

Apocalypse Now

The Soundtrack for All Time

Revelation 4-11

-Book 2 of 3-

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The Meaning of History: Crown Casting

(Revelation 4, 5:6)

All week I kept thinking about one of my all-time favorite stories. It's a story that Al Andrews introduced me to years ago, and I used it as a children's sermon about five years ago. It's called *The Pirate Who Tried to Capture the Moon*. [Parts of story are summarized.]

There was once a fierce pirate who loved nothing. He lived alone on an island, where he strode about in armor, waving a broad sword. And he watched for ships to capture. Through his glass, he spied the ship of flowers, with its daffodil flag and its sails of Queen Anne's lace.

And the pirate captured just about every ship you could think of. But each time he'd look up in the sky and see the moon sailing as it pleased. He'd shake his sword and yell, "Some day I'll capture you too!"

And the day finally came. But he couldn't figure out how to catch it.

The pirate paced back and forth in his rusty armor, back and forth, to and fro. He walked in circles, day and night, until he passed an old ship of books he had captured long ago. He searched its broken decks and shredded sails until he found a book that told all about the moon. Then the pirate laughed.

He took that book and six horses and sailed for land. He harnessed the mares to his ship, and he ripped across the earth—he ripped over fields and streams, leaving a

scar. Slowly, the pirate who loved nothing moved over the land in his ship, looking for everything the moon loved.

The moon loves to shine through curtains, said the book. It loves to float in pools of water. It likes to peek over small hills. The moon loves poetry.

The pirate slashed curtains from farmhouses and drapes from mansions. He cut curtains from stages and he loaded them all onto his ship. Into barrels he scooped frog ponds and reflecting pools and swimming holes. He chopped at small hills with his sword and shoveled them into his hold.

He captured poets and everything else he knew the moon loved. He swiped candles from the tables of Italian restaurants. He grabbed sadly playing violins from under the chins of gypsies. He kidnapped lovers as they gazed at each other softly, walking hand in hand.

He netted baying wolves, and children who danced all by themselves in the middle of the night. And the pirate sailed that bursting ship back to his island. And he waited. Clouds moved across the sky. The wind blew the empty sea. And finally the moon rose.

REVELATION 4:1: *After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."*

After this. After *what*? Well, after the letters to the seven churches, which are actually the seven dictations to the seven “angelos” of the seven churches (perhaps the seven-fold Spirit of God in the seven churches).

It’s interesting that now in chapter four we are first beginning to read what Jesus in chapter one said is really addressed to the seven churches. Chapter one verse eleven says, “Write what you [John] see . . . and send it to the seven churches.”

For the last two chapters, John has been dictating what he has heard for the angels of the seven churches. Nevertheless, the seven churches are clearly expected to overhear what is said to the angels. They overhear that they have some real needs and each a common challenge: to conquer.

Real, multiple, varying needs:

1. Some need to restore their first love.
2. Some are facing persecution and death.
3. There is false doctrine and idolatry.
4. There is sexual immorality and a need for church discipline.
5. Some are dead even though everybody else thinks they’re alive.
6. Some are doing well but don’t know it.
7. Some are “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked,” although they think they’re rich and wise.

All of them are called to conquer.

Now, let’s have a little sympathy for John. John sees himself as their pastor. And what is he supposed to say now, after all of this *need*?

There is a huge variety of need in this room right now, just like in those seven churches. And *I’m* supposed to

preach to you all? What do I say “after this”?—after you see your need?

They had various problems, but they also had one common problem, and it’s very likely reflected in the references to the Nicolaitans, Balaam, and the Jezebel woman. It shows up in their apathy, morality, and self-delusions.

After the legalism of the Jews, this problem was the first, great, cultural enemy of the early Church. It was called Gnosticism. Gnostic means literally “one who knows.” The Gnostics were the first, major, illegitimate offspring of the early Church, sired by the philosophy of Greece.

It’s a rather amorphous idea, but at the core it is the idea that we are saved through *knowing* stuff. All seven churches existed in a sea of Greek ideas . . . the Greek love of “gnosis”—knowledge. Education was savior.

We all exist in a sea of modernist ideas (really ancient ideas) but ideas that took our culture by storm in the 18th century in what we call now the Enlightenment. It followed the scientific revolution, which was largely an act of Christian worship.

The Enlightenment was largely a rediscovery of Greek thinking, separated from Christian worship. Greek philosophers like Aristotle, who fathered Empiricism (objective observation), taught that man’s highest function was to think and reason. To the Greeks, man’s crown and glory was his thinking mind.

Many say the modern era began in 1636 when Rene Descartes said, “Cogito ergo sum,” – “I think, therefore I am.” (Start with the thinking man.) In the Enlightenment, they said flat out, “Man is the measure of all things,” like my daughter’s T-shirt which says, “It’s all about me.”

I just glossed over 3,000 years of philosophy and history and put it on my daughter’s T-shirt. However, I think we can safely say that the Gnostics and the modernists are pretty much like the pirate who tried to capture the

moon . . . If you want to know the moon, you must conquer the moon. Send a man to the moon, capture a rock, and bring it back. To know a tree, cut it down and count its rings. To know a frog, capture it, kill it, and cut it into tiny pieces. To know a wife . . . well, we aren't very good at knowing wives any more.

What I'm saying is that just like those Greeks, we modern people *expect* something "after this." After all our problems have been pointed out, we expect some practical advice on how we can conquer them.

It seems God is our chief problem, so how can we comprehend God? How can we understand God? How can we make this God thing *work*?

This is hard for us modern people to take, but "after this," Revelation 4:1, we are really not *mentioned* as such in the rest of the book. The seven churches are really not mentioned as such in the rest of the book. No instructions; no practical advice whatsoever!

So we think it must not be about us. The popular view in the American Church today is that we get raptured out of here at this point. So the rest of the Revelation isn't *about* us. No instructions *to* us; therefore, it's really not *about* us, so it's not *for* us.

And that's strange . . . because this is the beginning of the very part of the book that Jesus tells John is directly for us. In chapter 1: "[John,] write down what you see . . . and send it to the churches . . ."

Maybe it isn't *about* us, meaning *dependent* on us, but it is *for* us, because Jesus said so. And the part we think is *for* us (chapters 2 and 3—the seven churches), the part we think we understand (do this, do that, repent here, repent there), is technically not *for* us. It's not addressed to us. It's addressed to those seven angelos messengers.

And now the part we don't understand (the rest of Revelation) is for us.

I used to teach the Revelation to this point and then stop, saying, “I don’t understand past here.” I can’t tell you all the people who have come up to me and said, “I always avoided Revelation. I just didn’t understand.”

We think it’s *so important* to understand. I guess I’m still not sure I *do* understand, but I’m beginning to understand I’m not *supposed* to understand everything! Maybe if I *did* understand, it wouldn’t be God.

There are different ways of knowing, and different things that can be known by them.

Last month I read in *Reader’s Digest* about a woman named Nancy who wanted to introduce her elderly mother to the computer and the Internet. She went to a popular website “Ask Jeeves” and told her mother, “It can answer any question you have.”

Her mother was very skeptical. Nancy said, “It’s *true*, Mom. Think of something to ask it.” Nancy sat poised with her fingers over the keyboard. Her mother thought a minute and then responded, “How is Aunt Helen feeling?”

There are different ways of knowing and different things to be known. There is one way to know objects and another way to know subjects. There is one way to know computers and facts and another way to know Aunt Helen.

Maybe God is more like Aunt Helen and less like a computer.

You can conquer, capture, and comprehend things less than you. You can measure things less than you but not greater than you. So if “man is the measure of all things,” then you must believe all things are less than you, and that you’re the king of all things. Yet all things in your kingdom are dead. A world of facts, and nothing worth knowing.

I’ve heard that if a tribal African wants to know something, he dances with it. If a *modern* person wants to know a thing, he captures it and takes it apart.

To know a tree, cut it down and count its rings. To know a frog, capture it, kill it, and cut it into little, tiny

pieces. To know a wife . . . well, we aren't very good at knowing wives any more. I *could* capture it, kill it, and reduce it to its parts. (Sometimes I think I do that emotionally and spiritually.) But if I did it completely and physically, it would be called anatomy and physiology.

I would know *about* my wife, but I would no longer *know* my wife, because she'd be dead. And I would be a murderer . . . alone in my own Hell.

I wonder if in our lust for understanding God, we could murder God. That may be a silly idea, but maybe we murder Him *to us*. We make Him understandable and thereby declare Him dead.

In John 5, Jesus said to the Pharisees and the preachers, "You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have life" – that is, that in understanding them you have life – "and it is they that bear witness to me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."

Because they so wanted to understand, and thought they did understand by the book, they couldn't understand or know Jesus, so they killed Jesus.

Maybe in our lust for understanding God we *did* murder God. We nailed Him to a tree. I think it was the Tree of Knowledge. And wasn't that the sin in the Garden? —wanting the knowledge of God more than we wanted to know God? We wanted the conquest of God more than communion with God, like pirates trying to capture the moon.

If Revelation 4:1 is our first step back into the Garden since we left it back in Genesis 3, maybe we had better be prepared to drop the fruit of knowledge to know its Maker.

Maybe we should give up having to understand in order to know. Maybe God doesn't want to be understood but known, like my wife wants to be known. Not captured, but known and loved. When a Hebrew man knew his wife, she oftentimes got pregnant.

Maybe this explains most of our modern, Gnostic problems with God. We are constantly asking, “How could bad things happen to good people? Surely good people will get into Heaven!” Maybe good people are like murdering Pharisees, who try to set a trap for God and pound the Son of God to their tree of knowledge.

Remember the pirate who tried to capture the moon? He found a book about the moon and learned everything the moon liked. Then he captured all those things to get to the moon.

Maybe the Bible is a book about God. We read it to find out all the things that God likes: honoring the Sabbath, not using His name in vain, permanent marriages . . . We learn everything God likes and try to capture those things in order to capture God and make Him a jewel in our crown.

I think we modern day preachers may be the worst . . . so Gnostic and modern that we give you all kinds of practical things to *do*, things we usually get from *Psychology Today* and Ann Landers, but not in Scripture – practical things for the seven churches to do:

- Five ways to restore your first love
- How you can avoid sexual immorality
- How to experience life
- How to make God work for you

Practical ideas are fine, but too much in the wrong way, and God looks more and more like a computer and less and less like Aunt Helen; more like a thing to be captured and less like a person to be loved.

I was listening to a “Preaching Today” sermon tape from *Christianity Today*. The host said something like this: “The sermon you are about to hear is so good because the preacher leaves the listener with many practical things to do. He doesn’t just leave you with the sense that God is great.”

I've thought about that statement a lot, and I need to say that I think "a sense that God is great" is pretty much *it*. It's called faith. And it looks like worship.

From here on out, I think John is just going to leave us self-conscious, self-absorbed, needy, sinful, frightened, confused, Gnostic, modern believers with an overwhelming sense that God is pretty great in every possible way!

You see, maybe that's what we need most. Maybe our chief need is to see our needs but then surrender our needs—lose our needs—lose our selves—in His greatness. Maybe it's really not about you. And that's great news! For, in fact, *you* are your biggest problem. Maybe the first step—and only step—in conquering is being conquered.

REVELATION 4: *After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.*

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a

face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

After this, John is out-carnated. He sees a rainbow, the sign of God's covenant of mercy. He sees seven, burning lamps that sit on lampstands. The churches are the lampstands. He sees the four, living creatures, cherubim and seraphim from Ezekiel and Isaiah. (The rabbis said they represent all creation, the strongest, noblest, wisest, and swiftest.)

But we don't understand all of it. It's pictures upon pictures, loaded with meanings. Space and time are different here. We cannot comprehend it all because it's larger and greater than anything we've ever seen.

John sees twenty-four thrones and twenty-four elders, like the twenty-four divisions of priests in the temple. Later we'll read of the twelve apostles and the twelve sons of Israel, together twenty-four.

Everything worships the One on the throne. They don't study; they *worship*. Everyone worships saying, "Holy, holy, holy . . ." The elders continuously cast their crowns before Him. And Jesus said to pray, "Father, thy will be

done on earth as it is in heaven.” What are they *always doing* in heaven? — Worshipping . . . casting crowns before Him.

Now, if you aren’t tracking with what I’m saying, let’s finish reading *The Pirate Who Tried to Capture the Moon*.

The pirate waited for the moon, and finally the moon rose.

But when it looked down, it saw that everything it loved was gone. So it moved down to look a little closer. And the fierce pirate, sitting on his island, laughed. The moon looked again, but still it saw no curtains, it saw no small hills. So again it came a little closer.

The pirate laughed again, and stood up to sharpen his sword. And the moon looked and saw nothing and came still closer. It looked and looked through streets and in villages and down empty wells. There were no pools of water. There were no poets, no lonely dancers. So it came closer still.

And the pirate, seeing the moon come lower, yelled out, “Moon! I have captured every ship and everything you love, and now I will capture you!”

Then he threw open the hatch. And the moon saw everything it loved streaming out of the pirate’s ship and onto the pirate’s island. Kitchen curtains and long candles and violins playing sad music and moody poets and lonely wolves and dancers who danced in the middle of the night. It gave a little sigh and came closer to the island, and the pirate watched. Still the moon drew closer, and the pirate saw it grow.

“I didn’t know the moon was quite so big,” he thought. And still the moon came down, the moon came down, closer, still closer. And the pirate started to feel afraid. He tore through the book that told all about the moon, but he couldn’t find a place that told how big the moon was. And the moon came down, growing larger, larger than the pirate’s ship, larger than his island, larger than anything the pirate had ever seen.

The pirate trembled, and he thought, “If I return everything I’ve captured, that will surely stop the moon.” So he cut the saddles and the bits from the wild horses, and the chain from the flowers, and they drifted out to sea. And a shadow passed across the giant moon; it was the birds streaming away.

And still the moon came down. So the pirate freed the madly playing violins and the howling wolves, the poets chanting and the pools bursting from their barrels, and he sent them sailing home.

Moonlight spread over the waves, it covered his empty island. The pirate lifted his trembling sword as the whole sky became the moon.

And then the moon stopped. And waited.

The pirate stared into its light and a wild shiver ran through him like a wave. He forgot about being afraid. He forgot about being fierce. He lowered his sword, he dropped his armor, and he whispered, “Moon, wonderful moon, it is you who have captured me.”

And the moon glowed through him and above him. Then, slowly, it started back into the sky, growing smaller, growing distant, until once again it sailed as it pleased. It drifted over the sea and over the island where now there was someone new the moon loved, who loved the moon.

For at that moment, in the middle of the night, the pirate began to dance.

Every good deed in your life must be part of that old pirate's dance, or it is sin. For "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin," wrote Paul. Faith is trusting God's great love for you, and it looks like worship.

In order to conquer, you must first be conquered. You must first lose your life. You must first surrender your crown.

So what can I say to all of us with all of our needs, insecurities, fears, and confusions? I can say this: "Look at how great our God is!" I can preach the Gospel so we cast our crowns before Him . . . so we worship.

I feel that so many of you are struggling to understand and comprehend and analyze your relationship with God and how to make it work. He is saying, "Stop. Behold my glory and cast your crowns before me. Stop going to worship to *learn* stuff. Go to worship to worship!"

Every moment of every day, stop and behold how great your God is. Surrender your hurts, fears, anxieties, dreams, and control. Cast your crowns before Him. Do you do that every day? It's more than just an action step, but a disposition of the heart, a surrender of the heart. Cast your crowns.

Like the moon in the book, God did come down. And now I need to make this sermon "Christian." If the moon actually came down on an old pirate like me, I wouldn't dance. I would drop in terror, paralyzed with fear,

guarding my heart more than ever.

Well, the moon didn't *actually* come down. But God did. And they wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger. The only crown He ever wore was a crown of thorns they pounded into His head while He died for you and me.

It's Jesus who shows John the throne. When John looks again, he sees this:

REVELATION 5:6: *Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.*

John looks and sees somebody he knows — Jesus, bleeding for him, for the churches, and He is seated on the throne.

We say, “It’s not about you” (not dependent on you). Yet it *is* all about you, for the Lamb on the throne bleeds for you . . . for us. It is all about you *in grace*. You can’t be the measure of all things, but “all things are yours and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s,” writes Paul. God made Christ head over all things for you, the Church (Ephesians 2).

So I believe those seven churches show up all over the Revelation, it’s just that they show up by grace. I believe they are somehow in those twenty-four elders on the twenty-four thrones. And what are they doing? Naturally, automatically, as their greatest joy, they are continuously casting their crowns before the One on the throne. How do they get their crowns back on?

You do know, I hope, that I’m not saying we can’t understand *anything* about God. I’m just saying we can’t

understand anything about God unless He chooses to reveal it to us by grace through salvation, and it looks like worship . . . just like we can't do any good deed for God, except what God does in us by His Spirit . . . by grace. And that looks like faith. How do they get their crowns back on?

God is the One who crowns us . . . and we cast our crowns before Him. What a picture John saw! – God crowning, elders throwing them down, the Lamb crowning, elders throwing them down . . . picking them up, throwing them down, picking them up, throwing them down . . . It must have looked like a *dance*: the dance of love at the heart of creation. And that dance is life. Life begins now when we worship.

Think of yourself and your crowns. Your sovereignty can look like a million different problems. It can look like fear, anxiety, pride, arrogance, or confusion. And it can sometimes even look like *good* things, things God gives us, like His righteousness and goodness. But even that is a gift from Him.

So say thank you. And cast your crowns before Him. Humble yourself and let Him do what He wants.

“After this,” when you're feeling frightened, when you're feeling confused, when you're feeling entirely occupied with yourself, cast your crowns before Him. Worship and forget yourself, your problems, your cares, your needs. Lose yourself.

You may say, “But what about all my needs and all my cares and all my worries? What might happen to me?” You might die – just like they're going to die in Smyrna. But if you're with Jesus, you won't stay dead.

When you humble yourself, I have it on good authority that He likes to pick you up and exalt you. Every time God appears in scripture, people freak out and fall

down. Then He touches them. That's *Jesus* . . . bending down on the Mount of Transfiguration and touching John . . . bending down in chapter one and touching John, saying, "Get up, John. I have a crown for you."

So "after this," worship all the time. In Jesus' name, amen.

Further Reading

Concepts create idols, only wonder grasps anything.

-Gregory of Nyssa in *Reaching for the Invisible God*

by Philip Yancey

In the year that King Uzzi'ah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke.

-Isaiah 6:1-4

As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming bronze. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the form of men, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. . . . As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man in front; the four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle at the back. . . . And their rims, and their spokes, and the wheels were full of eyes round about--the wheels that the four of them had. As for the wheels, they were called in my hearing the whirling wheels. And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of the cherub, and the second face was the face of a man, and the third the face of

a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle. And the cherubim mounted up. These were the living creatures that I saw by the river Chebar.

-Ezekiel 1:4-6, 10; 10:12-15

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created."

-Revelation 4:9-11

A Psalm of David. Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy

-Psalm 103:1-4

Then Pilate took Jesus and scourged him. And the soldiers plaited a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and arrayed him in a purple robe

-John 19:1-2

The trivialization in John's world was taking place through the gossip of those whose aberrant teachings would soon be known as gnosticism. The essential nature of gossip is that it talks about people instead of to them. Gossip leaves out all that is unique and glorious in a person and reduces him or her to an anecdote or a cliché or a stereotype. The gossip is

never in awe. The gossip is never in love. The Gnostics gossiped about God. They claimed to know a lot about God (Gnostic means “one who knows”), but it was all *about* God. Gnostics did not pray. They did not worship. Gnostics talked a lot to each other and wrote endlessly about what they thought. God was reduced to an anecdote, or fantasized into a speculation. . . . It is telling that our Bible concludes with Revelation, which is to say, with a call to worship. By the time we have come to this final entry in the library of 66 books, our minds are bursting with knowledge and our hearts burning with desire. With all that knowledge and all that desire there is a great danger that we will just run off and put it to good use—tell everybody what we know, enlist everyone in our cause: communicate, motivate.

-Eugene Peterson

Many a congregation when it assembles in church must look to the angels like a muddy puddly shore at low tide; littered with every kind of rubbish and odds and ends—a distressing sort of spectacle. And then the tide of worship comes in, and it's all gone: the dead sea urchins and jellyfish, the paper and the empty cans and the nameless bits of rubbish. The cleansing sea flows over the whole lot. So we are released from a narrow selfish outlook on the universe by a common act of worship.

-Evelyn Underhill

The Meaning of Your History: Unwrapping the Scroll

(Revelation 4:8-11, 5)

After all the confusion and struggles of the seven churches, and the seven-fold challenge to conquer, “after this” (Revelation 4:1) John sees a door open in Heaven. And everything is worshipping.

Last week we preached that the first thing, maybe the only thing, is worship. To conquer, one must first be conquered. We must let go of our need to understand in order to know.

REVELATION 4:8-11: *Day and night they never cease to sing, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, “Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”*

The scene is about *all things*. God is worthy because He created *all things*.

REVELATION 5:1-4: *And I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals; and*

I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

John sees a scroll in the strong right hand of God. It's written on the front and the back . . . nothing more to be said, it would seem. It is sealed with seven seals.

In that day, when legal documents were written, they were witnessed by six or seven witnesses. Seven strings would then be tied around the scroll, and hot wax would be dripped on each string and over the seam of the scroll. The witnesses would then press signet rings into the wax, sealing the document.

So some have speculated that the document is a last will and testament to those who inherit the kingdom at the death of the Testator, God's Son. Maybe the seven seals are stamped with the seven-fold Spirit of God (the Spirit of truth, who bears witness to Jesus and the Father).

Some have postulated the scroll is the Lamb's Book of Life. Some have suggested it's the Old Testament and New Testament, the whole of scripture. Some argue that it is, in fact, the rest of the Revelation.

I think it is *all* that and more. All Heaven just worshipped God for all things (creation), and now this scroll seems to pertain to all things. It's loaded with the words of God – in Greek, the "logoi" of God. Logoi also means "meanings."

That's what words do: give meanings to events. These are the words of the Creator, Author, Narrator of all things. I believe this scroll is the meanings of all reality. And it's sealed. We have creation with a sealed meaning.

The strong angel cries, “Who is worthy to open the scroll?” In other words, “Who is worthy to give meaning to all creation?” And *no one* in all created reality answers. Even God the Father is silent.

He is worthy, for He created all things. But who is worthy to disclose the meaning of all things? John begins weeping (“wailing” in the Greek, the activity of absolute despair). It is the weeping of one who looks into the abyss of Hell.

He’s not just weeping because he’s curious about what’s in the scroll. He’s not just weeping because he’ll never know about the ten-nation, European confederacy, and the drama of those “left behind.” He’s weeping because life has no meaning. And *John* has no meaning. Everything is absurd. There is no point to the struggle in the churches; there is no conquering.

In Smyrna, they are devoured by beasts in the coliseum and burned at the stakes. John rots on the island of Patmos, and it all has no meaning . . . no logos. John weeps the tears of a fallen world cut off from the light of life.

In the words of Bertrand Russell at the end of his life, “I have nothing to hang onto but grim, unyielding despair.” Creation without meaning. Pantos without logos. All pictures and no words. Events without story.

