

The Revelation

What It Meant Then

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The Revelation—What It Meant Then

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Preface

Many intelligent, well-read Christians have given up on understanding *The Revelation*. It is almost as if John wrote the letter in code, and the codebook has been lost. Everyone seems to have their own interpretation, and even scholars do not agree about a standard interpretation. Worse, many of the interpretations scholars put forth are so abstract that the letter seems to lack relevance. The easy solution is to focus on chapters two and three, where Jesus addresses the churches, and to summarize the remainder of the letter with, “God wins in the end!” While I agree that God does win in the end, I believe *The Revelation* contains many other valuable lessons. I also *refuse* to believe that we cannot understand such a substantial portion of the New Testament.

Rather than interacting with the four main viewpoints, I decided to take a different approach in what follows. Rather than say that I have the definitive interpretation, I am going to present what the *The Revelation* likely meant to the Christians who first read it.

I am *not* saying that what they heard is what we should hear. Also, I am not saying that just because the symbolism meant something then that it cannot mean something else now.

I am saying that their point of view is valid and that the early churches had a common understanding of the letter. (There were also minority interpretations, and that led to a certain amount of conflict and even sects breaking off from the mainstream.) As evidence for this, consider that *The Revelation* was included in the New Testament canon, a process that took centuries to complete. The early churches regularly used many writings that did not meet the requirements for inclusion. Among the requirements for inclusion were that the writing was apostolic, that it taught sound doctrine, and that it was useful. Without a common understanding, the letter would not have been useful, and it would not have been included in the canon.

As we try to see things from their point of view, we should keep in mind that the early Christians then would naturally apply the message to their own situation without giving a great deal of thought to the future. They certainly knew nothing of our modern times. Instead, they applied the symbols in the letter to their own circumstances and to the rulers of their era. We know enough about their times to reconstruct what the letter would have meant to them.

As you read my comments, please keep in mind I am strictly looking at the letter from a late first century perspective. For the sake of clarity, I simply state my conclusions without qualification. Please do not take this as my being dogmatic.

Is This the Preterist View?

Without meaning to discuss other viewpoints, this is not the Preterist view. In my understanding, the persecution of Christians in Rome by Nero and the fall of Jerusalem play only a minor role in *The Revelation*, and they did not directly affect the author or the audience of the letter. The letter was written years after those events.

Dates

All dates are Common Era (CE or AD) unless they are specifically noted as being Before Common Era (BCE or BC.)

Structure of the Comments

After each section of verse, I first provide analysis of what the text meant, often followed by some comments. The analysis and the comments are separated by a small line.

I also often add a Questions section. The purpose of the questions is to speak to the heart, where the comments speak to the mind. I don't offer any answers to the questions, and I don't think there are simple answers. *The Revelation* should be felt more than just understood, so please spend some time meditating on the questions, or make up some of your own.

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A Note About the Translation

You will quickly notice that the text of *The Revelation* sounds a bit different. I made this translation myself, for two reasons. First, I don't always agree with the choice of words made in the major versions, and I did not want to nitpick at the text. Second, I wanted to avoid copyright concerns.

John's writing in this book is simple and rough, and I tried not to improve on it. I also tried to translate each Greek word with the same English word, since John used certain words to create patterns. I encourage you to look at other translations as well, which are available online.

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Introduction

The Author

The Revelation was written by the Apostle John. He was the younger brother of the Apostle James. He was likely the youngest of the Apostles, and the first three gospels always mention him as “James and John.” They were fishermen on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and they worked closely with the Apostles Simon, also known as Peter, and Andrew.

John, along with Andrew, was a disciple of John the Baptist when Jesus came to be baptized. John and Andrew became Jesus' earliest recorded followers two day later. In spite of his youth, Jesus included John in his inner circle of Apostles, along with Peter and James. John, along with Peter, also followed Jesus when he was arrested and witnessed Jesus' trial and Peter's denials.

John played a leading role in the early days of the Church, working closely with Peter. His role became more prominent after his brother, James, was put to death in 42, and the Apostle Paul mentioned that he met with James the brother of Jesus (he became the leader of the church in Jerusalem after the Apostle James' death,) Peter, and John secretly to discuss Paul' doctrine around 45. Little is known of John's ministry over the next 25 years.

Around 69, John settled in Ephesus in the province of Asia. Although Paul had founded the church there some 15 years earlier, Paul had never bonded with the Greek churches, unlike the churches in Galatia and Rome. Instead, the churches throughout Asia embraced John as he ministered to them for almost 30 years. John died around 98, the last of the Apostles.

During Jesus' ministry, James and John earned the nickname “Sons of Thunder,” and Jesus rebuked them for wanting to call down fire on a Samaritan village that had turned Jesus and his followers away. James and John also asked Jesus that they be allowed to sit in the most prominent places in his kingdom, incurring the wrath of the other Apostles.

