REVELATION

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PREFACE

Thinking about the book of Revelation can entice several emotions ranging from fear to excitement. The purpose of the book is just as extreme. It brings a clear warning to those who have not given their life to Jesus that a destiny without Him will be horrendous. God is calling them out to Him for salvation. However, the book of Revelation is also designed to instill comfort in the believer that although life is full of pain, hardship, and evil, God wins! We do not totally understand what the future holds, but we do know Who holds the future!

John F. Walvoord wrote, “As the New Testament opens with the four Gospels relating to the first coming of Christ, so the Book of Revelation closes the New Testament with the general theme of the second coming of Christ.” The goal of this study is not to settle all eschatological arguments; but to focus on the fact that Jesus is coming again, He will judge every one of us, and by faith (or the lack thereof) in Jesus as Savior, we will spend eternity in Heaven or the Lake of Fire.

This book, *“Revelation,”* has one main purpose - to point everyone to Jesus. Although we will study the Dragon, Great Prostitute, Beast, seven churches, four horsemen, angels, elders, 144,000, and two witnesses, the main character is the Lamb (Jesus).

“Revelation” walks through the book of Revelation and contains nineteen study guides for personal study or group discussion and over one hundred devotions that help interpret and give practical applications for daily life. The goal of the book of Revelation and *“Revelation”* is to point you to Jesus. *“Revelation”* will not answer all theological questions, but it does emphasize the most important question, “What difference does it make of who Jesus is to you?”

1

FOCUS ON JESUS

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

John F. Walvoord wrote, “As the New Testament opens with the four Gospels relating to the first coming of Christ, so the Book of Revelation closes the New Testament with the general theme of the second coming of Christ.” The goal of this study is not to settle all eschatological arguments; but to focus on the fact that Jesus is coming again, He will judge every one of us, and by faith (or the lack thereof) in Jesus as Savior, we will spend eternity in Heaven or the Lake of Fire.

Warren Wiersbe said, “The word translated ‘revelation’ simply means ‘unveiling.’ It gives us our English word apocalypse which, unfortunately, is today a synonym for chaos and catastrophe. The verb simply means ‘to uncover, to reveal, to make manifest.’ In this book, the Holy Spirit pulls back the curtain and gives us the privilege of seeing the glorified Christ in heaven and the fulfillment of His sovereign purposes in the world.”

Revelation 1:1-3 says, ***“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. 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 the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”***

1. Who is the author of Revelation?

_____

_____

_____

2. What are some things we know about this author?

_____

_____

_____

Revelation 1:4-8 continues, ***"John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. 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 forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'"***

3. What are some views of these seven churches?

_____

_____

_____

4. What titles or descriptive phrases are used here to describe Jesus?

_____

_____

_____

Twice in that short section, we read the phrase, ***"Who is and who was and who is to come."*** The key is the return of Christ. Warren Wiersbe points out, "John's prophecy is primarily the revelation of Jesus Christ, not the revelation of future events. You must not divorce

the Person from the prophecy, for without the Person there could be no fulfillment of the prophecy." That is so important! Our focus must be on Jesus Christ. Merrill Tenney adds, "He is not incidental to its action; He is its chief Subject." It is all about Jesus. Please focus on Him throughout this study.

Revelation 1:9-11 adds, ***"I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.'"***

5. Why was John on Patmos?

_____

_____

_____

Revelation 1:12-16 says, ***"Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."***

6. Who is being described? What is the significance of some of the descriptions?

_____
_____
_____

7. What is the sword (Hebrews 4:12; Ephesians 6:17)?

_____
_____
_____

Revelation 1:17-20 closes the first chapter, ***"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.'"***

8. What was John's response to seeing Jesus?

_____
_____
_____

9. What titles or descriptive phrases are used here to describe Jesus?

_____
_____
_____

10. What are the seven stars? What are the seven lampstands?

_____

_____

_____

Warren Wiersbe's summation of the book is a great way to end this first study. He focuses on the action of the Lord.

Revelation 1-3
The exalted Priest-King ministering to the churches.

Revelation 4-5
Glorified Lamb of God reigning on the throne in Heaven.

Revelation 6-18
Christ is the Judge of all the earth.

Revelation 19
He returns to earth as the conquering King of kings.

Revelation 20-22
The heavenly Bridegroom ushering His bride, the church, into the glorious heavenly city.

"Whatever you do as you study this book, get to know your Savior better."

JESUS!

FOCUS ON JESUS • DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. 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 the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near." Revelation 1:1-3

As we begin our series on the book of Revelation, we have to set up some ground rules. The simplest rule to keep in mind when trying to navigate through what the Bible is trying to teach us is, "Jesus is always the answer." Throughout the next couple of months, we will be tackling some amazing theology, heartwarming doxology, confusion of imagery and symbolism, and at times some beasts that seem to be from the wildest imaginations of a child. However, all through Revelation, Jesus is always the answer.

The most beautiful truth to start our journey through the last book of the New Testament and the Bible, is to understand the first statement of this book. Revelation 1:1 reads, ***"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His servants."*** The first thing to know is that the word ***"revelation"*** in Greek is "apokalupis" which means "a revealing, an unveiling." The first statement of this amazing book is the revealing of Jesus Christ. Everything that we read about in the coming months, as David Guzik says, "Belongs to Him. He is the one doing the revealing."

There are a lot of schools of thought about Revelation. There is entire pseudo-Christian literature devoted to interpreting this book. There are many misuses of the book of Revelation, and one of them is to conclude that the main point of this book is anything other than Jesus. Jesus is the answer throughout this entire book; to only take away tribulation thoughts, political thoughts, and timelines is missing the entire book of Revelation. Revelation reveals Jesus to us; to miss Jesus in the book, we miss the book of Revelation.

Over the next couple of weeks, enjoy the sweet time you get to spend in God's Word. Praise God for revealing His Son and the work Jesus did on the Cross. Enjoy taking a fresh look at God's Word and resting on the truth that Jesus is always the answer.

GOOD NEWS FOR SOME

FOCUS ON JESUS • DEVOTION 2

James Mann

"John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. 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 forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'" Revelation 1:4-8

Revelation 1:4-8 is an interesting passage because for some people there is great excitement. For others, this passage has many negative implications. Working in children's ministry, I always get asked, "Why doesn't everyone believe in Jesus?" The truth is, everyone ends up believing in Jesus, but for many, it will be too late.

This passage shows us that Jesus is coming once again, and every eye will see Him. It is at that point that everyone will believe in Him. It will be difficult for people not to believe in Him as He is face to face with them. For the nonbelievers, this is a terrifying thought. For those who have built that relationship with the Lord, this is exciting. This sense of finally coming into contact with our Lord is the day we are all waiting for. I think this passage brings urgency to our mission while we wait. Thinking about the loved ones that I have that it will be too late for is terrifying. We all have people in our life who have heard of

God but have not accepted Him. Matthew 7:23 makes it very clear that there will be those that God says, ***"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."***

Verses 5 and 6 do a phenomenal job of showing the Gospel. We have a Father that loves us so much that He freed us from our sins using His own blood through Jesus. By doing this, He created a place for us in Heaven, or as this verse says ***"a kingdom."*** We are beyond blessed to have this love and we should not take it lightly. We should be so excited about this that we are sharing this love with all of those around us. It is not too late, so do your job before it becomes too late.

DIVINE REVELATION

FOCUS ON JESUS • DEVOTION 3

Patrick Bicknell

"I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.'" Revelation 1:9-11

Have you ever gone into a class at school knowing that the teacher was going to teach about a topic that was going to be hard to understand? That is how I feel about the book of Revelation. However, studying and learning more about this book is going to prove to be fruitful in our walk with Christ and in our knowledge of the Lord. Something that is important for us to look at before we dive into this book is the context of what is going on. In these verses, I want to highlight a couple of things that are brought up that will help us understand some of the coming chapters.

Revelation chapter 1 is a great introduction to the book as a whole. Right off the bat, it reveals to us that the contents of the book were being given by special revelation. More specifically, in the immediate context of Revelation 1 we see that John is going to be writing things specifically given to him by God to seven different churches. In verse 10, we see John write, ***"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day."*** This one small part of the verse is important to look at as it gives us much context for what John is about to write.

First, we see that John is ***"in the Spirit."*** This is different than just walking by or living by the Spirit as we are taught in other parts of the New Testament. The idea here is that John is uniquely being given revelation from the Holy Spirit. John Walvoord defined ***"in the Spirit"*** by saying, "Carried beyond normal sense into a state where God could reveal supernaturally the contents of this book." This is more than just divine inspiration of the author, rather it is a supernatural revelation of what God wants John to write.

Second, we see that John is writing this unique revelation to seven different churches. Now the question is always, "What is the significance of these seven churches?" Many people have many opinions on this question, as well as on other parts of this book. However, what I think is important for us to understand is that although the letters to these churches are meant to complete those churches, it is not meant to complete only those churches. These seven churches and what is written to them represents what the state of the church and the duty should be for all churches of all ages. We need to be sure to pay close attention to what John is about to write so that we test our church and see if we are living to the standard that God has called us to live.

LIKE THE SUN

FOCUS ON JESUS • DEVOTION 4

Sydney Kimball

"Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."
Revelation 1:12-16

Allow yourself to take some time to attempt to grasp the beauty and majesty of Jesus, our King, as described here by John, His beloved.

This passage, similar to the entire book of Revelation, is challenging to comprehend. Much of the prophetic texts in the Bible must be coupled with an understanding of Old Testament scriptures and customs in order to fully understand them. I am going to attempt to shed some light on the elements of this section of Scripture so that we all may have a better glimpse into the appearance of our glorious Jesus.

John heard a voice, but at first, did not see Jesus. Upon turning, he saw seven golden lampstands. Now, I believe that we, as the church, are represented by the lampstands. The lampstands themselves do not produce light. They receive the light from another source and display it. Followers of Christ are called to do the same. These lampstands are most likely displaying the light coming from Christ as His glory shines ***"like the sun."***

Jesus is recognized and described as being clothed with a robe and golden sash around His chest. Immediately, most of us would assume surely the golden sash has some importance. You would be absolutely correct! In the book of Exodus, the high priest is described as having a sash with a few golden strands within it. Jesus' entire band is made of gold and therefore is displaying more importance than any earthly priest before Him.

Next, John says that Jesus has hair as white as wool and eyes of fire. The white hair represents Jesus' wisdom and the fact that He is without or outside of time. Just like Him, His reign is everlasting. The fire in His eyes shows that all who are gazed upon by Him, are subject to His righteous judgment.

His feet of bronze signifies that He has been tried and purified by the fire of judgment. This fact allows me to place my trust in Jesus all the more. There is not a thing we face that He cannot understand or have compassion for because of the trials, tribulations, and judgment He has faced.

Jesus' voice, that sounds like water, is full of power and authority. Who can stop a mighty rapid from flowing? Who then can stop the voice of the Son of God? Lastly, the sword that John describes leaving Jesus' mouth, I believe, is simply John hearing Him speak. The Word of God is ***"sharper than any double edged sword"*** (Hebrews 4:12).

John was able to see Jesus in all of His beauty and splendor as we, one day, will as well. How exciting is it to think of the day when we get to gaze upon our perfect and loving Savior? I do not know about you, but I cannot wait!

INSPECTION!

FOCUS ON JESUS • DEVOTION 5

Joanna Montgomery

I remember going to youth camp. Each morning, we would tidy up our bunk area. During breakfast, an inspection of the cabins was done, and at morning chapel, one cabin was declared the winner and received a reward. I was not fond of cleaning up, but when my cabin won, I loved the reward. Inspection and correction are part of our spiritual walk. In Revelation, John shows Christ in all of His glory, inspecting His church.

Revelation 1:12-16 says, ***"Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength."***

John hears a voice, turns, and sees Christ clothed in perfect glory with a golden sash around His chest, walking among seven golden lampstands. In John's day, most people wore the belt around their waist, but Josephus (a scholar from the time of Christ) writes that Jewish priests wore a sash around their chest. The chest represents power, but the word for chest used here also represents the nurturing love a mother has for her child. Christ is a powerful high priest judging with love and understanding.

Christ is faultless and perfect in pure white with the sash indicating He's our high priest. His white hair shows eternal existence, ***"The Ancient of Days"*** (Daniel 7:9), the One who always exists. His eyes like a flame of fire have penetrating insight and knowledge, and He knows everything about us. His feet like bronze represent the judgment He took when He died for our sins on the cross, and represent the bronze altar for sacrifice at the tabernacle.

His voice like the roar of many waters has the power to speak the universe into existence and will one day raise His own from the grave. The seven stars held in His right hand show He controls the universe; and from His mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword. ***"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart"*** (Hebrews 4:12). God judges by His Word. Back to our passage, John said, ***"His face was like the sun shining in full strength."*** I cannot stare directly into the sun, and the glory of Christ is even brighter.

John saw Christ inspecting the lampstands, His church. The tabernacle had one solid gold lampstand with three branches on each side of the main stem. The top of each stem was fashioned into an open almond blossom where oil lamps sat. The oil lamps represent the Holy Spirit. Only the high priest took care of the lampstand. He lit the lamps, poured in oil, and trimmed wicks. If a lamp began to smoke and did not give a good light, he would snuff it out. Christ is inspecting the lampstands (His church). He trims the wicks, pours in the oil (the Holy Spirit), and sometimes uses a snuffer. Any believer misrepresenting Christ or hurting the mission of the church can be set aside. We do not lose our salvation, but we can be removed from use until we repent. Christ is inspecting His church and wants them to produce light.

As believers, we are responsible only to Christ. He paid the price for our sin, but He wants our hearts. He will inspect us, and one day will reward us for things we did to help further His Kingdom and help others find salvation through Him.

JOHN ON PATMOS

FOCUS ON JESUS • DEVOTION 6

Larry Gabbara

The Roman government banished John to the Island of Patmos. According to most biblical historians, he was exiled as a result of persecution under the Roman emperor, Domitian. This happened in the last years of his life. John was believed to be the last living disciple. While on the island, John received a vision and Jesus instructed him to write down everything he saw.

The book of Revelation is a warning. It was a warning that was first circulated to seven cities in the Roman province of Asia Minor and the warning is just as relevant for us today. Revelation 1:17-20 says, ***"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.'"***

When John saw Jesus, it was both terrifying and awesome. The Scripture tells us that John fell at Jesus' feet. John saw Jesus in His true form, full of majesty and glory. Jesus comforted John with His touch. Jesus told John that He is alive forever and ever. Jesus had conquered death. He is the living God. Jesus has total authority over Hades, the entire world, and all of creation. Jesus decides who lives with Him forever and who will spend eternity in Hell separated from Him forever. If we have confessed Jesus as our Lord and Savior and

asked for forgiveness of our sins, our sins are forgiven, and death has no hold over us. As believers, we now belong to Jesus and will live with Him forever.

Jesus commands John to write not only all the things that he saw, but things happening and things that will happen. Jesus is and always will be. The things John heard and saw were for him then, for us now, and for the future. These verses of the book of Revelation give us an indication of our future with the Lord. We have the opportunity through the free gift of salvation to someday see Jesus face to face as John did and to spend all eternity with Him.

2

THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

1. What is the Compliment Sandwich (also called the Feedback Sandwich or Criticism Sandwich)?

_____

_____

_____

2. What are some strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

_____

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Mark Murphy wrote a blog for Leadership IQ entitled, “The Compliment Sandwich: What is it and Why is it so Bad?” Murphy writes, “Neurologically, we humans just don’t hear the stuff in the middle. We hear the compliment given at the beginning because it comes out of nowhere. And we hear the compliment at the end because that’s the last message and it’s the thing that sticks with us. But we don’t hear what’s in the middle, so the constructive criticism gets lost.”

In referencing the seven churches, Jesus typically uses a different approach:

Compliment - Criticism - Command

He acknowledges what they have or are doing and then points out their flaws. However, instead of leaving them with another compliment, He gives an action step. He sets forth the challenge. The last statement is so important because this is what needs to happen next. As a coach, I knew my last words were the most important ones as I sent my players into the match.

The church in Ephesus is the first one addressed. Revelation 2:1 says, ***"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.'"***

3. Who is referenced? What are the seven stars? What are the seven lampstands?

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4. What is Jesus doing in this passage? What stands out to you?

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During the first century, Ephesus was a major city of Asia Minor (even the most important of the seven cities listed). It was a seaport and the home to various religious beliefs (Gentiles and Jews). It was the location of the great temple of Artemis (Acts 19) which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Greeks identified this fertility goddess as Artemis and the Romans as Diana.

In Revelation 2:2-3, Jesus gives the church in Ephesus a number of compliments, ***"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary."***

5. What compliments are given to the church at Ephesus?

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Paul speaks of some of these traits in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, ***"Remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ."*** In Galatians 6:9, he says, ***"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up."***

6. Which of these traits would be most interesting to you?

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7. How can these traits be developed?

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I like how James Hamilton describes the Lord's compliments of the church at Ephesus, "We can summarize these nine good things that the Ephesian church is doing by grouping them into two categories: 1) deeds and 2) theology. Everything said about their deeds is good: they're working, toiling, patiently enduring - stated in both 2:2 and 2:3, and they are bearing up for Jesus' name. And everything said about their theology is good, too: they are recognizing the difference between good and evil, testing those who claim to be messengers of other churches, and refusing to recognize liars."

In Revelation 2:4, Paul points out one criticism, ***"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first."*** James Hamilton says, "But the one thing that the church lacks… seems to indicate that the Ephesian church is muddling through without much joy, holding out with steadfastness but with faded fervor. It may be that they are slipping into a pattern of just going through the motions."

8. How can this relate to us in marriage?

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9. How can this relate to us spiritually?

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Finally, in Revelation 2:5-7, the Lord gives the command, ***"Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."***

10. What are they supposed to remember?

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11. What does it mean to repent?

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Matthew Henry writes, “They must repent. They must be inwardly grieved and ashamed for their sinful declension; they must blame themselves, and shame themselves, for it, and humbly confess it in the sight of God, and judge and condemn themselves for it. They must return and do their first works.” For some, that might sound too harsh, but sin should not be taken lightly. Leon Morris adds, “Christians can never dally with wrong. There must be a sharp break with it.” If you have been slipping away from the Lord, come back home. He is waiting for you. He misses you.

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Mark 12:30

ASSESSMENT

THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS • DEVOTION 1

Pastor Patrick Rowland

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.'" Revelation 2:1-3

In any kind of court case or investigation, it is critical that evidence and witness testimony have a high level of credibility. The witness' story cannot just be believable, the witness must also be a person who is trustworthy. This passage begins with the letters to the seven actual churches at the time of John's recording of Revelation with each letter having an important message for each church. You could call it an assessment of each ministry.

As a pastor for a long time, I am very aware of the assessments that are made each week of a church, ministry, pastor, and message. They are shared in the form of passive observations, social media comments, and my favorite, Sunday afternoon emails. We hear those comments all the time and over the years I have learned to only listen to the ones with credibility.

In Revelation 2:1, the messenger establishes credibility before one thought is shared, ***"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.'"***

These words are delivered by One who not only has been in the presence of each of these churches, but also maintains the spiritual life of those churches. We know based on chapter 1, verses 10-11, that it was Jesus who instructed John to record these words. It was Jesus who is the credible source of this ministry assessment. We read, ***"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea'"*** (Revelation 1:10-11).

If the church in Ephesus was given a grade card they would be receiving an A. Listen to how they are described, ***"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary"*** (Revelation 2:2-3).

Ephesus was one of the top cities in the Roman Empire because of its geographical location and its commerce. This also lead to a wide range of diversity and cultures which contributed to a reputation for pagan worship. In Acts chapter 19, we read of a riot in the city because of the impact Paul was having on sharing the Gospel. These new converts were directly affecting the economy. Basically, the church had its challenges in this culture. However, it is in the darkest times that light can stand out all the more. The church at Ephesus was known for standing out and standing up.

It makes me wonder, what would our church be known for? If you ask people in our community, "What do you know about The River?" how would they respond? Better yet, what are you known for? How would Jesus assess you and your life right now?

PRIVATE ENDURANCE

THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS • DEVOTION 2

Michael Fox

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.'" Revelation 2:1-3

I struggle with giving words of affirmation. It is something that I need to constantly work on and especially for those close to me that need it. Reading through the passage in Revelation chapter 2, I cannot help but be thankful for a picture of words of affirmation. The Apostle John is writing to the seven churches of Asia, and here to the church in Ephesus, giving them some words and reflections. I appreciate the ultimate goals of encouragement and development.

There are two qualities John writes about here in this passage: endurance and patience. As he shares with the church in Ephesus, he encourages them that he sees their patient endurance, and furthermore that they are doing it ***"for my name's sake."*** I cannot help but reflect on my own life, and how easy it is to do things looking for man's approval, man's words of affirmation, and wrong motives. Too often, I want someone to tell me I did something well for the glory of myself.

Matthew Henry writes in his commentary, "Christ keeps an account of every day's work, and every hour's work, his servants do for him,

and their labour shall not be in vain in the Lord. It is not enough that we be diligent, but we must be patient, and endure hardness as good soldiers of Christ. We must have and exercise great patience, and no Christian can be without it. There must be bearing patience, to endure the injuries of men."

In 1 Corinthians 15:58, Paul writes, ***"Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."*** Our service for the Lord makes a difference. Romans 12:12 adds, ***"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."*** At times the Christian walk and doing the right thing may be difficult, but it is worth it.

I pray today that I can have patient endurance in the work God has called me to. I want to recognize Who I am doing it for, not looking for the praise of man. I desire to glorify and honor Christ with everything I do.

THE PRAYER

THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS • DEVOTION 3

Sierra Combs

"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." Revelation 2:4

Several years ago I attended a very in-depth study of the Book of Revelation. We spent an entire year going through it verse by verse. Before we started, I was so excited to finally get some clarity on all of the interesting prophecies and, hopefully, finally iron out my own understanding (or lack thereof) of the end times. I was eager to learn, and while I did learn a great deal, my eschatological views were certainly not ironed out and instead of really understanding the things yet to come, I was just introduced to other interesting prophecies to ponder. While my expectations were not exactly met, I ended up walking away from that study with something so much more. We read in the first few sentences of Revelation that the words are those of Jesus Himself, and He promises blessing on those who read them, hear them, and keep them. As we go through this amazing book this summer, I encourage you to keep this promise in mind. Even if all of your questions are not answered (they will not be), you will walk away blessed.

While I excitedly came to the study yearning for knowledge of the future, it was the words written to a church long ago that I needed the most. In the first three chapters of Revelation, we read exhortations written to seven different churches within the Roman Empire at that time. Each church was unique in its geographical location, local culture, struggles, and strengths. The historical context is rich and yet there is so much to be learned and applied to the church and individual today. I remember the week we focused on the first

church at Ephesus and I walked away extremely challenged and convicted. It was as if Jesus was talking directly to me in my own struggles and sin. Revelation 2:2-5 says ***"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent."*** The Ephesian church clearly was doing some things right. Their city was a major metropolis, famous for the temple of the Greek goddess, Artemis. Not only were they surrounded by pagan cult worship, but they also had many false teachers passing through. Because of these influences, Christians in Ephesus had become rich in discernment against heresy and worldliness, and they were commended for this. Unfortunately, they had lost the most important thing, a genuine love for Christ.

At its origin, the Ephesian church was zealous in its love for its Savior. They embraced their salvation with joy, so overwhelmed by the love of the Father which then turned to love for Him and others. In 1 John 4:19, we are reminded, ***"We love because he first loved us."*** This love quickly spilled out into the dark world around them and the church grew as more people were saved through hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, as time went on they lost their zeal and passion for the Lord. Instead of good works overflowing out of love, they started going through the motions, motivated not by love, but perhaps by the works themselves. While their doctrine may have stayed true and pure, it did not matter. They lost their first love, the love for Christ. Without it, nothing else mattered.

This was a serious matter to the church then and it is just as serious (and prevalent) today. On a personal level, it hit me like a ton of bricks. How often do I get so worked up about defending the truth that I throw my love for others out the window? Pride creeps in and instead of love and compassion, I feel anger and judgment. Instead of responding in love, I respond with a critical spirit. I tell myself that I feel these things because of my love for God and His Word, but the gross reality is that when my love for others is lacking, my love for God is lacking. How often am I just going through the motions, doing things because it is how I have always done them? For the Ephesian church as well as for myself, the warning is strong and the consequence is detrimental and terrifying. The Lord warned that if they did not return to their first love, He would remove their lampstand. What was once a church that shined bright for Christ would have its witness taken away.

I never want to see this happen in my life. I have a prayer that I wrote in my Bible all those years ago when studying this passage. It still serves as a good reminder:

> Have I become like the Ephesian church? I like the rules, I live by them. I cannot stand for false teachers leading people astray. But somewhere along the way that has turned into pride and anger. I have lost my love for people. How then am I loving You? God, let me focus on loving you first, and then others, and let the rest all fall away. Please, Lord, do not take away my light.

Praise the Lord for His conviction and call to repentance. If you have found yourself lacking in love, repent and return to your first love. Let us remember the joy and zeal we had when He first saved us and return to that place until He calls us home!

AVOIDING AUTOPILOT

THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS • DEVOTION 4

Kendall Hine

"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." Revelation 2:4

If you ask me, the most tactful people in relationships are those that are the masters of the compliment sandwich. Have you ever had a conversation with a brother or sister who needs to confront you, but started out by complimenting you? You are on a high, feeling really good about yourself, and then they hit you with the truth. Your high is gone, and you are left contemplating the truth that your friend is speaking in your life, on quite the emotional rollercoaster. However, no sandwich is complete without two slices of bread, and they gracefully and lovingly build you back up, a perfect compliment sandwich. I do not know about you, but I think those can be some of the hardest yet most rewarding conversations.

We see the church in Ephesus get a compliment sandwich in Revelation chapter 2 when God begins to tell them what they do really well. They are people who work with great endurance, and have remained strong in their pursuit for the sake of the church! The Lord says in Revelation 2:2-4, ***"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary."*** Then they get the meat of the sandwich. God reprimands them, saying that they have forgotten their first love, the love of Christ. He rebukes them, saying ***"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first"***

(Revelation 2:4). The sheep have strayed into the pasture, lost, without their shepherd to guide them along.

Have you ever been driving and started floating off, only to come back to reality and realize you have been going ten minutes without really paying attention? I know I have! The church of Ephesus had been working so hard, yet was on autopilot. They were a church driven by reasons other than their love of Christ, what an oxymoron! Friends, I ask you today, when is the last time you stopped for a moment to ask yourself, “What is my reason for working in the name of Christ?” Are you truly motivated to work to further the Kingdom of God, or is it something else? You might find yourself going along with the motions, serving out of obligation, or wanting applause for your works. I encourage you to set aside time today and take inventory of your work for Christ. Do not set it to autopilot like the church of Ephesus, but instead, pour out your praise to the One who deserves it all. Let us not be a people who forget our first love.

THE RACE

THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS • DEVOTION 5

Pastor Justin Dean

I have been described as many things in my life, but a long-distance runner has never been one of them. I can run, and I would say I am decently fast, as long as I do not have to run farther than the distance my couch is from the fridge. No quote has better embodied my running style than Gimli the Dwarf's quote from *"The Lord of the Rings,"* "I'm wasted on cross-country. We Dwarves are natural sprinters. Very dangerous over short distances." My biggest fault is that I always run out of stamina. I start off well, but any serious distance ends in me walking and eventually cramping.

My current running situation is very similar to John's diagnosis of the current situation of the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:5-7, ***"Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."***

The problem was the church of Ephesus started their race well, but they were struggling to continue running. They had begun to fall off, to become complacent, and they were being warned that this would be their downfall. Unless they repented (turned to God) they would be left to their own apathy.

Like it or not, for many believers, our own spiritual race is run in a similar way. We start our relationship with Jesus on fire, sprinting

down the spiritual track. Unfortunately, we lack spiritual stamina, and like the church of Ephesus, eventually, we quickly run out of energy and begin to fall off. Too often, we get distracted by the world and return to our old, pre-Jesus habits. So how are we supposed to keep our stamina up? How can we continue to run with similar vigor and passion as when we began our relationship with Christ? The writer of Hebrews answers this very question. Hebrews 12:1 (NIV) says, ***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."***

Throughout our journey as believers, we tend to burden ourselves with plenty of things. Sinful habits, shame, and religiosity are just some of the things that we allow to weigh us down. Running is hard enough, but having to run it with ankle weights, jeans, and a winter coat sounds impossible to me. When we allow our flesh to creep in, and we do not regularly refocus and unload all that burdens us, we end up spiritually overheated and cramping.

I would encourage you to spend some time writing down a list of things that you feel make it difficult for you to focus on Jesus. What makes you stressed, exhausted, or bitter? Are you trying to carry them on your own? What would it be like to offload some of the things weighing you down to a godly friend or mentor, or better yet, Christ? Why? Spend some time praying and asking God to show you some of the things that you need to throw off.

HOUSE CLEANING OF THE HEART

THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS • DEVOTION 6

Cathy Story

Have you ever heard the saying, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results”? Do you ever feel like you relate to this saying? Sometimes I feel this way trying to clean my house with our four kids six-years-old and younger! It never ceases to amaze me that I can clean a room and turn around not five minutes later to that same room being right back to the crazy way it was. I am hoping you can relate and this is not just my house.

I have tried to work smarter and not harder as the years have gone on. I can recall times and days when the house did not always look like a disaster zone. I have then taken steps and worked to make changes to better help everyone in the house come together to find a better way of cleaning up. Some specific and labeled clear toy bins have made quite the difference in the kids being able to help clean up! While helpful, these solutions have not always negated the sometimes threat of getting rid of a toy that someone just will not clean up or put away.

At this point, you may be thinking, while this may sound like your house, how does it sound like the book of Revelation? As I read through Revelation 2:5-7, a command was being given to the church of Ephesus. They are being told, ***“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”***

I related this to a time I remember when I knew that my house looked like clean. The church was then being told to repent, which means to turn from your ways. Think about turning from your insanity. What do you keep trying to do that is not bringing about the changes you would hope or like to see? We then see that they were told to do the works they did at first. This was me trying the cleaning strategies I really know are best, but finding ways to get the kids involved. Notice this one part, ***"If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand."*** John looks at Jesus removing His presence from them. I would guess that many of us do not aim for this consequence to happen.

This command is not too different than what Jesus is looking for out of us. We can look at where we have fallen in life, we can repent from our sins and current ways of dishonoring God, and we can work to get back to the things that we know are beneficial for our relationship with Him. I would encourage you to take a few minutes from the messy house cleaning you have to do today and spend some time working on the cleaning in your heart that God is calling you to do.

3

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Prison ministry can be fascinating. One of the most striking observations is that many of those who are incarcerated walk in freedom, while many who are outside the walls are imprisoned in fear, doubt, and no sense of hope.

1. How can this be true?

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_____

I believe this relates to the church at Smyrna who were poor, yet rich.

Revelation 2:8 transitions from the church at Ephesus to the church at Smyrna, ***"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'"***

2. Who is being described and what does it mean?

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In Revelation 2:9-10, the Lord compliments the church at Smyrna, ***"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."***

3. What compliment is given to the church at Smyrna?

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4. What does it mean to have poverty and be rich?

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Revelation 2:10 continues, ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."***

5. What criticism is stated of the church at Smyrna?

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Jews were persecuting these Christians causing poverty and hurting their reputation. However, it was going to get worse. They would face prison and death. Warren Wiersbe notes, "No words of accusation are given to the congregation in Smyrna! They may not have enjoyed the approval of men, but they certainly received the praise of God. However, the Lord did give them solemn words of admonition as they faced increased suffering: 'Don't be afraid!'"

6. What are some common fears people have today?

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Finally, Revelation 2:10-11 gives the command to the church at Smyrna, ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful***

unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."

7. What two commands are given in this section?

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_____
_____

8. What is the reward for those who are faithful to death?

_____
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9. What does it mean?

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Paige Patterson makes an interesting observation, "The crown promised here is the stephanos, the victor's crown, as opposed to the diadēma or diadem. The stephanos was not worn by royalty, at least not as a sign of that position, but rather was awarded to the athlete who had won an athletic event. In other words, it was a 'winner's crown,' and the Smyrnans are invited to see themselves, whatever their sufferings, not as losers but as winners." All too often there is this mindset that when things do not go as expected or hoped that God is punishing. God will never leave us, wants the best for us, and sees the bigger picture.

James Hamilton's quotation helps us know how to be winners, "In order to be faithful unto death, the knowledge of Jesus must be bigger to us than the reality of death itself. Jesus is the First and

the Last, the Conqueror over death, the Giver of the crown of life to those who are faithful unto death. Jesus must be bigger to us than death itself."

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."
Matthew 10:28

NO FLUFF HERE

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA • DEVOTION 1

Shawna Johnson

The book of Revelation is crazy intimidating to me. When I visualize the imagery, it sounds like something from a fantasy book. As I continue to dive in (and move past the wild visuals), I am thankful for the promises we see.

John is on the island of Patmos and the Spirit of God appears to him, asking him to write down everything he sees and hears. He is given instruction to write to the angels of seven churches. We are going to look at his letter to the Church in Smyrna.

Revelation 2:8-11 says, ***"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'""***

Following Christ is not for the faint of heart. God does not promise we will not have troubles, trials, or times of suffering. As we see here and in many other places in Scripture, we actually read that life will be hard. In the middle of John 16:33, Jesus says, ***"In the world you will have tribulation."*** That is not fun to talk about! It is definitely not the fluffy, feel-good stuff we like to hear.

I am so thankful though, that He does not leave us with that. When we read John 16:33 in its entirety, we know there will be suffering, but look what is promised from God, ***"In me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."***

Going back to Revelation 2:8-11, we know there will be suffering, but when we cling to Jesus, we will receive the crown of life.

Thank you, Lord, for your promises. May we always remember, that we will never be left alone.

FAITHFUL

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA • DEVOTION 2

Pastor Noble Baird

Revelation has often seemed to be a heavy and scary book from God's Word. From the talk of the end of the world, great tribulation, final judgments, and ultimately death; it can be difficult to read and process. However, throughout these chapters and verses is the continued promise of salvation and eternity through and with Christ.

As Revelation opens, John writes Jesus' words to seven specific churches. One of the first churches mentioned in Revelation chapter 2 is the church in Smyrna. Beginning in Revelation 2:8-10 Jesus says, ***"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.'"***

The opening sentence is truly so amazing, ***"The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life."*** That is Jesus! At times we tend to just glaze over verses in Scripture because the "meat" or the "main point" is in a different spot in the passage. However, if we slow down and take time to prayerfully read over each word and verse, we can find another blessing. This passage is not simply a verse, but the words of Jesus!

Jesus goes on to warn the church of more tribulation and hardship to come. Yet, He encourages them to not fear. Although the hardships

will come, Jesus tells them to endure and stay faithful to the Gospel of His death, burial, and resurrection. He goes on to say that through whatever comes their way, they shall receive the crown of life.

In this life, we have and will continue to face hardships and tribulations. However, as Jesus reminds and encourages the church of Smyrna, ***"Be faithful unto death."*** I love how the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 10:23, ***"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."*** As we go throughout our week, may we truly not fear, but hold fast to the promise of He who is. He is faithful. No matter what those around us and this world throw at us, as we stand strong we will receive the crown of life and eternity with our Risen Savior!

TOUGH TIMES TESTIMONY

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA • DEVOTION 3

Mitchell Holmes

Revelation is an interesting book, but can be very confusing at times. The second chapter of Revelation, thankfully, follows a strict structure as it (along with the third chapter) goes through seven churches of that time. The author does the following for each: writes the church a compliment, gives a criticism or rebukes the church for some area in which they have fallen away or need to improve on, and then gives a command or exhortation to instruct them on how to proceed.

The church at Smyrna was going through some very difficult times when the author of Revelation writes a letter to them. The Christians in Smyrna were suffering severe persecution for their faith. Revelation 2:10 says things are about to get even worse, ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death."*** Christ, and the author of the letter to the church at Smyrna, is calling out to these Christians to stay true to their faith, to have courage, and not lose hope despite everything that they have been through and will soon go through.

Here is what is so significant about the church at Smyrna and all that they are going through: among the seven churches covered in these early chapters of Revelation, Smyrna and one other church are the only ones that are not rebuked in any way. These Christians were suffering immense persecution and tribulation and despite everything going wrong in their lives for following the Lord, they

never wavered or lost their faith. Despite, or perhaps even because of, their suffering, the Christians of Smyrna were pure in faith and in the moral way that they lived. What an incredible testament of faith and complete trust in God that these early Christians did not waver when faced with sufferings from Satan!

Whether it is to test our faith or to strengthen it, we will all go through trials and tribulations. There will be difficult times in life. Christ promises that we will all have hardship (John 16:33; James 1:2-4) but we have an incredible Savior that waits eagerly for us to draw near to Him when those times come. Rather than being miserable during the valleys of life, recognize that you are not alone. Christ is beside you and wants you to lean on Him when your own strength fails you. We have a good Father that does everything for our good. His plan is perfect so even though it feels unloving, there is a reason for our suffering. When those times do come, look to the example set by the Christians of Smyrna and do not lose hope; maintain faith, and trust that God has you in His hand.

CROWN OF LIFE

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA • DEVOTION 4

Pastor Philip Piasecki

Being a Christian is the greatest joy in my life. It has brought immense amounts of happiness, purpose, contentment, and so many other positive things I could not even possibly list them all. Each day I can wake up encouraged because I know how the Lord has saved me. This, however, does not mean that every day of my life is going to be a scene out of a children's book. Despite the joys of following the Lord, life can get tough sometimes. It is not a question of "if" we see tribulation and trials in this life, it is a question of "when" we will see them. We see a clear picture of this in Revelation 2:10, ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life."***

This verse at first glance can be discouraging. We see words like "suffer," "prison," "tested," "tribulation," and "death" and that makes us do a double-take. This is a challenging verse. Thinking about going through this as a Christian can be scary. We do not know what the future on this earth holds for us as believers. One day this very well could be one of us being thrown into prison because of our faith in Jesus Christ. However, despite the possibility of that circumstance, we can have joy because of our eternity with the Lord that is promised to us. In this verse, we are commanded to be faithful unto death, and as a reward, we will receive the crown of life. Even if we lose our life, we gain eternity with the Lord. I pray that the Lord would empower me through His Holy Spirit to stay faithful to Him even in the midst of extreme persecution. I pray that I would stay faithful to Him even in the midst of the minor tribulations that I face each and every day. Our

Lord is so faithful to sustain us through the tribulation so that in the midst of it we can still praise His name and hold fast to Him.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer, be faithful unto death, and He will give you the crown of life.

