

Messages from Revelation

by

The Rev. Henry Bast, D.D.

Temple Time Minister



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About the Author

Dr. Henry Bast graduated from Hope College with an A.B. degree in 1930, and from Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan, in 1933. Both are educational institutions of the Reformed Church in America. His first pastorate was at the Richmond Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, which he served from 1933 to 1939. He was then called to be college pastor and professor of Bible at Hope College, a position he filled for five years. He left Hope College to serve the Bethany Reformed Church of Grand Rapids as pastor from 1944 to 1956. In 1956 Hope College

conferred upon him the Doctor of Divinity degree. From 1956 to 1963 he taught preaching at Western Theological Seminary as Professor of Practical Theology. In the spring of 1963 Dr. Bast resigned his seminary position to become pastor of Bethany Reformed Church in Grand Rapids for a second time. Dr. Bast also served on numerous Boards and Committees of the Reformed Church, and was President of the General Synod in 1960-61.

During the last 20 years of his active ministry (from 1952 - 1972) Dr. Bast also served as the speaker on the Temple Time (now Words of Hope) broadcast until he was forced to retire due to ill health. Dr. Bast died in 1983. In 1986 Western Seminary established a preaching program in his honor which includes an endowed chair, the Henry Bast Professor of Preaching.

I

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.

— REVELATION 1:1-3

The book of Revelation is one of the most important and yet one of the most neglected books in the Bible. Some feel that it has nothing to say to our age because the book was written for the church of the first century only. Others who are exclusively interested in changing the political, social, and economic structures of society consider the book to be wholly irrelevant to our time. Some are bewildered by the visions and the symbols of the book and feel it is too difficult to tackle. And so, for many modern men and women even in the church, Revelation remains a closed book.

This is a great loss because the book of Revelation has very much to teach us. If we rightly understand it we will see that it is one of the most relevant books in the Bible for our time because it reveals another world. It teaches us that heaven is real. J. B. Phillips, to whom we owe a brilliant translation of the New Testament, tells us that when he had finished translating Revelation he felt that the book had taken him out of the time and space world with which we are

all so familiar and into another world; not into some never-never land of fantasy, but into the ever-ever land of God's eternal values and judgments.

Another reason that the book has so much to say to us is that it was written in a day like ours. In the last decade of the first century the church faced the full might of the Roman empire because Christianity had become a proscribed religion. The whole environment in which the church existed was hostile to the church. Philosophers scoffed at its message and politicians saw in it a danger or threat to their position in a totalitarian state. From a human point the situation seemed utterly hopeless. The tiny little groups of believers in the Roman world of the first century seemed doomed to certain extinction. It was to this beleaguered church that this message of hope and encouragement was first addressed.

I need not spend much time telling you that we are in the same situation in the world today. We too face a hostile environment. In many areas of our world there has been con-

tinuous persecution of Christians for fifty years. In other parts of the Western world the intellectual climate is totally hostile to Christianity. The doctrines of the Christian faith are not merely denied; they are dismissed as being wholly meaningless and irrelevant in the twentieth century.

With this brief introduction we begin our study of Revelation. The opening line of the book is, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." This identifies both the content and the nature of the book. Revelation is the communication of truth. It is the disclosure of things that cannot be seen until they are unveiled. Revelation is defined by Paul when he speaks of the Word of God as follows: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, [that] God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). Revelation then is truth that is beyond human conception. It is truth that does not arise out of the human mind but comes to us from the mind of God.

This defines for us the nature of this book. It teaches us that truth is not limited to the material world, to sensual things. In this comprehensive book we face total reality. It is not only a book about personal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, though this is one of its main themes; it gives us a broad view of history, beginning with the creation of man and taking us to the end of time. In this age when the material world is all that some people can see, we need a broader view; we need the revelation that God gives through Jesus Christ.

The book opens with a glorious vision of Jesus Christ the living Lord. John tells us that when he saw Jesus Christ in this vision, he fell at His feet as though dead. He heard a

voice saying to him, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." He saw Jesus Christ in all the glory and splendor of His deity. This vision is a symbolic representation of the teaching of the whole New Testament that Jesus Christ is God. He is "the beginning and the end." He has always existed. He is "the Lord who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8).

But He is God who has become man. In this vision the voice continues to speak and say, "Fear not, I am the living one; I died, and behold I am alive forevermore." His life on earth is described briefly in His death and resurrection. "I died, and behold I am alive for evermore."

He who walked this earth with His disciples died on the cross and rose again from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only a historical fact, but a continuing reality. He is the living One. We have seen that the major purpose of the book is the encouragement of believers to be faithful to Christ, and now we see that the first encouraging word to the church is the revelation that Jesus Christ is alive. This means that He is alive for us now. He is not merely a great teacher or a social worker, or a religious genius who died a tragic death; He is the living One, active in history, and concerned about His church on earth. Just as He laid His hand gently on John's shoulder and said, "Do not be afraid, I am alive," so He speaks to us. You remember how He said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

He is not only alive, but He knows what is going on in the church and in the world. He identifies Himself with His people.

When Saul of Tarsus was still a bitter enemy of the church, persecuting Christians and putting them to death, the Lord appeared to him and said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Jesus Christ is the living One. This is the first message that comes to us out of this wonderful book.

Having observed how Christ introduces Himself to the church, let us now observe the splendor and majesty of His appearance. John tells us that this person he saw was:

... one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

Rev. 1:13-16

Here we see the glory and the majesty of the risen Christ. We will pause for a moment to look at some of the details of the vision. The long robe with the high girdle just under the armpits identifies a person with high rank and royal power. The splendid garments indicate that He is both priest and king; and white hair, as we know from the prophecy of Daniel, is the symbol of deity. He has divine wisdom and purity. His eyes flashing with fire indicate that He has divine knowledge piercing to the innermost secrets of the heart. The feet burnished with bronze represent the ability to tread down all opposition.

The voice that sounded like the roaring of the surf of the sea indicates that Jesus has the power of Almighty God. A roaring surf is a symbol of irresistible power. The sharp sword piercing out of His mouth is the symbol of judgment.

Here is the part of the Revelation of Jesus Christ which we seldom hear today. If we are willing to go to the New Testament for our answer to the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” we will find that He is truly man and truly God. This is taught in all the books of the New Testament, but it is taught with finality in power and the magnificent symbolism of this wonderful book.

The third factor to consider in this vision of Christ is that it reveals the presence of Christ in the church. In this splendid vision Christ is standing in the midst of the lampstands, that is, in the midst of the church. Here again, we need to be reminded that in the book of Revelation a disclosure of truth is made primarily through symbol. Not all the symbols are explained in the text itself, but this one is. We are told that the seven lampstands are seven churches, which represent the totality of the church of Jesus Christ. The fact that He is standing in the midst of the lampstands means that He Himself is present with the church. He is not only the Lord of glory in heaven; He is with His people on earth. This is the fulfillment of His promises, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age” and “Where two or three are gathered together, there am I in the midst of you.”

This is another word of encouragement that comes to us out of this vision of the living Lord. Since Christ is with His people here on earth, the church will certainly sur-

vive. When Christ was on earth, He said to His disciples, “I will build my church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” In spite of the fact that the church seems to be doomed today in this secular society, and many boastfully declare that it is outmoded and already defeated, we learn from the book of Revelation that it is the world which will be destroyed and the church which will triumph.

The survival of the church in history, in this evil world, for over 1900 years is one of the miracles and wonders of God’s power. This book says to us today: Don’t count the church out. However victorious or overwhelming the powers of evil arrayed against the church may seem to be, remember it has faced opposition before, but the opposition has always been defeated and the church has always triumphed.

This is because Christ stands in the midst of the church, among the lampstands, in the midst of His people. He says, “I am alive forevermore and have the keys of death and Hades.” This means that He has power over death and the grave. Since you will surely die and enter into the realm of

the dead, don’t you think you ought to know the only One who can deliver you out of this death? No human being who has ever lived has even claimed to have power over death and the grave, but Christ declares it and demonstrates it. He won this power and demonstrated it in His resurrection from the dead.

With all our boasted knowledge and power, all our amazing discoveries in the realm of the material and physical, haven’t you observed how impotent we are to solve our moral and spiritual problems? The modern secularists are strangely silent about an event that faces all of us — the fact of death. Jesus Christ is the only One who has the key to death and the grave, which He won by His resurrection from the dead.

Put your trust in Him, confess Him before men. Say quite simply and sincerely, “Lord, I have sinned; Lord, I believe,” and He will put His hand on your shoulder and say, “Fear not, I have the keys of death and Hades.” May God enable you to find deliverance from death and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

II

The Message to the Churches

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

— REVELATION 3:20-22

Last week when we began this series of messages from Revelation, we studied the vision of Christ which comes in the first chapter. There we saw Jesus Christ the Son of God risen from the dead, ascended into heaven, and enthroned at the right hand of God. The living Lord was standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands. We are told that the lampstands are seven churches, and thus we have already been introduced to the symbolism in the book.