The last story I read was *The Horse and His Boy* out of the Narnia series. It’s the story of Shasta, an abused boy raised by a wicked father.

Shasta runs away and tries to get to Narnia. But over and over he encounters troubles, just like the rest of his life. He has a litany of woes, not least of which is encountering so many lions in his journeys. He calls himself “the most unfortunate boy that ever lived.” And you would agree, except that all those events happened in a *storybook* — a scroll.

John weeps because no one can open the scroll and read the story. The boy Shasta weeps in his story because a character in a story can't read his own story. It's events without story, suffering without meaning, pictures without words.

You rightfully say, "Well, *my* life is not some fairytale storybook on some shelf somewhere."

A few months ago one of my good friends came to my wife and me. At one point, she shared some pictures from her life, horrifying pictures worse than any fairytale story I've ever read. Like Shasta, she was an abused child raised by a wicked father.

I won't share all the pictures with you, but one picture was of a Halloween night long ago.

Her mother dressed her in a white robe and gave her wings and a halo. My friend was thrilled because she had always wanted to be an angel on Halloween night but wasn't allowed. Her father saw her and was furious. After trick-or-treating, he took her to a meeting where people performed rituals. They stripped her except for the halo, and men molested her on a table.

People come to pastors and want us to give story to the events of their lives, meaning to suffering, and words to pictures. But I can't unwrap that scroll. I cannot tell her her story. I'm not worthy.

John was weeping, and I've tasted his tears. They were tears of despair.

REVELATION 5:5-10: *Then one of the elders said to me, "Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."*

And between [in the midst of] the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain,

with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; and they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth" [or "do reign," depending on your translation].

John looks and sees an "arnion," a little lamb with seven horns that is all-powerful and has seven eyes. It's all-seeing, all-knowing. And the eyes are the Spirit of God. All Heaven worships this lamb like they do God.

God the Father is worthy through creation. God the Son—the Lamb—is worthy to open the scroll and declare meaning. And God the Spirit is seven-fold, emanating from the Father and the Son. The Trinity is *all here*, and the Lamb is handed the scroll, because He has conquered (after all the confusion of the seven churches, after the seven-fold call to conquer, after John weeps before the seven-fold Spirit of God).

The elder says to John, "Weep not!" In the Greek: "Conquered has the Lion" – perfect tense, completed action, with continuing impact. "Conquered has the Lion of the tribe of Judah."

John looks and sees a "slain little lamb" that he knows. Messiah, Son of Man, Suffering Servant, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Lamb of God . . . All these

confusing, irreconcilable, Old Testament, transcendent, mysterious characters implode into this little lamb bleeding on the throne and among the twenty-four elders (the people of God). And He is worthy to unwrap the scroll.

“For God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1).

“In him all things hold together. Through him and the blood of his cross all things are reconciled to God” (Colossians 1).

In Revelation 19, we find that His name is the Word—the Logos—of God. John writes first in his gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.”

The Word—the Logos—the Meaning . . . He takes the Logoi of God and prepares to declare meaning to all things.

The Revelation has suffered so at the hands of people like us, who make it exclusively about a few small things like the fall of Jerusalem or the drama of those left behind or our dislike of the United Nations. But it’s about so much more! It’s about all things and every creature. It’s about *you*.

Remember that. We get caught up in the trivialities of nuclear war, global economy, and world history, and we miss what’s truly great; for *all* power and *all* knowledge belong to the little Lamb on the throne, who conquers *all* things by dying in love.

He is the one who opens the scrolls of history.
He is the one who opens the scroll of your life.
He is the one worthy to open that scroll.

Why is that? Is it because He's all-powerful? Is it because He's all-knowing? According to the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fallen down before His throne, He's worthy because He bled for you . . . ransomed you.

If you line me up with George Bush and Albert Einstein and ask my kids to pick a daddy, they'll pick me every time. Why? Because I've bled for them. I'm the one worthy to give their lives meaning and to tell them who they are.

When they were little, they would come running for me to kiss their "owies." (I remember one night at church Elizabeth fell on her bottom, and that led to an embarrassing moment.) A friend without children once said, "That's so funny. They act as if you actually heal their wounds." I *did*. Same pain, but baptized pain – an entirely different meaning.

In a little way, Christ uses me to unwrap their scroll. I declare to them the knowledge of what things mean good and bad and who they are. I say, "Elizabeth, you're fine." And she runs off happy.

Jesus is worthy to open your scroll, a scroll of knowledge and understanding. In the Garden, we stole fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. In the end, we killed Jesus – crucified Him on that very tree, I think, because we wanted to understand all things more than we wanted to know the maker of all things.

Knowing Jesus and walking back into the Paradise Garden, like we preached last week, we must be willing to surrender that fruit. Yet knowing Jesus, He *feeds* us with that fruit of the knowledge of good and evil in grace. Fruit that once worked death (knowledge of ourselves without God—horror) now works life (knowledge of all things as gifts through Christ).

You see, we don't understand in order to know or catch Him; we know Him by grace, and He makes us

understand. He unwraps the scroll. Then all our understanding is no longer pride but worship. We can't unwrap the scroll, but we know the One who does.

My friend sat in my office after we had prayed against some horrific spiritual entities and saw God's absolutely awesome powers. She said, "I'm still haunted by pictures . . . in my dreams . . . wherever I go." (For her they meant shame, fear, and despair.)

And her pictures have confused me. I feel such compassion for my friend, yet I'm entirely unable to explain or comprehend. I've hardly ever suffered. Who am *I* to unwrap that scroll? I get confused and angry with Jesus. But where else can I go? "For you, Jesus, have the words of eternal life" (John 6).

So we will eat His body and drink His blood. We will commune with Him. I can't unwrap my friend's scroll, but I do know who can.

So we prayed, having battled a long time, and my friend had a vision—a revelation of Jesus, as she's had before. While we were praying, she told me what was happening in the visions.

It was clear in those visions that all her sufferings are His. He cries her tears. He wears her blood. He feels her aches. He is worthy to unwrap her scroll.

In a vision, she prayed, "Jesus, hold me." And He would not. He said, "You have to give me those pictures." She was thoroughly ashamed to show the pictures to the Lion of Judah.

I prayed, "Jesus, would you show my friend who she is and how you see her?" And Jesus told her, "Those pictures are part of who you are." And I thought to myself, Is it really Jesus she's seeing? Surely Jesus would hold her! How could those pictures be her?

We started praying through the pictures, each time giving the picture to Jesus and praying He would reveal truth. And each time, she would have another vision and

Jesus would appear. His presence in the picture would be like light in the darkness, entirely changing its meaning. Lies were extinguished by the Light of eternity.

Before the Lamb opens the scroll and gives meaning to all reality, story to all events, Logos to all things, He smells incense. The incense is your prayers and my prayers and my friend's prayers . . . our prayers spoken in faith in space and time and the confusion of this world. They rise before the eternal throne of God as He gives meaning to all reality.

When God the Father spoke Word into the darkness and created reality, He was smelling your prayers. When God the Son unwraps the scroll declaring meaning to all past, present, and future, He smells your prayers. And you, saints of God, reign on earth! "He always leads us in triumph," Paul writes.

We prayed through many pictures, and then she told me about one final picture . . . Halloween night, the coven, the angel outfit, the evil men, her wicked father. We prayed and surrendered the picture to Jesus.

Then she saw reality. Jesus entered the picture furious, like a warrior on a white horse. He went to that wretched table and picked up my tortured, little friend and tenderly dressed her in the angel outfit, a white robe. He sat her on His lap, rocked her, and held her. He told her how He hurt for her. He told her how hard He, the King of Glory, had fought for her. Then He said this: "You are always and will always be my little angel."

She told me all this, and then it hit me. I said to my friend, "Hey! He is holding you, telling you who you are!" She wept for joy. And Jesus told her, "Your pictures are my pictures." Those pictures are *their* pictures. It's who *they* are.

When He holds my friend, He holds *all* of her.
When He saved her, He saved *all* of her.
When He gives meaning to the scroll,

He gives meaning to *all* the scroll, past, present, and future.

And my friend's vision is only a glimpse into what we all are to believe by faith before sight. Jesus is Gospel meaning to every breath you take.

My friend looked at me after a while, and with tears in her eyes she said, "How do you think it makes God feel when we are ashamed of those pictures?" I said, "I guess that means we're ashamed of Him."

If you gave your life to Him, your life is His life . . . or maybe *His* life is *your* life, for He suffered first. Whatever the case, we are His body, and our scroll is His scroll. He is unwrapping the scroll of history. And when we worship and surrender our lives to Him, we find He is unwrapping the scroll of our lives, which is really the scroll of *His* life.

So in the words of Jeanne Guyon the mystic, "The revelation you receive will come to you as reality [that is, your life] . . ." This is the way it was in the life of Paul. He did not ponder the sufferings of Christ; he did not consider the marks of suffering on the Lord's body. Instead, Paul bore in his own body the experiences of his Lord. He even said, "I bear in my body the marks of Jesus Christ."

Jesus Christ had personally imprinted Himself upon Paul. "To live is Christ," wrote Paul, and "It is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me"—*Logos* in me—Glory in me.

Your life is a fairytale book in the strong right hand of God Almighty on the throne. And the Lion of Judah—Son of God—is beginning to read that book to you.

In C. S. Lewis' fairytale *The Horse and His Boy*, the unluckiest boy in the whole world (Shasta) towards the end of the book finds himself in one more disaster. He is walking down a narrow path in the dark, lost and alone. He begins weeping as he recounts all the tragic pictures of his life.

Speaking into the darkness, he senses something next to him. He feels its hot breath on his arm. He can't escape. Finally he whispers, "Who are you?" And he hears, "One who has waited long for you to speak." Shasta is terrorized and says, "Oh, I am the unluckiest person in all the whole world." The Voice says, "Tell me your sorrows." So Shasta does.

"I do not call you unfortunate," said the Large Voice.

"Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?" said Shasta.

"There was only one lion," said the Voice. . . . I was the lion." And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. "I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you."

"Then it was you who wounded Aravis?"

"It was I."

"But what for?"

"Child," said the Voice, "I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own."

"Who *are* you?" asked Shasta.

"Myself," said the Voice, very deep

and low so that the earth shook: and again “Myself,” loud and clear and gay: and then the third time “Myself,” whispered so softly you could hardly hear it, and yet it seemed to come from all round you as if the leaves rustled with it.

Shasta was no longer afraid that the Voice belonged to something that would eat him, nor that it was the voice of a ghost. But a new and different sort of trembling came over him.

In the words of last week’s sermon, “He trembled like an old pirate captured by the moon.” That trembling is worship. Shasta’s heart had been conquered. He was waking up to the glories of Aslan, the Great Lion, Son of the emperor from over the sea.

Children of God, you are waking to the glories of the Great Lion of Judah, Son of God. Behold that Lion; behold, He is the Lamb slain for love! He is the Lord of Love working everywhere in this world. And when you surrender your scroll, you begin to see Him. He gives meaning to your past (shame turns to glory), to your present (confusion turns to revelation, wonder, and worship) and to your future (anxiety becomes delirious hope).

In the story, Shasta turns out to be the prince.

In reality, my friend in the little angel outfit turns out to be and always was the Bride of Christ, clothed in white. But now because she has seen the abyss, because she has taken a particular glimpse of Hell, she understands the Lamb of God, the love of God, and the glory of God in a way that no one else in all creation does . . . an entirely new song. She is, in the words of Paul, a “hypervikcomen” – “super conqueror.”

“In all things,” wrote Paul, “God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his

purpose. And in all these things I am convinced that through him who loved us we are hypervikcomen”— more than conquerors!

Jesus told my friend in her vision, “I want to use these pictures for my purposes.” The little girl in the angel outfit conquers! Through her, the Lion of Judah declares the glory of God to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

Last night before I got up to preach this sermon, my wife said, “Peter, there is an angel standing on that little hill out there.” And I could tell she was shaken. I thought, “Whatever.”

We sang some more, and then she bent down again and said, “Peter, the angel is holding a little lamb!” I thought, “Whatever,” and I got up to preach. After preaching, I sat back down, and she was really messed up now. She said, “Peter, while you were preaching, angels walked through the walls and stood all around the sanctuary, especially right around you.” I thought, “Whatever . . . that’s my wife.”

Then she went and talked to someone else who said, “Did you see what I saw?” Susan said, “Yeah.” They both saw it.

You can do what you want with that. What they said to me was, “We think all those angels were sent because the Enemy was so mad about what you were saying.” I have another theory. I think all those angels came to listen to the story of the little girl in the angel outfit, because she declares the glory of the Lamb of God. And angels long to look into our salvation, and they listen with wonder.

The principalities and powers in the heavenly places—the evil ones—shudder with fear, for the little Lamb breaks down the doors of Hell and conquers everything. He says, “Behold, I make all things new.”

And I *dare* you to believe what John sees next. I *cannot* explain it, but it is truth:

REVELATION 5:11-14: *Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.*

The new song conquers all! Worthy is the Lamb.
Amen.

If you've never surrendered your life to the Lamb who sits on the throne—Jesus the Christ, God the Father through the power of His Holy Spirit, I'm not *asking* you, I'm *telling* you: In the name of God Almighty, for this is His commandment (says John), *live*.

His commandment is eternal life. (And you thought He just wanted to get you to stop *doing* something.) He wants you to live! He commands you to live! Surrender your life. Lose your life, and He gives you life.

- You tried to search for meaning in things, and it wasn't there, was it?
- You tried to search for meaning in what you could do and accomplish, and it wasn't there, was it?

- You tried to search for meaning in what this world says about you, and it wasn't there, was it?

Meaning is sitting on the throne of God bleeding for you. Give your life to Him.

Further Reading

At the same time you are constantly experiencing things which you not only do not, but cannot understand. You think you understand them, but your understanding of them is only your being used to them, and therefore not surprised at them. You accept them, not because you understand them, but because you must accept them: they are there, and have unavoidable relations with you! The fact is, no man understands anything; when he knows he does not understand, that is his first tottering step—not toward understanding, but toward the capability of one day understanding. To such things as these you are not used, therefore you do not fancy you understand them. Neither I nor any man can here help you to understand; but I may, perhaps help you a little to believe!

-George MacDonald, *Lilith*

For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.

-Romans 11:32-36

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood

of his cross.

-Colossians 1:17-20

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

-John 1:1-5

The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

-John 4:25-26

Then one of the elders said to me, "Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."

-Revelation 5:5

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right

hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-Romans 8:28-39

We do not dare to hate God, so we hate life instead. . . . Hating God’s most precious gift is a believer’s sneaky way to hate God.

-Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*

Abandonment is being satisfied with the present moment, no matter what that moment contains. You are satisfied because you know that whatever that moment has, it contains—in that instant—God’s eternal plan for you. . . . Abandonment is the means that the Lord will use to give you revelation. The revelation you receive will come to you as *reality* rather than *knowledge*. This is made possible *only* by abandonment.

-Jeanne Guyon

You got yourself stuck in a moment and you can’t get out of it.

-Bono, U2

God forbid that anyone should say that God loved anyone in time, for with him nothing has passed away and also

nothing is future, and he loved all the saints before the world was made, as he foresaw. When it happens that he makes manifest in time what he foresaw in eternity, people think that God has acquired a new love. And in the same way, when he is angry or does a kind action, it is we who are changed, whereas he remains unchangeable, just as the sun's rays hurt weak eyes and do good to healthy ones, although the sun's rays remain unchangeable in themselves.

-St. Augustine

Here you should pay careful attention and rightly understand, if you can, that God in his first eternal glance, if we could assume that there was one, considered all things to see how they were to take place, and saw in this glance when and how he was to create the creatures and when the Son was to become man and suffer. He also saw the smallest prayer and good work that anyone was destined to perform, and he considered what prayer and devotion he was to answer. He saw that you will urgently call upon him tomorrow and earnestly pray, and God will not answer the call and prayer tomorrow, for he has already answered it in his eternity before you ever became man.

-Meister Eckhart

Sin is behovely, but all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.

-Julian of Norwich

Some of us believe that God is almighty and can do everything; and that he is all-wise and may do everything; but that he is all-love and will do everything—there we draw back. As I see it, this ignorance is the greatest of all hindrances to God's lovers.

-Julian of Norwich

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!"

-Revelation 5:13

The disciples asked the master to speak to them of death: "What will it be like?" "It will be as if a veil is ripped apart and you will say in wonder, 'So it was You all along?'"

-Anthony DeMello

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.

-Ephesians 1:9-12

Important Old Testament references for today's text: Isaiah 11:1-7, Daniel 7:9-14, Isaiah 53, Zechariah 3:6-4:14, Isaiah 6:1-4, Ezekiel 1

The Seven Seals and the Soundtrack to the End of the World

(Revelation 6, 8:1-2)

It's time for summer movies, and once again they are loaded with violence and laced with deception, warfare, pestilence, death – movies aimed at my kids, like *Batman* and *The Mummy Returns*. I think it is important to protest immoral movies, but even better, I've come up with some wholesome, alternative screenplays. For instance:

- *The Joy of Batman*, which focuses on Bruce Wayne and how he sponsors the Gotham Art Museum in a wholesome exhibit of Thomas Kincaid paintings.
- *Superman the Green Thumb*, all about the great things Clark Kent learned editing the garden section of the *Daily Planet*.
- *The Mummy, the Real Story*, a documentary on Egyptian mummification techniques. (Too much for little children, but a vast improvement over what we have now.)

Last week I went and saw *The Mummy Returns*. It was so full of deception, warfare, pestilence, death, and demons it was downright apocalyptic! It's high time Hollywood produced something wholesome, like Bible stories. Let's read our Bible text, Revelation 6 and 8:1-2:

REVELATION 6: *Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.*

When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword.

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand; and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius [day's wage], and three quarts of barley for a denarius [day's wage]; but do not harm oil and wine!"

When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?"

REVELATION 8:1-2: *When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.*

Wow! The Revelation makes *The Mummy Returns* look like *Thomas the Tank Engine* in comparison. What are we to make of all the violence?

The popular, American notion is that this passage isn't about us. This is what happens to all the bad people, because all the good people have been raptured away. This is God's judgment on evil. Almost all the commentaries refer to these seals as judgment or wrath. The only problem with that idea is that Scripture doesn't say that.

In fact, when the fifth seal is opened, the martyrs cry out from under the altar, "How long, O Lord, before you will judge?" That seems to imply that the first four seals—the four horsemen—weren't judgment. At the sixth seal,

they finally cry, “Hide us from the wrath of the Lamb.” But this is after the skies roll up and the stars fall. Only at the seventh trumpet in chapter eleven do they sing, “Thy wrath has come.”

So what are we to make of the horsemen of the Apocalypse? . . . Deception, Warfare, Famine and Death? In some other dimension, they may be judgments. In some other dimension, they may be Satanic emissaries. But they are not portrayed that way here. In fact, they are called forth by the cherubim and seraphim as Jesus opens the scroll.

Why on earth would Jesus do that? Well, technically John and all creation wept and begged Him to in chapter five, in order to see in the scroll . . . in order to know meaning—logos. But why are these horsemen necessary? And when does this occur?

Well, regarding the when, I hope you noticed that in chapters four and five we spanned all history. At the end of chapter five, every creature is praising the Lamb on the throne. Now at the end of chapter six, once again we’re at the end of the world. The sky rolls up, all the stars fall to earth, and the mountains and hills are removed from their places. We will come to the point of the end over and over again in the Revelation.

If we forget all of our silly, little, End Times charts and just let Revelation speak for itself, I think we’ll begin to see patterns on top of patterns, meanings on top of meanings, histories on top of histories. It’s one vision of reality looking from one angle and then another; one dimension and then another.

Revelation is like a great symphony or anthem, which begins with seven, little churches in Asia Minor. As the symphony progresses, new themes are added, themes on top of themes, sevens on top of sevens, meanings on top of meanings, until it all crescendos at the end of the world, the new heaven and new earth.

In fact, there is singing throughout the entire book. We've already read that the four living creatures around the throne *never stop singing* "Holy, holy, holy," and that means that all the other songs right up to the end must build harmony on that theme. The same thing happens with the events of the book. John sees this and John sees that, and it's all true. It's eternity, but he just can't say it all at once.

This is not an excuse for taking the Revelation less literally; it's taking our stupid, modern, scientific mindset less literally, and taking the Revelation *more* literally. It's believing that our God is holy and eternal and wondrous, and, in fact, more than one thing can happen for Him at once.

So numbers, for instance, aren't just for counting. They reveal deep meanings and patterns. Seven is the number of creation and God's manifold fullness. In seven days He created, and on the seventh day He rested. There are seven seals.

Four is a number that often refers to this world. Four seasons, four directions, the four winds . . . (like the four horsemen in Zechariah sent out to patrol the earth). The first horseman is crowned and sitting on a white horse, which has caused some to speculate that this is Christ, meaning then that before all, He conquers. This is true.

But because this horseman is grouped with the other three horsemen, I think this horseman probably is Deception, the spirit of the Antichrist (false Christ). John told us it is already in the world (I John 4:3).

The next three horsemen are Warfare, Famine, and Death. They have power over one-fourth of the earth. I think if it weren't for the fact that you live in America—or in Laodicea—you would probably say right away, "Oh, yeah. I know the horsemen. One visited my town last year."

At the fifth seal, John sees martyrs under the altar where the priests threw the blood of sacrifice. These people

have been sacrificed to the glory of God like slain lambs. They cry out, “How long, O Lord?” (which they should know, if they read those End Times charts).

In the sixth seal, they get their answer. The sky rolls up, and the stars fall.

At the seventh seal, like a great concert having come to a crescendo, there is an awesome silence. And the seven angels are handed trumpets. Trumpets proclaim things. Seals hide mysteries. These seven seals, I believe, span all of history. These seals are *not* the substance of the scroll. You can’t read a scroll until you break all the seals.

But breaking the seals, releasing the horsemen, and the suffering of history are necessary in order to read the content of the scroll. So whatever is in that scroll is *worthy* of all this tribulation. And whatever is in the scroll we must not see very clearly yet, because we sure do complain every time a horseman comes riding along. It’s very rare—maybe ten minutes a week, if that—that we sing “Holy, holy, holy” to the One who breaks the seal.

But how *can* we sing when we live in a world of deception, warfare, famine, and death? Now we’re back to my first point about our movies laced with deception, warfare, pestilence, and death.

I remember sitting in a movie theatre as a young man, watching incredible violence on the movie screen. It really disturbed me; in fact, it scared me.

There was a man on the screen with dark hair and dark eyes . . . looked like he was of a Mediterranean descent . . . covered in blood, near naked. An angry mob thirsty for violence cheered as he was beaten beyond recognition. He was “as one from whom men hide their faces.” In his pain, he cried out for his beloved. And just when I thought that he was dead for sure, I heard this: [Rocky theme song plays].

Just when I thought Rocky Balboa was dead for sure, I heard trumpets! I heard the theme song!

The entire time the seals are being opened, the theme song is playing. They don't stop singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." And the theme song changes things. It tells you something: You are about to receive a revelation of glory, the glory of Rocky Balboa! Apollo Creed, Drago the Russian, and Mr. T are all means by which we can see and know the glory of Rocky. The theme song tells you, Do not be fooled. It's glory time!

