, nothing to do with God will ever completely fit into any man made scheme. For example from time to time we are given glimpses of heaven when we may not necessarily expect them, often at the start or end of a Section, or before a subdivision that deals with disaster and judgment and there is a need to show that the redeemed will be secure; and there are also unexpectedly long diversions, perhaps better understood as unexpectedly long treatments of a particular matter.

One thing we need to be clear about is that many of the pictures are not about something that happens just once in history, but are about things that reoccur again and again throughout history. These things are not just about others at another time, but are also relevant to us today.

Having a rough idea about this approach will help us as we go through the Book, though at this point it may sound horribly complex. It is likely that we will find it easier to understand after we have completed the journey through the Book than we do before we start. Some may find that they need to go through the Book twice; once to get some degree of understanding of how it works, and then a second time to see what it actually says.

## **BRIEF OUTLINE OF CONTENTS**

There were no chapter and verse divisions in the original text and there is nothing to tell us where we pass from one section to another. Sometimes the change is clear, sometimes it is far from clear. The divisions we adopt are therefore to be seen as practical aids to study but not as being necessarily correct.

<b>1.1-6</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>1.7 -3.22</b>	<b>Letters to Seven Churches</b> Centres on strength and weakness within the Church
<b>4.1 - 8.1</b>	<b>The Seven Seals</b> Centres on the sufferings of the people of God
<b>8.2 - 11.19</b>	<b>The Seven Trumpets</b> Centres on God calling his enemies to repentance
<b>(10.1-4</b>	<b>The Seven Thunders)</b> (John was commanded not to reveal this section)
<b>12.1 - 14.20</b>	<b>The Woman and the Man Child</b> Shows us the spiritual battle behind the scenes

**15.1 - 19.21 The Seven Bowls**

Last calls to repentance followed by judgment

**20.1 - 22.5 The Last Things**

Deals mainly with eternity after the judgment

**22.6 - 22.22 Conclusion****ABOUT THE FOLLOWING NOTES**

- 1) The notes that follow are not meant to be exhaustive or anywhere near complete, they often skate over the surface, and are meant to be little more than general guidelines and pointers to aid individual thought or group discussion.
- 2) While some things in these notes may be said with great conviction it should always be kept in mind that the view stated may not necessarily be correct. Contrary to the claims of some commentators, very little in the Book of Revelation can be tied down with absolute certainty. While divine inspiration is assumed for the Book of Revelation itself, no such claim is made for these notes.
- 3) In the notes words like symbol, symbolic etc, may become almost irritating by their frequent use, but this is almost impossible to avoid when dealing with such symbolic material; and the dangers of taking symbolic things literally is so great that it is safer that the words be overused rather than underused.
- 4) To keep things on a firm scriptural foundation please always read the verses indicated in bold italics and underlined, e.g. **1.1-3**, before continuing.

**REVELATION 1.1-6 ~ INTRODUCTION**

We will soon come to the first main section of the Book, centring on the Letters to the Seven Churches. But first we have the opening introduction.

**1.1-3 ~ Hear and keep**

These first words start us off in the right direction - it is to be all about Jesus Christ. However we have the same sort of relationship shown to us that we find in the Gospels - namely that Jesus Christ seems to be separate from God, and so our first impression may be that it is suggesting that Jesus himself is not divine, but is an agent sent by God; and yet it is clear that he is not just a man and nor is he an angel - so what is he? More will become clearer later.

Just how the message came to John is not entirely clear. It says that God gave the message to Jesus Christ to show to his servants. Then it seems that Jesus Christ passed on that message by sending an angel. Later we find that John actually had a vision, or possibly a series of visions.

Can we sort all this out? Probably not! But all that matters is that John had a vision in which an angel was often his guide, and that it was all about Jesus.

We are told that this is going to be about things that must soon take place, and that the time is near; but it is to become clear that it is about things right on to the end of the age, some of which have, humanly speaking, still not taken place 2,000 years later. It seems that God's view of time is not quite the same as ours. How can it be when he is the eternal I AM?

These verses are addressed to everyone who hears and keeps what is written in this Book, but there is a smaller group to whom the Book is initially addressed.

**1.4-6 ~ Greeting and doxology**

It is written initially and especially to 7 Churches that were in Asia Minor.

The Grace that is pronounced has a Trinitarian form:

- 1.) From him who is and who was and who is to come - this is the eternal I AM, who we may think of as God the Father.

- 2.) From the seven spirits that are before his throne - seven being the symbolic number for completeness this does not mean 7 separate spirits, but the Holy Spirit in all his fullness.
- 3.) From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

### **Exploration**

*We would almost certainly be very surprised if we heard a blessing from God the Father, God the Holy Spirit and the Archangel Gabriel. We would say, 'Hang on a minute, an Archangel can't be put on the same level as the other two.' The point is that this grace appears to be placing Jesus Christ on the same level as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit - perhaps our first impression was wrong.*

*The difficulty the early Christian writers had was in knowing how to speak of Jesus Christ when he was in the form of man on earth. In that situation he was in the relationship of a man looking to God, rather than that of being part of the Godhead, and this may partly underlie his use for himself of the name - the Son of Man, rather than Son of God.*

*And so the last part, centred on his redeeming work, shows him as serving his God and Father, and yet we notice that it is to him that is ascribed, 'glory and dominion forever and ever.'*

## **SECTION 1 ~ REVELATION 1.7 - 3.22 ~ THE SEVEN CHURCHES**

**(The 7 Letters centre on strength and weakness within the Church)**

### **1.7-8 ~ Look! and I AM**

It is not certain where the introduction ends and the first main section begins. Verse 7 can be seen as a paean of praise from the lips of John, or it could be the start of what was revealed to John in his vision.

What is clearer is that in verse 8 it is God who is being quoted. What he says is of the utmost importance to people being persecuted. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega.' - The beginning and the end. This is in a sense an elaboration of the title - I AM.

Speaking to a people being persecuted God is saying, 'I am with you from start to finish. One day the persecution will come to an end, perhaps in your death, but I will still be there for you. You will always be safe in my hands - so don't lose heart - the ultimate victory is secure.'

And now John is going to describe in more detail how the message came to him, so there is a bit of to-ing and fro-ing in these verses. The Introduction and the start of the first main section are intertwined.

### **1.9-11 ~ Commissioned to write**

As far as his physical life was concerned, John had been exiled to the barren Island of Patmos; but there he had a great spiritual experience, a profound vision, or possibly a series of visions.

### **Exploration**

*It says he was in the spirit on the Lord's Day. The most natural way for us to understand this is that it was on a Sunday, but this would be the only place in the Bible that this title is used like this, and it is likely that the use of it to describe Sunday may not have yet developed, and so it is at least as likely that it means that 'in the spirit' - in his vision, he was at the 'Day of the Lord', in other words that he was being shown things from the viewpoint of where everything was heading.*

*If we want to, there is no reason why we shouldn't take it both ways - that it was indeed on a Sunday, and also that he was enabled to see beyond the present*

*troubles and to look back on them from the viewpoint of the glorious consummation, to see the troubles as past and over and replaced by the future glory.*

We are told that John is going to see things and then he is to write it down and then send it to the 7 Churches of Asia. So this was to be a Vision which he was to translate into Words which other people were to Read. And we know that while it was to start its life going round 7 particular Churches, it was then going to continue round the world and down the ages, until here we are reading it today.

The 7 Churches were at: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. If we look on a map we will see that these go round in a clockwise circuit, and are given in the natural order that a messenger would follow as he went on his errand. There is no need to see any more significance in their order than that of straightforward geography.

The loud voice, like a trumpet, that John has heard giving him his commission has come from behind him, so he naturally turns to see who it is that has been speaking. This is where the actual Vision part of John's experience begins, and he is in for quite a shock.

### **1.12-16 ~ The glorified Christ**

What we have in these verses is of the utmost importance - it is the foundation on which everything else rests.

First we see the seven golden lampstands. They represent the 7 Churches. They may be in Asia Minor, but they also have their place in the presence of God. We should never lose sight of the importance of the Church and of individual Churches to God. They may sometimes drive us to distraction, but they are still precious to God, in his sight they are made of Gold and stand in his presence.

And now we see the glorified Jesus Christ standing in the midst of his Churches. They may be being persecuted, but he is right there among them.

We are later to see him in a very different light as the Lamb that was slain, but here we see him as the one who has been given glory and dominion forever and ever. Here he is the triumphant victor, the ruler of the kings of the earth.

The details of the description are clearly symbolic, for some of them are mutually contradictory, for example - if his face was actually like the sun shining with full force, John would not have been able to see any of the other details, he would have been blinded.

So we are not to waste time trying to imagine a picture that combines all the details given, but rather, just as we look at the different aspects of the Kingdom of God described as like a pearl, or a tree, or a net and don't try to draw a complex picture that includes them all together, so here we are look at each detail individually and learn all that we can from each of them, and realise that the full truth is even greater than all of them put together.

As we look at these details we come across the first great example of how the different parts of this great Book all inter-relate with each other, for we will find that the different features described have a special meaning for the 7 Churches, and will also be mentioned at various points later on.

The first feature we have seen already - he is the one who walks among the golden lampstands.

Secondly he is clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. It seems that this is a picture of being clothed with power and authority.

Thirdly his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow. This possibly indicates the wisdom of eternal ages.

Fourthly his eyes were like a flame of fire - nothing can be hidden from his sight. This applies to both the sins we commit and the good we achieve, but also to the evil that is being done against his people.

Fifthly his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace. This may be emphasising the strength and stability of his stand - he will never be tripped up or fall. Those that trust in him may be certain that he will never fail them.

Sixthly his voice was like the sound of many waters. This may mean that his voice may be loud and challenging or quiet and soothing; he always treats us as is best for us.

Seventhly in his hand he held seven stars, which we are told in verse 20 refer to the 'angels' of the seven Churches; almost certainly referring to the leaders of the Churches who have a great responsibility in a time of persecution - Jesus holds them in his hand.

Eighthly from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. This seems to be similar to the voice like the sound of many waters. His words can act in both directions, cutting down evil and encouraging the righteous.

And finally his face was like the sun shining with full force - a sort of summing up of the sheer brilliance of the vision of the exalted Lord.

What would our reaction be if we saw such a vision? Probably very much the same as John's -

### **1.17-18 ~ I am alive forever**

We may be reminded of God's words to Moses, 'No one can see me and live.' But this glorified Jesus touches him and says, 'Don't be afraid.' And now we may be reminded of Jesus touching the leper and of his words to the frightened disciples after his resurrection, 'Peace be with you.' His greatness and majesty is combined with tenderness and care.

And now we should notice carefully what he says. In verse 8 the Lord God had said, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega.' and here Jesus Christ says, 'I am the first and the last.' What is the difference? None - Jesus is the Lord God.

Next notice that in verse 8 the Lord God was also described as, 'the one who is and who was and who is to come.' and here Jesus Christ says, 'I am the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever.' And again we may ask, 'What is the difference?' and the answer would have to be, 'Nothing much, except that it might actually say even more.' Not only is he the eternal I AM, but the eternal I AM that even death cannot defeat.

To emphasise this he adds that he has the keys of Death and of Hades, (Hades simply means the realm of the dead - the place where dead people go). He is not only the Lord of life; he is also the Lord of the dead, wherever they may be.

So was it in fact Jesus himself who said those earlier words in verse 8?

### **1.19-20 ~ Now write**

Finally Jesus commissions John for the second time to write down what he has seen, but this time it may be possible to detect that it is meant to be for a much wider audience even though in the next two chapters we find that as part of the general message there are to be 7 Letters to 7 Churches. We need to be clear that these Letters are not something separate from the vision; they are given as part of the vision. They are not a separate section, but the completion of the section that started at 1.8.

### ***Exploration***

*Throughout the Book the number 7 has a special significance, and so we may reasonably expect that there is a particular significance to there being 7 Letters, especially when we find that at the end of each Letter, everyone is to take note, not*

*just the people of that particular place. We may reasonably conclude that 7 Churches are being used to give lessons that all Churches of every age are to learn - that though these were real Churches in real places at the time that John wrote, they are also being used in a symbolic fashion.*

*And so as we look at each Letter, we ought to see not only what it has to say about that particular Church at that particular time, but also to see how it may apply to ourselves today, and also what it says about the end to which we are all moving.*

*Some have claimed to find in these 7 Churches a progression through history, it has to be said that this is very tortuous and unrealistic. It is far better to see in them things that may happen to Churches, and individuals, again and again throughout history, though eventually leading up to the ultimate end. In this way they establish a pattern we will find recurring throughout the Book.*

Because these Letters are to actual Churches in known places, (almost the only things in this Book that are real as well as symbolic) we can understand something of the underlying situations, and so it is almost inevitable that the notes on this section will be longer than those on sections where we have no such known background.

## **2.1-7 ~ Ephesus**

### ***Exploration***

*In this Letter we can see clearly the general pattern followed in all of them. With slight variations they contain seven parts that can be called:*

*The Salutation - To the angel of the Church in Ephesus....*

*Christ's self description - him who holds the seven stars....*

*Commendation - I know your works....*

*Condemnation - But I have this against you....*

*Warning and threat - Remember then....*

*Exhortation - Let anyone who has an ear listen....*

*Promise - To everyone who conquers....*

*Not every Letter has all seven parts. God will not be bound by any system. But we will find that when one of these parts is missing from a particular Letter, there is significance to that omission.*

So now we turn to this first Letter:

'To the angel of the Church in Ephesus write,' We do not know for certain what is the significance of the use of the title - angel, but the Greek word for angel simply means a messenger, not necessarily what we would call angelic, and so it is reasonable to suppose that this means the person whose task it was to bring God's message to the Church, in other words the leader/teacher/preacher. This teaches us that the leaders of Churches are of the very great importance, they ought to be supported and upheld in prayer.

'Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.' As this is the first of the Letters it is appropriate that Christ describes himself as the one who has a special care for all the Churches and their leaders.