Possibly, *The Revelation* was the first of John's writings that became Scripture. He also wrote three letters and a gospel. John's other writings show that he was direct and black and white in his thinking as well as compassionate and deeply spiritual.

The Audience

John wrote specifically to the churches at and around Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia. This region is now in northwestern Turkey. The people were Greek with Anatolian influence. In keeping with Greek culture, each city considered itself an independent state with its own citizenship. Citizenship was hereditary and considered of great importance. Citizenship in Rome could be bought at a large price; citizenship in these Greek cities could not be bought at any price. The cities were highly competitive and strove to show that they were better than the others.

Hundreds of years earlier, the kings of the Greek empires had settled Jews in the larger cities. The Jews were known for their complete loyalty, and kings had forced the local Greeks cities to accept them and grant them citizenship, in order to stabilize the region.

The majority of the Christians in these cities were not citizens; the citizens were the “one percenters” of the day. However, even the non-citizens had a deep sense of patriotism and commitment to their city.

Around 190 BCE, a Greek king surrendered the region to the Romans. Around 85 BCE, after a revolt, the Romans increased their control over the region. By the late first century, the cities had been under Roman governance for almost two hundred years.

Rome had a legendary status in the minds of people of Asia. Its military dominated a huge territory, and only the Parthians, far to the east, could withstand it. Politically, the Roman Senate held the fate of the cities in its hand. With a simple decree, the Senate could revoke the status of any of the cities, and the former citizens would become foreigners. All the wealth of the empire seemed to flow to Rome, and the citizens of Rome were thought to live in enormous luxury. *Rome was everything each of the cities of Asia dreamed of being.*

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At the center of all things Rome was the emperor. All the power and wealth of Rome were epitomized by this one man. The people of Asia could easily imagine him seated on Mount Olympus, conversing with the other gods.

As the cities lost their independence, they turned to worshiping Rome and then the emperors as a way to salvage their dignity. The idea was that the cities were still great among men, but Rome and emperors transcended them. While the Romans considered this nonsense, they cynically allowed it and at times sanctioned it as a way of ensuring the loyalty of the cities. This worship could involve public celebrations that lasted for several days, including athletic competitions, chariot races, and plays, along with sacrifices and rituals.

Another empire factored into the thinking of the people of Asia. The Parthians had resurrected much of the old Persian Empire. The Romans held them back well to the east, but the people of Asia feared that they could be invaded if the Romans drew back. The Parthians soldiers were famous as horsemen and archers; they were known for turning around backwards on their horses and shooting arrows with deadly accuracy as they raced away after a charge. The Euphrates River formed the border between the two empires.

Historical Context

Persecutions

While Christians were frequently persecuted during the first 280 years of the Church, these persecutions were local events until around 250. While the first large scale persecution occurred in Rome in the 60's and was sponsored by Nero, the emperor and the Roman Senate were generally not involved. More often, a Roman governor or local officials sponsored persecutions, which tended to be short lived, however brutal they were.

Roman Emperors

Note that Julius Caesar is not included in the list. While he had himself declared Dictator, he was assassinated after four years, with no successor. Both *The Revelation* and *Daniel* chose to exclude him, whether modern interpreters agree with this decision or not.

1. Octavian (Augustus) 27 BCE–14 CE
2. Tiberius 14–37
3. Gaius (Caligula) 37–41
4. Claudius 41–54
5. Nero 54–68
 1. Galba (7 months) 68–69
 2. Otho (3 months) 69–69
 3. Vitellius (8 months) 69–69
6. Vespasian 69–79
7. Titus 79–81
8. Domitian 81–96

Augustus was adopted by Julius Caesar as a youth. After Julius' death in 44 BCE, Augustus engaged in a long power struggle and eventually established himself as emperor in 27 BCE. He stabilized and expanded the empire.

Nero became emperor as a teenager. Early in his reign, he listened to his advisers and ruled gently. As he grew older, he became more focused on indulging himself than on ruling, making him increasingly unpopular, especially with the Senate. Nero's self-indulgence led to mutiny among the legions in the provinces of Spain, Gaul (France,) and Germany. The Senate declared Nero a public enemy, and Nero ended up committing suicide as he fled from Rome.

Following Nero's death, civil war broke out. Three Roman generals, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, had themselves proclaimed emperor, but each of them failed to gain control in Rome and was overthrown.

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Vespasian was made emperor after the civil war. He was popular, and he stabilized Rome and the empire.

Vespasian had two sons, Titus and Domitian. Titus was famous for completing the siege of Jerusalem and was very popular, while Domitian was considered brooding and somewhat strange. Titus died suddenly after reigning for only two years, and Domitian took his place.

Domitian was an able administrator, but he was arrogant towards the Senate, controlling, and heavy handed in rooting out corruption. He thought very highly of himself, styling himself as the new Augustus. He also revived the imperial cult in Rome, which his father Vespasian had ignored. He had his father and brother declared gods and set up a temple in their honor in Rome. Half way through his reign, events triggered mental illness and increasing brutality in Domitian. He died at the hands of his own household.