[Singing] "... growing strong now ... won't be long now ... gonna fly high. ..."

Let me translate. "Holy, holy, holy is Rocky Balboa." That is, Rocky Balboa is different from other fighters. He loves Adrian his bride *so much* that when she shows up in the coliseum, nothing can stop him. So Rocky will "endure his cross, despising the shame, for the joy set before him." "*Adrian!*"

- Without Apollo Creed, we would never know the glory of Rocky Balboa.
- Without the Joker and Mr. Freeze, we would never know Batman (only Bruce Wayne).
- Without Lex Luther, we would never see the wonder of Superman.
- Without that evil mummy, we would never believe the courageous charm of Brendan Fraser.

and . . .

- Without the cross, we'd never see Easter.
- Without those horsemen, we'd never know the meaning

of the scroll.

- Without a great tribulation, we'd never learn the new song. Our hearts know this. That's why we go to movies. We just don't have the stomach for it in real life.

So we become voyeurs of other people's sufferings in movies and in scripture. But voyeurs of suffering can only be voyeurs of glory. And Jesus the Rock wants to share His glory with you.

Please see that breaking the seals reveals the glory of God. But all the while, the theme song is playing to give us courage. The theme song builds on the line: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." Holy does not mean prudish, pietistic, or puritanical, and certainly not wholesome. Holy means *wholly other*, not like other gods, gloriously strange.

The horsemen are the ways of this world: power, pride, conquest, warfare, death, survival of the fittest. We understand them. The horsemen ride the earth now. But when you hear the theme song, you know the horsemen are a set-up for the glory of God. The theme song tells you: It's time for glory. "The light shines in the darkness."

There is one thing you can see in the darkness better than in the brilliance of the noonday sun: the glory of a single flame. Jesus is that flame in our dark world. And "the light shines in the darkness." Jesus *is* the glory.

Last time we learned that Jesus reveals the meaning of all history and our history. But now, all history is ultimately about revealing Jesus, the bleeding heart of God. Jesus gives meaning to all my sufferings ("logoi"). But the deeper truth is that all my sufferings reveal Jesus ("Logos"), Glory of God.

We are only beginning to glimpse the glory now, says Paul. Our darkened eyes cannot yet handle the full brilliance of Christ. Yet we see something here in the dark

that we will sing about forever. How glorious is the light in the midst of darkness!

What is so strange and holy about this light? Well, look how the Lion of Judah has conquered! Behold, He is a little lamb that was slain. The Lion is the Lamb. He opens the scroll. It's Jesus who conquers all. And when does He conquer? When He was slain. That's incredibly strange. "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12). And Jesus was speaking of His death.

The Lion conquered by choosing to be slain in love. It's not like sometimes He's the Lion and sometimes He's the Lamb. It's not like He'll try the Lamb thing and then the Lion thing. The Lion *is* the Lamb.

Did you notice that at the sixth seal the kings of the earth and the peoples of the earth hide themselves in the mountains and caves crying out, "Hide us from the wrath of the little lamb"? The Light of Love judges the darkness like fire.

When He was slain, the world was judged.

When He was slain, Satan was cast out.

When He was slain, He draws all men to Himself.

When He was slain, He revealed the heart of God,
exalted and glorified.

How strange! How holy!

The scroll is a revelation of Him—Jesus, that is, "The Revelation of Jesus." At the seventh trumpet in chapter twelve, when the scroll is opened, at once we will find ourselves reading the Christmas Story. It's Jesus. He is so wholly strange, so different, that even though He is Lord

God Almighty, He empties Himself of all worldly power and becomes a baby. He conquers all things by dying in love, nailed to a cross.

My point is, we would never see His holy glory unless someone nailed Him to that tree. Violence, pride, warfare, horsemen, the powers of this world . . . It's in the midst of this world that Love is most gloriously displayed. He is not like other fighters. He is not like Rocky Balboa. He is not like gods of this world. He conquers by dying in love. It's called grace.

I believe the point of the horsemen of lies, wars, famines, and death is revealing Jesus, heart of God.

There are many meanings to our sufferings in this world: we sinned, it's the price of our free choice, God shaping us . . . There are many explanations (theodicies, as theologians call them), and many theodicies can be true at once. Only Jesus can unwrap the particular meanings of your particular sufferings. But if there is one particular theodicy or explanation or theme in Scripture that runs the deepest and broadest, I think it is this: Our world suffers because God wants to show us His greatest glory. He wants to show *us* . . . not angels, but His bride—His children.

It's absolutely true we took the fruit in the Garden and died, blind to the glory of God. But it was God who kicked us out of the Garden and cursed the earth. *He* “subjected the world to futility in hope,” writes Paul. He looses the horsemen for a reason: to wake us up to glory.

Even before the Garden, He knew the plan. *He* put that tree in the middle of the Garden, knowing that we'd eat fruit, knowing that He would be crucified upon the tree. That is:

God has consigned all men to disobedience,
that he may have mercy upon all. O the
depth of the riches and wisdom and

knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen. (Romans 11)

Ephesians 1-2: “His plan for the fulness of time was to unite all things in Christ . . . and He made us alive when we were dead in our sins . . . that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

The horsemen ride so we might know the glory of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus our Lord . . . not just *see* it, but *know* it and *live* it. Eugene Boring writes in his commentary, “‘Conquering’ in both cases, that of the Christ and that of Christians, means no more or less than dying.” I think it’s picking up your cross.

Those under the altar are witnesses (in Greek, “marturos” – martyrs), because they are slain like Christ by the sword of the horseman. The saints—the holy ones—die in love like Jesus. But without the horsemen, there would be no “marturos.”

We Americans tend to forget about “marturos”—witness—and pretty much focus all our energy on enacting legislation against the horsemen. We fight power with power.

I was reading one of my favorite authors this week. He wrote this: “Being Good Samaritans is not enough. We must figure out how to put up better lighting systems on the road to Jericho, and perhaps have it patrolled by police, and put an end to people being mugged on that dangerous highway.”

I agree with his sentiment, but he misses the point. It's very clear in scripture that the Good Samaritan is Jesus. He *is* enough, He *is* the point, and He wants us to see Him. It's when we're beaten on the side of the road that He comes to us and anoints us with "oil and wine" (Luke 10:34). We see His glory.

The point is not stopping all suffering; it is seeing Jesus in suffering. It's not outlawing crosses, but picking them up. That's what He wants.

It's fascinating that the third horseman is commanded to "not harm oil and wine." In the midst of the suffering, there must be oil and wine. The only other place "oil and wine" occurs as a phrase in all the New Testament is in Luke 10, in the hands of the Good Samaritan. It's in the suffering He anoints us with oil—His Spirit; He cleanses us with wine—His blood. We are called to dispense *His* oil and *His* wine in the midst of suffering.

I could very easily be misunderstood here, but I'm just saying this: We Americans work so hard to eliminate *all* crosses, and Jesus tells us to pick them up and follow. I think that's why the Gospel is conquering most rapidly in places like China, Russian, and Africa . . . lots of crosses there. I have seen places where the horsemen are riding. People will often riot just to get their hands on a Bible.

Mother Teresa's goal was not to stop suffering; her goal was to commune with Christ and know Christ in His sufferings. In doing that, she stopped immense suffering. She also conquered more hearts with the Gospel of love than anyone else in all the twentieth century. We want to eliminate Calcutta. (That's good.) But with no Calcutta, there is no Teresa. And with no cross, there is no Easter.

Many of you are mad or sad . . . mad that Jesus would open those seals. But don't forget: The horsemen are somehow necessary ("that in this world we will have tribulation") and can't be stopped. We must fight the

horsemen, but it's just an American illusion that they can be stopped by us. Although we medicate ourselves, cocoon ourselves, hide sick people in hospitals, and dress dead people in morgues; although we try to deny it, I believe that in some form the horsemen will one day ride into your town.

I think the horsemen were already riding among the seven churches of Asia Minor. So what did this revelation mean to them, when death rode into town? . . . when their loved ones were being slain in the coliseum? . . . when they were banned from trade and faced starvation? What did it mean to them?

And what does it mean to you, believer, when your body is laced with cancer and death rides into your town? What does it mean to you? It means this: It's time for glory. It's time to worship. It's time to listen for the theme song. The Lamb is unwrapping the scroll, and it's time to conquer. It's glory time!

Or have you forgotten just who your Lord is?

In your imagination, picture a man with dark hair and dark eyes, of Mediterranean descent, near naked, covered in blood. An angry mob cheers. He is beaten beyond recognition "as one from whom men hide their faces."

In pain, He cries out for His beloved Jerusalem, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He is the Lord God Almighty going to Hell for you. Watch Him. And listen for the theme song. [Singing together: "Holy, Holy, Holy"]

Did you see it? Were you looking at Him hanging there? Cherubim and seraphim; all the saints adore Him. If you were, I think you have begun to see His glory. “Though the eye of sinful man thy glory may not see.” But He washes you in His blood and shows you His glory, shining in the midst of the darkness.

“For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shown in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Corinthians 4:6) – the battered, beaten face of Christ.

While we were worshipping at the last hour, I kept seeing a picture. It was of a wall in Tijuana, Mexico; it could have been one of several. (We used to go there and build houses in the slums.)

In those shops in Tijuana there are black, velvet pictures high on the wall. Invariably, there are at least these four: a picture of Elvis; a picture of two naked people having sex—pornography; a picture of a naked baby doing rude things; and then a picture of the face of Christ, blood streaming down His cheeks, and tears in His eyes. He’s looking out on the shop.

For twenty years, I have laughed about that at parties and said things to people like, “One of these pictures doesn’t belong . . . because it’s holy.” Now I believe the Gospel and realize it’s holy because it’s *there*, the light shining in the darkness, the new covenant, the new song, the glory of God Almighty, the bleeding heart of our Lord.

In the name of Jesus, keep singing the theme song.
Amen.

Further Reading

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" . . . the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created." . . . and they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth." Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped. Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, "Come!"

-Revelation 4:8, 10-11; 5:9-6:1

And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am

he!’ and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs. But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. . .”

-Mark 13:5-10

The scroll is sealed with seven seals (5:1) and the Lamb opens the seals, one by one, from 6:1 to 8:1. But the events that occur at the opening of the seals are not, as interpreters of Revelation have too often supposed, the contents of the scroll. It would be a very odd scroll whose contents could be progressively revealed by the opening of a series of seals.

-Richard Bauchham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*

We must remember that even in these “civilized” times those who study the subject estimate that between 250,000 and 350,000 Christians are slain each year because of their faith. But all Christians, if we’re to overcome throughout life, must suffer curse and death before Christ as well. We age and die, some faster, others slower, not so dramatic as the Roman arena perhaps, but maybe as difficult.

-Rex Downie Jr., “Jesus Jumpstarts Revelation”

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” – therefore the LORD God sent him forth

from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

-Genesis 3:22-24

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

-Romans 8:19-21

For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

-Romans 11:32

The “lion” is really the lamb, representing the ultimate power of God. This is the meaning of John’s dramatic rebirth of images. . . . Since the Lamb operates by the ultimate power, the power of God, the Lamb *conquers*. As “Lamb” is the key christological noun in John’s vocabulary, so “conquer” (nikao), also translated “overcome,” “prevail,” “win the victory,” “triumph,” “win the right,” is the key christological verb. It occurs twenty-three times, twice as often as in all other New Testament books combined. The Lamb indeed “conquers” (3:21; 5:5; 17:14), as do faithful Christians (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7). Indeed, John explicitly points out that “conquering” is what binds together Jesus and his followers (3:21), and that Christians “conquer” not only by what they do but by what Jesus has done (12:11). “Conquering” in both cases, that of

the Christ and that of Christians, means no more or less than dying.

-M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*

Not long ago I had a conversation with an elderly missionary who had spent his early career in China. He had been among the six thousand missionaries expelled after the Communists took over. As in Russia, these Communists too strove mightily to destroy the church, which until then had been a showcase of the missionary movement. The government forbade house churches, made it illegal for parents to give religious education to their children, imprisoned and tortured pastors and Bible teachers. . . . I asked this elderly missionary, now a renowned China expert, what had happened in the intervening forty years. "Conservatively, I would estimate there were 750,000 Christians when I left China. And now? You hear all sorts of numbers, but I think a safe figure would be 35 million believers." Apparently, the church and the Holy Spirit fared quite well on their own. The church in China now constitutes the second largest evangelical community in the world; only the United States exceeds it.

-Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

Without our suffering, our work would just be social work, very good and helpful, but it would not be the work of Jesus Christ, not part of the Redemption. Jesus wanted to help by sharing our life, our loneliness, our agony, our death. Only by being one with us has he redeemed us. We are allowed to do the same; all the desolation of the poor people, not only their material poverty, but their spiritual destitution, must be redeemed, and we must share it, for only by being one with them can we redeem them, that is, by bringing God into their lives and bringing them to God.

-Mother Teresa, *Something Beautiful for God*

It is interesting to note how many artists have had physical problems to overcome, deformities, lameness, terrible loneliness. Could Beethoven have written that glorious paean of praise in the Ninth Symphony if he had not had to endure the dark closing in of deafness? As I look through his work chronologically, there's no denying that it deepens and strengthens along with the deafness. Could Milton have seen all that he sees in *Paradise Lost* if he had not been blind? It is chastening to realize that those who have no physical flaw, who move through life in step with their peers, who are bright and beautiful, seldom become artists. The unending paradox is that we do learn through pain. My mother's long life had more than its fair share of pain and tragedy. One time, after something difficult had happened, one of her childhood friends came to give comfort and help. Instead of which, she burst into tears and sobbed out, "I envy you! I envy you! You've had a terrible life, but you've lived!"

-Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*

The Omen

(Revelation 7)

Last Sunday after the service, a friend of mine came up to me and said, “Thanks, Peter, for preaching on the Revelation. To tell you the truth, I read it once, and it scared me so badly I never read it again.” I said, “Yeah, that’s like me.”

Part of my problem, I believe, was a movie I saw in high school. The movie was called *The Omen*. I don’t remember much about it, except this poor kid named Damion shaves his head and finds the number 666 tattooed on the top of his head, which is a major bummer, because according to the movie, that means he’s the Antichrist.

I remember that as a young Christian I was really stressed out about the possibility I wasn’t saved. I kind of wanted to shave my head and check for a number, because what if I was the Antichrist? I would pray, “Jesus, please don’t let me be the Antichrist.” And I’m not.

But just reading the Revelation can scare the snot right out of you and turn you into a grinch: a call to conquer; the horsemen of the Apocalypse; earthquakes, fire and brimstone; the Devil . . . And if you’re a preacher, you know that you’re held doubly accountable. “How am I going to get all these sheep to *conquer*?” Try reading Revelation with a millstone tied around your neck. It’s no wonder so many preachers are grinchies.

Last week we read in Revelation 6 that the Lamb begins to unwrap the scroll. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse ride out across the face of the earth (like the horses in Zechariah 6:5 that are referred to as four winds). After the horsemen, John sees the witnesses under the altar having been slain like slaughtered lambs and given white robes. At the sixth seal, the stars fall, the sky rolls up, and

the people cry out, “Who can stand?” That is a great question, especially if you read ahead to the seventh seal.

Hail, fire, blood, death, darkness in the heavens, demon locusts from the pit of Hell, horses that breathe fire and sulfur . . . Who can stand? Who will conquer? This would have been the burning question in the minds of those first recipients in the seven churches. Each of the seven messages ends with the phrase: “To him who conquers . . .”

“ . . . they will be clad with white garments” (like in Sardis); or

“ . . . I will write on him the name of my God and my own, new name” (Philadelphia).

Who will conquer? Who will stand? At the end of chapter six, all these terrified people cry out, “The great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?”

REVELATION 7: After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. Then I saw another angel ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads.” And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel, twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand of the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand of the tribe of Gad, twelve thousand of the

tribe of Asher, twelve thousand of the tribe of Naph'tali, twelve thousand of the tribe of Manas'seb, twelve thousand of the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand of the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand of the tribe of Is'sachar, twelve thousand of the tribe of Zeb'ulun, twelve thousand of the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Benjamin.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

So who can stand? – *These* guys can stand. Who *are* these guys? – Jehovah’s Witnesses? Seventh Day Adventists? Branch Davidians? 144,000 Cracker Jack, celibate, commando, End Times, Jewish warriors? Who *are* these guys?

There are obviously an awful lot of different opinions about chapter seven, so I’d like to remind you of some interpretive principles I’m using in understanding the Revelation:

1. The Revelation should be relevant to those seven churches in Asia Minor. It’s addressed to them, and “the time is at hand.”
2. The Revelation should also be relevant to us. “Blessed are those who read.”
3. All of scripture is its context. The Revelation is absolutely loaded with the Old Testament; with Hebrew pictures and poetic form.
4. John’s other writings and Paul’s letters give us our theological vocabulary. In other words, how John talks in his gospel and letters will help us understand how John talked in the Revelation. John is writing to and is a part of the churches in Asia Minor. They were evangelized and disciplined by Paul. For two years, Paul taught in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, and “all of Asia” came to hear it (Acts 19). By this time, they also would have viewed at least Ephesians and Colossians as scripture. II Peter 3:16 tells us so.
5. It’s a kairology and not a chronology. Don’t get stuck on counting. Take meaning more seriously than space and time. Through macrophysics and microphysics, we know that space and time are

relative to meaning and to light. But more importantly, long before that scripture itself revealed that with God our math (space and time) doesn't work.

$$1 = 3$$

$$3 = 1$$

1 = 7 spirits before the throne

7 spirits before the throne = 1

1 day is as a thousand years

a thousand years as a day

God's math is different from ours. Numbers are fluid around eternity, but meaning ("Logos") is light. It's Jesus, and all things are relative to Him. Pay attention to meanings before you do your own mathematics.

Many commentators refer to chapter seven as an interlude, because it breaks a series of seven. We Americans just *love* to *count* things! But who's to say that the counting isn't an interlude in eternity? Which comes first?

John sees four angels holding back the four winds, which are probably an allusion to the four horsemen. They have not yet harmed earth, sea, or tree. Then John sees another angel with the seal of the Living God. The 144,000 are sealed *before* the wind begins to blow. 144,000 is 12 x 12 x 1,000. The new Jerusalem is built with the 12 names of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb. The dimensions of the New Jerusalem are 12,000 x 12,000 x 12,000 stadia.

The 144,000 is Israel. But to Paul and John, *we* are Israel, the Israel of God grafted in, the true sons of Abraham.

There is a lot of weird stuff going around churches

these days about Israel, because we have forgotten that God has made us one (Ephesians 2:15). Already twice in the Revelation (2:9, 3:9) John has referred to people who say they are Jews but are not. They are a “synagogue of Satan.”

We should *hate* anti-Semitism not because we love “those Jews” but because we *are* those Jews. We love our brothers and sisters who missed the Messiah. A person is a Jew who is one inwardly (Romans 2:29).

Well, why are they numbered? Gordon Fee points out that every numbering of Israelites in the Old Testament was for one purpose, and that was forming an army. This is an army of 12 tribes of 12 divisions of 1,000 adult men. The 144,000 show up again in chapter fourteen with the name of God inscribed on their foreheads like a seal. And they sing the new song. They’ve “kept themselves from women,” which was an Israelite preparation for war.

This is an *army*. And they are called “first fruits,” a type of sacrifice. And according to James 1:18, “We are a type of first fruits of all God’s creatures.”

Notice that John only *bears* the numbering of the troops. In verse eleven, he *looks*. “And behold, a great number which no man could number from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue.” They have on white robes, like those sacrificed in the last chapter. And they sing a song, which is basically the new song. So John hears the 144,000. Then he looks and sees the multitude.

Modern poets rhyme sounds. Hebrew poets rhymed meaning. They said the same thing twice with a similar but slightly different meaning, rather than a similar but slightly different sound.

These two groups form a rhyme of meaning. I think that basically they are the same and refer to all believers in some way. By tracing the clues of the signature seals on the foreheads of the 144,000, the new song, and the servants of God throughout the book, I think you can bear this out.

But most importantly, when John said the angel had “the seal of the Living God,” all those believers in and around Ephesus would have thought of one thing, and John would have *known* they would have thought of one thing: Ephesians 1:13: “In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.”

Paul taught that every believer is sealed by the very presence of the Holy Spirit—Jesus’ very own Spirit, who He sends to teach us, guide us, and guard us for the day of redemption. In John 10, Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me, and I give them eternal life; they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

Paul in Romans writes, “In all these things we are hypernikomen [more than conquerors] through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

If you’ve given yourself to Him, you are stuck with Him and He with you! That explains Ephesians 4:30, “Don’t grieve the Holy Spirit of God in whom you are sealed for the day of redemption.” In other words, He’s stuck with you! Make it easy for Him.

What I’m saying is, the 144,000 are *at least* sealed with the Holy Spirit. And I believe they are us or represent us.

Now my sixth principle of interpreting and preaching the Revelation:

6. We should at least preach and believe what scripture says clearly in other places. Then who really cares if there's some bizarre, tribal army of celibate, ethnic Jews with nifty little cross tattoos on their foreheads somewhere in the distant future after we're raptured off the earth? That may be nice, my friends, but *we* have been sealed with the very Spirit of the Living God.

Did you notice? – We are sealed before the wind begins to blow; before the horsemen ride and the trumpets sound; when the wrath of God comes, as in the fifth trumpet, and the demon locusts are commanded not to hurt those sealed.

We suffer tribulation in this world, but none of our suffering is wrath, because Jesus the Lamb has taken all wrath for us. All tribulation is now a tool for love. We parents call it discipline. But we were sealed before the horsemen began to ride. And you were sealed, according to Paul and John, before you were born, before you did one good thing. That means you were *chosen*, elected, predestined, and saved by God's grace alone (Ephesians 2:8).

And that means you were sealed even before you confessed Jesus. He said, "You didn't choose me; I chose you . . ." (John 15:16). It was His Spirit who chose you to choose Him, even when you were dead. Even *then* He was guarding your heart and watching your spirit.

A couple sermons ago I told you about my wonderful friend who suffered incredible ritual abuse as a child, and how Jesus unwrapped her scroll and showed her a vision that she was His little angel. She had another vision while we were praying, of a time of horrendous abuse long before she confessed Christ. Jesus showed her that He was there. Once again He showed her a picture of Himself. He

was holding her heart and holding her spirit, even as her body was slain like a lamb.

Every time someone tells me a vision, I don't believe it's necessarily true. But I believe the Word of God, so I believe she was sealed even before the wind began to blow; before the Dragon was cast to the earth.

This is orthodox, reformed, Christian theology. I'm not just making up this stuff. It's much more than just an interesting doctrine. God wants us to *know* it and *live* it.

So all week I kept asking, "What does the sealing look like? God, what are you telling me?" And all week I kept remembering a story from long ago. It was about two orphan boys — thieves, liars, scoundrels. Having just been released from prison, one is picked up by the other and driven to the orphanage, to fulfill a promise to visit the nun that raised them.

While they are there, she gives them a "call" (a call to conquer) to come up with \$5,000 to save the orphanage from foreclosure due to back taxes. There is no way that these two characters can conquer. But a friend sends them down to the Triple Rock Church. The pastor preaches on the End Times, and then they all begin to worship. In the Spirit on the Lord's Day, Jake Blues has a revelation. He turns to Elwood Blues and says, "The *band*, Elwood! The *band*!" And Jake and Elwood see the light.