BE FAITHFUL

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA • DEVOTION 5

Jill Osmon

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." Revelation 2:10-11

We drop into the church at Smyrna, and from the text, we know a few things. They had tribulations, worldly poverty (although God is quick to point out they are rich), and were going through some form of slander. I could have written all of that about the church in 2022, right? It is a strange time in our world and culture. I love what John Piper says about this passage, "This is what was happening in Smyrna 1,900 years ago and it is still happening. When Christianity goes really public in a pagan world (instead of remaining in our safe, isolated, comfortable sanctuaries) the opposition labels us not as mistaken, but as evil and dangerous. The ironic and tragic response of many Christians in that atmosphere of conflict is to simply disappear. And to think that they are doing God a favor by stirring up no opposition to his name."

As I am writing this, I just read about some players in the MLB Florida Rays team that refused to wear the Pride Month emblems on their uniforms. I am sure there are many thoughts and opinions about if they should or should not, but what struck me was the kindness they showed even in their refusal. They did not disappear so as to not stir up opposition but, and this is so important, they tried to lead with love and truth. The world, in general, will probably not be kind to

them. They will fight slander and some American form of tribulation, but the end of verse 10 and all of 11 gives us our command. We are to be faithful!

We are not called to be faithful to the world or timidness, but faithful to the Gospel. We are to be faithful in the face of adversity and slander. When the world tells us we are hateful, we respond with truth and love.

We are to be faithful. Faithfulness will never look mean, condescending, or arrogant as to become so loud you are a clanging cymbal (1 Corinthians 13:1). We are to heed the Holy Spirit. Then we will avoid the second death of Hell and God will reward us with the crown of life.

We will be tested and face adversity, but be faithful. Your faithfulness will shine the light of the Gospel.

DO YOU FEAR SUFFERING?

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA • DEVOTION 6

John Rigg

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death." Revelation 2:10-11

Have you ever had someone try and tell you to do something that they have no experience in? You can often tell they have no experience in the matter other than what they have heard someone else say. I want to hear from somebody who owns the t-shirt, "Seen that, done that." Experience carries a lot of weight with me. That is why, if I am looking for how to do something around my house, I seek out someone who has experience (or I look it up on YouTube).

The second letter that Jesus tells the Apostle John to write in the book of Revelation is addressed to the church in Smyrna. In that letter, Jesus says to them, ***"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life"*** (Revelation 2:10).

The Christian church in Smyrna was under heavy persecution during this time, and Jesus knew the tribulation they were suffering and where it was coming from (Revelation 2:9). History tells us that Smyrna once was a center for Emperor worship. In fact, archaeologists have discovered coins portraying Nero, dedications

to the emperors Titus and Domitian, and statues of Domitian, Trajan, and Hadrian (Yamauchi, *New Testament*). These artifacts all demonstrate Smyrna's devotion to the emperor.

So as the transformed Christian church began to demonstrate its allegiance to Jesus Christ and not the emperor, persecution and tribulation came upon them. Some would be thrown into prison, and some would suffer death.

Why trust Jesus? What makes someone read this letter and then continue in the faith? The answer is in the opening of the letter. Revelation 2:8 says, ***"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'"***

The command, ***"Do not fear,"*** comes from our Lord; someone who has suffered the persecution of the world, died, was buried, and then experienced God raise Him back to life.

As you live out your life as a follower of Jesus, are you surprised when persecutions come? Do you get mad at God or want to give up on following Jesus? Maybe you have an unreal expectation of Christianity and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus?

The Apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 4:12-14, ***"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."***

We can trust Jesus because He is not commanding us to do something that He Himself has no experience in. The Bible repeatedly states that persecution should not come as a surprise to us but should be expected. God uses the sufferings of His children as testing of faith and promises life to those who endure.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'" Revelation 2:11

4

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

The third church was Pergamum. It was a wealthy city. However, it was wicked as the people worshiped pagan cults including Athena, Asclepius, Dionysus, and Zeus. It was famous for its university which had a library of about 200,000 volumes. They even manufactured their own parchment or paper (John Walvoord, *"The Bible Knowledge Commentary"*). Warren Wiersbe notes that Pergamum was called "the greatest city in Asia Minor." He also points out, "The city also had a temple dedicated to Aesculapius, the god of healing, whose insignia was the entwined serpent on the staff." This is the medical symbol of today.

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.'" Revelation 2:12

1. What is the ***"two-edged sword"***?

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This ***"two-edged sword"*** is also referenced in Revelation 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21. The clearest passage for this is Hebrews 4:12, ***"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."***

2. What does this passage say about the Word of God? What does that mean?

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Revelation 2:13 records the Lord's compliment on the church at Pergamum, ***"I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells."***

3. What compliment does the Lord give the church at Pergamum?

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The Lord acknowledged that the church at Pergamum was in a bad neighborhood. The phrases ***"where Satan's throne is"*** and ***"where Satan dwells"*** might refer to the famous temple to Asklepius, the Greek god of healing, symbolized by the figure of a snake. This reference can take us back to the Garden of Eden or forward to the evil dragon in one of John's later visions (Revelation 12:9 and 20:2) which is labeled as that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan (J. Ramsey Michaels, *"The IVP New Testament Commentary Series"*). The church held fast even though Antipas was martyred there.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) applies this passage well, "Thou holdest fast my name; thou art not ashamed of thy relation to me, but accountest it thine honour that my name is named on thee, that, as the wife bears the name of the husband, so thou art called by my name; this thou holdest fast, as thine honour and privilege."

4. Has there been a time when you have or have not been true (not ashamed) to the name of the Lord? Please explain.

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In Revelation 2:14-15, the Lord mentions some criticisms He has against the church at Pergamum, ***"But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans."***

5. What two criticisms does the Lord have about the church at Pergamum?

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First, John references Balaam and Balak (Numbers chapters 22-24, 31). Balaam had been guilty of counseling King Balak to cause Israel to sin through intermarriage with heathen women and through idol worship. Intermarriage with heathen women was a problem in Pergamum where any social contact with the world also involved worship of idols (John Walvoord, *"The Bible Knowledge Commentary"*).

Second, he refers to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. It appears that the "Balaamites" and the "Nicolaitans" at Pergamum are almost certainly not two groups but one. "Nicolaitans" could have been a coined nickname. "Balaam" is Hebrew for "master of the people" while "Nicolaitan" in Greek could be read as "conqueror of the people" (J. Ramsey Michaels, *"The IVP New Testament Commentary Series"*).

6. How is being a Christian different than the meaning of the "Balaamites" and the "Nicolaitans"?

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Revelation 2:16-17 records the Lord's command to the church at Pergamum, ***"Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it."***

7. What command does the Lord give the church at Pergamum?

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I appreciate James Hamilton's thoughts, "We call people to repent because we love them and want to keep them from judgment. And if they do not repent, we are to follow the steps prescribed in Matthew 18:15-18 because we love them and want to keep them from judgment."

8. When was manna used in the Old Testament?

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In *"Preaching the Word,"* James Hamilton suggests that idolatry arises from the desire to have our needs met. Jesus promises to meet those needs. Jesus offers the provision of ***"hidden manna,"*** which is a better provision than any idol offers. He tells us we do not need to go to other gods. Idols are gods we create, they have nothing eternal to offer.

9. What new name would you like written on your stone?

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A.T. Robertson in *"Word Pictures in the New Testament"* makes an interesting cultural note. ***"A white stone"*** (or pebble) was used in the courts of justice. Black pebbles were used for condemning, while white pebbles were for acquitting. The only other use of the word in the New Testament is in Acts 26:10. It is where Paul speaks of "depositing his pebble" or casting his vote. The white stone with one's name on it was used to admit one to entertainment and also as an amulet or charm.

The white stone or pebble means we are not guilty. We have freedom!

The white stone or pebble is our ticket to Heaven!

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17

ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE PRESENCE OF THE ENEMY

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM • DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ferdinand Sanders

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.'"
Revelation 2:12-13

If someone were to observe your life and write about how things were going, what sort of things would be written? Would they be positive or negative? Would others be encouraged by how you are handling the things around you? Would you even want someone to summarize what they view as your "spiritual health" or would you rather take some time to get things "in order"? This is sort of what happens in the book of Revelation. At the beginning of Revelation, Jesus speaks to John in a vision, instructing him to record and pen letters to the seven churches of Asia. These letters are almost like a "current state of affairs" and paint a picture of the present condition or status of each of the churches in these cities. One of the cities that John writes to is the church in Pergamum.

Upon reading the message that John is to portray to the church of Pergamum, it is a little unclear as to how things are going overall. By just looking at the first two verses written, we see encouragement but also two references to the presence, dwelling, and rule of Satan. Quite the juxtaposition! In reading about Pergamum from the *"Enduring Word Bible Commentary,"* we see that the city of Pergamum was a bustling place. Pergamum was the capital city of the region for more than three hundred years and was a center for

culture and education, having one of the great libraries of the ancient world. Pergamum was a very "religious" city, some even believing it to be the center of paganism. Does anyone feel called to go plant a church there?

Although it may not seem like a natural first reaction after reading about the location of ***"Satan's throne,"*** the martyring of Antipas, and the place where ***"Satan dwells."*** I actually find myself feeling a sense of encouragement after reading Revelation 2:12-13. Despite all of the reasons for the church of Pergamum to be a "failed operation" or a "lost cause," John is instructed to write, ***"Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith."*** You may feel like you are not making an impact, you may feel like you are persecuted, or that you are surrounded by the enemy; however, as we see with the church of Pergamum, they are still seen, recognized, and valued in the eyes of Jesus.

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." 2 Corinthians 4:7-10

WELL DONE

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM • DEVOTION 2

Jeannie Yates

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.'"
Revelation 2:12-13

I remember being moved to tears and greatly inspired by the testimony of Jim Elliot when I first heard it as a child. Jim was a Christian missionary called to bring the Gospel of Jesus to the Auca Indians, a cannibal tribe in Ecuador. After several successful plane-to-ground "trades" with the tribesmen, Jim, along with four other missionaries, made a plan to land the plane and meet the tribe face to face. On the day the five missionaries landed the plane, they were met by hostile tribesmen with spears. They gave their lives trying to share the hope and love of Jesus with courageous faith.

Revelation 2:13 says, ***"I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells."*** Here we see the church of Pergamum receives affirmation for having the same kind of unwavering faith. Even though they were surrounded by evil and those being martyred for the faith, they stood strong and made the choice to not deny the name of Jesus.

I have often thought about what I would do if I was faced with the choice of denying Christ or dying for Him. Would I take a stand like

Jim Elliot and the church in Pergamum? Am I seeking to just get by and live for this life or am I living to hear the words, ***"Well done, good and faithful servant"*** from Matthew 25:21? I pray we can encourage each other as Paul did Timothy, ***"Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus"*** (2 Timothy 1:13).

Jim Elliot's legacy did not end with his death; in fact, that was only the beginning. His wife, Elizabeth, along with the other widows, continued to make peaceful contact with the tribe until their eyes were opened and salvation came to the hearts of the Auca people. It is a beautiful story of the overwhelming mercy and grace that can only be found in the Gospel. I strongly encourage you to read Jim's story written by his wife, Elizabeth, in the book, *"Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot."*

I'm waiting my whole life for that day
I will live my life to hear You say
Well done, well done; My good and faithful one
Welcome to the place where you belong
Well done, well done; My beloved child
You have run the race and now you're home
Welcome to the place where you belong

"Well Done" by The Afters

THE MAJORS

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM • DEVOTION 3

Caleb Jones

"But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans."
Revelation 2:14-15

Have you ever had someone speak some hard truth to you? It never feels great. No one truly looks for other people to point out their flaws. At work, I often times do because it generally speaks to a skill or project and not my character. It is probably why we take feedback from people we are not close to so much better than those we are the closest.

Even when I am the healthiest and I am constantly looking for feedback, it never feels right when someone negatively says, "You are acting like someone else." It is not enjoyable when your spouse just calls you by your mother or father's name just to point out a character or personality flaw.

I especially get uncomfortable when Christians point out other Christians or ministries that seem to contradict the Bible. To me, it is really hard to live by Matthew 7:5 as well as warn each other of false teachings as we see here in Revelation. Matthew 7:5 says, ***"You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."***

What John is trying to do here is to warn the church of Pergamum that they are divided. Both the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans followed Roman rule which required sacrifice to their gods.

Have you ever heard the phrase, “Don’t major on the minors”? I think the church went through a huge phase in the last 30-40 years of majoring on the minors. We have traded in our theology for preferences. We have found churches that fit the mold or style of our lives. This is not what the church of Pergamum was struggling with and John is calling them out and bringing to light the major theological issues that were present. Their problem was not focusing on the minors. It was theology. It was a major issue.

What can we learn from this? Spend some time today asking God to reveal where you have drifted. Where has your theology drifted? Who are you following theologically and does that line up with God’s Word? What are we majoring on that is actually very minor? What is major that we are not taking seriously enough? Who in your life has drifted away from the Gospel and how can we lovingly speak the truth with boldness?

CRITICISM

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM • DEVOTION 4

Adam Moore

"But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans."
Revelation 2:14-15

Criticism is something that the average person does not stop and realize how much they do. Do you ever get around a person who is negative, or constantly critical? Our culture has branded the term "Debbie Downer" as a person who is always negative or even critical. Most people do not care to be around a "Debbie Downer" unless they themselves are a negative person, in which case, misery often loves company. Throughout Scripture we are reminded not to criticize, complain, scoff, mock, or murmur. Sadly, God had to get the attention of the Israelites several times due to these negative attributes that many of us are still guilty of today.

Our verses today have a lot of a back story to them. In order for you to get the full story, you would have to read several places throughout Scripture, but mainly here in Revelation and within the book of Numbers. For the sake of keeping this writing limited to a daily devotional, I am going to somewhat paraphrase, but I would challenge you to dig into the Scripture and study the church of Pergamum.

The church of Pergamum was located in one of the most wicked places in the world, and the Lord implores them not to compromise

with the wickedness that is going on around them. Pergamum is so wicked that just one verse earlier, the Bible describes it as a place where Satan's throne is. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, the Bible refers to Satan as the God of this world. We are still implored as Christians not to compromise in this modern-day for the days are evil.

Some of the believers in Pergamum stood strong and never compromised, while others fell to the teaching of Balaam, and some to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Balaam was warned by God not to say anything in a destructive manner concerning the children of Israel for Balak the king of Moab. The king was afraid of the Israelites because of their might and strength, so he asked the prophet Balaam to curse God's people the Israelites. Balaam could not directly disobey God and curse the Israelites which angered the king. After several meetings with Balak the king, Balaam finally devised a plan that could bring Israel's destruction. Balaam had the king utilize a scheme of idolatry and sexual immorality to entice the Israelites and bring about destruction resulting in the death of 24,000 people. The church of Ephesus hated the works of the people called the Nicolaitans, so God commended them for hating their works and mentioned that he hated their works as well.

As wickedness began to run rampant throughout the camps of Israel due to the influence of Balaam and the Nicolaitans, I am sure that criticism began to run rampant as well. Those Israelites who had seen the miracles of almighty God and witnessed His deliverance were starting to justify their appetite for sexual immorality and worldliness. Church, the enemy still uses these tactics today. Oftentimes, the enemy entices us with the things that appeal most to our flesh, and the best way to defeat an enemy is to know their tactics and then recognize the stumbling blocks that are put in our way. For starters, always strive to praise God and never criticize. God loves it and begins to move when His people begin to praise!

WATCH YOURSELF

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM • DEVOTION 5

John Stone

"Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it." Revelation 2:16-17

"He who has an ear, let him hear." That is a figure of speech that I commonly hear thrown around that intrigues me. It is used as a way to express emphatic agreement with statements that are obviously true. Here's an example:

Person 1: "The roads in Michigan are terrible. We all pay taxes, so the government should do something about it."

Person 2: "100%!"

In a similar way, the Bible makes many statements that we read and say, "100%! I agree completely!" However, do we?

As we are studying through the book of Revelation, specifically the letters to the churches, we should not forget that despite the symbolism and prophetic nature of the book, these words are still true and applicable for all time. This letter, written to the church at Pergamum, is given as an encouragement and a warning. Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord, whose great love led Him to die to redeem mankind from sin and death is the very same One who wields the

sharp two-edged sword in verse 12. He is calling His church to repent of the sin of divided loyalty. They are located in the city where Satan lives and from which he rules his kingdom. That is horrifying to imagine! In their faith, they have stood strong against Satan's attacks, particularly Antipas (one commentary says he was their pastor) being martyred. Even so, Jesus says, ***"I have a few things against you"*** (verse 14). I can hear them replying in exasperation, "A few things? But we live in Satan's home town! He killed our pastor! This is really hard! Is that not good enough?" Jesus knows these things and can empathize as the One who was tempted in all the same ways (Hebrews 4:15), but He is still calling them to repent and backing up that call with a very real threat (verse 16).

This warning is just as applicable to us today as it was for them in the 1st century. We may not know who Balaam was (Numbers 22) and have probably never heard of the Nicolaitans, but we suffer from the same sinful divided loyalties. We may not live in Satan's home town, but he still rules this world. He is still infiltrating the church with false teachers and sowing division (2 Peter 2:1-3). He has orchestrated the masses against the principles of God to cast doubt and cause confusion. Despite all these things, Jesus Christ still requires 100% from us. It is not 51% or 75%. It is not even 99%. It is 100%. It means 100% of our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). It also comprises 100% of our resources, time, talent, and allegiance. I can hear the responses, some coming from within my own mind, "That is idealistic. How could God require that? It is impossible to be perfect! I cannot give 100% all the time!" However, the One with the two-edged sword is the same One who said:

- ***"Friendship with the world is hostility toward God."*** James 4:4 (NASB)

- ***"You shall be holy for I am holy."*** 1 Peter 1:16 (NASB)

- ***"You cannot serve God and wealth."*** Matthew 6:24 (NASB)

- ***"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."*** Matthew 5:48 (NASB)

- ***"But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven."*** Matthew 10:33 (NASB)

- ***"Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects."*** Colossians 1:10 (NASB)

How are we to reconcile this? The Bible and our own life experiences clearly teach that we will never be perfect on this side of eternity. Paul laments this struggle in Romans chapter 7, particularly in verse 24 where he writes, ***"Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death?"*** He answers his own question in the next verse, ***"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*** Jesus Christ did not just die to give us perfection and eternal life after we die, He freed us from slavery to sin and made it possible for us to live lives of obedience that are pleasing to the Lord now.

Whatever temptation you and I are facing right now can be resisted or fled. If we can overcome any current temptation, we can do the same with the next. Christ has 100% won that victory for us. There will be failure, but do not believe the lie of Satan that we are hopeless and disqualified and therefore have no reason to try. When you fail, confess your sin to God and He will wipe your failure off the record (1 John 1:8-9). Ask God to strengthen you to fight for holiness. Meditate on the Bible and arm yourself with the Word to be able to follow the example of Jesus and fight temptation with Scripture (Matthew 4:1-11). The Lord knows the areas of your life that have not been given over to Him. He knows where your loyalties are divided. Ask Him to reveal these to you (Psalm 139:23-24), so that you can search them

out and, through the power of Christ in you, destroy the divisions that prevent you from giving him 100%.

Jesus has given us a warning in Revelation 2:16-17 and it is serious, but He has also offered a reward for obedience. He has proven His commitment to us by indwelling us with His Spirit. We need to be a church filled with those who overcome; who are 100% committed to Christ in all areas of their life.

"So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you; for the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." Deuteronomy 4:23-24 (NASB)

HIS NEARNESS

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM • DEVOTION 6

Peter Mason

"Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it." Revelation 2:16-17

I lost many hours and sleepless nights to endless theological debates, with other young pimple-faced students at Bible college, that ran into the wee hours of the morning. Sadly, discussing theology has become a "turn-off" for many, because of young naive Bible college students like I was. Discussing theology can quickly become a competition for who can sound the smartest, win an argument, or prove a point. When we talk about God and topics of life, death, Heaven, and Hell in the abstract to win arguments rather than to love each other in the reality of our lives, it tends to be unhelpful. However, discussing our beliefs and theology should be a life-giving and soul-edifying activity.

We have seen the church at Pergamum receive praise and commendation for being able to stand up for truth in the face of persecution amid the pressure to serve other gods (verses 12-13). However, a new opponent has walked onto the scene called the "Nicolaitans." We are not sure exactly what heretical beliefs the Nicolaitans were expounding, but we can guess it had to do with worshiping other gods alongside Jesus. Jesus speaks words of complete love to this church in verse 16 (NIV), ***"Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."***

That might not sound like words of love; does it not sound pretty harsh? Jesus' words are stark and blunt only because He knows what is at stake: the peace and joy we find in the one Gospel of Jesus. Jesus commands this church to think soberly and clearly about the city they find themselves in and those who actively encourage them to join in with pagan rituals. While we may not be surrounded by pagan temples that explicitly ask for our worship, we are surrounded by a multitude of masked idols who are competing for our hearts; the gods of materialism, success, greed, pride, and self-glory. All of whom seek to take away our peace and joy which is so readily available in the Gospel.

The promise to those who turn to Jesus and remain convinced of His Gospel is to receive ***"hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone"*** (verse 17). All three of these items are associated with the office of the High Priest in the Old Testament. The hidden manna was preserved in the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, Aaron's staff which budded with white almond flowers was also kept in the Ark of the Covenant, and the names of Israel were placed on the clothing of the high priest. While slightly obscure, this three-fold promise is a promise of nearness and honor. Those who cling to Jesus alone for their salvation, joy, and peace will be rewarded with His nearness and receive the honor of being the ones who safeguard the Gospel.

As you step into your day, remember that a multitude of idols will be asking you to compromise your allegiance to Jesus, but do not believe them. They will only bring discontent, pain, and destruction. Engage in a theological debate with yourself when you are tempted to stray and cling to Jesus. He will do all the work and provide all the grace and mercy you will need.

5

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

The fourth church addressed is Thyatira. It is the church in the smallest city listed, but it is given the longest message. Alan Johnson points out, “Although not a great city, it was nevertheless important through commerce in wool, linen, apparel, dyed stuffs, leatherwork, tanning, and excellent bronze work. Associated with its commerce was an extensive trade guild or labor union network which must have played a prominent role in the social, political, economic, and religious life of the city.”

Acts 16:14-15 says, ***“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.”***

1. What is said about Lydia? Is this consistent with the cultural description of Thyatira?

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In Revelation 2:18, John writes, ***“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.’”***

2. How is the Son of God described here? What thoughts come to mind?

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The expression ***"Son of God"*** appears only here in the book of Revelation. It is a designation for the Messiah.

In Revelation 1:14-15, John gives a similar description, ***"The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters."***

The reference to His eyes being ***"like a flame fire"*** and the brilliant reflections of His feet emphasize the indignation and righteous judgment of Christ (John Walvoord, *"The Bible Knowledge Commentary"*). Matthew Henry explains the description as follows, "That his eyes are like a flame of fire, signifying his piercing, penetrating, perfect knowledge, a thorough insight into all persons and all things." Henry goes on to say, "That his feet are like fine brass, that the outgoings of his providence are steady, awful, and all pure and holy. As he judges with perfect wisdom, so he acts with perfect strength and steadiness."

Revelation 2:19 records the compliments given to the church at Thyatira, ***"I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first."***

3. What compliments are stated concerning the church at Thyatira?

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I appreciate how Warren Wiersbe describes these believers, "The believers in Thyatira were a busy lot! They were involved in sacrificial ministry for the sake of others. What's more, their works

were increasing and characterized by faith, love, and patience; so the church was not guilty of mere 'religious activity.'"

4. What does ***"your latter works exceed the first"*** mean?

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5. How can this be a good reminder and challenge to us?

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Revelation 2:20-23 records the criticism that was directed to the church at Thyatira, ***"But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works."***

6. From 1 Kings chapter 16, who was Jezebel?

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The problem at this church was that they tolerated evil.

The woman at Thyatira was probably not named Jezebel, but resembled her. Alan Johnson notes, "As this wicked and deceptive woman in the OT led Israel astray and persecuted the true prophets of God, so this woman at Thyatira was enticing the servants of God to abandon their exclusive loyalty to Christ." Being called a "Jezebel" is still a negative connotation even today.

The sin of this Jezebel included teachings that led others into engaging in sexual immorality and idolatry. However, it does not stop there. She refused to repent. The believers were known for their growth (***"your latter works exceed the first"***) which would imply repentance, yet they tolerated one who led some astray.

James Hamilton boldly states, "Those who belong to Jesus repent of sin. The refusal to repent of sin identifies someone as unregenerate."

7. What does ***"I am he who searches mind and heart"*** mean?

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In Revelation 2:24-29, John records the command from the Lord, ***"But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."***

8. What images come to mind when you hear the command to ***"hold fast"***?

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They had the Gospel. To ***"hold fast"*** means to live it out.

9. How do we live out the Gospel?

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Warren Wiersbe wrote, "It is interesting to contrast the churches at Ephesus and Thyatira. The Ephesian church was weakening in its love, yet faithful to judge false teachers; while the people in the assembly at Thyatira were growing in their love, but too tolerant of false doctrine. Both extremes must be avoided in the church. 'Speaking the truth in love' is the biblical balance (Ephesians 4:15)."

10. What promise was given to the believers who ***"hold fast"***?

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Paige Patterson in *"The New American Commentary"* writes, "The promise is then that the church at Thyatira, faithful to the calling of God, will eventually receive the morning star that is the abiding, close, imminent, and eternal fellowship with the Lord himself." Heaven is beautiful because that is where the Lord will be!

"And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." Galatians 6:9

PERFORMANCE REVIEW

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA • DEVOTION 1

Joe Wilson

"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.'" Revelation 2:18-19

Through many years of managing employees and instructing in professionalism, I have performed my share of performance reviews on both the accepting employee and the not-so accepting. One thing I have learned from success and failure is employees are much more willing to accept the bad if you let them know the good as well. To get "slapped in the face" with all the bad just seems unsurmountable without a little good mixed in there with it.

I believe Jesus provides us the perfect example of conducting a performance review as He gives John the words to write unto the seven churches. Today we will focus on the church at Thyatira from Revelation 2:18-19, ***"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.'"***

Thyatira was approximately 40 miles southeast of Pergamum and was noted for its abundant crops and the manufacture of purple dye. The church in Thyatira was small, but obviously, the Son of God thought it to be significant enough to include this letter in His inspired Word.

Verse 18 provides all we need to know about Who will be conducting the performance review. I believe the title of ***"the Son of God"*** would be enough for even me to understand the absolute importance of what was about to be disclosed. It also encourages confidence that His instruction really is the best way to succeed.

In Verse 19, the Son of God provides the church in Thyatira with what they are doing very well - love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I am sure we could all agree these are qualities we would love and desire to have associated with our personal character as well as the church or community God has chosen for us to serve.

I believe the Son of God has given the church in Thyatira a great start to their performance review that will also encourage them to take a solid look when the "not so goods" are identified in Revelation 2:20-24.

COFFEE TALK

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA • DEVOTION 2

Gary Wright

"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.'" Revelation 2:18-19

My cousin owns a coffee business and they have coffee shows all over the U.S. Occasionally, my wife Kim and I sell their coffee at these shows. We let folks sample the different flavors in hopes they will like one and make a purchase. When we first started selling the coffee, I did not have much faith in the product, but when I saw how much folks loved it, my faith began to grow and I became a passionate salesman.

The church in Thyatira had some major issues that Jesus wanted them to deal with, but before He goes into those issues, Jesus commends them on their works.

First, He commended their ***"love and faith."*** Believers in Thyatira did not put their faith in something fleeting like coffee, they put their faith in the ***"Son of God,"*** Jesus Christ!

Their faith and love in Jesus produced in them a heart for ***"service."*** True love for Jesus overflows into love and service for others. This love is not just an outward "going through the motions" thing, it is a true heart change that comes from faith and love in Jesus. It is not just for those who are easy to love, but also for those who are hard to love.

Due to the strong idolatry in Thyatira, no doubt the believers had to go through some difficult circumstances. However, because of their faith in Jesus, they had ***"patient endurance."*** In other words, they had peace knowing that Jesus was in control so they were able to stand firm in their faith no matter what hardships they were dealing with.

Lastly, Jesus commended them on their growth, ***"Your latter work exceeds the first."*** They were growing as believers and because of their growth, more people were reached with the love of Christ. In the same way that my faith in my cousin's coffee made me a passionate salesman, the love and faith for Jesus made the believers in Thyatira passionate about serving Him. All too often we are excited to talk about sports, stocks, shows, and stresses, but not the Savior.

Jesus was encouraging the believers in Thyatira to continue to grow in love and faith which produced service and patient endurance. Jesus is encouraging us to grow in these areas as well.

Have you put your faith in Jesus? Do your faith and your love for Jesus produce a heart change that overflows into love and service for others? Does your faith change the way you react to difficult circumstances? Are you growing as a believer?

What needs to change in your life so you can serve Jesus more passionately? If you need help in any of these areas, I recommend talking to a pastor at your location.

THAT FIRST STEP

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA • DEVOTION 3

Josh Thayer

"But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden." Revelation 2:20-24

John is writing here to the church in Thyatira. Now, this was a working man's town full of different merchants, but was primarily secular, with no focus on any particular religion. Here we stumble upon a woman who was teaching that immorality for believers was no big deal. She was caught up in sexual sin herself and like the Scripture says, ***"refuses to repent."***

Repent simply means to change our mind and direction from following our way to following God's way. It sounds simple when you write it out, but I believe once the devil knows you want to repent, he will throw everything at you to fall back into sin. This is where reliance on God is the only way out. It is when you need to devote yourself to reading the Bible, spending time in prayer, and having other people in your life who will walk with you and pray for you. I am here to tell

you today, that whatever sin you are caught up in, you can be free! The first step is to change your mind and direction.

We also see here a strong reminder of God's omnipresence. That is a fancy word for God is always present. If we truly understood that word, I think repentance would be a lot easier. Realizing that God was standing right next to me in the flesh, would I still sin? We see here in the Scripture, ***"I am he who searches mind and heart."*** We cannot hide from God. He knows what is in our hearts and minds, and He still loves us. That last statement gets me every time because I know what goes on in my heart and mind, and for God to still choose to love me brings me to tears. I want to ask, "Why me God, I am not worth it?" If you hear anything today, you are worth it. God sent His one and only son for you! Jesus died on a cross so that we could have an opportunity at salvation and a ticket into Heaven for eternity.

Whatever you are going through in your life, know you are not alone and you are not trapped. There is a way out and it begins with changing your mind and direction and running to God. It is choosing to spend more time in His Word and in prayer. It will not be easy and it will not happen overnight, but Jesus desires you more than anything. So take that first step today, right now, and walk into freedom with Jesus.

RUN AND REPENT

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA • DEVOTION 4

Pastor Keaton Washburn

As we continue our study of Revelation, we are going to focus on the criticism of the church at Thyatira. The word of the Lord to the church at Thyatira in Revelation 2:19-23 says, "***'I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.'***"

In verse 20, there is a word that the Lord gives to those at Thyatira that stands out, ***"tolerate."*** After commending the church for continuing to increase in their love, faith, service, and patient endurance, the Lord gives them a bit of a scolding. He has this against them, that they tolerate Jezebel and her teachings. Jezebel is a false teacher and the Christians in Thyatira are doing nothing about her, despite the fact she is seducing those within their church and drawing them into sin.

One of the most common bumper stickers I see is the word, "coexist," with the symbols of many religions superimposed into various letters that make up the word. The message of the bumper sticker is that all religions should "respect" one another and get along; or to put it

another way, “stay in their lane.” While that sounds good, that is the message of Jezebel here in Revelation that the Lord is specifically speaking out against! The call of Jezebel was that Christians could still be Christians while also adding to their faith the sexual immorality that she sold. The culture of Thyatira was filled with feasts that often turned sexual and Jezebel tempted those around her to participate in them. Her call seemed innocent but was the gateway to sin.

The call to the Christian today is that, though toleration sounds good, there are lines that God takes where we must follow suit. There is a time when coexisting is dangerous. That line here is false teaching. Anyone who adds to the teachings of Scripture is a false teacher. As Scott Duvall puts it in his commentary on Revelation, “When we dabble with false teaching, we are playing with fire.” Be wary of the teachers you listen to. Have your Bible out and cross-check everything they say with Scripture. If it does not line up with Scripture, run. The message to Jezebel and her followers is the same today to false teachers and their followers, “Repent.”

WHAT IT TAKES TO RULE NATIONS

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA • DEVOTION 5

William Kinney

"Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 2:25-29

It is fair to say that we often do not hear the Word too well. When we hear the Word and hear something the preacher says that offends (maybe even convicts) us, we close our ears. We might even start looking at our cell phones or strike up a conversation with the person next to us to distract us from what God wants us to hear.

What happens when we "turn off our ears" and blatantly disregard what God wants us to hear? According to Scripture, a few events occur when we stop hearing the Word of God. Romans 10:17 (NASB) states, ***"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."*** Our faith is built up by hearing the Word of God, and the more faith we have, the more we yearn for the listening and doing of God's Word. On the contrary, when we stop listening to the Word, we constrict our faith, which eventually leads to the hardening of our hearts. When this happens, I believe Proverbs 28:9 (NASB) comes into play, ***"One who turns his ear away from listening to the Law, Even his prayer is an abomination."*** The ***"one who turns his ear away"*** is somebody who has entirely stopped listening to the Word and the Holy Spirit's convictions. Their prayers are an abomination to God. That is a scary thought! It makes my heart race to even think

about God truly disgusted by my prayers. However, when we are hearers and doers of the Word, God promises us in Revelation 2:26-27, that we will receive the reward of ruling nations beside Jesus after His return.

So how do we avoid hardening our hearts and making sure our prayers bring glory to God? First and foremost, we need to believe and have faith that God placed us in the specific location where we are hearing the Word of God for a reason. Without that, we will not get anything from the sermon, social discussion, or Growth Community. Secondly, we need to build our active listening skills. Active listening takes practice, and the few guidelines to practicing are to listen attentively to the speaker, understand what they are saying, respond and reflect on what is being said, and retain the information for later. Practicing these four skills will allow the preacher, friend, or group leader to pour into our lives and soul from God. Also, try to take notes throughout a sermon, and review the notes sometime after the gathering, which will allow for more meditation and reflecting on the Word. I want to lay out a challenge! Instead of not listening and turning our ears away from the Word, let us hear the Word. Let us always turn our ears toward Christ and His grace when we are convicted. Let us choose to turn that conviction into action as we actively participate in God's purpose for our life.

HEAR
LISTEN
UNDERSTAND

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA • DEVOTION 6

Debbie Gabbara

"Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches." Revelation 2:29 NLT

I think we would agree that there can be a vast difference between hearing and listening. John ends his letter to the church at Thyatira with a reminder to all of us to hear what the Spirit says and to listen closely to what Jesus is saying through the Revelation to John.

"Anyone with ears" is you and me! One definition for the word hear is to hear what someone is saying. That sounds a little redundant. When searching the Bible, I found verse after verse that tells of hearing God. Romans 10:17 says, ***"Faith comes from hearing."*** The writer in Psalm 85 pleads, ***"Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people."***

We all want to hear God speaking to us. Mark 4:24 says, ***"Pay attention to what you hear."*** Luke 11:28 says that those who hear the Word of God and keep it are blessed. We want peace in our lives and we want God's blessings, but we will only hear God if we are listening in the quiet places of our hearts.

Listening is different than hearing. Listening is to hear something with thoughtful attention. Listening is quite different than just hearing. How many times in your life has someone asked you the question, "Did you hear me?" The thought in your head was, "Yes, but I do not have any idea what you said." I know there have been far too many times in my life when I heard but did not listen.

Philippians 4:9 (NIV) says, ***"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."*** Matthew 7:24 (NIV) tells us, ***"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and put them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."***

Like the Christians in Thyatira, we live in a world that is filled with false teachers and evil. Jesus encouraged the believers at Thyatira, and He encourages us to seek Him and remain loyal to Him until He returns. Truth is also all around us, we can be led to truth through a pastor or teacher and through studying the Word with other believers. Listening is receiving and God is always at work all around us.

Matthew 7:7 (NIV) adds, ***"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you."***

Hearing should lead to listening which results in understanding. To understand is to achieve a grasp of the nature, significance, or explanation of something. Jeremiah 33:3 (NIV) says. ***"Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."***

Here in Revelation chapter 2, Jesus asks us to seek Him and hold tightly to the truth of the Gospel until He comes. God promises us understanding. He helps us to hear His voice through prayer, reading, and studying Scripture and then listen with the thoughtful intention for instruction from the Spirit and receive that into our hearts and minds.

God promises in Psalm 32:8 (NIV), ***"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you."***

6

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

The city of Sardis was notable for three main things (Alan Johnson, *"The Expositor's Bible Commentary"*). First, it had a temple to Artemis which equaled the size of the famous temple of Artemis in Ephesus. It is not as well-known because the one in Sardis was never finished.

Second, the city of Sardis was known for its necropolis. This was referred to as a cemetery of "a thousand hills" because of the hundreds of burial mounds visible on the skyline some seven miles from Sardis.

Third, the city of Sardis was known for its impressive acropolis. This fortified structure provided a militarily strategic advantage. The acropolis rose about eight hundred feet and was virtually impregnable because of its rock walls, which were nearly vertical. The city was often attacked but only captured twice. In the sixth century B.C., Cyrus desired to attack Sardis. A Persian soldier observed a soldier of Sardis descending a hidden winding path to retrieve his fallen helmet. The Persians followed his path back up to the summit and captured the whole city, taking them quite by surprise.