Subsequently, the Senate appointed Nerva as emperor, knowing that he would wield little power. He died after two years and was succeeded by Trajan, who restored stability. He and his four successors became known as the “Five Good Emperors.”

Major Events

Five events occurred that are particularly important to understanding *The Revelation*.

The Persecution in Rome

In July 64, a fire burned a substantial part of Rome. Rumors circulated that Nero had started the fire in order to clear space for a new palace he wanted to build. Nero countered these rumors by blaming the Christians, and he started a public persecution in the city. Roman historians who witnessed it said that the Christians were treated so brutally that people began to feel sorry for them. In 67, the persecution claimed the lives of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

The Destruction of Jerusalem

In 66, Roman corruption in Judea led to a full scale rebellion. The rebels managed to destroy an entire auxiliary legion, exciting the Jews and shocking Rome into sending Vespasian and his son Titus to suppress the rebellion. The rebels and many Jews entered Jerusalem and prepared for a siege, while the Jewish Christians left the city and headed for Petra in Arabia, which was outside Roman control. The Romans besieged the city for years, which was interrupted by the civil war in Rome in 68–69. In 70, Titus managed to breach the city walls, leading to the destruction of the Temple and a great massacre.

The destruction of the Temple effectively ended the Jewish priesthood and worship required by the Law of Moses. This touched on the very identity of Jews everywhere. In the following decades, the Pharisees introduced new forms of worship revolving around their traditions and the synagogue. Meanwhile, the attitude of the Romans towards the Jews hardened. Vespasian ordered that the Temple Tax, long paid by Jews for the upkeep of the Temple, be paid to Rome instead, to help pay for the war.

This affected those living in Asia in two ways. The Jews became increasingly hostile towards Christians, many of whom still practiced Judaism, as they sought to reestablish their identity. To the Greeks, who placed great emphasis on their cities, Rome had destroyed God's city. To some, this would indicate that Rome was more powerful than God.

Civil War in Rome

After Nero's death in 68, civil war broke out as three generals had themselves proclaimed emperor and were then overthrown. Meanwhile, the Jews were managing to hold out in Jerusalem against Vespasian and Titus. Rome had appeared invincible, but, suddenly, it appeared as if the empire might break into two parts, east and west, or even collapse completely.

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The Worship Center in Ephesus

As Domitian revived the imperial cult, the cities of Asia filed petitions with the Roman Senate, each asking for the privilege of hosting the province's main worship center dedicated to Rome and the emperors. The petition of Ephesus was accepted. The existing worship center, dedicated to Rome and Augustus, was expanded with a new wing dedicated to Vespasian and his sons. It featured an 18 foot tall statue, either of Domitian or of his brother Titus. With the privilege of hosting the worship for the province came annual celebrations that officials in every city would want to be well attended. This set the stage for a tremendous conflict between the local authorities and the Christians.

Domitian Terrorizes The Senate

Domitian had despised the Senate and held a lofty view of himself from the beginning of his reign. However, in 89, one of the governors attempted to lead a revolt against him. Although the revolt was quickly stopped, Domitian became increasingly paranoid and brutal. At the same time, he began to seriously view himself as a god, demanding that he be addressed as "Our lord and god."

By 93, Domitian was openly terrorizing the Senate, accusing senators of plotting against him, putting them to death, and seizing their estates to pay for his building projects. He carried a list of names of those he suspected, who would become his next victims.

In 96, the members of his own household, fearing that their names were on the list, assassinated Domitian. Upon hearing of his death, the Senate, fearing a trap, condemned those who were starting the rumor and sent a party to investigate. Upon learning that Domitian really was dead, the Senate, amidst great rejoicing, damned his memory. This involved erasing his image and name throughout the empire. Domitian was the first of only three emperors to be disgraced in this manner, which reflects the intensity of the Senate's hatred of him and the fear he had instilled.

What Happened In Asia?

What exactly happened in Asia after 89 and the expansion of the worship center in Ephesus is not clearly recorded. However, combining the known facts with some of the descriptions from *The Revelation*, we can make some informed guesses.

First, this was a local persecution, limited to Ephesus and other cities in Asia. The local authorities believed in emperor worship and promoted it. The Senate viewed it as a politically useful superstition, while Domitian no doubt enjoyed the thought of it. However, throughout the empire in the first century, Asia was the only place where this sort of worship was practiced.

Initially, the leaders of the cities in Asia were very concerned that the celebrations at the worship center in Ephesus be well-attended and run smoothly, and the Christians quietly stayed away. The local authorities then denounced the Christians to the governor, who held the power to truly punish the Christians. The governor would view the Christians behavior as an act of disloyalty to Rome in general and disrespect toward Domitian in particular.

The governors were members of the Roman Senate, and, generally, a governor served for one year and then returned to Rome. As Domitian's mental state deteriorated, each new governor he sent felt increasing pressure to respond to reports that Christians were refusing to worship the emperor. By 93, as Domitian terrorized the Senate, the governors had zero tolerance for displays of



The head and forearm from the statue in Ephesus, shown with a tour guide.