You can call me weird, but all week I kept asking God what this sealing meant to me, and I kept feeling like God was saying "Peter, it means you need to be more like Jake and Elwood Blues and less like the Grinch."

Finally, on Thursday I watched the movie *The Blues Brothers*. I realized I should not be like Jake and Elwood in every way; however, I should be disciplined by Jake and Elwood in some very important ways.

They were *fearless*! They had "no anxiety about anything" (Philippians 4:6). Chased by cops, Elwood says to

Jake, “They can’t catch us. We’re on a mission from God.” They know God will always “lead them in triumph” (II Corinthians 2:4). When a friend tells Jake there’s no way they’ll get the band back together, Jake says, “Oh yeah? Well, me and the Lord, we have an understanding. We’re on a mission from God.”

Jake and Elwood are sinners and idiots, but they have *faith*. So they are fearless. They keep reminding themselves, “We’re on a mission from God.” Fearless and graceful, they *believe* that, although they are being chased by the Chicago police, state troopers, a band of rednecks, the Illinois chapter of the Nazis, and the girl Jake stood up at the altar (who is now trying to kill him with flame throwers, grenade launchers, and machine guns). They believe that everything is being “orchestrated by God for the good” (Romans 8:28). So they can even enjoy the small things in life with gratitude.

There is one scene in which Jake and Elwood are blown sky-high in a phone booth. They land and Elwood says, “Hey, Jake! There must be seven dollars worth of change here!” Fearless . . . graceful . . . powerful . . .

They save the orphanage. Even though they know they’re sealed and on a mission from God, they still “toil and strive with all the energy He mightily inspires within them” (Colossians 1:29). They do it “that their joy might be complete” (I John 1:4). They end up back in the slammer but full of joy.

Fearless, graceful, powerful, sacrificial, joyful . . . because they had a revelation. In short, they act like people who *actually believe* the Gospel.

What if you actually believed that you had been saved, sanctified, and sealed by the blood of the Lamb, already “seated in the heavenlies with Him,” and “nothing in all creation could separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus”? *What if?*

Preachers are afraid to preach this stuff, because they feel the millstone around their neck, and they rely on their own strength. A friend told me a few weeks ago that his preacher father told him, “I won’t preach grace, because people use it as an excuse for sin.” And people *do*, and when we use grace as a reason to sin, we don’t understand. We need to ask ourselves if we’ve ever believed.

But if we don’t preach grace, we preach the law. We preach flesh, pride, and fear . . . and fear can’t conquer.

Jesus said, “This is the whole law and the prophets: love.” And John writes, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment. And he who fears is not perfected in love. We love because he first loved us” (I John 4). Before the wind began to blow, He loved us.

Paul reminds us that Satan, your opponent, was disarmed at the cross. His power is now fear inspired by lies (propaganda). So you may be saved and sealed but rendered impotent for the kingdom of God, because Satan has you cowering in fear. God says to you, “Fear not!”—not only because it’s a wonderful gift, but also because He wants you to step on the head of that Serpent and conquer.

Did you notice that it’s the army that gets sealed with the guarantee of salvation? God desires fearless, graceful, powerful, sacrificial, joyful warriors.

In Ephesians 6, Paul writes, “Stand therefore having girded your loins with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace. And take the shield of faith with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one, and put on the helmet of salvation. Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”

In short, “put on Christ.” Believe the seal — salvation. The armor of God is the seal of God. Believe it and put it on. Believing you conquer (in reality), you begin

to conquer (in space and time).

My sweet, abused friend receives those visions from Jesus because He is madly in love with her and wants her to see His glory, and because He wants her to experience victory now. After she has seen that she's sealed, I've seen her rebuke Satan until he leaves screeching in pain.

That's wild, but the same is true for you.

If you've given your life to Christ, you are on a mission from God. "Do not be frightened in anything by your opponents," writes Paul. Fear not. And if you say, "Wait a minute. Fearlessness like that could get you injured!" Yes. "Fearlessness like that could get you killed!" Yes. "Fearlessness like that could get you crucified!" Yes, praise God! And you'd be sealed, like Jesus. "For on him has God the Father set his seal" (John 6:27).

Dying with Jesus, you conquer with Jesus . . . dying in faith.

All those in the multitude in the second half of Revelation 7 have the white robes of those sacrificed under the altar. They are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, and they share in the sufferings of the Lamb.

They stand before the throne right *now* (present tense), serving in His temple *now* (present tense), singing "Salvation belongs to our God" (present tense), but they shall hunger and thirst no more (future tense), and God will wipe away every tear (future tense). That implies they're hungry and thirsty now, and have tears now, yet they stand before the throne in the temple now.

Hebrews says, "Let us draw near [present tense] the throne room of grace with confidence."

Who *are* these hungry, thirsty, tear-stained people who stand before the throne and sing, "Salvation belongs to our God"? The elder says, "These are those who *are coming* out of great tribulation." (It's not "who *have come*." The Greek is actually a present participle.)

This is still God's army, and they are fearlessly singing in tribulation, for Jesus told them, "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer [imperative tense – a commandment], for I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

"Do not be frightened in anything by your opponents [principalities and powers of evil], for this is a clear omen to them of their destruction but of your salvation, and that from God" (Philippians 1:28).

God's kingdom conquers . . .

- when Paul and Silas sing in the Philippian jail.
- when Peter and John rejoice on the temple steps, having been flogged.
- when Richard Wurmbrand dances in his Romanian prison cell.
- when Sudanese Christians meet under the banyan trees for worship.
- when my abused friend sings songs of joy to Jesus in His temple.
- when Jesus recites the first line of Song 22, nailed to the cross, bearing our Hell.

The Blues Brothers is a musical. They sing the whole way through! Revelation is also a musical; the saints won't stop singing. And, to get back to our question, Who *are* these guys? Where else have I seen people in tribulation, suffering, and tears; suffering yet singing with joy, "Salvation belongs to our God"? *Right here.*

So fear not, worshippers of the Living God. You are *not* the Antichrist, but you *are* the omen. So make that ancient Serpent tremble. Worship.

Three thousand feet up! Up the side of
Mount Crumpit,
He rode to the tiptop to dump it!
“Pooh-pooh to the Whos!” he was grinch-
ish-ly humming.
“They’re finding out now that no Christmas
is coming!
“They’re just waking up! I know just what
they’ll do!
“Their mouths will hang open a minute or
two
“Then all the Whos down in Who-ville will
all cry BOO-HOO!”

“That’s a noise,” grinned the Grinch,
“That I simply must hear!”
So he paused. And the Grinch put a hand to
his ear.
And he did hear a sound rising over the
snow.
It started in low. Then it started to grow . . .

But the sound wasn’t sad!
Why, this sound sounded merry!
It couldn’t be so!
But it WAS merry! VERY!

He stared down at Who-ville!
The Grinch popped his eyes!

Then he shook!
What he saw was a shocking surprise!

Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and
the small,
Was singing! Without any presents at all!
He HADN'T stopped Christmas from
coming!
IT CAME!
Somehow or other, it came just the same! . . .

“Maybe Christmas,” he thought, “doesn’t
come from a store.
“Maybe Christmas . . . perhaps . . . means a
little bit more!”

And what happened then . . . ?
Well . . . in Who-ville they say
That the Grinch’s small heart
Grew three sizes that day!

-from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*,
by Dr. Seuss

You see, that’s how the Grinch’s heart was
conquered. For without ribbons, without bows, without
presents, the Whos down in Who-ville sang just the same.
They *are* the omen, like you. Christ *is* coming, and you can’t
stop Him.

In the name of Jesus, and under the authority of His
blood, may you conquer some grinchies, even if one of them
is you. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Further Reading

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear omen to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine.

-Philippians 1:27-30

He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. . . . Then I saw another angel ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads." And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth; they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And

I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth. . . . Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.

-Revelation 3:12, 7:2-4, 9:3-4, 14:1-3, 22:1-5

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

-Ephesians 1:11-14

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom

-I Corinthians 1:21-22

Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? Under the apple tree I awakened you. There your mother was in travail with you, there she who bore you was in travail.

-Song of Solomon 8:5

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.”

-John 10:27-29

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. . . . What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to

separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

-Romans 8:15-17, 31-39

It is, strictly speaking, not man but God who perseveres. Perseverance may be defined as *that continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion.* It is because God never forsakes His work that believers continue to stand to the very end.

-Louis Berkhof

They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace: but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof. Nevertheless they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

-Westminster Confession of Faith

They're not gonna catch us, we're on a mission from God.

-Elwood Blues

Oh, yeah?! . . . Well me and the Lord, we got an understanding.

-Jake Blues

Moderate strength is shown in violence, supreme strength is shown in levity.

-G. K. Chesterton

The devil . . . the prowde spirite . . . cannot endure to be mocked.

-Thomas More

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision.

-Psalm 2:4

To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda, nor even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist.

-Emmanuel, Cardinal Suhard

Prayers From the Other Side of Silence

(Revelation 5:8, 8:1-6)

REVELATION 5:8: *And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and they were holding golden bowls full of incense [thumiama] which are the prayers of the saints*

In the Revelation, God is absolutely sovereign. The stars and mountains, the kings of the earth, and even the Dragon and the demons of Hell are pawns in His hand. None of them change history or move God. Yet right before He opens the scroll, the Lamb upon the throne smells something: your prayers.

In John 14, Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” In Matthew, when Jesus is going up Mount Zion, He says, “If you have faith and never doubt, you will be able to say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and cast into the sea,’ and it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer you will receive, if you have faith.”

In Revelation 1:6, John writes that Christ has made us kings and priests. We reign on earth through prayer. And I’ve seen it in places like Romania, where praying believers toppled a dictator. I’m so grateful for the prayer teams. I *know* it makes a difference.

Our prayers are far more powerful than any of us know. But you may be saying, “I have tried it, and it doesn’t work. I pray, and Heaven is silent.” Maybe you need to pray *more*. Just think about what we could do with more prayers and more people praying!

Jack Lou was a pastor at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. One time he told me about a fellow who approached him after the Sunday morning service. He was absolutely thrilled about a new discovery in his prayer life. He said to Jack . . .

Speed prayer has revolutionized my life! I'm planning to open an academy and teach it to others, and I want you to be a part. With speed prayer, no longer do you have to rise early in the morning to make all your requests known to God. *So much more* can be said!

I have developed a system of designating requests with symbols. For instance, family concerns are designated "F." Arguments with my wife are category "3." That's an "F-3." A workplace argument is a "W-3"; African missionaries are "A-7." So you petition God saying, "A-7, W-3, F-3. In Jesus' name, amen." What do you think, Jack?

Jack realized the guy was *serious*, so he said, "Wow . . . that's really great. You should also develop *speed fasting*. That way you could fast between breakfast and lunch, and you'd never have to miss a meal!" The guy just looked at Jack and then said, "You're not taking me seriously, are you?"

I think that sometimes we *do* take the speed guy seriously. Have you received Internet prayer requests? It seems like we take him seriously with requests like these: "Pray for six-year-old Jimmy Spencer in Trout City, Idaho. If you believe in God and prayer, you won't delete this message, but you'll pass it on to at least six others." *More* prayer; more people saying more words; many words.

If God is leading you to pray for somebody on the Internet, *do it*. But will we be heard for our many words? Jesus said in Matthew 6:7, “The Gentiles think that they will be heard for their many words.”

Maybe it’s not about *many words* but *better words*, like reciting “The Prayer of Jabez” or saying “in Jesus’ name” at the end of our prayers. Maybe we don’t pray the *right words*. But if it’s simply a matter of saying the *right words*, I think the Bible calls that witchcraft . . . magic . . . not prayers but incantations. Then people silently reject Christ because the incantations don’t work. Worse yet, believing they *do* work, they play the harlot with God.

Does prayer work? That’s like asking, “Peter, did your date work?” It’s like one of my children asking another one of my children, “Has your conversation with Dad worked?”

Usually when my children are trying to get something with many words and slick words, when they’re trying to *make* it work, odds are it won’t. “Please, please, Dad . . . Can I get a pop? *Mom* said so. In the name of Mom, get me a pop!” Yet I long to hear them speak to me.

One night when my daughter Elizabeth was little, she ended a long, involved, bed-time prayer with this phrase: “But I guess you know all that, because you can read my brain. Amen.” He *can* read her brain, but He still wants to hear her speak His name and share her heart.

In Matthew 6, Jesus continues: “Don’t be like those Gentiles who think they will be heard for their many words. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” When my kids were little, I could read their brains and knew what they needed. But I still wanted to hear them call my name and share their hearts. “Daddy.”

Jesus goes on in Matthew 6: “When you pray, pray like this: ‘Our Abba—Father—Daddy—in heaven’” He said “pray *like* this” not “pray *exactly* this.” It’s not magic words or even *many* words. That’s not the key.

In the gospel of John, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, having spoken of His death and resurrection, Jesus repeats His promise saying, “Truly, truly I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name. Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name. Ask that your joy might be full.”

Did you get that? For three years, they have been with Jesus. He had even taught them the Lord’s Prayer, and in all that time they hadn’t asked one thing in the name of Jesus. Maybe “in the name of Jesus” is not as easy as learning the five, magic words. It requires a journey *with* Jesus to Mount Calvary.

Many of you are frustrated. You pray, and it’s not that you don’t get a new car or pearls or something; it’s that God seems silent. So not only do you wonder if prayer works, but you also wonder if you matter. “Does God care? Am I an orphan?” Heaven is silent.

Back to the Revelation . . .

The slaughtered Lamb on the throne opens the first six seals, and we see conquest, warfare, famine, and death. We see martyrs, and we see the sky roll up and the stars fall. Finally, in chapter eight, the Lamb opens the seventh and final seal.

“When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.”

Silence after *all that noise!* After the heavenly worship, the creatures that *never stop singing* “Holy, holy, holy,” and all the noise of heaven and earth, all at once: silence . . . for about half an hour. Silence in Heaven.

We get so frustrated by the silence. And we get so anxious with silence. Some of you are frustrated because other people pray and hear voices, and *you* pray and there is silence. You try many words; you try better words. And Heaven is silent.

What makes it worse is you’ve heard people like me say things like this: “If God seems distant, guess who

moved,” or “God is talking all the time. He’s a chatterbox.”
Is God a chatterbox?

John is the beloved disciple. He is even *in* the Spirit *on* the Lord’s Day, and all of Heaven is silent! Yet John wrote, “Those around the throne never stop singing, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.’” Silent, yet all reality is “upheld by the word of His power.” Heaven is silent, but maybe God is still somehow speaking in the silence. Maybe the silence is part of the heavenly song.

So for those of you who are frustrated by the silence in your ears and the voices in other people’s ears, I want to remind you that there are different ways of hearing. Some have gifts that others don’t have, and that’s by design. But if you come to Jesus as your Lord, Jesus Himself says in John 10 that you have heard. “My sheep hear my voice.”

So stop stressing about “if you hear.” Love, trust, and obey Jesus, and you *do* hear.

Yes, sometimes sin blocks us from hearing. So if you know of sin, confess it and get it out of the way. But sometimes Heaven *is* silent. And sometimes silence says more than words and *does* more than words. Silence cleanses us of . . . *us*. It prepares us to hear.

Moses spoke to God face to face, like a man talking with a friend. But first he was exiled for forty years in the wilderness! God worked in the silence, preparing him for the day he would hear this: “Moses, Moses, I AM.”

Jesus was without sin. Yet immediately after He was baptized in the Jordan in the Spirit, the Holy Spirit led Him into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. After that He came preaching the kingdom.

David writes, “For God alone my soul waits in silence.” The mystics called this “the dark night of the soul.”

Sometimes Heaven is silent, yet silence is part of the song. Revelation is like a great anthem. It builds and builds to the seventh seal, and then all at once . . . *silence*. Our hearts anticipate the crescendo. Silence makes us long for God’s

crescendo—faith, hope, and love for God’s crescendo. All of Heaven is silent with anticipation.

Or . . . maybe *God* is silent with anticipation. When you are silent in a conversation, you are anticipating and inviting the other person to speak. For seven chapters, God has been speaking to John, and for thousands of years God has been speaking through creation and futility. And now *silence*.

Maybe He is inviting, anticipating, longing for someone else to speak . . . like a father anticipates the day his newborn baby says, “Abba” — “Dada.” When that happens, the daddy screams to everybody else in the room, “Shut up! Jonathan just said ‘Dada!’” Everyone will stop, he holds his breath, and all will strain to hear, “Dada” (in Aramaic — “Abba”).

Jesus said, “Henceforth you have asked nothing in my name.” A lot of noise—babbling—but not word—“logos.” Then came the cross, and then they asked “in His name.”

Paul writes, “When we cry ‘Abba Father,’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children of God, then heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided that we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

When my children first spoke “Dada” out of the silence, I communed with them, my flesh and blood, and the word moved me like nothing else. And I would move mountains in order to hear it.

“Pray this way,” says Jesus. “Abba, who art in heaven”

Do you remember what Aslan first said to Shasta in *The Horse and His Boy* when he showed up in the dark silence to unwrap his scroll? Shasta whispered, “Who are you?” The Great Lion replied, “One who has waited long for you to speak.”

Perhaps the Lion of Judah, the Lamb on the throne, has been speaking to you all of your life. Now He has unwrapped your scroll, and with silence He calls to you: “Speak to me, deep calling to deep, Abba Father, God save me.” In Hebrew, “God save” is “Yeshua.” In Greek, it is “Jesus.”

Silence is an invitation to speak. And the word spoken out of the silence is the best.

Recently Susan and I were in Chicago for my sister’s wedding. We met all kinds of great, new relatives. There was a lot of socializing, a lot of noise, and a lot of words — words used as tools and even as weapons.

But on the last night, our anniversary, just Susan and I took the rental car and went on a date. We drove into Chicago and found a little, Italian restaurant. We ordered some dinner . . . sat there on the sidewalk . . . they brought us some bread and wine . . . and we just talked about whatever was on our minds. We talked about eighteen years of marriage. Then we were silent. We sat in silence looking at each other.

We are silent with the people we trust most. We don’t need words as weapons. And that silence is a sweet communion which speaks volumes. Then sometimes in moments like that, out of that silence, Susan will look at me and say, “I love you.” And those few words are worth more to me than all the other words in the dictionary. I’ll move mountains in order to hear them.

REVELATION 8:1-6: When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets.

I think the seven angels are the seven eyes of the Lamb, who are the seven lamps on the seven lampstands, the seven spirits who are the Holy Spirit sent out into all the world speaking in the seven churches and our hearts, even speaking through the seven trumpet blasts. (Trumpets proclaim things, like the Day of Atonement in the temple.)

And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. And the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

This other angel, and what he does, breaks the series of seven trumpets, which is part of the series of seven seals, as if this is another glimpse into eternity, which produces the series of sevens or is the *goal* of the series of sevens. (Seven is the number of creation.)

Everything in this picture is connected with “and also”—“kai” in the Greek—(not “then”) as if it’s eternal. I think it’s another picture of the heart of God: the One on the throne, the Spirit before the throne, and this other angel.

People argue about who this angel is, but it’s very clear what he’s doing. He’s a priest offering incense on the altar in the temple. Every day in the temple, the priests anointed themselves with myrrh and spices, and offered incense of frankincense and spices at the morning and evening slaughter of the sacrificial lamb, as in Exodus 30.

In Leviticus 16, however, God commands Aaron to offer incense *in* the Holy of Holies, before the Ark—the Mercy Seat—the throne of God. He was commanded to take a censer full of coals from the altar and two handfuls of incense and go *behind* the curtain and put the incense on the fire of the golden altar, which was right before the Lord. The smoke from that incense was said to protect Aaron lest he die as he threw the blood of sacrifice upon the Mercy Seat—the throne of grace.

And the trumpets sounded, proclaiming Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement.

Only the High Priest was to make this offering of incense and sacrifice before the throne, and it probably took him about half an hour. Scholars think this incense offering was made in silence.

This angel is the High Priest. This angel mediates the covenant; the angel mixes our prayers with incense he is given, and they ascend before God. Then the angel takes the golden censer and throws it on the earth.

Who is this angel messing with our prayers?

“Angel” means messenger. So not all angels are angels like we think of them in our English culture. In the Old Testament, the angel of Yahweh, the “angel of the Lord,” is clearly not an angel like other angels. He is addressed as God Himself, and He appears as a man. He wrestles with Jacob and calls him “Israel.” He stops Abraham’s knife on Mount Carmel. He speaks to Moses out of the burning bush on Mount Sinai. He shows up all over the Old Testament.

And if you saw Him, I believe you’d call him “Jesus.”

Well, who’s this angel mediating our prayers? Paul writes, “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom to all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time” (I Timothy 2:5-6).

Hebrews 7 and 8 spells it out: Jesus is our High Priest, and He Himself is the sacrifice. It's His blood on the mercy seat. The most natural way to translate the prepositional phrase in verse three is not "stood at the altar," but "stood on the altar." Jesus is the bleeding Lamb on the throne, and He made sacrifice once and for all.

Then the author of Hebrews writes, "But he always lives to make intercession for them that draw near to God through him." That's *us*. Jesus takes your prayers and mixes them with His incense ("thumiam," meaning "fragrant odors," like myrrh for anointing priests and frankincense for incense).

Where does Jesus get this fragrance? When He is born, kings come and give Him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. John records that Mary anoints Jesus with costly, aromatic oil on His way to Jerusalem to die. And Jesus says, "It was intended that she should keep this for the day of my burial." On the cross, Jesus smelled of that fragrance. John then records that they covered his dead body with fragrance, as was the custom of the Jews.

Jesus mediates our prayers through His sacrificial death on the cross, and "He always lives making intercession for us." Even as He hung on the cross, people prayed. A thief prayed. I imagine a Roman centurion prayed, "Oh God, who *is* this man?" People in the crowd must have prayed, "God, where *are* you?" And even though they crucified Him, and Roman centurions pounded the nails, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

His incense fragrancd their prayers, and coals from that altar purified their prayers. He is the sacrifice embodying their prayers. Then the censer was cast upon the earth. The centurion dropped to his knees saying, "Surely this was the Son of God." The thief said, "Jesus, remember me when you enter into your kingdom." The earth shook, the rocks split, and the graves opened.

He “lives to make intercession for you,” for “we don’t know how to pray as we ought.” For instance, you pray, “Oh God, I really want a Cadillac and some pearls.” And Jesus mixes your prayers with His incense from His sacrifice. Then maybe He prays something like this: “Father, forgive her for her small heart. What she really wants is security in you. Father, she wants to know that she’s more valuable to you than pearls.”

He intercedes *for* us, and through His Spirit He causes us to intercede. He uses His silence to purify our hearts and entice us to speak. And with His Spirit He enters our silence and enables us to speak word out of babble: “Abba Father.”

Even when we’re dead in sin, and *where* we’re dead in sin, He enters our silence. He exposes our silence with His, causing us to speak a right confession before God . . . an honest word.

Brennan Manning tells of a minister friend who bottomed out. He resigned his church, abandoned his family, and fled to a logging camp in Canada.