Verses 2-3 sound tremendous. If we knew that Christ was saying all that about us, we would surely be well pleased; but then comes the sting in the tail, 'But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.'

It is sadly very easy for a Christian life to slip into a sort of 'auto-pilot' state. We develop a system for doing all the right sort of things, and anyone seeing us would say that we were leading a good Christian life; but at the heart the fire is going out. It is equally easy for this to happen to a whole Church.

And so Jesus says, 'Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.' And the threat is that their lampstand may be removed, in other words their Church will cease to exist.

And then comes an unexpected extra comment, 'Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.' Who were these Nicolaitans?

### **Exploration**

*What was it that Christ hated?*

*We cannot be certain, but they, or other groups that seem to be similar, feature also at Pergamum and Thyatira; and it is generally thought that these were people who taught that compromise with other dominant religions was acceptable. Ephesus was a very prosperous city, but the whole of life there was dominated by their famous temple to Artemis (also called Diana). If you wanted to get on in Ephesus you had to take part in various rituals connected with the worship of Artemis, and it seems that some Christians argued that as the heathen goddess didn't really exist it was alright to go along with what everyone expected you to do, and then come to Church to worship Christ. But in practice it wasn't just a matter of going through a meaningless ceremony, it was a matter of a whole mindset that was at complete variance with the Gospel. It meant doing things that denied the worship of the one true God, and on top of all that, it was often blatantly immoral. God hated it.*

*We may well ask to what extent should Christians in an Islamic society go along with such things as observing Ramadan, or to what extent would that mean aligning themselves with the mindset that says, 'do these five things and you will earn acceptance with God.' and so in fact deny the Gospel of grace?*

*In what ways are we tempted to go along with the gods of dominant materialism in ways that deny the Gospel?*

We come to the Exhortation - 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.'

Two things we may easily miss from this. Firstly we are told that these Letters are what Jesus Christ is saying to the Churches, but here it says that they are what the Spirit is saying. Which is it? Secondly the message is for all.

### **Exploration**

*Identical twins sometimes know what each other is thinking to such an extent that one may start a sentence and the other finish it - their thoughts are identical. It is something similar with the Godhead, but even more so. What God the Father says, Jesus Says, and what Jesus says the Spirit says, and what the Spirit says, the Father says. There is no difference.*

*Secondly, though this is at the end of the Letter to the Church at Ephesus, it doesn't say, 'Let the Christians at Ephesus listen to what is being said to the Church at Ephesus.' It says that everyone should listen to what is said to all the Churches, for this is the formula used at the end of all seven Letters.*

*So we are not to read these Letters as being only relevant to the particular Church at that particular time, they are all relevant for all Christians at all times.*

Finally we have the lovely Promise, 'To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.'

Because of sin, man and woman were barred from approaching the Tree of Life in Genesis 3, but now the promise is given that through Christ, what was then forbidden will be freely available. Permission is given to eat of its fruit - come and eat. This is a lovely picture of the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. It's a picture we will come across again later.

What is the key thing in this Letter to the Church at Ephesus? It is Love. 'You are doing well, but you are forgetting your love.'

The Tree of Life is not open to those that do well, but to those who love.

The first commandment is - love God, and the second is - love your neighbour. How is our love?

We have spent some time on this first Letter because it sets the pattern for all of them. Now we move on to Smyrna.

### **2.8-11 ~ Smyrna**

If the first mark of a true and living Church is love, a second is suffering, and at Smyrna we find it in abundance, and one thing we can notice immediately is that in this Letter the standard Condemnation and Warning is omitted. Here is a Church that is really up against it and God's sole purpose is to strengthen and support them. God sees no sin in his people when they are up against it.

Very appropriately for those who are facing martyrdom, Jesus describes himself to them as, 'The first and the last, who was dead and came to life.'

'I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich.' Later we will come to a Church that thought it was rich but God saw it as poor, but here is a Church that was up against it in all sorts of ways but God sees it as rich - this Church is one of God's jewels.

'I know the slander on the part of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.'

### ***Exploration***

*It seems that Smyrna was excessively loyal to the Roman Empire. For the past 250 years or more they had worshipped at a temple to Dea Roma, Rome personified as a goddess, and all citizens were expected to offer sacrifices there. All citizens, that is, except for Jews who had a special exemption throughout the Roman Empire freeing them from all sacrificial obligations. The Jews here, whilst sheltering behind their exemption, became ringleaders in getting the Christians into trouble for not doing what they themselves thought ought not to be done!*

*God was clearly not amused; in fact he was so disgusted by their double standards that he brands them as not proper Jews at all, but members of a synagogue of Satan. Hard words indeed, but their behaviour was disgraceful and disgusting.*

*We know more about the situation in Smyrna than we do about many places because it was here that Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was burnt at the stake. The earliest surviving description of the death of a martyr (apart from those in the Book of Acts) is that of Polycarp and, among other things it shows that it was the Jews who were ringleaders in getting him martyred for not doing what they themselves refused to do.*

What does God say about this poor Church? He praises them, he warns them of suffering to come, he tells them not to be afraid, he tells them to remain faithful, and he promises them the crown of life. He tells them that they will not be harmed by the second death. In other words - they may be killed for their faith, but they will still have eternal life.

There were almost certainly things in the Church at Smyrna that were not right, but God refused to consider it. This is similar to the blessing God made Balaam give to the Israelites in the Old Testament. Here were a mutinous, rebellious, people; but when faced by a deadly enemy, God would do nothing but bless them.

The third Letter is to Pergamum:

### **2.12-17 ~ Pergamum**

To the Church at Ephesus Jesus said, 'I know your works.' To the Church at Smyrna he said, 'I know your affliction.' But to the Church at Pergamum he says, 'I know where you are living.'

God not only knows about us, but also about our environment. There was clearly something especially difficult about the environment at Pergamum for the Christians who lived there. And this is underlined for us by the description that Jesus gives of himself, 'These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.' He is the one who cuts apart the good from the evil. It seems that these people were in need of great wisdom in seeking to know what line to take in a very complex situation.

In relation to Smyrna we saw that there was a temple there to a personification of Rome, but Pergamum was the first place to dedicate a temple to one of the actual Caesars as a god. They erected a temple to Augustus, and so the Imperial cult had its centre here in Pergamum.

#### ***Exploration***

*In connection with Smyrna we saw the blessing God directed Balaam to give to Israel, but now we are reminded of the dark side of Balaam's character. He was a sort of freelance prophet, on sale to the highest bidder. He was all set to pronounce a curse on Israel because Balak would pay him to do so, but God would not allow it. However Balaam was not to be completely thwarted - he taught the Moabites how to bring their own curse on the Israelites by corrupting their morals, and leading them to compromise their religion by accommodating Moabite religious observances. We find that the same thing was happening here. The Nicolaitans are also mentioned again, so it seems that this was a widespread threat to the Church, and no doubt still is today.*

*It is impossible to know the exact nature of what was going on, but it is virtually certain that it was all to do with compromises. It was hard enough to be living in an environment where you were expected to offer sacrifices to various heathen gods, even harder when one of those gods represented the might of Rome to which you were subject. Hardest of all when there were people around who claimed to be Christians, and who said, 'Come on, it's alright - just do it and then get back to worshipping Christ.'*

*The argument would have been all the stronger because they had already seen at least one of their number - Antipas - killed for his faith. We may imagine the argument - 'If we all take this sort of stand, there will eventually be no Christians left, we must be reasonable and fit into society as best we can.'*

*It seems as though there was also the beginning here of a brand of Gnosticism that claimed to have secret knowledge, and as long as you had this secret knowledge you could do more or less what you liked, a teaching that of course made life very much easier.*

He of the sharp two-edged sword threatens to come and divide between them. On the one hand those who play around with compromises and supposed secret knowledge are to repent or he will come and make war against them with the sword of his mouth. On the other hand those who conquer, those who keep themselves pure from this corruption, those who simply follow the truth of the Gospel, will become partakers of a true and absolutely pure secret.

"I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."

This is one of those points where we today struggle to understand the meaning of the symbols, but we may consider that Jesus said that he was the true bread from heaven, so this may be to do with receiving something of the very nature of Christ himself; and though there are many competing suggestions for the meaning of the white stone, we can say that whichever is right, it has the same depth of significance as that which we give to a wedding ring, and if we were to develop that idea then the new name would be that of the husband, who is the Son of God.

The situation at Pergamum was undoubtedly very complex, very difficult, but Jesus Christ knew all about it. There is nothing he does not know. Is anything too hard for the Lord?

And so we move on to Thyatira:

### **2.18-29 ~ Thyatira**

Thyatira was probably the smallest and least important of the seven Churches, yet the Letter to it is the longest. What is the reason for this? Possibly because it has at its heart a bitter disappointment. Here was a Church where so much was good, but something was threatening to destroy it.

We start with the description Christ gives to himself, 'These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.' Here is one who sees into the hidden place where evil is plotting the Church's downfall, but he is also the one who can stand firm in all circumstances.

Look at the glowing Commendation: 'I know your works - your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than your first.'

Ephesus had been commended for most of these things, but, love was missing, and their fire was going out; but these people had love as well and, far from going out, their fire was burning ever brighter. What more could anyone desire?

It seems that Thyatira was more like a trading centre, a place where people just got on with making a living, and so there may not have been quite the same pressure from outside to go to the right temples; but that there were those in the Church who were teaching that love required them to go along with the rest of the community anyway.

The problem was 'Jezebel'. This may be a code name being used of a particular known false teacher, but more likely it is a personification of this type of false teaching that was threatening the Church.

### ***Exploration***

*As the name Jezebel is used we should consider the character of Jezebel, Ahab's wife. We see that she was a very powerful woman, she was a woman who got her way, and her way included the worship of Baal.*

*The name Baal means Master and each area worshipped their own Baal together with his female consort, but they were really all sub-branches of the same type of fertility religion in which various things were done to stimulate the Baal and his consort to mate and so supposedly bring fertility to the land. These 'acts of worship' sometimes included human sacrifice but more generally included things of a sexual nature, intended to stimulate the gods to do likewise.*

*It was thought that failure to do the necessary acts would lead to a bad harvest, and so the worship of Yahweh which forbade these acts was seen as being treacherous.*

*It is probable that Jezebel would have had no problem with people worshipping Yahweh as long as they also took their proper part in the Baal rituals. It was the insistence by the priests and prophets of Yahweh that they alone had the truth and that the people must not join in these activities that infuriated her.*

*The situation in Asia Minor in the time of the early Church was very similar, with the call to have your own particular worship if you like, but you must also worship the local god or gods or else they may not give a good harvest.*

*It seems likely that 'Jezebel' in this letter refers to teaching within the Church to the effect that Christians should agree to this as part of being loving people.*

It seems that at the heart of this lovely and loving Church, love was being distorted to teach participation in things that were contrary to, and denied the uniqueness of, the Christian Gospel. We are here on the edge of a common problem - to what extent is the Church to be open to welcoming outsiders, and how clearly are we to impose rules that may make outsiders feel they do not belong?

How can we be in the world, but not of it?

However this is worked out there must be no compromise with non-Christian ideas therefore the Church must be ruled properly, and so it is appropriate that God promises to those who overcome that they will have, 'authority over the nations; to rule them with an iron rod.' We will consider more of what this means later.

They are also promised, 'the morning star.' Later in this Book Jesus proclaims himself to be, 'the bright morning star.'

These people were being led astray to give themselves to a false idea of love. Jesus promises that if they stay true to a proper understanding of Christian love, he will give himself to them.

This is the second time we have seen possible hints to a teaching that will become much clearer later - the marriage of the Church to Christ.

Can we expect something better from the next Church - that at Sardis? Sadly not.

### **3.1-6 ~ Sardis**

Oh dear! No commendation at all, just a sad commentary - they have the name of being alive - but - 'you are dead.'

The description Christ gives of himself here is, 'him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.' In his life on earth as man, he was filled with the Spirit of God, but now he is the Lord of the Spirit just as he is the Lord of the Church. The significance seems to be that the Spirit brings life, and that life is meant to be in the Church; but here is a Church that is dead.

How did they get their good reputation? Presumably because they at one time did a lot of good things, but now they are going to sleep, in fact they are so fast asleep that they might as well be dead.

There is still a hope for them. They can wake up and remember where they once were and return to life, but if they don't they have had it.

There are a few faithful souls who still have life and they will not be lost.

The message of the Church of Sardis is - stay awake, keep alive. Don't rely on the past, but be alive today.

'New every morning is the love our waking and uprising prove.' says the old hymn. But it is not just God's love for us that is to be seen new each day - it is also our love for him that needs to be new each day.

From this sad scene we move on quickly to something much better - the Church at Philadelphia:

### **3.7-13 ~ Philadelphia**

What a contrast - with Sardis no commendation, but with Philadelphia there is no condemnation.

Christ describes himself as the one 'who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.' and he tells this Church that he has opened the door for them and no one can shut it.

Why does God so love this Church? Because humanly speaking it is so weak, but it has held tenaciously to its faith. All they can do is to maintain their love for their Lord, and that is all he requires of them. He for his part will keep them safe, open the door for them, and eventually make them a pillar in the temple of God.

They may seem to be so weak, but God sees them as one of the strongest parts of his holy temple which is the company of all faithful people.

The pillars in temples were decorated with all sorts of inscriptions, and this one will be no exception, it will have wonderful things inscribed on it. It will have written on it the name of God, the name of the city of God, and the name of Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament we are told that God has his people's names graven on the palms of his hands, but now it is the other way round, he has all his names graven upon them. This is a very emphatic way of saying, 'You will never be forgotten.'

One more Church to go - Laodicea.