<http://lh3.ggpht.com/>

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disloyalty toward Rome and, especially, toward Domitian. At the same time, the local officials would be quite willing to enforce any measures the governor authorized.

The governors made worship at the temple in Ephesus mandatory, and slips of vellum or papyrus were given to those who burned incense and prayed to Domitian. Local authorities then checked that individuals had proper “papers” before allowing them to complete official business of any kind. Wealthy Christians lost everything.

Christians who refused to comply with demands to offer worship to the emperor faced torture or even death, and their enemies took advantage of this by reporting them to the authorities, often anonymously. Between 93 and 96, the intensity of the persecution increased as Domitian became increasingly unstable and each new governor increasingly feared for his estate and his life. Domitian was only 45 years old in 96, and there was no end in sight to his reign or the persecution centered around Ephesus.

Suddenly, in 96, word came from Rome that Domitian was dead and that the Senate had damned his memory. The head of the huge statue in the worship center was pulled off, and workmen were employed in all the cities to chisel out Domitian's image and name everywhere it was found. The Roman governor revoked all the extraordinary measures put in place to guarantee that people worshiped, and the persecution stopped.

How Intense Was The Persecution? How Useful Was The Letter?

Again, we don't have direct information. However, the churches around the Roman Empire quickly and fully accepted *The Revelation*; otherwise, they would not have included it in the canon. The letter was written to a very limited audience in Asia, so the events that occurred must have been sufficiently intense and the letter sufficiently useful that churches in places like Rome and Alexandria heard about both and began teaching from the letter.

Date of Writing

Early Church tradition says that the letter was written in 95, one year before Domitian's death. However, this date seems rather late, as the historical context shows. The letter itself indicates, through symbolism, that it was written during the reign of Vespasian, probably later in his reign, perhaps around 78. This makes sense of the letters warnings of “what must soon happen,” as opposed to, “what has already been happening.”

Most likely, the letter was read to all the churches in Asia. Chapters 2 and 3 led to major repentance in many of them. Then, there was waiting, and the letter lay dormant. A decade later, the events the letter warned about began to take place. By 95, all the churches in the empire new of the persecution, and John's letter was copied and widely distributed. Thus, the letter was written around 78, but it first circulated widely around 95, leading to the traditional date.

Type of Literature

The Revelation is a series of prophetic visions¹. Portions of *Daniel* and some other Old Testament books use this approach, and later Jewish writers used it extensively. The prophet receives one or more messages in a dream or while in a trance. The message consists of supernatural images designed to create shock and awe. The images themselves are composed of symbols and numbers, each of which has a specific meaning. The images then create graphic descriptions that illustrate the message in simple, bold points. However, the meaning is lost if the meaning of the symbols is unclear.

When trying to understand a prophetic vision, a first century audience would not try to assign literal meanings to the images, nor would they try to uncover deeply hidden meanings. Instead, they would apply common interpretations to specific symbols and numbers. In addition, the messengers who carried the letter to the churches would have received detailed explanations from John,

¹ This sort of literature is often called “apocalyptic.” This term comes from the Greek word for “revelation” and came into use because of the letter itself.

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especially on points that were not clear. When the letter was initially read, the churches heard a clear and consistent message.

Symbols and Numbers

The following lists many of the symbols and numbers used in the letter and their meanings.

Lamb—Jesus, emphasizing his sacrifice to take away sins

“The Lamb” is the primary title for Jesus in *The Revelation*. The letter uses it 31 times as a title for Jesus, and once to describe a beast raised up by the Devil in an attempt to lure people away through false religion. The letter uses “Christ” seven times, “Jesus” 14 times, but only three times to refer to him directly.

The Old Testament Law of Moses frequently required lambs to be offered as sacrifices. One of the most important of these sacrifices was the Passover. In *Exodus*, God, working through Moses, brought ten plagues on the Egyptians because Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, refused to let the Israelites go out to worship. Before the final plague, God warned that an angel would go through all Egypt and strike down the firstborn son in every family. *Exodus* 12.3ff describes the provision God made for the Israelites, so that they would not suffer as well. That evening, every family was to sacrifice a lamb and sprinkle the blood above the door of their house. When the angel saw the lamb’s blood, he would “pass over” that house. The blood of the lambs saved the people of Israel.

Isaiah 53 tells that Christ would give his life as a sacrifice for the sins of others; verse 7 describes him as a lamb going to slaughter. Paul, in *I Corinthians* 5.7, calls Jesus our Passover lamb. Peter, in *I Peter* 1.18–19, says that the blood of Jesus, a lamb without blemish or defect, redeems us. John, in his gospel, makes Jesus as the lamb of God a central theme.