Revelation 3:1 addresses the church at Sardis, ***"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'"'***

1. Does the church at Sardis receive a compliment?

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The only compliment that appears stated for the church at Sardis is that they had a good reputation. They were believed by others to be alive and healthy. The Lord sees this church differently. William

Ramsay describes them, “No city of Asia at that time showed such a melancholy contrast between past splendor and present decay as Sardis.”

Revelation 3:1-2 records the criticism concerning the church at Sardis, ***“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.”***

2. What is the criticism against this church?

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3. What could be some examples of what goes on at a church like this one?

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Matthew 23:27-28 says, ***“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”***

4. How does this passage relate?

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Paul says something similar in Ephesians 5:14, ***"For anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.'"***

5. How does this passage give hope to those who are sleeping?

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Revelation 3:3-4 gives the command to the church at Sardis, ***"Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy."***

6. What command is given to the church?

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7. What does ***"soiled their garments"*** mean?

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8. How could that image apply to use today?

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Finally, Revelation 3:5-6 gives the consequence of making the right choice, ***"The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."***

9. What promises are given to the ones who conquer?

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John Walvoord makes an encouraging insight, "The statement that their names will not be erased from the book of life presents a problem to some. But a person who is truly born again remains regenerate." He continues, "While this passage may imply that a name could be erased from the book of life, actually it only gives a positive affirmation that their names will not be erased."

Several passages support this claim.

- ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."*** John 5:24

- ***"Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.'"*** John 6:35-37

- ***"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day."*** John 6:39

- ***"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."*** John 10:28-29

Alan Johnson gives a cultural insight and perspective, "The pure relationship to Christ is permanently guaranteed: 'I will never erase his name from the book of life.' In ancient cities the names of citizens were recorded in a register till their death; then their names were erased or marked out of the book of the living." Paige Patterson adds, "In Athens the name of a condemned person was deleted from the town registers prior to the execution of that individual."

For Christ to say that he will never blot out or erase the conqueror's name from the book of life is the strongest affirmation that death can never separate us from Christ and his life.

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:38-39

10. How can one get their name in the ***"book of life"***?

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"And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Revelation 20:15

RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP?

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS • DEVOTION 1

Mark Pittenger

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'" Revelation 3:1

The ***"angel"*** of the church is often identified as the pastor, bishop, elder, or leader of the church. The fact that those who are in this position are the ones being addressed here, gives credence to 1 Timothy 3:1, ***"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."*** This would explain why He goes so hard on the ***"angel"*** in Sardis.

The passage gives an interesting description, ***"The words of Him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars?"*** Who is this speaking of? The "He" referenced here is Jesus. We see that Jesus ***"has"*** the spirits and the stars in John 10:29 when it reads, ***"My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."***

When I said He goes hard on the angel of the church of Sardis, I mean it! He says, ***"I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."*** Ouch! Imagine being on the receiving end of that statement being made by Jesus. That one cuts pretty deep. It is especially harsh because when He addressed every other church, He gave them a pat on the back before He corrected them. However, with Sardis, He went straight to the tough talk. There are no compliments found here for the church of Sardis. In fact, it says the only "good" thing going for them is their reputation, but even that is not justifiable.

It is believed that the church of Sardis was very active in the community and appeared to be thriving. However, the church had taken their eyes off of Christ and therefore were practicing "religion" instead of a "relationship." To the outside world, the church of Sardis was alive and well, but to Jesus, they were on the verge of death! That may hit home for some of us, huh? Do you get up and go to church on Sundays because "that is what we do"? Are church gatherings, activities, and events just part of your routine? Or is it more than that for you? Is there a relationship with Jesus? We need a consistently "under construction," always growing relationship being built on the truth of Christ and what He accomplished for us. I pray that your relationship is real.

Matthew 7:21-23 says, ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"***

HOW ABOUT US?

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS • DEVOTION 2

Rich Sawicki

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.'" Revelation 3:1

The Holy Spirit was not lashing out because He was having a bad day. The Lord is not quick to anger and only speaks the truth.

The Spirit was warning that the church was dead. This is a pretty strong thing to say and we need to understand that this warning is not only for the church of Sardis. It can be a warning to us as well.

How can we spot death in the church? I think if we are going to take a look at a problem in the church, we first need to realize who or what the church is. The church is all of us that believe in:

- The life - God came to earth in the form of a man (Jesus).
- The death - He that knew no sin, died for our sins.
- The resurrection - Jesus rose from the dead after three days.
- The ascension - Jesus went to Heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father.

When we realize that we are the church, we understand that if there is a problem with the church, then we must examine ourselves.

The church of Sardis did not start off dead. In fact, they were the shiniest church around, having a reputation for doing so many great things in the past. It is very easy to become complacent in our

Christian lives, even while doing all of the things we are supposed to do as Christians.

- Show up at church each week - Check
- Sing a song during worship - Check
- Pay our tithes - Check
- Listen to the pastor's message - Check
- Attend Growth Communities - Check

All of this is what it looks like when you are "going to church." These are all good things, but none of this is really being the church. Jesus calls us all to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV), when He says, ***"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."***

The church should come together and worship, tithe, and listen to messages. All of these things encourage and strengthen your knowledge of God, and we should absolutely get involved in a Growth Community to build relationships and learn from each other. However, if everything we do is inside the church building and in the comfort of our Growth Community, we are not really being stretched. If we are not being stretched, we are not growing.

I know that there have been times that I have been just like the church of Sardis and maybe you have too. However, the great thing is that once you can see it, you can change it. A reason God warns the church of Sardis is to make an example for us, because He wants us to change before we fall asleep, or worse become dead on the inside. Some things that we can look for to tell if we are on our way to becoming the church of Sardis include:

- Living on past accomplishments and not in the present.
- Not reading the Word and allowing the Bible to change your heart, soul, and mind.
- Being proud or lying about stupid stuff.

There are some ways to avoid falling asleep. Matthew 22:37-39 (NIV) says, ***"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"***

Praying is very important to maintaining and growing with God. The only way to truly do that is through an honest and open relationship with God.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5 NIV).

If we are honest with God and with ourselves and let God change us on the inside, it will change us on the outside, too.

Pray: "Lord God, thank you for helping us change from the inside out. I hope people on the outside see us as you see us, so we can get them to come inside. In Jesus Name, Amen."

SPIRITUAL COMA

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS • DEVOTION 3

Pastor Kyle Wendel

"Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 3:2-6

Have you ever felt like you were in a spiritual coma? You may have looked well on the outside but on the inside were nearing spiritual death. That is what the church in Sardis was dealing with. The church looked healthy but was nearing a spiritual death.

I fully understand this feeling. One of the struggles I have had is feeling like I have to have it all together. It becomes exhausting. It is not initially physical exhaustion, but a spiritual one. I can go on throughout the days looking like a spiritual person, but on the inside, I know my relationship with God is very distant. Appearances can be deceiving. On the outside, you would see someone who works at the church and seems to have it together. You would not see that person who has been struggling with all aspects of life. You would not see me struggling to pray, struggling to read my Bible, struggling to be genuine and authentic in my walk with the Lord, struggling with all of

the questions flooding my mind, struggling with all of the excuses I make, and struggling with the weight that knowing I am in a spiritual coma.

I recently have had a time when I became very vulnerable about my situation and it was so freeing and a breath of life to me. I opened up to many people that I was terrified to be real with. I have felt so loved and cared for. They have genuinely wanted to see my walk with the Lord thrive. It is so freeing to be open about your struggles and to have others show the love of Christ to you.

I say these things so some may know they are not alone. We all have our struggles. However, we need to wake up from some of the spiritual comas we are in. We need to stop making excuses and turn to the Lord. We need to be real and genuine with the Lord. Ask for Him to help wake you up from the coma you might be in. Ask Him to give you people with whom you can be open and they will care for you. Turn to Him. Make time to be in the Word daily. Make time to be in prayer daily. Make time for your relationship with your Lord and Savior. God wants you, all of you. Let us be a people who give God our everything as we anxiously await His return.

WAKE UP

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS • DEVOTION 4

Angela Cox

"Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 3:2-6

In this passage, Jesus is commanding the church of Sardis to wake up. The church of Sardis had a reputation of being alive as a church, or in other words, a thriving church. Unfortunately, the church was "dead" inside. Because of its reputation, the church was very complacent. Jesus was sending word and urgency to remind them of this and to ***"wake up."***

How many times can we, as the body of Christ, find ourselves walking with the façade, the reputations we have gained in church, when inside we are completely hollow. This is why we have such a loving Father! As it says in verse 3, ***"If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."*** He says this in an urgent way to warn His people and to love them as a good Father should. We need to remember what foundation we are planted on. He does this to show us that there is more to this "Christian" walk than a pretend smile and a hollow heart.

Ephesians 5:13-16 says, ***"But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.' Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil."*** Paul is talking here about how Christians should live out their faith rather than imitating the world. We, as a church, can operate with learned cultures and so many boundaries, but God just simply wants us to go back to the basics. When we walk around with the "We have already tried it that way" or this "stuck" mentality, we close off the opportunities that could be right in front of us. We then are just like the church of Sardis becoming complacent and prideful.

God simply is stating that there is devastation when we are not obedient and open to His ways. We all have different journeys and circumstances, but at the end of the day, we all serve the same God. His command is to love Him and love His people.

John 15:12 says, ***"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*** When we walk around with pride and cannot seem to listen to the wise, we become lost. It is time to wake up church! Jesus died for us that we may be made whole. Let down the pride and allow God to remold and shape the church within.

"***Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*** Matthew 11:28

WAKE UP CALL

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS • DEVOTION 5

Jeremy Smith

"Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 3:2-6

It is time to wake up. That seems to be a familiar phrase used just about every morning in our house. Some days it is overheard as Amber is waking the kids for school; other days, it is more direct and with a heavier emphasis on me reminding myself that it is still a weekday and there is work to be done.

Here in Revelation chapter 3, Jesus is giving instruction to the church. Jesus is clearly stating that the church should know better. They have been taught how to live and the expectations of fulfilling a life centered around Christ. Yet, they are still chasing after their own needs and desires. James 1:22 says, ***"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."*** It is a reminder that this race we are in is a marathon, not a sprint. Jesus goes on to remind us that we need to be sure we repent. That is turning 180° and moving in the opposite direction. James 4:8 adds, ***"Draw near***

to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

We should be looking at how to build a closer relationship with God and not just check off a box saying yes this task is done.

As I read through this section, I like to add more emphasis to ***"wake up!"*** Now I am asking you, are you awake? Ask yourself these questions:

- How am I showing Christ through my own actions?
- Could I have handled that situation better or differently to exemplify what God has done for me?
- Did I give all the glory to Him or am I going to be blindsided when He returns?

WHAT A WAKE UP CALL

THE CHURCH AT SARDIS • DEVOTION 6

Pastor Roy Townsend

I am sure that many of you have traveled before the invention of the smartphone. For those of you who may not know, when we traveled and needed to be awake at a certain time, we would call the front desk for a wake-up call. You would say your name, room number, and the time that you needed a wake-up call. It seems so funny to think about now. I tell my phone that I need an alarm for a certain time and the phone alarms and wakes us up. It may surprise you that the Scriptures often speak of our need for a wake-up call.

We read in Revelation 3:2-6, ***"Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."***

Historically, we can read that the town of Sardis was a very well-fortified city, but their history was littered with enemy armies finding a way into the city through cracks in the structures and natural walls. Unfortunately, the town had felt so secure in its walls and natural fortifications that they did not have guards standing watch. Barclay writes, "A city with a history like that knows what the Risen Christ was talking about when he said: 'Watch!'" (or wake up).

I see many parallels for us as the church of Jesus Christ. We need to wake up. We have become so sleepy and are on a path of impending destruction like the church as Sardis, but we as Christians are to wake up from our sleep and watch. We are taught throughout the New Testament to have an attitude of watchfulness. Romans 13:11 reads, ***"Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed."*** The Apostle Paul further urges us in 1 Corinthians 16:13, ***"Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong."*** We must wake up and watch because we are under continual attack to entice us away from growing and strengthening our relationship with Christ and His people.

Just like the historical city of Sardis, we know what will happen if we do not keep watch. We want to be the ones found worthy with our names written in the Book of Life. We do not want to be like the ones who were overtaken and all that remains is the ruins of their lives.

7

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

As most people know, Philadelphia means “brotherly love.” The city was established by king Attalus II (159-138 B.C.) and the name of the city apparently came about as a memorial to the loyalty of the brothers Eumenes and Attalus (Paige Patterson, *“The New American Commentary”*).

Warren Wiersbe makes some interesting observations, “Philadelphia was situated in a strategic place on the main route of the Imperial Post from Rome to the East, and thus was called ‘the gateway to the East.’ It was also called ‘little Athens’ because of the many temples in the city. The church was certainly located in a place of tremendous opportunity. The only major problem with the location was that the area was prone to earthquakes.”

1. Have you visited Philadelphia, Pennsylvania? Either way, do you have any thoughts about the city?

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Revelation 3:7 begins the conversation concerning the church at Philadelphia, ***“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.’”***

2. What description is given of the Lord here? What does it mean?

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Note: For further insight into ***“the key,”*** Isaiah 22:22 and Revelation 1:18 are helpful.

In Revelation 3:8-10, we read of some nice compliments the Lord gives the church at Philadelphia, ***"I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie - behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth."***

3. What compliments are listed in these three verses?

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In the New Testament, an ***"open door"*** speaks of opportunity for ministry. Here are a few clear examples:

- ***"And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles."*** Acts 14:27

- ***"For a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries."*** 1 Corinthians 16:9

- ***"When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord."*** 2 Corinthians 2:12

- ***"At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison."*** Colossians 4:3

This Colossians passage really jumps out to me because Paul was in prison and was more interested in the doors opening to share the Gospel than having the doors of the prison open to freedom.

4. In what areas of your life is it possible that God has or is opening doors or opportunities for you to witness?

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5. How can difficulties be used to share the Good News?

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Unbelief sees the obstacles, but faith sees the opportunities!

The only criticism that might be given of this church would be in the words, ***"I know that you have but little power."***

6. Is that statement a criticism? Why or Why not?

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Revelation 3:11-13 closes the section with the Lord's command for the church at Philadelphia, ***"I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."***

7. What commands does the Lord give the church at Philadelphia?

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8. What images come to mind when you hear ***"hold fast"***?

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Warren Wiersbe points out three promises the Lord makes to the church at Philadelphia:

- He would take care of their enemies (Revelation 3:9).
- He would keep them from the tribulation (Revelation 3:10).
- God would honor them. (Revelation 3:12).

9. What images come to mind in being ***"a pillar in the temple of my God"***?

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"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own." 1 Corinthians 6:19

WHO HOLDS THE KEYS?

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA • DEVOTION 1

Pastor Patrick Rowland

Keys are a sign of authority and ownership, as well as a path to safety. I recall coming of age when my parents gave me a key to the house and the weight of responsibility that came with it. At that age (I cannot recall how old), I would be coming home to neither of my parents there to let me in. The house would be locked and I had the authority given by my parents to unlock the door to safety. When I was locked outside, I was vulnerable to whatever dangers were there, yet inside behind the locked door, I was protected.

In Revelation 3:7 (NIV), it says, ***"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."***

John is the author of Revelation, but it is Jesus who is identified as the voice of these words to the church in Philadelphia. It is the words of Him ***"who holds the key of David."***

David was the greatest king of Israel at the height of the nation of Israel, and to this day is the most revered king in the minds of all Israelites. The key of David represents the authority and ruler of the Israelites; however, in this context, it is larger than land with boundary lines. The key is not connected to a physical throne or nation, but that of a spiritual kingdom.

Jesus does not just hold the key; He is the key to unlocking the gate to the Kingdom of God. That authority has been granted to Him by God the Father and His death and resurrection open the door to anyone. Only He has the authority to open and close it.

The church is full of flawed, hurting, and recovering sinners and as flawed, imperfect people, sometimes we hurt those outside the Kingdom by trying to shut the gate thus locking people out. It is probably people we think are not right or good enough. Listen, that is not Jesus' standard as only He can unlock and lock the Kingdom gate and He has the gate open for you. Once inside the Kingdom we are safe from the dangers that await us on the outside.

STEPPING CONFIDENTLY

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA • DEVOTION 2

Kendall Hine

"I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name." Revelation 3:8

If you have never had the opportunity to go on a high ropes course, I highly recommend that you give it a try. About four years ago, I went on a high school field trip to climb a huge obstacle course up in the trees for the day. We got our harnesses on, sat through the training, and we were off! If you do not know how a high ropes course works, there are two lines attached to your harness that secure you to a safety line the entire time you are up in the trees. No matter where you go, you are attached to that safety line. Now, before that experience, I would have never admitted to having a fear of heights, but boy was I wrong. I remember the paralyzing fear that washed over me as I went to begin any of the obstacles. Would the line hold me? What if it broke and I fell? What if I got stuck up here forever? The questions were rolling through my head, and needless to say, I was happy when the day was over.

One thing I realized from that experience (other than my newfound fear of heights) was how unsure I felt of myself, regardless of the fact that I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt I would be safe. Constantly, I doubted the integrity of the safety measures, and never had confidence in myself to take the next step. In many ways, I see that uncertainty and doubt spill over into my everyday life. Yes, I know that I am held in the palm of the hand of the Almighty, but what if something goes wrong? Boy, the devil is a convincing liar.

What a powerful reminder in Revelation 1:8, ***"'I am the Alpha and Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'"*** How reassuring it is to know you are held by the Beginning and the End! Next time you are standing on the platform, only focusing on the shaking of your knees or the jump you have to take, remember Who holds you. We do not rely on our own strength but on the strength of the ***"Alpha and Omega!"***

We have a great promise in John 10:28, ***"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."*** Philippians 4:13 adds, ***"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."*** The promises from God are firm, and I encourage you today to remember that you are secure in Jesus. Walk today knowing the peace of God, and have the confidence to take the leap!

THE JERSEY

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA • DEVOTION 3

John Rigg

"Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie - behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you." Revelation 3:9

When I was in High School, I loved participating in sports. Football was my favorite. For our home games, we always wore our dark jerseys and light jerseys for games away. Some years later as an adult, it came to my attention that the Dallas Cowboys chose to wear their away colors whenever possible because their win/loss record at home was poor. They apparently declared their darks unlucky. In fact, the Cowboys did not even wear their dark jerseys at all in 2010. I have never really been a Dallas Cowboy fan, so this just gives me a reason to continue that tradition.

Nevertheless, the point I would like to make in all this is that when playing sports, teams wear contrasting jersey colors so everyone can understand who is on whose team.

I wish we could adopt this practice at church.

As we approach the second coming of our Lord, it is getting harder and harder for believers and the world to tell who is a true follower of Christ and who is not. The different colored jersey method probably will never be adopted, but it would be nice if it were.

When reading the book of Revelation, we can surmise that the church at Philadelphia was having this same problem. For both the

believer and non-believer, when the church gathered together, it was difficult to tell who were true followers of Jesus and who were not.

Revelation 3:9 says, ***"Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie - behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you."***

The Jews described in this verse were not God's people inwardly, they were only Jews by birth. They had lied about being part of Christ's church, only to be called out by Jesus as "synagogues of Satan." Matthew Henry's Commentary says this, "Assemblies that either worship false gods, or the true God in a false manner, are the synagogues of Satan."

Unfortunately, because it was difficult to determine who is who, many were confused about what it meant to follow Jesus. This created great difficulty for the church and ultimately detoured many from coming to Him in faith and continues to be a problem in the church to this day.

This will not always be so. Jesus says, ***"…they will learn that I have loved you"*** (Revelation 3:9).

Jesus encourages the church at Philadelphia (and you and me today) that there will be a day that those belonging to the ***"synagogue of Satan"*** will come to learn the reason why people come to Him. It is the same reason why every true believer comes to Christ. They come because of God's great love for them (Romans 5:8).

One day, everyone will acknowledge that great love (Romans 14:11). It is the desire of our Lord that this becomes a reality for everyone on this side of Heaven (John 3:17-21).

Take a moment and honestly answer these questions:

- Why do I gather at church?
- Is it because of His great love for me, or for some other reason?
- Am I a true follower of Christ, or does it just look like it?

BEING KEPT BY JESUS' WORDS

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA • DEVOTION 4

Peter Mason

"Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth." Revelation 3:10

What is the first image that pops into your mind when you hear the word "endurance"? The most common is an image of athletics: marathon runners, weightlifters, or bikers. Endurance is the ability to exert power over a long period of time under strain. It is usually measured by muscle, sweat, and strength.

In verse 10, Jesus commends the church in Philadelphia for their endurance. In this one verse, a picture may be forming in our minds of a church filled with 1st-century, strong, super-Christians far more devout and committed to Jesus than us in our ordinary weeks. A commendation of endurance may not immediately resonate with your experience of the Christian life today. However, if we look back to verse 8, we read, ***"I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word."*** The endurance that Jesus commends them for, looks very much like powerlessness and weakness through the eyes of the world. These Christians in Philadelphia did not necessarily have any strength in themselves. In fact, Jesus said that their strength came from outside themselves. The picture of the church in Philadelphia is a small, weak community that patiently clung to Jesus' words for strength and deliverance.

Instead of falling into the anxiety of thinking you have to outsmart, outmaneuver, and outgun the challenges and pressures of your life, you can take an alternative route. You can instead, trust that Jesus

is fully capable of doing exactly what He promises. You can trust that His words about you and the world are truer than the thoughts and fears running through your head. When that happens, you will be able to patiently endure the worries, fears, and pressures of the world with lightness and easiness.

The second part of verse 10 is Jesus' words of promise, ***"I will keep you from the hour of trial."*** We discover the supremely comforting truth of the Christian life. When we keep Jesus' words and trust Him, we discover that He is the One already keeping us. He already has plans to hold fast to us. The faithfulness of Jesus is the source of ultimate endurance in the Christian life, not your faithfulness. The Christian life is one of continual repentance and turning to the life-giving words of Jesus and finding at the end, that He was the One keeping us.

So today, as you enter the worries and pressures of the day and experience moments that make the words of Jesus seem distant or insignificant, remember they are life and truth. He has better and truer words than the world, and His word is good. The words of Jesus are good news of life, joy, and peace. Listen to those and patiently endure with joy.

TRAINS AND PLANES

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA • DEVOTION 5

Pastor Keaton Washburn

"I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown." Revelation 3:11

I hate detours and traffic and I assume you are not a huge fan of them either. Instead of getting where you need to be in the time and route that you were planning on, it takes longer and usually goes well out of the way. In Revelation chapter 3, John writes to the church in Philadelphia, a Roman city, regarding the detours and slowdowns of life.

In Revelation 3:10, John writes regarding their ***"patient endurance,"*** assumedly through trials. When trials, detours, and slowdowns came, the believers in Philadelphia endured them patiently. The Word of the Lord continues in verse 11 to say to those in Philadelphia, ***"I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown."*** It begins with an encouragement, ***"I am coming soon."*** Therefore, the exhortation, ***"Hold fast what you have."*** Because Christ is coming soon, hold fast so that no one may take your crown, ultimately meaning their salvation.

A couple of years ago, I took a trip to the Czech Republic. After flying into Prague, we took a train around the country from city to city. This train raised my expectations of what a train could be. It had large compartments, almost like suites in it, a train car dedicated solely to a kids' play area, large bathrooms, spacious seating areas, and they served full meals during the trip. My seat was towards the back of the train, but I did not mind. As the train got going, I explored the various cars and took in all that it had to offer. I walked up to the front cars and then back to my seat, just in time to get my complimentary meal.

I did not mind walking around on the train though, because I knew where it was ultimately taking me. I would walk up to the front of the train and back, but I did not mind walking back to my seat, taking me further from my destination, because I knew where I was ultimately headed.

The message to the believers in Philadelphia was that they needed to hold fast to Christ through trials because Christ was coming back and they knew their ultimate destination which was eternity with Him.

The takeaway for believers today is quite similar. We are to hold fast in our faith in Christ, even through the slowdowns and detours, even when it seems like we are traveling in the wrong direction for a time, because we know our ultimate destination. Like the train taking me around the Czech Republic, we can stand firm knowing that the Lord is carrying us to our final destination!

WHAT DO YOU POSSESS?

THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA • DEVOTION 6

David Hudgens

"The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 3:12-13

I grew up poor, truly poor, as the middle child of five siblings living in Taylor. Later in life, my mother shared with me memories of those early years growing up in "the blue house" (my family's beloved name for our Taylor home). Among these memories included a game that she would play with my two older sisters. The game was this: my sisters, three and five years of age at the time, would compete to collect as many pop cans as possible while out for a walk with my mother as she pushed me, an infant, in the stroller. My sisters would gleefully try their hardest to out due the other in hopes of receiving the reward of a special candy bar at the grocery store after the money was collected from their haul of empties. Now, however fun this revelry was for my siblings, the point of the game, I learned, was not to reward them with candy, rather it was to gather as many cans as possible in hopes the deposit amount would afford the purchase of blue box macaroni because that would be the day's lunch-time meal.

In that moment of sharing, I learned that my development years were often occupied with the very real mystery of where our next meal would come from. However, I would also learn through my mother's recounting that these early years of following Jesus would also serve to shape her and my father's authentic devotion to Christ.

You see, only five years before this memory did both of my parents come into the saving knowledge and grace of Jesus Christ. Before that time, by their late twenties, they had achieved relative success as the owners of multiple restaurants and were able to buy and experience whatever they desired. They were known within the cities they lived and worked in and were welcomed at the tables of the strong and powerful. However, as is so often the refrain of those like them, they felt empty and without hope. That is until they met Jesus! Meeting Jesus changed everything, and as a result of surrendering their lives to the Lord, my parents began a new journey of sacrificial living in the pursuit of their loving Savior and of His purposes for their lives, and most of all for His glory alone.

In their new life with Christ, I suppose not unlike the church in Philadelphia, my parents had little by worldly standards. Over the course of their faithful years to Jesus, they had little status, little money, and little influence. They were rejected by many. Sometimes, they were even turned away from those within the family of God. However, what they did possess was a strong faith, a confident hope, and an unquenchable love for the Savior. They bound themselves to the Word of God and learned to depend fully upon the Spirit of God for all things. They had learned, as the apostle Paul famously penned that he knew ***"the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength"*** (Philippians 4:12-13 NIV).

So then, I ask, what is the result from this learning to be content, this learning to endure? Consider these words from Jesus as He describes the eternal destiny of the faithful in Philadelphia.

Revelation 3:12 says, ***"The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I***

will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name."

Indeed, what hope awaits anyone who endures, anyone who holds fast to their faith. It is a hope that gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). It is a hope that brings honor to the lowly (Proverbs 29:23). Moreover, what a glorious promise is given to the faithful to become "pillars" in the temple of God, to have the name of God written upon them forever, and to be secured as His possession for all eternity! Yes, what a privilege it is to suffer in the way of Jesus, who is the stone the builders rejected and yet became the cornerstone (Psalm 118:22).

So Christian, be of good cheer. When suffering comes, suffer well and ***"keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you"*** (2 Thessalonians 2:15 NLT). Keep His Word and do not deny His name. In 2 Corinthians 4:17, we read, ***"For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."***

8

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Hierapolis, Colossae, and Laodicea were neighboring towns. It appears a disciple of Paul named Epaphras served there and might have even founded the church in Laodicea.

- ***"Just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf."*** Colossians 1:7

- ***"Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis."*** Colossians 4:12-13

1. What is told about Epaphras in these verses?

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Laodicea was known as the "City of Compromise" (A.T. Robertson, *"Word Pictures in the New Testament"*).

2. How can a compromise be positive or negative?

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Revelation 3:14 begins the section of the Lord addressing the church at Laodicea, ***"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.'"***

3. How does the Lord describe Himself in this section?

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4. What titles stand out to you? Why?

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Normally, the Lord addresses each church with a compliment and then some criticism. Revelation 3:15-17 says, ***"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."***

5. What compliment is given to the church at Laodicea?

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6. What criticism is given of the church at Laodicea?

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I appreciate cultural studies. It is fun to watch Scripture take greater focus when you learn something. There are two instances in this passage.

First, hot, cold, and lukewarm have a deeper meaning to the original audience. As was mentioned earlier, Hierapolis, Colossae, and Laodicea were neighboring towns. Hierapolis was famous for its hot springs (even 95 degrees) while Colossae had water that was cold and pure. James Hamilton goes even further in saying, "Archaeological evidence indicates that the waters around Laodicea were afflicted with a 'calcium carbonate content' that resulted in the waters being impure and emetic - that is, they caused vomiting." It is not by accident that the Lord says He would ***"spit you out of my mouth."***

Paige Patterson confirms this observation, "The Lord of the lampstands says to the church at Laodicea that like your own water supply you are lukewarm and disgusting to my taste. I wish that you were either a fresh, life-giving drink of cold water or else a healing, hot mineral bath. But, because you are neither refreshing and life giving nor healing, you are simply disgusting; and I will spew you out of my mouth."

The water was so bad, that they had to transport water. Alan Johnson writes, "A six-mile-long aqueduct brought Laodicea its supply of water from the south. The water came either from hot springs and was cooled to lukewarm or came from a cooler source and warmed up in the aqueduct on the way. For all its wealth, the city had poor water." Even their good imported water was unacceptable.

Second, the word ***"blind"*** in this section and the phrase from the next section (verse 18) of ***"salve to anoint your eyes"*** would also be great object lessons for the church at Laodicea.

Commentator Alan Johnson adds, "Laodicea had a famous school of medicine; and a special ointment known as 'Phrygian powder,' famous for its cure of eye defects, was either manufactured or distributed there, as were ear ointments also."

7. What thoughts come to mind when you think of “lukewarm”?

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8. How can one have poor eyesight spiritually?

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Revelation 3:18-19 gives the command from the Lord for the church at Laodicea, ***“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.”***

9. What command is given in this passage and how does it relate to us?

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As has been noted, Laodicea was a wealthy area. We all know those wealthy neighborhoods. James Hamilton gives an example of their wealth, “Laodicea was also a wealthy banking center. After a massive earthquake in A.D. 60, Laodicea needed no help from Rome in the rebuilding of the city. In this Laodicea seems to have demonstrated a certain proud self-sufficiency.” He goes on to say, “It seems that the affluence of Laodicea made the church there particularly vulnerable to self-reliance. Given the enormous affluence of our own culture, we need to hear what Jesus says to the church in Laodicea. We need to be shown that the wealth of our culture does not meet our deepest needs.”

10. How can self-reliance be good and bad?

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Warren Wiersbe adds, “The Laodicean church was blind to its own needs and unwilling to face the truth. Yet honesty is the beginning of true blessing, as we admit what we are, confess our sins, and receive from God all that we need. If we want God’s best for our lives and churches, we must be honest with God and let God be honest with us.” Our greatest need can only be fulfilled by the Lord.

Revelation 3:20-22 gives a beautiful promise, ***“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. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also 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.’”***

11. How can this passage be applied to unbelievers?

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12. How can this passage be applied to believers?

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“I say to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.’” Psalm 16:2

"AMEN"

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA • DEVOTION 1

James Mann

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.'" Revelation 3:14

One of the most interesting things to me, when it comes to God, is how many different but meaningful names we give Him. Oftentimes, we overlook these in our typical day-to-day reading of the Bible though. Here we are given the name of ***"Amen"*** for God. To make things more interesting, the term "amen" is something that we end our prayers with, but most of us are never taught what this really means.

The dictionary definition of amen is "so be it." You might be wondering, "Why do we end our prayers like this then?" We are beyond blessed that we have a God who is faithful to us. When He says He is going to do something, we can already consider it as done. There is not a question or any sort of doubt that we, as believers, should have in His ability to accomplish all things. When we are ending our prayers by saying "amen," we are giving our wants, our needs, our thanksgiving, and all other things to God knowing that He will do with it what is necessary and so we are able to say, "So be it."

Now looking back at our passage, we are seeing God as that ***"Amen,"*** or as that assurance of Him being faithful. We know that the words that are to follow are going to carry weight because these are words coming from Him. I cannot begin to explain how grateful I am that we can have that faith in someone. He is the only One that this is the case. We live in a world where we are being told so many

things by so many different people, that we do not know who to trust anymore. I reflect back to how I was raised and my dad always told me, “Believe nothing you hear and about a third of what you see.” It is so sad to me that we are having to raise the coming generations on that mindset. I would love to be able to tell my future children that they can fully rely upon and have faith in others. The truth is, that is not the case in a world clouded by sin. The only ***“Amen”*** and faithful person that will never lead us astray is God Himself.

THAT IS NOT WARM ENOUGH

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA • DEVOTION 2

Josh Thayer

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." Revelation 3:15-16

Have you ever had leftovers sitting in the fridge and decided to warm them up in the oven? Have you waited 10 minutes, which you thought was obviously enough time, and took your first bite and your food was still cold? You then realize, after you were comfortable on the couch watching your favorite show, that you had to get back up and put everything back in the oven. That is kind of what is going on here.

The Apostle John was writing to the church in Laodicea and he was bringing to light how the church had become lukewarm. The believers there did not take a stand for anything they believed in. Over time, this led to the church becoming self-satisfied and hardened to anything to do with Christ. They turned into a "we believe in Jesus but that is all we are" kind of people. They were just going through the motions, checking off the "going to church box" to make themselves look good while their lives did not reflect Jesus or the church.

Jesus even talks about this in Amos chapter 5 when the Israelites had become complacent. They were in essence putting on a show with fake worship. They were living sinful lives and trying to cover it up with religion to make themselves look good. Amos 5:21-24 says, ***"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings***

of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

These are the kind of things that God is talking about. Being a lukewarm Christian is nothing more than a show. It is a show that God wants nothing to do with and at the end of it all, He will spit you out of his mouth and say, ***"I never knew you."*** Matthew 7:21-23 (NKJV) records, ***"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"***

As Christians, we are called to more than a show. We are called to be the sons and daughters of Jesus. It is a calling to live a life full of purpose with Jesus at the center of it all. We should want to reach, gather, and grow through Jesus so that we can live a life different from our culture. It is a life that will be fulfilling and selfless and at the end of it all, have the opportunity to walk into Heaven with God for eternity.

HONEST SELF-EXAMINATION

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA • DEVOTION 3

Sydney Kimball

"For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent." Revelation 3:17-19

If you are anything like me, right before my dental checkup and cleaning I run through a mental checklist. Have I been brushing, flossing, and using mouthwash? Are my teeth white? Is my breath fresh?

When all of my answers are yes, I go into my appointment with confidence. Somehow, every single time, without fail, my dentist lets me know that I have some sort of issue. Whether it be a cavity or some other invisible problem, I am always left confused. How is it that no matter how hard I work to keep my mouth clean and healthy, I always end up with a similar, disappointing result? My dentist proceeds to tell me that just because outward appearances point to a healthy mouth, it does not mean that there is not something unhealthy going on underneath the surface.

This same concept is addressed by the Lord in His message to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:17-19. The church sees itself as rich, increased with goods, and having a need for nothing. When we break this down, we see that they truly believe they are in a deep

relationship with Christ, have understood and accepted the abounding grace of Jesus, and to their knowledge, follow the guidelines that Jesus has given us for how we ought to live our lives. However, the Lord sees the church's true state. One commentator describes the reality of the church "as deeply marked, and... completely eaten up with pride and wrapped up in delusion." A lack of self-awareness and spiritual discernment, in combination with honest ignorance results in a distorted reality of our spiritual state.

We, as Christians, can live our lives attempting to be "good" people but will still fail to be seen as righteous before the Lord. We can go to church each week, study the Scriptures, and go through all of the "godly" motions, but head knowledge and behavior out of obligation do not result in a refined heart. Our Heavenly Father can see through our masks, paper-thin walls, and dangerously realistic facades straight to our broken and prideful hearts.

How do we ensure that we can know our diagnosis before our appointment? It is through honest self-reflection, time spent meditating on Scripture, and seeing how actions relate to those who have been deemed righteous and faithful by our Lord. It all starts with humility. At our core, we are sinners and it is in our nature to try and justify our less than godly actions. True humility before the Lord will allow space for Him to begin to refine you. He will have the room to fill your heart with the overwhelming love that will result in true obedience, not the kind that flows from obligation and leads to bitterness or resentment.

If we are not careful we can misdiagnose ourselves like the people of Laodicea. We can say on all accounts, "I have been careful to follow all of the rules and look like the perfect Christian from the outside," but upon an honest examination of the heart, we can see how God sees us. When we recognize those things in ourselves it opens up a

whole new door of growth and opportunity for the right relationship with Christ. That is a beautiful thing.

Just like our teeth, we need regular checkups and cleanings. The cavities in our hearts, those being pride or sinful motivations, can only be removed by God Himself. Let Him in so He can begin to fix what needs fixing underneath the surface so that what is on the outside is truly representative of what is underneath.

JESUS REBUKES HIS BELOVED

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA • DEVOTION 4

William Kinney

"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent." Revelation 3:19

It was March 2018 in Valdosta, Georgia, where my wife and I got stationed for the past three years in the Air Force. Those three years were the first time we had been away from our home church, family, and friends as Christians. We looked for a home church in Georgia, but we never found one we regularly attended because of our judgments. Not being part of a church was hard; this and many other bad decisions caused us to fall away from God's purpose for our lives and fall into sin.

In late 2017, we conceived a child named Elias, and he was a miracle baby. My wife and I struggle with infertility and have tried various fertility treatments. What is amazing is that Elias was conceived without any treatments whatsoever. My wife and I were ecstatic, as we knew he was and will always be a true miracle and gift from God. However, at 24 weeks into the pregnancy, my wife went into labor. That night which should have been joyous for me, was a night full of regret and rude awakenings for myself because I had one too many drinks that night. My pregnant and in-labor wife had to drive us to the hospital, and the rest was a blur. Because of the drinking, I kept passing out in the hospital and I could not fully be there for my wife, which I will always look back on whenever I want to drink again. After my son was born prematurely at 1 pound and 12 inches long, he had to get transported to another NICU in Albany, Georgia, an hour and a half away, the closest hospital that could accommodate him. The following eight days were indeed a battle for Elias, as they had to put

him on and off a ventilator while battling infection after infection and being resuscitated once.