### **3.14-22 ~ Laodicea**

#### ***Exploration***

*No one knows how the Gospel first got to Laodicea, but we do know quite a lot about the place. It was renowned for its prosperity. It was situated in a fertile valley at the junction of several important trade routes. When it was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60, it was promptly rebuilt without any appeal being made to Rome for the customary financial assistance. They were proud of their banking centre and also of their medical school which produced a special powder for the treatment of various eye complaints. They were also well known for high quality cloth, garments and carpets.*

*All in all, they were a prosperous, self made and self sufficient community.*

*One natural feature was the hot spring that rose in the hills nearby. The water cooled as it flowed down towards the town, until where it fell over a waterfall just opposite the town the water was lukewarm.*

*It seems that the self satisfied spirit of the place had infected the Church there, and we find that they needed a very serious wake up call.*

To this Church Christ describes himself as, 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation.' These people needed to be reminded that they possessed nothing that did not originally come from God, and was not brought to them by Christ.

God's diagnosis of them is that they are like the waters nearby, neither hot nor cold. He would rather that they were boiling hot or freezing cold. Lukewarm-ness revolted him. The opposite of love, is not so much hate, but indifference.

The reason for their being lukewarm is their self sufficiency and self satisfaction. It seems that there was little in the Church to distinguish them from others around. They lived the same kind of lives, with the same attitudes, the same self sufficiency, and the same pride.

They thought they had everything they needed - riches, health, medicines, clothes - they had the best of everything. But God said just the opposite - spiritually they were poor, sickly, blind and naked.

He urges them to turn away from the counterfeits of the world around them, and turn to him to receive true riches, true health, true sight, and clothes that will last for eternity.

And then comes the famous verse 3.20

In its actual context this is about a Church letting Jesus come into their life and gatherings. And looked at this way we can see just how pathetic the situation was at this Church. They gathered together for a time of self congratulation, while Jesus was left standing outside. Have we ever been to a Church Service at which we felt that Jesus himself had been left outside? Jesus is saying that he wants to be in the heart of all they do, but he won't force himself on them, he wants to be asked.

This verse has, of course, been repeatedly used of individuals as opposed to Churches, but there is nothing wrong in this. A Church is a corporate body made up of individuals, so what applies to the Church as a whole, applies also to the individual members of the Church. But, of course, the verse has also been used of individuals who are as yet outside the Church. The fact that it has been so greatly used in this way would indicate that God approves of this use also.

As befits the last promise given in these seven letters, the promise here is the greatest of them all, 'To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.'

The mind boggles as to just how much this means. If it had just said, 'I will give a place on my throne.' we might have thought of this as a sort of invitation to see what it is like to sit on the throne; but when it adds, 'just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.' it becomes something far more than that. Jesus actually reigns and rules with his Father, so???

Whether or not the writer of this Book was John the Apostle, we can certainly put this promise together with the words of 1 John 3.2 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.'

In these two chapters we have seen examples of seven Churches in different situations and in different states of spiritual health. Similar situations with multifarious variations have existed all over the world and in all ages, and most Churches go through many of the different stages of spiritual health. It is not adequate to just see how the message applied to those particular Churches at that particular time, we are to take heed of those words, 'Let everyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.'

Through these Letters God speaks to us today. We are to be encouraged, we are to be challenged, we are to take heed and repent, we are to rejoice and look forward to a future so far beyond our ability to comprehend that it can only be described in a series of wonderful symbols.

There are serious warnings in these Letters but the final emphasis is on the glory that awaits those who persevere and conquer.

When we face persecution or other difficulties because of our faith, we would do well to start by looking at the glory that is promised will be ours at the end, and then to look back at the problems from that viewpoint.

Above all else we are to see that behind, and through, all history stands the figure of the glorified Jesus Christ, and we are to make him the centre of everything. What is waiting for us at the end is in his hand.

If we seek the glory without seeking the Lord we will lose both. If we seek after the Lord we will obtain both because in a very deep sense the two are one and the same.

## **SECTION 2 ~ REVELATION 4.1 - 8.1 ~ THE SEVEN SEALS**

**(The 7 Seals centre on the sufferings of the people of God)**

### ***Exploration***

*With Chapter 4 we move into the 2nd main section. Some people are adamant that the whole Book was received in one all embracing vision, others would see it as consisting of several different visions that all combine together. It matters little which is correct.*

*One hint that this might be a second vision rather than the continuation of the first comes in 4.2 'At once I was in the spirit.' But we have been told before, 1.10 'I was in the spirit.' There is nothing conclusive here, but we could take this to suggest that after the vision of chapters 1-3, John returned to the normal routine of life and then he had his second vision - chapters 4-7.*

*Whichever way we take it, John is certainly now shown things from a different viewpoint; not the strengths and weaknesses of the Church, but the sufferings caused by opposition.*

*However we start with a glimpse of heaven.*

### **4.1 ~ A door opened**

In the film 'The Truman Story' the hero is duped into living his whole life in an artificial environment where his every move is recorded and transmitted on TV for the world's entertainment, until one day he stumbles upon a door that takes him through into the real world. You are only given a hint of what will follow, but it is clear that his life will never be the same again and that he is about to find true love.

In this section, and in many other similar passages throughout the Book, we are taken through a door from a world that has become a shadow of what it ought to be, and we see a glimpse of true reality, and our lives should be transformed by what we see. What we see may be highly symbolic, but it should blow away the shadows that curtail our spirits on this earth.

What we are about to see are the greatest things that could ever be seen. They are so great that the terrors of the persecution that will feature in this section will seem as nothing compared with the glory that can never be destroyed.

### **4.2-3 ~ The Throne of God**

What John sees is none other than God himself. Can God be described? Clearly not, for what we are going to have are descriptions of things that surround the throne. The One who actually sits on the throne is indescribable and John hardly tries - 'Like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.'

'So, John, what did God look like?'

'Like jasper and carnelian.'

We may be rather disappointed, but there is a very important lesson to be learnt - God is to be known by what he does and by what is going on around him. In the book 'The Shack' God says that he is a Verb, not a Noun, which accords with his description of himself in Exodus as 'I AM'. God cannot be known by what he looks like, but only by what he says and does.

While jasper and carnelian may not do much for us, there is an important thing that we might easily miss, but which is the central focus of this whole section, and that is that God is on the Throne. All sorts of nasty things may be going on in this world and persecuted Christians may be tempted to despair, but 'through the door' we see that the reality is very different - God is on the throne and reigns over all.

The almost non-existent description of God himself is followed by a dramatic description of what is going on around him.

#### **4.4-6a ~ The 24 Elders**

The first thing John notices is the 24 elders on the 24 lesser thrones round the central throne. 12 is of course a very symbolic number for Israel. (12 tribes.) It is also very symbolic for the Church. (12 Apostles.) Almost certainly these 24 represent the whole people of God from both the Old and the New Covenants.

Humanly speaking both the 12 Tribes and the 12 Apostles consisted of flawed people, but here they are wearing white robes signifying purity, and golden crowns signifying the fact that they reign with God. We will see a little later how this transformation has taken place.

It seems as though John was so amazed to see God's people so closely connected to God himself, that it was only after he has studied them that his eyes were drawn back to the central throne of God. He has no further description of God but he sees flashes of lightning and hears rumblings and peals of thunder. This emphasises that here is the seat of all power. In the world of that time, and still today, almost everything could be tinkered with in some way or other, but no one could do anything about a thunderstorm. So God is being presented as the One who has a power that cannot be withstood or controlled in any way.

And then he sees 7 flaming torches, which are the 7 spirits of God. These have already been mentioned in 1.4. This is not to be taken to mean that there are 7 different spirits of God, but as being symbolic of the Spirit of God in all his totality and fullness. As the whole vision is being addressed symbolically to 7 Churches this may also be understood as pointing to the fact that the Spirit of God is available in his fullness to all the 7 Churches, and as those 7 Churches symbolically represent every Church, it means that God's Holy Spirit is available in his fullness to every Church and every Christian.

John's gaze now begins to move out from the centre and he sees that all around is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. There are no dusty corners here, nothing hidden from sight, everything is clean and pure and open.

And there is more to come.

#### **4.6b-8 ~ The 4 Living Creatures & their Song**

This is where many readers begin to get lost and give up - a great pity for it is these verses that introduce us to the worship of heaven.

But who are these four living creatures? There is help at hand, for we get a very similar description in the 1st and 10th chapters of Ezekiel, and Ezekiel 10.20 tells us that they were the Cherubim. The exact nature and work of the Cherubim is impossible to discover, but they are consistently presented as being the protectors of holy things, we may say that they are those angelic beings that are closest to God. We may therefore think of these four creatures as representing the angelic host before God.

#### ***Exploration***

*It is not possible to be sure from verses 4.4 and 4.6b (see also especially 5.6) which were the nearer to the throne, but it is certainly possible to argue that the representatives of the Church might have been nearer than the representatives of the angels - a remarkable thought.*

And so we come to the first Worship Song heard in heaven - there are to be four more in this section, one in this chapter and three in the next chapter and each has a special significance.

Here we remember that it is sung by the four living creatures, the representatives of the heavenly host, those who were charged with symbolically guarding the Almighty; and their song is about the essential nature of God: 'Holy,

holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.' We may justifiably see in this a hint at a Trinitarian formula, but in origin it is the Hebrew way of expressing complete and utter holiness, and could also be taken to mean that God always was holy, always is holy, and always will be holy.

Now we move on to the second Song.

#### **4.9-11 ~ The Elders' Song**

We remember that these 24 elders represent the people of God from every age, both Old and New Testaments, and so their song is to do with God's relationship with the World.

'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.'

We may indeed think here of the whole Universe and whatever else there may be and see it all as created by God, but for the people of John's time their thoughts would probably have been very much centred on this Earth.

We may say that angels worship God for who he is, and mankind worship God for what he has done, though obviously the two are not mutually exclusive and can be healthily combined.

So far we have seen God on the throne, or at least we have been told that he is there, and we have also seen the Holy Spirit presented as the 7 spirits of God. Is there more to be seen? There is indeed.

#### **5.1-5 ~ The Scroll with 7 Seals**

We have already had 7 Churches, we are later to have 7 Trumpets, and 7 Bowls, and to hear of 7 Thunders, but here we are introduced to 7 Seals. What is sealed is a scroll written on both sides. This is generally understood to mean the whole purpose of God - God's eternal plan. Something has happened that means that it is sealed with seven Seals and no one can read it and find out where God's plan is leading. It seems that there is no one worthy of such a task.

John is distraught but is told not to weep for there is someone who can do it, someone described as, 'The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.' John is told that this person has conquered and can undo the 7 Seals - but who exactly is he?

#### **5.6-8 ~ The Lamb**

John looks to see this Lion, and what does he see? He sees a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. We don't need to worry about how a Lamb could stand as though it had been slaughtered. If we take any of the symbolism in this book literally we will soon be in a mess, but if we treat it as symbolism is meant to be treated it is full of meaning.

This is telling us that it is only because Jesus Christ has suffered and died that the Seals can be opened. It is only because he died on the cross that God's eternal plan can be fulfilled.

There are three more things to notice here about this lamb that had been slain; firstly he had seven horns meaning that he has full authority and power; secondly he had seven eyes, meaning that he was filled with the Spirit of God; and thirdly he is able to approach into the very presence of the One who sat on the throne and take the scroll out of his hand - here is someone with a standing greater than that of any angel and of any person, someone with a unique relationship with the One on the throne. We might say that they are working together hand in hand on this great project.

The second half of verse 8 suggests that the hopes and prayers of all mankind are being fulfilled by what this Lamb has done; and this is expressed in the next Song.

### **5.9-10 ~ The Song of Redemption**

If the first Song was about God's being, and the second was about God's doing, this is about God's redemption.

Because this Lamb, this Jesus Christ, has died on the cross, people may become saints. Not everyone is saved - they come from, or out of, every group on earth; but salvation is available to everyone without exception.

Everyone who is redeemed is made a king and a priest. They serve God and reign on earth.

We may think that Christians do not always reign on earth, those being persecuted certainly would not have felt this was so, but as far as God is concerned this is the true situation. Other people may seem to have the power, but the people who actually work out God's plans are his people.

It says that, 'they will reign on earth.' and this could be taken to mean that one day the time will come when they do, perhaps not actually in this world as it now is, but in the New Earth that will one day be revealed. This is almost certainly incorrect; it is more likely that it means that all the way through history this is what the saints will do - it is they who will work out God's purposes. The powers that be, will come and go, but what the redeemed do will last for ever.

All of this is especially wonderful for redeemed people, but what are the angels to make of it?

### **5.11-14 ~ The worship of Heaven**

Everyone in heaven, angelic and human join in the first great song of praise, and then, as if that is not enough, every kind of existence you could think of join in a second great song.

So now the scene is set and the 7 seals can actually be opened.

#### ***Exploration***

*In this section we get the first example of an intriguing presentation. We have the first 6 Seals opened together with descriptions that go with each one, but when it comes to the 7th Seal we find that we seem to have come to the end of history and instead of a full description we are ushered into the start of the next section. It is as though God says, 'We are not ready to go into this bit yet. We need to do more preparation first, so we will go back to the beginning and start again.' And so, after a very brief mention of the 7th Seal, we are ushered back to the 1st Trumpet.*

*What we eventually find is that each time this happens, the end of all things, leading to eternity ahead, is dealt with progressively more fully. The full pattern is not as easy as that - God cannot be fitted into any simple mould and nothing is ever quite as we might expect it to be; but these thoughts may help us to understand more clearly how things are going to be presented.*

*With the first four of the Seals there are two extra details, each is 'presented' by one of the four Living Creatures, and each is to do with a horseman. This is not the only place where the first four of something are marked out as in some way different from the last three, for with the seven trumpets the last three are also called the three Woes. This is just mentioned in passing to point to the fact that there is more interplay between the different parts of the Book than may at first be apparent.*

### **6.1-2 ~ 1st Seal - White Horse**

We are entering another section where many people are tempted to give up, but it is important that we do not miss out anything for the whole Book hangs together. There is inevitably more than one possible understanding of some points, but what is presented below has general agreement.

The 1st horse is white; its rider has a bow and is given a crown. He comes out conquering and to conquer. White is the colour of purity. The rider does not take a crown, but is given a crown, so this sounds like a God given right rather than a usurped power. In 19.11 we come across a white horse again and in that passage the rider is clearly Jesus Christ. For these and many other reasons we would take this to be a symbol of the Gospel of Jesus Christ going out into the world to defeat the enemy and win souls for God.