One winter afternoon, as he sat shivering in his aluminum trailer, the portable electric heater suddenly quit. Cursing this latest evidence of a God-forsaken world, this minister shouted, “God, I *hate* you!” He sank to his knees weeping.

Manning writes, “There in the bright darkness of faith, he heard Christ say: ‘I know; it’s okay.’ Then this shattered man heard Jesus weeping within him. The minister stood up and started home.”

As Jesus hung on the cross, the sky grew dark from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. And Jesus cried with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (the first line of Psalm 22). You see, *that’s our line!* And He says it for us in the silence of a God-forsaken world. He speaks our curse to God; He prays our prayer to God.

Psalm 22 is a cry for salvation. Then Jesus says, “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” and “It is finished.” (The curtain in the temple rips from the top to the bottom, the earth shakes, and the rocks are split.)

We are seeing more than we can comprehend. But at least get this: When you pray, be silent before Him and His cross, before His body broken and blood shed. Be silent; then speak.

But we are addicted to words! We use words as tools and weapons in fear. How can we surrender to God’s silence?

Well, take time. Get rid of all the other words. Share all your words and requests with Him (pink Cadillacs, pearls, A-7, W-3, F-3 . . .). Don’t worry. He takes all your prayers and purifies them. Speak all your words, and then . . . *don’t stop!* You haven’t yet spoken. Speak all your words, and then be silent before Him. Then if words come to your heart, speak those.

If you’re praying for Aram, say all your words about Aram! And then sit with Aram in your mind before the throne of grace, before body broken and blood shed, in silence. *Then* speak . . . for the words that come to your heart out of that silence are probably not your words.

“We need prayers of words, yes,” writes Madeleine L’Engle, “the words are the path to contemplation; but the deepest communion with God is beyond words, on the other side of silence.”

How can I be silent enough
to speak God’s words or pray His Word?

I want to tell you of the only time I ever saw Jarek Conelly sit still:

Jarek was four years old, and I was performing the marriage ceremony of his mother Janielle to Andy Conelly. Both had recently come to Christ. Jarek was Janielle’s son

from a former relationship. Jarek didn't really have a father. His skin was dark, so people could tell he was not Andy's boy. I think Jarek felt that. He was always restless, his body never silent.

During the ceremony, he was all over the place and wouldn't sit still. By the time we got to the vows, he was quarantined by relatives in the front row. As Janielle and Andy, bride and bridegroom, said their vows, Jarek was squirming and making noise. When I began to lead them in the ring ceremony, Andy stopped me mid-sentence, turned around, looked at Jarek (squirming in his seat), and as everyone watched, he said, "Jarek." And Jarek froze, pinned to his seat, wide-eyed and silent. "Jarek," Andy said, "I love you with all my heart. I will always be your daddy, and you will always be my son." And Jarek was frozen in silence and wonder.

I didn't hear the next word Jarek spoke to Andy, because he was silent for the rest of the service, but I pray that it was this: "Daddy."

So behold, children of God, He loves you with all His heart. God the Father waits in silence for you to speak; God the Son died for you so you could speak; God the Spirit inhabits you giving you words to speak.

Habakkuk 2:20: "The Lord is in his holy temple" (that's *you*, children of God), "let all the earth keep silent before him." He is about to speak from His temple: "Abba, Father, holy is your name. Bless, heal, protect, and may your kingdom come."

"And the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it on the earth and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake." (At the second trumpet, a great mountain is cast into the sea.)

Our prayers really *do* move mountains. But even better, they move God. He moved all the way from Mount Zion to Mount Sinai to the Mount of Transfiguration all the

way to Mount Calvary, in order to hear His children speak,
“Abba, I love you.”

May your heart be silent before Him. If words
should happen to arise in your heart, speak them. They
probably didn't come from you.

Further Reading

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

-Psalm 62:5-6

Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!

-Psalm 141:2

Once I was asked by someone what I consider most important in the training of the sisters. I answered: Silence. Interior and exterior silence. Silence is essential in a religious house. The silence of humility, of charity, the silence of the eyes, of the ears, of the tongue. There is no life of prayer without silence.

-Mother Teresa

Father in heaven, to whom belong boundless wisdom and deepest compassion, you understand us, our going out and our coming; you know what is in man. But you desire that we understand you. Even as our Master answered not a word to his haughty accusers, thus exposing their fraudulent deceit and revealing his own innocence, so you speak in love and understanding when you speak not a word! For one is speaking when he remains silent in order to show the listener that he is beloved. One is speaking when, as teacher, he listens to the pupil. One is speaking when he demonstrates that profound understanding comes from listening. We may fear that we are lost in the desert of abandonment when we do not hear your voice. But it is only the golden moment of stillness in the intimacy of

conversation and communion. When we come imploring, pleading, promising, even threatening, and you greet us with barely a word, you understand us completely, and you speak by answering our needs. Bless, then, the golden moment of silence, for the same paternal love is ours when you are silent as well as when you speak!

-Soren Kierkegaard

Before I can listen to God in prayer, I must fumble through the prayers of words, of willful demands, the prayers of childish “Gimmes,” of “Help mes,” of “I want . . .” Until I tell God what I want, I have no way of knowing whether or not I truly want it. . . . The prayers of words cannot be eliminated. And I must pray them daily, whether I feel like praying or not. Otherwise, when God has something to say to me, I will not know how to listen. Until I have worked through self, I will not be enabled to get out of the way.

-Madeleine L’Engle

The earthly minded person thinks and imagines that when he prays, the important thing, the thing he must concentrate upon, is that God should hear what he is praying for. And yet in the true, eternal sense it is just the reverse: the true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when the person praying continues to pray until he is the one who hears, who hears what God is asking for.

-Soren Kierkegaard

We know from our human relationships how much faith we need to have in a person in order to be silent with them. We know that our faith in a person is deepened by such silence. This too is the dynamic of our silence in prayer—realizing God’s love for us expressed in the love of Jesus, deepening our faith in his love.

-Brennan Manning

Should you ask the biblically poor woman to describe her prayer life, she might answer: “Most of the time, my prayer consists in experiencing the absence of God in the hope of communion.” She is not richly endowed with mystical experiences. That is fine because it reflects the truth of her impoverished humanity. Yet the experience of absence does not mean the absence of experience. For example, the soldier in combat who, during a lull in the battle, steals a glance at his wife’s picture tucked in his helmet, is more present to her at that moment in her absence than he is to the rifle that is present in his hands. Likewise, the poor in spirit perceive that religious experience and mystical “highs” are not the goal of authentic prayer, rather the goal is communion with God.

-Brennan Manning

All evil stems from this: men do not know how to handle solitude.

-Blaise Pascal

“Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it. . . . Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

-John 14:13-14, 16:24

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time.

-I Timothy 2:5-6

Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make

intercession for them. For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself. . . . Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord. . . . For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence; it is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant.

-Hebrews 7:25-27, 8:1-2, 9:2-4

And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne.

-Revelation 8:3

When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

-Matthew 2:10-11

Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair;

and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial."

-John 12:3-7

They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

-John 19:40

The prayers which had ascended, unremarked by the journalists of the day, returned with immense force—in George Herbert's phrase, as "reversed thunder." Prayer reenters history with incalculable effects. Our earth is shaken daily by it.

-Eugene Peterson

The globe itself lives and is upheld as by Atlas arms through the prayers of those whose love has not grown cold. The world lives by these uplifted hands, and by nothing else!

-Helmut Thielicke

Warnings Upon a God-*@!#ed World

(Revelation 8:6-10:1)

There was a farmer who had three sons: Jim, John, and Sam. No one in the family ever attended church or cared about God. The pastor tried for years to get the family interested in the things of God but to no avail.

Then one day Sam was bitten by a rattlesnake. They called in the doctor, and he examined Sam well. He announced that the prognosis for Sam was very poor. So the pastor was called, and when he arrived he began to pray as follows:

O wise and righteous Father, we thank Thee that in Thine wisdom Thou didst send this rattlesnake to bite Sam. He has never been inside the church, and it is doubtful he has, in all this time, ever prayed or acknowledged Thine existence. Now we trust that this experience will be a valuable lesson to him and will lead to his genuine repentance.

And now, O Father, wilt Thou send another rattlesnake to bite Jim, and another to bite John, and another really big one to bite the old man? For years we have done everything we know to get them to turn to Thee, but all in vain. It seems, therefore, that what all our combined efforts could not do, this rattlesnake has done. So, Lord, send us bigger and better rattlesnakes. Amen.

REVELATION 8:6-13: *Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.*

The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.

The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea; and a third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the fountains of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the water, because it was made bitter.

The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice, as it flew in midheaven, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets which the three angels are about to blow!"

REVELATION 9:1-19: *And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key of the shaft of the bottomless pit; he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth;*

they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads; they were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion, when it stings a man. And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them.

In appearance the locusts were like horses arrayed for battle; on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. They have tails like scorpions, and stings, and their power of hurting men for five months lies in their tails. They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abad'don, and in Greek he is called Apol'hon.

The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphra'tes." So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of mankind. The number of the troops of cavalry was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulphur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and

sulphur issued from their mouths. By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur issuing from their mouths. For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, with heads, and by means of them they wound.

And now, “May God bless you and keep you and make His face to shine upon you and give you peace.”

“Excuse me, but *wait* a minute!
What the H-E-double L was going on there?”

Well, I’ve been studying it a long time, and I’m not exactly sure. It seems there’s stuff going on here that we see, like people dying. And there’s stuff going on here that we *don’t* see, like the golden altar. Just like we see conquest, warfare, famine, and death, but we don’t see four horsemen. At least we don’t see them *objectively* in space and time.

I’m not sure what we see objectively in space and time, and I’m not sure when it happens in space and time. Did the hail, fire, and blood fall 3,000 years ago in the plagues upon Egypt? Will it fall again sometime in the future? Has it been falling now for thousands of years as hail, lightning, and bloodshed worldwide? Or all of the above? And what does it mean?

The first trumpet—“hail, fire, and blood”—is like the first and seventh plagues on Egypt, as God was about to take Israel to the promised land. So a person could wonder, “Gosh, are we supposed to be leaving here . . . going some place else?” The first, seventh, eighth, and ninth plagues on Egypt are here in these trumpets.

At the second trumpet, a great, burning mountain is cast into the sea, and one-third of the sea turns to blood. Some people think the mountain is Babylon. Jeremiah 51:25

and 42 is a good argument for that. Some people think it's Mount Zion, for in 70 A.D., probably a little bit before this book was written, Rome utterly obliterated Zion and plowed the temple into the ground.

Many informed people think the Revelation is all about the destruction of Jerusalem. They have some great reasons for that. In fact, it's very difficult to tell when Jesus, in the gospels, is speaking about the destruction of Jerusalem and when He is speaking about the end of the world. In the Olivet Discourse, He speaks about *both together*. So some people think it's Mount Zion that is thrown into the sea. Rome ruled the sea.

Many people think this burning mountain is a volcano — actually, Mount Vesuvius in Italy. In 79 A.D., this great, burning mountain *was* cast into the sea. Ten to fifteen thousand people were killed, encased in stone, or burned or drowned in sinking ships on the Bay of Naples. In fact, you can still see the remains in Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Did you know that if Yellowstone erupted as it did in prehistoric times, it could easily destroy most all of the crop production in the United States of America and push this world into a global famine and maybe even an ice age? They say it's going to go off again sometime.

At the third trumpet, a great star falls to earth. At any time, astronomers could look up in the sky and see a comet hurling towards earth, and Bruce Willis with all his Rocket Jocks couldn't stop it.

When this star hits the water at the third trumpet, it turns a third of the water bitter. It is the opposite of the story of Marah, when the Israelites came to the bitter water, Moses cast a tree into the bitter water, and it turned sweet. It's like God's hand is being removed from His people, undoing His blessing. Jeremiah 9:15: "He will give disobedient Israel wormwood to eat and poisoned water to drink."

At the fourth trumpet, a third of the light from the heavenly bodies is kept from shining, like an ash cloud from Mount Vesuvius, like the plague on the Egyptians, like the locust cloud in the prophecies of Joel, like Peter quotes in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost explaining what happens:

“This is what was spoken of by Joel: ‘In the last days I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh . . . and I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes’”

“These are the last days,” says Peter. So tonight you might see a blood-red moon.

The fourth of the seven trumpets undoes what God did on the fourth of the seven days of creation. Maybe God is *un-*creating or *re-*creating. Seven days in Genesis; seven seals, trumpets, and bowls in the Revelation.

At the fifth trumpet, the locusts are released from the abyss, like the plagues in Egypt, like those locust plagues prophesied in Joel. You know, a locust’s lifespan is five months. But these locusts don’t act like other locusts. They don’t afflict and eat plants; they afflict *people*. They have crowns, and human faces, and women’s hair, and lion’s teeth. They are clearly demonic, under the control and authority of the Ancient Serpent.

Josephus records that during the horrific, six-month seizure of Jerusalem, roving bands of possessed, Jewish transvestites raped and murdered their fellow Jews in the condemned city. They had women’s hair, men’s faces, and lion’s teeth. For five months these bands of transvestites assaulted the city. (You didn’t see that one coming, did you?)

Hal Lindsey suggests the locusts may be black Cobra helicopters spraying nerve gas from their tails. Some Catholics have argued the demon locusts are Lutherans. Roving bands of possessed, Jewish transvestites in black helicopters, and Lutherans. Whatever this is, it’s *bad*; really

bad.

Actually, I believe I've talked to some of the locusts. I think they're demons. They hide behind crowns and human faces and gorgeous women's hair, but they long to inflict you with pain. If you're a believer you battle them, and they can harass you and keep you in fear. But they themselves cannot truly harm you — they cannot kill you. For you are sealed with the seal of God, the Holy Spirit, and they have been disarmed.

However, even though they cannot kill you, they can possess the godless people of this world, kings and soldiers and armies, such that they *can* kill you.

At the sixth trumpet, a great army is released from over the Euphrates. It kills a third of mankind. I suspect this pictures people and armies under the control of demons. Rwanda, Bosnia, Serbia, the Sudan, the Third Reich . . . that was far more than just angry people. Just this cavalry is 200 million strong. The combined United Nations forces in Desert Storm were 1 million. There is no single army this big on earth.

Or maybe this is all the evil armies that have ever marched over the face of our earth.

Or maybe this is the Battle of Armageddon.

Or maybe it's a poetic description of the Parthian cavalry north and east of the Euphrates.

Others say it's obviously the poetic description of the siege of Jerusalem . . . it's the fall of Jerusalem, just like the fall of Jericho, which you'll remember was preceded by seven trumpets blown by seven priests as they marched around the city seven times.

If *you* were in Jericho on the walls, I'm sure about the sixth time around you would have thought to yourself,

“What the H-E-double L is going on?” And after six trumpet blasts, we wonder what the Hell is going on.

Well, it appears that *Hell* is going on, that all *Hell* is breaking loose! Actually, only one-third of Hell is breaking loose, as if it’s a warning for the other two-thirds. So for those who die, maybe these *are* the bowls of wrath (they parallel the trumpets). But for the two-thirds, they are a warning.

The trumpets are part of the seals. Broken seals reveal mysteries. Blaring trumpets announce news (“*evangelia*”). I suppose that whether the news is good or bad depends almost entirely upon which side of the wall you are standing . . . just like the plagues were good news to the Israelites but pretty bad news to the Egyptians.

Good news if you’re planning to leave,
Bad news if you call Egypt home;

Good news if you’re inheriting the Promised Land,
Bad news if you’re highly invested in Jericho.

These trumpets proclaim news—a message. We don’t know the details, and maybe we’re not *supposed* to know all the details. That way, whether we look back in time and see Mount Vesuvius, the fall of Jericho, the plagues, and the fall of Jerusalem; whether we look in the paper today and see earthquakes, disasters, and demonic activity; whether we look into the future and see predicted Seismic activity in California, global warming, and Armageddon . . . no matter which direction we look, the message comes across very loud and clear: You are living in a “God-damned” world. And I choose my words carefully, theologically, and Biblically.

If you’re offended that I say that, I understand. You may have some cultural moralisms that you need to sort through. But you should somehow inform your children

that God cursed the earth. It's a damned world. You may say, "That's cursing!" No, it's not. God already did the cursing. You're living in a God-cursed world that *will* be consumed with fire.

Maybe you find that offensive not because of some cultural baggage over swear words, but maybe it's offensive because you're on the wrong side of the wall. Maybe you're highly invested in Jericho and Egypt, and I just really insulted your investment portfolio.

But stop being offended, and repent. This *is* a God-condemned, damned world, and you don't need black Cobra helicopters to tell you so. The creation literally devours itself. One organism lives off the death of another. We call it "the survival of the fittest," and we think it's *normal*.

As we speak, millions die in wars, famines, and natural disasters. Afflicted by demons, men rape little girls and murder people for sport. We hide from it here in Laodicea. But the truth is, you may take your last breath this evening, and all those things are just a warning, just symptoms of the disease. For long ago and not far away, God said to the man, "The day you eat of the fruit of the tree you shall surely die"—the law.

In rebellion, the man and woman ate, and I believe that on that day they *did* die. They became the walking dead, their hearts dead to God, unable to see, unable to love, incapable of real love.

But on that very day, God came to them, and in the deepest love (because that is what God is) God damned the world. He cursed the world. In Genesis 3:17, God says, "Adam, cursed is the earth for your sake." And on that day God invented the rattlesnake. God cursed the Dragon and cast it to earth, and he became the Snake. And God said, "You shall bruise the man's heel." God subjected us to snakes, and "God subjected the world to futility in hope," writes Paul.

Hope of *what?* – our repentance.

Rattlesnakes, demons, wars, famines, black helicopters . . . they may be our enemies, but they are not the real problem. The real problem is your own, dead, unrepentant heart. We don't love; we don't trust God; we don't depend on God; we depend on ourselves, the works of our hands, and the things of this world.

So in the face of the trumpets, what do we do?

- Get better insurance policies
- Take vitamins
- Hire a police force
- Pay geologists to study Mount Vesuvius

Maybe we get religion, because we think, “Oh, man, God will be *so impressed* with the good works of my hands, because I'm going to make this world a better place!” But God *curse*d this world. *Wake up*.

It's like we're dead on a ship bound for Hell, and we don't know it. God fires a torpedo to sink the ship, and now it's a sinking ship . . . a God-condemned, damned ship. Satan's the captain and doesn't want to lose his cargo, so he runs up and down the hallways of the ship yelling to everybody, “You can have all the steaks you want! You can have all the drinks you want! Hey, no rules! You can play soccer in the Grand Ballroom! Live the good life!”

If that doesn't work, and we wise up and begin to look around and say, “Hey, the ship is sinking!” he says, “Well, don't play soccer in the Grand Ballroom, get to work! Grab a hammer; get some tools; make this ship a better place! Go to church, do good deeds . . .”

And what does God want the whole time? *Abandon ship*. Repent. Cry out for salvation, and stop trusting the works of your own hands. God doesn't really even have to launch torpedoes. All He has to do is remove His hand, and

creation begins to devour itself. And the demons rage, and the armies march, and the Serpent strikes, and we taste Hell—the wrath of God.

So listen to the trumpets; pay attention to the rattlesnakes. Maybe a war, famine, or plague would do America some good, and we'd have a revival. Like that pastor prayed, "Lord, send us bigger and better rattlesnakes. Amen."

Revelation 9:19: "For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, with heads, and by means of them they wound" (strike the heel).

"Lord, send bigger and better rattlesnakes!"

REVELATION 9:20-10:1: *The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot either see or hear or walk; nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their immorality or their thefts.*

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven . . .

Did you get that? Six trumpets, a lot of snakes, and *nobody, nobody repents!* They just get better insurance policies, stronger drugs, and more religion: that is, idolatry. They trust in the works of their own hands. Rattlesnakes, by themselves, do not produce repentance. I know this . . .

Several years ago, sitting down to dinner in our new condominium, I was interrupted by a man at the front door. He said, "You need to come see what's out in your front yard."

So my friend Brian and I ran outside and found this huge, six- or seven-foot-long snake. It looked like a rattlesnake, but it was a bull snake. So I said, “Brian, watch the snake, I’ll get a box, and we’ll catch it.”

Now, Susan and I had just moved in. I had been wanting to meet our next-door neighbor, and maybe even share the Gospel. Well, when I came back out with the box, my friend Brian was standing on our neighbor’s front porch holding the tail of the snake. The rest of the snake was trying to follow the head, which had wedged itself in the brick vents on my neighbor’s condo.

I ran and grabbed hold, we both were pulling on the snake, and I met my neighbor. She opened the door and said, “What the hell is . . . !” Then she saw the snake and said, “Oh, [potty word]!” and slammed the door and ran back inside.

We couldn’t get the snake out of the vent. Finally, we had to let it go, and it crawled into her home. Then I had to knock on the door and say, “Um, sorry, but you know that snake you saw? It’s in your home. And my name’s Peter. I live next door.”

I don’t know if she ever repented, because she never spoke to me again.

Some folks think that what we Christians are all about is chasing snakes into their homes and then prophesying doom. But I don’t think we’re called to prophesy doom like Joel and Elijah did . . . maybe point it out, because an awful lot of it is already here.

So when people say, “Man, this world sucks,” your job is to say, “Amen!” In fact, more than that, say, “Did you know this is a God-damned world?” But we’re not to be messengers of doom—bad things, but messengers of Jesus—good news.

I don’t think you’re called to prophesy doom; you’re called to prophesy Jesus in the midst of doom.

Next John sees another, mighty angel. John receives a scroll, and he's told to prophesy about many nations, tongues, peoples, and tribes. And "the testimony of Jesus *is* the spirit of prophesy" (Revelation 19).

Then we see two witnesses who prophesy the testimony of Jesus. And when they do, people give glory to God. They repent. And then the last trumpet sounds.

But what *is* the testimony of Jesus, the spirit of prophesy? It's right in front of us. The slaughtered Lamb is sitting on God's throne, and *He* opens the seal; *He* opens the scroll.

The seventh—last—trumpet anticipates the last plague: the slaughter of the firstborn. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." He *is* the Passover Lamb for us, the new Israel.

So what is the testimony of Jesus? It's the good news in the midst of this "God-damned" world: that God so loved this "God-damned" world that — dare I even say it? — God damned God. He died and descended into Hell in our place.

Galatians 3:13: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree.'" In Christ, God offered His only begotten Son, His sacrificial Lamb, in our place. Trumpets always sounded proclaiming sacrifice on the Day of Atonement.

In Christ, God bore our Hell, suffered our cross, and died in our place. And, you see, He's not content to only pay. He's not content to only save. He goes to Hell on our behalf, but even more, He bears our pain.

- He boards the sinking ship
- He is born in a manger
- He suffers with his children in Pompeii
- He weeps over Jerusalem

- He feels the pain of every soldier in battle
- He whimpers with every beaten and abused child hiding in a closet
- He communes with us in all our sufferings

In that communion, He allows us to taste the Hell that He bore for us. So in this “God-damned” world, this God-cursed God exposes His heart and calls to His people, “Would you lose yourself now? Would you stop trusting the works of your hand? Would you surrender to my love?”