God took him home on April 2, 2018. Understandably, after watching our child pass away in front of our eyes, we were devastated, and sometimes still are. After looking back, we know this was God's rebuke and discipline in our lives. We were not living for God; we were living for ourselves. After our son went home, we returned to Michigan to our home church and family, which allowed us to build up our relationship with God and realize that we only need Jesus in our lives. That is the point. Jesus loves us so much that He does not want to discipline us, but it is out of necessity; so, in our brokenness, we come back to Him. He is waiting with open arms! Let us self-reflect and see if we are doing anything Jesus has to rebuke us for. We need to ***"be zealous and repent"*** proactively before we are lovingly disciplined.

WELCOME HIM

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA • DEVOTION 5

Jill Osmon

"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." Revelation 3:20

I think we immediately assign this portion of Scripture to the unbeliever. Jesus is standing at the door to your life, knocking, wanting you to accept Him and invite Him into your life. It is the offer to be made new through the Gospel. It is a powerful image that has a profound depth to what God is offering through the Good News. If you have never accepted Christ into your life, admitted you were an imperfect sinner, who Jesus died on the cross and was raised from death for, I would urge you to open the door of your life that He is knocking at. Accept His gift of forgiveness and grace, and ask Him to be Lord of your life.

I would like us to look at this verse from another viewpoint. As believers, we can often times feel like our proverbial life or house is void of Jesus. This is true especially when we struggle with difficult seasons of life. Our house feels empty and cold, sometimes lonely or even scary. We wonder where the light and warmth went, and why it feels like Jesus left. Then we come to this verse in Revelation. There are life circumstances in which we essentially leave Jesus out on the porch, maybe because we are embarrassed by what we have done, angry that someone has done something to us, or that we have failed in some fashion. We wonder where He is while ignoring the knock and Jesus' voice calling us, telling us He will help carry the burden, give us rest (Matthew 11), or that He will never leave us (Deuteronomy 31).

Will you heed His knock? Can you hear Him? He is calling from the porch, asking to come in. Maybe because you have never accepted Him into your life? Or maybe you are a believer who has left Him out of some pretty big seasons and circumstances of your life? Invite Him in and let Him be a part of every corner of every room of every house that is yours. It will be better with Him inside, beside you, guiding you, and encouraging you. He will be displaying His love and faithfulness right there at the dinner table, and not from the front porch.

OVERCOMERS

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA • DEVOTION 6

Larry Gabbara

"The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also 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 3:21-22

This is Jesus' final and harsh message addressed to the church at Laodicean. The church was unenthusiastic, they have shown little or no excitement for the Lord. They also claimed to be rich in wealth but not in spirit. Jesus offers them a second chance. With this, the relationship with the church is back on mission.

Laodicea was the worst of the seven churches. Jesus offers them the chance to repent and become one of Jesus' overcomers. This is also the same chance we are given today. This shows that Jesus loves us so much we are given many chances to become one of His children.

Salvation is a gift from the Lord to all of us. This is offered to us as a special reward. It shows that the Lord loves all of us no matter how many times we have turned our back on Him.

We are given the chance to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us.

If we had opened our ears, we would have heard this message from the Spirit many times. The Holy Spirit has always been there, but our minds and hearts did not give Him the chance to enter in.

I grew up in church, I knew who God was, yet I did not have the Holy Spirit in me. I did not understand what was missing was a personal

relationship with Jesus. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to find the truth. It did for me. We are to walk in the Spirit. We should live our lives in the truth and light. The gift is eternity.

I heard the message but missed it over and over. Then one day my ears were opened, and then my mind was opened, and I gave my heart to Jesus. I am now an overcomer, and you can be too!

9

WORSHIP

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

"Of all the things Christ wants for us, loving Him and focusing our attention on Him are the most important." Charles Stanley

Revelation chapters 4 and 5 contain some of the most intense worship in all of Scripture. John is invited to peak into Heaven. He meets twenty-four elders. He spots four living creatures - one that looks like a lion, another that looks like an ox, a creature with the face of a man, and a living creature like an eagle. Even though they have six wings and are full of eyes, all attention is drawn to the throne. Everyone and everything worship the One on the throne.

1. What comes to mind when you think of worship?

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These two chapters in Revelation, record at least five instances of worship.

First, four living creatures worship God the Father.

Revelation 4:8 says, ***"And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say, 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!'"***

There are several views of who or what the four living creatures are or represent. The thoughts include angels that display the attributes of God, animals that display certain characteristics of God, and the view that "they represent Christ as revealed in the four Gospels: in Matthew, the lion of the tribe of Judah; in Mark, the ox as the servant of Yahweh; in Luke, the incarnate human Jesus; and in John, the eagle as the divine Son of God" (John Walvoord, *"The Bible Knowledge Commentary"*).

The four living creatures were not to be the focal point then or now.

2. Who is the focal point?

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3. Why do you think they use the word ***"holy"*** three times?

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4. How often did they worship ***"the Lord God Almighty"***?

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"The heart of God loves a persevering worshipper who, though overwhelmed by many troubles, is overwhelmed even more by the beauty of God." Matt Redman

Second, twenty-four elders worship God the Father.

Revelation 4:10-11 adds, ***"The twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.'"***

Obviously, an initial question is, "Who or what are the twenty-four elders?" Alan Johnson, in *"The Expositor's Bible Commentary,"* documents, "There are at least thirteen different views of their identity,

ranging from the twenty-four ruling stars (or judges) in the heavens to the simple figure of wholeness and fullness." In *"Preaching the Word,"* James Hamilton points out, "The twenty-four thrones are probably a symbolic number representing the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles."

5. What was the posture of the twenty-four elders?

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6. What was the next act of worship of the twenty-four elders?

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7. Which of their statements jump out to you? Why?

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"Worship is giving God the best that He has given you." Oswald Chambers

Third, twenty-four elders and four living creatures worship the Lamb which is the Christ.

Before this next worship session begins, an angel asks in Revelation 5:2, ***"Who is worthy to open the scroll?"*** Initially, it appears there is no one who is able to do it. Revelation 5:5 gives the answer, ***"And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'"***

8. How do these titles refer to Jesus?

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9. As you are going through this study, have any worship songs come to mind?

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Revelation 5:8-10 continues, ***"And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"***

10. What is the posture of those worshiping the Lamb?

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11. What did the Lamb do that made Him worthy to open the scroll?

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"Worship is an inward feeling and outward action that reflects the worth of God." John Piper

Fourth, many angels worship the Lamb.

The Lamb is not an angel. He never was and never will be an angel. He created all angels. He is mightier and over all angels including fallen angels.

Revelation 5:11-12 says, ***"Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!'"***

James Hamilton, in *"Preaching the Word,"* mentions, "The word myriad can mean ten thousand, or it can simply refer to an innumerable multitude." ***"Myriads [ten thousand] of myriads [ten thousand],"*** would be well over a million. The immense roar must be tremendous.

12. When was a time you worshiped with a lot of other believers? What was it like?

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13. The passage says that they worshiped ***"with a loud voice."*** How could that be significant?

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"To be used of God. Is there anything more encouraging, more fulfilling? Perhaps not, but there is something more basic: to meet

with God. To linger in His presence, to shut out the noise of the city and, in quietness, give Him the praise He deserves. Before we engage ourselves in His work, let's meet Him in His Word... in prayer... in worship." Chuck Swindoll

Fifth, every creature worships God the Father and the Lamb.

Revelation 5:13-14 records, ***"And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshiped."***

My initial thought is that every person who ever lived ends up worshiping the Lamb. That would mean saved and unsaved individuals will eventually worship Jesus. Philippians 2:9-11 supports this scene, ***"Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so 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."***

14. What emotions are stirred up as you read these passages?

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15. What is the posture of those worshiping the Lamb? How many times have we seen this in this study?

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16. After working through this study, what challenges are laid before us?

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“When God is at the center of your life, you Worship, when He’s not, you Worry.” Rick Warren

"WORTHY OF MY SONG"

WORSHIP • DEVOTION 1

Cathy Story

In Revelation chapter 5, we are reminded of how worthy Jesus is of our praise. Revelation 5:9-10 writes, ***"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign forever on the earth.'"*** When I think of the word ***"worthy"*** my mind goes to being deserving of something. These verses remind us that Jesus was slain for us, and because of His blood (death, burial, and resurrection), we are able to be saved.

Recently the song "Worthy of My Song (Worthy of it All)" by Phil Wickham, has provided a great reminder of just how worthy God is of our praise. The lyrics in the bridge of the song say,

> And in the blessing, in the pain, You are worthy
> Whether You say 'yes' or 'no,' or 'wait,' You are worthy
> Through it all, I choose to say, 'You are worthy'
> I'll never stop singing Your praise, No I'll never stop singing Your praise
> And when I finally see Your face, I'll cry worthy
> And when You wipe these tears away, I'll cry worthy
> Above every other name, You are worthy
> I'll never stop singing Your praise, No I'll never stop singing Your praise

While our head knowledge of the fact that Jesus is worthy of our praise is often there, it can be difficult to always get our hearts to align with what our minds know! While it is unnatural to think that in the middle of a struggle we would stop and remind ourselves of how worthy our God is, the reality is, He is worthy. Jesus being worthy does not mean we will not experience any more hurts or pains at this time, but one day those pains of this world will be gone.

Revelation 5:13 says, ***"And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"*** There will be a time when we finally see His face and cry, ***"Worthy!"*** Maybe you are in a spot today where crying worthy is difficult for you to do. No matter what circumstances you are facing today, I would encourage you to take a few minutes to look up both the lyrics to this song and the song to listen to. Take time to read and listen to the words, and remind yourself of just how worthy our God is!

DO NOT FORGET

WORSHIP • DEVOTION 2

Pastor Philip Piasecki

"Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it."
Revelation 5:1-4

As we start into chapter 5 of the book of Revelation, we find ourselves still in the throne room and our attention is brought to this scroll. It is a scroll that nobody in Heaven, on Earth, or under the Earth is able to open up. Essentially this mighty angel yells out, "Who can open this thing?" John begins to weep because he believes that there is nobody who can open it. The whole book of Revelation is filled with prophecy and deep theological things. We could spend the rest of our lives debating what this scroll is, why there are seven seals, and so on and so forth. However, what I find amazing about Scripture is that in the midst of all of that, there are still so many practical applications as well. We may look at John and think how could he possibly forget that Jesus, the Messiah, God of all, would be powerful enough to open this scroll? Yet, how often in our own lives do we forget the power of God? We struggle in situations thinking to ourselves, "This is hopeless, who could possibly solve this situation?" We fret instead of recalling the power of the Lord, understanding that He can do all things, and that He will make a way even in the toughest of situations.

Revelation 5:5 continues the passage, ***"And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'"***

Then in verse 5, John gets the same reminder that we all need so often, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered. He alone is able to open the scroll. Jesus, the Lion of Judah, has conquered. He alone is able to save you, He alone is able to give you a purpose, He alone is able to strengthen you, and He alone is Lord over all. We must not lose sight of this in our lives. We need to look to Him for our strength each and every day. Please remind yourself daily that He is all-powerful and that He is in control. We have to fight the desire to try and lean on other things for our strength. It can become a habit to look towards people in our lives for that strength, but people will fail us. Your husband, wife, friends, or family cannot give you the strength that God is able to give you. Jesus Christ alone needs to be the source of our life, and from that everything else flows out. Weep no more, He has conquered.

"IS HE WORTHY?"

WORSHIP • DEVOTION 3

Sierra Combs

Spending eternity in Heaven has always been an impossible concept for me to grasp. I want so badly to understand it, but it is a complex mystery that I will just have to wait for. As a child, with only the current world to compare it to, Heaven scared me. Of course, I was told it would be amazing and beyond anything I could ever dream up in my head, but besides the streets of gold and perfect beauty, the only real activity that I sensed happening was the worshiping of God. Believers will be there 24-7, gathered around the throne with knee bent in worship. It is for eternity. I am embarrassed to admit that my little childish heart just wanted to live on Earth forever because the things of this life seemed much more exciting and fun than spending what I thought would be an eternity in a never-ending church service. While I will never fully grasp the reality of Heaven, my perspective and longing for that place have significantly shifted. I have realized that this world has nothing to offer me, and every day it seems to be growing darker. Right is now considered wrong and wrong is now right and sin once done in private is now put on full display to be celebrated. Evil abounds. We can see in Scripture that it will only roar louder and louder before Jesus returns, and I find myself constantly echoing the apostle John in his last words of the book of Revelation, ***"Come Lord Jesus!"*** As the years pass by, I long even more to enter those gates and see Jesus face to face.

In Revelation, John is given a vision of Heaven where he sees a scroll that holds the judgments of God, sealed up and waiting to be opened and poured out on a wicked world. Revelation 5:1-4 records, ***"Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven***

seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly." John knew that if the scroll could not be opened, evil would continue to plague the Earth, and yet as he is weeping, he receives good news! Revelation 5:5-10 continues, ***"And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.' And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain… And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb… And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"*** Here we see the amazing picture of Jesus. He is the Lamb who was slain for the sins of those who put their faith and hope in Him; yet, He is also the Lion of Judah, one who will fiercely return to judge the world of its wickedness. The Lion will triumph, not because of His fierceness, but because He became that Lamb, living a life without sin and dying on a cross for us. The blood of Jesus is the only thing that could defeat sin and death. He alone is worthy! Revelation 5:12 says, ***"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"***

While we may not spend every second of eternity knee bent around the throne, we will live out our eternity in a constant state of praise and worship to the only One who is worthy - Jesus Christ. It is not

because we have to, but because we get to! How I long for the day! I want to leave you with a song that so beautifully summarizes the incredible sentiments of Revelation chapter 5. I encourage you to listen to it with a heart of thankfulness and awe in what the Lord has done for us.

"Is He Worthy?" by Andrew Peterson and Ben Shive

Do you feel the world is broken? (We do)
Do you feel the shadows deepen? (We do)
But do you know that all the dark won't
Stop the light from getting through? (We do)
Do you wish that you could see it all made new? (We do)

Is all creation groaning? (It is)
Is a new creation coming? (It is)
Is the glory of the Lord to be the light within our midst? (It is)
Is it good that we remind ourselves of this? (It is)

Is anyone worthy? Is anyone whole?
Is anyone able to break the seal and open the scroll?
The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave
He was David's root and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave
Is He worthy? Is He worthy?
Of all blessing and honor and glory
Is He worthy of this?
He is

Does the Father truly love us? (He does)
Does the Spirit move among us? (He does)

And does Jesus, our Messiah hold forever those He loves? (He does)
Does our God intend to dwell again with us? (He does)

Is anyone worthy?
Is anyone whole?
Is anyone able to break the seal and open the scroll?
The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave
He is David's root and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave
From every people and tribe
Every nation and tongue
He has made us a kingdom and priests to God
To reign with the Son
Is He worthy? Is He worthy?
Of all blessing and honor and glory
Is He worthy? Is He worthy?
Is He worthy of this?
He is!

“CROWNS”

WORSHIP • DEVOTION 4

Cameron Aldrich

I feel like most people tend to think in terms of earthly materials when it comes to being satisfied and content with where they are at in life. Considering that, I am sure that many of us have used the phrase “if only” at some point or another as we evaluate where we are and where we wish we could be in life. It seems so easy to come to the conclusion that the more we have, the more satisfied and content we will be. How often do each of us think about (or dream about) wealth, the house, or the job that we do not have, and perhaps will never come close to having in our lifetimes. We try and glimpse into a sort of altered reality where those things are actually within our possession.

A sort of “joke” that I believe is overused (and that is just plain obvious) comes to my mind, and I am certain we have all been on the receiving end of it at some point. It starts with us asking either of the following questions that we tend to ask others when we want to offer our help, “Can I get something for you?” or “Is there anything you need?” The playful response is, “A million dollars would be nice!”

That is a perfect response, right? If only.

In Revelation 4:4, John begins to describe what he sees around the throne of the Lord, ***“Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.”***

John takes the time to depict the traits of authority and wealth that those elders portray based on the belongings they wear. However,

what stuck out to me the most comes at the end of the chapter, ***"And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created'"*** (Revelation 4:9-11).

I believe that the elders that John envisions in this chapter have a solid understanding of where their true satisfaction and contentment comes from. Their faith in the Lord is incredibly strong and firm. As John shares that they cast their crowns to the Lord as they worship Him, I cannot imagine that they did so with an ounce of hesitation or doubt. In our world, a crown is a symbol that typically represents authority, wealth, and prosperity. These elders not only gave up their crowns and all that they signified, but they also proceeded to worship the Lord immediately afterward. They displayed complete surrender to God and confidence in knowing that He is their ultimate provider. Their crowns meant nothing to them compared to God.

In our world, it is so easy to get distracted and to focus solely on the things that our culture promises will bring us satisfaction and contentment as we steer further and further away from the Lord. Yet in the truth that Scripture fully supports, God is the only One with whom our souls can truly be satisfied and content. He provides so much more than that to us through His grace, love, mercy, and especially Jesus and His ultimate sacrifice.

I am reminded of a powerful, declarative chorus as I reflect upon where our true wealth and satisfaction are found. Here are the lyrics to "Crowns" by Hillsong Worship. I hope you can be encouraged by these words today.

My wealth is in the cross
There's nothing more I want
Than just to know His love
My heart is set on Christ
And I will count all else as loss
The greatest of my crowns
Mean nothing to me now
For I counted up the cost
And all my wealth is in the cross

“THRONE ROOM”

WORSHIP • DEVOTION 5

Pastor Ferdinand Sanders

Every summer, we take about 250 high school and middle school students up to New Life Camp for a week of spiritual growth, games, swimming, bonfires, and, of course, camp food. This past year, our overall camp theme was “Thrones.” Throughout the week of chapels and small group devotional time, we challenged students to take a look at who or what they are placing on the throne of their lives. As a group, we walked through the Gospel message that God alone is on the throne, but left His seat on the throne to come to Earth to take our sin to the cross, and because of Calvary, we are invited to become heirs of the Kingdom of God. In addition to a week’s worth of chapels, we also spent time looking at different attributes of God that all tell why God is worthy to be on the throne during our morning Bible studies. Throughout the week, I began to get really convicted by this concept of “thrones,” but not in the way that I anticipated. I kept on coming back to this thought, “Who are we to somehow validate God’s worthiness of being on the throne?” It is not that we were somehow teaching or presenting the idea that we have some form of authority on why God is worthy to be on the throne; but the deeper we went on this topic, I found myself getting more and more overwhelmed by the glory, majesty, and holiness of God.

We see similar responses throughout the Bible whenever people find themselves in the presence of God. We see a lot of this within the visions of John in the book of Revelation. In Revelation chapters 4 and 5, John paints a beautifully intricate depiction of the throne in Heaven, ***“At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the***

throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal" (Revelation 4:2-6). What possibly could our response be to the glory of God other than praise? Revelation chapters 4 and 5 are filled with really the only appropriate responses that we can, should, and will probably have to the only One who is worthy to be seated on the throne. Though we have no authority whatsoever to grant that God is worthy to be praised or worthy to be seated on the throne, the only response that we will have in His presence is to praise and to declare Him as worthy!

- ***"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"*** (Revelation 4:8)

- ***"Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."*** (Revelation 4:11)

- ***"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"*** (Revelation 5:13)

I strongly encourage you to read Revelation chapters 4-5 and to listen to the song "Throne Room" by Kari Jobe. Though we cannot imagine what it will be like to be in the presence of God, I love how this song takes what we know from Scripture and attempts to capture the feeling and emotion of what we can only speculate.

“Throne Room” by Kari Jobe

You rendered heaven
The veil was torn in two
You gave us Your Spirit
Now we are close, closer than we think
Creation is groaning
Longing for the unseen
Here in this moment
Eternity’s close, closer than we think

What are they singing? What is it like?
You are surrounded with thunder and light
Everything in us, the longing, the ache
To join with the heavens, the anthem of praise

Holy, Holy
Holy, Holy

The train of His robe
Filling the temple
The elders and angels
All bowing down, casting their crowns
The Lamb who was slain
You are the risen King
Jesus our Savior
Alpha Omega, end and beginning

Lion of Judah the One on the throne
The only One worthy to open the scrolls
You split the heavens and come for Your Bride
Fulfill all Your promise, with fire in Your eyes

Holy, Holy
Holy, Holy

Blessing and honor and glory and power
Belong to You alone

Holy, Holy
Holy, Holy

He's the Lamb

THE SHOW'S RECIPIENT

WORSHIP • DEVOTION 6

David Hudgens

I have a friend and mentor, Erik, who for 20 years of his life was a touring, independent musician and worship leader. Regularly, he would lead worship at church conferences and the like, often sharing with me how truly amazing it was to be surrounded by large groups of people singing to Jesus with passion and conviction. He is right. It is almost impossible to adequately explain the encouragement, contentment, and joy that one experiences in those unique gatherings where voices joined together, in one song, all assembled, offer praise to our King and Savior Jesus.

When I think about it naturally, it is a curious thing what believers do when we gather together. Consider it with me for a moment. We set aside the same day each week to meet up, sing songs, and read from and meditate upon ancient writings. We make grand visual displays, some wave flags, some raise hands, while others bow low and reflect quietly. All of this is done unto an invisible being. Really, it is quite remarkable to accept. Our natural senses, apart from a personal encounter with Jesus, would be quick to reject such a thing. Yet, within John's throne room vision, we get a glimpse of perhaps how even more wild the experience of heavenly worship is and will be.

I do not often pay too close attention to the section headers in my Bible, but every once in a while one will captivate my thoughts. This is the case with our reading today. My Bible gives these titles to chapters 4 and 5 respectively: Introduction to the Drama, A Dramatic Introduction, and The Lamb Opens the Scroll. Honestly, could these sections be entitled any better? Well, perhaps they could, but they

are certainly fitting to the scene described by John as he is invited to view the realm of Heaven. With each verse, we are shown something truly otherworldly as unfamiliar creatures take shape and hierarchies are explained. We learn of a song that is repeated day and night, without end, and discover names given to God that are phrases that point to the depth of His character and nature. It is an amazing and wonderfully dramatic scene that leads to the climax of the entrance of Jesus and His being honored above all living beings as worthy to open the scroll.

John's description of what he witnessed causes me to have this thought. The best stories, the best adventures, and the tales we tell are filled with struggle, fear, worry, the fantastical, victory, and celebration. In other words, the best stories we craft and share are epic dramas.

Have you ever thought about your worship as being like this before the Lord? Have you ever considered the path you walk with Jesus as being like that of a grand drama being written and played out for the glory of the Father and the Son? For the Christ-follower, the people you meet, the struggles you endure, the defeats and victories, the life lived by grace and walked in faith, all of it is a dramatic display for the glory of God.

Allow me to end with this final reflection. My friend Erik, who I mentioned earlier, once shared with me a conversation he had with a well-meaning church member. He explained that one day, after a gathering, a gentleman approached him and expressed discontent for his on-stage display while leading the congregation in praise and worship. The man stated that he was concerned that his worship was nothing more than a show and not at all befitting for properly worshiping the Lord. Erik's loving response was this, "Oh, you're

right, it is a show. But don't be confused, it's just not a show for you. It's a show for Jesus, who alone is worthy of it and more."

10

TRIBULATION

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

"For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be." Matthew 24:21

1. What do you know about the ***"Great Tribulation"***?

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"But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." Matthew 24:36

2. Do you have any thoughts about the ***"Great Tribulation"*** and its timing?

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There are a few things we know about the Great Tribulation. It is in the future, but no one knows the exact timing. It will be horrible. Satan will run rampant. Jesus will return. There will be a battle. Jesus wins!

Concerning the book of Revelation, Charles Ryrie wrote, "Chapters 6-19, which picture the tribulation period, contain three series of judgments: the seals (6), the trumpets (8-9), and the bowls (16)." Paige Patterson says the middle portion of the book of Revelation "concentrates almost entirely on the events referenced as the great tribulation (Matthew 24:21; Revelation 7:14) or the time of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7; Zephaniah 1:15; Daniel 12:1). Both Old Testament anticipation and New Testament elucidation feature this as a time of indescribable judgment on a rebellious earth."

It would be helpful to read Matthew chapter 24 and Revelation chapter 6. Warren Wiersbe made this observation between the two passages:

Matthew 24	**Revelation 6**
False Christs (vv. 4-5)	White horse rider (vv. 1-2)
Wars (v. 6)	Red horse - war (vv. 3-4)
Famines (v. 7)	Black horse - famine (vv. 5-6)
Death (vv. 7-8)	Pale horse - death (vv. 7-8)
Martyrs (v. 9)	Martyrs under the altar (vv. 9-11)
Worldwide chaos (vv. 10-13)	Worldwide chaos (vv. 12-17)

3. Who is speaking in Matthew chapter 24?

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4. What is He describing in Matthew chapter 24?

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Revelation chapters 8, 9, and 16 describe the judgments of the Great Tribulation. It would be good to read those chapters.

Warren Wiersbe noted a similarity between the trumpets and the bowls:

The Trumpets	**The Judgment**	**The Bowls**
8:1-7	The earth	16:1-2
8:8-9	The sea	16:3
8:10-11	The rivers	16:4-7
8:12-13	The heavens	16:8-9

The Trumpets	The Judgment	The Bowls
9:1-2	Mankind - torment	16:10-11
9:13-21	An army	16:12-16
11:15-19	Angry nations	16:17-21

5. Does anything stand out to you in these chapters?

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6. How much of the earth was destroyed? How many of the creatures of the sea are destroyed? What is Wormwood? What was affected in the heavens? How long was mankind tormented?

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Instead of spending a lot of time and space on these judgments, it is clear to say that they will be horrible!

Through all of this, one verse stood out to me. Revelation 16:11 says, ***"And cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds."***

7. What does it mean to ***"repent"***?

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God turns the world upside down to get man's attention. In spite of the display of His immense power, the majority of mankind will reject His offer for salvation.

Romans 1:18-20 also seems to reflect this sentiment, ***"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."***

8. Why are people without any excuse when they stand before the judgment seat of Christ?

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The Great Tribulation cannot be captured by any film director. However, there are daily challenges and tribulations that we may and will face.

For believers, James 1:2-4 states a benefit of trials today, ***"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."***

9. What is the benefit listed here of a proper perspective during trials?

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For unbelievers, 2 Peter 3:9 expresses a sense of tough love, ***"The***

Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

10. What is meant by the word ***"perish"***?

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If you have not given your life to the Lord, please do not delay. Your future will go from bad to worse.

If you have given your life to the Lord, remember that although we do not know exactly what the future holds, we know Who holds the future.

THE HUMAN HEART

TRIBULATION • DEVOTION 1

Pastor Chuck Lindsey

"Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves 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?'" Revelation 6:15-17

The hardness of a human heart is astonishing! This thing that is supposed to be soft and tender, is often as hard as solid rock. A tender heart is synonymous in Scripture with humility, teachability, love, and submission to God. Whereas, the hard heart is always a picture of rebellion and hatred towards God, His ways, His Word, and His people.

The extreme hardness of the human heart is on display in the worst event the world will ever see. The Great Tribulation, a name which means that it is like no other time of trouble the world has ever experienced, will be a time of unimaginable difficulty and suffering. Yet, in that difficulty, suffering, and trouble, man will harden his heart and refuse to relent and turn to the True and Living God.

This is vividly and tragically on display in the words of Revelation 6:15 (NKJV), ***"And the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains."*** Something happens and mankind seeks to hide. So what happened? Well, verse 14 tells us (get this) that the veil of the

sky or heaven has been pulled back so that the people of the Earth can see the face of the Lord who is against them! (Read that again!) Verse 14 (NKJV) says, ***"Then the sky receded as a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved out of its place."*** Immediately following this, man tries to hide from the face of God! They collectively say (verse 16 NKJV) ***"to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'"*** This is beyond belief! Rather than turning to the Creator in repentance and worship, they turn to created things (mountains and rocks) to kill them! They can see the face of the Lord and His throne, and yet, they harden their hearts towards Him and choose to die rather than bow the knee in worship. No stone has ever been so hard!

Now, lest you and I misunderstand what God is doing in all of this, chapter 14 tells us that while all of this (judgment and suffering) is going on an ***"angel [is] flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on earth - to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people - saying with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water'"*** (Revelation 14:6-7 NKJV). Amazingly, God is still trying to save people! He sends an angel to preach the Gospel throughout the whole earth telling them to turn to God and repent. Some will, but most will not.

The Great Tribulation proves both the love of God and that sinful man will not relent under any circumstances and deserves the judgment of God against him.

NOT REAL

TRIBULATION • DEVOTION 2

Pastor Ben Kirkman

As a teenager, I dreamed of having a Rolex. I am not sure why I wanted such a nice watch because I do not like wearing watches, but man, I had to have one. The problem was, I did not even have the funds to get a decent watch from Walmart. My Rolex dreams would become a reality (kind of) my freshman year of high school when we took a class trip to Washington D.C. As we were sightseeing, I found a really nice group of street vendors selling Rolexes for fifteen bucks. You know I scooped up one of those. I also managed to get a pair of Oakley sunglasses for ten dollars. I thought I had hit the jackpot! It seemed like two awesome deals in one day! By the end of the day, one of the "diamonds" on the watch had fallen off and the Oakley logo on the glasses had rubbed off completely. Obviously, I had been sold imitations of the real thing. I still have that "Rolex" in a box of items from my childhood. I enjoy taking it out and showing my kids every once in a while, and laughing with them about my foolish purchase.

As we dig into Revelation and get into the Tribulation (the bowls, trumpets, and seals), we see a scary outpouring of God's wrath and judgments. What is crazy to me is that leading up to the devastation, we see people blindly buying into a peace that is not real, a peace that is short-lived and fake. We find people following the ploys of the Antichrist all while rejecting true peace only found in Jesus.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3, Paul says, ***"For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come***

upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape." Because of their rejection of the real Christ, we see people blindly marching after a false peace right to their destruction. As you read through the different aspects of the coming judgment, please honestly consider this question, "Have you put your faith and trust in the only one that offers true peace?"

Romans 5:1 says, ***"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."*** Are you following the only One that can save you from the outpouring of God's real wrath? In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, we read, ***"And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from wrath to come."*** Do not be deceived by the false peace the world may offer. In the end, any peace that rejects Jesus is not real.

CRYING OUT FOR JUSTICE

TRIBULATION • DEVOTION 3

Pastor Josh Yates

International Justice Mission shared a touching story:

> Hope was just a 13-year-old boy when a woman came to his village in Ghana sharing news of a man looking to hire local boys. The woman promised Hope's family that if he came with her, he would be sent to school and given opportunities that he would never find at home.
>
> Driven by their dream for a better future, both Hope and his mother agreed he should go. So Hope left his family and soon learned he would not be given the opportunities he was promised. Instead, he became one of the thousands who are currently enslaved in Ghana's fishing industry - many under the age of 10.
>
> Thousands of children like Hope are enslaved on Lake Volta, working long hours in Ghana's massive fishing industry. Hope was enslaved on the lake for five long years, enduring fear, abuse, and the constant risk of drowning. Out on the water, nets sometimes became snagged, and Hope would have to slip under the water's surface to try to free them before he ran out of air. More than once, he thought he would not make it out alive.

When we read stories like this, our hearts cry out for justice. We want rescue for this boy. We cry out for punishment for those that enslaved him.

Then again, there are deep cries for justice in the situations and circumstances in and around our own lives. Some wives are in the middle of abuse from their husbands. There are children that go without food. Some parents rarely provide for their children. There are bullies at school. We cry for justice.

There is a reason that we all cry for justice. The way things are is not the way things were created to be. A brief look back at the creation of the world in Genesis shows us that we were meant to have a perfect relationship with God and with each other. The world has been broken by sin: Adam's, Eve's, yours, and mine. With sin comes great injustice and so we cry out for God to make things right.

Here is the Good News, God has made things right and will make things right! You might be thinking, "Wait! How can both be true?" I am so glad you asked that question!

God gives everyone the opportunity to be made right at the cross of Jesus Christ. Justice came because Jesus took the penalty of our sin upon Him and offers us salvation. In 1 Peter 3:18, we read, ***"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit."***

God will also bring justice to every single person that has ever lived and will ever live. God will judge the people of the Earth for the sin that has been committed by every one of us. The seal judgments (Revelation 6), the trumpet judgments (Revelation 8-9), and the bowl judgments (Revelation 16) will pour out God's wrath on all sin during the tribulation.

While there are different theological viewpoints about when the rapture will occur (God's people taken to Heaven - 1 Thessalonians

4:16-18), one thing is for sure: God will judge sin. Justice is coming because our God is just.

The question for you is, “Will you bear the judgment of God for your sin or will Jesus?” The choice is yours. Jesus died to pay the penalty of your sin and to give you eternal life with God. God’s free gift is offered to you today. Have you given your life to Him and asked Him to save you? You can do that right now, where you sit. Ask God to forgive you and save you from your sin and He will do just that. If you have questions about that, text “RIVERCONNECT” to 97000 and let us know. We would be honored to speak to you and help!

Reader, justice is coming. God will make all things right again and redeem all those that have run to Jesus for salvation. This is something we can be sure of and rejoice in. Praise be to our God!

Revelation 19:1 says, ***“After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.’”***

CERTAIN HOPE

TRIBULATION • DEVOTION 4

John Stone

Life is full of uncertainty. It seems like every day we are peppered with more and more dire news predicting the downfall of society and the end of the world. If we let it, all this messaging can leave us feeling on edge, nervous, and helpless. In a similar way, reading through the book of Revelation, or The Apocalypse as it was traditionally called, we can find ourselves confused by the symbolism, overwhelmed by all the death and suffering, and perhaps a little relieved that none of it seems to be imminent. Scholars have spent lifetimes attempting to match timelines and meanings and rarely if ever, agreeing with one another. “Prophets” on the best-seller list continue extorting Christians, claiming to decipher events that God has not chosen to reveal. All of these can culminate in a feeling of uncertainty.

“There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). The longer I study the Bible, the more clearly I see the same pattern repeating itself from Genesis through Revelation: rejection - warning - judgment - restoration. Ultimately, that is what this story is about: God’s warning given to men due to their rejection of Jesus Christ, His final judgment on sin, and His restoration of all things. For some, this is a terrifying story. For the one who has faith in Jesus Christ, it is a story of hope. How can hope be found in the midst of this apocalypse? There is hope because Jesus Christ is worthy to open the book and break the seals! (Revelation 5) Jesus, the One who is without sin, can cast the first stone (John 8) to remove the corruption from His creation and make all things new (Revelation 21:5). The hands that open the seals are the very same hands that held the little children (Matthew 19:13-15) and opened blind eyes (John 9:6). They are the same hands that were nailed to the cross of Calvary for your

sins and my sins. They are the same hands that hold us now and no one can remove us from them (John 10:28-29; Romans 8:35-39). There is nothing uncertain about that.

"But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Luke 21:28 (NASB)

SEVEN TO HEAVEN

TRIBULATION • DEVOTION 5

Jeremy Smith

Most people fall on either one side or the other when it comes to discussions of end times. Either they are fascinated and cannot read enough, or the idea of the end times gives them extreme anxiety and they prefer to not talk about it. For me, I always seem to find new things or a differing idea that really gets my mind going. As far as what we read, God has only given this vision to one man, John. John, in turn, was tasked with transforming these visions into words and detailing what kind of expectations we should have for the future. Now, I am sure if you were to ask a hundred people about the Tribulation, you would get a hundred different answers about all the who's, what's, when's, and how's. That is the fascinating part for me. There is no right or wrong thought to answer those questions, leaving us a significant amount of room to discuss what may happen or when.

One of those wild things that stands out to me is the number seven. Some have referred to it as the number of completion or perfection. If we go all the way back to the beginning, Genesis 2:3 says, ***"So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation."*** Matthew chapter 18 gives another example when talking about forgiveness. Peter asked Jesus how many times they should forgive. ***"Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times'"*** (Matthew 18:22). These couple of instances are obviously from a much lighter context, compared to the seven seals. Much like every story we read, we want to build and build to the climax. So we have John reveal as each seal is broken, each step of the process is more intense and something worse than its predecessor.

Then we get to Revelation 8:1, ***"When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour."*** Can you imagine this? Most descriptions of Heaven talk of singing, shouting, and praise. How you would go from that image to dead silence sounds wild. I think of my own home, with our family of six and all the animals, it can get rather loud fairly quickly. When it all gets quiet, that is when things get a little more nerve-racking. It is like the calm that is experienced in the eye of a storm.

Are you able to say that you have felt that kind of peace? Maybe it only lasted briefly like that or maybe it was a little longer. From my experience, it was like a huge weight being lifted off my shoulders. Regardless of your stance on the Tribulation, do you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that one day you will be spending eternity in Heaven? If you cannot say definitively yes, make today will be that day. Romans 10:9-11 says, ***"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.'"***

BAD AND WORSE

TRIBULATION • DEVOTION 6

Pastor Patrick Rowland

This week's focus on Revelation chapters 6, 8, and 16 brings us to read about the 7 seals (chapter 6), 7 trumpets (chapter 8), and 7 Bowls (chapter 16). One cannot help but notice the significance of 777 as you read them and the parallel of Matthew chapter 24. For today, I want to focus on Revelation chapter 6.

Matthew 24:4-8 (NIV) says, ***"Jesus answered: 'Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.'"***

Jesus warns of false christs, wars, destruction, power struggles, lack of food, earthquakes, and basically chaos. We read in Revelation 6:1-8, the first four seals are four different horsemen with four missions: the white horseman to conquer, the red horseman to create hostility and bloodshed, the black horseman to create poverty and famine, and the pale horseman to plague that leads to death.

Jesus called these the beginning of the ***"great distress."*** Matthew 24:21 says, ***"For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now - and never to be equaled again."*** It will be a time when faith will be tested and not all will be faithful, which leads to the fifth seal.

Revelation 6:9 says, ***"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained."*** These are the faithful martyrs, those that did not worship the false christ. They are asking Jesus for justice against the enemies of God.