The lamb symbol makes two important points in the letter. First, Jesus was the sacrifice that takes away the sins of the saints. Only through the Lamb can people receive forgiveness for their sins. Second, Jesus overcame the world and received glory and honor because he submitted himself to death at the hands of the world without resistance, like a lamb going to slaughter. The letter calls saints to do the same. Chapter 5 develops this idea fully, the first place Jesus is referred to as the Lamb.

“like a son of man”—Jesus

The Revelation uses the expression “like a son of man” twice. It refers to Jesus. *Daniel* 7.13 also uses the expression to describe Christ.

Clouds, thunder, lightening—divine anger, rebuke, judgment

One of the themes in *The Revelation* is that God will judge and punish the world and the Devil for their opposition to the Church. Clouds, thunder, and lightening symbolize God’s wrath and judgment.

Psalms 18.6ff recounts how God came to David’s rescue, riding on clouds, thundering and casting lightening bolts down against David’s enemies. *Psalms* 97.2–4 describes God surrounded by clouds, with his lightening lighting up the world below. *Ezekiel* 30.3, *Joel* 2.1–2, and *Zephaniah* 1.15 all proclaim a day of the Lord, a day of clouds, of doom for the nations.

Rainbow—divine restraint in judgment

The rainbow symbolizes God’s restraint in bringing judgment against the world. *The Revelation* symbolically describes judgments God will bring against the world. If these judgments were carried out literally, the earth and the sun would be destroyed. The rainbow shows that God will restrain his judgments, so the saints should not be overly fearful, nor should they be disappointed!

Genesis 9.8–16 describes the agreement God made with Noah and his sons after the flood. The flood destroyed all life from the earth, except that saved through the ark. God promised never to bring such a destructive flood again. God created the rainbow as a reminder of his promise, that he would show restraint in the future.

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White—holiness, purity

The letter uses “white” 17 times, always in reference to God, Jesus, or the saints. Most often, it describes the robes of the saints, made white by washing them in Jesus’ blood. It symbolizes the holiness of God and the purity from sin enjoyed by those in Christ.

In *Daniel* 7.9, white describes the clothing and hair of the Ancient of Days, or God. In *Matthew* 17.1–2, Jesus’ clothing became white when he was transfigured before Peter, James, and John. In *Matthew* 28.2–3 and *Acts* 1.10, angels were clothed in white. All these references suggest divine holiness. In *Isaiah* 1.18, God tells the Israelites that he will turn their sins as white as snow, symbolizing that he will forgive them and cleanse them.

Trumpet—warning, call to prepare

Trumpets symbolize warnings and calls to prepare. The first round of God’s judgments come at the sounding of trumpets, indicating that they are warnings of worse judgments to come if the world does not repent.

In *Numbers* 10.2, God commanded that two trumpets be made to call the tribes of Israel to break camp. In *Numbers* 31.6, trumpets were used for signaling to the army as it went out for battle. In *Judges* 3.27, Ehud sounded the trumpet to call the Israelites out for battle. In *Ezekiel* 33.1–7, the watchmen were commanded to blow the trumpets as an alarm, warning of danger.

Crown—triumph, victory

The crown symbolizes victory over opposition. Only Jesus and the saints have real crowns in *The Revelation*. Bizarre creatures unleashed by the Devil have “something like crowns”, showing that these “crowns” are not real.

In ancient Greece, a crown of leaves was awarded to the victor in a sporting event. Roman generals wore the conqueror’s gold crown at their victory parade, called a triumph.

Diadem—royal authority

The diadem appears in three places in *The Revelation*: 12.3, 13.1, 19.12 It symbolizes royal authority.

The first use of diadem refers to the Devil, showing that the Devil has royal authority over the world. In *John* 12.31, 14.30, 16.11, Jesus calls the Devil the prince of the world. The second use refers to a beast raised up by the Devil, representing Rome and its emperors. The third use refers to Jesus, who has received ultimate authority from God (*Matthew* 28.18)

Horn—strength, power

Horns symbolize strength and power in *The Revelation*. Horns are used to represent the power of the Lamb, which is complete, and the Devil and his servants, which bring trials and suffering on the Church.

Deuteronomy 33.17 describes the tribe of Joseph as having the horns of a wild ox, with which he will gore the nations. In *Psalms* 18.2, David calls God the horn of his salvation, his stronghold. *Psalms* 75.4–5 warns the wicked against lifting up their horns against God; in verse 10, God warns that he will break off the horns of the wicked but exalt the horns of the righteous.

Beast—Rome and the emperors

The Revelation uses three beasts to describe three aspects of Rome: governing power and authority, emperor worship, and the emperors themselves. The beasts describe the terrifying power of Rome to persecute the Church.

Daniel chapter 7 uses supernatural beasts to symbolize four great empires. *Daniel* identifies three of them, Babylon, Media-Persia, and Greece. The fourth, unnamed, empire is Rome.

Babylon—Rome, decadent and ready to fall

Babylon was an ancient city along the Euphrates River. It had a long history of power, grandeur, and self-promotion. It became the center of an empire around 609 BCE. Under Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple and deported the Jews to Babylon.