“And I, when I am lifted up,” said Jesus, “will draw all men to myself.” “Cursed is every man that hangs on a tree,” said God in the Old Testament. Jesus came to be bitten by the Snake. But He crushed the Snake’s head, and God raised Him from the dead.

So what is the testimony of Jesus?

When I was in high school, an old member of our church came and shared his testimony. His name was John Rankin. He was one of my dad’s old friends, who fought in the same war as my dad did—World War II. He was a tank driver in Europe. His job was to ride the iron horse spewing fire, smoke, and sulfur, right into Hell.

John rode in it with one other man, and this man was a believer. He had shared with John his testimony of Christ’s love, how God loved John so much that He became a man, entered this world, and suffered in this world. He bore John’s pain, He hung on a cross for him, and He took John’s curse for him in a cursed world.

John *could* believe that this was a cursed, “God-damned” world. In the midst of World War II, he could taste the curse.

This man told John how God bore His own wrath on the cross for John, and how He rose victorious over death on the third day. John listened, but he did not repent.

One day they were riding “unbuttoned.” (That’s what John called it.) That’s when they rode in the tank with their heads exposed at the neck. They had to speak to each other through a tube that went to their throats, because the sound of the engine was so loud in that tank. As they were riding, John’s friend yelled through the tube, “John, what are you going to do about Jesus?”

John, trying to put him off, said, “What do you mean?” He didn’t hear anything, so he asked again, “What do you mean?” He still didn’t hear anything, so he turned and looked. His friend’s head had been completely blown off by enemy fire.

The trumpet sounded. And that night John surrendered his heart to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Trumpets are sounding all over. The last one may sound for you tonight.

The third woe is not spelled out. I think that’s because the third woe is this: Missing such an incredible salvation. Don’t miss it. Repent.

For those of you who think this was kind of a bummer of a message, know that the knowledge that we live in a “God-damned” world really is wonderful news.

This last Wednesday I was really having a Hell of a day. I had spent a long time on the phone with people who wanted to remove their money from the giving because of something I had done . . . I was involved in all kinds of other stuff that was bugging me . . . I really think I was under the oppression of those stinking, demon locusts. It was a very hard day, one of the hardest days I’ve had in quite a while.

In the afternoon, I walked into the bathroom and saw my son Coleman imitating Elvis Presley in the

bathroom mirror. And I thought to myself, “You know, for a ‘God-damned’ world, this is a pretty great day!”

And you ain’t seen nothing yet, children of God.

Further Reading

“And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets. The trumpets shall be to you for a perpetual statute throughout your generations. And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the LORD your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies. On the day of your gladness also, and at your appointed feasts, and at the beginnings of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; they shall serve you for remembrance before your God: I am the LORD your God.”

-Numbers 10:8-10

“And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams’ horns before the ark; and on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. And when they make a long blast with the ram’s horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up every man straight before him.”

-Joshua 6:4-5

The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” To the woman he said, “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your

desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

-Genesis 3:14-19

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day. And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’”

-Acts 2:14-21

The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens

will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.

-II Peter 3:9-10

Consider, for example, the descriptions of the plagues of the seven trumpets (8:6-9:21) and the seven bowls (16:1-21). These form a highly schematized literary pattern which itself conveys meaning. Their content suggests, among many other things, the plagues of Egypt which accompanied the exodus, the fall of Jericho to the army of Joshua, the army of locusts depicted in the prophecy of Joel, the Sinai theophany, the contemporary fear of invasion by Parthian cavalry, the earthquakes to which the cities of Asia Minor were rather frequently subject, and very possibly the eruption of Vesuvius which had recently terrified the Mediterranean world. John has taken some of his contemporaries' worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms. The point is not to predict a sequence of events. The point is to evoke and to explore the meaning of the divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world.

-Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*

We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities . . . we can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

-C. S. Lewis

We need our pain warnings before we can turn to love. Yet if we watch television or read magazines, we often come

across a different attitude toward pain: avoid it, deaden it. But when we take a pill, when we kill the pain, we don't heed its warning.

-Madeleine L'Engle

God never threatens; the devil never warns.

-Oswald Chambers

If you think of this world as a place intended simply for our happiness, you find it quite intolerable: think of it as a place of training and correction and it's not so bad. Imagine a set of people all living in the same building. Half of them think it is a hotel, the other half think it is a prison. Those who think it a hotel might regard it as quite intolerable, and those who thought it was a prison might decide that it was really surprisingly comfortable. So that what seems the ugly doctrine is one that comforts and strengthens you in the end. The people who try to hold an optimistic view of this world would become pessimists: the people who hold a pretty stern view of it become optimistic.

-C. S. Lewis

The modern philosopher had told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the *wrong* place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring.

-G. K. Chesterton

The Mahabharata says, "Of all the world's wonders, which is most wonderful? That no man, though he sees others dying all around him believes that he himself will die."

-Annie Dillard

When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of the world, carefully weighing all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay (the matter grows too difficult for human speech), but let the atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.

-G. K. Chesterton

The Sweet and Sour Gospel

(Revelation 10)

When I was a youth pastor in California, I tried just about everything to get the kids in the back row of the youth room in Danville to *shut up* and listen to the Word of God. I stripped to my underwear one time and put on the armor of God . . . I shaved my head and ate goldfish . . . I refereed a live chicken-wrapping contest . . . I employed wonderful exegetical tools of systematic theology and principles I had learned in seminary . . .

And *still* the kids in the back row would not shut up and listen to the Word of God.

God has done all kinds of things to get *us* to listen too. He sent the prophets, the law, burning mountains, global catastrophes, promises of lands flowing with milk and honey, principles to live by . . . and still Israel hardens her heart and does not listen.

In the church, we get athletes, heroes, and success stories. As a youth pastor, I tried everything to get kids to listen to the Word of God. Then one Monday night the kids in the back row *did* listen. But *I* wasn't speaking. It was one of our volunteers named Jeff Rinehart.

If you saw Jeff, you'd think, "Well, there's a model citizen." He had been a high school football star with great grades . . . had a wonderful wife . . . the kind of person you'd want your high school kids to model themselves after.

But this night he stood in front of the youth group, and with tears in his eyes he told about a time in his life when he lay on the floor of his apartment for three days and did not move. He did not eat. He was surrounded, he said, with knives, pills, and instruments of death, because he wanted to die.

He had never told anybody the story, not even his wife, until a few days before. And that night at youth group,

he told us. He told the kids that although he had professed Christ as a high-schooler, a friend in college enticed him into selling some cocaine.

Jeff said that before long he found himself strapping cocaine to his body and flying back and forth between San Diego and San Francisco, enthralled with the money and the adventure of it all. This happened while no one knew.

About eight months into it, he sat in the back of a limousine talking to a supplier in the front seat behind smoked glass, telling the supplier he was having trouble collecting on one of his accounts. The supplier began to lecture Jeff on the need to enforce discipline.

Jeff said he didn't really know what the guy was talking about, so the guy spelled it out saying, "Well, if you'd like me to have him killed, I will." All at once, it hit Jeff like a ton of bricks. He wasn't a *success*; he was a *drug dealer* talking about having someone snuffed out for money. And all his life, all his history, all his chronology had led to this.

Jeff said that after that realization, he went home and sank into the abyss. Fighting back tears in front of the youth group, he told of those three days lying on the floor in his apartment absolutely horrified at himself. Then, he said, he prayed. And at *that* point, he knew he had a choice. It would either be death or Jesus. He would either kill himself—suicide—or he would die with Jesus—salvation.

He said that on the third day, the phone rang. It was his old youth pastor who had no clue what was going on. But for Jeff it was the sweet sound of grace. Jeff said it was then he chose Jesus (or I could say, Jesus raised him).

Last I heard, Jeff was in seminary.

This is my point: As Jeff wept those bitter tears in front of his wife and all those kids, the Gospel was entirely sweet. And the kids in the back row did not move a muscle.

We are in Revelation 10 now, about halfway through the book. Except for the first three chapters, which were the letters to the seven churches, the book has centered around

this incredible scroll from the right hand of God. The Lamb has been opening the scroll.

The scroll contains the Word of God—meaning of God—“Logos” of God, and by the end of chapter nine, all the seals are broken and all but the very last trumpet has sounded. We’ve seen warfare, famine, plague, death, earthquakes, burning mountains, demons from Hell, horrific armies marching across the face of the earth, the cataclysmic events of history . . .

And then chapter nine concludes with this statement: “The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent . . .” That is, the kids in the back row *still* would not shut up and listen!

REVELATION 10:1-3: *Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring; when he called out, the seven thunders sounded.*

John sees a mighty “angellos”—a mighty messenger—coming on the clouds of Heaven. In chapter one verse seven, he said, “Behold, he is [not “will be”] coming on the clouds of heaven.” This angellos has a rainbow around his head. The rainbow is a symbol of God’s covenant of grace. It was given to Noah.

The face of this Angellos shines like the sun, just like Jesus’ face shone in chapter one. He stands on sea and land, a symbol of His sovereignty over all things. His voice is like a lion roaring. (There is only one lion in the book of Revelation.) When He speaks, the seven thunders sound.

That's like the voice of God from Psalm 29. This Angelos acts just like the manifest glory of God in Ezekiel 1-3. And He acts just like the Son of Man in Daniel 7 and 12.

Jesus *is* the Son of Man; Jesus *is* the manifest glory of God; I believe Jesus *is* the Angel of the Lord—the Angel of Yahweh. And the book of Revelation is entitled, “The Revelation of Jesus.”

Not every angel is Jesus. But I think this one is. He *brings* the Word of God; He *reveals* the Word of God; He *is* the Word of God.

In His hand is a “bibliaridion,” which is a small “biblion,” a small scroll. The scroll may be the same as the scroll in the right hand of God, or it may be a smaller version of the scroll in the right hand of God, but it is very clear that the two are linked.

All seven seals are now broken on that big scroll, and the scroll in the hand of the Angel is open. The Angelos roars, and the seven thunders sound.

REVELATION 10:4: *And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.”*

Seven is the number of creation. There are seven seals, seven trumpets, seven thunders, and seven bowls. We've talked about how I think they are theodicies: that is, explanations of the sufferings and pains of this world.

So broken seals reveal the glory of God. Jesus is revealed in the midst of tribulation. And trumpets proclaim news. Jesus is *heard* in the midst of tribulation. Now there are seven thunders, and John is commanded not to write them down. I think that means there are more purposes in your sufferings and tribulations than we could even begin to

comprehend. And there is more to Jesus our Lord than we are able to know.

In II Corinthians, Paul said he ascended into the third heaven, and he heard things there that he could not utter, that it was unlawful for any man to speak. The thunders are the third series of sevens. Maybe the sevens are all levels of heaven, levels of meaning, levels of reality, or dimensions within creation. Whatever the case, when we speak of Jesus the Christ, we are saying far more than we know.

REVELATION 10:5-7: *And the angel whom I saw standing on sea and land lifted up his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there should be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.*

The trumpet call to be sounded is the last trumpet. Paul says that at the last trumpet, we will be raised—raptured—caught up in the air—with Christ. The trumpet sounds in the next chapter.

But in verse seven, John wrote something strange. “In the days of the trumpet call to be sounded . . .” as if that trumpet call lasts for days, or as if that trumpet call occurs in many days.

Well, “in those days,” the mystery of God, as He announced (“evangelizo” or “evangelized”) to His prophets, will be fulfilled—finished—accomplished. And what *is* the mystery of God?

- Colossians 2:2: The Gospel of Jesus the Christ.
- Romans 16: The Gospel of Christ.
- Ephesians 3:4: The Gospel of Christ.
- Ephesians 1:9: “The mystery of God’s will is to unite all things in Christ.” And according to Paul, this was accomplished when God raised Christ from the dead and made Him sit down in the heavenly places at His right hand.

Now this Angelos standing on the sea and the land says, “There will be no more delay.” Time’s up. What He actually says in the Greek is more like this: “There will be no more ‘chronos.’” King James translates it, “There will be no more time.”

We already read at the start of the Revelation, and we’ll read it again at the end: the “kairos,” not “chronos,” is at hand: Here. God’s time. Eternity. Kingdom time. The kairos is at hand, and there will be no more chronos: Calendar time. Human time. History.

Eternity has invaded temporality.

And it gets weirder than this. For there will be no more chronos in the days of the seventh trumpet call when the mystery is fulfilled . . . as if in the *last* days, eternity will be continually invading temporality . . . as if in the *last* days, the eternal kingdom of God will be overpowering the kingdoms of this world and your own little kingdoms . . . as if in the *last* days, the Gospel of Jesus the Christ will be preached, and people will listen.

According to Peter in Acts 2, these *are* the last days. And eternity *is* invading temporality. And that means a whole lot. It’s fun to kind of philosophize about it and speculate. I’ve wondered if it means something like this: When believers die, they hear the seventh trumpet, and Jesus comes for them, just like He said He would in John 4

(“I will come for you”). They see Him coming on the clouds of heaven. (“He is coming on the clouds of heaven,” says John, “and all eyes will see him.”)

Jesus says to the thief on the cross, “This day you will be with me in paradise.” I think that means the thief saw Him coming, and He came *soon*. And He came in that thief’s generation, so that that thief did not “pass away” or “sleep” like his ancestors the Jews waiting for the Messiah. He saw Jesus coming on the clouds of heaven at the very same moment that *I* will see Jesus coming on the clouds of heaven: The boundary between all of our chronologies and God’s eternity.

It’s just speculation, and I don’t know. But I *do* know this: When you surrender to Christ, you surrender your chronos—your chronology—your history—to His eternity.

“Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but he has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come” (II Corinthians 5:17).

In Christ, you are no longer your chronology. You are no longer the things that you have done in the past, and you are no longer the things that you plan to do in the future. You are defined entirely and utterly by the eternal grace of God in Christ Jesus *right now*. And His grace transforms all your time.

REVELATION 10:8-11: *Then the voice which I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, “Go, take the scroll which is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, “Take it and eat; it*

will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.” And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. And I was told, “You must again prophesy about [or “to” or “before”] many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.”

“Again prophesy.” Prophesy what?

Revelation 19:10: “The spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus.” I think that according to John, every believer prophesies whenever they declare their testimony of Jesus. When you tell people about the love of Jesus, that doesn’t just come from you, according to John. It doesn’t mean that all are gifted as prophets in the way we usually think of prophecy, but all believers receive the Spirit, and “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

So John is told to prophesy *again*. How has he already prophesied? It’s not the first nine chapters of Revelation, because we just heard them. He hasn’t told anybody yet. How has he already prophesied?

Most of his life, he has born testimony to Jesus. And now this prophesying is the content of the little scroll proclaiming Jesus. This scroll contains the Word of God. Maybe the big scroll is the Word of God, Jesus in all of His fullness, and the little scroll is the Word of God, Jesus through John: The testimony of Jesus according to John . . . or the gospel of John . . . or maybe the New Testament . . . or all of the above.

Whatever it is, it is the Word of God—the Good News of God—coming through John. And it’s clear that although all Heaven waits with eager anticipation for the opening of the scroll, and all the earth shakes and the Dragon rages, and kingdoms rise and fall, and armies march across the face of the earth, the Word of God—the content

of the scroll—*will not* be revealed through any of these incredible things.

The Word of God will be revealed through something better: a little, old man, exiled on the Isle of Patmos; seven little, struggling churches in Asia Minor; and you.

Ephesians 3:9: “The mystery hidden for ages in God . . . that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.”

You reveal God’s glory in Christ to angels and demons. And you reveal God’s glory in Christ to peoples, nations, tongues, and tribes. And although they did not repent in all the cataclysms of history, they *listen* to you. They repent, and eternity invades chronology. The kingdom comes.

The kingdom comes when you ingest the Word and speak it.

But this is very important: John is told to *eat* the scroll. He eats the scroll and says it’s sweet in his mouth. The Gospel is sweet. God saves; God loves sinners; God takes all your chronology and gives you His eternity. The Gospel is sweet.

But it becomes bitter, hard to digest, in John’s stomach. Maybe it’s because it’s so large! The seven thunders, eternity invading temporality, mysteries of the ages . . . it’s huge!

Every week that I preach, I get a bitter stomach. I think, “God, who am *I* to talk about this?” But sometimes I also get a bitter stomach for a different reason. It’s so sweet to think God loves you, until you realize that God loves *you* . . . unabridged, naked *you*.

A young mother was seeing a psychologist. The psychologist asked her, “Which of your three children do you love the most?” This young mother said, “Well, I love all of them the same.” He said, “Oh, come on. You don’t

love them all the same. You can't love them all the same! Surely you must love one more than the other." He pressed her and pressed her and pressed her.

Finally, she broke down and started weeping. She said, "Okay! I do love one more than the other! The one that's sick I love more. The one that's scared and confused I love more. The one that's hurting I love more. And the one that's bad, not just naughty but really bad . . . that one I love the most."

That's like the love of God, isn't it? And it's sweet until you realize that *you* are the child He loves . . . bad . . . sick . . . confused. Just *look* at the love of God, Jesus on a cross. Digest it. Who pounded the nails? Could anything be more bitter than that?

It's only by the grace of God that we ever have the courage to see ourselves. Like the song, "It was grace that taught my heart to fear."

My friend Jeff was a Christian. I believe it was a moment of great grace in that limousine when God shown His light and Jeff saw his heart. It wasn't that he had *become* a murdering drug dealer, but he had always *been* one in his heart. That is a bitter pill to swallow. And for three days, he lay on the floor of his apartment wanting to die.

I prayed with a friend once who by God's grace had remembered a very dark period in her life. She was horrified at herself. She wept and wept and wept. I had my arm around her, praying with her while she was weeping, and finally she cried out, "Jesus, I want to die. I just want to *die!*" And she heard these words: "You *are* dying." At that, I felt the peace enter her body.

Several years ago in prayer I had a miraculous encounter with God. He showed me I had gone to seminary and worked in a church and compiled such an impressive chronology of good deeds because in my heart I hated His Bride—the Church—for what I had seen her do to my father. All my good deeds were infected with Hell, because I

wanted to *show* her, I wanted to *beat* her.

In that moment, I saw myself, and I lay on the floor weeping for hours. Then, like my friend, there was great peace. God was crucifying Peter Hiett's proud chronology so I could no longer love Peter Hiett for all his good deeds. I had to just love Peter Hiett by grace. That's a bitter meal, realizing self needs to die. I couldn't excuse that self, I couldn't pay for that self, and if I killed that self, there would just be more self.

According to Matthew, after Judas betrayed Jesus, he repented of his deed. But I don't think he repented of *himself* . . . because he killed himself with himself. That's just more self. Suicide is the self exalting and exerting itself in one final act of rebellion.

After Peter denied Jesus, Scripture records that Jesus looked at Peter, and Peter looked at Jesus. Then Peter ran out and wept bitterly. He took the bitter meal, he repented of himself, he surrendered himself to Jesus for death, and he was born again. And on Pentecost Peter preached, and it was sweet.

If the Gospel has never seemed bitter to you, you need to spend less time talking about Jesus and more time looking at Jesus. For in seeing Jesus, you see yourself. Anthony DeMello wrote:

I had a fairly good relationship with the Lord. I would ask him for things, converse with him, praise him, thank him. . . . But always I had this uncomfortable feeling that he wanted me to look at him. And I would not. I would talk, but look away when I sensed he was looking at me. I was afraid I should find an accusation there of some unrepented sin. I thought I should find a demand there; there would be something he wanted from me. One day I finally

summoned up courage and looked! There was no accusation. There was no demand. The eyes just said, “I love you.” And I walked out and, like Peter, I wept.

When we see Jesus, we see the light. And we see ourselves in the light. And that can be hard on the stomach. So if the Gospel has never *been* bitter in your stomach (even though it doesn’t need to *stay* bitter), then you probably need to hold your tongue. For the undigested Gospel is *not* Gospel; it’s religion . . . and it’s law, it’s works, it’s condemnation, it’s death.

Instead of being the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world,” we become the “Moral Majority” . . . or the “Christian Left” preaching against those rich people. We become a political position. And we preach, “I’m right and you’re wrong!”

Is that the *Gospel*? Is that *sweet*? Yes, it may be sweet in my own stomach, but it’s bitter on my lips for the world. And the Gospel is to be bitter in my stomach and sweet on my lips for the world. “God saves sinners of which I am chief.” That’s digested Gospel on the lips of the Paul in I Timothy 1.

James Dobson says he saw a sign on a convent in California that read: “Absolutely no trespassing. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. Signed, The Sisters of Mercy.”

That sounds familiar. It’s undigested Gospel. But when you digest the Gospel, you preach Christ with compassion and humility.

And having seen my own soul, I can weep for Eric Harris, and I can weep for Dylan Klebold . . . Timothy McVeigh . . . maybe even Judas Iscariot. Do you remember that Jesus called him “friend” that night and washed his feet? Do you think He was lying?

In the next chapter, we're going to meet the two witnesses. I believe they're a picture of us. And when they preach, they preach in sackcloth. Yes, fire comes out of their mouths, but sackcloth means they preach in repentance . . . humility.

Do you see why the Gospel was so sweet on the lips of Peter? Do you see why the Gospel was so sweet on the lips of Paul? Do you see why the Gospel was so sweet on the lips of Jeff Rinehart standing in front of the youth group that night so many years ago?

The Gospel is to be *that sweet* on *your* lips as well; sweet when you ingest it, bitter as you digest it, then once again sweet on your lips to the world. God loves, saves, came for sinners — our testimony.

When I was younger in the Lord and hadn't digested the Gospel very well, I thought maybe I needed to get some bigger *sins*. (I grew up in a pastor's home.) I thought maybe I needed to go fornicate a bit or become a drug lord or kill somebody or *something*, in order to have a "good testimony."

The problem was, I hadn't really digested the Gospel. I hadn't spent enough time looking at Jesus. And I've still only just begun.

Except for the grace of God, we are all plenty enough dead in our trespasses and sins. In fact, I don't think there are degrees of dead. You're just *dead*. And we're all plenty enough dead that the Gospel should *always* be sweet on our lips. If it's not, just spend a good chunk of time alone with Jesus and yourself.

Every now and then, by grace, God lets me see me in the light. Last year on my Sabbatical, for instance, I did something one day. It was the kind of thing I had done lots of times before, but alone with Jesus this day, I *saw* myself. I couldn't hide from myself. And I realized that had I been born into another family with another set of constraints, and another environment, apart from the grace of Jesus, I *could*

have raped somebody. I *could* have murdered somebody.

What I saw was that I was a sinner. And there was no excuse. I remember this feeling of almost insanity. How could I wound *God* like that? I remember driving down the road thinking, “I cannot *stand* myself! I can’t get *away* from myself! I don’t know what to *do* with myself!”

In the end, I remember saying, “God, all I can do is surrender myself—*die* to myself—and believe that *Jesus saves sinners* . . . of which I may be chief.” He loves me, not for my chronology; He loves me from all eternity.

St. Ignatius wrote that one of the greatest graces he ever received was the grace of the tax collector, the discovery that he was a sinner, just like everyone else.

My point is this: John never murdered believers like Paul did. John never denied the Lord in his moment of greatest need like Peter did. But *John* ate the scroll and saw his own heart.