It is the sixth seal that we will see the judgment or when you could say, "All Hell broke loose" (sorry if that is offensive). The description in verses 12-17 is a world of darkness and the whole world being turned upside down. Those still on Earth will not be able to escape the distress and catastrophe that will be before them as the seventh seal is opened (chapter 8).

It is as if just when you think it could not get much worse, it absolutely does for those that remain on Earth, for those that oppose God. I hate to leave you in the middle of the story, but this is where we end today. However, remember that for us it is avoidable through Jesus.

"For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

11

WITNESSES

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

God loves us (Psalm 103:11; John 3:16; 13:34; 15:12; 16:27; Romans 5:5, 8; 2 Corinthians 5:14; Ephesians 2:4; 3:19; 1 Timothy 1:14; 1 John 3:1; 4:8-11, 16, 19; Jude 1:21)!

As we work through the book of Revelation, it is good to pause and reflect on the love of God. The Bible is a love story of God redeeming His wayward people.

1. How do most people view the Bible?

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2. Please further explain how the Bible is a love story.

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Romans 8:38-39 is so beautiful, ***"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

3. How does this passage relate to the book of Revelation and even to our lives today?

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In 2 Peter 3:9, we read, ***"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*** God loves us and wants everyone to get saved. However, many and

even most have and will reject Him. He loves mankind so much that He even sends witnesses during the Tribulation. There are two key sets of witnesses - the 144,000 and the two.

One Hundred Forty-Four Thousand Witnesses

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

4. What are some of the characteristics of the 144,000 witnesses listed here?

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Revelation chapter 7 records more information about these witnesses. Verses 1-8 record, ***"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 ascending 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, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.' And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,
12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,
12,000 from the tribe of Gad,
12,000 from the tribe of Asher,
12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,
12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,
12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,
12,000 from the tribe of Levi,
12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,
12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,
12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,
12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed."

5. What characteristics of the 144,000 do we see here?

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The fact that the 144,000 witnesses were Jewish, virgin men should probably change the thought patterns of those considering being associated with the cult Jehovah's Witnesses.

Revelation 7:9-12 continues the narrative, ***"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, 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 on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'"

6. How many people were before the throne?

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7. Who were they worshiping?

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8. How were they worshiping?

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Revelation 7:13-17 adds, ***"Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 'Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will***

be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.””

9. What blessings do these witnesses receive?

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God uses the masses to proclaim His message, but He is also interested in the willingness of individuals. The book of Revelation also documents the ministry of two witnesses.

Two Witnesses

Revelation 11:1-3 says, ***“Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, ‘Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.’”***

10. Which is longer, ***“forty-two months”*** or ***“1,260 days”***? How many years are they?

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Revelation 11:4-14 continues, ***“These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. They have the power to shut the sky,***

that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here!' And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come."

11. What powers do these witnesses have?

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12. Do these men remind you of any Old Testament characters?

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13. Who kills them? How long will they be dead?

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14. What was the result of their coming back to life?

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One of my favorite sermons is by Andy Stanley and is titled, *"If You Don't, It Won't."* Stanley encourages us to pray big. Our prayers should include the phrase, "God if you don't step in, it won't happen." It is the concept that we need God. All too often our prayers are vague and will resolve themselves eventually. Remembering that people are more important to God than things, we need to pray big. Pray for people. Pray for the salvation of the one who comes to mind right now. Pray for the chains of addiction to be broken on your loved one. Pray for relationships to be healed. Pray big.

15. Who do you need to pray for right now?

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16. What will you do this week to reach out to them?

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Witnessing starts with prayer. Pray Big!
Please remember to thank God after He answers.

SEALED

WITNESSES • DEVOTION 1

Jeannie Yates

My mom has always been an amazing homemaker. I remember when I was a kid, baked goods never came from a box and canned goods rarely came from the store. I was usually tasked as the "helper" during canning season. Green beans, tomatoes, pickles, peaches, cherries - you name it, we probably canned it. The jars would remain on the kitchen counter as we patiently waited for the desired seal. The seal would lock in the freshness, preserving all of our canned goods for future use. Not only would it keep the food safe from bacteria, but also any critters that might threaten to spoil it.

We see the Scriptures use this idea of being "sealed" when referring to our status with Christ after we believe and put our trust in Him. In Ephesians 1:13-14, the Apostle Paul writes, ***"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."***

This part of Revelation displays the Good News of our salvation. John is painting a verbal picture of the completion of this seal in Revelation 7:2-3, ***"Then I saw another angel ascending 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, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.'"*** Verses 9-10 add, ***"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, 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 on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

I love the observation about the witnesses made by the commentator, James Hamilton Jr. He writes, "They do not credit themselves for overcoming. God sealed them. They state plainly that salvation belongs to God. This means that their salvation is not due to the right choices they made, the virtue of their character, the superiority of their wisdom, or the strength of their will. Salvation belongs to God. God saved them. So they praise God."

I do not know about you, but I am so thankful that my salvation is not left up to my merit. I would fail. It is not my striving that earns the seal of the Holy Spirit. It is only by God's grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 reminds us, ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."***

Did you catch the response of the people in Revelation chapter 7? This great multitude from every tribe and nation is standing before the throne, crying out in worship, **"*Salvation belongs to our God!"*** This reminds me of a song we have sung at our gatherings called, "My Testimony" by Elevation Worship. Next time you hear it, close your eyes and picture this display of praise happening before God's throne.

The miracle that I just can't get over
My name is registered in heaven
My praise belongs to you forever
This is my testimony from death to life
'Cause grace rewrote my story, I'll testify
By Jesus Christ the Righteous
I'm justified
This is my testimony

TIME WELL SPENT

WITNESSES • DEVOTION 2

Caleb Jones

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, 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 on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.' Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation.'" Revelation 7:9-14

For the past couple of years, I have thought so much about time. It is the one thing I cannot have more of. I cannot keep it. I am always running out of it. It is made me extra intentional with how I spend my time. As I read Revelation, I again read it through the lens of time. Our physical bodies are no more and are now faced with eternity.

Here in Revelation chapter 7, we read about the end when every believer finally stands before God. There is no more pain, no more suffering, and no more death. All of us who have professed Jesus as Lord will be standing before the throne of God, praising Him for who He is and what He has done. Verse 9 says that a great multitude that no one could number came out of the Great Tribulation.

This leads me back to the time I have here on Earth. What will my influence be? How many people will come to know Christ because of the life that I lived? So often we get wrapped up in the busyness of life that we do not stop to think about the people that we might impact. I love the illustration Francis Chan gave years ago. He compared our life to this extremely long rope and put a small piece of tape at the beginning of it. He compared our lives here on Earth to that red piece of tape and said most of us live for that small section. We should be living our lives planning for what happens after we die, eternity. Luke 12:40 says, ***"You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."*** This verse is telling us to plan. Plan for Jesus to come back today. Mark 16:15 adds, ***"And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.'"***

We are called to make disciples. We are called to preach the Gospel to the whole world.

So, where will you spend eternity? What about your neighbor? What about your family member? What about your coworker? Who will join you for eternity when we stand before the throne of God?

GOD'S PEOPLE WILL BE PRESERVED

WITNESSES • DEVOTION 3

Debbie Gabbara

"And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel." Revelation 7:4

Many religions have many different answers to the question, who are the 144,000 that are referred to in Revelation chapter 7? Many questions surround this passage of Scripture:

- Who are the people that make up these 144,000?
- Is the number literal?
- What is their purpose?
- What is the seal?
- Are they Jews who have believed in Jesus?

Different religions have different answers. After reading many commentaries, we are going to look at it just as the Bible says. In Revelation 7:4-6, the 12 tribes of Israel are chosen and sealed by God. Revelation chapter 14 calls them, "Redeemed and blameless, and these who follow the Lamb wherever He goes."

Beginning in the Old Testament and through the Bible, we see that God preserves His people. In Genesis, God first chose Abraham and promised that He would make Abraham a great nation. God later repeats His promise to Isaac when he is told that his descendants will be more numerous than the stars. The nation of Israel gets its name from Isaac's son Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. Genesis 35:10-11 records, ***"And God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.' So he called his name Israel. And God said***

to him, 'I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.'"

God's people are chosen and treasured. Deuteronomy 14:2 says, ***"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."***

Just like Adam and Eve, we all think that we can find more than God has given us and sin causes us to wander away. God has always been faithful to His people even though time and time again they chose the sin of the world and turned away from the ways of God. Time and time again we see that God rescues them.

The Lord sent prophets to warn and preserve His people. Jeremiah 1:4 says, ***"Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'"***

Romans gives us a picture of the Israelites, God's chosen people, that would one day include the birth of Jesus. Romans 9:5 (NLT) says, ***"Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are their ancestors, and Christ himself was an Israelite as far as human nature is concerned."***

Romans 9:24-26 tells us that we are all chosen by God, Jews and Gentiles. God loves us all and chose us all to be children of the living God. One day, Jesus will return and call His children home. They will come from the four corners of the Earth and wander no more.

Ephesians 1:13 states, ***"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were***

sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." It is beautiful that God has a plan for all His children.

PEOPLE ARE DROWNING

WITNESSES • DEVOTION 4

Gary Wright

"And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth." Revelation 11:3-4

When my daughter Kayla was in the fifth grade, her class took a trip to Mackinac Island. My wife Kim and I decided to go along. The hotel we stayed at had a pool and the kids went swimming the first night we were there. The parents were sitting around the pool area talking while the kids swam. All of a sudden, one of the parents started yelling, "Hey, my son is drowning!" I got up, ran to the edge of the pool and I could see a kid on the bottom, so I jumped in and pulled him out. Thankfully, he was fine.

Similarly, the Bible teaches us that without faith in Jesus we are all drowning in sin. Without Jesus, we have no hope for the forgiveness of sin and we have no hope for a relationship with God.

Throughout history, God has always provided witnesses to point sinful people back to Himself. The book of Revelation tells us that the future is no different. During the tribulation, God is going to call up two witnesses. The message of the two witnesses will warn of the coming judgment from God and a call for people to repent and turn to Christ. Even during the tribulation, our merciful God will offer salvation. The witnesses will be clothed in sackcloth, which shows that they are in mourning. They are mourning and heartbroken over the wickedness of the world and God's judgment upon it. The two witnesses are described as lampstands because they will reflect

the light of Jesus into the world and point people to the truth, the Gospel of Jesus. Olive oil was commonly used in lamps. The olive oil represents the Holy Spirit that leads and powers the two witnesses. The olive tree depicts an unending supply of oil flowing into the lampstands. God will use the two witnesses to speak the truth, but salvation will come through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In our present time, God has called those of us that have put our faith in Jesus to be His witnesses. Because we have put our faith in Jesus, the Bible tells us that we have the same Holy Spirit living in us that will lead and power the two witnesses. We are the lampstands that shine the light of Jesus to our generation.

The two witnesses will be heartbroken for those who do not know Jesus. Are we heartbroken over our family and friends that do not know Jesus? Do we love them enough to jump in and do whatever it takes to save them from drowning?

THE POWER OF THE LORD

WITNESSES • DEVOTION 5

Larry Gabbara

The book of Revelation is a challenge to understand. If we just open the book and expect a clear meaning to pop into our head, it probably will not happen. Over time, many Bible scholars have attempted to interpret this book.

Revelation 11:3 says, ***"And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth."*** We must turn to Scripture to help us understand what the two representatives of God means. Reading through Revelation chapter 11, we find the two witnesses are placed by God in the holy city after the Gentiles have trampled the city for forty-two months.

The Bible calls the time that the two witnesses were here on Earth the second woe. The witnesses are given power from God to protect themselves with fire and plagues. We read that they have the power to turn water into blood, and the ability to consume their foes. If anyone attempted to harm them, they would be doomed to death. God also gave them power over nature.

Once their testimony is over, God then allows the Beast to rise from the bottomless pit to conquer and kill the two witnesses. Their dead bodies are left in the street of that great city where Jesus was crucified. Their bodies are left right there for all to see, for three and half days, people from all over the nation gaze and rejoice over their death. The two witnesses had been a torment to all the people of earth. The people refused to allow their bodies to be placed in a tomb.

What happens next shows the power and glory of God!

After three and half days, God breathed life into them, and He commanded them to come up to Heaven. The two witnesses stood up on their feet and were lifted to Heaven.

Revelation 11:13 adds, ***"And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven."*** In these verses, we can see the power and the might of our Lord.

If we do not believe and put our faith in the One True God, we will suffer terrible pain and plagues. We will miss out on spending eternity with the Lord!

CHOSEN WITNESSES

WITNESSES • DEVOTION 6

William Kinney

The book of Revelation is a prophecy given to John about what will happen before and after Jesus' second coming. Revelation chapter 11 is a great prophetic message of how the world will be in those final days of this Earth. Though this chapter is a prophecy, there are a few principles that this chapter has spoken to me, specifically about the two witnesses from Revelation 11:1-14.

After reading and meditating on this passage for quite some time and pondering what God wants me to know and share about Him, I concluded that God will always have the glory no matter what the rest of the world thinks about Him, and God uses His people to bring His glory to the world. The witnesses God places on the Earth in this passage for 1260 days (around three and a half years) are a marvelous testimony of God's faithfulness. I could not imagine prophesying to a world for that long of a time and probably trying to be killed by the world, which is likely an everyday occurrence for them. However, the world cannot harm them because God grants them the power to defend themselves by fire coming out of their mouths, and if anyone tries even to hurt them, they must be killed by the fire (verse 5).

When we are witnesses for God, He will defend us, one way or another. God also gave these witnesses miraculous powers to stop the rain from falling for the three and a half years of their prophesying, the ability to turn the waters of the Earth into blood and strike the world with every plague as much as they would like.

When we walk in God's purpose for our lives, God will grant us great

responsibility, which most of the world will despise and reject. Yet, when God's purpose for our lives is fulfilled, He will take away His defense and allow us to be persecuted by the world. I am glad that is not the end of the story! God brings His witnesses back to life into Heaven, in His arms, for His glory. After God's judgment, the enemies of His witnesses will fear the Lord and give glory to Him.

Can you call yourself a chosen witness of God? If not, the only way to be chosen is to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, which calls for you to believe in your heart that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins, and rose again victoriously, beating Hell and condemnation, so you can too!

"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9

12

ANTICHRIST

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

If you have ever taken some time to study the book of Revelation or end times in general, you have heard of the Antichrist. He is also referenced as ***"the Beast"*** (Revelation 13) and ***"the man of lawlessness"*** (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

Throughout history, believers have been trying to identify the Antichrist. People have considered Nero, the pope, Adolf Hitler, and Benito Mussolini.

1. Have you heard of any other thoughts on who people guessed was the Antichrist?

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_____
_____

2. Do you think the Antichrist is alive today? Who or from where?

_____
_____
_____

Another interesting point that is often discussed is found in Revelation 13:18, ***"This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666."*** I remember buying our Christmas cards one year and the total came up to $6.66. The cashier asked if I wanted to pay one cent more to avoid the number. I laughed and stated that as a Christian, I did not need to be afraid of the number (however, if she offered to take one cent off the price I may have accepted it). The number can open up a discussion about the Lord.

3. Have you had any situations involving the number 666?

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It is believed that when the Antichrist appears there will be a lot of turmoil in the world. There is a tone in Scripture that he will bring a period of peace. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote, "According to Daniel 9:27, when the dictator of the Middle East emerges as the 'Prince that shall come' (Daniel 9:26), he will make a covenant with Israel for a seven-year period. The details of this covenant are not given in Scripture, but it is implied as a covenant of protection."

The main passage for the Antichrist is found in Revelation chapter 13. Merrill Tenny documents several other references to the Antichrist saying, "In the Old Testament he is prefigured under the 'king of Babylon' (Isaiah 14:4); 'Lucifer' (Isaiah 14:12), 'the little horn' (Daniel 7:8; 8:9), 'the king of fierce countenance' (Daniel 8:23), 'the prince that shall come' (Daniel 9:26), 'the wilful king' (Daniel 11:36). In the New Testament he is called 'the man of sin,' 'the son of perdition,' that 'Wicked One' (2 Thessalonians 2:3-8), 'Antichrist' (1 John 2:18) and 'the Beast' (Revelation 13:1-10)." It is this last passage that we will observe.

Revelation 13:1-2 says, ***"And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority."*** This ***"Beast"*** is the Antichrist.

Paige Patterson points out that ***"a beast rising out of the sea"*** implies the beast is a gentile. He goes on to point out that the second

beast ***"rising out of the earth"*** (Revelation 13:11) focuses on "the land" or Promised Land and represents this beast being Jewish.

4. Would it surprise you if one of the beasts was Jewish?

_____

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_____

John Walvoord points out, "In Revelation 13:2 the beast was seen to gather in the symbolism of the three preceding empires - Greece (a leopard, cf. Daniel 7:6), Medo-Persia (a bear, cf. Daniel 7:5), and Babylon (a lion, cf. Daniel 7:4).

The book of Daniel was written more than 500 BC. It accurately records history, prophecies already fulfilled since its writing, and events yet to come.

5. How should this information found in Daniel strengthen our faith?

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_____

Revelation 13:3 continues, ***"One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast."*** James Hamilton points out, "We see in 13:3 the cheap imitation of a satanically empowered king setting himself up as a messianic pretender."

6. Who is he imitating and what is the aspect of the imitation?

_____

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Revelation 13:4-10 adds, ***"And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?' And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. If anyone has an ear, let him hear: If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints."*** Warren Wiersbe uses alliteration to explain this section. He points out there will be wonder (Revelation 13:3), worship (Revelation 13:4), words (Revelation 13:5-6), and war (Revelation 13:7-10).

7. How long is ***"forty-two months"***?

_____

_____

_____

8. What kind of ***"words"*** will the Beast use?

_____

_____

_____

9. Please write out the last sentence of verse 10.

_____

_____

_____

10. What does it mean and does it apply to us today?

_____

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_____

The book of Revelation is not the only place to read about the Antichrist. Interestingly enough, the word Antichrist is not found in the book of Revelation. The word Antichrist means “against Christ” or “false Christ.” The word is found in four passages which are also written by John.

“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.” 1 John 2:22

“And every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.” 1 John 4:3

“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.” 2 John 1:7

“Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.” 1 John 2:18

11. How is the fourth passage different than the other three?

_____

_____

_____

12. What characteristics would you expect to see in someone we would call an antichrist today?

_____

_____

_____

13. What should we do about them?

_____

_____

_____

"Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." Revelation 13:10

KNOWING THE BEAST

ANTICHRIST • DEVOTION 1

Patrick Bicknell

The book of Revelation is a prophecy given to John about what will happen before and after Jesus' second coming. Revelation chapter 11 is a great prophetic message of how the world will be in those final days of this Earth. Though this chapter is a prophecy, there are a few principles that this chapter has spoken to me, specifically about the two witnesses from Revelation 11:1-14.

After reading and meditating on this passage for quite some time and pondering what God wants me to know and share about Him, I concluded that God will always have the glory no matter what the rest of the world thinks about Him, and God uses His people to bring His glory to the world. The witnesses God places on the Earth in this passage for 1260 days (around three and a half years) are a marvelous testimony of God's faithfulness. I could not imagine prophesying to a world for that long of a time and probably trying to be killed by the world, which is likely an everyday occurrence for them. However, the world cannot harm them because God grants them the power to defend themselves by fire coming out of their mouths, and if anyone tries even to hurt them, they must be killed by the fire (verse 5).

When we are witnesses for God, He will defend us, one way or another. God also gave these witnesses miraculous powers to stop the rain from falling for the three and a half years of their prophesying, the ability to turn the waters of the Earth into blood and strike the world with every plague as much as they would like.

When we walk in God's purpose for our lives, God will grant us great responsibility, which most of the world will despise and reject. Yet, when God's purpose for our lives is fulfilled, He will take away His defense and allow us to be persecuted by the world. I am glad that is not the end of the story! God brings His witnesses back to life into Heaven, in His arms, for His glory. After God's judgment, the enemies of His witnesses will fear the Lord and give glory to Him.

Can you call yourself a chosen witness of God? If not, the only way to be chosen is to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, which calls for you to believe in your heart that Jesus Christ died on the cross for your sins, and rose again victoriously, beating Hell and condemnation, so you can too!

"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

ANTICHRIST • DEVOTION 2

John Rigg

Revelation chapter 13 describes the arrival of the apocalyptic Beast. In verse one, we see the Beast coming out of the sea and this more than likely is referencing the "sea of humanity." This helps us understand that the Beast represents a man that rises out of the brokenness and depravity of mankind. He rules over a worldwide government that is represented by the ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, which was also represented by the fourth beast of Daniel, which also had ten horns (Daniel 7:7-8). He will use his worldwide influence to defame the name of God and God's people. This kingdom will be greater than all the kingdoms of Daniel's day, reflected in the description of the leopard, the bear, and the lion. The primary goal of the Beast during this time is to use all this influence and power to redirect the worship owed to God onto the dragon, Satan, who has given him the power to do so.

Revelation 13:3-4 says, ***"And the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'"***

So, why is the world so easily deceived into worshiping Satan at this time in history? In 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12, we read, ***"The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."***

During this time, Satan has a relatively easy job in convincing everyone to worship him. Although there is no truth in him, people will follow him as they ***"pleasure in unrighteousness."***

Revelation 13:8 (NKJV) adds, ***"All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."***

However, there is a "beauty" in this time of the Beast. It is found in those who desire righteousness and truth over unrighteousness and lies. Their names will be found written in the Book of Life of the Lamb.

Although the revealing of the Beast will bring much trouble and tribulation as never before seen on the Earth, God will use this time to separate those who love and worship Him from those who would rather pleasure in unrighteousness and follow Satan into eternal condemnation.

Speaking of Heaven and eternal life, John says, ***"But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life"*** (Revelation 21:27).

It is good to remember that the book of Revelation is a revealing of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:1). It is easy for us to get distracted by all the signs of the Beast and lose sight of the beauty of Jesus Christ. As terrible as the Beast is, he is just a pawn in the hand of God to finally rid His creation of sin and unrighteousness.

Our primary concern then should not be the Beast, but the beauty of Jesus Christ and that He has made a way for our name to be written in the Book of Life.

SATAN'S FAKE CHRIST

ANTICHRIST • DEVOTION 3

Pastor Roy Townsend

I have had the privilege of traveling to different countries throughout my life. I enjoy traveling, but one of the unique similarities of each place that I visited was the fake products that were for sale to travelers. It is fun to watch people be excited about the fake items that would be super expensive back home. Can you believe that I could get a watch for $100 but back home it was $3,000? That designer bag was only $50, but in America, the bag was $2,500. Wow, what a deal! In most instances, the tourists that I was traveling with knew that the items were fake, but in other instances, it was hard to determine if the products were fake. For example, if they were trying to sell me a gold chain, it was harder to determine if the chain was fake or not.

In Revelation 13:1-4, John gives us a prophetic description of how Satan will use an imitation christ-figure to deceive the world during the end times called the Beast. It reads, ***"And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'"***

Bible commentator Hamilton wrote, "There were four living creatures around God's throne in Revelation four, and those living creatures

reflect the beauty, power, majesty, and character of God. The best that Satan can come up with are perverse and twisted parodies of God, and Satan's beast reflects his character just as the four living creatures reflect God's character. Satan's beast is a grotesque and unnatural blend of brutal and bloodthirsty animals of prey, and that's what Satan is like."

It seems shocking that Satan would go to these lengths to imitate God the Father and God the Son, but Satan even empowers the Beast (fake christ) to imitate what Christ did on the cross and through the resurrection. Earlier we read, ***"One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast."*** Whether the world is willingly being deceived, like me buying a Rolex watch for $100 in the Caribbean, or when it is more difficult to determine if this is a gold chain; we know that Satan will be effective in deceiving the world.

When I discuss these verses with people we are often confronted with the thought of what are we to do? Mark 13:22-23 reads, ***"For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand."*** These verses tell us that there will be these fake christs that will be able to do some wondrous things, but we need to be ***"on guard."*** The Scriptures through the words of Christ warn us to remember that Christ told us "all things beforehand."

ENDURE

ANTICHRIST • DEVOTION 4

Pastor Noble Baird

The Beast - there is no easy way to share this passage of Scripture in Revelation 13:1-10. John shares the vision he has about the Beast, which is another name for the Antichrist. Throughout the book of Revelation, it is the true endgame of this world. Satan will be attempting his last quarter push, pulling out all the stops, and throwing everything he has at this world. His desire is the same desire he had in the Garden of Eden, to deceive and destroy lives. In Revelation 13:1-4 we have an intense description of the Antichrist as he comes into power, ***"And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'"*** We go to the movies and think that Hollywood is amazing and so creative with its writings, yet John wrote this description and illustration thousands of years before Hollywood even existed. It is amazing. John gives us this depiction of the Antichrist's coming to power and we see people so deceived and awestruck by this false Christ as they worship and declare, ***"Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"***

Yet, as the world is being deceived and it seems as though Satan's plan is coming to fruition; what are we as followers of Christ called

to do? Are they to wave the white flag and cash in their chips? No. John writes in Revelation 13:10, ***"If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints."*** John calls us to endure. If we are captured, or yes, even if we are killed; we as followers of Christ are called to endure. I know this may not seem like the happy-go-lucky devotional you may have been expecting today. However, as a pastor and brother in Christ, we must share the reality of what will come to this Earth before Christ victoriously returns. Remember, all the disciples except John (trust me he did not get off the hook - they tried to kill him!) died giving their lives for the cause of the Gospel.

Today, I just want to encourage you to endure and cling to the Gospel of Christ. Remember that no matter what this world throws at us, whether that be at work, school, or family outings, we must endure. As you endure through trials and hardships, share the light and love of Christ wherever you walk.

I simply want to leave you with the words of Stephen as he was being stoned to death for his faith and proclamation of the Gospel in Acts 7:60, ***"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*** With his dying breath, Stephen not only endured in his faith, but he loved and knew that this was the will of the Lord. May we endure for the cause of the Gospel.

ENDURANCE IN ADVERSITY

ANTICHRIST • DEVOTION 5

Pastor Justin Dean

Soccer is a sport that I was never any good at. The best I could do was play goalie, and that is because I am big-boned enough to prove an opposing obstacle in the goal. The amount of running in that sport is astonishing. Distance running, sprints, stop and goes, and agility are required to even play, and let us just leave it at, "I did not have what it takes." I never had the endurance required to keep up.

Truthfully, endurance is a necessary quality to have in many different facets of life. Endurance is more than just a physical quality, but is a quality that can be found in our emotional, vocational, and spiritual lives. In Revelation 13:8-10, John hones in on the latter, ***"And all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. If anyone has an ear, let him hear: If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints."***

There will be many trying things that happen in the end times. Specifically, in chapter 13, we are dealing with the first and second beasts. We see that many will worship the first Beast, but those who have their names written in the Book of Life will instead have the endurance to make it through. Those who are truly saved will have endurance and will not be overcome by the pressure from those around them to worship something false.

In our world today, we are not pressured to worship a leopard with ten horns and seven heads rising from the sea but often times we

are tempted to succumb to pressure from other things in our world. We are tempted to consume media like shows, movies, or music that we know contain things that are wrong in order to be current and relevant to the world around us. We make crude jokes because that is what the non-believers around us find funny. We try and blur the lines of sin and create grey areas because it is harder to live pure and set apart than it is to fit in with the world around us.

We have a powerful command in 1 Peter 1:14-16, ***"As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"***

Your life should look different after the start of your relationship with Jesus. If it does not, you may need to do some reflection on your personal holiness. We are called to live as people who are set apart, in big ways that may not involve the worship of a leopard with ten horns and seven heads, but in our everyday lives and decisions.

Has the media you consume (Movies, TV, Music) changed since becoming a believer?

Does your language, both in what you say (jokes and stories) and how you say it (cursing), look any different from the non-Christians in your life?

As your personal devotion time closes for the day, I want to encourage you to take time and pray that God would give you strength and endurance to not be worn down by the world around you. Pray to remain steadfast under the adversity brought about through your flesh and this fallen world.

THE WARNING BRINGS COMFORT

ANTICHRIST • DEVOTION 6

Joanna Montgomery

When I was a young girl, I remember hearing sermons on the Great Tribulation, the mark of the Beast, and the end of the age. It used to frighten me because I did not fully understand the beauty of truth. We currently live in a world where truth is treated as subjective. We are told by those who do not follow the Word of God, that truth is what you want it to be; the truth is up to the individual to discern or to know. For those of us in Christ, we know that is a lie and is very evil. It is a voice of confusion and torment for anyone who believes it. I am so thankful for the truth. God is truth, and He is not the God of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). I love Isaiah 46:9-10 which states, ***"Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'"*** I find great comfort in knowing that nothing surprises God. Not only does He know everything, but He has declared from before time began exactly how time would end, and in ancient times, He declared things that have not happened yet. He states He will accomplish all His purpose. As people who love and serve God, we can take great comfort in that.

In Revelation chapter 13, we see exactly what God refers to when He declares the end from the beginning. John is writing to us about our future, and while some of the descriptions and truths we read can be disturbing, knowing our loving Father in Heaven is laying it all out in the fashion He has already described, brings great comfort because it proves He is real, He is in control, and if we love Him our eternity is secure.

Revelation chapter 13 gives us the picture of the Antichrist, or "The Beast." Before we look in detail at this future ruler, we need to think about the term Antichrist. Many people see Antichrist as someone who is against Christ, which is accurate, but there is an even deeper meaning. Antichrist also means "in place of." When we look at this term fully, this Beast is a person who is against Christ and will be put in place of Christ. There are two different Antichrists, or Beasts, mentioned in Revelation Chapter 13. The first one is described in verses 1-10.

The "Beast" described is a human, but God identifies him as a beast. Man is made in the image of God; however, the Antichrist is not an image of God, but a wild beast out of control and without discernment and knowledge.

In verse one, the Beast rises out of the sea. According to Revelation 17:15, this is not a literal sea, it is instead a sea of people. This individual will rise up out of the nations and will be a leader as noted by the crowns or diadems. The Beast has ten horns and seven heads, which is directly related to the vision in Daniel chapter 7. In his vision, Daniel saw an unidentifiable beast coming out of the broken Roman Empire. Ten horns represented ten rulers of ten kingdoms, and of those ten, three would be replaced by a single ruler. This single ruler is the Antichrist, or the Beast, and he speaks great blasphemies against God.

The Beast gets power and authority from Satan, or the dragon (verse 2), and the people worship him. This Beast is like a leopard with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion. This reflects the vision in Daniel chapter 7 where three beasts represent Babylon (the lion), Media-Persia (the bear), and Graeco-Macedonia (the leopard). The Revelation chapter 13 Beast rising out of the sea of people

is a composite Beast. The Beast combines characteristics of the beasts representing kingdoms in Daniel's vision. They are given in the reverse order from Daniel, perhaps because Daniel was looking ahead to the future, and John in his vision is in the future, looking backward. This Beast, the Antichrist will have the advancements in arts and sciences, philosophy, architecture, beautiful literature, and the outward culture that was the glory of Greece (the leopard). He will also, noted by the feet of the bear, have elements of the Media-Persian empire, with its pagan splendor and wealth. Finally, the mouth of a lion reminds us of Babylon (the lion) under Nebuchadnezzar. The Antichrist will rule with the dictatorial authority of the ruler of Babylon.

The all-powerful Beast will willingly be under the domination of Satan which God will allow to fully rule the Earth at this time. Satan will indwell the Antichrist and will control him as the ultimate dictator. The Beast will be the closest thing to an incarnation of Satan that is found in Scripture.

In verse 3, something strange happens. The Beast receives a wound that either kills him, or is bad enough to kill him, but he appears to rise from the dead (as Christ did). This creates quite a stir among the people, and they follow the Beast in admiration and astonishment. It is amazing to me that people will not believe in the resurrection of Christ which has many witness accounts, but they will easily believe in the resurrection of the Beast, which may be a lie.

The people will be deceived. They will worship the dragon, Satan, and the Beast that was healed. They will say there has never been anyone or anything as wonderful as the Beast, and will truly worship him and Satan, the one who gives him power. Satan hates God. Satan wants to turn everything and everyone against God, and so this Beast will speak great blasphemies.

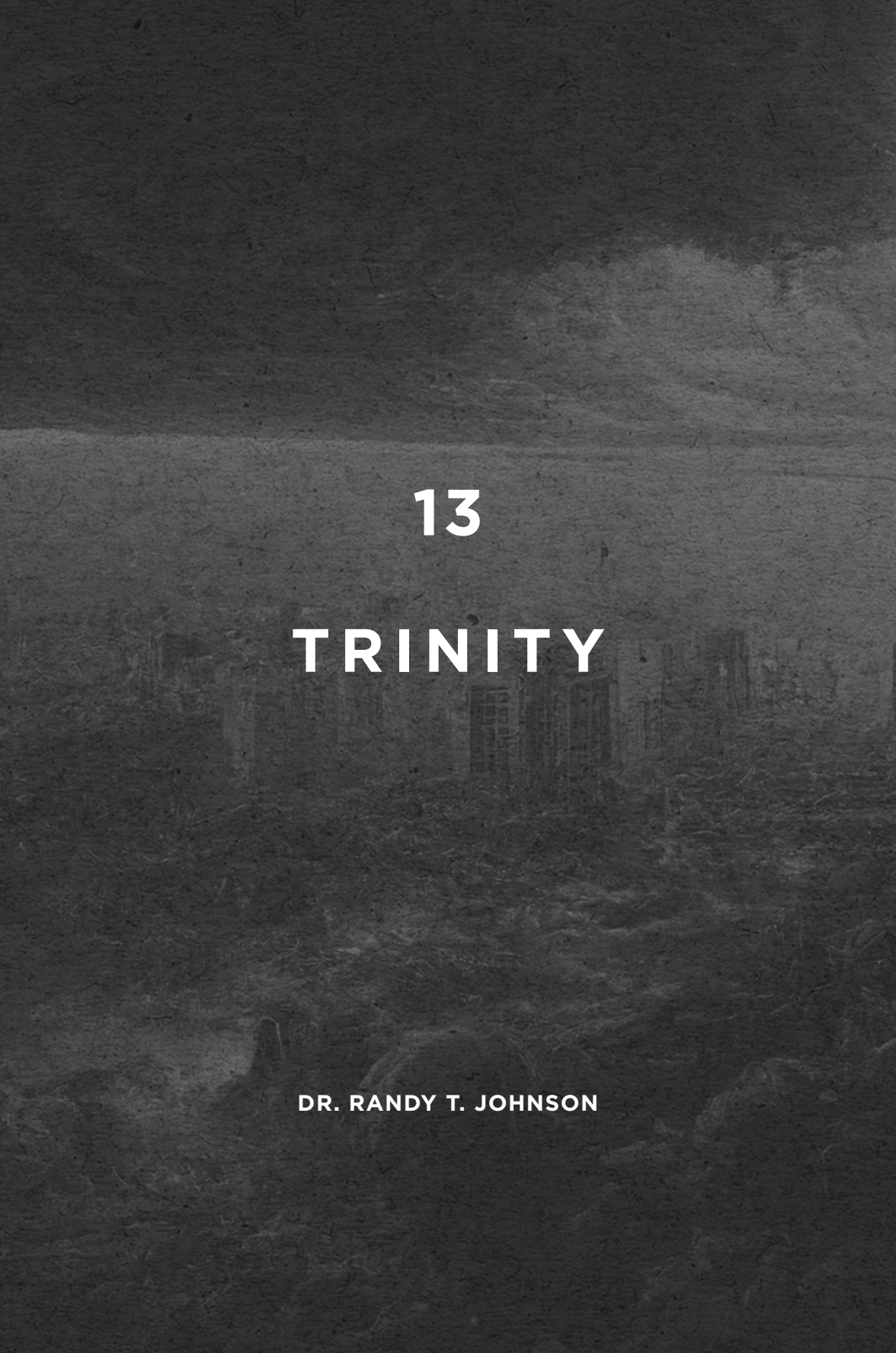
The Beast will be allowed to reign and to blaspheme God for forty-two months, or three and one-half years. This Beast will delight in speaking making many promises and declaring things people want to hear; even Daniel mentions the large mouth of the Beast. As believers in God, it is important to test everything we hear or read against the truth of the Bible. The Beast will be able to smooth-talk people into believing in him and rejecting Christ, the true Savior of the world, and God the Father.

The Beast will speak blasphemies against God, Christ, and those who are in Heaven (verse 6). Satan will do everything within his power to turn everyone on Earth against the loving God who has created them. The hate for the things of God will grow during this time, and for those who are believers, verse 7 states the Beast will make war on the saints (those on Earth who believe in God) and will conquer them. The Beast will be given authority over every people group, every ethnicity, every language, and every nation left on this Earth. He will have all power over all people.

While this may sound like an uncompromising dictator, verse 8 states those who dwell on the Earth will worship the Beast. The people will love what the Antichrist provides and promises and gives to them. It is everyone whose name is not written in the Lamb's Book of Life. It is only those people who have rejected Christ and the salvation offered through Him will worship the Beast.

Verse 9 pleads with everyone to hear the Word and to listen. The saints, those who belong to Christ and love God the Father, are told to endure and have faith. That is our job as believers in God and our Savior Jesus Christ. We are to tell others the truth of the Word so they are not swayed by the Beast who will speak beautiful things about life on this Earth, and horrible things about God and Heaven. We are the light of the world, and we are given the Bible to understand the

truth. These things were written so we would believe in God. The true God of the Bible has given us this detail and knowledge so we know He is really God, and we can trust in Him. It is a secure truth that never changes. God wants us to know and to trust Him so our eternity will be in Heaven where we will have joy and peace and love. We find great comfort in knowing God is in control, and nothing that happens will surprise Him. He loves those who love Him, and His desire is for us.



13

TRINITY

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

I have heard it said, “Imitation is the highest form of flattery.” It can be fun watching a child naturally mirror their mom or dad by how they walk or what they say. As a coach, I remember seeing young basketball players stick out their tongues (like Michael Jordan) when making a layup and golfers wearing red shirts (like Tiger Woods) in tournament finals.