The second and third chapters of the book of Revelation contain letters to the seven churches. This shows us that Christ is not only alive and that He is concerned about the church, but that He also speaks to the church. John is commanded to write the specific message the risen Christ has for each church. The words are the Lord's and it is communicated to the Apostle John by the Holy Spirit.

In this day when churches are continually speaking to the world by sending out pronouncements on the social, political, and economic issues of the day, and making

their own pronouncements about the mission of the church, it might be well for us to listen to what Christ has to say to the church. The letters to the seven churches give us ample opportunity to hear what Christ thinks of the church on earth. In each letter the church is exhorted to hear what the Spirit has to say to the churches.

We begin our study of Christ's message to the churches by observing the character of the churches to which He spoke. The fact that they are all named indicates that they were actual churches. These are all local congregations or churches founded for the most part by Paul in his Ephesian ministry and ministered to now by John the apostle. It is important for us to observe this because it teaches us that the book of Revelation was written in an actual historical situation. It is rooted and grounded in history.

But it is clear from the book itself that the living Lord in these messages is not addressing the churches of that day only. All the reproofs, encouragements, warnings, and promises which these letters contain are not

limited to the designated churches. These messages and reproofs are for the church of all times. Each letter ends with a refrain, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

As we analyze the content of these letters, we find that there are words of encouragement, but there are also sharp words of rebuke for those who have been disobedient. In these messages to the seven churches, each church passes under the review of the living Lord because He is the supreme pastor of all the churches.

One church had grown cold, having lost its first love. Another church had some who followed the teaching of Balaam, the false prophet who led Israel astray, openly advocating idolatry and immorality. There were others that harbored heresy. In one church there was a group known as the cult of Jezebel, the idolatrous queen who almost completely wiped out true religion in Israel. Another church harbored a group known as the “synagogue of Satan.” Finally the church of Laodicea is rebuked because it was neither hot nor cold but lukewarm.

From the fact that there was sin and wickedness in the primitive church, we may draw several inferences that will help us to understand the church in our days. The first is that when we speak of the church we must make a distinction between the church visible and the church invisible. This is part of the Biblical doctrine of the church that was strongly emphasized by the Reformers. There is one church because there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one hope of our calling. When we speak of the church invisible we mean the real church of Christ, which is spoken of in the Bible as the body

of Christ, the elect, the household of faith, all those who are truly incorporated into Christ by faith. It is spoken of as being invisible because it is invisible to the eye of man. No one but Jesus Christ Himself can look into the human heart. Hence, only God knows those who are truly His, as Paul says:

But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”

2 Tim. 2:19

To speak of the church visible and the church invisible then is to look at the church from two points of view. The church invisible is the body of Christ and it consists of the whole community of believers. The church visible is the institution of the church in which these believers are assembled in outward association in work and worship. Since we cannot look into the hearts of men when the church is formed on earth, we must admit people into the church by a creditable profession of faith. For this reason, the church on earth is not a perfect church. It does not consist exclusively of the regenerate. The church on earth — the visible church — is a mixed assembly. This is because it is governed and administered by men who are not omniscient and not infallible. That is why there are hypocrites, false teachers, and unregenerate sinners in the church.

Furthermore, we must remember that Jesus Christ forbids that we should try to build a perfect church. Remember the parable of the wheat and tares. The disciples in

their anxiety and zeal for the kingdom of God called Jesus' attention to the weeds in the wheat and asked Him if they should pull them out. You remember how Jesus answered: "Let both grow together to the harvest."

The fact that there is false teaching and wickedness in the church does not mean that Jesus approves of these things; in fact, the main emphasis of these letters is that the living Lord never approves of wickedness. Hypocrites may deceive men but they cannot deceive Jesus Christ.

The second thing that invites our attention in Christ's message to the churches is the content of the message. The main thrust of the message is the call to repentance. This runs through all the letters.

Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. . . . I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality.

Rev. 2:16, 21

The living Lord will never tolerate iniquity and sin. He says of a church which condones sin:

Except they repent of their deeds, I will strike her children dead. And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

Rev. 2:23

When we consider all the wickedness, iniquity, false teachings, and even blasphemy that is perpetrated by and through

some who call themselves Christians, we may well ask if there has ever been an age that needs to hear the call to repentance which Christ addressed to the church of His day as desperately as we need to hear it. We evangelicals insist that we believe the whole Bible and that we are obedient to Jesus Christ — but are we? Do we preach repentance? The gospel is good news, but there is bad news before the good news; and the bad news is that we are sinners, that we have broken the law of God, that we are alienated from Him and that He never winks at such sin and disobedience.

We would do well, all of us, to read the New Testament again and study the preaching reflected there. The New Testament opens with the preaching of John the Baptist who came crying, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The Gospels then introduce us to Jesus Christ, who came into Galilee "preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel'" (Mark 1:14, 15).

No one stressed the necessity of repentance more strongly than Jesus Christ Himself. It was He who said over and over again, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

In that magnificent description of Christ that comes at the end of Revelation 3, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," there is a call to repentance as is evident from the previous verse: "Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:19).

The Christ who stands at the door knocking is waiting for an answer; in fact, we are expected to answer. We are held re-

sponsible if we do not answer. He says, "If any man hears my voice and opens the door. . . ." We ourselves must open the door. We must repent. The door is the door to the human heart and Christ never breaks through that. He doesn't open it by force.

Some keep the door closed deliberately and consciously. Some years ago in my ministry I was asked to visit a man who was dying of cancer. He had never gone to church, but his Christian neighbor asked me to go and call on him. I spoke to him about Christ and the meaning of death, but I got no response. No matter what opening I tried to make, he turned the conversation to something else. Suddenly, as a kind of last effort, I asked him if he would like to have me pray for him. He rolled over in bed, turned his back to me and said as he turned, "No thanks, don't bother." He refused to answer the call.

On the other hand, although the Bible teaches human responsibility, it does not teach that a man can respond to the gospel whenever he wants to. The call comes from Jesus Christ and it comes while He stands there knocking. He takes the initiative and He sets the time. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." This means that the call to repentance is a gift of grace. It is God who gives repentance and forgiveness of sins. The door of the human heart can be opened only when Christ stands knocking, that is, when the gospel is preached and heard. This

is a situation we cannot create ourselves, and that is why the invitation is always urgent: "Today if you will hear his voice, harden not your heart. Behold, now is the acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation."

The third thing to observe in the message of Christ to the churches is the wonderful promise with which the message ends: "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me." This is metaphorical language, but it promises the closest and most intimate fellowship with Christ that is possible for a person to have. "The love of Jesus, what it is none but His loved ones know."

If you have once confessed Christ and failed Him, He invites you to turn from your sin so that He may come back to you and fill your life anew. If you have never confessed Christ and you are listening to this broadcast, then Christ is knocking at the door of your heart. The invitation says, "If anyone hears my voice. . . ." You see, it is wide open. He will fill the emptiness and frustration that characterizes your life now. Nothing else will do it. Millions have tried to find the fulfillment of their desires in the world and have failed. Jesus Christ has come to give us the abundant life. Here is the call: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." And here is the promise: "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me."

III

The Vision of Heaven

After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this."

— REVELATION 4:1

This verse of the fourth chapter of Revelation brings us to the main theme of the book. In the previous chapter we are introduced to the churches on earth in their struggle with the might and power of Rome. The scene now shifts from earth to heaven. John says that he heard a voice like a trumpet, saying, "Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this." The natural sense of these words means that the content of the book is the revelation of what will happen after John's day. We can see, therefore, that this is a book of prophecy, which reveals what will take place between the first and second comings of Jesus Christ.

The major theme is a revelation of the conflict between Christ and the devil, the church and the world, or ultimately between good and evil. It stresses the trials and tribulations that the church will suffer in the world. The major purpose is to strengthen and encourage the early church now faced with the hostility of the Roman empire. But its message is not for the primitive church only; it is meant for the church in all ages. It teaches us that no matter how bad things

may seem to be on earth at any moment of time, Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. He is in charge. He has already conquered sin and death and Satan in His resurrection. He was declared to be the Son of God with power by His resurrection from the dead. The description of this great conflict begins in the sixth chapter, but before the struggle begins, we are given a wonderful consolatory vision of the reality of heaven.

John begins his description of the vision of heaven with an exclamation, "and lo, in heaven an open door." The apostle sees heaven through that door, and through his eyes we can see it too. He says that he was in the Spirit, which means that his mind was completely absorbed in the revelation. The open door means that the knowledge of the invisible world comes to us by revelation only.