Some may like to connect this with the incarnation, or with Pentecost, but it really applies to the whole period of history through which the Gospel has gone out to convert the heathen and confront the enemy - the Gospel Age.

#### **6.3-4 ~ 2nd Seal - Red Horse**

The 2nd horse is bright red, we might say, blood red. There is almost total unanimity that this refers to persecution. There are differences of opinion as to whether it means persecution of one nation by another, or of individuals by nations, or of individuals by other individuals. It can be taken to mean all forms of persecution.

Here is the universal pattern that reoccurs throughout history - the preaching of the Gospel is followed by persecution. This does not mean that all Christians will always be persecuted, but that this is a pattern to be expected. When it happens we should not say, 'Something has gone wrong.' Rather we should say, 'The enemy is upset.'

#### **6.5-6 ~ 3rd Seal - Black Horse**

The 3rd horse is black. The passage is difficult, but what is said seems to indicate prices above that which a poor person could pay. It is generally thought that this refers to that other form of persecution, not the bright red of shed blood, but the black darkness of oppression, injustice and economic hardship. In John's time this would have applied to those who refused to take part in heathen temple worship and so were barred from membership of trade guilds and so lost their trade and income. It has applied, and does apply, to all forms of anti Christian discrimination.

Things are not looking good.

#### **6.7-8 ~ 4th Seal - Green Horse**

The 4th horse is pale green, or livid green - things have become even worse. It seems that this refers to something that often follows from less organised persecution, namely open war between nations, in which it is not only Christians who suffer but mankind in general. Here is wholesale carnage killing up to a quarter of mankind, so that Hades, the place of the departed, is filled to capacity.

However exactly we understand the details, what is clear is that the preaching of the Gospel can be expected to lead to persecution of various kinds and to open religious warfare in which multitudes of ordinary people will be slain for no fault of their own.

So where is God in all this? What is he going to do about it? This is exactly the question the saints were asking -

#### **6.9-11 ~ 5th Seal - How long?**

'How long will it be before you judge and avenge ...?' And the answer is that they must wait a bit longer. God's timing is not always quite what we would think it ought to be.

We have finished with the 4 Horses but this is the 5th Seal - the time of waiting.

We may think this is rather negative, but what an important message it is. One of the hardest things in life is waiting, but it has to be done. We have to learn to live through the time when God says, 'I will act, but not yet.'

We must remember that this is all symbolic and not get tied up in knots about the exact meaning of souls being kept under an altar. All we need to think is that their deaths were in some way a precious sacrifice to God and that they are assured of a life of glory at the last.

### **Exploration**

*It will be helpful to get it clear in our minds that we are not being shown things that follow one another in a tidy sequence, but of things that continually overlap each other. The proclamation of the Gospel does not cease when persecution starts. Persecution does not wait till proclamation has ended. The two go together. This general principle applies throughout all the 7 sections of the Book.*

*The general pattern is that the first 5 subdivisions are about things that are constantly reoccurring throughout history; the 6th subdivision is about the great tribulation of the last days or about when God steps in; and the 7th subdivision is about the judgment.*

*And so we come to the 6th Seal which will go on for more than a chapter; in this section it is mainly about God stepping in to judge man's futile endeavour.*

### **6.12-17 ~ 6th Seal - The end is at hand**

At last we see God in action. This is what it is all leading up to. This 6th Seal describes symbolically the approach to the end of the age. The widespread terror of that time is shown to us by the pictures of a collapsing universe, and of a very frightened human race.

### **Exploration**

*The number 6, and especially the threefold number 666, was the symbolic number for man - man on his own, not completed by God. God deals with 7s. Man was created on the 6th day and on his own cannot rise beyond 6. There may also be a connection here with 6 days of labour without the 7th day of rest. Man works all his life and never reaches that rest. It is only the gift of God that gives us Rest. It may therefore be significant that it is the 6th Seal that shows us the futile end of man's self endeavour. We will come across the number 666 later, but it will help us to have the significance of the number 6 clearly in our minds before we reach that point.*

The description given is highly poetic and cannot be improved - it speaks for itself. We would do well to think of the 'Wrath of God', as meaning, not God losing his temper, but God acting towards sin in the only way that he can - ultimately all that spoils God's creation must be removed. God's eternal plan must be fulfilled.

These verses 12-17 tell us what will befall the unbelievers; but what is to become of the believers? We now see something of the special arrangements God has made for them.

### **7.1-3 ~ The sealing of the redeemed**

The symbolism changes, but that is what happens in visions. We are shown that nothing will be allowed to happen that will adversely affect the ultimate state of the redeemed.

Who exactly is going to be saved?

### **7.4-8 ~ The sealing of those from Israel**

12,000 is a symbolic number and this section indicates that every person from the Old Covenant people who ought to be saved will be saved.

What about the rest of the world?

### **7.9 ~ The sealing of the Nations**

What could be more comprehensive? No further details are given because they are beyond counting.

And here we go again - now that we are into something really good, there is more singing.

**7.10-12 ~ More worship**

Two more wonderful Songs of Praise which are going to lead into a question and answer routine that will lead us on to one of the most lovely passages in the Book.

**7.13-17 ~ A vision of Heaven**

It seems that we are to understand that these people robed in white, are those referred to in 6.9-11, those who had actually died as martyrs and who were given white robes; but now by a slight twist we are told that their robes are white because they have washed them in the blood of the Lamb. It may be reasonable to add our own twist and see this as including all who have had their sins washed away by the shed blood of Jesus.

Here is a good example of the difference of taking something literally and taking something symbolically. Taken literally, washing clothes white in blood is ridiculous. Taken symbolically it is wonderful, and very precious to all believers.

Verses 15-17 are very beautiful, competing with the somewhat similar words of 21.3-4 for the honour of being the best loved verses in the Book. We should notice that it is not just that all bad things have gone, but that there is a positive purpose - they are there to worship God. The universe finds its true fulfilment when its Creator is given his proper worth.

In the middle of these verses comes something we might easily miss: verse 17, 'for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd.'

These words are remarkable for two reasons. Firstly for the wonderful image of the Lamb becoming the Shepherd, and secondly because, while we have seen the Lamb coming to the throne and we have seen him taking a scroll from the hand of God, this is the first time we are told that he is at the centre of the throne. How could anyone but God be at the centre of the throne of God? Exactly!

The chapter division, not part of the original Book, is odd. The 7th Seal belongs with the other 6.

**8.1 ~ 7th Seal - Silence**

And so we come to the 7th Seal, where we would have expected to hear something about the final judgment and what follows - instead we get silence.

Why is there this silence? We can't be sure, but it seems that there are things that God is not yet ready to reveal. This is all part of the process by which the emphasis slowly moves from the early stages towards the final stage. In the next main section the last stage will be mentioned but not in much detail; by the end of the Book it will dominate everything; but at this early point it is not even mentioned - just silence. There is a time and a place for everything.

**SECTION 3 ~ REVELATION 8.2 - 11.19 ~ THE SEVEN TRUMPETS**

**(The 7 Trumpets centre on God calling his enemies to repentance)**

***Exploration***

*As we approach chapters 8-11 we would do well to take another look at how they fit in with what has gone before.*

*We have been shown the 7th Seal being opened, followed by silence, and then we are into the sounding of the 7 Trumpets. It would be quite logical to suppose that these 7 Trumpets are going to be a further unfolding of the 7th Seal, in other words that the 7th Seal is such a major topic that it is going to be presented in 7 subsections called the 7 Trumpets, and there are some who would take it that way, but there are many problems that follow from that approach.*

*Fundamentally the earlier Trumpets are not about the final judgment. They are about warnings that could be heeded, but sadly are not.*

*Rather than a description of the final judgment, we have something much more like a parallel to the 7 Seals except that whereas the Seals dealt largely with the sufferings of the redeemed, the Trumpets deal largely with the sufferings of the enemies of God.*

*9.21 is a key verse, 'And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts.' These things were not the final judgment, but things that were meant to lead people to repentance.*

*We therefore conclude that we are once again to look on this section as being to do with things that happen repeatedly throughout history, but this time they are things that ought to lead people to repentance.*

*So this section is not following on from the previous section but covers the same period from a different viewpoint. However as has already been stated the 'centre of gravity' of the section moves one step nearer to the final judgment.*

## **8.2 ~ The 7 Trumpets**

We are shown the 7 angels with the 7 Trumpets, but there is some explanation before we come to the blowing of the 1st Trumpet.

### **8.3-5 ~ Prayer is heard**

Two things are clear from this: firstly what is to follow is in some way an answer to the prayers of the saints, and secondly that the terrible things to be described are not what evil men do to the saints but what God does to evil men. The thunder, rumblings lightning and earthquake come from the altar.

It has been suggested that the 'great quantity of incense given to be offered with the prayers of the saints', means the intercession of Christ for his people.

### **8.6-7 ~ 1st Trumpet - disaster on the earth**

This is to do with disaster on the earth. Throughout history there have been so called natural calamities that have blighted the land; these are sometimes called 'Acts of God', and the title may be nearer the truth than we might like to think.

The teaching seems to be that such calamities are one of the means God uses to bring people to repentance, or that whatever their origin, they should move people to consider their standing in the sight of God, for at any time some such disaster might befall anyone.

We notice that this is a warning, not a final judgment - it is limited in extent - a third. Numbers such as this are not to be taken literally, they are part of the picture.

### **8.8-9 ~ 2nd Trumpet - disaster on the sea**

Notice that this is not a literal mountain, but 'something like a mountain' - it is a symbolic picture of a similar disaster on the sea. Again it is limited in extent and so is a warning.

### **8.10-11 ~ 3rd Trumpet - disaster on fresh water**

A similar disaster concerning the land waters without which no one can live.

And finally:

### **8.12 ~ 4th Trumpet - disaster in the sky**

The skies above are afflicted.

These first 4 trumpets show us that God uses afflictions on land, sea, waters and the skies to seek to bring people to repentance.

### ***Exploration***

*We may wonder whether God actually does this sort of thing, well - Jesus when speaking about the tower of Siloam that collapsed killing several people, and of*

*Herod killing people who were offering their sacrifices to God, said that these things should make his hearers search their hearts and repent.*

*If we still find it hard to think of God doing, or using, things like this, we should remind ourselves that all this is symbolic of the fact that in all sorts of ways God seeks to bring people to repentance. The Hebrew mindset would not see much difference between natural acts that God allows, and specific acts that God does; but we with our different mindset may find it easier to think of these things as being natural acts that God can use to call people to repentance.*

And now comes a sort of intermission.

### **8.13 ~ 3 Woes to come**

An eagle (some manuscripts have 'an angel') becomes God's messenger. The words, 'Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth,' introduce the fact that the last three Trumpets are also called Woes. We see that this is addressed to, 'the inhabitants of the earth,' emphasising again that these Trumpet calls and Woes are not about the afflictions of the redeemed, but about things that come upon all mankind. The redeemed may well suffer along with their fellow men, but in their case the ultimate end is altogether different.

### **9.1-12 ~ 5th Trumpet - 1st Woe - satanic malevolence**

'I saw a star that had fallen from heaven to earth.' There is little doubt but that this refers to the devil, and he is allowed to release from the 'bottomless pit' all sorts of terrible things.

We should not get hung up trying to discover the place and form of the bottomless pit - this is a symbol in a vision and is not meant to be taken literally. What this section is meaning is that God allows the devil to do his foul work in the world.

#### ***Exploration***

*We may ask, 'Why does God allow this?'*

*The answer may be along the lines of the saying, 'To the person who repeatedly says, "My will be done." God will eventually say, "Your will be done."' It may be disturbing to think that God allows the devil to do his evil work, but this is actually not nearly as disturbing as thinking that the devil is able to do his work without God's permission. This section makes it clear that the devil has not got supreme power, and that he can be controlled and stopped at any time that God wishes. God allows him to do his work for a reason, and when the right time comes he will be destroyed.*

*We have an interesting time trying to give particular meaning to all the different aspects of the description of the 'locusts', but it is safer to take the passage as a whole as giving an impression of the horribleness of them.*

*We notice that the devil's time is limited to five months, meaning that it is for quite a long time, but not for ever.*

*We may think we see things going on in the world of our day that can be explained by this passage, but we need to remember that this is actually about things that happen repeatedly throughout history. The devil is at work, because God allows it.*

And so we come to the 6th trumpet.

### **9.13-21 ~ 6th Trumpet - 2nd Woe - nearing the terrible end**

Who are, 'the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' who are to be released and bring havoc on the world?

They are clearly evil angels, who delight to bring wholesale slaughter on mankind, and yet, like the devil, they are only allowed to operate by the permission of God.

### **Exploration**

*We can only speculate, but we notice that the Euphrates flows through Babylonia, and Babylon is later on to be used as a picture of all man centred power operating without reference to God. The pride and arrogance of self made men, and nations; and of man made political and religious systems.*

*We may therefore reasonably see these four angels as representing the terrible manmade political and religious wars down the centuries.*

*We need to be careful not to get drawn into the trap of giving meanings to every little detail, but the description given in verses 16-19 certainly remind us of the terrible war machines of every age.*

*Verses 20-21 remind us that the whole purpose of God in all this was to bring people to repentance.*

*If men and women are lost, it will not be because they have not seen the signposts pointing them in the right direction, but because they have not wanted to go that way.*

We are now coming to the 7th Trumpet, but there is an unexpected surprise in store.

### **10.1-4 ~ The Seven Thunders**

The sounding of the 7th trumpet is heralded by the arrival of a mighty angel. He stands with one foot on the land and one on the sea, which can be taken to mean that he is to proclaim things to do with the whole of life.

Then just as the 7th Seal led to the 7 Trumpets, so the 7th Trumpet seems to be leading to the 7 Thunders; but the surprise is that a voice from heaven forbids John from telling us anything about them.

We may be disappointed, or we may be relieved, but the real question is, 'Why?' Why are we not allowed to know about these Thunders?