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Nebuchadnezzar also made the city magnificent. However, at its height in 539 BCE, the Medes-Persians captured the city in one night with no fighting, bringing the Babylonian Empire to a sudden end.

In *The Revelation*, Babylon symbolizes Rome as wealthy, full of pride, and ready to fall.

Sword—Authority

“Sword” appears a number of times in *The Revelation*, several times as part of a description of Jesus.

In most places in the New Testament, “machaira” is used, a short, dagger-like sword used by the Romans. Along with soldiers, high-ranking Roman officials wore the machaira as a symbol of their right to pronounce a death sentence.

Luke 2:35 and *The Revelation* also use “rhomphaia”. The rhomphaia, used by the Thracians, barbarians who lived to the northeast of Asia. It consisted of a two-foot long handle with a heavy, 2 1/2-foot long blade. The rhomphaia was capable of splitting a shield in two with a single stroke.

In *The Revelation*, all occurrences of sword in reference to Jesus refer to the rhomphaia. It is also described as double-edged, so the image is that of a medieval broadsword. The sword of Jesus is not a relatively small dagger. It is large, powerful, and capable of doing great damage to his enemies.

2—valid witness or testimony

The letter uses the number two in chapter 11 to symbolize that the preaching of the two witnesses is valid.

Deuteronomy 17.6 and *19.15* state that a man cannot be convicted based on the testimony of single witness, but only if two or three witnesses agree. In *Matthew 18.16*, Jesus applies the Old Testament principle to Church discipline.

4—on all sides, from every direction

Four is symbolic of coming from every side or every direction. Four creatures surround the throne of God to defend his holiness. Four angels stand at the corners of the earth, holding back judgment. Satan goes to the four corners of the earth to gather the nations to make war on the Church.

Isaiah 11.12 describes how God would gather his people from the four quarters of the earth. *Jeremiah 49.36* describes God’s judgment against Elam, how four winds from the four quarters of heaven would sweep the nation away to all parts of the earth.

7—complete, full

Seven symbolizes things full and complete.

In *Genesis 2.2–3*, God completed his work of creation and rested on the seventh day. He made the seventh day holy in commemoration. In *Genesis 4.15*, God warned that anyone who harmed Cain would suffer vengeance seven times over. *Psalms 12.6* describes God’s word as flawless, like silver refined seven times in a furnace. In *Isaiah 30.26*, God describes a time of blessing he would bring on his people, saying the sun would shine seven times brighter.

3½—incomplete, partial

3½, or half a seven, symbolizes something incomplete or not done fully. “Time, times, and half a time”, 42 weeks, and 1,260 days, all equal 3½ Jewish years.

Daniel 7.25, *12.7*, and *12.14* use the term “time, times, and half a time.”

10—trial, testing

Ten symbolizes trial and testing resulting from persecution by the Devil and his forces.

In *Genesis 31.41–42*, Jacob accused his uncle, Laban, of changing his wages ten times, causing hardship for Jacob. In *Exodus 7.14–11.1*, God sent ten plagues on Egypt. In *Numbers 14.22*, God condemns the Israelites for testing him ten times.

12—the people of God, the Church

Twelve represents the people of God, the Church.

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In *Exodus* 39.14, the breastplate worn by the high priest contained twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel. In *Matthew* 19.28, Jesus told the Apostles they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. *James* 1.1 is addressed to the twelve tribes, scattered among the nations.

24—priesthood

24 symbolizes the priesthood of the saints.

I Chronicles 24.1–18 relates how David separated the priests into 24 divisions to minister before God.

144—All the people of God, all the Church

144 represents the whole church, 12 x 12.

1,000—a large number

1,000 is symbolic of a great number, many.

In *Deuteronomy* 7.9, God promises to be faithful to a thousand generations. (This would represent 20,000–40,000 years.) In *Psalms* 50.10, God lays claim to the cattle of a thousand hills. In *Psalms* 84.10, a single day in God's courts is better than a thousand days elsewhere. In *Psalms* 105.8, God promises to remember his covenant for a thousand generations.

Combinations

Numbers can be combined: 144,000 indicates the large number of all the people of God.

Overview of the Letter

John narrates *The Revelation* in the first person. He refers to himself as “I” around 90 times. He makes cameo appearances, but his main role is to observe and record. The expression “I saw” appears 34 times as spectacular scenes unfold before him. He opens by stating his name three times in the first nine verses. In verse 22.8, he closes with “I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things.” His presence throughout lends Apostolic credibility to what might otherwise be easy to dismiss.

The letter contains four main sections, each introduced by John saying “I was in the Spirit” or “carried me away in the Spirit.” Each section contains a distinct portion of the overall message. The main sections are preceded by a greeting and followed by a short closing.

The first section introduces Jesus, then records messages from him to the seven churches addressed by the letter. Each message is personalized to that church and is intended to prepare them for the events described in the following sections. Some of the messages are very encouraging, some are open rebukes, and some are both.