Before we look at the details in this majestic vision of the glory and power of heaven, we must understand what we face intellectually in the Western world in the twentieth century. Modern thought completely denies and rejects the reality of heaven. It is popularly supposed that science

has made it impossible for us to believe in another world, but this is a mistaken idea. It is not in the sphere of science to make such a decision or to reach such a conclusion, for it does not come within the realm or the data that scientists deal with. In fact, some of the greatest scientists of all time, especially in our day, have confessed that they do believe in God and in the reality of heaven.

We must understand that it is a militant, philosophical secularism that has denied the revelation of the Bible about God and heaven, and this denial has infiltrated into the church. The continuous mocking of the reality of heaven by Communists and secularists, the constant derisive attack on Christianity as a religion that has nothing to offer but pie in the sky, has weakened or destroyed the faith of many today. The enemies of faith, however, are not all outside of the church; the secularists in the church also have no interest in any world but the one we live in. This explains the constant insistence that all our preaching must be relevant. We are evidently not permitted, even in the church, to entertain thoughts of the reality of heaven.

The book of Revelation openly challenges the position of the secularist in the church. It teaches us to confess and proclaim the faith against all opposition. We must not be intimidated. We must not remain silent. We believe that the gospel is true; therefore we believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the reality of heaven. This is the historic faith. The faith that produced the martyrs in the Christian church was the faith of men and women who were absolutely certain about heaven and about God. They knew Jesus Christ was alive and that He ruled

from heaven. They knew the meaning of death and that in their martyrdom they would immediately be with Christ. “Absent from the body, present with their Lord”; this was their faith. They believed it because it came to them by revelation, which was not for them only but for us also.

We must recognize once more that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge that comes to us by human investigation, and the knowledge that comes to us from outside ourselves — the knowledge that comes by revelation (see Heb. 1:1, 2). These two kinds of knowledge are described in that inspiring passage of 2 Corinthians where Paul testifies how the knowledge of God sustains the Christians in their trials when he says,

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

2 Cor. 4:17, 18

Let us now look through the door that is opened in heaven by the hand of God and with John look at the things that are there.

The first object in the vision that captured John’s attention was a throne set in heaven and One who sat upon the throne. The throne not only dominates this vision, but it is one of the main themes of the book, where the word is used 47 times. This is the throne that is above every throne; and one reason it is mentioned so many times is that the primitive church was confronted by an-

other throne, Caesar's throne, which struck terror into human hearts everywhere because it represented tyranny and the ruthless power of a godless state.

I don't have to expand on that because we live in that kind of a world too. There are millions of Christians in our world who live under a totalitarian state, as did the Christians of the first century. It is significant that the first thing we learn about heaven from this vision is that the real throne is there. The center of power in this world is not in Moscow or Peking or in Hanoi or in Washington, but at the throne of God. Communists jeer about our faith in heaven as a doctrine of pie in the sky; but when we have an authentic revelation of heaven, the very first thing that is disclosed is the throne of Almighty God.

The second thing we observe in this vision is the revelation of God. He is described as follows:

And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. (Rev. 4:3)

No human hand could have written that unaided. Observe the restraint; there is no attempt to describe what God looks like. This is in keeping with the whole revelation of the Bible about God. He is wholly, other than man; He is a spiritual being. Moses reminds the children of Israel in the wilderness that when they saw God, they saw no visible form. God who sat on the throne is described in terms of color, brilliance, transparency. The sea of glass before the throne suggests separation emphasizing the

holiness of God. The rainbow around the throne suggests the covenant that God had made with His people. When we sum up the revelation of God in this vision, we observe that the holiness and majesty of God dominates the whole picture.

In the third place our attention is directed to the company round about the throne. We have already observed that the throne is in the center of the vision. We now see 24 elders seated on the throne, clad in white garments with golden crowns upon their heads. This represents the church of the redeemed in heaven. The number 24 comes from the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the 12 apostles who governed the church in the New Testament, thus making up one company of all the redeemed. It teaches us that believers are in heaven around the throne of God. This represents the church triumphant.

The second part of the company around the throne is described to us as four living creatures, one looking like a lion, another like a calf, a third like a man, and the fourth like a flying eagle. These are more difficult to identify. Some commentators think they represent the hosts of angels in heaven, which is supported by the teaching of the Bible that there are many ranks and orders of angels in heaven praising and glorifying God. There are others who feel that the four living creatures represent all of creation. We may recall that Paul says that the whole 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" (Rom. 8:20, 21). At any rate,

when we see the company around the throne of God, we are introduced to a whole new world. We must remember that this is not fancy but fact. This material world does not represent all of reality. God is the creator of all things and we confess the reality of both worlds when we pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The fourth object that attracts our attention is the Lamb who stands in the midst of the throne. At the same time our attention is directed to a book that is held in the right hand of Him who was seated on the throne. This book is the book of destiny. It is a papyrus scroll which is completely covered with writing in front and back. It contains the secrets of history. Next week we will see what happens when the book is opened. We will see "the things which must come to pass hereafter."

In this part of the vision there is a quest for someone to open the book, but no one was found who could do so. "And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it" (Rev. 5:3). This means that no human being has the power or the character to open the book, that is, to carry out God's purpose of redemption. When John begins to weep because no one can open the book, his attention is directed to the Lamb who is standing as though it had been slain. The Lamb takes the book, which means that Jesus Christ has come to carry out God's purpose of the re-

demption of mankind.

The fact that no one was found who can open the book teaches us man's inability to break free from the consequences of sin and guilt. Evil is real. Man is caught in the grip of it. The way things are going in this world today, we ought to be convinced of the fact that we are utterly helpless before the power of evil. Many thousands are exclaiming today, "How can we stop the drug traffic that is destroying our children? What can we do about pornography?" We see love turning into lust, power turning into tyranny, and worship is becoming idolatry. This is what sin does and man is incapable of breaking its power himself. The great news of the gospel is that the Lamb takes the book; that is, Jesus Christ the Son of God has come to carry out God's purpose for the redemption of mankind.

Before I close for today I want to assure you that if you are aware of your utter helplessness, not only of the power of evil in the world but the power of sin in your life, if you feel the burden of guilt in your conscience, I invite you to come to Jesus Christ for deliverance. He is the Lamb of God who has taken upon Himself the burden and the guilt of our sins. He bore the curse of it all on the cross of Calvary. He bore it for all of those who come to Him in repentance and faith. He Himself invites you to come. "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

IV

A Look at Things to Come

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 6:1

In the sixth chapter of Revelation we come to the place where the action begins. Last week in our study of the fourth and fifth chapters, we saw God sitting on the throne handing a sealed book to the Lamb who was standing in the midst of the throne. This is the book of destiny, and when the seals are opened we get a look at things to come.

The first thing John heard when he saw the vision of heaven was a voice speaking to him like a trumpet saying, "Come up hither and I will show you what must take place after this" (Rev. 4:1). This shows us that the book is an unveiling or disclosure of the future, beginning from the point in time where the revelation was made to John to the second coming of Christ.

Thus the events described cover the whole period of time from the apostolic age in the first century to the end of the world. This book then has a message not only of personal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, but also a revelation of the meaning of history. It gives us the key to the interpretation of history. History is centered in Jesus Christ who came to redeem the world from sin and death.

The vision of the opening of the seven

seals is the first in a series of three cycles of visions. The first cycle is the opening of the seven seals, the second the blowing of the seven trumpets, and the third the pouring out of the seven bowls of the wrath of God. These cycles comprise the main section of the book of Revelation (chapters 6-16).

They are to be taken as running concurrently and not chronologically; that is, all three of the cycles cover the whole period of time between the first and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Each has a different emphasis and a different point of view, but they all show "the things which must come hereafter." Some have seen the relation between these three cycles of visions as follows: in the opening of the seals the purpose of God is disclosed; in the blowing of the trumpets the purpose and judgment of God are announced; and in the pouring out of the bowls of wrath the judgment of God is carried out.

With this brief introduction as a background let us now consider the meaning of the opening of the seals. In the opening of the first four seals we see the world in alienation from God and under the judgment of God. John describes the opening of the seals as follows:

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.

Rev. 6:1, 2

Then in quick succession a bright red horse appears, whose rider is given a great sword; then a black horse whose rider had a balance in his hand; and with the opening of the fourth seal, a pale horse whose rider was named Death. Thus we are introduced to the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

In order to get at the meaning of the vision, we must know who the riders are. There is no difficulty identifying the last three horsemen. The rider permitted to take peace from the earth represents the bloodshed and destruction of war, the battlefield with its slaughters. The third horseman with the balance in his hand represents famine, and the rider on the fourth horse represents pestilence and death. All of them signify that there will be war, famine, and pestilence — God’s instruments of judgment.

Since the rider on the white horse is not identified specifically in the narrative, there is a sharp difference of opinion among commentators on the interpretation of this first horseman. Many take this rider as a symbol of Jesus Christ, or the triumph of the preaching of the gospel. They identify this rider with the conquering rider on the white horse in chapter 19, which unquestionably refers to Jesus Christ.