Whatever other reasons there may be, we can certainly learn that no one knows all there is to know about the future. There is a widely held view that from the Book of Revelation we can work out a detailed plan of what is going to happen in the future, but we can't, and we are not meant to try. God has deliberately withheld information from us. This applies particularly to those who try to create a timetable running consecutively through the different sections of Revelation - even if this was the right way to understand it, it couldn't be done because a whole section is missing. As long as we live this life we will only ever be able to 'see through a glass darkly'.

### **10.5-7 ~ The 7th trumpet will bring fulfilment**

We are told solemnly that when the 7th Trumpet sounds the time of delay, the time of waiting, will be over, and God will act to vindicate his people and complete his plan for all things. And we now begin to realise that this means: when the 7th Seal is opened, when the 7th Trumpet is sounded, when the 7th Thunder rumbles, when the 7th bowl is poured out; then it will all happen. These are all ways of speaking of the same thing, but from different viewpoints.

The actual sounding of the 7th Trumpet is surrounded with more activity.

### **10.8-11 ~ The sweet and bitter nature of the Gospel**

We will recognise that as on numerous occasions throughout the Book, things that are said here are echoes of things said in the Old Testament. But what is this about? This scroll that is both bitter and sweet? Is it not the fact that the Good News of the Gospel is inevitably coupled with the bad news of persecution, and also of

condemnation for the rebellious? The 7th Trumpet is going to be the final Victory but it will also be the final Woe.

Verse 11 tells us that John's work is by no means complete, there is a lot more he is to say.

### **Exploration**

*We might at first think that the first part of chapter 11 has moved us on into another section altogether, but we would be misled, for the 7th Trumpet is not sounded until verse 15. We may perhaps see those verses as being a sort of review of the first 6 Trumpets from another slightly different viewpoint; or they may be to assure the believers that though there is going to be a terrible time, their ultimate destiny is secure.*

*We may object that this breaks the pattern that we are beginning to grasp; and this is not the only complication that doesn't seem to fit into the expected pattern - we may not have noticed that the 7 Thunders, which John was not allowed to reveal to us, came before the 7th Trumpet when we would expect them to have come after it. Perhaps our pattern is faulty, or perhaps this just emphasises that God will not be the prisoner of any neat and tidy scheme, and he will confound any such scheme that we may try to devise.*

*There are in fact several subdivisions in the Book that go on longer than we might have expected, so it could be said to fit into some sort of a pattern, but when all is said and done, a scheme is only to help us, and not to control God!*

### **11.1-3 ~ Two Witnesses**

We surely didn't expect this! But the first 14 verses of this chapter are all connected with the combined sweet and bitter experiences of the people of God as they proclaim the Gospel.

Again we must remember this is all part of a vision. We are not to think that John is measuring an actual building, it is all symbolic.

It seems that there is, both here and later, a special significance to measuring, that it signifies the making of something more secure. It is no longer something somewhat vague and insecure, but something measured and recorded, and so, unalterable.

What is to be measured is only the inner court, not the outer court, implying that it is only those who have entered into the Holy Place, by the blood of the Lamb, that are secure. Others who have only dabbled with the religious trappings of the Faith will not be secure.

In verse 3 we are introduced to two witnesses, of whom we will hear more in the next verses, but we notice here two periods of time.

First we have the Holy City trampled over for 42 months, and then we have the two witnesses prophesying for 1,260 days. What we may not at first realise is that these are exactly the same - 42 months is 1,260 days.

Why are these two identical periods described in two different ways? We do not know, but it has been suggested that a siege is often described as being for so many months, but that proclaiming the Gospel is something that is to be done every day.

What is even more remarkable is that this same period of time comes again later in the Book described in yet a third different way, but we will come to that in due time.

Now we turn to see more about these two witnesses.

### **11.4-6 ~ The witness of the Church**

The two witnesses are called two olive trees and two lampstands.

What we have here is a symbol of a twofold witness, and we may recall that Jesus always sent disciples out in pairs, or it may be referring to the 2 covenants; but why are they both olive trees and lampstands?

We cannot be sure but a possible suggestion is that this refers to the witness of Word and Sacrament. Olive oil is used as a symbol of Grace, so we may see the olive trees as symbolising the witness of the sacraments of God's Grace. We may not think of the Sacraments as a witness, but Paul clearly did, 1.Cor 11.26 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' And the Word of God is meant to bring light to the world. We could also think of this as referring to the witness of a Christian life - 'Let you light so shine before men ...' There are other possibilities, but in one way or another they are about the witness of the Church throughout the Gospel age.

It is made very clear that the true witness of the Church is backed up by the full power of God.

### **11.7-10 ~ The time of contempt**

Let us reflect that we are here still in the subdivision of the 6th Trumpet, we are in a section that deals with the period leading up to the end of the age. The time during which we will discover that eventually evil seems to be victorious until God steps in and puts all to right.

Verse 7 tells us of this terrible time. The witness of the Church seems to come to an end, and the 'beast' comes from the bottomless pit, and conquers and destroys them. The devil seems to be supreme. The Church is held in absolute contempt, all people seem to hate it and rejoice at its demise. It may be salutary for us to realise that people will actually look on the Church as, 'a torment to the inhabitants of the earth.'

### **11.11-14 ~ The time of exaltation**

Thanks be to God, the previous section is not the end of the story. The seemingly annihilated Christians are raised up and taken up to heaven. More detail will be given of this in later sections.

### **11.15-19 ~ 7th Trumpet / 3rd Woe - Paradise regained**

The 7th Trumpet sounds, and we are back in heaven, getting a glimpse of what it is all leading to. And as we have come to expect there is singing again.

The forces of an evil world had thought they had annihilated the Church, but not a bit of it. It is Christ who is the Victor - 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.' We are told that this is said, but it sounds very much like a song.

But verses 16-18 we are told is a song. It speaks clearly for itself.

In verse 19 we see God's temple opened. We need to remember again that this is still part of a vision it is not meant to be taken literally - it signifies that all barriers between God and his people have now been removed.

The final words could be taken in at least two different ways. We could see it as something like a divine fireworks display to celebrate the final victory, or we could see it very differently as a picture of the terrible disaster that is to be poured out on God's enemies - backing up the last words of the song just sung, 'destroying those who destroy the earth.'

In practice the two have to go together. It is sadly not possible to have the one without the other.

## **SECTION 4 ~ REVELATION 10.1-4 ~ THE SEVEN THUNDERS**

**(John was commanded not to reveal this section)**

### ***Exploration***

*Many commentators put chapters 15-16 and chapters 17-19 as two separate sections, and they may well be right to do so, but we will be putting them together as all one section. (The reasons for this will be explained when we get there.) This means that we are left with only six main sections, and some may feel that this Book so full of sevens must surely have seven main sections, and that especially the final section that takes us on into eternity should be the 7th section.*

*To get the numbers right we have therefore included the Seven Thunders as Section 4. They were after all part of John's vision, and so should be included in some way as one of the sevens. We may know nothing about them, but that does not mean that they were not part of the sevenfold vision. It would surely be wrong to just dismiss them as though they did not exist.*

*At the very least there must be some lesson we are meant to learn from the fact that John was not allowed to reveal this section. Without any real justification it could be suggested that these were about God acting in real anger, and that them being sealed up means that God, though sorely provoked, will not do it.*

## **SECTION 5 ~ REVELATION 12 - 14 ~ THE WOMAN AND THE MAN CHILD**

**(This section shows us the spiritual battle behind the scenes)**

### ***Exploration***

*As there are not seven clearly stated stages in this section we might at first think that it is an extended addition to the end of the seventh trumpet, but it is soon clear that this is not so. Though it is so different it is clearly a new section starting right back at the start of the Gospel age. It is in fact possible to find seven divisions, but this may be reading too much into it and so the possible divisions are only indicated below in brackets and should be treated with caution.*

*This section shows us that what is going on in the world is an outward manifestation of the spiritual war between Christ and the devil. We will be introduced, still symbolically, to various spiritual entities. They are the dragon, the beast out of the sea, the beast out of the earth, Babylon, and the people who have the mark of the beast. The following sections will show us what ultimately happens to each of these antichristian forces.*

*It cannot be overemphasised that in this vision we are being shown truth through symbolism. It is impossible to take it all literally, and we should not take any part at all of it literally, that would destroy the symbolic integrity of the whole vision.*

*This does not mean that this is any less the truth. Indeed it means just the opposite, it means that it is presenting a truth that is beyond our full comprehension - this is more true than any literal explanation could ever be.*

*So! Let us re-enter this symbolic world and see what it teaches us.*

### **12.1-6 ~ The Woman, the Dragon and the Man Child - (Division 1 ~ 12.1-6)**

*We will immediately be able to grasp the main points - a woman bearing a son - a dragon seeking to devour the child - the child being preserved and taken to the throne of God - the woman in the wilderness for 1,260 days.*

*And we will almost certainly have reasonable ideas what this is about, but sorting out the details may be more difficult.*

*The woman wearing a crown of twelve stars represents what we call, the Old Testament Church. Here is signified the whole history of the Old Testament people of God, right up to and including Mary, whose destiny was to bear a Son.*

Watching malignantly is a great red dragon - watching and acting whenever he can. The 7 heads suggests a world wide dominion. 10 horns indicated great strength. The 7 diadems suggest authority, but we may note that he is not given them, he has just assumed them. Satan has always pretended to have more authority than he actually possesses. What does seem to be true is that he has working for him a multitude of evil spirits (fallen stars).

The male child, who is to rule (or shepherd) all the nations, we may confidently say is Jesus Christ. In these verses it seems that verse 5 sums up the whole of the life of Jesus on earth - this may seem remarkably abrupt, but this Book is not about the life of Christ on earth, it is about what follows from that life.

Then comes the Ascension and the Christ is taken to the throne of God.

Finally we see the woman in the wilderness for 1,260 days. This is the Church of the New Dispensation; but it is still the same woman for in the purposes of God, the People of God in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, are one and the same.

We have already come across the period symbolised as 1,260 days in 11.3 where we saw that it stood for the whole Gospel Age. This same period of time coming in more than one section is one of the many things that point to the fact that the different sections, overlap each other, rather than follow on from each other.

So in these 6 verses we have a short symbolic description of all history.

We are shown a people (the woman) prepared by God to produce a special Son, we see that people constantly attacked by Satan seeking to destroy the holy seed right up to, and including, King Herod. We have a brief indication of that Son being the Shepherd until he is taken up into glory. Finally we see the people of God (the woman) in the wilderness, but also, we note, in a place prepared by God.

If we think back to the original setting of this Revelation, it was given to a people facing persecution. They were very much going through the wilderness with all its trials and tribulations, but this was not something that had gone wrong, this was where God had placed them and he would nourish them there, until the time would come for their final redemption.

This same truth can be applied to any Christian, at any time and anywhere, when they are 'going through the wilderness'. God has not forsaken them. He has in fact put them there and will nourish them there.

The next verses show us more clearly that what has been happening in the World is a manifestation at our level of a battle that is going on in the heavenly realms.

## **12.7-12 ~ War in Heaven - (Division 2 ~ 12.7-12)**

### ***Exploration***

*If we try to make the narrative run on consecutively through this chapter we soon find ourselves in a muddle, but if we realise that although it doesn't have any stated equivalent to 7 seals or trumpets, yet it still consists of a number of separate and overlapping sub-sections, then it becomes much easier to follow.*

*Here is the same general situation dealt with in verses 1-6, but looked at from the perspective of heaven.*

*This may make it easier to follow, but it is by no means easier to understand, for it takes us into the heart of a deep mystery that is probably completely beyond our comprehension. We are shown that the underlying source of the problem is not only the sin of man on earth, but also the rebellion of angels in heaven. While, as we keep on saying, this may all be symbolic, it must be symbolic of something real, and whatever exactly it refers to, it is more than a little challenging.*

*We may have thought that heaven was a place where everything was always perfect, did not Jesus teach us to pray, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', but while this may be generally correct these verses suggest that it is not necessarily completely correct; or at least that it has not always been correct, for if we insist that there can be no possibility of there ever having been sin in heaven, how are we to explain the fall of Satan and those that were with him?*

*It is commonly said that in this world you cannot have love without freewill, and that you cannot have freewill without the possibility of sin; and it can be argued that the whole Bible shows how God works out the complicated situation that follows from that; showing what sin leads to and how God deals with it until he finally annihilates it through the death of Jesus Christ, so that only the love remains.*

*It's a matter of, 'You can't have the one without the other.' The only way to create more love is to allow good and evil, and then to deal with the evil.*

*In God's timing the full victory has already been won and 'it is finished', but in mankind's timing the problems still continue, until that day when we enter into the full enjoyment of that victory as we rise to be with Christ for ever.*

*This passage would suggest that there seems to have been something similar in heaven; that this too is a place, or state, where there is free will, a place where people and angels worship and serve God, not because there is no other choice but because they are free to do so, and they want to; and that this free will has in the past led to rebellion in heaven, just as it has on earth; a rebellion that has also been dealt with by the death of Jesus Christ, so that at the end there will indeed be love and joy and peace forever. The final annihilation of all evil forces will be dealt with emphatically in the coming chapters; and that is followed by the sort of pictures of heaven that we expect, where there is nothing that spoils in any way.*

*A large part of our difficulties with this may be due to our inability to understand the nature of eternity, and of the relationship of the time in which we live to that eternity.*

*There is plenty to think about here.*

*To avoid a vast and contentious diversion it will be assumed that Michael and Satan are two actual angels, one loyal and the other rebellious; but the question as to whether they may, like virtually everything else in this Book, be being used symbolically of something else, is a topic some may be brave enough to consider.*

*This is not just about the question as to whether or not we believe in a personal devil. There is the third option - that it is perfectly possible to affirm the existence of an actual, personal, devil, but to also see him as sometimes being used symbolically of various forms of evil - e.g. Matthew 16.23*

*We had better turn our attention back to these verses!*

*'War broke out in heaven.' We need to remind ourselves again that this is symbolism not actual history, but it must mean something, and it can only mean that there was some kind of conflict in the heavenly places, that somehow, for some reason, certain angels led by one particular angel rebelled against God. The forces of good led by the Archangel Michael win the conflict and Satan is thrown down to earth together with his followers.*

*Satan is to claim that he is now the Lord of this world, but that is just one of his lies, this is but the place he has been cast down to until the time of his final nemesis. John has been exiled to Patmos until the time of his exaltation to heaven. Satan has been exiled to the world until the time of his nemesis. Satan is only Lord of this world if people make him so; he has not been given that role or title by God.*

In the proclamation of verses 10-12 there is a mixture of exultation and woe.