1. Have you experienced or noticed any cute imitations?

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Although imitation can be taken as a compliment, it is not always positive. Think of some of the synonyms used for imitation: fake, forgery, dupe, counterfeit, mockery, phony, sham, copycat, and wannabe.

2. Have you ever been tricked into purchasing an imitation?

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Unfortunately, imitation is even seen at the highest level. The book of Revelation records that Satan (definitely a wannabe) has created his own version of the Trinity. Before examining the mockery, I want to examine the Holy Trinity.

The True Trinity

The Godhead eternally exists in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are one God, having precisely the same nature, attributes, and perfections. God the Father is fully God. God the Son is fully God. God the Holy Spirit is fully God. The Bible presents this as fact. It does not explain it.

3. Which one do you relate to most or best? Why?

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Four words into the Bible (***"In the beginning God"***), we already have the Trinity implied. The Hebrew word used for ***"God"*** (Elohim) is in the plural form which seems to refer to a triune God. God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) created the heavens and the earth.

C.S. Lewis makes an interesting observation, "All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that 'God is love.' But they seem not to notice that the words 'God is love' have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love."

4. Explain either point in your own words.

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Liberty University declares, "We affirm our belief in one God, infinite Spirit, creator, and sustainer of all things, who exists eternally in three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These three are one in essence but distinct in person and function.

We affirm that the Father is the first person of the Trinity and the source of all that God is and does. From Him, the Son is eternally generated, and from Them, the Spirit eternally proceeds. He is the designer of creation, the speaker of revelation, the author of redemption, and the sovereign of history.

We affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ is the second person of the Trinity, eternally begotten from the Father. He is God. He was conceived by the virgin Mary through a miracle of the Holy Spirit. He lives forever as perfect God and perfect man: two distinct natures inseparably united in one person.

We affirm that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, proceeding from the Father and the Son and equal in deity. He is the giver of all life, active in the creating and ordering of the universe; He is the agent of inspiration and the new birth; He restrains sin and Satan; and He indwells and sanctifies all believers."

5. What are the responsibilities of God the Father?

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6. What are the responsibilities of God the Son?

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7. What are the responsibilities of God the Holy Spirit?

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Matthew 28:18-19 says, ***"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'"***

8. What is implied by having all three Persons of the Godhead listed?

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John 1:1 says, ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."*** Verse 14 adds, ***"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."***

9. Who was (and is) the Word? Does this relate to the topic? Why or why not?

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Matthew 3:16-17 describes events that happened at the baptism of Jesus, ***"And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"***

10. How were all three Persons present and involved at the baptism of Jesus?

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2 Corinthians 13:14 adds, ***"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."***

11. How does this verse add to the discussion of a triune God?

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12. Why are the different traits (grace, love, and fellowship) associated with each Person?

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The belief in the Trinity is essential, but that does not mean we have to fully understand it. John Wesley said, "Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God."

The Unholy Trinity

Satan has his own trinity. Revelation 16:13 says, ***"And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs."*** There is the dragon (Satan), the beast, and the false prophet.

David Jeremiah points out, "This beast is the False Prophet, the right-hand man of the Antichrist. As Satan continues his malicious masquerade, he will complete an unholy trinity. Just as God is a trinity, so will Satan be. His program will counterfeit God's program. Satan's answer to the Son of God will be the Antichrist." He continues, "The Holy Spirit's counterfeit is the second beast, or the False Prophet. The Holy Spirit has one main objective, and that is to glorify Jesus Christ. The False Prophet has one objective, and that is to cause people to worship the first beast."

In his article *"Satan is No Myth"* (*Moody*, 1975), J.O. Sanders points out several areas where Satan is a counterfeit of the true God.

He has his own church - ***"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan"*** (Revelation 2:9).

He has his own ministers - ***"For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough"*** (2 Corinthians 11:4).

He has his own sacrificial system - ***"No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons"*** (1 Corinthians 10:20).

He has his own communion service - ***"You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons"*** (1 Corinthians 10:21).

He has his own throne - ***"And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority"*** (Revelation 13:2).

He employs false teachers - ***"But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction"*** (2 Peter 2:1).

His ministers proclaim his own gospel - ***"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed"*** (Galatians 1:6-9).

13. What is the true Gospel?

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Hope Bolinger made a powerful conclusion, "It should come as no surprise to us that Satan steals from God's original work. Satan never creates anything. He only twists what already exists."

Two passages show the demise of the three separate entities of the unholy trinity:

"And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur." Revelation 19:20

"And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." Revelation 20:10

14. What three entities are listed here?

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15. What is the last chapter of their biographies?

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Chuck Swindoll's statement shows a great distinction between the Holy Trinity and the counterfeit one, "Emmanuel. God with us. He who resided in Heaven, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit, willingly descended into our world. He breathed our air, felt our pain, knew our sorrows, and died for our sins. He didn't come to frighten us, but to show us the way to warmth and safety."

SIN IS TOXIC

TRINITY • DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

Revelation chapter 13 begins with John doing his best to describe the coming of the Beast. The physical description of the Beast that rises out of the sea is like something out of a J.R.R Tolkien book. While reading, I was drawn to two ways John describes the Beast.

Revelation 13:1 says, ***"And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads."*** Revelation 13:5-6 continues, ***"And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven."***

There is a lot to go off of here to paint the picture that this Beast is not good. The part I was drawn to was more over the Beast's character. We see he spoke with haughty and blasphemous words. He had blasphemy spewing forth from every syllable he spoke towards God, Heaven, and God's people. Sounds like a pleasant guy to be around, and yet, sadly, people will follow him. The Beast lived in his sin, his rebellion towards God, and his pride. The fact that the Beast lived this way speaks more about who he is rather than what he is saying. His character is on display. He is not just a "blasphemer" as an action, it is rooted in who he is to the core of his being.

The thought I had while reading this chapter was what an absolutely destructive force sin is. Sin is destructive to humanity since it entered the world, but at least humanity has always had God pulling us to Him,

offering repentance, writing the Law on the hearts of the Gentiles, and giving the Law to the Hebrews, desiring that none should perish. For the Beast, sin consumes him.

Sin and rebellion against God are so toxic to your being. Luckily for us, our character is not rooted in our rebellion, our sin, our past, or our blasphemous moments. For us, Paul's words to the church of Corinth become our character, ***"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"*** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Because of the work of Jesus on the cross, we are no longer bound by our sin. We are no longer ruled by rebellion. The Beast was consumed to his very core with toxicity and death. Praise Jesus for what He did on the cross. We are the righteousness of God because of what Jesus did.

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

TRINITY • DEVOTION 2

Gary Wright

"Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name." (Revelation 13:16-17)

Have you ever had something in life that you loved so much that you became obsessed with it? I have, and it was clay target shooting. When I first started shooting it was something that I did occasionally and just for fun. Shooting became so enjoyable to me that I started doing it more often and eventually started shooting in competitions. I eventually got to the point of it consuming my thoughts and life. If I was not shooting, I was talking about it, hanging out with people that were also involved in the sport, and it was what I spent my money on. I worshiped shooting.

What is worship? Worship is to hold something up with such devotion, reverence, honor, and esteem that it becomes the first priority in our lives.

During the tribulation in Revelation chapter 13, people will be tricked into believing the Antichrist is Jesus and many will submit to him and worship him.

Revelation 13:4 says, ***"They worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'"*** The Beast is the Antichrist. There will also be an image of the Antichrist that will be worshiped; those who refuse to worship the Antichrist or the

image of him will be put to death. All who worship him or the image of him will get a mark on their forehead or their right hand, showing outwardly where their devotion lies. This mark is called the mark of the beast, which is something most of us have heard of. There is a lot of speculation as to what the mark will be, but we really do not know. Only those who worship the Antichrist and receive the mark will be able to buy or sell things such as food, clothing, and medical supplies. In Revelation 14:1, the 144,000 will also have a mark; however, it will show that they belong to God, ***"Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads."***

These Scriptures show the importance of worship. For several years of my life, I worshiped shooting. This is going to sound corny, but I was focused on the wrong target. When we truly love and worship Jesus, He is going to show up in our thoughts, speech, finances, and actions. We may not have a physical mark to show who we worship, but people will see it in our lifestyle.

What are you worshiping?

Romans 12:1 adds, ***"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."***

FALSE MIRACLES

TRINITY • DEVOTION 3

Pastor Roy Townsend

As I was preparing for this writing, I came across a section that highlighted false miracles. False miracles have always fascinated me as they are recorded in the Bible. Pharaoh's magicians in the Old Testament were able to do some pretty spectacular miracles when they were battling Moses and Aaron. Exodus 7:10-11 records, ***"So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the Lord commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and they, the magicians of Egypt, also did the same by their secret arts."*** However, in this story, Moses' demonstration of God's power is greater as Aaron's staff swallows up the other staffs from Pharaoh's magicians.

A New Testament recording of a false miracle involves Simon the sorcerer which is recorded in Acts 8:9-11, ***"But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, 'This man is the power of God that is called Great.' And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic."*** Again, this Simon the sorcerer saw great works and miracles performed by God through Philip, and it was clear that God's power was greater than Simon's false miracles.

Finally, a future recording of a false miracle comes to us through the prophecy recorded in Revelation 13:11-14, ***"Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and***

it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived." Here we are given a picture of false miracles performed by Satan through the false trinity. Just like Pharaoh's magicians, Simon the sorcerer, and now through Satan's false trinity, we see a ***"mortal wound"*** that has been healed. We see people astonished by the ***"great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people."*** The Scripture records that it will deceive many people just like the earlier times that are recorded in the Bible.

However, just like with Pharaoh and Simon, we know that God's power is stronger than Satan's power. So even though this prophecy seems very scary and troubling, we know that God will prevail. Wayne Grudem writes, "The power of God is greater than the power of Satan to work miraculous signs and God's people triumph in confrontations of power with those who work evil." We cannot forget what God's Word reveals in 1 John 4:4, ***"Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."*** We are to hold strong in our knowledge that we serve a God who is greater than the one who will work these false miracles at the end of time!

WHO DO YOU WORSHIP?

TRINITY • DEVOTION 4

Caleb Jones

Sometimes it is really hard to distinguish the voice of God. We constantly have distractions right in front of our face that make it difficult to understand who God is, what He wants for us, and what decisions He wants us to make. We live in a very self-centered, "me" culture. Have you ever recalibrated yourself with social media usage? Have you stopped using it because you feel like you are on it all the time? How about your spending habits? Are you trying to keep up with the Joneses? My last name is Jones, so I live at the center of that struggle. What is in front of our eyes and what we spend our time and money on will always be what Satan uses to get us to worship him versus God. The older I get, the more I see that war in my own life. Satan is trying to call us to him by imitating good things in our lives while God is also trying to call us. In Colossians 3:2, God calls us to set our affections on Himself. He is calling us to dwell on the eternal, versus things that will fade away.

Here in Revelation, Satan is doing the same thing as he is now. In chapter 13, He is blaspheming God. He is trying to trick people that he is God because he wants to be worshiped. He wants to be the Most High (Isaiah 14). Satan will always take the form of what seems to be right in order to control someone's soul. However, in Revelation chapter 13, God identifies him with what he truly is - a Beast. In 1 Peter 5:8, we read, ***"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*** As I think about what it means to be sober-minded, I think of someone who is lean on their thoughts. It is someone focused on the task. They are not distracted in any way, shape, or form. It is a soldier at war, waiting to fight.

So who do you worship? I "grew up going to church." When I say grew up in it, I mean in my 38 years on Earth, I can probably count 20 times I did not attend a Sunday gathering. Does that mean I worship God? I have served the church my entire life. Does that mean that I worship God? I have given faithfully to the church my entire life. Does that mean I worship God? I even work for the church. Surely, that means that I worship God! Unfortunately, none of these mean that I worship God. Our actions will never dictate who we serve. Matthew 6:24 says, ***"No one 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 money."*** My challenge for all of us is to identify who we worship. God wants our whole hearts. He wants all of us.

What is He calling you to forsake to follow Him?

THE DWELLING PLACE

TRINITY • DEVOTION 5

Pastor Patrick Rowland

From the beginning of time, Satan has waged war against Christ and His followers. It all started in the Garden of Eden as he deceived Eve and sin disrupted God's perfect creation. God's plan for redeeming His creation was sending Jesus, His own son, as the final sacrifice for our sin. Revelation chapter 12 shows the "behind the scenes" story of the birth and life of Christ and the spiritual battle that has taken place since the beginning of creation. As chapter 12 ends, Satan being defeated in his pursuit of destroying Jesus takes the battle from attempting to destroy Jesus, to attempting to defeat those that follow Jesus.

In Revelation chapter 13, we are introduced to the Beast of the Sea and the Beast of the Earth. The first Beast is used to win over the world and turn worship from Jesus, to the Dragon (Satan). It seems odd in my mind that it would be a Beast that would amaze people as we do not seem to attribute the characteristics described in chapter 13 to "a Beast." We see a beast as scary, intimidating, forceful, and anything but appealing. This Beast is described as gifted with speech, persuasive, powerful, and bold enough to blaspheme the name of God in the place where He dwells. The place of God's dwelling is both physical and spiritual.

In the Old Testament, the first place God dwelt was in the Tabernacle (Exodus 25-31) as it was a traveling tent where the Ark of the Covenant or the place of dwelling was kept. Much later in 2 Kings chapter 6, King Solomon built a permanent dwelling in a temple with the same instructions of the original tabernacle. It was one of the wonders of the world and a place fit for God. That temple was later

destroyed by the Babylonians (2 Kings 25). In Jesus' time, there is a second temple built, but it was later demolished in AD 70 by the Romans.

Today there is no physical building or temple for God's dwelling, instead, His dwelling is spiritual. In John 1:14, we are told that God became flesh and dwelt among us in the physical body of Christ. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:19, that our body is a temple for the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwelling is not in a physical space, but in those that have put their trust in Him.

Satan, and eventually the Beast, battles to blaspheme the name of God in the hearts and minds of all Christ's followers. From the beginning of time, Satan has battled to turn your heart away from God. Paul wrote to the Ephesians (6:12) and reminds us today, ***"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."***

A REAL AND PRESENT DANGER

TRINITY • DEVOTION 6

John Stone

"Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six." Revelation 13:18 (NASB)

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction." Proverbs 1:7 (NASB)

Revelation chapter 13 describes a time of great fear for Christians; a time of deception, persecution, and death when the people of the world declare their allegiance with a mark proudly displayed on their bodies. Generations of believers have been on the alert for the one described as ***"the Beast"*** or ***"the Antichrist."*** We tell ourselves that we would never be fooled and worship a false god. As vigilant as we may be in watching for a guy with 666 on his forehead who is persecuting Christians, we can easily overlook the more real threat to our souls.

We were created to worship. As human beings we have the desire built into us; we are hardwired for it. However, because of our inherited sinful nature, we have a big problem. Our propensity to worship can easily be derailed into idolatry. This problem is explained in Romans 1:22-23 (NASB), ***"Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."*** We who were made in His image fall in love with worthless counterfeits and forget the One who made us. Our Father designed us to love, serve, and glorify Him only. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul,

mind, and strength (Luke 10:27). The object of our worship is made apparent by what we spend our time thinking about, and by who we use our strength serving.

How simple it would be if all we had to do was choose a mark on our forehead and then go on about our lives. Everyone would know where we stood and vice versa. It is not that simple. We are known by how we live (2 Corinthians 3:2); our allegiance is proven every day (Luke 9:23) as we choose to follow Christ, or not. There is a real and present danger, but do not be deceived by thinking it is far off. It is here. It is now. It is today. The danger is that we do not take the command of our Lord seriously and neglect our responsibility to represent Him the way we should here and now (Matthew 10:33). Jesus did not shoulder the wrath of God so that we could live a life of idolatry and spit on His sacrifice. He died and rose again to free us from such empty, meaningless pursuits. He has freed us from the fear of the unknown and has given us everything we need (2 Peter 1:2-4) to live lives that are glorifying to Him.

We need to stop worrying about what or who may come. Today, focus on Jesus. Proudly pick up your cross, whatever He has given you to bear, and joyfully take one step after Him, and then another, and another. Follow Him. He will not lead you astray.

Luke 12:4-5 (NASB) says, ***"I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!"***

14

THE FALL OF BABYLON

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Babylon is an important city in history and the future and is located in present-day Iraq. It is known for wickedness and false religions. Basically, it is known for being in opposition to God. Babylon is referenced in the first and last books of the Bible. Babylon and Babel come from the same Hebrew word which means “confusion.” Babel existed first and became known as Babylon. Genesis chapter 11 details the sin of Babel.

1. What is the sin at the Tower of Babel?

_____

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There can be several answers to that question. The people were told to fill the land (Genesis 9:7), yet they decided to all stay in one place and build the tower. Another thought is that possibly the people built the largest tower possible to avoid being destroyed by another flood. However, in Genesis 9:11-17, God promised to never destroy the Earth with a flood again. Finally, it could be the all too common problem of pride in wanting to be like God (Genesis 11:4). From the very beginning, Babel (Babylon) became known as a city or nation against God.

The word Babylon is found 272 times in the Bible. Only seven of those are found in the book of Revelation.

2. Do you remember any stories (or a book of the Bible) involving Babylon?

_____

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3. Bonus question: Who founded Babel which later became Babylon (Genesis 10:8-10)?

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Although Babylon had quite the history, Revelation chapter 17 describes Babylon in detail and her fall in the End Times.

Revelation 17:1-6 says, ***"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.' And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.' And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly."***

This chapter warns immediately that the topic is the ***"judgment"*** of Babylon. James Hamilton points out, "Now Babylon is going to be personified so that we, John's audience, will be able to feel what we should about who the world is and how it has acted."

4. What derogatory title is given of Babylon?

_____

_____

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5. How is this title a common description of unfaithfulness to God (the book of Hosea)? By the way, the Greek word for prostitution is "porneia."

_____

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6. What did Babylon's appetite consist of?

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Revelation 17:7-14 continues, ***"But the angel said to me, 'Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the***

beast. These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.'"

7. What does it mean that the Beast will ***"rise from the bottomless pit"***?

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_____

8. What is the ***"Book of Life"***? Whose names are in it?

_____
_____
_____

9. What are the two sides of the battle listed here? Who wins?

_____
_____
_____

10. What titles are used for Jesus here? What titles are used for those with Him?

_____
_____
_____

The Beast comes from the home of Satan and rules by the power of Satan. The lost (unsaved) will follow the Beast. This will include many leaders and nations. It appears Rome will be involved. The enemy appears enormous, but then One appears. Always remember, ***"The Lamb will conquer them."***

Revelation 17:15-18 adds, ***"And the angel said to me, 'The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.'"***

11. What will happen to the woman (Babylon, ***"the prostitute"***)?

_____

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This passage presents some beautiful truths:

- ***"God has put it into their hearts"*** - God is involved in the world.
- ***"His purpose"*** - God has a plan.
- ***"Until the words of God are fulfilled"*** - God's Word will be fulfilled.
- God wins!

As I study this passage, I am reminded of Matthew 6:24, ***"No one 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 money."*** The world has a lot of fool's gold that will not satisfy. Only the Lord brings victory!

WALK IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

THE FALL OF BABYLON • DEVOTION 1

Rich Sawicki

There are a few main subjects in Revelation chapter 17 that we need to look at, but first, we need to know what they represent.

- The Great Prostitute: represents the great city of Babylon
- The Beast: represents Satan or the Antichrist
- The Fall of Babylon: represents God's judgment

In Bible times, the great city of Babylon was a port city near the Euphrates River. People from around the world would come there to buy, sell, and trade. It was a culturally diverse place with many people and many gods. Babylon was a place that was leading the people away from God and towards the Antichrist.

The Antichrist is not out to convince us there is no God, he just does not want us to know the one true God, Jesus. The Antichrist would love for you to worship him as God, but unfortunately with all the bad publicity he has gotten, we might be a little leery. That is why he has got other people, leaders, rulers, and kings to do the job for him. It is easier to get you to follow his followers that emulate his character with things like selfishness, lust, and pride.

As the Scripture shows, the great prostitute was riding on the Beast, the Antichrist. The deceptions of the enemy are always going to be contrary to God's ways. God gave us dominion over the beasts, but the Beast here was more powerful than the Great Prostitute.

What does God's Word teach us about Satan? John 10:10 says, ***"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy."*** That great

city, Babylon, was a thief. It was robbing people of their mortality with all kinds of selfishness and lusts of the flesh. They were killing Christians for their faith in Jesus like it was entertainment to them. There was no sanctity for human life.

In 1 Peter 5:8, we read, ***"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."*** He is looking to devour or consume everyone and everything. He even destroyed his own opportunity to live in Heaven with God. Selfishness and pride caused him to get kicked out of Heaven. God knows it is only a matter of time before the Antichrist's destruction and the final great judgment will come. However, in the meantime, the Antichrist will use the Great Prostitute to entice as many people away from God with all kinds of attractive things.

The world's standards of success, beauty, and desire come in many different forms. Some may not even seem to be evil, you really need to be honest and look at what is influencing you. If it is not God, then it can only be the enemy. The Great Prostitute makes sin look enticing and desirable because that is her job.

Pray that Jesus will reveal any areas in your life that are being influenced by the Great Prostitute. Ask Jesus to remove them before you face coming destruction and judgment. Walk in the ways of righteousness.

THE LAMB WILL CONQUER

THE FALL OF BABYLON • DEVOTION 2

Pastor Philip Piasecki

I love to go to the movies. I feel like there are not many experiences that compare to being in a full theater, all sharing the same experience of seeing the plot of a movie unfold. When my wife and I started dating, I wanted to take her to the movies. I quickly learned an interesting personality trait that she had, she loved reading the plot of the movie online before seeing the movie. This blew my mind, but she explained that she still enjoys the movie, she just likes knowing the ending so she can know what to expect. I understand her point of view, sometimes it is nice to know the ending before we get there. This is one of the amazing things about the book of Revelation, we get to read about the end of the story before it actually happens.

Revelation chapter 17 is a truly difficult passage to really wrap your head around. As we read about the Beast and the Great Prostitute, we get details of these things that have caused great destruction and great harm to many throughout history. Then they set their sights on God Himself, verse 14 tells us that ***"they will make war on the Lamb."*** However, it is the rest of verse 14 that really stood out to me while studying this Scripture, ***"They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."***

Just read that a couple of times over and really let it sink in, ***"The Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings."*** That is how the story ends for those who stand in opposition to the Lord. I think it is so important for us to constantly remind ourselves that God wins. Even when it seems like everyone around

us is making war on the Lamb, the Lord is working in the midst of this world to His victory at the end of it all.

Revelation 17:17 adds, ***"For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled."***

In verse 17, we have evidence of God using the will of men to accomplish His purposes. He is the one ultimately in control, even when it may seem like everything is out of control. We do not have to have anxiety about the direction of our world, because we have already seen the end of the movie! We know that God, in His perfect will, is in control. I hope that understanding that today can give you a sense of peace and hope. When we truly believe that the Lord is in control, it allows us to operate confidently through the power of His Holy Spirit. We can follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit to live boldly for Christ knowing that He is powerful over all things. The end of verse 14 says, ***"Those with him are called chosen and faithful."*** That should be the desire for our lives to be identified that way by Christ. Let us live in confidence with Him.

JESUS WINS!

THE FALL OF BABYLON • DEVOTION 3

Pastor Keaton Washburn

A couple of months ago, I played the game *"Risk"* for the first time. If you are not familiar, the goal of the game is to conquer the whole map. Each player takes their turn and chooses to take reinforcements or spend their reinforcements in hopes of expanding their empire. Winning requires strategy, a bit of luck, and enough people skills to create allies. I am not sure if it was a lack of skill or luck, but the first time I played I went on to get last place. As a result, the other three players had a large advantage and expanded their empires. As with every good game, in the end, there was a clear winner. They accomplished this by taking over the whole map and conquering every territory. As I said, I did not win, but I learned a lot and look forward to the next time I get to play.

Like *"Risk*," there are empires in the world that want nothing more than to expand their territory and conquer as much as they can. Some empires want to conquer media, others land, and still others wealth. In Revelation chapter 17, the angel interprets a vision that John sees of the Babylonian empire, painted as the picture of a prostitute. In Revelation 17:9-13, the angels list many kings who hand over their power to the Beast, to expand the Beast's empire. Verse 12 says, ***"And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast."*** Notice how long the angel says the kings receive authority - one hour! It is for just one measly hour. We can understand this as telling us that those "kings" who serve empires whose purposes oppose the Lord will only be in power for, metaphorically, ***"one hour."*** Though it may feel like a long time that they have had influence over culture, their reign is short.

What is the end of these kings? Verses 13-14 tell us, ***"These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."*** They oppose the Lamb, but the Lamb conquers them. Their end is defeat. Those who oppose the Lord will never win. The Lord always wins! Though it feels like the purposes of the Evil One are prevailing at times, his end is always defeat and he hates to be reminded of it. So today, if you are a follower of Christ, your King always wins. His purposes always prevail. Darkness will be defeated once and for all!

JUDGEMENT IS COMING

THE FALL OF BABYLON • DEVOTION 4

Mitchell Holmes

Revelation chapter 17 deals with the assured downfall of Babylon, a city and symbol of opposition to God. Despite showing up in the Bible in various places and times, the term "Babylon" is always used to exemplify those that stand on their own understanding and turn away from the Lord in the forms of antagonism to the Christian faith, blasphemy, and idolatry. Several of the chapters leading up to chapter 17 have foretold the fall of Babylon, but now we get to see some of the imagery and symbolism that serves to detail the specifics of the process of Babylon falling.

Revelation 17:1-2 says, ***"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.'"*** Right at the beginning of the chapter, the angel that John is seeing makes a statement that is easy to overlook. I think this statement is an incredible testament to God's majesty and a great comfort to those that are a part of His family. The angel looks to John and starts to discuss Babylon, listing off some of the charges that God will bring to bear against Babylon. What is so remarkable about this exchange is that the angel says, ***"Come, I will show you the judgment,"*** making it absolutely clear that judgment is coming. This statement is not an "if," it is not up for debate, there is no refuting, no rebuttal, no plea to be made, and no chance of victory for those that oppose God. What the angel sets up for us in the first verse of this chapter is that God has already won. The Great Prostitute, the symbol of Babylon and all that they stand

for, have turned their backs on God. Babylon looked to the enticing embrace of fleshly desires and sexual immorality. They chose to sin, and in doing so, incur the wrath of the Almighty Creator.

How often do we forget that God has already won? There is no one out there that can choose the flesh, that can choose to turn their back on God and escape judgment. In 2 Corinthians 5:10, we read, ***"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."*** Take solace in the fact that there will not be a battle, there will not be a contest, God has prevailed. When judgment comes, He will exact His price. Right now, there is still time to spare those that are turned away from God. That will not be the case forever. Will we take advantage of what time we have to impact souls and point them to Christ?

As I wrap up this writing, another thought weighs on me. As encouraging as it is to know that our God is the victor, this passage also brought up a different feeling in me; a feeling of disgust in myself. This Great Prostitute is a temptress not only to Babylon. The call of the prostitute is not only heard by those that are living in separation from God, but also by those of us that are His sons and daughters. Every battle that we currently face, every temptation that lurks in the dark, every impure thought that rests under the surface, God has already won if you are willing to give the battle to Him. How dare we, how dare I, take advantage of His forgiveness to even entertain the thoughts and whispers of this immorality. I do not know who needs to hear this, but remind yourself daily of the price that was paid for your sins.

IDOLATRY TODAY

THE FALL OF BABYLON • DEVOTION 5

Stephen Billings

"Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.'" Revelation 17:1-2

When I think about the daily grind of life, especially in regard to my ministry, family life, and relationships with friends, I usually am not meditating on the return of Christ. I am not thinking about the upcoming judgment that is a part of each of our eternal destinies. To be honest, my mind is usually set on the next task that is ahead or a fun upcoming event within the children's ministry here at The River Church.

As we have been studying the book of Revelation, my mind has been brought out of thinking about life's current circumstances and instead, has been challenged to think about what is to come as Christ will return and His pending judgment.

The question then arises, "Is my daily life putting me in a good position to be ready for Christ's return and future judgment?" Better yet, "Is there any form of idolatry in my daily life that is keeping me from being close to God?"

In the book of Revelation, there are seven bowls of judgment that God tells John will take place in the future. Revelation 17:1-2 speaks about one of the bowl judgments that is to be poured out on the

"Great Prostitute." While we do not know all the exact details about who or what is the ***"Great Prostitute,"*** we know that the Great Prostitute is connected to the city of Babylon (Revelation 17:5). The connection to Babylon is that Babylon is known as the "origin" (Tony Evans) of "organized idolatry, blasphemy and the persecution of God's people" (David Guzick). Babylon represents disobedience to God in these two verses.

Some commentators believe that the prostitute mentioned in Revelation chapter 17 is either "a metaphor for people who are unfaithful to God" (Tony Evans) or a "world system" (John MacArthur). My hope is that none of us take part in any form of idolatry that would leave us impure and stained, leading to punishment as seen throughout Revelation or at the end of a believer's life.

The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that if we have fallen into idolatry or any sin in our daily lives, God wants to forgive us. He wants us to follow after Him. We start this in the examination of our sinful behavior followed up with confession to the only one who can forgive us of our sins. That is Jesus Christ. As we examine our lives, ask God to convict us and draw us closer to Himself. He desires a relationship where idolatry has no place.

If you are interested in learning more, please visit our website to listen to one of our messages (https://theriverchurch.cc/messages).

CONTINUAL TRUSTING

THE FALL OF BABYLON • DEVOTION 6

Pastor Josh Yates

The story is told that John Kavanaugh, who was a noted and famous ethicist, went to Calcutta, seeking Mother Teresa, and more. He went for three months to work at “the house of the dying” to find out how best to spend the rest of his life. When he met Mother Teresa, he asked her to pray for him. “What do you want me to pray for?” she replied. He then uttered the request he had carried for thousands of miles, “Clarity. Pray that I have clarity.”

Mother Teresa answered, “No, I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh said that she always seemed to have clarity, the very kind of clarity he was looking for, Mother Teresa laughed and said, ”I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

We long for clarity, do we not? I know that I do. It is something that we desire from God because we want to know what is next. In reality, we want to be in control. We need to learn how to trust God.

No matter the time of our lives, there is so much going on and so much that we do not understand. Maybe you are reading this today and you are struggling through some of the toughest days of your life. Maybe life is going just awesome and things could not be better. No matter where you are, there are at least moments that we just do not understand what God is doing. It is in those moments that we have to trust His heart.

A reading of Revelation chapter 17 leaves us with images that are hard to understand. John the Revelator talks about the bowl judgments of God and the pouring out of His judgment. A woman that is called a prostitute (representing Babylon and the evil of the world) and there is a Beast with all kinds of horns. It is a lot to take in.

However, when reading this, there are a couple of things that stand out. The Book of Life and the names that are written in it are mentioned in verse 8. This is the Book of Life where every follower of Jesus' name is written. If you have given your life to Jesus as your Savior, your name is in there and the judgment of God is nothing to be amazed at. He will keep His promises.

That leads us to the second thing in Revelation chapter 17. In verse 17, John tells us that God has put a plan into the minds of even those that do not follow Him. His plan, His words, and His timing are all perfect.

Even when you do not understand what is going on in your life, when the waves roll, when the ground is uneven, or maybe even crumbling beneath your feet, God still loves you. He is still on the throne. He still has a plan for you. You have not been forgotten.

In the moments of our lives, whether good or bad, we must remember that our Savior is returning, that He loves us, and that all will be made right.

Revelation 22:7 (NLT) says, ***"Look, I am coming soon! Blessed are those who obey the words of prophecy written in this book."***

Even so, come Lord Jesus! Maranatha!

15

FINAL BATTLE

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan has predicted, “World War 3 is a guerrilla information war with no division between military and civilian participation.” I think we have seen this in Russia and Ukraine. I know many Americans have prepared for that potential time.

1. What are your thoughts concerning a World War III?

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_____

Albert Einstein made an interesting point, “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.”

2. What do you think Einstein meant by his statement?

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Scripture lets us know that there will be at least one more World War. It is the Battle of Armageddon. Billy Graham said, “The Bible plainly forecasts the coming of yet another great war. It will be a war to eclipse anything the world has ever seen. It will embrace most of the nations of the world; and its focal point will be in the Middle East, where the armies of the world will some day deploy themselves, centering at Mount Megiddo. This great war has been called the battle of Armageddon. In the midst of this terrifying war that could destroy civilization the Lord Jesus Christ will return to this earth in glory and power to judge the nations of the world and set up His own glorious kingdom.”

3. What do you know about the Battle of Armageddon?

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Revelation 16:12-16 sets the stage for this big battle - war to end all wars, ***"The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ('Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!') And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon."***

Although the enemy forces initiate a war with God, it is God who takes the first step. He will have the Euphrates River dried up (which was previously turned to blood). This is no small feat. Paige Patterson points out that this great river divided the East from the West running for approximately 1,728 miles (the vertical length of the continental United States is 1,582 miles).

4. What enemies of God are listed here?

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Armageddon encompasses hills, fields, and plains. Warren Wiersbe wrote, "The area is about fourteen miles wide and twenty miles long,

and forms what Napoleon called 'the most natural battlefield of the whole earth.' Standing on Mount Carmel and overlooking that great plain, you can well understand why it would be used for gathering the armies of the nations." He also points out that it was on this plain that Barak defeated the armies of Canaan (Judges 5:19), Gideon met the Midianites (Judges 7), and King Saul lost his life (1 Samuel 31).

The passage references ***"coming like a thief."*** We see this elsewhere in Scripture:

- ***"But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief."*** 1 Thessalonians 5:4

- ***"Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."*** Revelation 3:3

5. What is meant by this reference to ***"coming like a thief"?***

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Revelation chapter 19 also describes this amazing battle. Verses 11-16 say, ***"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the***

nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords."

6. Who is riding on the ***"white horse"***? How is He described?

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7. What does the ***"sharp sword"*** refer to? Can you think of a verse in Hebrews that states this?

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Revelation 19:17-21 continues, ***"Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.' And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh."***

8. How long does it seem the battle will last?

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9. What happens to the beast and the false prophet?

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Revelation 20:7-10 also speaks of a battle, ***"And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."***

10. What happens to the Devil?

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11. How long do occupants remain in the ***"Lake of Fire"***?

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"I would rather go to heaven alone
than go to hell in company."
R.A. Torrey

"I cannot preach on hell
unless I preach with tears."
Dwight L. Moody

WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?

FINAL BATTLE • DEVOTION 1

Joe Wilson

So I have to admit, I can be hyper-focused on the news when something major is happening or is just about to happen. I will watch for hours just waiting for a new piece of information, no matter how small it is. I am not sure if it is the excitement of the unknown or the curiosity about how it will affect me and my family. At times I am shocked at what I am witnessing, but more often than not, if I have paid attention, I just think, "What did you think would happen?"

When looking at the final battle in Revelation, I go to the same place in my head, "What did you think would happen?" Better yet, "Did you think He was not being truthful? He told us, did He not?"

Revelation 20:11-15 says, ***"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on 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. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."***

I am not sure where you sit on this, but verse 15 specifically should be a call to wake up and take a hard look at where our trust truly lies.

It literally scares me to even think about my name not being written in the Book of Life.

Revelation 3:5 states, ***"The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels."***

So I ask you today, ponder and meditate, "Where is my trust?"

Do not be the one who looks after the fact and asks, "What did I think would happen?"

THE IN-BETWEEN

FINAL BATTLE • DEVOTION 2

Cathy Story

How often do you stop to think about how interesting the times we live in are? I do not just mean the times historically or politically, but spiritually. Spiritually we are living in a time of in-between. We live the ever-present moment of knowing that Jesus has come, and Jesus will come again. For those who have chosen to profess belief in God and that He sent His son to die for our sins; we know that Jesus has come to reclaim that which was lost! We live in a time when God has blessed us with His literal Word that speaks to us today. The book of Hebrews gives us some great reminders. Hebrews 4:12 states, ***"For the word of God is living and active."*** Hebrews 13:8 writes, ***"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."***

These verses should give us great encouragement. Looking back through the Bible, we can see time and time again where God showed Himself to be faithful, a provider, a helper, and loving. We can go back and read about heroes of faith who were broken and lost, just like us, that God used to change the world. We can look to His Word and see how God's sovereign hand was always in control. Does that mean that everything in every situation always worked out with a happy ending for those involved? By no means. There were still hurts, there were still tragedies. There were frustrations, setbacks, and difficulties. How can I be encouraged? It is because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Revelation chapters 18 and 20 record the ending of God's story. These chapters show us that Satan will be defeated. Revelation 20:10 writes, ***"And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur."*** Despite the fact that we are still

waiting for Jesus' return, we know that He is victorious. God is the same God throughout the Bible. Right now we live in the in-between. It is the time of knowing that Jesus has died to set us free, and waiting for His glorious return. We can know Him, trust Him, and worship Him even in a world that is so messy, broken, and hurting. Because we know God's Word is perfect, and we can read about all that God has done, we get to live in a time where our waiting will not be in vain. We have the promise of a new Heaven and a new Earth that will one day come.

Wherever you are while you navigate through the in-between today, take hope! We have the gift of God's Word, of having fellowship with other believers, and of the Holy Spirit living inside of us. Jesus has never changed. That victory that Jesus will have over our enemy will take place. One day, we will stand in a place where there is no sin blocking our view of Jesus. Let us make the best use of our time while we are in the in-between and ensure as many people as possible who interact with us know that Jesus is Lord.

THAT NONE SHOULD PERISH

FINAL BATTLE • DEVOTION 3

John Rigg

As we near the end of the book of Revelation, we also near the end of all things as we currently know them. Presently, you and I know only a world that includes sin and unrighteousness, but we are told throughout the Scriptures, that this will not always be the case. Unrighteousness will not always prevail. In the now, if we are willing to confess our sins before God, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). We can individually be rid of unrighteousness. However, not all of mankind is ready to do so, as the world continues in unrighteousness.