Others, such as H. B. Swete, Leon Morris, and F. F. Bruce, take the four horsemen

as a unit, which means that all of the first four seals represent the judgments of God on the world. The first horseman, then, is also a symbol of judgment representing the ambition of men to conquer the world by military power and rule it by force. Its first fulfillment was in the Roman Empire where the Caesars ruled the world with bitter tyranny in John’s own day. There have been other attempts in history to conquer the world and rule over it with absolute power. Napoleon in the early 19th century, Hitler and his Nazis a generation ago, and the Communists in our day are all representative of the rider on the white horse riding on, conquering and to conquer the nations of the world by military power.

Taking the four horsemen together, we see that they represent the scourges of judgment on a world that has alienated itself from God. There are other scenes of judgment in the cycles of visions which come later in this book; but, as Leon Morris points out, in each case the judgment is viewed from a different point of view. He says, “The first four seals form a unity. They show us the self-defeating character of sin.”

This speaks to us today. We are punished not only for our sins but by them. How proud we have become! Even theologians are proclaiming that we can make it without God. But the Bible says, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). This is true of nations as well as individuals. A world that rejects God comes under the judgment of God.

The rider on the white horse with a bow in his hand is riding to conquer as never before in history. We must never forget that

Communism's one aim is world conquest and world rule. This is the main cause of the wars — big and little — that come upon us today. The desire to reign over all nations leads to warfare and slaughter. The white horse is always followed by the red horse. But there is an increase also of famine in a world where there could be enough for all. In spite of the advances made in science and medicine, pestilence is becoming one of the feared scourges of our day. The opening up of the first four seals is a revelation of the judgments of God on those who reject Him. They show us the consequences of rejecting God. Without God to rule over them, men and nations destroy themselves. We cannot make it without God because God is our only hope.

The second vision that comes before us in the opening of the seals is the vision of the souls of the martyrs under the altar. The description of it is given in verses 9 and 10.

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?"

Here the apostle not only saw something, but he heard something.

Before we discuss the meaning of this vision, it is important to observe that the scene now shifts from earth to heaven. In the opening of the first four seals, our attention was directed to the disasters and judgments that are coming upon the world.

In the opening of the fifth seal, however, we have another vision of heaven where we see God on the throne. This change of scene from earth to heaven, and heaven to earth, appears frequently in the book of Revelation. It teaches us what may be one of the most important lessons of the book for our age. It teaches not only that heaven is real, but that it is also our only source of strength and joy and hope. Amidst all the earthly trials and afflictions to which we are subjected here on earth, we who believe in God and Jesus Christ His Son must continually lift up our eyes to Him. When the scourges of judgment roll over the nations of the world, we are to remember that we are secure in Jesus Christ who said, "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

This time our attention is directed to heaven in order that we may observe under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God. The souls under the altar are the souls of the martyrs, specifically those who had been put to death for their faith in Jesus Christ at the time when the book was written. But it should also be observed that the vision contains a prophecy that there will be more martyrs. After they cry out for vengeance on their blood, they are 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" (Rev. 6:11).

But if these are Christian martyrs, how can their souls cry out from heaven for God to judge and avenge their blood? The answer to that question is that this is not a cry for personal vengeance. These are Christian

martyrs, dwelling in heaven with Jesus Christ. Their spirits have been made perfect so that there can be no personal vindictiveness here at all. We must observe that it is their blood that cries out for justice. The counterpart to this is the word of the Lord to Cain, "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10). The blood of the innocent martyrs who were tortured and put to death for no other reason than that they served Jesus Christ calls for justice. They are under the altar, that is, the altar of incense, because this is the place in heaven from which their blood cries out. These prayers are heard and will be answered when God Himself vindicates His righteousness and the righteousness of His people.

The third vision we see here is that of the final judgment. This comes with the opening of the sixth seal. This is how John describes it:

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?"

Rev. 6:12-17

It is apparent, of course, that this is highly symbolical language; but it is the language of judgment. It is so used by the prophets of the Old Testament when they describe the day of the Lord, the day of the final judgment. This includes the events preceding the judgment day itself in the end-time. When we say that these are symbols of something that is to happen, we do not mean that it is any less real. A symbol is a means of communicating the truth. The Word of God is revealed to us in many ways: in dreams, in audible words, but also by symbols. Catastrophic changes in nature, therefore, are symbols of final upheaval in the end-time.

H. B. Swete in his learned commentary on the book of Revelation says that "racial and social revolutions are the earthquakes which herald the approach of the end." He sees the stars falling from the sky as a symbol of old age and failing strength. "Here they seem to represent the decay of society, such a period of collapse as followed the ruin of the Empire, and may yet be in store for our present civilization." I want to call your attention to something very remarkable about that statement. Swete wrote this over 60 years ago when nothing was more stable than the social and political order of western Europe and England and in America. If someone had written that today, a skeptic might object, "Oh, but he's reading that into the Bible from the times in which we live." I call your attention to the fact that Swete's interpretation of this passage was written long before the times in which we live. It

shows us how clearly our age is predicted in the book of Revelation. Have there ever been such violent and widespread racial and social revolutions as we are witnessing today? This conveys to us one urgent message — the time of the end may be near.

I close by calling your attention to the last verse in the passage which speaks of the Day itself. When that day comes many will call on the mountains and rocks, saying, “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?” You see, there is something worse than death. The day of judgment is the day of the wrath of the Lamb, and facing Him is the most terrifying experience a human being can have. It is more frightening for a sinner

to stand in the presence of a righteous and holy Saviour than it is to face death.

Although there are many signs that we are in the end-time, the final judgment has not yet come. This is still the acceptable time. You can still be saved from the wrath of the Lamb. It is still the day of salvation, but it could be the eleventh hour. If you have never confessed your sins to God, if you have never confessed Christ as your Saviour, do it now. If you face Him as a sinner and acknowledge your transgressions, He will receive you. He Himself has said, “Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out.” When the day of the wrath of the Lamb comes, you will be safe and secure in the arms of the Saviour. Come to Christ now.

V

The Church in Two Worlds

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!"

— REVELATION 7:9-10

The seventh chapter of the book of Revelation, from which this verse is taken, consists of an interlude between the opening of the seven seals and the blowing of the seven trumpets. We saw last week that this section of the book (chapters 6 to 16) consists of a series of three cycles of visions. The opening of the seven seals, the blowing of the seven trumpets, and the pouring out of the bowls of wrath are all symbolic representations of the judgments of God in history culminating in the final day of judgment, the day of wrath at the end-time.

The main purpose of the book of Revelation is to encourage believers to be faithful to the Lord they confess and to assure them of the final victory over all evil. This purpose is carried out in the two visions that make up the seventh chapter. The first, the sealing of the saints, gives us a view of the church on earth. The second, the multitude which no man could number, gives us a vision of the church in heaven. Here then we see the church in two worlds: the church militant and the church triumphant.

We must always remember that when we talk about the church — if we are going to talk biblically — we must speak of the church in heaven as well as the church on earth, because it is one church. The Bible always reminds us that there are really two worlds; God is the creator of all things visible and invisible. This needs emphasis today when in so many areas the church has been reduced to a purely temporal social institution. We get quite another view of the church in the New Testament and especially in this book of Revelation.

Someone has said that the true church is like an iceberg: only a very small fraction of it is visible above the water, whereas the main part of the gigantic iceberg is below the water. So when we see the church struggling here on earth, we must remember that we see only a tiny fraction of the people of God. The great multitude which no man can number is already in heaven with Christ.

In the vision of the sealing of the saints we are introduced to the church on earth as it is suffering in tribulation and facing perse-

cution. John says:

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.

Rev. 7:1-3

The "four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth" means that the judgments will not begin until God has performed another task, the sealing of His people. The seal is the signet ring used by Oriental monarchs to identify their possessions and to certify the gentleness of their letters and decrees. The ancient practice of marking possessions with a seal is similar to the practice of branding cattle as a mark of ownership.

The Old Testament background for this vision is found in the ninth chapter of Ezekiel, where a man with an ink stamp is commanded to go through the streets of Jerusalem to mark all those who have been faithful to God in the time of widespread apostasy and wickedness. These were marked so that they would be spared in the time of God's judgment on Jerusalem.

The number of the sealed is given to us as 144,000, which, of course, is not literal

but symbolical. It is the number of completeness: twelve times twelve times a thousand. This represents the church on earth. It teaches us that the church of Jesus Christ is the true Israel symbolized by the twelve tribes of Israel. The sealing of the 144,000 indicates that the full number of the redeemed are safe and secure in Jesus Christ.