Exultation that Satan's rebellion is defeated and that though they may suffer at Satan's hands during their life on this earth the saints will overcome him by the blood of the Lamb.

Woe because, although Satan is a defeated foe, yet he can still wreak havoc on the earth and in the Church.

We move on to the next few verses, which again overlaps what has gone before.

**12.13-17 ~ War on Earth - (Division 3 ~ 12.13-17)**

We see that Satan's hatred for the Church is just a continuation of his hatred for the male child, Jesus Christ.

Satan afflicts the Church grievously, but is not allowed to destroy it.

This period is described as being, 'for a time, and times, and half a time.' If we take 'a time' to mean a year, and 'times' to mean two years; we find that this is 3½ years, which is the same as 42 months which is the same as 1,260 days. It is not clear why the same period is described in these three different ways, but the same period it is. This is a symbolic description of the length of the Gospel age, the time during which the Gospel is preached but also the enemy attacks.

That this period is here described as 3½ years may be to point us to the 3½ years during which Elijah was hidden in the wilderness and that God provided for him there. This may be to tell us that God will do again what he has done in the past.

We may also notice that the period at the end of the age, the final terrible days, the great tribulation, are described as being for 3½ days. There may be no more significance than that the length of the Gospel Age is as much longer by comparison than the last terrible days, as 3½ years are longer than 3½ days. Not a strict mathematical thing, but a general comparison - one very much longer than the other.

Chapter 13 is going to show us, again symbolically, two of the agents, or tools, that Satan uses to do his work. (A third agent - Babylon - will be shown to us in passing in chapter 14 and more fully later.)

These three form a thoroughly evil trinity - antichristian persecution, antichristian religion, and antichristian seduction.

**12.18 -13.10 ~ The Beast from the Sea - (Division 4 ~ 12.18 - 13.10)**

Here we see a portrayal of antichristian persecution. We could go into great details about the meanings of all the features mentioned, but it is probably better to take an overall look at this fearsome beast and tremble.

We should however notice that this beast combines features from all four of the four creatures in Daniel 7. This points us to the fact that this beast represents all persecuting powers from all times and places.

What is the significance of the head that seemed to have received a death blow but which recovered? We need to be cautious, but if the different heads represent different persecuting empires throughout history, then the persecuting empire at the time Revelation was written was Rome. The first terrible persecution had been under Nero, then when he committed suicide there was a relative peace, but this was to soon be followed by further persecution under Domitian, and many people looked on Domitian as Nero returned to life again.

This form of opposition is very terrible and needs to be portrayed in a terrible way, but it is not always very subtle. It can wreak havoc, but is not good at explaining why it should be doing what it is doing - for this it needs more help.

### **13.11-18 ~ The Beast from the Earth - (Division 5 ~ !3.11-18)**

It is generally thought that this is one of the most difficult passage in the whole of Revelation to explain, so we will not try to go into any detail, but simply to suggest that this represents all forms of false religion and false ideology that support persecution and give persecutors the excuses they need for what they do; and that this is the same as the false prophet that we find later on.

Here is a beast that sounds positively cuddly compared with the first beast, but it speaks like a dragon, in other words it is the tool of Satan.

The first beast may be terrifying, but this second beast is actually far more dangerous. Here we may see all forms of religious and philosophical and sociological teaching that seeks to destroy the Christian faith and present Christians as being the enemies of mankind instead of as being the salt of the earth.

Verses 16-17 show us a society that only allows people to get the means to live if they conform to what the state demands. People don't have to be actually killed if they are denied what is needed to maintain life.

And what is meant by the number of the beast - 666? We are told it is the number of a man, and that probably just about sums it up. Our translations may make it sound as though it refers to a particular man but there is no such emphasis in the original.

#### ***Exploration***

*It is possible, with a bit of jiggery-pokery, to find ways to make many names come to the numerical number 666, and so it is not surprising that this has been done many times through history, sometimes in quite ludicrous ways. What is more important is that the number 666 continually falls short of 7 - the number of perfection, completion and rest; it can therefore be taken to stand for all man made endeavour that leaves out God and so can never reach perfection. Every kind of teaching that leaves out God must be seen as doomed to be for ever failing.*

This chapter has been a bit grim - it is time we moved on to the other side of the story - what happens when God steps in.

### **14.1-7 ~ Behold the Lamb - (Division 6 ~ 14.1-13)**

In Chapter 7 we saw the 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel, symbolic of all those from Israel who are to be saved; followed by the multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, symbolic of everyone else who are to be saved. And now here, standing with the Lamb, we have 144,000 in verses 1-5, and in verse 6 we have, 'every nation and tribe and language and people.'

This is surely not just a coincidence; rather it is again speaking of all of every nation who hold to their faith in God and his Christ.

They are described as being virgins who have not defiled themselves with women. We might put this rather differently today. It is not about sex, or about men rather than women, but about those who have remained fully committed to Christ. In the Old Testament, going after other gods is often described as going after a prostitute.

In verses 2-3 we hear of a voice like the sound of many waters, and we recall that this was part of the description of Jesus Christ in Chapter 1, and this voice is also like thunder and like the sound of harps, and there was the sound of a new song. It sounds as if Christ himself is teaching his people a new song, putting a new song in their hearts, which is of course, figuratively just what he does for the Christian.

If we think this is a bit fanciful, and we find that level of intimacy surprising, what will we think when we come to the wedding feast?

**14.8 ~ Babylon - (Division 6 continued)**

'Fallen is Babylon the great.' We are caught on the hop - Babylon has not been mentioned before, but we will hear a lot more later. All we need to know at the moment is that Babylon symbolically represents all antichristian seduction - the temptations of the world and the flesh. Not the crude attack of the persecutor, or the warped teaching of false prophets, but the attraction and enticement of seemingly exciting and glamorous things that will lead us away from Christ.

After their 3½ days of seeming triumph, the powers of evil are all toppling to disaster as God steps in; what is their end going to be?

**14.9-11 ~ A terrible end - (Division 6 continued)**

We must continue to remember that this is symbolic. After his personal words of introduction in chapter 1 there has not been a single word in the whole Book that has not been symbolic, (with the possible exception of a few facts about the 7 Churches,) and what is to follow continues to be symbolic. There is no justification for anyone to say that this bit is literal. So what does it symbolise? - The total and irreversible condemnation, fall, punishment and destruction of all that is evil, and of those who have given evil their allegiance, and refuse to repent.

We are into a grim section, but we have a couple of verses of respite.

**14.12-13 ~ Perfect peace for the redeemed - (Division 6 continued)**

The number of man is 666, never attaining to the number of rest, but those who die in the Lord, rest from their labours. This does not mean that there will never be anything more to do, that would surely be terrible, rather it means that whereas the world never achieves that for which it is aiming, those 'in the Lord' will achieve through him everything and will be at perfect peace.

**14.14-20 ~ A ghastly harvest - (Division 7 ~ 14.14-20)**

And so we are back to the final judgment and the description is truly grim, but remember again that this is symbolic, it is pictorial, and is given in full 3D technicolour.

What we are being told here is that the harvest will come, the righteous will be reaped and gathered into God's storehouse to be with him forever; and the lost will be completely and utterly destroyed.

***Exploration***

*The details of the destruction taken literally become not only repulsive, but also quite ridiculous. Taken symbolically it means that this is total and irreversible. It is not only written in black and white, it is written in blood.*

*This is not just a dream, it is a God given vision, but when we come to these gory bits we need to treat them in the same sort of way that we treat nightmares. We know that most nightmares paint a picture far worse than the problems that are facing us in real life. We should not be afraid of the nightmare, but of what it represents.*

*So we should not get hung up on the superabundance of blood, but we should face up to the fact that what is being painted in blood is a terrible and irreversible fate. This is absolutely - the end.*

*While this passage seems to be very much about the final judgment, we need to remind ourselves again that throughout this Book we are shown things that happen repeatedly throughout history, and the same is still true here. There will indeed be a final great judgment, but there are also many times throughout history when this pattern is followed. Evil powers seem completely dominant, the position of believers becomes almost unbearable, and then the whole system collapses, is destroyed, and the believers are vindicated.*

*And so we come to the end of a difficult but very important section. We need to know that there is more going on behind the scenes than we see on earth, and this may help us to make sense of some of the things that happen in life that would otherwise be inexplicable.*

In the next section we will have the final stated 7 of something - the 7 Bowls.

## **SECTION 6 ~ REVELATION 15 - 19 ~ THE SEVEN BOWLS**

**(The 7 Bowls centre on God's last calls to repentance followed by judgment)**

### **15.1-4 ~ Another vision of Heaven**

We start with another vision of heaven. We have the symbolic picture of the sea of glass that we have come across before, but this time it is not just 24 elders who are there, or 4 living creatures, it is the great multitude that no one could count who are there, and as we have come to expect they are singing. All this singing could be said to be a way of unifying the singers with the great God about whom they sing.

We notice that this time the sea of glass is mixed with fire. These are people who have been through the fire and come purified.

### **15.5-8 ~ The 7 Bowls of God's wrath**

The previous section has shown us terrible things being done by Satan and his assistants, but this introduction makes it very clear that what is to follow is what God does. We could say that what follows is God's response to what Satan does.

#### ***Exploration***

*And so we come to the outpouring of the 7 Bowls of the wrath of God. It may be as well to repeat that the wrath of God does not refer to God losing his temper, but God acting towards sin in the only way that holiness can react towards evil.*

*It will also be good to remember that whilst this section may seem to be dealing with judgment, the first 6 bowls are not the last judgment. They are once more things that happen again and again throughout history as God confronts rampant evil. That they are not themselves the final judgment is made clear by the fact that again we get those words, that we have had earlier, 'and they did not repent of their deeds.' The things signified in this section are still meant to lead people to repentance.*

*Properly understood, this should teach us that the 'wrath of God' is not to do with God wanting to punish people, but with God wanting to bring people to repentance.*

*In many ways the 7 Bowls are similar to the 7 Trumpets, but more severe. These are God's severest attempts to bring people to repentance.*

### **16.1-2 ~ 1st Bowl - foul and painful sores**

We notice that these bowls are poured out on those who allied themselves with the beast and worshipped its image.

### **16.3 ~ 2nd Bowl - blood in sea**

We may well see a resemblance to some of the plagues on Egypt in these Bowls, and of course the whole purpose of the plagues on Egypt was to get Pharaoh to repent and change his mind.

### **16.4-7 ~ 3rd Bowl - blood in rivers**

We see an interesting justification of what God is doing. This is not God acting unexpectedly, but acting in a way that is fully compatible with what had been going on.

### **16.8-11 ~ 4th and 5th Bowls - fire and darkness**

These two bowls show us God acting in two almost opposite ways. First they are scorched by the heat of the sun, and then they are plunged into darkness.

We have passed through these Bowls quickly because of their similarity with the 7 Trumpets, but what is the difference from the Trumpets? Fundamentally the Trumpets show us how God deals with sinful people, but the Bowls show us how God deals with people who have clearly identified themselves with the devil and all his works. These are people who have not only sinned, but have knowingly sold themselves to sin. God has to deal with such people more harshly if there is to be any chance of repentance.

#### **16.12-16 ~ 6th Bowl - I am coming**

As is the usual pattern the 6th Bowl brings us up to just before the final judgment. Interestingly it does not tell of more suffering, but of preparations for the final conflict. It seems as though it is now too late to repent, now there is only time to prepare for the final showdown.

This final showdown is called the battle of Harmagedon. These verses show us the forces of evil being gathered together for the battle, but we notice that it is actually God who prepares the battlefield. God is shown as being in control of what is going on. When everything around us seems to be going wrong we should remember that nothing has ever slipped out of God's final control.

#### **16.17-21 ~ 7th Bowl - It is done**

The 7th Bowl is the final judgment. We are told that it is poured out on Babylon, and everything about Babylon and its fall will be amplified in chapters 17-19

Life on earth as we know it is brought to an end.

Some people suggest all sorts of explanations about how these things can actually come about. They have forgotten that this is still all symbolic. We are not meant to work out such details, they are just part of the picture. We are meant to look at the picture as a whole and fall down in awe before the Holy God.

#### ***Exploration***

*As has been stated earlier, many people suggest that this is all there is to the 7th Bowl section and that from chapter 17-19 we are into a completely new main section. It certainly does no harm to take this line, but there are good reasons for thinking otherwise and taking these chapters, 17-19, as actually the continuation and completion of the 7th Bowl.*

*If we add these chapters to the Bowls section, it does make it very much the longest section in the Book, but if we leave them off it makes the Bowl section very much the shortest section; so the argument from length proves nothing either way.*

*More seriously, putting them as a separate section, leaves the Bowls section surprisingly short and in particular, as the 'centre of gravity' of the sections has been moving towards the last days, we would expect at this stage in the book that the 7th Bowl would receive a lengthy treatment and not just the brief comment of 16.17-21.*

*In that brief comment Babylon has been presented as the central feature of the 7th Bowl, but so far Babylon has only been mentioned by name with virtually no description, and so we would expect to hear something more about it, this is the natural place for some amplification, and sure enough this is what chapters 17-19 are all about; moreover these chapters are introduced by 'one of the angels who had the seven Bowls, which suggests that they are connected with the section about the Bowls.*

*This is the line these notes will follow. To make the overall number of main sections up to the expected 7, we have reinstated the 7 Thunders, which most commentators don't just keep sealed up, but delete completely from their reckoning.*

**17.1-2 ~ Come and see**

So we are invited to see more about the corrupt system given the name of Babylon, and what is to become of it. We need to remember again that whoredom, or prostitution, is a common Old Testament symbol for anything that lures people away from the worship of the one true God.