At one point, John wanted to call down fire upon an entire Samaritan village, and Jesus constrained him. But now John ate the scroll, John saw his heart, and when John preached the Gospel, it was as sweet on his lips as on anyone’s in all the world.

So eat the scroll and preach the Word.

For a moment, think of the worst sin you ever committed. If it’s not murder, rape, or being a drug lord, let me help you out. Jesus said, “Guys, if you look on a woman with lust, you’ve committed adultery.” He sees your heart. If you say to someone, “You fool!” you are liable to the Hell of fire.

You see, your chronology is murder, rape, laziness, anxiety, pride, self-righteousness. All your good deeds are like filthy rags.

Now picture the King of Glory, hanging on a cross, covered in blood, nailed to wood, suffering Hell. In your imagination, look at Him. And let Him look at you. Watch these words form on His bloody lips: “I love you. I love you.”

You believe that. And behold, the old has passed away; the new has come. You *are* a new creation. You are no longer your chronology. You are *His eternity*. And the words that come to your lips after you have been to this place are the sweetness of the Gospel for a dying world.

George Gallup did a survey asking Americans what their favorite hymn was. It was “Amazing Grace.” Do you know why? I think it has something to do with the fact that the guy who wrote it was a slave trader. He would chain the slaves up in the bottom of the ship so they could not kill themselves on the journey over to America. And by the grace of God, one day he saw his own heart.

When John Newton was eighty-two, right before he died he said, “I don’t remember much, but I remember these two things: I am a great sinner, and my Jesus is a great Savior.”

Don’t forget those two things, and preach the Gospel. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Further Reading

And I heard the man clothed in linen, which was upon the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand unto heaven, and sware by him that liveth for ever that it shall be for a time, times, and an half; and when he shall have accomplished to scatter the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished. And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end.

-Daniel 12:7-9

And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and sware by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer: but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets. . . . And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time [“chronos”] is at hand.

-Revelation 10:5-7, 22:10

But when the fulness of the time [“chronos”] was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

-Galatians 4:4-5

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality.

-I Corinthians 15:51-53

“Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. . . .”

-John 14:1-3

And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

-Luke 23:43

“Then will appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory; and he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place. . . .”

-Matthew 24:30-34

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. . . .”

-John 5:24

Christ has fulfilled all the promises of God. “Today is the day of salvation.” Procrastination – the chief mischief introduced by predictors and fortune tellers of all kinds (“if the truth is still in the future, I do not have to deal with it today”) – is abolished. We live in an intense, eternal Now.

-Eugene Peterson

To this day we don’t know whether Jesus was born in 4 B.C. or 6 A.D. but we do know that he was not born when our calendars say at 1 A.D., which means that most of us missed the new millennium while we were watching the super bowl in 1995. As Augustine said, “Who cares? Christ wanted to make Christians, not mathematicians.” . . . It’s curious that early Christians had so little interest in time, in dating precisely Jesus’ birth, or even his death. Paul again and again tells people to stop bothering themselves about silly “times and seasons.” Don’t you see? It’s because Paul believed that, in Jesus Christ, *time had ended*. The world had stopped. A new age had been, was being born.

-Will Willimon

And above the firmament over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness as it were of a human form. And upward from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were gleaming bronze, like the appearance of fire enclosed round about; and downward

from what had the appearance of his loins I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking. . . . And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and, lo, a written scroll was in it; and he spread it before me; and it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And he said to me, "Son of man, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. And he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it; and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. And he said to me, "Son of man, go, get you to the house of Israel, and speak with my words to them. . . ."

-Ezekiel 1:26-28, 2:9-3:4

So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, "Take it and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth." And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. And I was told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings."

-Revelation 10:9-11

The reason why preachers are so eager to preach in a chock-full church is that if they were to say what they have to say in an empty room they would become anxious and afraid, for they would notice that it pertains to themselves. . . . To

preach from the pulpit means to bring charges against oneself.

-Soren Kierkegaard

Birth pangs are felt in polished pulpits as once they were in a crude manger. Preaching the Word of God involves pain—for both preacher and hearers. What flows through one person's mouth into the heart of another, after all, is the Word of the wholly other God, and that's bound to create a disturbance along the way.

-Donald McCullough

Christians who remain in hiding continue to live the lie. We deny the reality of our sin. In a futile attempt to erase our past, we deprive the community of our healing gift. If we conceal our wounds out of fear and shame, our inner darkness can neither be illuminated nor become a light for others. We cling to our bad feelings and beat ourselves with the past when what we should do is let go. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, guilt is an idol. But when we dare to live as forgiven men and women, we join the wounded healers and draw closer to Jesus.

-Brennan Manning

Dangerous are those who tell lies in such a way that people think they are the truth, but far more dangerous are those who tell the truth in such a way that people think they are telling lies.

-Soren Kierkegaard

End Times Superheroes (Revelation 11)

Last week in Revelation 10, we saw this mighty messenger who comes down out of heaven, who speaks and the seven thunders sound, and at the sound of the seven thunders John is told to not write down what they say but to seal it up. After the messenger speaks, John is told to go and get the open scroll in the hand of this messenger, eat the scroll, and then prophesy.

REVELATION 11: *Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told: "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant my two witnesses power to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth."*

These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth. And if any one would harm them, fire pours out from their mouth and consumes their foes; if any one would harm them, thus he is doomed to be killed. They have power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to smite the earth with every plague, as often as they desire. And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit will make war upon them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies [body] will lie in the street of the great city which is spiritually called

Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. For three days and a half men from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations gaze at their dead bodies [body] and refuse to let them [their bodies] be placed in a tomb, and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up hither!" And in the sight of their foes they went up to heaven in a cloud. And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever." And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."

*Then God's temple in heaven was opened,
and the ark of his covenant was seen within his
temple; and there were flashes of lightning, voices,
peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.*

And that's the end . . . not of the book, but the end. For the last trumpet is blown and the temple is opened. But right before the end, there is a great showdown between good and evil. In verse seven, for the first time in the Revelation, we meet the Beast that ascends from the bottomless pit. It's probably the Antichrist.

I John 2:18: "Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour."

That was written about 75 A.D. So if *that* was the last hour, this is *really* the last hour! And many antichrists *have* come. But wouldn't you like to know the name of the big one still to come? — the one "whom Jesus will slay with the breath of his mouth at his return" (II Thessalonians 2)?

Over the last two thousand years, there have been many candidates for Antichrist. But in the twentieth century, I would think that the most likely candidate would have been Adolph Hitler, who murdered 6 million Jews. Maybe he was *an* antichrist.

After Hitler, probably the biggest candidate was Anwar Sadat. As a young Egyptian, Anwar Sadat admired Hitler, because Hitler hated the Brits (who occupied Egypt) and the Jews.

In 1970, Sadat became president of Egypt. In 1973, he attacked Israel in the Sinai. But strangely, in 1977 he seemed to change. In 1979, he signed a peace treaty, a covenant with Israel. Christians in the United States thought this new Egyptian Pharaoh was a great candidate for Antichrist . . . one who had seemed like an enemy, signing

this covenant with Israel . . . that sounds a lot like Daniel 9:27.

But then Sadat was gunned down by Islamic fundamentalists and didn't come back to life.

Many Christians thought about Jimmy Carter next. If he wasn't aiding and abetting the Antichrist (he set up that whole treaty), maybe he *was* the Antichrist. I still have the book from 1980, *Countdown to Armageddon*, in which Hal Lindsey points out that Jimmy Carter *was groomed* by the trilateral commission, who clearly smacked of the one world, end times government.

We can smile and shake our heads now, but what do we do about the Antichrist who is to come? It's easy to look back and see it wasn't those guys, but don't you want to know who it is to come? Don't you want to know how to read the times and the seasons and the wars and the famines and the plagues and the geopolitical events of our day and the meaning of the United Nations?

Don't you want to keep your eye on Israel so you'll know? So you can make a difference?

In the *Left Behind* series, the name of the Antichrist is Nicolae Carpathia, and the tribulation saints live in a bunker reading the times and the seasons so they can battle well and make a difference.

But the real superheroes of the tribulation are two freaky witnesses who show up on the new temple mount: Elijah and Moses. They have the power to consume their enemies with fire from their mouths. And Nicolae Carpathia can't touch them until the time of their testimony is complete (which is about book seven).

In the Revelation, John doesn't really tell us who these two superhero witnesses are. However, it's very clear *in* the Revelation and in all of scripture that every believer is called to be a witness ("martyr" in Greek, where we get our word "martyr").

Acts 1, the last time we see Jesus' earthly body:

When they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:6-11).

Jesus says, "It's not for you to know times and seasons . . . but you shall be my witnesses."

So how are you doing? When was the last time you bore testimony to Jesus? How are you doing at being a witness? Why don't you do it *more*? Probably because you're like me. So let me guess at some of the reasons:

1. You just don't know what to say. And you don't want it to sound canned, like you're reading some tract or something.
2. You don't have all the answers to all the questions.

3. You secretly worry, “What if some of *their* questions damage my faith?”
4. You say, “I can’t witness like *other* people. I can’t witness like Andrew Trawick, with his clear, logical presentation of the plan of salvation. And I can’t witness like Annie Thompson, who goes up to people and shares visions and sings songs. I can’t witness like either of those two.”
5. You say, “I’m weak.”
6. You think it won’t make a difference.

Please remember that the Revelation was written to seven little churches in Asia Minor and you. Chapter eleven must not be bankrupt of meaning for us.

So if there are two freaky, weird, fire-breathing prophets in a reconstituted Israelite temple in the distant future for a three and a half-year period, that’s just *fine*. But chapter eleven must mean *more* than that, or it is bankrupt of meaning for almost all the Church throughout history. And the Revelation becomes voyeuristic Bible trivia. But it’s *not*. It’s about *you* being a witness.

The last interlude in a series of seven was about the work of the Church in history and its protection. This interlude is too. It’s about you being a witness *now*.

1. So if you say, “I can’t witness; I don’t know what to say!” eat the scroll like John did. You see, it’s not so much *what* you say as it is who you *are*. You are called to *be* a witness. You don’t simply witness. Digest the Word of God and live it out.

A shepherd feeds his sheep not so they’ll regurgitate the meal on his feet, but so the sheep will digest it and turn it into wool. Digest the fact that you are a sinner. God saves you by grace in Christ Jesus. Digest it, and you will be a

witness: compassionate, humble (they are dressed in sackcloth), and genuine. It won't be canned; it will be *life* in you.

2. "But I don't have all the answers!" Let me tell you a three word phrase that will help you immensely and bring great glory to our Father where there has been a great deal of pain: *I don't know*.

You're not called to testify to the meaning of hominid fossils as they relate to Hebrew verbs in Genesis 1. And you're not called to bear witness to the meaning of everyone's sufferings all the time. The seven thunders are sealed up; you can't know. But you *are* called to bear witness to Jesus, whom you *do* know.

3. "But I might get into a debate, and what if I lose *my* faith?" As soon as John is told to testify, he is given a rod and told to measure the sanctuary or temple. Lots of people think that's proof that there's going to be a temple rebuilt in Jerusalem, but with what will it be rebuilt? In chapter three, Jesus says, "To him who conquers I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God." We *are* the temple. John's measuring is an Old Testament picture from Zechariah and Ezekiel, a picture of setting something aside.

Because of John's witness, the true Church is built, set aside, and sealed even while the nations trample the outer courts. Maybe that's the *visible Church*. But if you really belong to Jesus, He will not let you go. What does that mean? — You can go walk on water without fear. Be a testimony to Jesus in the midst of the storm.

4. "But I can't witness like Andrew Trawick and Annie Thompson." *Fine*. All at once in verse three, we meet these two witnesses to whom it is given to prophesy for 1,260 days, which is 42 months, which is the amount of time nations are given to trample the Holy City, which is three

and a half years, which is “time times and half a time,” which is the amount of time the woman is protected in the wilderness, which is the amount of time allotted to the Beast to blaspheme, which is the recognized amount of time in Luke 4:25 and James 5:17 that Elijah stopped the rain from falling.

It is also the amount of time Antiochus Epiphany defiled the temple (before Jesus came), it’s the amount of time the Romans seized Jerusalem, and it’s the amount of time Nero persecuted the Church. That three and a half is also the duration of Jesus’ ministry on earth in His body.

That amount of time refers to a *lot*. Three and a half is also a broken seven. Seven is God’s perfection. Three and a half is the time of trouble and rebellion. And at the end of Daniel, Daniel asks this man in linen, who appears to be the Son of Man hovering above the waters between two witnesses, “How long till the end of these wonders when Israel is delivered and dead people receive eternal life and stuff like that?”

This man raises his hand like the messenger in chapter ten, and instead of saying, “There will be no more time,” in Daniel the man says, “It will be for a time times and half a time.” Then he tells Daniel, “Go your way, for the words are sealed till the time of the end.” And Daniel is told to seal the scroll. In the Revelation, *John* is told to leave the scroll open, “for the time is at hand.”

I don’t know what it all means, but it at least means this: This is the time of the end. This is time times and half a time. It’s the time of the Church bearing testimony in the last days. And this is the time of the two witnesses. The two witnesses *are* the two olive trees. In Zechariah, the two olive trees before God are Joshua the High Priest and Zerubabel the King.

And the two witnesses are the two lampstands. In the Revelation, lampstands are churches.

And the two witnesses are technically (in the Greek) one body — singular. In Revelation 10:8 and 9a, it’s “body” — singular. In verse 9b it’s “bodies” — plural. It’s like although they are many, they are one body. And they have powers like Moses and Elijah: stopping rain like Elijah; sending plagues like Moses.

Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration as witnesses. I think it may have been those two guys also at the ascension. But Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets. Romans 3: “The law and the prophets bear witness to the righteousness of God.” That is, they bear witness to . . . Jesus. And it’s very important that there are at least two. For the Old Testament law stipulated time and time again, “Nothing shall be established without the testimony of two witnesses.”

So it’s not enough for you to hear just the testimony of Andrew Trawick. You must also hear the testimony of Annie Thompson, and vice versa. There is a reasoned, systematic witness to the Gospel of Jesus, and there is a visionary, poetic, and ecstatic witness to the Gospel of Jesus. And they are *both* prophetic; they are *both* the testimony of Jesus.

Andrew and Annie
Law and Prophet
Moses and Elijah
Logos and Rhema
Principle and Passion
Mind and Motion
Reason and Feeling
Left-brained and Right-brained
Baptists and Pentecostals

. . . maybe even . . .

Male and Female or
Female and Male

. . . but at least two witnesses.

What I am saying is, you need to digest the Word of God and be the witness God made *you* to be. Write a book, sing a song, share your lunch, but be the witness God made you to be. Same scroll, different witnesses; same food, digested differently.

Last year Session was extremely troubled by the great degree of diversity within our church. So we carried out a top secret experiment that very few people knew about. We took Annie Thompson and Andrew Trawick, and we chained them in the basement of the church. We fed them a diet that was exactly the same, cheeseburgers and Coke, for time times and half a time.

At the end of that time, we went down and examined them, expecting them to be exactly the same, because we are what we eat, you know. Lo and behold, we found out that they were *still different!* The same food digested differently. Annie was still singing songs . . . Andrew was still saying, "If you'd like to receive Jesus, repeat these three simple steps." Parents, you understand this. You know that you feed your kids the same stuff, and they turn out differently.

Two witnesses; one Jesus.

Satan will try very hard to get the witnesses fighting with each other. It used to bother me that Christian witness was so diverse, but now I see that Jesus is *way* too big and *way* too colorful and *way* too personal for any one witness.

Your witness, child of God, is unique, priceless, and irreplaceable. Do not be somebody else. Eat the scroll,

digest the Word, then speak of the same truth of Jesus.

Two different witnesses, but the same fire proceeds from each of their mouths. After Jesus told His disciples that they would be His witnesses, He told them to go to Jerusalem and wait for the promised Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit showed up, “and there appeared to them tongues as a fire distributed and resting on each of them.”

In the book of John, Jesus breathes on His disciples before He leaves, and He says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” That’s big. And Jesus had told them the Spirit would be His witness, “convincing the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.”

Listen closely: The Holy Spirit is the Word of testimony and judgment on *your lips* when you testify of Jesus.

5. So if you say, “I’m weak,” the Word—Spirit of God— isn’t. You have absolutely no idea of the power that rides out on the words of your tongue when you speak of Jesus. It’s a fire.

Did the fire disappear after Pentecost? We don’t see it later. Or is it just that we can’t *perceive* it with our eyes in this temporal world of ours? It’s still there. Speak Jesus. Speak fire. You may say, “Well, I can’t stop the rain.” Jesus said, “You’ll do greater works than these,” and He stopped the rain.

I remember standing with Andrew in a field years ago in Brazil. Andrew was preaching, and there were rain clouds everywhere. I was a little bored anyway, so I thought, “Well, I’ll just give it a try.”

I stood there while Andrew preached, I rebuked the clouds to go away in the name of Jesus, and it rained all around us but not on us. When Andrew finished his testimony, it rained.

Maybe we *have* that power sometimes . . . maybe I'm nuts in the head . . . or both. But I do know this: Paul was clear that "all things work for the good of them who love God and are called according to His purpose."

And this is His purpose, that *you* would be His witnesses and testify to the mystery hidden for ages, which is Christ in us. He is a pillar of fire that leads the captives out of Egypt into the promised land; He is Word and will not return void.

6. So if you say, "I tried it and it didn't work," biblically I'm forced to say to you, "You're wrong! You *are* a fragrance from 'death unto death' or 'life unto life.' And the Word of God *will not* return void but will accomplish the purpose He has for it."

As you testify, the world is judged not by you but by the Word. Grace received or grace denied. More than all of that, I have found (and I believe scripture bears me out) that we are just *terrible, terrible* judges of when something "works."

In the witnesses' lifetime, they only see persecution and rejection. In fact, the Beast and his people are allowed to *kill* them. And nobody repents. When Jesus was killed everybody scattered, just like He said they would. If we would have been there, I think we would have said, "Obviously *His* life did not work. Those three and a half years did not work."

The witnesses are raised after three and a half days, which reminds me of somebody else. After they're raised, an earthquake hits, and it's *then*, after they have ascended in a cloud, that people in the Revelation for the first time repent and give glory to God. It "worked" when nothing else in the entire Revelation had "worked" so far! It "worked," but they were no longer around (at least on earth) to see it.

Do you realize that you sow seeds that may not germinate for forty or fifty years? Seeds that may not

germinate for 2,000 years? Paul writes that you have already been raised. John writes that you already have eternal life. And they both argue that your faith in the midst of suffering and tribulation is the witness that God desires. It's the seed that bears fruit.

And when you look at history, you see that that's born out. The seed of the Church *is* the "blood of the martyrs"—witnesses—who praise God with resurrection life, even as they die.

Yet these two witnesses seem to be more than that. They die, stay dead, and then ascend in a cloud. (Maybe one day we'll see two guys do that somewhere.) These two witnesses sound an awful lot like Jesus, almost like they're His *body* or something. And they are.

You need to know that you testify to a Jesus who is a living presence within you. I think that's why Jesus desires people as witnesses, not just textbooks, computers, or tracts. We are witnesses to a living person who inhabits our bodies; we are *His* body, and He lives *His* life in us.

In the end, even though these two witnesses die at the hands of the Antichrist, these saints *do* end up conquering the Antichrist and the Dragon "by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony." The person Jesus *is* the Word of our testimony.

And then the last trumpet sounds. The curtain in the temple rips from the top to the bottom. Verse nineteen: "Then God's temple in heaven was opened . . ." Peace with God. And we are raised with Jesus. The end.

We digest the Word, but in the end we find the Word has digested us. And we *are* the body of the Word of God. We *are* the body of Christ in this world.

So whether or not there are two freaky, weird witnesses in the reconstituted temple in Jerusalem in the year 2059 . . . I don't really care. Because they're *boring* compared to you. The message is the same as it was in 70-something A.D.: People of God, you are far more than you

know. So eat the scroll and speak the Word of God. You *are* the End Times Superheroes.

Let's sum up what we're saying:

To really make a difference; to battle the Dragon, the Beast, and the evil works of the Antichrist; to be End Times Superheroes, we should do all we can to understand and affect the geopolitical events of our day, seeking to enact legislation regarding the nation of Israel, *and* preparing ourselves for the evil dominion of the one world government. Right? Well . . . no.

In fact, I think that's pretty much meaningless. God wants so much more from you. He wants you to tell the people in your life just how much He loves them. In a word, *Jesus*.

Long ago I heard a preacher tell a story about a man who had a conversation with Jimmy Carter, after he lost the presidential election to Ronald Reagan. I don't know how true the story is, but according to the story, Carter was incredibly depressed at the time, because he felt like such a failure . . . a geopolitical failure . . . hostages . . . all the things that were going on . . . the landslide loss to Reagan. (Not only that, but people in his own denomination thought he was the Antichrist!)

In this conversation, Carter's friend said, "Jimmy, is there anything you feel good about?" Jimmy said, "I do feel pretty good about the Middle East Peace Accord." The friend said, "What I mean is, do you feel like a success before God? Did you do what you promised you would when you entered the White House? You told me you would share Jesus with anyone who spent the night at the White House."

Jimmy thought for a minute and then said, "Actually, yes. I did do that." He went on to share with him about a night in 1976 when Anwar Sadat spent a night at the White House. That night Jimmy got up, grabbed his Bible, and went down to Sadat's room. He knocked on the door

and asked Anwar if he could talk to him for a moment. Anwar invited him in, and Jimmy Carter and Anwar Sadat sat next to each other there on the bed. Jimmy said, “Anwar, I believe in a God who loves you so much that He sent His Son Jesus to die.”

According to the story, that night when Jimmy finished his testimony, the two of them sat next to each other on the side of the bed and prayed to the Prince of Peace.

That next year, Anwar shocked the world by going to Israel and giving a passionate speech for peace. The year after that, he won the Nobel Peace Prize. The year after, that the Middle East Peace Accord was signed. A few years after that, he was gunned down by Islamic Fundamentalists for his liberal views.

If Sadat *was* an antichrist, that’s how Jimmy Carter did battle.

Do you want to make a difference in the world? Share Jesus. It changed an antichrist, perhaps. It changed nations, kings, armies, empires, and geopolitical history. And even *that* is backwards. I think the truth is something more like this:

Before the foundation of the world, God took His book, and with His own blood He wrote in that book a name: Anwar. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light! And He created the heavens, and He created the earth and all that is, and He created the nation of Egypt, and He created the nation of Israel, and He told an incredible story to them.

Then He wrapped Himself in flesh and came to this world.

He descended into Egypt as a child, He came out of Egypt into Israel, and He suffered and died on a cross outside Jerusalem for the sins of the world.

He was placed in the ground like a seed, but He rose from the dead, and His kingdom grew and grew and grew . .

. all the way to Georgia. And He arranged all things . . . nations, empires, plagues, famines, rains, geopolitical history . . . such that they would work together for this incredible good, that on a particular night in 1976 the son of a Georgia peanut farmer would sit on the bed next to the son of an Egyptian store clerk and say, “Anwar, I believe in a God who loves you so much.” *Jesus. Fire.* And at that preordained, precise moment, the King of Glory rode into Anwar’s heart on those words and laid siege to His beloved.