The Heidelberg Catechism in expounding the Apostles' Creed comes to the article on the church with the question, "What do you believe concerning 'the Holy Catholic Church'?" and answers, "I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it." (Question and Answer #54)

The safety and security of believers is stressed many times in the New Testament. When Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel of Christ, he wrote Timothy this wonderful word of assurance:

But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

2 Tim. 2:19

Speaking of believers, Paul says that they are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit until the day of their redemption (Eph. 4:20). The four horsemen of judgment are riding through the earth now with gigantic strides, the four winds of judgment are

blowing with increasing fury, but the vision of the sealing of the saints assures us that Christ's own children will never be harmed.

The second vision in this chapter is the vision of the multitude no man could number. This is how John saw it:

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!"

Rev. 7:9, 10

This is a vision of the church in heaven, the church triumphant. It represents redeemed humanity, all the saved from all ages of history.

Our attention is directed to three main points in the vision. Let us look first of all at the number of the redeemed. John saw a great multitude which no man could number. There are some who feel that heaven is a little comer somewhere in this universe in which a few saints will be gathered together. The Bible gives no such impression; it impresses us with the vast number, the innumerable company of the redeemed. This is the fulfillment of the promise of God to Abraham. Abraham was a great man of faith; but when the promise of even the first son was so long delayed, he sometimes became discouraged. In one such moment of doubt, the Lord brought him out of his tent where he was tossing sleeplessly through the night, and said: "Look toward heaven and

number the stars if you are able to number them." Then the Lord added, "So shall your descendants be." At another time the Lord told him, "I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the seashore" (Gen. 22:17). Since the company of the redeemed is innumerable, we are not even to attempt an estimate of the number of the saved, not even in billions. It is enough for us to know that there will be an innumerable company of the redeemed in eternity.

We should also notice the universality of the company of the redeemed. They are out of "every nation, from all peoples, tribes and tongues." Since this prophecy of the large number of the redeemed was made in the first century of our era, we can see from our point of view in time how wonderfully it has already been fulfilled. Today there are Christians in all nations — not only in Europe and America, but on every continent and in the uttermost parts of the earth.

The vastness of the multitude who are saved, however, must not deceive us. The Bible nowhere teaches us that every man will be saved in the end. The universalism the Bible teaches is that the redeemed will come from all races, nations, and people; but it nowhere teaches that every individual will be saved. The Bible makes a clear distinction between the saved and the lost, and no book in the Bible makes that point so clearly and solemnly as the book of Revelation. We must also remember that it was Jesus who said,

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those

who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.

John 5:28, 29

The second point in the vision to which our attention is directed is the manner in which these people are dressed. This is stated twice. First, we are told that they are dressed in white robes and that they have palms in their hands. This is stated again when the redeemed are identified as those “who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Here we have no difficulty determining the meaning of the symbolism. Heaven is populated with people who have been redeemed through faith in the saving death of Jesus Christ on the cross. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. In the doctrinal language of the New Testament this means both justification and sanctification. The white robe they wear is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. No man can enter heaven without that. Isaiah says, “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.” Paul, speaking both of Jews and Gentiles, says, “There is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” The righteousness of Jesus Christ must be imputed and imparted to us before we can stand before the glorious throne of God in that glorious company. Make this your prayer:

When He shall come with trumpet sound,
Oh, may I then in Him be found;
Dressed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.

The third point in the vision to which our attention is directed is the activity of the redeemed. The question is often asked, “What will we do in heaven?” In this passage we find some of the answers. We will praise God. At numerous points in this book, John records the anthems and hymns of praise he heard from heaven again and again. Here is one of them:

Blessing and glory and wisdom and
thanksgiving and honor and power and
might be to our God forever and ever.
Amen.

These are the songs of the redeemed. Every person who has felt the burden of sin and guilt and has found peace and joy in God’s gracious deliverance from it, has a sense of gratitude to God for such deliverance. But this sense of gratitude we have here on earth as saved sinners doesn’t begin to equal the sense of gratitude we will have when we get to heaven. After seeing the glory of that place and the awfulness of eternal separation from God, even eternity will not be long enough to thank Him. That is why they sing the praises of God in heaven.

But this is not the only activity of the redeemed. Before the throne of God, they serve Him day and night. In the world to come there will be no idleness; there will be new forms of service. Jesus Christ will continue to be our shepherd and He will guide the redeemed to springs of living water forever. In heaven our life goes on, but it is a purified and redeemed life. It is free from all sorrow and suffering and discontent, for “God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.” On earth God’s children pray, “Es-

tablish thou the work of our hands, Lord"; in heaven, in our perfect and pure service of God, that prayer will be fulfilled.

In today's study we have seen the church in two worlds. The church on earth is the church militant, because believers must continue to fight every form of sin and evil. But this is not the only church. We see that other part of the church now by faith, but when

God removes us from this earth by death we will be translated to the church triumphant. There we will praise God and serve Him forever. All this can be yours if you confess Christ as your Saviour, for "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself." We beseech you, therefore, be ye reconciled to God.

VI

The Great Conflict

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child ana she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads.

— REVELATION 12:1-3

With this vision we are introduced to one of the main themes of the book of Revelation. The main section of the book describes the great conflict between Jesus Christ and the church, on the one hand, and the devil and all the forces of evil on the other.

In the first century this struggle appeared to be hopeless because the church at that time consisted of tiny little groups of believers spread all over the Roman Empire. The book was written in a time when these believers suffered severe persecution, probably in the last decade of the first century. From a human point of view, the situation seemed hopeless. It would appear that it was impossible that this group of Christians could survive with such might and power thrown against them.

The purpose of the book is to show that things are not what they seem, for there is more to the church than these little widely scattered communities of Christians. The message of Revelation is that there are unseen heavenly forces serving them. For one

thing, their Lord and Saviour is a living, present Lord who has already triumphed over death and the devil by His resurrection from the dead; and the ultimate victory will not be with Rome but with Christ and His church.

Hence, this book has much to say to the church today. We need this message of encouragement, of hope and victory, because we too seem to be hopelessly outnumbered. Men in every area of life in America and in Europe have pronounced the church dead. In Europe they are talking openly about the post-Christian era; and in both Europe and America, Communists, secularists, and skeptics sneer at our faith.

The numerous visions of this book revealing heaven and all its hosts of powers are given to encourage the church to see what the facts really are. This struggle on earth between Rome and the church is not merely the pitting of one earthly power against another, men against men; but all the hosts of heaven and hell are involved in it. This great battle which the book of Revela-

tion describes is a struggle between all the forces of evil and all the forces of righteousness. It began in the Garden of Eden and it will be concluded with victory when Christ comes again. We are all involved in this conflict, either consciously or unconsciously, either for Christ or against Him.

We begin our study of the great conflict with an identification of the characters in it. Once more we must be reminded that all this is communicated to us in the highest kind of symbolism. We can identify all the main characters involved in this struggle and that is enough to give us the essential message of the book, although there are details in the vision which we may not be able to explain fully. We will take the characters in the order in which they appear in the narrative.

The first character introduced to us is a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and with a crown of twelve stars on her head. The number *twelve* is the key to the understanding of the vision. It indicates that the woman represents Israel, spiritual Israel, the church as the people of God. The splendor and brilliance with which this woman appears in the sky indicates that no matter how much the church may be despised by the world it is glorious in the sight of God.

When we say that the woman clothed with the sun is a symbol of the church, we mean the church of all time — both the Old and New Testament church. This book teaches that the church is one. Some take the fact that the woman is clothed with the sun and has the moon under her feet for the two Testaments: the moon, the lesser light, for the Old Testament; and the sun, the full light, for the New Testament.

The second character in the vision is the child who is brought to birth in the vision. This child is Jesus Christ. The church is pictured here as an expectant mother, which means the church in Old Testament time. This symbolizes the expectancy in Israel of the Messiah to come. The whole Old Testament is filled with promises that Christ would come out of Israel and that He would be born of a woman.

The third character we meet in the vision is an enormous red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns. He is so big and strong that his tail swept a third of the stars out of heaven and cast them to the earth. Here there is no problem of identification because we are told that this great dragon is the devil himself. The ten horns represent his power, the seven heads his cleverness and also, in all probability, his vitality. He is hard to kill.

In the thirteenth chapter, we find two more symbolical creatures: a beast with ten horns and seven heads coming out of the sea, and another beast with two horns which looked like a lamb but spoke like a dragon coming up out of the earth. These beasts are the devil's agents; the dragon is the devil himself.

Here then are the main characters involved in the great conflict. Christ and His church represent the forces of righteousness; the devil and his agents, the forces of evil. These are the antagonists in the great battle. In the course of this warfare we don't hear much about the red dragon, but we hear a great deal about the beast with the ten horns and the beast with the two horns. This is because the devil himself keeps in the background and fights the battle through his agents, the beasts.

The beast with the ten horns may be taken to represent godless governments set against the church and persecuting Christians. The first fulfillment of this is the persecution of Christians by Rome in the first century, but these persecutions have been repeated in history many times. This beast is active in our world. The totalitarian state in Germany under the Nazis and the Communist powers in Red China and Russia are contemporary examples. It has been estimated that more Christians have been put to death for their faith by dictators in this century than in all the previous centuries of the Christian era. This is another sign that we may be coming near to the end; and millions of Christians in Communist countries are crying, "How long, O Lord, how long?"