***Exploration***

*We will be better able to understand what this is about if we get as clear an idea as we can of the Symbolic meaning of Babylon.*

*We go right back to Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel, or to be more accurate the City of Babel with the tower they began to be built in it. The centre of the story is that of a proud people who said, 'Let us make a name for ourselves.' Surprisingly God says that left unhindered there will be no limit to what they will be able to do, but he steps in to hinder them and stop them in their tracks.*

*The moral of the story is that men working together in unity without God can do almost anything, but that this is not what people were created to do, so God will step in to confound their great plans.*

*God's purpose for men and women is that they should find their destiny in him, not in their own cleverness. This is not God acting as a megalomaniac, but God acting to save a people from a way of living that will ultimately lead them to disaster.*

*From this start Babel/Babylon becomes a picture of all man centred power and endeavour that excludes God.*

*Later when Judah was taken into captivity in Babylon, the picture became more active, as not only excluding God, but being actively against God.*

*Over the centuries Babylon became a more general picture of all man centred activity that draws people away from God, replacing God with their own human ability. It includes all forms of industry, commerce, art, culture, entertainment, etc; that would draw people away from God. The embodiment of 1 John 2.16 'the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches ... (which) ... comes not from the Father but from the world.'*

*We can see that here we are dealing with something half way between human folly and satanic activity. Those involved in this sort of activity would deny that they have anything to do with Satan, indeed they may argue that their intentions are entirely honourable; nevertheless Satan will be mightily pleased with it, and will encourage what they are doing, for its end is to exclude God.*

*In the trio of, 'the world, the flesh, and the devil.' the first two are the 'domain' of Babylon, but the devil has his 'tentacles' reaching deep down into the whole system.*

**17.3-6a ~ Babylon - the scarlet woman**

We might for a second think this woman is going to be the Church as in chapters 12-14, but we very quickly see that this is a very different figure. She is sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and she holds a cup full of abomination and impurity. And then she is named, 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations.' Finally we see that she is drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

What an indictment of a system that thought it was 'great'.

The scarlet beast we have come across before, and symbolises all antichristian government. This figure, this woman, symbolising mankind's self effort is being carried by an antichristian symbol, and that symbol, that scarlet beast, is in turn an instrument of Satan.

As Christians we walk a tightrope through this earthly life. On the one hand we are to honour the powers that be as being God's ministers, but on the other hand

we are to be aware that secular systems that deny God, and systems based on the worship of a false god, are deeply rotten at the core and will seek to destroy our faith, and will in the end be themselves completely destroyed. We are to be in the world, but not of it.

**17.6b-8 ~ Renewed persecution?**

A difficult passage! What is this, 'was and is not and is to come.' meaning? We have seen before that it may refer to the situation at the time that John was writing - Nero committed suicide, but then came Domitian, who many people thought was Nero reborn. But remembering how so much of this Book is about things that constantly recur throughout history, we could apply it to any system that seems to be collapsing and then revives, often even stronger than before. We need to lay hold of one important point - whatever this refers to; all such systems will eventually 'go to destruction.'

**17.9-14 ~ The Lamb will conquer**

'This calls for a mind that has wisdom.' Indeed it does! But this may be a special call to the people of John's time to think what this means for them. The details may well be relevant to many other situations, but it is clear that it closely relates to the power of Rome - the city built on 7 hills.

Whoever, or whatever, this refers to, we see what happens at the end, 'They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them.'

What an amazing picture. On one side is the fearsome dragon with all its obvious power and might; on the other side is a Lamb. And it is the Lamb that prevails. The way of the cross is mightier than every army there has ever been. Every army there has ever been has eventually disappeared, but the Lamb that died and rose again is victorious for ever.

**17.15-18 ~ Revolt against Babylon**

Here is something new. There comes a time when the beast will hate and devour the woman who is Babylon. This may mean that time and time again throughout history, people have been carried along by a godless system that seems to give them what they want, but it always goes wrong in the end, and the people turn against the system and destroy it. Sadly it is always replaced by a new system which is just as bad. Or perhaps it means that Satan becomes jealous of the success of the system he has supported but which wants the praise that he thinks should be his.

The only final cure will be God's final judgment, and so we turn to look at the final end of Babylon.

**18.1-3 ~ Fall of Babylon proclaimed**

The final fall of Babylon is solemnly proclaimed.

**18.4-8 ~ Come out of her**

The people of God are urged to 'come out of her' for her end is coming. It is a call we should be hearing all the time. We must not get caught up in a system that ultimately denies God, or denies his importance.

We now see how various groups of people will suffer as a result of the fall of Babylon.

**18.9-10 ~ Rulers weep and wail**

All rulers, all those at the top of the organisation will weep and wail.

**18.11-14 ~ Merchants weep and wail**

All who had jobs in the organisation will weep and wail.

**18.15-17a ~ Rich weep and wail**

All who became rich through the system will weep and mourn.

**18.17b-20 ~ Traders cry out**

All who aided and abetted the system cry out.

**18.21-24 ~ No more**

Here we have a symbol within a symbol. The whole section is highly symbolic, but within it comes this illustration of a millstone being thrown into the sea. Just as it is impossible for millstone to float, so it is impossible that there will be any escape for Babylon - the whole system will be totally swept away.

A phrase that can be applied to this whole passage is 'no more.' or 'no more at all.' The time is coming when every vestige of this corrupt system, this arrogant system that thinks it can manage without its Creator, will be gone for ever.

As we have now come to expect, the defeat of evil is followed by rejoicing in heaven.

**19.1-5 ~ Hallelujah**

We may perhaps be a bit disturbed by the fact that the multitude in heaven is almost gloating at the fall of Babylon. We need to remember two things.

Firstly this is not actual reality, this is symbolism, and is part of the emphasis that evil will be overcome and the forces of good will triumph.

Secondly we need to realise that the reason why the fall of Babylon is such good news is that it has been stopping the majority of mankind from entering into their true destiny. People have now been set free from a dead end system and can now enter into real life.

And what exactly is that 'real life' to consist of?

**19.6-8 ~ The marriage of the Lamb**

The real destiny of men and people created in the image of God is not to be fiercely independent, but to be married to the Lamb.

What exactly does this mean? No one can tell; but we remember that at the start of the Bible we are told of marriage that they shall become one flesh. The implication is that the Church will join with Christ in his kingly rule. Exactly how far we are to take this can be argued for ever, but it should not be allowed to mean anything less than something wonderful beyond imagining.

**19.9-10 ~ Worship God**

Perhaps it is because John is so bowled over by the idea of the Church being married to the Lamb, that he rather loses control of himself and falls down to worship the angel who has given this fantastic news.

The harlot, Babylon, has been dealt with, but what is to become of the beast and the false prophet?

**19.11-16 ~ King of kings and Lord of lords**

Remember that this is still all symbolic, but it is symbolic of deep truth.

We see the start of a great set piece battle. Heaven is opened - not just a door to heaven, but heaven itself, for from it come not only the majestic figure of Christ riding on a white horse, but with him are the armies of heaven, following him wearing white raiment and riding white horses. All other symbolism is now stripped away, as Christ is seen not as the Lamb, but as, 'King of kings and Lord of lords'.

We may imagine that this is symbolising the return of Christ to judge.

Next we see something of the arena in which the battle is to be fought.

**19.17-18 ~ Preparation for the battle**

Well, we are not here actually shown the arena, but we are shown preparations being made for the battle. Preparations are being made for clearing away the corpses that are left after the battle. It may be a bit gruesome to hear of all the birds being assembled ready to clear away the dead. It is of course still symbolism and symbolises

that the outcome is known before the battle begins. There is no doubt who will be victorious, there never has been. From before the world began this victory has been sure and certain.

### **19.19-21 ~ Victory**

We have no long description of the battle, but just a brief summary. The beast and the false prophet are captured and thrown into the lake of fire, which is the picture of a sort of cosmic incinerator into which will be thrown everything that is no longer wanted. There is no hint whatever that they will somehow survive and live an endless life of torment. This would be impossible for they are symbolic pictures of false ideas and systems. Symbolic pictures cannot live for ever, but they can be completely destroyed.

And what of all who have followed them? Yes, they are killed and the birds have their ghastly feast.

We may not have noticed that people are being presented with two very different options - either to be guests at the wedding feast of the Lamb (or indeed to actually be the Bride), or to be themselves a feast for the birds of the air.

## **SECTION 7 ~ REVELATION 20 - 22.5 ~ THE LAST THINGS**

**(This section deals mainly with eternity after the judgment)**

### ***Exploration***

*It may be being presented in gory visions but it also has a degree of excitement, rather like that of a great epic film, as the enemies are dealt with one by one; and now there is only one more left - Satan himself. We may be expecting to move straight into this last victory and then all will be wonderful for ever, and this will indeed be the main topic of this section, but it is to be bound into the theme of the whole Book by starting back in the Gospel age with the victories and sufferings of the people of God.*

*The layout of the first part of this section is in fact similar to that of earlier sections, but as the 'centre of gravity' has now moved to looking ahead into eternity, the first 5 divisions are put together in a short summary 20.1-6, the 6th division is covered by 20.7-10, and the 7th division by 20.11-15. This is then followed by chapters 21.1 - 22.5 which deal with things after the final judgment. We may look on this as a sort of special 8th sub-division to round off the Book - a special extra section that takes us beyond the end of history and on into eternity.*

*The realisation that the parallel with the other sections shows that 20.1-6 are about the Gospel age, will save us from all sorts of complex and misleading conjectures about the so called Millennium, and so set us free to concentrate on the glories of eternity.*

*This is the section of the Book that has suffered most from people taking parts of it as being literally true, instead of being a deeper sort of truth - symbolic truth.*

*Except for John's personal introduction at the start, and possibly certain aspects of the 7 Letters, every single part of the Book so far has been symbolic, and there is nothing to suggest that these last few chapters are to be treated differently, indeed they are full of things that cannot be taken literally. It is therefore clear that the correct treatment is to take these last chapters in their entirety as being symbolic. Once we have grasped this we will be saved from all sorts of strange ideas that would divert us from the grand design that is being set before us.*

### **20.1-3 ~ Satan bound for a thousand years**

These few verses are about, 'the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan.' The various names are informative - the strong and ugly dragon; the

cunning and deceptive old serpent; the slanderous devil; and the adversary and false accuser - Satan.

He can appear in many different guises, from a terrifying monster to the epitome of sweet reasonableness.

We see him being seized, bound, thrown into the pit, and locked in, so that he will not deceive the nations for a thousand years, after which he will be let out for a little while.

**Exploration**

*This is the first time we have come across a length of time called a thousand years, and this period of time is only to be mentioned in a short section of just six verses. In other words this is the only place such a period of time is mentioned in the Bible (except for 2 Peter 3.8 where it is a figure of speech meaning a long time.)*

*It is clear that everything else in this section is symbolic, so it follows that the thousand years must also be symbolic. What is it symbolic of? We do well to look at the other passages that spoke of the bottomless pit. We find that it has always been symbolic of forces of evil being kept restrained but not stopped completely - the time when evil is limited as the Gospel is being proclaimed; the period of time, the Gospel age, when the Church, though persecuted, grows to cover the face of the earth. In the previous passages we saw that after a time Satan was set free for his final fling, before his final destruction.*

*There is such a clear parallel with these verses, especially 3b 'After that he must be let out for a little while.' that it seems clear that this is speaking of the same time. It is not a literal number of years but a symbol of a long time, namely the Gospel age. In other words it is a symbolic number being used in exactly the same way as in 2 Peter 3.8*

In other sections the Gospel age has been pictured as being for 3½ years which contrasts with the 3½ days of the great tribulation; but here 1,000 years is being contrasted with eternity. In each case the numbers are suitable for the contrast intended.

'But surely,' some will say, 'the next verses show the previously martyred saints reigning on the earth for a thousand years.' Well actually, they don't -

**20 4-6 ~ Reigning with Christ**

Without any exception, every time thrones have been mentioned in this Book, they are in heaven, and the same is true of verses 11-12 of this chapter, so it is to be expected that the thrones in verse 4 are also in heaven - not on the earth, and there is nothing in these verses that indicates otherwise.

As we have seen before there is a sense in which Christians always reign on earth, for it is through them that God is working out his purposes, but these verses do not say that dead Christians will come back to physical life and sit on literal thrones on the earth. Rather, these verses are all about heaven and tell us that Christians who die will be resurrected to reign with Christ in heaven; we have seen this before.

**Exploration**

*We are here into the difficult topic of the meaning of time after death. In the time scale of this life, Christians who have died are waiting in Hades till Christ comes again, but in the time scale of Heaven, they are already resurrected and are reigning with Christ.*

*There is therefore a double sense in which Christians reign during this Gospel Age, here called a thousand years. On the one hand those still alive on earth are a royal priesthood and so they are always reigning in that it is through them that God works out his purposes. On the other hand those who have died, 'bypass the rest of*

*time' and have already reached the Resurrection, after which they reign with Christ in heaven. It is unwise for anyone to claim that they have the correct understanding of these things, but this is surely nearer to the meaning of the passage than the suggestion of dead martyrs returning to live again on this earth.*

*We should not get too tied up in knots about sorting out the details for it is clear that it is all, including the thousand years, to be taken symbolically, and also the meaning of time after death is outside our present knowledge.*

Moving on, it is also important that we have a correct understanding of verse 5, 'The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.'

It is easy to get the false idea that this refers to a sort of sub-class of Christians who do not take part in the first resurrection and so do not share in this reigning with Christ. But this is not what it says. Those who in verse 4 are said not to have been marked with the mark of the beast are surely all Christians, not just a select few. It is impossible to divide the people of God into two classes, for all Christians become children of God and all are included in what the family do. Symbolically there are only two groups - pictured as those who are sealed with the mark of the Lamb and those who bear the mark of the beast.