The second section describes God's wrath and judgment against the world. Jesus breaks seven seals off the scroll containing word of judgment, which releases four horsemen, seven trumpets, and finally, seven bowls of wrath. This section also introduces the Devil and reveals how Roman authority and emperor worship are the Devil's tools in attacking the Church.

The third section describes God's judgment on Rome, the ultimate punishment of the Devil, universal judgment on the unrepentant, and the wedding of Christ and the Church.

The fourth section describes the Church as the beautiful “New Jerusalem”, filled with glory, where God and Jesus live.

The Message

The message of the letter is simple: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” (*Romans* 8.18) Jesus, through John, warns his people about a tremendous persecution about to take place. Because of the persecution, the Christians will suffer greatly. Those who persevere, not counting their present sufferings as a great cost to obtain future glory, will see God's judgment on the persecutors and gain eternal life.

The Devil is the source of the persecution, and he will use human governments, religions, and sensuality as his tools. The people of God “... will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death,

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and you will be hated by all nations because of me.” (*Matthew 24.9*) However, “... he who stands firm to the end will be saved.” (*Matthew 24.13*)

The message contains four simple lessons:

1. God and Jesus are the ultimate power and authority.
2. The Devil hates God and therefore persecutes God's people. The more righteous the people of God, the greater the persecution. The world will join in this persecution.
3. God will ultimately destroy the Devil and all those who follow him, punishing them severely.
4. Those who stand firm in their faith, even to death, share in God's glory and receive eternal life.

The Revelation sounds like an Old Testament book. The letter is filled with quotes from and allusions to the Old Testament, to the extent that cross referencing all of them would be a distraction. God is portrayed as holy, filled with wrath against sin, and bringing judgment against a sinful world. Jesus is portrayed as stern, awesome, a warrior, and a bringer of judgment. *The Revelation* clearly teaches us that the God of Jesus and the God of the Old Testament are one and the same, and it reminds us that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” (*Proverbs 1.7*)

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The Greeting (1.1–1.8)

In the first century, letters such as this would be read by a trained Reader to the assembled Christians. The audience would expect the letter to start with a greeting, but not like the one they were about to hear.

An Unusual Start (1.1–1.3)

1 ¹The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon happen. He disclosed it, having sent by his angel to his servant John, ²who witnessed the message of God and the witness of Jesus Christ, as much as he saw. ³Blessed are the one reading and those hearing the messages of this prophecy and holding onto the things written in it. For the time is near.

As the audience settled in to listen to the reading of the letter, they expected to hear a standard greeting. However, this letter was far from standard. Instead of a greeting, John announced that God had given Jesus a revelation to show the churches what would soon happen. Jesus then sent an angel to deliver the message to John. Those who heard the letter would do well to take its lessons to heart, for the things foretold would soon take place.

Imagine what the audience would have felt on hearing these words: shock, fear, curiosity, all mixed together. We can imagine the reader pausing and then saying, “Now that I have your attention...”

The Typical Greeting (1.4–1.6)

⁴John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace and peace to you from the one who was, who is, and who is coming, and from the seven Spirits that are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born from among the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To the one who loves us, having freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and who made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be the glory and the might to the ages of the ages. Amen.

Now the letter provides a standard greeting. The author was John, and he was writing to the “seven” churches in the Roman province of Asia. Seven is symbolic of something full and complete, and the letter is addressed to all the churches, although Jesus will address seven of them directly in the first section.

John’s praise introduces several important themes.

- God is eternal and unchanging. In the turbulent, uncertain times ahead, the Christians can look to God for stability.
- Jesus faithfully witnessed, even though it cost him his life. The Christians will soon face the same call.
- Jesus rose from the dead, and his followers will overcome death as well.
- Jesus rules over the rulers of the earth, including the seemingly all-powerful emperor of Rome.
- Jesus loved the saints enough to die bearing their sins, and he has made them into a kingdom and priesthood to serve God. No circumstances or suffering can alter that.

Back to the Unusual (1.7–1.8)

⁷Behold! He comes with the clouds; every eye will see him, even of those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will beat their breasts over him. Yes, amen.

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who was, who is, and who is coming, the Almighty.”

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The “greeting” now returns to its unusual form. In verse 7, John strings together quotes from the Old Testament. Clouds symbolize judgment, and Jesus will soon return to pass judgment, and the world will mourn because of it.

In verse 8, God himself speaks directly to the audience. Alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. God was before the creation of the world, and he will remain after the world is gone. He alone is the ultimate power, not any man, not even the Roman emperor himself.

Imagine how the Christians felt after hearing this introduction! This is the only writing in the New Testament that claims to be the result of a direct revelation from God and the only writing where God breaks in on the writer to directly address the recipients. Nero had martyred Paul and Peter eleven years earlier; Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem had been fulfilled less than ten years before. Now, something even more catastrophic was about to take place!

Questions

How would you respond if your church received a letter like this?

Do you believe that a time of intense persecution is possible today?