The second beast, usually identified with the false prophet who appears later in the book, looks like a lamb and speaks like a dragon. This means that he carries on his attack through falsehood and deception. This beast is also active today in churches that deny God, disregard the law of God and set up their own standards of conduct, all under the name of Christ. The beast with the two horns blasphemes the name of God, and you can hear plenty of that in some so-called churches today.

Having determined the identity of the characters in the great war, let us look next at the nature of the conflict in which they are involved. This is a spiritual conflict. It is not a struggle for land, territory, gold, and goods, but a battle for the minds and souls of men. Remember that the ultimate antagonist is not the false prophet who tries to deceive God's people, nor is it the godless government that persecutes Christians and

denies them freedom; the ultimate antagonist is the devil himself who uses agents to carry out his purpose.

When Paul writes to Ephesians about this warfare, saying, "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12), he is not merely informing us that the devil is our enemy; but he is teaching us the nature of the conflict in which we are involved. It is a spiritual warfare, a battle fought not only between men on earth, but a battle that involves all the spiritual powers in the universe. The battle is fought in the invisible world as well as in the visible world. It is the ultimate struggle between good and evil.

This warfare began in heaven. John says,

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the world — he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Rev. 12:7-9

This in all probability refers to the rebellion of the angels in heaven before the world was created. Those who rebelled with the devil were cast out of heaven, but they continued the conflict on earth. The battle began on earth when Satan tempted Eve and Adam to

sin and rebel against God. God rebuked the devil in the Garden of Eden and pronounced upon him his ultimate doom. This is the first stage of the conflict on earth.

The second stage of this warfare occurred in Satan's attack on Jesus Christ, which is described in some detail in this section of the book. "When the woman was giving birth to the child," we read that "the dragon stood before the woman that he might devour her child" (12:4). But he is thwarted in his effort because immediately after the birth, the child is caught up into heaven. This brief statement sums up the life and ministry of Christ on earth. His life is not described here in detail; the vision mentions only the birth of Christ and His ascension into heaven after His resurrection.

The Gospels, however, give a full account of that conflict in the days of Christ on earth. Herod the Great tried to put Him to death immediately after His birth. The Pharisees, Sadducees, Judas Iscariot, Herod the King, Pilate, as well as Caiaphas the chief priest, were all the devil's agents attempting to destroy the Son of God. But neither the devil, who personally attacked Christ in the temptation, nor any of his agents succeeded. The child was caught up to the throne of God. That is, in the ascension and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the victory over the devil and all his agents was won. This is the good news of the gospel which is symbolically described for us in this wonderful book of Revelation.

The third stage of this spiritual war is described in the closing section of the chapter. John says: "And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the

male child" (Rev. 12:13). This is the war of the devil against the church, the people of God. It is where we are now. The entire period between the ascension of Christ and His return is the third stage of the conflict.

It must be observed that in this phase of the contest the devil becomes more furious than ever. He has already been thrown out of heaven, he has been defeated by Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection from the dead, and he knows now that he has but a little time. This is his last opportunity to fight against Christ and His church. He doesn't bother about the false church because that already is in his camp; his one goal is to separate believers from their Lord and Saviour. He uses two methods: one is persecution, throwing all the weight of godless government against the church — the beast with the ten horns.

The other method of attack is by deceit and fraud — the beast with the two horns who looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. This stage of the conflict began with the exaltation of Christ to the throne of God and will continue until Jesus comes again. It will be intensified, however, as the time of the Lord's coming draws near. The Bible everywhere teaches that before His return there will be an intense increase of evil and opposition to Christ and His church, which may be the battle of Armageddon.

Perhaps the most important lesson the church has to learn today out of this symbolic description of the ultimate battle, is to know the devil for what he is. He is a huge red dragon. He is an enormous beast with ten horns and seven heads. He has hideous strength. Never underestimate the power of sin and evil. Let us stop joking about the

devil. He is real. He is implacably opposed to Jesus Christ and to the salvation of any person on this earth, and he will do everything in his power to keep those from Christ who have already confessed His name. This is the great conflict and we are all involved. You can't sit this one out. You cannot be neutral. You are on one side or the other.

Jesus said, "No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24). Choose Christ, serve Him, and you will be on the winning side.

VII

The Great Victory

After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants."

— REVELATION 19:1, 2

One of the amazing things about the book of Revelation is the constant recurrence of doxologies and songs of praise and thanksgiving. Here is one from the introduction to the book: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (1:5, 6). Here is one from the fourth chapter: "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" (v. 11). The nineteenth chapter, which we are studying today, begins with an anthem of praise: "After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just.'"

This continuous expression of praise and gratitude is astonishing when we recall the circumstances under which this book was written. It was written in the first century, probably in the tenth decade, when all the

might and power of Rome had been turned against Christianity. The church was suffering bitter persecution and it seemed that this tiny community of believers would certainly be eradicated in a short time. John himself, who writes this book, is in exile on the island of Patmos. But these believers were not defeated and not discouraged because they knew Jesus Christ as their living Lord and Saviour. Through faith in Him they saw another world where God sat on the throne and where the angels and the redeemed were already praising Him for the victory that Christ had won for them.

This is just the book for us in these days when enemies of the faith proclaim that the church is dead, and the prophets of doom pronounce the defeat of Christianity. You may recall that in the introduction to the book there is a special blessing pronounced upon those who read it. "Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near" (1:3). The time is near for us also. Instead of

neglecting this last book in the Bible, we ought to be reading and studying it daily for it speaks to our time.

Today we come to the section of the book that describes the great victory over all the forces of evil. Once more we see heaven opened, and a white horse with a rider named "Faithful and True, who in righteousness judges and makes war" (19:11). The rider on this horse who is called Faithful and True is Jesus Christ. He leads all the armies of heaven to destroy all the forces of evil.

Let us begin our study of this vision by observing the enemy forces which are defeated. These may be described in three categories. The first enemy defeated is the world. This term has several meanings in the Bible, but in the New Testament it is frequently used in an evil sense. The world is man in alienation from God, organizing life into a system from which God is excluded. The world in this sense is evil and hostile to God. Jesus said, "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Paul, speaking of the world, said, "Come ye out from among them and be ye separate." James says, "Do ye not know that friendship with the world is enmity against God." In 1 John we read:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. (1:15, 16)

This teaching of the Bible about the evil

in the world and its opposition to God and His people is found in the book of Revelation in a series of majestic symbols. We have already met some of the enemy and explained the symbols.

In this section of the book, we meet one more formidable enemy for which John reserves the longest description. In this vision the enemy is described as the great harlot. On her forehead was written the name "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations." This is intricate symbolism, but the main ideas are clear.

The ancient city of Babylon was the bitter foe of Israel, and in this vision Babylon is code language for Rome. All of her power was arrayed against the church in the first century. To say that Babylon is Rome is not to say that this meaning is limited to ancient, historic Rome persecuting the church. The ultimate portrayal in the vision is the world in all of its pomp and glory. Speaking of the fall of Babylon, F. F. Bruce says,

What is here portrayed is not merely the doom of an ancient city, but the sure collapse of all human organization, commercial and otherwise that leaves God out of its reckoning.

Babylon then is the world, the world in its power to allure believers and draw them away from God. Hendriksen says,

It symbolizes the concentration of the luxury, vice and glamour of this world. . . . Babylon thus viewed is past, present and future. Its form changes, its essence remains. Hence, we conclude that also the harlot represents the world as center

of anti-Christian seduction at any moment of history.

This world is defeated by Jesus Christ. He said to His disciples, “I have overcome the world.”

The second enemy defeated is Satan himself. The archenemy of God and of all righteousness, the accuser of God’s people, the seducer of mankind, is first bound for a thousand years and thrown into a bottomless pit. After this John saw the devil thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where he remains forever and ever.

This great victory is described in the present and past tense because John is telling us what he sees in a vision. But in a sense, the victory has already been won in the death and resurrection of Christ, which guarantees the ultimate defeat of all the forces of evil. The whole book was written for our encouragement and inspiration, teaching us that God is in control of history and He will bring it to a good end.

The third enemy defeated is death. In the majestic vision of the risen Lord in the first chapter He is standing in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, and He is saying,

“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (v. 18).

The Bible looks very realistically at death. It is the great terror that grips human hearts, and it is the last enemy to be destroyed. But Jesus Christ has the keys of death and Hades, which means that His authority extends throughout the realm of

death. He has this authority because He has defeated the enemy who boasted his control over that realm. Paul says of our Saviour Christ Jesus, that He “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). The word *abolish* here means literally “to make powerless.” Although Christians are not spared physical death, it is no longer the great enemy. It is no longer to be feared. This triumph over death is one of the believers benefits from the resurrection of Jesus Christ as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:54, 55: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?”