Those who do not come to life 'until the thousand years were ended' (i.e. at the end of the Gospel Age), are not a sub-class of Christians, but non believers, who are raised to life at the end of the age so that they may stand before the judgment seat of Christ and receive their judgment.

This understanding is backed up by verse 6. 'Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power.' We cannot think that there will be Christians who are subject to the second death, so those taking part in the first resurrection must be all the Christians, not just some of them, and they will live for ever. The second death is the final fate of the lost - those who have the mark of the beast. They will be raised at the second resurrection, raised to be judged and to go to their eternal fate.

Following the same pattern that we have repeatedly seen before, the Gospel age is followed by the Great Tribulation.

### ***Exploration***

*Taking some of these verses literally has led to the development of many conflicting doctrines about the so called Millennium, together with doctrines about so called raptures and partial raptures etc.*

*Instead of forming doctrines from the Gospels and Epistles and finding illustrations for these doctrines in the Book of Revelation; these doctrines have been formed from these few verses in Revelation and the rest of the Bible has then been manipulated to fit in with them. This is not how the Book of Revelation should be used; these verses should not give rise to any new doctrines that would not exist without them.*

*It might be thought that it would do no harm for someone to believe in a special Millennium at the end of the history of the earth, but it seriously detracts from the great goal towards which we are being brought in these last chapters. It is a mistake, it is harmful, and it ought to be abandoned.*

*Is there then no period of 1,000 years? Symbolically there is, and we are living in it, it is this Gospel age. To think that at this late point in the Book a whole new era, not mentioned before, is being introduced before the final judgment, is most peculiar. This era has in fact been mentioned in every section of the Book - it is the Gospel Age - there is nothing more to it than that, and nothing less than that.*

*In the context of this section which leads us on into eternity, 1,000 years is a very telling figure to use for the length of the Gospel Age - to us creatures of time, it seems like a very long time, but to God set in the context of eternity, 'A thousand years are but as a day.'*

*And so now we move on to the great tribulation that comes at the end of it and God stepping in to bring things to a conclusion -*

### **20.7-10 ~ Gog and Magog - final fate of the devil**

We have seen Satan having his 'final fling' before. What is new in these verses is the mention of Gog and Magog. Many and various are the explanations that have been given. Again we need to remember that this is all symbolic. We are not to look for any actual power on the earth in our time, or in the future; instead we are to seek something from the past that could be used as a symbol.

Gog and Magog appear in Ezekiel 38-39. It is not possible to know who exactly they are, but they are presented as an overwhelming force that comes to attack the innocent people of God, but God will step in to destroy them.

This is surely exactly what we are looking for. It is ideal as a symbol of an overwhelming force attacking the people of God, but whom God will step in to destroy.

We are not to look for any other identification; it is the symbolism that matters. The very fact that the actual people are unknown makes it an ideal symbol of any and every time when this kind of thing happens.

The other thing that is new is that this is the first time we are told that the devil himself is thrown into the lake of fire.

Finally we have those last words, 'and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.'

### ***Exploration***

*We are told that this is the fate of the beast and of the false prophet as well as of the devil. Now the beast and the false prophet were not actual beings, but symbols of false systems. Symbols cannot actually suffer for ever and ever, they can only be destroyed; so this must surely be understood as symbolising that this is their total and final end - there is no way back- no resurrection. This is the end. And the devil shares the same fate, so this appears to symbolise the final and total annihilation of the devil and all his works.*

And so we come to the final judgment.

### **20.11-15 ~ The final judgment**

Everything yields up its dead and all are judged, and what really matters is whether your name is in the book of life. The importance of this is emphasised by the fact that Death and Hades (the place where dead men go) are thrown into the lake of fire. There is no more place for death so it goes into God's cosmic incinerator.

### ***Exploration***

*If we want to ask the question, 'What does this cosmic incinerator symbolise?' The answer is that it need symbolise nothing more than that the things put into it cease to exist; but if we want to push the question further - God himself is described as being a consuming fire, so we could see this as pointing to the fact that God absorbs into himself all that should not exist any further. In the consuming fire of God all that is evil just disappears.*

*We may be able to see a parallel here with what happened when Jesus Christ took our sins upon himself on the cross. A lot more could be said about this.*

So what is left? What is eternity with God going to be like? We have seen glimpses as we have worked through the Book, but now we have two chapters. All the

nasty stuff is finished with, but what exactly is the good stuff? The answer will not be easy! It would be foolish to expect it to be. We are clearly entering territory that is once again far beyond our comprehension. Yet again we need to be reminded that, because it is beyond our natural comprehension, it will be presented to us in a number of symbolic pictures. Take any parts literally and we end up with confusion and contradictions. Take it all symbolically and we build up layer upon layer of wonder upon wonder - things that we may not fully comprehend, but things for which we can fall down before God in wonder and adoration.

### **21.1-2 ~ New Heaven and Earth, New Jerusalem**

The first verse is about a new heaven and a new earth, and the second about a new Jerusalem. There will be a great deal more about the new Jerusalem later, but we begin with just that passing reference to a new heaven and earth.

This first verse is a bit of a battleground, with many taking it literally or coming perilously close to taking it literally. What has gone before is deeply symbolic, what follows is deeply symbolic - you cannot take what is said about the new Jerusalem literally without it becoming a nonsense and without destroying its wonderful meaning. Consistency demands that we treat the new heaven and earth, and the new Jerusalem in the same way; it therefore lacks integrity to take this one verse literally. We need to look at it carefully.

#### ***Exploration***

*Verse 1, 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.'*

*Firstly we need to decide what it is that is meant by 'heaven' in this passage. This does not seem to be anything to do with the 'heaven' we have seen in previous chapters. This is not the place with the throne of God surrounded by the 24 elders and the 4 living creatures. This is the earth and its atmosphere, as in Genesis 1.*

*We are told that the first heaven and earth had passed away, but the exact meaning of the word translated 'passed away' is not clear, and seems to be impossible to pin down. So though the most natural understanding would be that the new earth cannot be the present earth renewed, these words do not actually prove that it isn't.*

*But why does it say, 'and the sea was no more'?*

*It is generally said that to the Jews the Sea symbolised unrest, conflict, and division, and so it is now gone; but what is not always recognised is that those who take this line are therefore saying that this is a symbolic picture and not reality.*

*There are only two alternatives - either it is to be taken literally and the new earth literally has no more sea, which means that it is so completely different from the present earth as to bear no resemblance to it whatsoever; or it is symbolic.*

*The more you think through the implications the more difficult it becomes to take it literally. This should not worry us because it has been made abundantly clear by the whole Book that we are not meant to even think of taking it literally.*

*If we take it symbolically, then questions about whether this is a new earth, or the old earth renewed become meaningless. It is neither - it is a picture of something we cannot yet understand.*

*(There are of course some other passages in the Bible that refer to a new heaven and a new earth, or seem to be related to the topic, and they need to be studied carefully, but the way in which we understand them may be more dependent than we realise on whether we take this verse in Revelation as being literal or symbolic. This is another point at which we do well to remember that the purpose of the Book of Revelation is to illustrate the doctrines established in the rest of the Bible, not to formulate doctrine in the first place.)*

Next we see, 'the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband'.

This heaven must mean the place where God dwells, but look at the description - taken literally it seems nonsense, but symbolically just see what it is saying!

We have come across the bride before, and what was it? It was the people of God, the Church, which is to be married to the Lamb. So what is this saying? It is saying that the New Jerusalem is a picture of the Church.

Taken literally you have a very peculiar description of a City, and it becomes even more peculiar later; but taken symbolically we are being taken into something mind bogglingly wonderful, as what follows later will also make clear.

### **21.3-4 ~ God will be with them**

These verses are justly famous. They compete with the somewhat similar 6.15-17 for the claim of being the most beautiful section of the whole Book, but there is little more that can be said about them than what they say themselves. They very simply sum up the promise that the deepest aspirations of all Christians will actually be fulfilled.

The start of this promise has come in the Old Testament, and we have seen it in a slightly different form in those earlier verses, but here it comes in what many will think is its most beautiful and complete form.

### **21.5-8 ~ It is done**

The words, 'I make all things new.' in verse 5 are sometimes used to 'prove' that the new earth of verse 1 must be this present earth renewed. They prove no such thing. The things God makes new are sometimes out of something else and sometimes out of nothing. These words prove nothing either way. And when we see in the coming verses what is meant by the new Jerusalem, we may wonder what on 'earth' this argument is about anyway.

Verses 6 onwards may seem to contain both a surprise and a disappointment.

A surprise: because we have just had a glimpse of the Church becoming the bride of Christ, but here we are seen to be the children of God. There is no actual contradiction for two reasons: firstly because it is possible to be both the bride of Christ and the children of the Father, but that is almost certainly taking it altogether too literally. Secondly and much more importantly, because when you are dealing with symbols you do not try to harmonise the different symbols together, but instead use them to give layer upon layer of truth. We are back to Jesus' parables of the kingdom of God being like a tree, a pearl, a net, etc.

The possible disappointment is that we have another reference to the fate of the lost, when we hoped that was all over. But there is a possible extra lesson we can learn from this, and that is that though we will look at these two chapters as being primarily about the final state of blessedness, they, like nearly all that has gone before, can also apply to the here and now.

We are, here and now, the bride of Christ. We are, here and now, the children of God. But this does not mean everyone - in the here and now, there are those whose destiny is sadly very different.

### **21.9-14 ~ The New Jerusalem**

So there is it - stated in black and white - the new Jerusalem, holy Jerusalem, does symbolise the bride of Christ.

We have got so used to wonderful descriptions of Christ that we may not for a moment realise that the beauties we see described here are not of Christ, but of the Church, of us!

We should note that the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles are both mentioned, this is something we have seen before. This makes it clear to us that this is a picture of the whole Church of God from both the Old and the New Covenants.

### **21.15-21 ~ The Perfect Cube**

If we needed anything more to tell us this is a picture, here it is; an angel with a measuring rod does not measure a literal city 1,500 miles long, wide and high, just like that! He appears to be measuring a picture, or plan.

The actual dimensions need to be stated in two ways. They need to be stated in a unit that we understand, in our case 1,500 miles, because this gives us the meaning of something of almost limitless size. But they also need to be stated in the original units - 12,000 stadia - because the dimensions are symbolic, 12 times 1,000.

The other details given are all of beautiful things. Much hilarity has been caused by the question, 'Where did the oysters come from that had pearls large enough to form a whole gate?' Of course the answer is again that this is once again a symbolic picture.

### ***Exploration***

*But what exactly is the significance of the shape and size of this City? Well, the shape is a perfect cube, and there is only one other thing in the whole of the Bible which is a perfect cube, and that is the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, and then in the Temple.*

*The Holy Jerusalem is the people of God, and they are the Holy of Holies in which God dwells by his Spirit. The vast size (3,375,000,000 cubic miles!) indicates that this Holy of Holies does not consist of a few special saints, but is the company of all God's people from every place and time.*

*To try to take any of this passage literally is not only incorrect, it will also impoverish us; for it conveys symbolically things that are mind bogglingly greater than anything that can be gleaned from any literal understanding.*

### **21 22-27 ~ No temple in the city**

The picture seems to shift slightly, and this by now should no longer surprise us. These pictures are not static realities, but appear as is needed to make certain points; they will then change to make further points.

So what is the meaning of this bit about, 'The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.'?

Perhaps this is another reminder that this is not only about what will be at the end of time after the final judgment, but that it is also a picture of what the Church is, in the sight of God in all times, including our own age. The Church should always bring light to the nations.

### **22.1-5 ~ The river of the water of life**

This last section of the description of the Holy Jerusalem shifts slightly again, and shows us a more personal view of what that state of bliss will be like. It takes us back to the start of Genesis and shows us that the curse of the fall has been completely dealt with and overcome.

Trying to put all the details of these several sections together is to attempt the impossible. It cannot be done, and we are not meant to try.

What is being presented, in a number of varied pictures, is something beyond our full comprehension.

Our response should not be to engage in a kind of scientific analysis, but to fall down and worship.

All that follows from now to the end of the Book can be described as 'after notes' or final comments.

## **REVELATION 22.6-22 ~ CONCLUSION**

### **22.6-7 ~ I am coming**

'What must soon take place.' We may say, 'But it hasn't, 2,000 years have gone by.' But that would only be because we have forgotten that though this Book leads up to the end of time, it is also about things that are constantly happening throughout time. There is a very real sense in which we can say that these things are not only coming soon, but are actually now.

But, what about, 'I am coming soon.'? Again there is a sense in which Jesus does come again and again throughout history; but as regarding the final visible coming at the end of the age, it may be helpful to know that the word translated 'soon' can also mean, 'suddenly'.

### **22.8-11 ~ Now is always the hour**

We have come across verses 8-9 before, and verse 10 is clear enough as long as we remember that the time is always near, for this vision has been about all time from the very beginning to the very end.

But verse 11 is more puzzling. We have seen time and time again throughout the Book that God is calling people to repentance, but if they will not repent then they will be left as they are, and judged as they are. As has been quoted before, 'To the person who repeatedly says, "My will be done." God will eventually say, "Your will be done."'

### **22.12-17 ~ Come**

Here is the balance to the 'letting' of verse 11, it is God saying, 'Come.' The invitation is always there, but God will not force anyone against their will.

### **22.18-21 ~ Take heed**

In other words, 'Don't meddle, but take heed.'

And the last word is a word of Grace. We may have been bothered by the gruesome pictures of the fate of the lost, but the greatest wonders that have been presented in this Book are that, on the one hand, God works in almost endless grace to seek to bring people to redemption, and only when all else fails are they finally sent to destruction; and on the other hand, that his grace has prepared for those that love him such good things as pass man's understanding.

## **THE COLLECT FOR THE 6TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY**

'O God, who hast prepared for them that love thee such good things as pass man's understanding: Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.' (Book of Common Prayer)

### **Books by this author:**

All you need to know about Heaven - A biblical exploration  
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All you need to know about Hell - A biblical exploration  
ISBN 0-9549491-1-0