In the end, this is always my point: Jesus is so cool that sometimes I kind of *want* to tell people about Him.

During World War II, Martin Niemoller was a household name. He was the bishop of the dissenting Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany. (Probably no Christian did as much to fight the policies of Adolph Hitler, except for possibly Dietrich Bonhoeffer.) Toward the end of his life, Martin said he had a recurring dream in which he saw Hitler standing before Jesus on Judgment Day. Jesus got off His throne, put his arm around Hitler, and asked, “Adolph! Why did you do the ugly, evil things you did? Why were you so cruel?”

In the dream, Hitler would hang his head and answer, “Because nobody ever told me how much you loved me.”

The bishop reported that at this point in the dream, he would wake up in a cold sweat, remembering that during the many, many meetings he had had with Hitler, he had never once said, “By the way, Fuhrer, Jesus loves you! He loves you more than you’ll ever know. He loved you so much that He died for you.”

God is sovereign. But maybe there is more than one way to fight World War II.

So, witnesses of the Living God, eat the scroll, digest

the Word, and speak it. Amen.

Further Reading

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Eli'jah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem.

-Luke 9:28-31

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it

-Romans 3:21

“The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently. . . .”

-Luke 16:16

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Sama'ria and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into

heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” . . . When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them.

-Acts 1:6-11, 2:1-3

“And I will grant my two witnesses power to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.” These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth. And if any one would harm them, fire pours out from their mouth and consumes their foes; if any one would harm them, thus he is doomed to be killed.

-Revelation 11:3-5

“But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning. . . .”

-John 15:26-27

“Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. . . .”

-John 16:7-11

Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

-John 20:21-23

He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. He who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

-I John 5:10-11

“The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

-Revelation 11:18

Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”

-John 12:30-32

Then I Daniel looked, and behold, two others stood, one on this bank of the stream and one on that bank of the stream. And I said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, “How long shall it be till the end of these wonders?” The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven; and I heard him swear by him who

lives for ever that it would be for a time, two times, and half a time; and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end all these things would be accomplished. I heard, but I did not understand. Then I said, "O my lord, what shall be the issue of these things?" He said, "Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end. . . ."

-Daniel 12:5-9

And he saith unto me, Seal the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand.

-Revelation 22:10

"And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. . . ."

-Revelation 12:11

"But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. . . ."

-Luke 6:27-28

The Invincible Army

(Revelation 11:15-19)

In the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indiana Jones and museum curator Marcus Brody explain to Egyptian officials the Ark of the Covenant and why the Nazis want it. “The Bible speaks of the Ark leveling mountains and laying waste to entire regions,” says Brody. “An army which carries the Ark before it is invincible.” That’s cool. The power of God. “An army, which carries the Ark before it, is invincible.”

Wouldn’t you like to get your hands on the Ark and take it with you to your in-laws house or to school or to work? “Hey, boss . . . about that raise . . . I want to show you something here behind my desk. It’s the *Ark of God!*” In one way or another, we’d all love to get our hands on it, I suppose. You can understand why the Nazis wanted it in the movie.

The word ark very simply means “container.” But this ark, the Ark of the Covenant, was special. In Exodus 25, God gives to Moses all the specifications for the Ark. You can read about it.

Beginning in verse sixteen, He says, “You shall put in the ark the testimony that I shall give you.” So the Israelites placed within the Ark the stone tablets—the ten commandments—the Word of God to them. On top of the Ark, the Israelites made two golden cherubim, according to what God had told them, with wings outstretched over what was called the Mercy Seat, which was like God’s throne on earth. “There I will meet with you,” says God to Moses.

God also gave very elaborate instructions for the tabernacle (which means “tent”) where they were to keep the Ark of the Covenant, and elaborate instructions for the veil which was to separate the Ark of the Covenant from the people.

At the end of the book of Exodus, the cloud that led the Israelites (the glory and presence of God, the Angel-Messenger of the Lord, and the fire that spoke from the bush) . . . He descends and fills the tabernacle.

They would carry the Ark into battle. They carried the Ark across the River Jordan, and when the priest's feet touched the water, suddenly the Jordan parted like the Red Sea.

Perhaps the most famous story about the Ark is when the Israelites carried it, as they were commanded to do, around Jericho. Marching around Jericho, the throne of God's presence, holding His Covenant Word, surrounded by the cherubim, seven times on the seventh day, as the priests sounded the seven trumpets.

(All of that should sound rather familiar to you students of the Revelation . . . the throne, the Covenant Word, the cherubim, the sevens, and the trumpets.)

And on the seventh day, on the seventh time around, when the priests had blown the seventh trumpet, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. And the Israelites began to occupy the Promised Land. An army that carries the Ark is invincible.

The only problem is, what army *can* carry the Ark? If you paid attention in Sunday School, or if you simply watched the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, you would know that's the real problem.

At the end of the movie, when the Nazis finally get hold of the Ark and open it, a blast of lightning, wind, and Spirit is released, killing everyone except Indiana Jones and Marian, who both averted their gaze from the swirling images. Through the deafening noise, a Nazi exclaims, "It's beautiful!" before he meets his doom. Then the visible power returns to the Ark, and the lid slams shut.

I love what that Nazi guard said: "It's beautiful!" And it was. The problem was, he *wasn't* beautiful. And then the beauty and the glory and the power and the presence of

God for him was death.

“The Lord, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth” (Malachi 3:1-2)?

In Leviticus 15, when the Ark is brand new, two sons of Aaron go behind the veil in front of the Ark, and they die. God speaks to Moses and says, “Oh yeah, Moses, one important thing: Tell Aaron that before he goes behind the veil before the Ark of my presence, he must make these blood sacrifices and cleanse himself for the atonement of sins, or else he’ll die.”

The Ark is an incredible power, but it’s not a *magic* power. It doesn’t simply respond to our conditions. Lots of people don’t believe in the power of God because it’s not magic; that is, it doesn’t simply respond to their conditions. Abracadabra and there it is! You do this and the Ark does that. I pray for a Cadillac, and I get a Cadillac.

Science can only prove magic powers. “Every time I release the rock, it falls to the floor at thirty-two feet per second squared. Wow! That’s predictable! I’ll call it gravity! I don’t know what it is, but I can count on it.” *Magic power.*

My wife is a power, but she’s not a magic power . . . I’ve found that out. She’s a *personal* power. And the Ark was a personal power. It mattered what person used it and how they used it. People didn’t really *use* the Ark; the Ark used *them*. People didn’t really *judge* the Ark; the Ark judged *them*. What happened to you in the presence of the Ark was your judgment.

So the Israelites would carry the Ark into battle, and it would judge, rewarding the people of God with victory, and destroying the destroyers of Israel with the wrath of God. With the Ark, the kingdoms of Palestine became the kingdom of Israel. But it wasn’t a magic power.

And it wasn’t simply an automatic power, as if you didn’t have to *do* anything. Sometimes we think all we have

to do is *wait on the Lord*, and He takes care of everything . . . while we watch TV.

The Israelites had to march. They had to fight. And it required faith. In fact, it seemed that God almost got a charge out of putting the Israelites in these ridiculous circumstances that required a whole lot of faith, and it was *there* that He revealed His power.

“Oh, you bunch of wandering slaves, poor and weak from wandering in the desert for forty years, this is what I want you to do: Take my box and go march around the mightiest city in all of Palestine, blow some trumpets, make some noise, and all the walls will fall down.”

And if they don’t? Well, then I guess the Israelites get slaughtered. And if they don’t march? I guess they starve to death in the desert. God has a way of putting you in those situations.

Not a magic power; not an automatic power; but an absolutely awesome and horrific power.

This is the problem: Powers like that can be very hard to live with. In I Samuel 5, the Philistines capture the Ark from sinful Israel and try to use it for their purposes. But it destroys the idol in their temple and brings misery to the Philistines. In terror, they send it back to Israel on a cart.

Some Israelites look in it, and they die. They leave it on Abinadab’s farm. Finally, years later, King David came and got it. But one of David’s friends, Uzzah, reached out his hand to steady the Ark, and the Lord “broke forth on Uzzah,” killing him on the spot. David was so freaked out, he wouldn’t bring the Ark into Jerusalem but left it on Obededom’s farm.

An army that carries the Ark is invincible. But what army can carry it?

David finally goes to get it and brings it properly into the city of Jerusalem. But in the very next chapter, he says this: “Hey, I should build a temple for this thing.”

I think I understand his reasoning. I think he's thinking, "We need more than just a *tent* to contain this thing; we need a big, stone temple." You don't put uranium and plutonium in a pup tent. You put it in a cement vault, right?

Jesus is wonderful as long as you keep Him in one of those big, stone churches.

That very night, God speaks to the prophet Nathan. "Say to David, Would you build me a house to dwell in? Ever since I brought Israel from Egypt I've had a tent for my dwelling." Then He explains He moved with His people Israel:

"In all that time did I ever say to any of the leaders of Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house?' Say to David, The Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house, and I will raise up your seed [offspring] after you, and he will establish his kingdom, and he shall build a house for my name. And I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. And I will be his father, and he shall be my son" (II Samuel 7).

He will build my house. The Jews thought that was Solomon, but we know better. The promised seed is Jesus. Do you remember what Jesus said about that stone temple? "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He *did* build a temple. And it *does* contain the presence of Almighty God.

What ever happened to the Ark? Well, after King Josiah in the 7th century B.C., the Ark drops out of history. Some people think the Ark is still buried on the temple mount under the old spot for the Holy of Holies, which is now occupied by the dome of the Rock Mosque, which produces a lot of problems for people like George Bush . . .

politicians.

Some people believe it was carried off by the Babylonians in the Exile. Indiana Jones thinks it's buried in Tanis, Egypt. Some people believe it's guarded to this day in Ethiopia by Ethiopian Orthodox priests. In Jesus' day, they didn't know where it was, but there were hopes and rumors that it would reappear in the temple in the Messianic age. The veil would open, and there it would be.

In 70 A.D., the Romans came along and utterly obliterated the Temple. No Temple, no Ark, no manifest presence of God, no power, and how they longed to find that Ark!

In scripture after King Josiah, the Ark is not seen again until a short time after 70 A.D. when it is seen by a little, old, political prisoner exiled on the island of Patmos by Rome (the new Babylon). He hears a trumpet — it's the seventh trumpet — and he sees the Ark in the temple.

By Revelation 11:15, six of the seven trumpets have sounded. John has been told to measure the temple, and that's when we saw the two witnesses, which I believe are a picture of us looking like Jesus. They ascend into heaven.

The seven trumpets comprise the seventh seal. At the seventh trumpet, that great scroll from the throne of God is now entirely open . . .

REVELATION 11:15-19: Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever." And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God saying, "We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but thy wrath

came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

The temple in heaven is opened; the veil is ripped from the top to the bottom; the great scroll is unwrapped. And behold, in chapter twelve verse one, what do we see? A pregnant woman about to give birth. She gives birth to a baby that we know. He is the Word of God; He is the Word of our testimony; He is the testator and mediator of the new and eternal Covenant; He is the presence of God; He is the Angel of the Lord; He is the King of Glory, and they wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and placed Him in a manger. (Those Hebrews might have even used the word “ark.”)

I believe that great scroll is the new, eternal Covenant, the Word of God. The earthly body of Jesus is like the Ark. And now the Ark *is* in His temple.

Think with me a moment about the things we have just read. In Revelation 11:15, the seventh and last trumpet is sounded. The apostle Paul said, “At the last trumpet the dead will be raised imperishable” (I Corinthians 15:52). For *me*, that’s in the future. Yet Paul and John talked in several places as if it were in the *past*.

In Colossians and Ephesians (Paul’s letters to these seven churches in Asia Minor to which the Revelation is *also* addressed), Paul writes as if they’ve already been raised. In Colossians 3:1, he writes, “If you’ve been raised with Christ . . .” He tells them in Ephesians, “You are seated with Him in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 2:6), like it’s a done deal!

You *are* the temple of the Lord, seated in the heavenlies.

At the seventh trumpet, voices cry out, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.” We don’t see that yet, but Jesus said in Revelation 1 that He is the “ruler of the kings of the earth.”

In Matthew, after Jesus rose He said, “All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth. So go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18-19).

Paul writes in Ephesians 1:22, “God has put all things under Christ and made Him head over all things for the church.” It’s like Jesus has already won, and now He’s just unwrapping, unfolding, His victory in space and time through *us*. He has “taken His great power and begun to reign.”

The kingdom came with Jesus; it’s growing in space and time, coming through us—the Church. And through us—the Church, the destroyers of the earth are destroyed, Satan and all his evil works.

In Ephesians, Paul writes, “This is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages [the Gospel] that through the church [us] the manifold wisdom of God would be made known to the principalities and powers” (Ephesians 3:9). You see, *our job* is to deliver a message to Satan. The message is this: YOU LOST! The Church reveals the New Covenant—the Word—the Gospel—in the days of the seventh trumpet call.

At the seventh trumpet is judgment. We know that the judgment day is in our future. Yet John records Jesus saying, “Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’ He said this to show by what death he was to die” (John 12:31-33).

Judgment is *now*, as if we’re standing before the Ark of the Covenant *now*. How can that be?

In Matthew, Jesus describes the judgment. He says:

“When the Son of Man comes in all his glory . . . he will sit on his glorious throne and divide the nations. . . . And the king will say to those on his right, ‘Enter into the kingdom prepared for you. For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick and in prison, and you came and visited me.’ And those on his right will say to him, ‘But Lord, when did we see you hungry, sick . . . ?’ And he will say, ‘Whatever you did to even the least of these, my brethren, you did to me’” (Matthew 25).

We’ve focused a whole lot on “the least of these” part. But Jesus said “even the least of these, *my brethren*.” Who are His brethren? *Us*. That is, “What you do to my people you do to me.” Why? Because He is present in His people and known in His people. They are His temple. And this is the judgment: He is saying, “Do you love me? Do you want me? The lowly, weak people in your life are my tabernacle, my moving temple. My glory is hidden in their weakness. And what *will* you do in my presence?” *Judgment*.

There *is* a judgment day to come. Yet *now* is this world judged. There *will* be a consummated kingdom, but all kingdoms belong to Jesus the Christ *now*, and He uses them for His purposes. Through the Church, He unfolds His victory in space and time.

It was when Jesus the Christ hung upon that Roman cross that He cried, “IT IS FINISHED.” It *is*. And it was at that moment that the veil in the temple ripped from the top to the bottom. And behold! The Ark wasn’t there.

Now John looks and sees the temple. I think that’s the temple he measured at the start of the chapter. (Suddenly, we saw the witnesses, who I think represent us, then they died like Jesus—martyred, and then they ascended

into heaven.) So now the temple is in Heaven, and he looks, and it's open. Behold, within it—within *them*—is the lost Ark! The Church carried the testimony.

So this is my message: The Ark of the Covenant is in the temple. And if Indiana Jones would have paid attention in Sunday School, he would have known. The Word of God . . . “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you . . .” (Colossians 1:26-27).

The Ark is in the temple.

I've told you about the four-year-old girl who went to the doctor for an examination. He looked in her ear and said, “Hey, is the Cookie Monster in there?” She said nothing. “He took his tongue depressor, looked in her mouth, and said, “Hey, is Big Bird in there?” She said nothing.

He took a stethoscope, put it over her heart, and said, “Is Barney in there?” This little girl became animated and said, “Oh, no! *Jesus* is in my heart. Barney's on my underpants.”

I don't know if Barney was on her underpants, but that's the Gospel. The Ark is in the temple. Jesus is in her heart.

When my son Coleman was little, he used to put his fingers in his ears (because we had told him Jesus was inside him) and yell, “Jesus, I can't hear you! Are you in there? I can't hear you!” I don't know if he ever heard an audible voice or not, but he *did* hear Jesus. Because Coleman will tell you — Jesus is in there.

That's not just a sentiment. It's not just a manner of speaking. It is a basic doctrine of our orthodox faith. And how can it be that little Coleman Hiatt is not utterly

destroyed by the presence of God, like those Nazis in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Uzzah, and the sons of Aaron? How is it that Coleman doesn't just blow up? What army *can* carry the Ark of the Covenant? — Coleman. Us. The Church.

How can that be? Hebrews 10:19 says it's because of the "blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh) . . ." — His sacrifice.

Jesus, the very presence, glory, love of God, messenger of the Lord, died that we may enter and that He may enter us and live in us—His temple, His people. The Ark *is* in His temple—His Church, and the army that carries the Ark *is invincible!* In fact, it's already finished in all eternity.

Do you hear what the Lord is saying to these seven little churches in Asia Minor up against the Roman empire in the height of its glory? He's saying, "I am in your midst. I walk among the lampstands. And I am in my temple, which is my people, and my seven little churches. We will topple the Roman Empire and the Great Dragon and the Beast and the Whore of Babylon. For the gates of Hell cannot stand against my Church."

(Now two thousand years later, if you press any secular historian, they are going to have to admit sooner or later that the greatest power unleashed in the sons of Adam on the face of our planet earth was contained in those seven little churches in Asia Minor.)

"Laodicea, you are rich, fat, and lazy. But I'm still in you. Let's get up and march. Philadelphia, I know that you are weak. But I'm in you, and I'm strong. Smyrna, I know you suffer, I know you die, but I am in you, and I *do not* stay dead. So have faith, Smyrna, and walk into your promised land."

Do you hear what the Lord is saying to us? "My Ark is in my temple. And my temple is a tabernacle, and it moves. I travel with you to your in-laws house and to school and to work, and I will travel with you when you leave this

place and go across the highway. I travel with you, and don't you *dare* think that you can leave me in some stone building somewhere. I move with my people." And I think He may say this to us:

Stop waiting for my presence, as if I'm not already there. I *am* there. And stop waiting for my power, as if you don't have it. My power is in you. And stop waiting for the next program or the next class or the next professional to come along. I am with you and in you, and nothing is impossible for me. I told you, "Greater works than these shall you do." So pray for the sick. Pray that you might prophecy. Cast out Satan. Move mountains. Walk on water. Occupy your promised land. Your only hindrance really is your own fear and faithlessness. But don't you ever say that I can't use you! Don't you ever say that someone can't change! Don't you ever say that it can't be done! For I am in my temple.

"There is an immeasurable greatness of power in us that believe." But, you see, it's not magic. And it's not automatic. It's the person of Jesus. And I think He is limited by our faith, because He wants us to surrender to His life lived in us out of love.

I think He's also limited by our faith because He doesn't want to show up and scare us to death. He doesn't take us by force. *Satan* will, if he gets the opportunity, but not Jesus. He romances our hearts. He suffered and died for us that we would surrender in love. And *we do!*

Listen very closely. *That* is the greatest power of all. The slaughtered Lamb is on the throne. The Eternal Covenant is on the Mercy Seat. The King of Glory is pinned

to a wooden cross.

It is the power of God unto salvation. It is the power that draws all men unto Himself. My friends, that power dwells in you as well. Christ lives His life in you when you walk by faith in Him.

So take a shot at it. Pray for the sick. Cast out demons. (He has given you that authority.) March into your promised land And . . . HANG ON CROSSES.

The seven churches toppled the Roman Empire. I got to meet some of the believers who toppled the government of Romania. It happened like this (a lot of little encounters like this that aren't little):

Richard Wurmbrand was one of the prisoners in those Romania prison cells, and he tells about the years when he was tortured and beaten and left to starve . . . what the world would consider certainly one of the least of the brethren . . . one of those to be discounted.

He tells about a young atheist who was thrown in his prison cell one day, screaming, "I *hate* God, and leave me alone!" But Wurmbrand shared his faith with him anyway . . . told him about Jesus . . . argued about the Gospel . . . presented evidence . . . quoted Scripture . . . read Scripture . . . still young Joseph would not believe.

During that time, Wurmbrand loved the other prisoners in the cell. He would give his food when they were hungry and he was hungry. He even tore out the lining of his jacket and risked freezing to death one winter in order to give it to Joseph.

One day Joseph said to him, "We've read nearly everything that Jesus said, but still I wonder what he was like. I mean, what was he like to know as a man?"

Wurmbrand thought for a moment and then said, "Joseph, years ago when I was in Room 4 there was a pastor there who lived like Jesus. He gave himself away. He loved everyone there. One day a committed Communist asked him a very similar question. He said to the pastor, 'What was

Jesus like?’ In a moment of great courage and great humility, this pastor said, ‘Jesus was like me.’ The committed communist man said, ‘If he was like you, then I love him.’”

Joseph looked at Wurmbrand and said, “If Jesus is like *you*, then I love him too.”

I really believe that at that moment, a kingdom of this world became the kingdom of our God and of His Christ. And the Destroyer was cast out. And Joseph walked through judgment and into eternal life. It was the same moment that a man lifted His head from a cross and cried, “It is finished.”

Eternity invading time. The Ark is in the temple. And the army that carries the Ark *is* invincible.

Further Reading

“They shall make an ark of acacia wood; two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. . . . And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you of all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel. . . . And you shall make a veil of blue and purple and scarlet stuff and fine twined linen; in skilled work shall it be made, with cherubim; and you shall hang it upon four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, with hooks of gold, upon four bases of silver. And you shall hang the veil from the clasps, and bring the ark of the testimony in thither within the veil; and the veil shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy. . . .”

-Exodus 25:10, 21-22; 26:31-33

The LORD spoke to Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died; and the LORD said to Moses, “Tell Aaron your brother not to come at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the mercy seat which is upon the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. But thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. . . .”

-Leviticus 16:1-3

So they set out from the mount of the LORD three days' journey; and the ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them. And the cloud of the LORD was over them by

day, whenever they set out from the camp. And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Arise, O LORD, and let thy enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee." And when it rested, he said, "Return, O LORD, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel."

-Numbers 10:33-36

So Joshua the son of Nun called the priests and said to them, "Take up the ark of the covenant, and let seven priests bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark of the LORD." And he said to the people, "Go forward; march around the city, and let the armed men pass on before the ark of the LORD." . . . On the seventh day they rose early at the dawn of day, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times: it was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout; for the LORD has given you the city. . . ." So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city.

-Joshua 6:6-7, 15-16, 20

When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they carried it from Ebene'zer to Ashdod; then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. . . . And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us; for his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our god." . . . They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the

Philistines, and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not slay us and our people." For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there

-I Samuel 5:1-3a, 7, 11

And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there because he put forth his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the LORD had broken forth upon Uzzah; and that place is called Pe'rez-uz'zah, to this day. And David was afraid of the LORD that day; and he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" So David was not willing to take the ark of the LORD into the city of David; but David took it aside to the house of O'bed-e'dom the Gittite. And the ark of the LORD remained in the house of O'bed-e'dom the Gittite three months; and the LORD blessed O'bed-e'dom and all his household. And it was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of O'bed-e'dom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of O'bed-e'dom to the city of David with rejoicing

-II Samuel 6:6-12

Now when the king dwelt in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies round about, the king said to Nathan the prophet, "See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent." And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart; for the LORD is with you." But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says

the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” . . . When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son”

-II Samuel 7:1-7, 12-14a

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

-John 2:19

“Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” He said this to show by what death he was to die.

-John 12:31-33

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. . . . I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. . . .”

-John 14:12, 18-20