This defeat of the enemy death explains the calmness with which the early Christians could face martyrdom. They knew that because Christ had defeated their last enemy, death, nothing would ever be able to separate Him from them. John says, “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them” (Rev. 14:13 KJV).

Having described the enemies over whom the victory was won by Jesus Christ, let us observe now how the victory was won. We have already seen that the victory is won by Jesus Christ, the mighty conqueror who rides out of heaven on a white horse with a sword in His mouth and whose name is the Word of God. He won the victory specifically by His death on the cross, where He cried, “It is finished.” His riding forth out of heaven is a symbolic representation of His mission.

He does not win the victory by material

weapons. The sword in His mouth is symbolic of the Word of God. It is the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes. In the power of Christ His disciples eventually conquered the pagan Roman empire and by that same power in His name they have continued to conquer. There is no more important lesson for the church to learn than the fact that the triumph of Jesus Christ which rings throughout the whole book of Revelation was accomplished with spiritual weapons.

He won the victory by His perfect obedience to God. Jesus Christ is the second Adam. The first Adam failed when he fell before the temptation of Satan; but Jesus Christ, the second Adam, never once yielded to the temptations of Satan, although He was attacked personally in His life on earth. In temptation after temptation, Jesus Christ threw the enemy back in defeat. This is why Paul sums up the gospel when he says, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19).

But He won the victory specifically and finally in His death for sin and His resurrection from the dead. John says, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). The writer of Hebrews says, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage" (2:14, 15).

More specifically it was by the shedding of the blood of Christ that the victory over all the forces of evil was won. Listen as the

heavenly choir sings, "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" (Rev. 5:9). This is the refrain that runs not only through the book of Revelation but through the whole New Testament.

The victory over sin and evil was won through the atoning death of Christ when He shed His blood on the cross, and was confirmed in His resurrection from the dead. Paul says that Jesus Christ was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4 KJV).

At this point someone may say, "You have been talking in this message about the victory of Jesus Christ over all the forces of evil, but I don't see much of it in the world I live in. I see a world of bloodshed, hatred, violence, wars, immorality, and wickedness of every kind." To that observation I would like to make a few remarks. First of all the victory is won potentially. Satan was defeated in his first encounter with God when he was thrown out of heaven. We learn this from the twelfth chapter of Revelation where John says,

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world — he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown

down with him.

Rev. 12:7-9

Satan was defeated once more in the second stage of the conflict when he attacked Christ in His earthly ministry. Christ won that victory in His triumphant atoning death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. It is true that the devil is still active in the world, but this activity must be understood in the context of the teaching of the whole book. His activity is limited. He has but a limited time. The only time he has is this age, for he will be thrown into the lake of fire when the Lord returns. That will be the beginning of the new age, the perfect world, the heavenly Jerusalem, when all traces of sin will be eradicated from the universe.

The second comment I'd like to make on the objection that evil is raging furiously today is that the victory is in Christ and not in the world. In that sense the victory is here now. The early Christians testified, "This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). Thus, in Christ, we share the victory, too. Faith in Jesus Christ is the only answer to the problem of sin and evil. If you confess Christ as your Lord and Saviour you will feel the opposition of the world and of Satan, but in Christ you will surely win the victory. This is how the battle is won. "And they have conquered him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev. 2:11).

VIII

The Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgment

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.

— REVELATION 19:11

As we near the end of the book of Revelation we come to some of the most intricate symbolism in the book. Here we have the vision of the marriage supper of the Lamb, the Rider on the white horse who judges and makes righteous wars, the devil bound for a thousand years, the battle of Gog and Magog, the great white throne and Him who sat upon it, and finally Death and Hades thrown into the lake of fire. The battles in these visions indicate that there will be a final world-wide protest against Christianity, but also a final victory by the forces of Christ over the devil and all his agents. This is also the section of the book which speaks of the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ.

Before I discuss any of these events, I would like to make a preliminary remark about the interpretation of this part of the book of Revelation. Evangelicals are agreed on most of the basic doctrines of the Bible, but when we come to the last chapters of the book of Revelation there is what may be called a deep cleavage between believers.

There ought to be room for difference of opinion about the millennium in the household of faith, but it is a tragedy that these great passages of Scripture have become a theological battleground that divides believers. The church today needs nothing so much as the positive message in this book, but we have turned many away from the book because of the sharp controversy which has developed on the order of events of the last days. A. T. Robertson, the brilliant New Testament scholar of the first half of this century and a devout believer, says something in his commentary on Revelation that we need to hear. Speaking of the millennium he says:

It will help us all to remember that God's clock does not run by ours and that times and seasons and programs are with Him. This wonderful book was written to comfort the saints in a time of great trial, not to create strife among them.

Concerning the interpretation of a difficult verse in this chapter, he says, “I confess my own ignorance as to the meaning of the symbolism . . . without any predilections for post-millennialism or pre-millennialism.”

Instead, therefore, of trying to determine the exact order of the events in the end-time, or the exact meaning of every symbol in this section of the book, let us direct our attention to the two dominant visions in this section. The first is the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the second is the final judgment.

The second coming of Jesus Christ is one of the underlying themes of the book. After the doxology in the first chapter in which the church ascribes praise and dominion to Christ “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,” John adds:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

Rev. 1:7

In the closing verses of the book, the Lord Himself announces that He will come: “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done” (22:12). His coming is also announced in a vision in the nineteenth chapter where John says, “Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war” (v. 11). The second coming of Jesus Christ is not only one of the major themes of the book of Revelation; it dominates the whole New Testament. It is the blessed hope of the

church.

Concerning the nature of the second coming of Christ, four observations may be made. First, He will come personally. He Himself will come. This was the final promise made when He left this earth and His disciples. Luke describes the scene:

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 1:10, 11

“This Jesus” clearly means that the person to whom the disciples had been talking, just before the ascension, would come again personally.

The personal return of Jesus Christ needs emphasis today because there are some who interpret the teaching of the New Testament about the second coming as a spiritual coming only. It is true that Christ came when the Holy Spirit fell upon the church at Pentecost and that He has come in many great awakenings and revivals in history, but this does not exhaust what the Bible means by the return of the Lord. His second coming will be as real as the first. He will come in His own person:

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.

1 Thess. 4:16

The writer of Hebrews says:

So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Heb. 9:28

The personal return of Jesus Christ is the blessed hope of the church, and there is no hope outside of Him. This is why we must preach the gospel.

The second observation we may make about His coming is that He will come visibly. Let us go back for a moment to the Mount of Olives where the angels made the announcement, “He shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven.” The disciples saw Him ascend. They watched Him go, and they continued to stare into the sky after He disappeared from their sight. “In like manner” means that there will be a visible return when He descends again to the earth. After the first doxology in Revelation comes the first announcement of His return in which the apostle says, “And every eye shall see him.”

The third observation we make on the coming of Christ is that He will come the second time in glory and triumph. His first coming was in humiliation when He took upon Himself our nature. Paul contrasts these two comings in that magnificent summary of the mission of Christ when he says:

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the

form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Phil. 2:5-11

When Jesus stood before the religious leaders of the Jewish people in His days on earth, the high priest asked Him if He was the Messiah. He answered that He was, but then He added:

Nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.

Matt. 26:64 KJV

This coming in glory and power is symbolized for us in Revelation 19 in the vision of the rider on the white horse.

The fourth observation we make on the second coming of Christ is that He will surely come. This is twice stated in the closing verses of the book where Christ says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Today there are millions who mock the idea of a personal return of Christ to this earth, but the Bible prepares us for such skepticism and ridicule. His first coming was also prophesied, but many lost faith in the promise of His coming; and when He finally came they mocked

and rejected Him. In the same way, Peter tells us, in the last days before His coming there will be mockers who will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation." Thus we can see that the scoffing and mocking of our day is only a fulfillment of the prophecy of the New Testament. Jesus will certainly come. He will come personally. He will come visibly. He will come in all the glory and power of His deity.

Thou art coming, O my Saviour,
 Thou art coming, O my King,
 In Thy beauty all resplendent;
 In Thy glory all transcendent;
 Well may we rejoice and sing.
 (Frances R. Havergal)

The second vision we are to study from this section of the book is the vision of the final judgment. John says:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done.

Rev. 20:11, 12

It is apparent from the language used here that this is a general judgment, and so the passage has mostly been understood. There will be one final day of judgment

when all men will be judged. Wilbur Smith says: "In many conservative, theological groups of our day, it is considered almost a heresy to speak of a great day of judgment to come, because of certain dispensational preconceptions. I am, of course, a believer in dispensations, but I believe it has been a great mistake to refuse to speak to the men of our generation of the judgment to come. I do not deny that there are a number of judgments to occur in the future. . . . Yet the Scriptures do definitely speak of one great single event of judgment to come, and we have sinned in almost robbing the preaching of our day of this terrible but divinely revealed truth."