The Scriptures reveal to us over and over again that God's longsuffering towards sin will eventually run out and He will deal with sin and unrighteousness, just as He has promised. Why is He so patient you may ask? It is because He is ***"not wishing that any should perish"*** and that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

So, the Apostle John is shown how the final battle will take place and records these events in the book of Revelation.

Prior to chapters 18-20, we see Jesus promising to remove the "faithful" from the trial which shall come upon the whole Earth (Revelation 3:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:17). Both those that are alive and those who are dead in Christ, will join Him in the air before the world is tested. During this time of Tribulation, the world will be tested through a series of judgments, which to many, will reveal that Jesus is who He says He is, and they will be saved (Revelation 7:9-17). Again we notice, He is ***"not wishing that any should perish."***

Chapters 18-20 now tell of God's final battle against those who continue in unrighteousness. John records the future destruction of the great Babylon and the religious system called the harlot, which has been the catalyst for the world's fornication. However, even in this great fall, we are shown He is ***"not wishing that any should perish."***

Revelation 18:4 says, ***"Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues.'"***

Next, John sees Heaven open up and Jesus returning with the armies of Heaven to throw the Beast and the False Prophet into the Lake of Fire and slay those who had received the mark of the Beast and those who worshiped its image (Revelation 19:20).

This is followed by another act of long-suffering. Jesus reigns on Earth for 1,000 years void of the deception of the Devil, as he too has been chained and sealed in the bottomless pit. Nevertheless, the influence of Jesus over civilization and the removal of Satan are not enough to encourage people to follow God. As many will join Satan when he is released once again at the end of the 1,000 years in a rebellion against God and His Son (Revelation 20:7-8). Still, God is ***"not wishing that any should perish."***

Nevertheless, all rebels, those not found in the Book of Life, will be resurrected and thrown into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:11-15). This ends the final battle.

You might wonder why God would tolerate all our sin, rebellion, and unrighteousness for such a long period of time. It is because He is love (1 John 4:16) and is ***"not wishing that any should perish."***

THE SOVEREIGN KING

FINAL BATTLE • DEVOTION 4

Patrick Bicknell

"And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." Revelation 20:7-10

Revelation, as I am sure many of us have seen through our study of this book, is very interesting. Revelation 20:7-10 is no exception to that. Here we see something that almost makes you wonder how that could happen. The events of these verses take place after the thousand-year reign of Christ on Earth. Once His Kingdom has reigned for a thousand years it says that Satan is released from the prison that he was in and he deceives the world, gathers up people to rebel against God, and heads into one final battle against our Lord.

My question when reading this book, is how could they do that? Christ, who is going to return and will be the perfect King that we have all long awaited for, will still have people rebel against Him. However, after reading these verses, I see much of myself in them. I start to ask myself how many times have I seen God move in an incredible way and yet I still choose to sin against Him. This is exactly what is happening in these verses. Now there are two things I want to highlight that we see.

The first point I want to talk about is a bit more doom and gloom. In these verses, we can see first-hand just how depraved our sinful flesh is apart from the working of God. Even after seeing Christ reign perfect and holy, there will still be some who rebel against Him. It proves Ephesians 2:1, that we truly were or are ***"dead in our trespasses and sins."*** These verses show us that left to our own devices, we are not far away from these people. That is why it is so important, that while grace and mercy are being shown by God, we repent of our sins and put our faith in Him. If we continue reading in Ephesians 2 it says, ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast"*** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The second point I want to look at is God's sovereignty in this situation. Even though people are going to rebel against Him after His earthly reign, He is still in charge. He knows what is going to happen and these events do not take Him by surprise. Those of us who have put our faith in Christ can rest assured knowing that at this final battle, the Lord will come out victorious. He is the Sovereign King who will win the war, and who will bring about His plans. This should not only give us comfort in the future events that are going to take place, but also in the situations we find ourselves in right now. Since God is in control of future events that are yet to happen, He is in control of the current events that are happening in your life right now. Look to the one who saved your soul, offers salvation freely as a gift of grace, and trusts His mighty power to carry you through anything.

THE GREATEST BATTLE EVER WRITTEN

FINAL BATTLE • DEVOTION 5

Pastor Justin Dean

In my opinion, not many TV shows end well. Maybe it is because I do not ever want the show to end, but I tend to feel that something is always missed in the final season or finale. There are several reasons like some storyline is left unexplored, a character did not end up with the romantic interest that everyone wanted, or they could not bring back the actor that played a character everyone loved. There always seems to be something that makes the finale just a little bit less epic than what everyone hoped for.

The Bible writes of the finale of our world, and unlike your favorite TV show, it does not disappoint. Revelation 20:11-15 (NIV) says, ***"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."***

In my opinion, this is one of the most comforting and terrifying sections of Scripture in the Bible. It terrifies me because this is the ultimate end. In verse 13, we realize that in the end, God will be judging me according to what I have done, and I know that is never

going to go well for me. I know myself as a sinner, and I can only imagine what my judgment will be according to my works. My terror is also for those who do not have their names in the Book of Life. This is their final judgment, and it ends with them being thrown into the Lake of Fire for eternity.

This should cause us to reflect on what we are living for. In the same way a writer is writing for their story's final ending, we should be living with eternity on our minds, for us and for others. We are not saved by our works, so ultimately the comfort I find in this passage comes from my certainty that my name is in the Book of Life and that I will be with God forever. Even though this is the case, I am still going to have to answer for what I have done here on Earth. Do you live in a way in which you are content with being judged by God on His White Throne? Many times, my answer is "absolutely not." This should cause us to reflect on God's Word and how He calls us to live.

It should also stir in us a desire to pray for the non-believers in our world. Our desire should be that none experience the eternal judgment that awaits in the Lake of Fire. Our hearts, minds, and actions should reflect a desire to see people come to know Jesus so that their names are in the Book of Life.

Ultimately, we must begin to live with the finale on our minds. Too often we get distracted by the insignificance of our world and forget what is of ultimate importance, eternity with God. I want to encourage you to take time and pray, asking God to keep you focused on eternity, and that your actions would reflect your mindset as you go about your day.

SPOILER ALERT: GOD WINS

FINAL BATTLE • DEVOTION 6

David Hudgens

At the time of this writing, the 2022 NFL football season had recently begun. Commercials across all media platforms ramped up as promoters sought to energize even the most casual fan to engage in the pastime of supporting their favorite team as they compete for the yearly prize of being crowned champion. The industries of television, radio, film, and social media joined forces to encourage the populace to sit in front of their screen of preference and consume all things football, all week long.

Love it or hate it, football is a deeply embedded hallmark of American culture. We gather with friends to celebrate it, analyze it, place bets, track stats, draft the perfect fantasy team, ignore mowing overgrown lawns, and sometimes, even attempt to move Heaven and Earth, if you will, to reorient our schedules to watch it live.

To a certain degree, I get it. There is a drama to the game of football, energy and excitement come from watching head-to-head testing of physical strength and mental acuity. The ability of a team to endure crushing blows from their opponent and yet still, by some act of the will, overcome and march on to victory - it invigorates the senses.

When I think about it, watching the big game is perhaps the most fun for me when I know in advance that the outcome will be in favor of my team. Do you know what I mean? I am sure, like me, you have once needed to miss that “really important” game presented live and instead watch it later on your DVR. Also, like me, you probably could not resist using your smartphone to peek at the final score ahead of reviewing the recording. Finally, as you watched the game

unfold, you had this beaming confidence, regardless of your team's momentary struggles throughout play, that victory was assured - it is really quite marvelous.

Now, not too dissimilar to what I have just described, is the hopeful assurance of every believer that God's full plan of redemption will come to pass. That redemption is the Lord's expressed plan for final judgment and justice to be carried out upon all evildoing and sin, to welcome into eternity all those whose names are recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life, to renew both Heaven and Earth, and to establish His earthly kingdom. This is a future that, for every follower of Jesus - every member of His team - should provide a peace-filled hope, absent of fear and worry.

For all of us, as members of God's family through faith in the completed work of Jesus as the once for all sacrifice for sin, live not in ignorance of the final outcomes of eternity. Rather, we have from the Spirit of God, a recorded guarantee that, in fact, God wins. Irrespective of either human or spiritual attempts to supplant the laws and authority of God, His words and decrees are final.

Consider God's own words as delivered through prophet Isaiah, ***"So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it"*** (Isaiah 55:11). It is the Lord who is the guarantor of His plans. He alone has the power and authority to accomplish all that He decides. Indeed, this goes well for us, His people, because we now live - or watch, if you will - the story of redemption in full confidence and expectation that God's team wins in the end.

16

MILLENNIUM

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

I have friends who are Democrats. I have friends who are Republicans. I have family members who vote Democratic. I have family members who vote Republican. I value and love them. They are intelligent and have a reason for how they vote.

1. What are some of the positive points of the Democratic Party?

_____
_____
_____

2. What are some of the positive points of the Republican Party?

_____
_____
_____

Hopefully, this was a healthy discussion. Both "sides" have valid arguments, but the key to remember is that neither party can save America. The world (including the "Christian" country of America) needs Jesus. Only Jesus can save us. There is a time when Jesus will reign on Earth.

3. What would you change if you were the President of the United States?

_____
_____
_____

4. What do you think will be areas of concern that Jesus will address when He reigns?

_____
_____
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The Millennium is the time when the Lord Jesus Christ will reign on Earth for one thousand years. Revelation chapter 20 addresses the Millennium. There are three major views of the Millennium.

- Postmillennialism - the thousand years represent the triumph of the Gospel in the period leading up to the second coming of Christ. The return of Christ will follow the Millennium. (Some key supporters: Charles Hodge, A.H. Strong, David Brown)

- Amillennialism - denies a literal Millennium or reign of Christ on Earth. The millennial reign of Christ is reduced to a spiritual reign in the hearts of believers. (Some key supporters: Augustine, Louis Berkhof, William Hendriksen, Abraham Kuyper)

- Premillennialism - interprets Revelation chapter 20 as referring to a literal thousand-year reign of Christ following His second coming. As the Second Coming occurs before the Millennium, it is therefore premillennial. Both the amillennial and postmillennial views must interpret Revelation chapter 20 in a nonliteral sense. (Some key supporters: Lewis Sperry Chafer, A.C. Gaebelein, H.A. Ironside, Charles Ryrie, C.I. Scofield, Merrill F. Unger, and Justin Martyr - and many other early church fathers)

After summarizing these three views, John Walvoord makes an interesting observation, “Many passages speak of the second coming of Christ being followed by a reign of righteousness on earth (Psalm 2; 24; 72; 96; Isaiah 2; 9:6-7; 11-12; 63:1-6; 65-66; Jeremiah 23:5-6; 30:8-11; Daniel 2:44; 7:13-14; Hosea 3:4-5; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:1-8; Zephaniah 3:14-20; Zechariah 8:1-8; 14:1-9; Matthew 19:28; 25:31-46; Acts 15:16-18; Romans 11:25-27; Jude 14-15; Revelation 2:25-28; 19:11-20:6).”

Revelation 20:1-3 sets the stage for the Millennium, "***Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while."***

5. What event sets the stage for a peaceful Millennium?

_____

_____

_____

6. What titles are used for Satan? Are you familiar with any other titles for him?

_____

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_____

7. Does it surprise you that ***"an angel"*** will be able to bind Satan?

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Revelation 20:4-6 continues the narrative, ***"Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand***

years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years."

8. How many times in these six verses is the Millennium referred to as a thousand years?

_____
_____
_____

9. Who will reign with Christ in the Millennium?

_____
_____
_____

10. What are the criteria for those who will reign with Christ in the Millennium?

_____
_____
_____

11. Outside of ruling with Christ, what will be their responsibility?

_____
_____
_____

Faithfulness is rewarded. Please do not overlook the tragedy that had already taken place. Some believers had been beheaded. They refused to worship anyone or anything other than the One True Living God. They watched brothers and sisters in Christ die gruesome deaths. They looked death in the eye and chose faithfulness to Christ. Their faithfulness is rewarded.

12. How and where do you need to be more faithful to the Lord?

_____

_____

_____

"I am only one, but still I am one.
I cannot do everything, but still I can do something;
and because I cannot do everything,
I will not refuse to do something that I can do."
Helen Keller

TAKE THEM CAPTIVE

MILLENNIUM • DEVOTION 1

Jeannie Yates

"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended." Revelation 20:1-3

Can you imagine what it would be like to not have the Tempter? Can you picture the kind of freedom from temptation we, as believers, will experience without the Father of Lies whispering to our flesh? For a thousand years, we will reign with Him and our enemy will be bound. What an incredible hope we have in Jesus.

In 2020, a particular trend went viral across various social media platforms: the temptation challenge. The idea of the challenge was to set before your children a delicious treat, pizza, or toy, tell them not to eat or touch it, turn on the camera, and leave the room. If you do a search for "temptation challenge" on Google, you will find some hilarious videos of sweet, seemingly innocent children grappling with this temptation. While the purpose of this challenge is entertainment, the reality of the temptations we face every day is so very real, and sometimes the burden can seem unbearable.

So, what do we do with our temptation while we wait for that day when Satan is bound? The Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10:13, ***"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond***

your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." This is something we all have in common. We all face temptation; but God has given us this promise, that He will provide what we need to escape and endure.

Perhaps we should start by heading the words of Paul again in 2 Corinthians 10:5-6, ***"We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete."*** One of our greatest weapons against temptation is to change the way we think. We need to focus our thoughts on the pleasure of obedience. I love what the commentator James Hamilton, Jr. says about this passage in Revelation, "We need to have our imaginations ravished by the beauty of holiness, so that we will not be led astray by the ways that Satan perverts beauty with his unholy attractions. We need to have our thoughts about influence taken captive by the power of righteousness, so that the weakness of unrighteous schemes will have no appeal to us. We need to see the usurper thrown down and the true Lord of the world ascend the throne, so that we will live for his kingdom and not that of the imposter."

So, let us take inventory of our thoughts today. What lies am I believing? Am I letting the "power of righteousness" rule? Is my heart focused on living for His Kingdom? What thoughts am I letting run free in disobedience? Philippians 4:8 says, ***"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."***

WHO IS IN CHARGE?

MILLENNIUM • DEVOTION 2

Don Schelske

When President Ronald Reagan was shot in 1981, the White House staff scrambled to reassure a concerned world that the U.S. government was still in business. With Vice President George H. W. Bush flying back from Texas, apparently, the staff had no clear direction as to who was in the driver's seat.

U.S. Secretary of State and retired Army General Alexander Haig walked into the press room and claimed that he was third in line according to the U.S. Constitution (mistakenly ignoring the Speaker of the House and the 25th Amendment). General Haig said, "As of now, I am in control here," and that statement was famously paraphrased as, "I'm in charge." That confusion was quickly resolved, but it is not the only incident of uncertainty as to "who is in charge."

In more than 20 years as a newspaper journalist, I covered many "interesting" local political campaigns, and as citizens, we have witnessed contentious transitions of power, both national and international. Then there are cultural shifts that defy any democratic process.

Sometimes, we might observe all the confusion and wonder if anyone is "in charge."

Revelation 20:6 says, ***"Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years."***

Among the blessings of the Millennial Kingdom will be a sense of stability and peace not known since the Garden of Eden. There will be no partisan politics, no struggles for power (not even spiritual, since Revelation 20:2 reveals that Satan will be bound in the bottomless pit), and no question of "who is in charge."

While it is exciting to think about believers "reigning with Him," that excitement is only possible because Jesus Christ will be the ultimate authority over everyone on Earth. Philippians 2:10-11 declares, ***"So 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."***

Note that the word "Savior" is not included in this passage. Apparently, not everyone will have accepted the gift of salvation, but every one will acknowledge that He is ***"Lord."*** We may rightfully feel pity for the unbelievers. Still, there will be no doubt about who will be in charge.

While it is encouraging to know the certainty of the future, it is fair for us to ask the question in the present: Who is "in charge" right now for those of us who call ourselves Christians? Who do we acknowledge as our leader? Whose laws do we follow in daily life?

Regardless of who currently holds civil leadership, and regardless of what the culture currently holds in high regard, we have a clear choice for our allegiance.

Colossians 2:6 gives the action step, ***"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him."***

WILL YOU REIGN WITH CHRIST?

MILLENNIUM • DEVOTION 3

William Kinney

Since childhood, I have always been fascinated with fictional stories of medieval times. More specifically, I enjoy the tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. King Arthur is excellent, but I have always been more impressed with the knights loyal to King Arthur, such as Sir Lancelot and Sir Galahad. Like most knights in those times, though fictional, King Arthur's knights' loyalty, devotion, and dedication to the king were unfaltering. What amazes me the most about knights is their loyalty to a king who may or may not make the best decisions. I could not imagine having followers devoted to my cause or agenda with such fidelity that they would take care of and defend me from any threat with their life, but Jesus can.

The future Kingdom of Jesus Christ and His believers unfold in the book of Revelation. After Satan and his demons are bound in the abyss by an angel sent by God, all New and Old Testament believers of Jesus Christ will be resurrected to reign with Him as royal priests and judges. This prophecy defines Jesus as our King, a perfect King that we cannot compare to any other king, even the fictional King Arthur. So, should we not be more devoted and loyal to the King of kings and Lord of lords? Should we not place more trust in Jesus, our Savior, since no one or anything else can rescue us from our sins? He already won the war, so why do we put our trust in the temporal things of this world like money, lust, and false idols? I believe the reason is simple; for many of us (including myself), this boils down to a faith issue. Though this is a simple issue of faith, building our faith is not an easy task. James chapter 2 holds the framework for building our faith, ***"You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works"*** (James 2:22). It is only by

works that we can demonstrate our love and obedience to Christ our King, as obedience to Christ and love go hand in hand. We cannot say we love Christ if we are not obedient to His commandments and cannot be obedient to Christ without loving Him.

Obedience and love are the foundation for our faith; without that foundation, our faith will crumble. Therefore, are we doing the works God calls us to do to build our love relationship with Him, allowing our faith to grow in Him? By the way, the most important way to show our love and obedience to Christ is to accept Him into our hearts as our Savior. It involves believing in our hearts that He died on the cross for our sins and rose again three days later. If we do not accept Jesus as our Lord, we miss out on an opportunity of a lifetime to have a relationship with the one true God who created us to reign with Him for eternity.

HE IS KING

MILLENNIUM • DEVOTION 4

Sierra Combs

I recently sat on a bus with some fellow staff members, and the topic of eschatology came up. Actually, I think I was the one who brought it up because I love hearing what my brothers and sisters in Christ think about the end times! It is quite interesting that there are so many wise, God-honoring, and God-loving Christians who passionately hold different views on how it is all going to go down in the end. As someone who is very black and white and dogmatic in many areas, I have yet to take a hardline, official stance on my eschatological views, and I always wonder if I am one compelling argument away from being permanently swayed. Unfortunately, the conversations on the bus did not lead to that as everyone had a different opinion and made some good points for backing up their views! The particular conversation we were having was about the Millennial Kingdom and where it fits on the futuristic timeline. The topic of the Millennium is a controversial one. While it is a very interesting matter, there is not a large amount of Scripture devoted to it, which makes for an even higher probability of differences in interpretation. It is also written within the book of Revelation, which is a mix of literal and figurative language, and sometimes it is hard to know which is which. I actually went into the conversation expecting us all to have similar opinions and was surprised to find that every single one of us interpreted things differently.

The word millennium means 1,000 years, and the idea of a Millennial Kingdom is mentioned in Revelation 20:1-6, ***"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for***

a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years."

Many Christians view this passage as literal events that are yet to come. Things will get worse and worse in the world culminating in a literal Great Tribulation, and then Christ will return. Satan will be bound, the saints who have been raptured and those who have been martyred will join with believers who have survived the Tribulation and they will join Christ as He reigns over a literal kingdom for a thousand years. After these years, Satan will be released and one final rebellion will take place, followed by the final judgment. This is the premillennial view (as they believe Christ will return prior to His reign). Another view is the postmillennial view, which holds that Christ will not return until the end of the Millennial Kingdom. It is the Church's job to preach the Gospel and Christianize the world, eventually ushering in a type of golden age (that will last either a literal or figurative 1,000 years) where the majority of the world and its leaders will prioritize God and His Word. Things will keep getting better until the Millennium comes to an end with one final rebellion, and then Christ will return. The third main view, the amillennial view,

holds that Christ currently rules His spiritual kingdom in the hearts of His believers (as opposed to a literal physical kingdom) and that the "1,000 years," is a metaphorical number that began when Jesus ascended to Heaven and will end when He returns and ushers in the new Heavens and new Earth.

To my surprise, all of these interpretations were represented on that bus. It was a fun conversation. Though I did not walk away with any concrete clarity, I was reminded that in the end, it really does not matter. Whatever view you land on, we can all hold fast to the fact that Christ is currently reigning over the universe while seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will soon return for us. He was, is, and will always be our King. Until then, we can all join in unity as we proclaim His great name to a world that is desperate for Him!

HOPE

MILLENNIUM • DEVOTION 5

Josh Thayer

"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years." Revelation 20:1-6

I think reading Revelation can be a daunting task. There is all this talk of dragons and beasts, sometimes I feel like I am reading *"Lord of the Rings."* Is Frodo riding the dragon holding the ring? Here I digress and I think first we need to understand that Revelation was written in "apocalyptic" form, which is just a fancy word for a type of Jewish literature that uses symbolic imagery to communicate hope to those in the midst of persecution. So all of these things that John is writing about have not actually happened. God basically gave John a vision of what would take place in the future.

We find ourselves here in chapter 20 and John references 1,000 years a few separate times. First, he locked up Satan (the dragon) for 1,000 years. Then we see reference to people who had been killed over their belief in Jesus and they came back to life and reigned for 1,000 years. Also, there is a second death and there are some more reigning for 1,000 years. If I can sum this up simply, the 1,000 years is referred to as the Millennium and it is understood differently among scholars. Basically, nobody knows the answer to this 1,000 years, you can *"Google"* and do your own research, but here is what I want to focus on from this passage - hope!

It does not matter what you believe about the 1,000 years, because at the end of the day it does not matter. That is not going to make or break your relationship with Jesus. At the end of the day, we have hope because Jesus came, lived a perfect life, chose to die for you and me to give us a way, and to give us hope that we will be with God in Heaven at the end of it all. Whether you lean toward postmillennialism, premillennialism, amillennialism, or whatever other millennialism words you want to make up does not matter. What matters is you choose to live for Jesus every day. You need to choose to live a life that is different from everyone else. Choose a life where Jesus is the center and everything else revolves around your relationship with God!

ENCOURAGEMENT AND COMFORT

MILLENNIUM • DEVOTION 6

Pastor Ferdinand Sanders

If I had to guess, I would assume that the book of Revelation elicits one of two responses from people sitting down to read it. I think that there is a group of people out there who chase the intrigue of reading it for its sense of supernatural mystery and overall apocalyptic feel. While others (maybe most), tend to keep Revelation "on the shelf" because of the difficulty of really wrapping our minds around some of the concepts and characters of John's vision. Regardless of how easy or difficult it may be to wrap our minds around, or how the contents of the book of Revelation make us feel, we only cheat ourselves if we do not view all parts of Scripture as full and complete with something very real to offer us.

In Revelation chapter 20, John depicts an event in which an angel descends from Heaven and locks up ***"the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan,"*** in a bottomless pit for 1,000 years. After this event, John then later sees thrones in addition to ***"the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God."*** They are the martyrs of the faith. I will be the first one to acknowledge that these are quite intense topics that are not regularly discussed or presented from the pulpit! It is quite easy to talk about all the positive things we stand to gain from a life devoted to Christ, but we often downplay the two things we see here in these first 6 verses of Revelation chapter 20.

First, there is a very real spiritual warfare around us. Ephesians 6:12 says, ***"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."***

Second, it discusses the persecution we will face as Christians. John 15:19-20 says, ***"If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours."***

So, what do we take from such a heavy topic? When I read these verses a second time, a few words and phrases really stand out and provide a great sense of encouragement and comfort. I am serious! Look at some of the words and phrases used in terms of the authority over the enemy: ***"seized, bound, threw, shut, sealed."*** Then look at these words from the next few verses, ***"came to life, reigned, blessed and holy, death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years."*** Even within the intense and heavy writing of Revelation, we can find comfort, encouragement, and hope.

17

JUDGMENT AND HELL

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Hell and Heaven are real, actual places of eternity. A description is probably not necessary as people regularly use the words. The word "Hell" is spoken by people who do not even believe in God: hotter than Hell, it will be a cold day in Hell, come Hell or high water, not a chance in Hell, it hurts like Hell, give them Hell, and go to Hell! Hell is the epitome of negative, horrible, abominable, grotesque, appalling, and awful.

1. What other phrases have you heard for Hell?

_____

_____

_____

Everyone will end up in either Hell or Heaven forever.

The next study guide will discuss Heaven. This study guide will focus on Hell. However, before looking into either of these topics it is important to realize there is a judgment. In 2 Corinthians 5:9-10, we read, ***"So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."*** Those who have placed their trust in Christ will appear before Christ in what is known as the Bema Seat Judgment. This is a moment of rewards or crowns that we should hope to have to place at His feet (2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; Revelation 2:10; 3:11). We are able to be there because of the work of Christ.

Unbelievers appear before Christ based on their own works or deeds. Revelation 20:11-15 describes this Great White Throne Judgment, ***"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on 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. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." This passage is describing the Great White Throne Judgment.

2. What "book" is described here?

_____
_____
_____

3. What happens to someone whose name is in the ***"book of life"*** and those whose name is not in the ***"book of life"***?

_____
_____
_____

4. What happens to ***"Death and Hades"***?

_____
_____
_____

5. What images come to mind when you envision the ***"lake of fire"***?

_____
_____
_____

Scripture is very clear there is a Hell (lake of fire). It is a literal place. Jerry Falwell said, “I think hell’s a real place where real people spend a real eternity.” Charles Spurgeon adds an interesting perspective, “There is no injustice in the grace of God. God is as just when He forgives a believer as when He casts a sinner into hell.”

6. Do you agree or disagree with these quotes?

_____

_____

_____

Revelation 21:8 says, ***“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”***

7. How is Hell described?

_____

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Revelation 14:10-11 adds further insight, ***“He also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”***

8. What descriptions are given of Hell?

_____

_____

_____

Billy Graham knew the importance of understanding there is a Hell, "If we had more hell in the pulpit, we would have less hell in the pew."

9. Do you think Hell is discussed too much or not enough?

_____

_____

_____

Matthew 25:46 adds, ***"And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."***

10. How long is each destination?

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_____

_____

I love R.A. Torrey's perspective, "I would rather go to heaven alone than go to hell in company."

11. How would you reply to the person who says, "I do not care where I go because I will have friends in both places"?

_____

_____

_____

"Gehenna" is a Greek word translated as Hell. Charles C. Ryrie wrote that it is referencing a "refuse dump and a place of perpetual fire and loathsomeness, and the valley in Jerusalem illustrates the fire and awfulness of the lake of fire."

12. As a summary, how would you describe Hell?

_____

_____

_____

"[Jesus spoke] twice as often
of hell as of heaven."
D.A. Carson

"[Jesus] spoke more often about hell
than he did about heaven.
We cannot get around this fact."
Leon Morris

"Jesus talked more about hell
than He did about heaven
in order to warn men of its reality."
John MacArthur

SENTENCING

JUDGMENT AND HELL • DEVOTION 1

Patrick Bicknell

I recently saw this video of a man, some years ago, who was interviewing a celebrity from the United Kingdom whose name was Stephen Fry. In the interview the man asked him, "Suppose when you die, and everything about God is true, and you have to stand before Him one day what will you say?" He responded like this, "I guess I would say, bone cancer in children? How dare you. How dare you create a world where there is such misery that is not our fault."

I think what he believes might happen when people stand before God someday is something that a lot of us envision as well. I have commonly heard people talk about standing before the throne of God as something like a courtroom. In this courtroom, we will be able to give our case, present the facts of our lives, and give a plea as to why we should not take the judgment that God would pronounce on us. This is not what is being described here in Revelations 20:11-15. The throne and judgment that is revealed are the Great White Throne. What is unique about this throne, and the scene that John is depicting, is that it is not a trial but a sentencing. In this place. God is not waiting to hear the cases of the people of the world and determine if they are to be sentenced as guilty or not guilty. Here God is pronouncing the just judgment of sinners and condemning them to Hell. We see this in Revelation 20:12, ***"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done."*** The idea of standing before the throne means that the sentence is already in and they are waiting to hear their condemnation. John Walvoord, a commentator talking

about this verse says, “The standing posture means that they are now about to be sentenced.”

Now most of us when we hear this can become afraid and ask, “What will I do when I stand here?” Thankfully, as many commentators believe, this is not a place that followers of Christ will ever have to be. The punishment for our sins was already judged and sentenced in the person and work of Jesus Christ. When Jesus went to the cross for us, He already was sentenced in our place and took the punishment we were supposed to take. So now, we no longer have to stand before the Great White Throne because Christ did that for us. How amazing is it to see that the place where we should have been standing, the sentence we were supposed to hear, was taken for us by Jesus?

THE URGENCY OF THE GOSPEL

JUDGMENT AND HELL • DEVOTION 2

Pastor Justin Dean

One thing I have always struggled with is procrastination. Science projects were always started the night before being due, homework in high school was done in the class before, and papers in college were turned in at the last possible minute. I like to think that I am not the only one who struggles with procrastinating.

Naturally, we want to put off things that are uncomfortable or difficult, especially when we think we have time to do them later. Often times we are most guilty of this when it comes to sharing the Gospel. If we are honest, it can be difficult, awkward, and uncomfortable sharing the Gospel with others. We tend to want to put it off or "wait for the right time." Sometimes we forget the inevitable judgment that is coming because we do not want to think it is happening any time soon.

Revelation 20:11-15 says, ***"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on 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. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."***

The only way your name ends up in the Book of Life is through belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A relationship with Jesus Christ starts through admitting that you are a sinner in need of a Savior, and that Savior is Jesus, through His death on the cross for our sins and His resurrection from the dead. So many people do not believe or have never even heard this truth. It is our job to tell them.

Paul reminds us of the need to preach this truth in Romans 10:13-14, ***"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?"***

We know what is coming, and we know that what saves is a relationship with Jesus Christ. So, how will people hear if we do not make it a priority to tell them? It cannot be something that we procrastinate. It is urgent, as urgent as a life-threatening wound. The eternal destination of our coworkers, friends, and family members is at stake every day we avoid the Gospel conversation. It is not something that we can afford to put off. As intimidating, awkward, or uncomfortable as it may be, it is something we must make urgent.

Maybe you feel like you do not know where to start when it comes to talking to people about Jesus. I would encourage you to start by telling them how and why you came to know Jesus. Your story is incredible, you were saved from your sin, and because they know you, it will impact them. You have experienced something they need, a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

As you finish up this devotion, I would encourage you to take some time to pray. Ask God to put some people on your heart who need to hear the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. Write their names down. What is stopping you from talking to them about Jesus? Are those reasons worth the risk of them never hearing the Gospel?

SPARED FROM ANGUISH

JUDGMENT AND HELL • DEVOTION 3

Mitchell Holmes

I would like to take a moment to describe a situation for you. Imagine with me that you are driving on the freeway and suddenly ahead of you is a massive backup of vehicles. It becomes quickly apparent that there is something major going on and the freeway is backed up for miles as more and more cars are stopped by this massive traffic jam. At first, you are optimistic that this setback will lighten up or reduce in a timely fashion, but as 15 minutes turns into 30 and your vehicle has only moved 50 feet, you realize that an end to this is nowhere in sight. To make matters worse, you just finished the last sip of your water bottle, your car's air conditioning stops working, and the temperature reaches a humid 95 degrees. As you decide it may be in your best interest to get off the freeway and take side roads to your destination, you notice a sign that says, "Next exit: 15 miles ahead."

What I have just described to you is my own personal Hell on Earth. I cannot think of many things that I would enjoy less than being stuck in a hot vehicle, on a humid day, in traffic for hours, with not even the wind to cool me down. However, as awful as this situation would theoretically be, it pales infinitely in comparison to the scene that we see described for us by the apostle John in Revelation 20:11-15, ***"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on 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. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and***

Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

This passage is nothing short of terrifying. As all the dead in the sea and all the dead buried in the ground are ripped from their graves and brought before the throne of judgment, we see their every thought, word, and deed judged by the just, holy, and perfect Lord. Those whose names were not recorded in the Book of Life did not meet the requirement of perfection, nor did they seek the name of Jesus for forgiveness and thus they are thrown into a place of eternal suffering, the Lake of Fire.

The Lake of Fire may be made of literal fire as we know it, or it may be a description of something beyond our capabilities to understand and thus, much worse.

Regardless, residency in the Lake of Fire means separation from God and separation from everything that is good. Therefore, it is nothing but anguish and punishment for eternity. In addition, this literal Hell will keep all of its occupants completely and utterly alone and separated from one another in absolute darkness.

If you have confessed your sins and sought Jesus for forgiveness from them, you can avoid this eternal suffering. However, I think it is easy to forget the horrors from which we have been spared because there is no immediate example of this grace in our lives. God did not have to spare us from this torment and yet, He loved us enough to send His Son to die in our place. Take a moment today to thank the Lord for paying the ultimate price in your place and sparing you from an eternity in Hell.

I also hope to use the discomfort of the reality of Hell to motivate you. Every single person reading this has someone in their lives that does not know Jesus and has not repented. Those people will spend an eternity in unimaginable suffering unless someone alters their course. Please do not let it be too late before you try to reach them with the Gospel.

JUDGEMENT OR HELL

JUDGMENT AND HELL • DEVOTION 4

Caleb Jones

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on 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. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." Revelation 20:11-15

As we get to the end of the Bible, we read about John's vision where everyone who has ever lived will stand before Jesus who sits on the heavenly throne. This is referred to as the Day of Judgment. Revelation 3:21 tells us that both Jesus and God will sit on this throne.

It is hard to imagine the presence of God. We currently have the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. John 14:16 (NIV) says, ***"And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever."***

There will come a day when we stand before God and He will judge every single one of us. Verse 15 says that if anyone's name was not found in the Book of Life, he would be thrown into the Lake of Fire. When we read verse 13, it seems to say that what we do determines

where we go. However, we have to go back to Acts 3:19, ***"Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out."***

There will come a day that God will judge all of us. Every man, woman, and child will have to give an account for what we have done. Thankfully, Jesus gave us the way. In fact, He is the way (John 14:6).

Maybe you have received Christ as your Savior but this is your time to repent because you have been living as your own king.

If you have never repented of your sin, today is the day. Do not wait. We will soon stand before God Almighty and our name will either be written in the Book of Life because we have repented and acknowledged Christ's kingship and salvation over our lives, or we will be cast into the Lake of Fire because we rejected the One who died for us.

HELL

JUDGMENT AND HELL • DEVOTION 5

Adam Moore

One of my favorite summertime and fall activities is to sit out in my backyard near an open bonfire. We have a yard full of trees that are constantly dropping branches so there is always an abundance of good material for making a fire. It never fails that as the fire gets red hot and the embers begin to glow that at some point my mind comes full circle to a literal place the Bible calls Hell, or the ***"Lake of Fire."***

Just as I throw the endless supply of dead tree branches that dare to fall and trample on my landscape into a fire, the Bible says that those who reject Jesus Christ as their Savior will face a similar fate. However, as I watch my tree branches burn and eventually turn into a pile of ash, Hell will never burn out and the souls that are bound there will face eternal torment.

Revelation 20:11-15 says, ***"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on 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. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."***

Throughout Scripture, we find different descriptions of Hell from a place of ***"outer darkness"*** (Matthew 22:13) to a place of ***"fire and brimstone"*** (Revelation 14:10 KJV) along with several more passages describing Hell as a place of conscious eternal torment in an unquenchable fire.

Friends, there are only two classifications of people in God's eyes, lost and saved. Those who are lost and never accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior will spend eternity in a place called Hell. Those who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of their life will spend eternity in Heaven. I do not believe we as humans can imagine how amazing Heaven will be (1 Corinthians 2:9) and how terrible Hell will be. The Bible gives us glimpses of what both eternal destinations are like, but in our human minds, we cannot fully comprehend them.

I once heard a story about the sinking of the Titanic, and it was said that after the destruction of the ship a list was made of all those that were on board that simply stated, "known lost" and "known saved." One day we are all going to stand before God and those whose names are found written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be in the category "known saved." Those whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be in the category "known lost" and will be separated from God for eternity in the Lake of Fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mathew 22:13.)

The question today is what have you done with Jesus? Are you "known lost" or "known saved"?

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL

JUDGMENT AND HELL • DEVOTION 6

Pastor Kyle Wendel

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on 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. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."
Revelation 20:11-15

Very common misconceptions about what happens after death concern Heaven. Many people believe in Heaven. Many would even believe that everyone goes to Heaven when they die. Many people would say that if you are a good person you can make it to Heaven. These are all untrue.

Another misconception I see often relates to that of Hell. Many say they would not believe Hell is real. Others might say it is a place you spend some time at but then can make it to Heaven. Some might even say it is a fun place to be at or that the punishment is not that bad. These are all far from the truth.

If we look at Revelation chapter 20, we see that everything we do is judged by the Lord. If we are judged for everything that we do on

Earth, we have no chance of making it to Heaven. No matter how good we think that we are, the scales are not judged in that way. Our sin would greatly outweigh our "good." However, it simply comes down to one question, "Have you sinned?" In Romans chapter 3, we see that all have sinned and have fallen short of God's standard. We all have sinned. We have no chance if it is up to us. Heaven is something we cannot obtain by our power. The only way we can be in Heaven and have eternal life after we die is by Jesus alone. Jesus was the sinless sacrifice that was made for us. He was perfect and willingly died in our place so that if we believe in Him, we can inherit eternal life. It comes down to that alone.

If we do not choose to believe and trust in Jesus' sacrifice, the Bible is very clear about what happens. We will go to Hell for eternity. There is no swapping where you will go. You will be in Heaven or Hell for eternity. Hell is described as a Lake of Fire or eternal death. That is the punishment because of our sin. The worst part is eternal separation from the presence of the Lord. That might seem like a tough pill to swallow at first, but once we recognize the reality and weight of our sin against God, we understand that Heaven is not a place we belong or have the right to be. It alone is by the work and blood of Jesus that we can be saved from our sin.