In this solemn scene of judgment we see all the dead, small and great, standing before the throne. This means that the dead have been raised up. They are standing there in their resurrection bodies. Jesus said: "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28, 29).

That the final judgment is a general judgment appears also from other passages of Scripture. The writer of Hebrews says, "It is appointed unto men once to die but after this the judgment." Paul says, "We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Rom. 14:10). He also says, "So each of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12). The universal character of this final judgment is described by John in an earlier vision when he pictures the terror of the unsaved at the judgment:

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?"

Rev. 6:15-17

At the judgment day two books will be opened (Rev. 20:12). The first book is the record of our deeds, and the other is the Lamb's book of life in which are written the names of the saved. From this we can see that salvation is always by grace but judgment is by works. This does not mean that God has two standards. It simply means that those who are redeemed by the grace of God

through faith in Jesus Christ show by their deeds that they are truly saved. Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." But those who reject Christ, whose names are not written in the book of life, will also be judged by their works and they will be condemned because their works are evil. It must be clearly understood that judgment day is Domsday only for those who have rejected Christ.

The day of judgment will be a day of terror for the wicked and the unrighteous, but it will be a day of joy and blessing for those whose sins are washed away in the blood of the Lamb. We must understand that judgment does not always mean condemnation. There is a judgment unto condemnation and a judgment unto life, and in that day all who are in Christ will be publicly acquitted.

IX

The New Jerusalem

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

— REVELATION 21:1, 2

As we come to the last two chapters of the book of Revelation it will be helpful for us to take a brief look backward to review what we have covered. The theme of the book is the triumph of Jesus Christ and His church over all the forces pitted against them. In this conflict it always seems as if the church on earth will be defeated, but in the last chapters of the book we see Jesus Christ and His church triumphant. Satan and all the forces of evil are completely destroyed (ch. 20).

When we come to chapters 21 and 22 of the book, we are in eternity. The new heaven and the new earth and the new Jerusalem belong to the new age. As we begin the study of these visions we must always keep in mind that they are a revelation of the world to come in which there is no sin, no disobedience, no evil of any kind. These two chapters, then, contain a revelation of the eternal state of those who are saved in Jesus Christ.

The book of Revelation is the book of destiny. It not only takes a sweeping view of history, but it takes us to the end of history

into eternity itself. The book answers all the ultimate questions: What is the purpose of life? What is the destiny of man? What comes after death? Although the answers are given for the most part in symbols, the message comes through loud and clear. It is the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah where the Lord says to His prophet,

Tell the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for what his hands have done shall be done to him.

Rev. 3:10, 11

This is the message of the whole Bible and it comes to a dramatic climax in the magnificent visions and symbols of the new heaven and the new earth and the new Jerusalem in the closing chapters of the book of Revelation.

Let us study the description of the new heaven and the new earth first. Chapter 21 opens with the statement:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. (v. 1)

The first question that naturally enters our minds is: What does this mean? What kind of change will this be? While we cannot be dogmatic about this, it seems to me that the writer is telling us that there will be a great transformation of this earth and the universe itself. This is evident from the fact that “the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” After John had seen the vision, he heard the Lord say, “Behold, I make all things new I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (2:5, 6). The Bible teaches everywhere — and not in Genesis only — that the universe has its origin in the direct creative act of God: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).

Scripture speaks in many places of the change that will take place in the universe at the end of time. The writer of the 102nd Psalm says:

And the heavens are the work of thy hands. They will perish, but thou dost endure; they will all wear out like a garment. Thou changest them like raiment.
Psalm 102:25, 26

God says in Isaiah:

For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.
Isaiah 65:17

In 2 Peter we read:

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.

2 Peter 3:10

We must recognize that there is an element of mystery here. All of our questions are not answered. We cannot be dogmatic about the change that will take place in nature. We may say, however, that the pattern of the new heaven and the new earth is found in the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. His resurrected body belongs to the new age, and in that sense the new age is already present with us in Christ risen from the dead. That a transformation in nature is necessary can be seen from what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:

For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?”

1 Cor. 15:53-55

The second pattern that will give us some understanding of the nature of the new heaven and earth is found in the new birth which occurs in the heart of every believer. Jesus speaks of the age to come as the re-

generation and Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.

But not only is there a change in nature in the new heaven and earth, there is also a change in character. The new heaven and new earth means that life on this earth will undergo a complete moral transformation. All evil will be purged out of it. All that was corruptible will be made incorruptible. In the new heaven and the new earth there will be no sin and no evil at all. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Paul describes the whole creation as groaning and suffering.

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.

Rom. 8:19-21

Here we learn that nature itself suffered with the fall of man. God created man good, but He created a good world too, and at the end the effects of sin will be completely eradicated through the redemption of Jesus Christ. God will make all things new. He

has already done that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and in the spiritual resurrection to a new life in all believers. The new heaven and the new earth will be the final transformation.

Let us now see what the apostle has to say about the new Jerusalem. He tells us that he was carried away into a great high mountain where the Spirit showed him "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

The first thing we must understand about this vision is that the new Jerusalem is not strictly a vision of heaven, although it has been often so taken. The new Jerusalem is a symbolic representation of the true church, the redeemed and sanctified people of God from all ages. We know this because in the same sentence the writer describes the people of God as the bride adorned for her husband, which is common biblical language for the church.

The city is described as coming down out of heaven, which means that the origin of the church is not in man but in God. The church is not a human institution; the true church is created by God. God's action in the building of the church is described many times in the New Testament, but the most comprehensive statement is found in Romans 8:

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. (vv. 29, 30)

From the numerous descriptions of the church in the New Testament let me give you one more, this one from Peter:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

1 Peter 2:9

The city is an excellent figure to describe the true church because it is a community, a community created and sanctified by God through Jesus Christ His Son and by the agency of the Holy Spirit. Someone has said that the city is at once the hope and the despair of man. With great confidence we built cities in the nineteenth century and in the early part of this century, and we had great expectations of them. We were proud of our cities; but now, in only a few brief years, our cities have become ghettos of poverty and misery and disease, as well as armed camps in which forces and classes of society oppose one another. But God's city will endure forever.

The new Jerusalem is the fulfillment of God's great promise of the redemption of man. Speaking of the patriarchs in ancient history, the New Testament writer says that they left their homeland, seeking a city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God. In the new Jerusalem God fulfilled His promise to Abraham and all the patriarchs. The writer of Hebrews says, "Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God for he has prepared for them a city."

We have just time to take a brief look around the city. We must be reminded once more that this is profound symbolism, in which the life and character of the people of God in their final state are described. Let us now look at some of the details in the vision of the Holy City. Consider the size and shape of the city. It was 1,500 miles long, wide, and high — a perfect cube. This teaches us the perfection and completeness of the church of Jesus Christ. It is the community of all the redeemed of all ages in their final state. It is the holy city, not only complete, but perfect and pure. There is no germ of corruption or evil in it at all. This is why only those whose sins are washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ can enter that city. In the midst of all the splendor and glory of the city the writer adds an informative note: "But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life" (21:27).

The enormous walls around the city indicate the absolute security of the people of God. The twelve foundations of the city represent the teaching of the Bible, that Jesus Christ is the only foundation of the church, "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20).

Lighting is one of the major problems even for a modern city, but the new Jerusalem is a well-lighted city.

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

Rev. 21:23

The city also has a wonderful water supply and provisions:

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.

Rev. 22:1, 2

That there are twelve gates of the city does not mean that there are many ways to salvation, for Jesus is the way and no man cometh to the Father but by Him. The twelve gates indicate that from whatever direction men may come, they may enter the city through faith in Jesus Christ. The church is not for one class of people or one nationality or one race or one culture.

Jesus said, "And men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). This prophecy of Jesus is being fulfilled now before our very eyes. Although Christianity may be declining in the Western world, people are coming to Christ today by millions in other parts of the world. In Indonesia, Africa, Latin America, and the islands of the sea they are pouring through the gates

of the holy city; and they are finding salvation, peace, and joy in Jesus Christ.

Although the new Jerusalem will be completed only in the world to come, we must not forget that there is a true church on earth now. Wherever Christ is truly believed, wherever there is a true community of believers living in fellowship with Christ and serving their fellow men, the holy city is already a reality.

As we conclude our study of the book of Revelation with its splendid visions of the blessedness and triumphant glory of believers, as well as the terrible vision of the judgment of unbelievers, we need to be reminded that the study of this book is not an academic matter. It is a matter of life and death. The book begins with the pronouncement of a special blessing on those who read it, and it closes with a glorious invitation. The invitation is to enter the city and drink from the stream of living water that flows through it.

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come."
And let him who hears say, "Come."
And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price.

Rev. 22:17

I add only one word to that. The invitation is still good, but you must accept it if you are ever to live in that city. ■