Romans 10:9 says, ***"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."***

What do you believe about Heaven? Can you back it up with what Scripture says? What about Hell? Can you back up what you believe with Scripture? Scripture alone is where we should go to find these truths. The world will mess these important truths up greatly. Most would not want to accept these biblical truths as well. Let us hold fast to the word of truth and hold fast to the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior.

18

HEAVEN

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

Hell and Heaven are real, actual places of eternity. A description is probably not necessary as people regularly use the words. The word "Heaven" is spoken by people who do not even believe in God: A marriage made in Heaven, good Heavens, in Hog Heaven, Heaven help us, Heaven on earth, Heaven sent, it is heavenly, or even some paradise references. Heaven is the epitome of glorious, delightful, divine, wonderful, paradisiacal, perfect, and blissful.

1. What other phrases have you heard for Heaven?

_____
_____
_____

Everyone will end up in either Hell or Heaven forever.

John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible. This verse refers to both places, ***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."***

2. How are both places described here?

_____
_____
_____

3. What determines each person's destination?

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_____
_____

Romans 6:23 says, ***"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

4. Where does one find eternal life?

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Heaven is an actual place. It is not just a concept. Jonathan Edwards has said, “To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here.”

5. How do you view the worst day on earth compared to Hell, and the best day now compared to Heaven?

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Jesus says in John 14:1-3, ***“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”***

6. What does Jesus say about Heaven?

_____

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_____

In Luke 23:43, Jesus is talking to a thief on the cross, ***“And he said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.’”***

7. What images come to mind with the word ***"Paradise"***?

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Matthew 7:13-14 says, ***"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."***

8. Does everyone go to Heaven? If not, is it the majority of the people?

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Revelation 7:15-17 gives us a taste of Heaven, ***"Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."***

9. What stands out in this passage to you?

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Revelation 21:3-4 says, ***"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself***

will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"

10. How is Heaven described?

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Revelation 22:1-5 continues the description, ***"Then the angel 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. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."***

11. What aspects catch your attention?

_____

_____

_____

"For the Christian, heaven is where Jesus is.
We do not need to speculate
on what heaven will be like.
It is enough to know
that we will be forever with Him."
William Barclay

ALL THINGS NEW

HEAVEN • DEVOTION 1

Jeannie Yates

Almost everyone I know that has grown up in the church has made their own “replica” of Heaven out of paper towel rolls and cotton balls. I remember that day of Sunday School well. We were given an assortment of everyday items to build and create what we thought Heaven looked like, and then the best part, we spray painted it all gold! We all wonder what Heaven will be like, in fact, there are even songs written about our “mansion just over the hilltop.” When I was younger, I thought the idea of Heaven sounded great and all, but I wanted God to wait until I was older. I am sure I am not the only one that had those thoughts. I realize now that my focus was all wrong. I was focused on the things of Heaven, the stuff, and missing the great delight of Heaven, God Himself.

Revelation 21:1-5 says, ***“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. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.’ And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’”***

In his commentary on Revelation, James M. Hamilton, Jr. writes, “So this new Jerusalem is a city because God will dwell there, and

it seems to be likened to a bride because God will covenant with his people who dwell with him there." This is not a new concept. Throughout the Bible, we see God making covenants with His people. In Genesis chapter 17, we see God's covenant with Abraham, ***"And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you"*** (verse 7).

Here in Revelation chapter 21, we hear God making another covenant with His people. Not only will He dwell with His people and be their God, but He will wipe away all the heartache from the sin-ridden world they knew before. In verse 5, He says, ***"Behold, I am making all things new."*** If you are anything like me, all it takes is a look at today's current headlines and you will long for this day where death, mourning, and pain are no more. Let us not miss the fact that we can have a taste of this even now. This is the Gospel - the Good News! When we recognize our need for a Savior, ask God for forgiveness, and submit to His authority as Lord, He makes us new. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*** All the hurt, disappointment, mistakes, and failures that were there before are now made new and we become ***"the righteousness of God"*** (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Hold that thought for a moment and go read the rest of chapter 21; I will wait.

Does that not sound incredible?! May we have a longing for that day. Not for the mansions and gold-paved streets, but may we long for Him. Revelation 21:23 adds, ***"And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb."***

REUNITED

HEAVEN • DEVOTION 2

Pastor Noble Baird

The whole concept and idea of a new Heaven and new Earth are mind-boggling. Maybe, this is true for just me, but this is a concept and an important part of Scripture that has always been difficult for me to understand and comprehend. Although I have done some studies, I truly believe we can never study Scripture enough. Just when we think we may have exhausted a passage, the Spirit will reveal another portion or vantage point that we never even considered. In the same way with Revelation, the amount of debate and views are simply endless.

In Revelation 21:3-4, John writes, ***"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"*** What an amazing truth and comfort! The dwelling place of the Lord is with us, His most prized creation! Yet, it does not end there; He will wipe away every tear, death will end, pain will not exist, suffering will not be a thing, and He will wipe it all away. The amazing truth of this new Heaven and new Earth is that we will be in the presence of the Lord. His creation will finally be perfected alongside Him, as we were always intended to be!

This may seem like a cop-out to some. However, for me, there is no greater comfort to the uncertainty and the endless debates about a new Heaven and new Earth than knowing that we who

have professed Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior will be in His presence, physically together with Him. On that glorious amazing day, He truly will wipe away every tear, sorrow, any ounce of fear and hurt, because we will be reunited with our Lord and Savior for all eternity!

NO SHOES IN HEAVEN

HEAVEN • DEVOTION 3

John Stone

What do you expect when you get to Heaven and meet Jesus?

Each of our expectations varies, but I have recently asked this question to people and the answers tend to be heartbreaking. They seem to reveal a lack of understanding of how much our Heavenly Father actually loves His children or perhaps an underestimation of the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work on the cross for them. One man said he would not be surprised if St. Peter dropped the gate on him. Another said he expects to be issued a shoeshine kit but nobody will be wearing shoes. Another said she expects a spanking followed by a hug. On the surface, these answers may sound funny, but these people were not telling jokes. Many of us probably share similar feelings if we have ever contemplated our life and our many shortcomings. I know I have. We have failed Christ so many times, in so many ways, that there must be some kind of punishment waiting. The Catholic Church even fabricated a non-biblical place called Purgatory based on this same idea. Even though the Bible clearly demonstrates the opposite, we just cannot get it through our heads that God could possibly love us that much.

In fact, God loves His sons and daughters so much that He crushed His own Son, Jesus Christ (Isaiah 53), and poured out His wrath on Him so that we could be righteous; His atonement for all our sin, past, present, and future. We will still struggle with sin, and we should struggle, fight, and make war against it, but do not lose hope and think that our failures somehow disqualify us or revoke our inheritance in the Kingdom of our Father (Luke 15:11-24). We should be broken and weep over the sinful condition of our flesh (Romans

7:21-25) knowing it grieves and dishonors Him; but never forget that, because of Christ, our eternal soul is righteous and worthy to be in the presence of God (Romans 8:10). God is not frowning when He thinks of you. The day you confessed Jesus as Lord, He did not roll His eyes and grumble, “Another dirty sinner I have to put up with.” The Bible says the angels in Heaven rejoice when one sinner repents (Luke 15:10)! The angels are not throwing a party in a room down the hall and suddenly get quiet and go back to studying catechism when God bursts in to see what all the noise is about. There is joy in Heaven! The angels are celebrating with God because one sinner, you, turned to Christ! However, the joy does not end there. You are not just another hash mark on the throne room wall or notch on God’s belt to be forgotten when the next sinner displaces you. You are loved and all of Heaven is waiting in anticipation of the day that you come home.

Jesus said He was going away to Heaven to prepare a place for us. If we have ever thought about it we may assume, because He is God, that He can just speak and everything is done. He could, but I do not believe so in this case. Jesus does not build concrete block apartments! I believe He is crafting a custom home for each of us that is uniquely designed to fit our personalities; a house perfectly suited to maximize our comfort and enjoyment (John 14:2), and a place of true rest. He knows us better than we know ourselves (Psalm 139:13; Matthew 10:30; Romans 8:26). Look at the intricacy of creation. Jesus does not cut any corners. He does not forget important details. The building of this house is literally a labor of love by the Creator of the universe for you.

God loves us so much that He chose to share the greatest gift in the universe with us, namely Himself. For now, we have only gotten a taste, but throughout eternity we will never exhaust the glory and wonder of who He is (Ephesians 2:4-9). I hope that we all long to

hear our Savior say, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master.” However, for now, we get to walk, we get to run, we get to work for the glory of God to further His Kingdom and add to the joy of Heaven. Put aside any thoughts that our Father’s love for us is conditional. He loves us perfectly with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). Know that when He thinks of you He smiles. Instead of shuffling toward Heaven in shame and trepidation, hold your head high (Luke 21:28), act like the royalty you are (Romans 8:16-17); because your Father, the King of the universe, loves you and delights in you (Psalm 37:23). You are His child and you bring Him joy.

“The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.” Numbers 6:24-27 (NASB)

A WEDDING CELEBRATION

HEAVEN • DEVOTION 4

Pastor Ferdinand Sanders

Whether or not you are married, I feel like it is safe to say that we are all familiar with the wedding ceremony. This celebratory occasion is when friends and family all gather together, some traveling great distances, to celebrate love, commitment, and sacrifice. It is the union of marriage. For many women, this is a day that they have dreamed of for almost their entire lives. I have commonly heard people say that their wedding day was "one of the best days of their life." Coincidentally, I find myself writing this on the anniversary of my wedding day! Some aspects of the wedding I remember in great detail, while other parts of the day are a little bit of a blur. The day somehow felt both very long as well as super quick. I remember the weather was perfect, and it was such a joy to celebrate with people who love and care deeply for both of us as individuals, as well as a wedded couple.

In Revelation chapter 21, after we see all sin and evil defeated, John begins to go into detail regarding a ***"New Heaven"*** and ***"New Earth"*** that is ***"prepared as a bride adorned for her husband"*** (Revelation 21:2). The imagery and symbolism of a wedding ceremony is not a foreign concept in the Bible. Many of you may have heard the Church referred to as the "bride" of Christ. I must admit that at first, I found it a little strange to be collectively referred to as the "bride," but the more I began to think about it and understand it, the more I realized just how beautiful and perfect the imagery is.

As the Church, whenever we look at the marital relationship, one of the best examples we get as husbands is found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul writes, ***"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ***

loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). In fact, I almost feel like we do not fully embrace all that verse conveys when we only view it through the lens of the marital partnership. We see the perfect example, and we try our best to contextualize and apply it to our human nature, but we know that ultimately we will inevitably always fall short through our own strengths.

To me, this concept truly is fulfilled in Revelation because of the Gospel. Through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, our slate is wiped clean. That is incredible imagery of a bride in a perfect and spotless wedding dress! Now imagine Christ at the altar, what I can only imagine is excitedly waiting for His bride to turn the corner, smiling from ear to ear, knowing that we are to be united with Him in the ***"New Jerusalem."***

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Revelation 21:4

A PERSON AND A PLACE

HEAVEN • DEVOTION 5

Debbie Gabbara

"No longer will you need the sun to shine by day, nor the moon to give its light by night, for the LORD your God will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set; your moon will not go down. For the LORD will be your everlasting light. Your days of mourning will come to an end." Isaiah 60:19-20 (NLT)

My granddaughter asked me the other day if it is correct to say that God's plans are perfect. Her question made me think of the Children of Israel and God's plan for them to become His chosen people as a direct line to the Messiah, Christ Jesus.

Giving us a way to redeem our sin and spend eternity in Heaven with Him was always God's perfect plan. Jesus came to the Earth to fulfill that plan. He was God and He was also fully man. He lived His life to lead others to His Father. Jesus promised us in John 14:2 that He was going to prepare a place for us so that where He is we might be also. Revelation chapter 21 tells us it will be a place where God Himself will be with us. There will be no mourning, pain, crying, or death.

Heaven is mentioned over 500 times in the Bible. This world is just temporary, we are just passing through here. When our time is finished here on Earth, God wants us to live there forever with Him in the beautiful place that was created to share with us. However, God leaves the decision up to us. We have to choose to be with God by believing that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the cross, and was resurrected. Through our faith, His blood covers our sins and

that allows us to live forever in Heaven with the Lord. Philippians 3:20-21 says, ***"Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself."***

Revelation gives us such a beautiful description of the place God created to spend eternity with His people. There are streets made of gold, a crystal sea, gates made of pearls, and foundations made of beautiful jewels. When I think of Heaven, I think of the brilliance of God and beauty as we have never known. I pray your heart is longing to be in Heaven with God and in His presence forever.

"We were made for a person and a place.
Jesus is the person. Heaven it the place."
Randy Alcorn

I CAN ONLY IMAGINE

HEAVEN • DEVOTION 6

Cathy Story

The other day our children said, “We are going to draw what Heaven looks like!” We chuckled and told them to go for it, draw what they think Heaven will look like. The white paper and yellow crayons came out and their best ideas of Heaven were created with all of their childlike imagination. I typically do not consider myself strong in arts and crafts, or spatial sense. If someone tries to describe to me what something will look like, or how we could move something to look different, I try my best to cut them off as quickly as possible and explain that I really just cannot imagine what they are trying to say to me. Unless I see it, I struggle to imagine what something will look like! Had I chosen to draw with my children, I probably would have created yellow arches and streets too.

While there are many aspects of Heaven we will have to patiently wait to discover, there are a few things we can know with certainty and excitement! Revelation 21:4 writes, ***“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”*** For these reasons, we can rejoice! We can look forward to the day and time when we finally get to see and experience all of Heaven in its glory! In the meantime, we wait, tell others, and prepare for that day.

When it comes to gift giving, I can hardly contain myself. I tend to have to shop at the last minute because once I have the gift, I am ready to give it! When getting a gift, I can wait; but giving a gift causes too much excitement at what the response will be. In this meantime of waiting for Heaven, I want to wait with that same eager

expectation. You can question yourself along with me, do you live with such eager expectation that you cannot help but share about the goodness of God and who He is? Think about who you may be able to gift with the message of Jesus dying for them on the cross. Who can you think of that may be able to join you in eager expectation of what Heaven will be like.

19

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

I like famous movie lines. In studying the return of Christ, one key scenario comes to mind. In his 1984 movie, *"Terminator,"* Arnold Schwarzenegger boldly proclaims, "I'll be back." He immediately returned to quite the scene. He kept his word. I view Jesus, with more power than Arnold could ever imagine, saying with words of comfort, but warning, "I'll be back!" Jesus is coming back. He will keep His word.

Maybe you are more of a fan of history and remember General Douglas MacArthur. During World War II, he promised the people of the Philippines, "I Shall Return." He did keep his word.

1. Can you think of any other movie scenes, book depictions, or historical events when the promise of a return was given?

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Acts chapter 1 records Jesus leaving for Heaven. Right after He ascends, an angel says, ***"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"*** (verse 11). As soon as He leaves, we are reminded that He will return.

2. How will the Lord return?

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Paul Lee Tan has noted, "Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with promises of the Second Coming of Christ. There are 1,845 references to it in the Old Testament, and a total of seventeen Old

Testament books give it prominence. Of the 260 chapters in the entire New Testament, there are 318 references to the Second Coming, or one out of 30 verses. Twenty-three of the 27 New Testament books refer to this great event. The four missing books include three which are single-chapter letters written to individual persons on a particular subject, and the fourth is Galatians which does imply Christ's coming again. For every prophecy on the First Coming of Christ, there are 8 on Christ's Second Coming."

3. What points stand out most in this quote?

_____

_____

_____

4. Does this quote surprise you? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

The parables of Jesus Christ often refer to His return. Look up each parable, write down what the parable is, and mention how it relates to the topic.

Matthew 24:44-51:

_____

_____

_____

Matthew 25:1-13:

_____

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Matthew 25:14-30:

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Luke 12:35-38:

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Luke 12:39-40:

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Luke 21:25-36:

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Continuing in our study on Revelation, John quotes Jesus, ***"And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book"*** (Revelation 22:7).

5. How do we keep ***"the words of the prophecy of this book"***?

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Revelation 22:12-13 picks up the topic again, ***"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."***

6. How is the Lord described in this passage?

_____

_____

_____

7. Why do you think He repeats Himself so soon (only five verses later)?

_____

_____

_____

"When He returns is not as important
as the fact that we are
ready for Him when He does return."
A.W. Tozer

8. What does this quote mean?

_____

_____

_____

The last two verses of the Bible (Revelation 22:20-21) say, ***"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen."***

9. What is the very last message of the Bible?

_____

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_____

"Precisely because we cannot predict the moment,
we must be ready at all moments."
C.S. Lewis

Jesus will return. He will be back!

DO YOU DESIRE JESUS' RETURN?

THE RETURN OF CHRIST • DEVOTION 1

Pastor Roy Townsend

As a child growing up in the church, I always heard the saying, "Jesus is coming soon. Be ready!" I want to be honest in saying that these words caused great fear in me. Not only did I hear this message often, but we sang about the return of Christ in our worship times. We sang a southern Gospel song which included this language:

> Jesus is coming soon, morning or night or noon
> Many will meet their doom, trumpets will sound
> All of the dead shall rise, righteous meet in the skies
> Going where no one dies, heavenward bound.

I understand that these words were meant to cause me to be glad, but I was still a very immature Christian. I did not understand the importance not only of the promise that Jesus is coming back, but the example that I should be desiring and communicating to Jesus my desire that He comes back!

Revelation 22:12-20 reads, ***"'Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.' Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. 'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.' The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And***

let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

We can see from this section that Christ has promised to come back, and this is a major promise that we as Christ followers hold deeply. In this same section of Scripture though, we see that the Holy Spirit, the church, and even the Apostle John, who was inspired to write the book of Revelation, call on Jesus to come. We can see that it is important for us to desire or live with expectancy for Christ to return. Warren Wiersbe writes, "When the church lives in expectancy of Christ's return, such an attitude provokes ministry and evangelism as well as purity of heart." How many times have I missed the point that the Apostle John commands us to say ***"come"***? How long did I live in resistance to His coming? I was selfish. I wanted what I wanted! I did not want to miss out on life, and I can see how foolish I was in that belief. My encouragement for today is for us to pray for this expectancy. I want to pray that we grow past our selfish and fearful desires, and look to embrace the Lord Jesus as His bride by saying, ***"Come, Lord Jesus!"***

WE WILL SEE HIS FACE!

THE RETURN OF CHRIST • DEVOTION 2

Pastor Roy Townsend

When I think of all the things that I have learned in the last few years, I cannot believe the importance of seeing someone's face. My friends that are working in the school system tell me of the difficulties with not being able to see the student's face or with the students' difficulty in not being able to see the teacher's face. As a teacher and pastor, it is my desire to be in a personal relationship with others, and we rely heavily on looking at someone's face to understand them better and be in a better relationship with them. In today's Scripture, we will learn about when believers get to see the face of God.

Revelation 22:1-5 reads, ***"Then the angel 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. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."***

Recently, I was teaching a lesson on Heaven, and we were looking at this Scripture. We were discussing all the wonderful descriptions of what Heaven looks like. Water flowing from the throne of God is as ***"bright as crystal."*** The Tree of Life is bearing twelve different types of fruit, a different type for each month. Nothing bad will be there. These are exciting facts, but then we got to what I believe will

be the best part, ***"They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."***

The Scriptures make it clear that nobody can see God's face and live. Moses was told this is Exodus 33:20, ***"'But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.'"*** The Apostle John reiterates this fact in John 1:18, ***"No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known."***

Wow, so now we know that those who have accepted Christ as their Savior will see God face-to-face. We will not just be living in a paradise, but we will be living and seeing God. God's plan in the Garden of Eden was to live with man. The Scriptures portray that we were in an intimate face-to-face relationship with God, and His wonderful plan is to restore that intimate relationship with man.

We have seen the need for mankind to have face-to-face relationships, and that face-to-face intimacy with God will be restored as described in Revelation chapter 22.

BIBLE BOOKENDS

THE RETURN OF CHRIST • DEVOTION 3

Sierra Combs

If you were to wander around my house, you would find old books in every corner. Even the closets are full of books that I have no room for. If it is old and has a beautiful cover, I feel as if I need to have it, and I have many hundreds to prove my obsession. While I do very much love to read and learn, ironically most of my reading is done on a digital device. Yet it still does not stop me from buying old books, putting them out on display, and just admiring the beauty. Part of this I blame on Disney. I was 6 years old when *"Beauty and the Beast"* came out, and for the last 31 years I have been waiting for someone to gift me an in-home, two-story library, complete with two spiral staircases and a giant fireplace. Not surprisingly, I am still waiting. There is just something about a beautiful, old, well-written book that stirs the soul. The Bible is literally just that. Its message contains the most beautiful words you will ever hear, and nothing has or will ever be better written. It is certainly very old, and it has the power to stir your soul and change you completely. It is the Word of God, and no other set of books could ever compare.

If you have read the Bible in its entirety, you can see that from the very beginning until the very end, it is all about Jesus. While the beginning of time and the end appear to be very different, there are many significant similarities to both. This has always struck me and is such a beautiful reminder of how amazing God is and how His words are perfect and true. I invite you to turn to the first few pages of your Bible with me. In Genesis chapter 2 we are told that ***"the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and***

good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:8-9). The man, Adam, is given full access to the Tree of Life but is forbidden to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam fails the test, eats from the forbidden tree, sin enters the world, and God's story continues for another 65 books.

Now we should flip to the very last chapter of the very last book of the Bible. Revelation 22:1-5 says, ***"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life… also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."*** Does that sound familiar? Just as at the beginning of time, here we again see the Tree of Life. This tree is both literal and symbolic, representing eternal life and blessing that can come only from God. When sin entered the world through Adam's disobedience, access to this tree was cut off. Death enters the scene. Yet, God did not leave us without hope. Instead, He sent His only son Jesus to pay the debt that we owe. The perfect Jesus died on a cross, taking the penalty for our sins. When we trust in Him as Savior, we are reborn and forgiven, given full access to the Father. What Adam lost for humanity, Jesus gives back. One day when He returns, we will live with Him forever in a new Paradise, with full access to that same Tree of Life that brings healing to the nations. Revelation 22:14 says, ***"Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates."*** Verse 17 gives the invitation for

all to come, ***"And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price."***

From the very beginning, before the foundations of the world until its end, it is all about Jesus. When we look at the very first sentence of the Bible in Genesis, we see that the creation of the universe was through Him. The apostle John reminds us of this when he tells us, ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"*** (John 1:1-5). Jesus is the Word. Just as it started with Him, it also ends with Him. Revelation 22:20-21 reads, ***"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen."*** Jesus, Himself sums it up perfectly in Revelation 22:13 when He declares, ***"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."*** If there ever were a perfect set of literary bookends, nothing could be better than Jesus!

ALMOST THERE

THE RETURN OF CHRIST • DEVOTION 4

Pastor Philip Piasecki

Have you ever found yourself waiting for someone to pick you up or meet you somewhere, and they are running late? Not only are they late, but they double down by telling you they are "almost there." When in reality they are not even close. They tell you they are five minutes away when really they are fifteen minutes away? This is one of my biggest pet peeves. It is not the being late part, but the not being honest about being late part. If you are fifteen minutes away, just say you are fifteen minutes away so I can plan accordingly! Just be honest people! Okay, thanks for letting me vent. I feel like some Christians have this perspective toward Jesus when they think of His second coming. He clearly tells us in Scripture that He is ***"coming soon."***

Revelation 22:6-7 says, ***"And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.'"***

We may read this some two thousand years later and feel that He is confused about His definition of the word ***"soon."*** Just like the person who says they are almost there when they are not even close. This is when we must humble ourselves and acknowledge that His ways are not our ways. When thinking about the second coming, I love to think of 2 Peter 3:8, ***"But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."***

When we look at the second coming through the perspective of this verse, the Lord has only been gone a little over two days. In His eternal perspective, He is coming soon. So, why does Christ tell us He is coming soon, what should our response be to that? Is it to stare at the sky each day looking for His return? Of course not, but unfortunately many Christians fall into the trap of being consumed with His second coming that they neglect the work that the Lord has put before them.

Revelation 22:11-13 adds, ***"Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy. Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."***

I love that the verse says let ***"the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."*** Despite the fact that the Lord is coming soon we have a job to do. We still need to be righteous and we still need to be holy. We have a world that needs saving and we should thank God for every extra day that He waits to return, because that means more people around us have the opportunity to know the saving love of Christ. When the Lord does return, I hope He finds the people of The River Church busy growing in their faith and sharing the love of Christ with others.

CARRY THE LIGHT

THE RETURN OF CHRIST • DEVOTION 5

Pastor Josh Yates

We experience so many things in our lives. There are ups and downs, successes and failures, and struggles and victories. These events are so often personal and very close to us. A loved one is suffering. We have personal challenges with health, finances, and relationships. Maybe you made a bad decision and are struggling through the fallout. Possibly another person did something that hurt you deeply and you are trying to wade into the deep waters of forgiveness if that is possible.

Nationally, we have been through a lot in the past year. Decisions have been made on abortion and gun control along with a racial divide that is seemingly huge. We seem to be very separated as a nation. Shootings seem to be happening with regularity. So much so that we are less and less surprised when we hear of them in the news.

When we consider these things, it is heartbreaking and we can begin to lose hope, even faith. God, what is going on? When will you make all things right?

Revelation 22:1-5 says, ***"Then the angel 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. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his***

face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."

A day is coming when Jesus will make all things right. He will judge the world and justice will reign. Healing will come. Provision will be plentiful. Those that have accepted Jesus as their Savior will see His face (not his back like Moses did) and will bear His name. The night can seem so dark at times, but night will be no more. God, Himself will be our light!

These verses bring me back to the truth that God will make all things right.

However, will that only happen in the future?

As a child of God, you bear his name now. You carry the light of Jesus today. You have the fruit of the Spirit in your life to impact those around you at this moment.

Matthew 5:14 and 16 read:

- ***"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."***

- ***"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."***

In 2 Corinthians 4:6 (NLT) Paul adds, ***"For God, who said, 'Let there be light in the darkness,' has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ."***

Carry the light of Jesus wherever you go. He has a purpose and plan for you as the light of the world. God will make all things right in the future. In the meantime, shine the light of Jesus and allow Him to use you to impact lives around you.

In his song, “Don’t You Give Up On Me,” Brandon Lake sings, “When the night’s at its darkest, that’s when the light hits the hardest.”

URGENT REPETITION

THE RETURN OF CHRIST • DEVOTION 6

Pastor Ben Kirkman

Growing up on a farm, my childhood was filled with many urgently repeated warnings. When I failed to consider those warnings, I often found myself in dangerous situations. I seemingly enjoyed finding out the consequences of unheeded warnings. (I am honestly not sure how I survived my childhood.) It was a slight challenge to decide which story of unheeded warning to share with you for this devotion; there are just too many from which to choose.

Our farm had around three acres of yard to mow. Every summer I begged my dad for the opportunity to mow the grass. Finally, after years of begging, when I was around eight years old he finally decided it was time to teach me to drive our mower. We started in the barnyard, a big, wide-open chunk of grass. The only hazard was a large drainage ditch on the north edge of the yard (by a large ditch, I mean it also doubled as our sledding hill in the winter). My dad mowed several passes in front of the ditch to give me room to safely turn and mow back in the other direction. He sat me on the tractor and stood behind me on the hitch. He walked me through all of the important how-tos and what-not-to-dos of operating our antique mower. I remember thinking, “I’ve got it, I’ve got it, just let me take my foot off the clutch and go.” Before I started he warned me, “Start your turn when your front tires cross the grass I have already mowed in front of the ditch. I have given you plenty of room to turn.” With that warning out of the way, we were off. I was driving. I was mowing! My dad was standing right behind me encouraging and reminding me of the instructions he had just given. As we got close to the mark where I was to turn, he started saying, “Get ready to turn.” As the turning point came and went he got a little more animated: “Turn, turn, turn!

Push the clutch! Push the brake!" I completely froze. As my front tires headed down the ditch, I held on tightly to the steering wheel. In self-preservation, my dad jumped off the back and watched as I drove the tractor straight down the ditch and into the opposite bank. I was fine (I did put my mowing career on pause for another summer), the tractor would eventually be fine once recovered and repaired, but it could have ended very badly. I had a clear, urgent warning that I failed to observe!

As John is wrapping up Revelation, we see him urgently repeat a phrase from Jesus three times. In Revelation 22:7, 12, and 20, we read, ***"I am coming soon."*** At this point in our study, we have already seen a glimpse into the Apocalypse, the judgments, and the glorious return and reign of Jesus. We have been made aware of what is coming. It is like John throws out this final plea as he wraps up this letter. "Jesus is returning, these events will happen, I am throwing out this final, urgent warning. Jesus is coming soon, do you believe in Him? Do you know Him? Are you ready for His return? Do not miss the urgent repetition. Jesus is coming soon!"

The Bible teaches that God is merciful and gracious, while His character is also urgently declared to be holy and righteous! The Bible also repeatedly warns that because of our sin we desperately need the atoning work of a Savior. Jesus is that glorious Savior. Do you know Him? The Bible closes with the urgent repetition that Jesus is coming soon. Are you ready for His return and to one day stand before Him?

"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen." Revelation 22:20-21

GLOSSARY

666: Number of the Beast. Six is the number of man; therefore, 666 means completely corrupt (three 6's mimic the complete perfection of the Trinity).

144,000: Jewish believers, 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes who will be witnesses of the Gospel and lead many Jews to Christ during the Tribulation.

Abaddon: Hebrew name given to Satan in Revelation 9:11, meaning "the destroyer."

Alpha and Omega: A title Jesus uses to indicate His eternal nature, "the first and the last" (alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet).

Ancient Serpent: Satan.

Antichrist: Anti means "against" or "in place of." Antichrist, therefore, may refer generally to any apostate teacher who is against Christ or who claims to be Christ. The Antichrist refers to the final and horrible world ruler of the Tribulation. He is one who stands both against Christ and who seeks to usurp Christ's place as the false Messiah of the Jews.

Apocalypse: A term sometimes used for the book of Revelation since the word revelation comes from the Greek (*apokalupsis*), and means, "an unveiling, revelation."

Apollyon: Greek name given to Satan in Revelation 9:11, meaning "the destroyer."

Armageddon: Theological term for the rapid series of military assaults and battles culminating in the return of Christ, when all nations come against Him. Sometimes used to refer to the place of the final battle, Megiddo.

Babylon: A word that designates human rebellion against God, sometimes manifested in a corrupt empire that exists counter to God's will.

Beast: The Greek word rendered "beast" denotes a wild animal and by extension, a savage being. Revelation uses "beast" in its natural sense once, but all (about 30) other uses of the word are figurative, referring to one or another agent empowered by Satan to oppose God, the Lamb, and the saints. The Beast is the Antichrist.

Book of Life or Lamb's Book of Life: The book of life is referred to six times in Revelation and is essentially a register of the names of the righteous. The presence of one's name in the book guarantees entrance into Heaven. By contrast, those whose names are not written in the Book of Life worship the beast and ultimately are condemned to the Lake of Fire.

Bottomless Pit: "Bottomless pit" is one phrase in the Greek of the New Testament and is literally the "abyss," which means "bottomless, unbounded, the pit, or the immeasurable depth." The bottomless pit holds a unique type of demon. It is also the home of the beast who makes war against the two witnesses. At the beginning of the Millennial Kingdom, the bottomless pit is the place where Satan is bound. At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released and promptly leads an unsuccessful revolt against God.

Bride of the Lamb: The bride symbolizes those who are faithful to worshiping Jesus in anticipation of the marriage of heaven and earth at His coming. They, therefore, look forward to His return with joy.

Day of the Lord: This is the period of time that begins with the Tribulation and extends through the millennial reign of Christ on earth through the destruction of the heavens and the earth and into the ushering in of the new heavens and earth and the eternal state.

The Dragon: He is Satan and also referenced as the Great Dragon, a Great Red Dragon, that Ancient Serpent, and the Devil."

Eschatology: The doctrine of "last things" or "things to come." The word eschatology comes from the Greek (*escatos*), and means, "last, extreme."

The False Prophet: In a successive vision, the Dragon confers his power on a Beast (Antichrist) that rises out of the sea. A second Beast (the False Prophet) is said to speak "like a dragon." The Dragon, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet take their place as an evil triumvirate in the chapters that follow (16:13).

The False Trinity: The Dragon (Satan), the Beast (Antichrist), and the False Prophet comprise a counterfeit Trinity. All three will eventually be thrown into the Lake of Fire.

Four Horsemen: The four different horses and riders allude to the book of Zechariah. These horsemen indicate judgment through military conquest and power. Some interpretations see these as literal figures that will come at the end of days. Others view them as symbolic representations of regular occurrences in history (false peace, war, famine, and death).

Great White Throne Judgment: Often called the final judgment, the Great White Throne Judgment follows the millennial reign of Christ. Its purpose is not to determine whether one is saved or not, but rather to pass judgment on the works of the unsaved to demonstrate their unrighteousness and that they fall short of the holiness of God. The sentence is the second death: eternal separation from God in the Lake of Fire.

Heaven: Although it can refer to atmospheric levels (“the heavens”), its main reference is the eternal state for believers (followers of Jesus Christ) with the Lord after death. Joy and worship will replace tears, death, and sorrow.

Hell: In common usage, this term refers to the place of future punishment for the wicked. The word properly translated as "Hell” in the New Testament is the Greek *Geenna* or *Gehenna*, a place in the valley of Hinnom where human sacrifices had been offered and where continuous burning of rubbish made it an apt illustration of the eternal lake of fire.

Imminency: This is a term used in connection with the return of Christ for the church. His coming for the church as promised is imminent, without the necessity of any event that must take place before the Lord returns for His church. It is different from the Second Coming as He meets believers in the air as opposed to walking on Earth.

Jesus Christ: The Messiah, the Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, the Beginning and the End, the Living One, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Lamb of God, the Son of God, the Son of Man, and the Faithful Witness, among other titles, belong to Jesus, Who offers the revelation to John.

Judgment Seat of Christ: This term describes the event when believers will be brought into an examination before the Son of God. The Greek word for “judgment seat” is *bema* and is sometimes referred to as The Bema Seat Judgment. Culturally, it referred to the platform where the umpire for the Greek games would sit and issue rewards to the athletes. Thus, the purpose of the judgment seat is not to determine whether the one judged is a believer or not, but rather to publicly assess, whether acceptable or worthless, one's works (outward) and character (inward) for rewards or their loss.

Lake of Fire: Refers to the eternal state of the wicked who are forever separated from God and consigned to a special abode of suffering because of their rejection of Christ or their lack of the righteousness of Christ. It is also called the second death.

The Lamb: The Lord Jesus Christ.

Mark of the Beast: In sharp contrast to the call that God's people show allegiance to God alone, this mark indicates loyalty to the beast and its number (666).

Millennium: The word millennium means a thousand years and refers to the promise of Scripture that Christ would reign on Earth for a thousand years.

- **Premillennial View:** The second coming of Christ will occur before the Millennium.

- **Amillennial View:** The second coming of Christ is at the end of the Church Age and there is no earthly Millennium.

- **Postmillennial View:** The second coming of Christ is after the Millennium.

Rapture: The "snatching away" of the church before God unleashes His wrath upon the Earth. It is different from the Second Coming as He meets believers in the air as opposed to walking on Earth.

- **Pretribulation Rapture:** The rapture of the Church will take place before the seven-year period of the Tribulation begins. Therefore, the Church will not go through any of the Tribulation period.

- **Pre-wrath Rapture:** The rapture of the church occurs prior to the wrath of God poured out on the Earth, but in this view, the wrath of God does not occur until about or after the last quarter of the Tribulation. Thus the church will experience most of the events of the book of Revelation.

- **Mid-tribulation Rapture:** The rapture will occur in the middle of the Tribulation, after three-and-a-half years before the Great Tribulation.

- **Post-tribulation Rapture:** The Church will be on Earth during the entire Tribulation. Some would say the rapture is a part of the second coming, others that it is distinct from the second coming though separated by only a very short interval of time.

- **Partial Rapture:** Only saints who are worthy will be raptured before the wrath of God is poured out; those who have not been faithful will remain on the Earth to endure the Tribulation.

Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls: Symbols of God's judgment on idolatry and triumph over it. They serve as heralds of God's righteous judgment. They often echo previous instances of God's judgment in Scripture, calling people to repent and turn to God.

Second Coming: This is the time when Jesus Christ will return, defeat the Antichrist, and set up his 1000-year Kingdom on Earth. The second coming is not the Rapture. The Rapture takes place prior to the Second Coming. Also, the Rapture will occur at an unknown time while the Second Coming will take place 42 months after the Antichrist declares himself to be God.

Seven Golden Lampstands: Seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Seven Stars: Pastors of the seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Tribulation: This term is used by most theologians to refer to Daniel's 70th week, the seven-year period of unprecedented trouble that will occur on Earth through a series of divine judgments to be poured out on the entire inhabited Earth. It begins with the signing of a peace treaty with Israel. The Great Tribulation refers to the last half of this seven-year period. It is so called because of the increased wrath that will occur in these last three and half years.

Two Witnesses: During the tribulation, two men will prophesy in the streets of Jerusalem. These two witnesses of God will have the power to prevent it from raining on the Earth, to call fire down from heaven, to turn bodies of water into blood, and to command a number of other plagues. After they preach for 42 months, the Antichrist will be allowed to kill them. Three and a half days later they will be resurrected and Raptured up to Heaven. Some scholars say the two men could either be Elijah and Enoch or Moses and Elijah.

Wormwood: A star falling to the Earth. Wormwood was a well-known bitter herb in the Bible times. By naming the star Wormwood, we are told that its effect will be to embitter the waters of the Earth, so much so that the water is undrinkable. It will not be a matter of simply a bitter taste to the water; it will literally be poisonous.

OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, "We don't go to church, we are the Church." We believe that as God's people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord's Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher it's bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***"all things in common."*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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