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Section One: Jesus Prepares the Churches (1.9–3.22)

In this first section, Jesus prepares the churches for the coming trials. John introduces the glorified Jesus; he is powerful and awesome. Jesus then addresses each of the churches, encouraging, admonishing, and rebuking each according to their needs.

How John Received the Message (1.9–1.11)

John starts by describing how he received this revelation.

⁹I, John, your brother and partner in the affliction, kingdom, and perseverance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the witness of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard a great voice behind me, like a trumpet, ¹¹saying, “Write down what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

Apparently, the authorities had exiled John because of his preaching and his leadership role among the churches. Patmos was a tiny, barren island off the coast containing salt mines. One Sunday, he heard a loud voice calling him to record and transmit a message for the churches. Trumpets symbolize warnings; the message will be a call to prepare.

Importantly, John makes clear that he in no way made up this message. God and Jesus revealed the message to him in a series of visions, and John, like a scribe, simply wrote down what he saw.

The stylized statement, “I was in the Spirit” indicates that this is the start of the first major section of the letter.

The seven churches are now specified as Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. While the first three cities mentioned were among the most prominent in the province, the last four were not, and the province contained many other significant congregations. Jesus will address these seven churches individually, clearly indicating that they were not chosen at random or simply because they fell upon a mail route. They were singled out as representative of all the churches in Asia, and while the message to each is quite personal, the overall message is intended for all the churches in the province.

Jesus In His Glory (1.12–1.20)

Jesus is introduced in a way that guarantees that the churches will listen carefully as he addresses them.

¹²I turned around to see the voice that was talking with me, and when I turned, I saw seven gold lamp stands, ¹³and in the midst of the lamp stands, one like a Son of Man. He was dressed in a robe reaching his feet, and a golden sash was wrapped around his chest. ¹⁴His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like fine brass when it has been refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶He held seven stars in his right hand, a sharp, double-edged broadsword came out of his mouth, and his face was like the sun shining in its power.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell down before his feet like a dead man. He put his right hand on me, saying, “Do not fear. I am the First and the Last, ¹⁸and I am the Living One. I was dead, and behold! I am alive to the ages of the ages, and I hold the keys to Death and Hades. ¹⁹So then, write what you have seen, and the things that are, and the things that must happen after these. ²⁰The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and of the seven golden lamp stands, is this: the seven stars are angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands are seven churches.”

In the vision, John turns toward the voice and sees seven lamp stands, which represent the seven churches. Walking among them is “someone like a son of man”, that is, Jesus. He is dressed as a priest prepared for service to God. White describes his absolute purity. His eyes are piercing, seeing

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beneath the surface to the heart. Feet of fine brass have power to crush his enemies underfoot; his voice thunders like a waterfall. In his hand, Jesus holds the fate of each of the churches. His words are a large, sharp, double-edged sword; his glory is brilliant beyond beholding. Jesus is stern, powerful, and awesome. The image is not of the gentle Savior but the almighty Lord. John faints at the sight.

Jesus gently encourages John not to be afraid. Jesus is eternal, just as God is eternal, and he has power over death. Jesus then commissions John to write down what is and what will take place.

John was very close to Jesus during their time together, yet he collapsed at the sight of Jesus in his glory. We focus on Jesus enduring opposition as he preached the gospel, healing people, submitting himself on the cross, and forgiving sins, which we should. However, we must keep in mind that Jesus is Lord and Judge over the world.

Questions

How does John's description of Jesus fit with your image of Jesus?

Is your concept of Jesus broad enough to see Jesus as both gentle and powerful?

Jesus Addresses the Churches (2.1–3.22)

Jesus addresses each of the churches. Each address starts with a description of Jesus' character, then a description of the state of the church, then encouragement and admonition. The churches are addressed in the order the letter would be delivered by a messenger following the road connecting the cities.

In each message, Jesus shows an intimate knowledge not only of the needs of each church, but also of the history and the culture of each city.

Ephesus—Hard Work, Hard Heart

Ephesus was the largest city in Asia. It was an important commercial center, and the temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Paul spent two years in Ephesus, and the church there had been the focal point for the spread of the gospel throughout the region (Acts 19.10). It was also John's home base.

2¹“Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus: He who grasps the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lamp stands, says this—²I know your deeds, your labor and perseverance, and that you cannot bear evil men. You tested those who call themselves Apostles (and they are not,) and you found them to be liars. ³You have perseverance, you endured because of my name, and you have not grown weary.”

⁴“However, I hold this against you: You have departed from the love you had at first.

⁵Therefore, remember from where you have fallen, repent, and do the earlier deeds. But if not, I will surely come to you, and I will remove your lamp stand from its place, if you do not repent.

⁶Yet you have this: you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷“He who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who emerges victorious, I will permit him to eat from the tree of life, which is in the garden of God.”

Jesus describes himself as holding the churches in his hand. This could equally represent his protection or his power over them and their fate.

He tells the church that he sees their efforts. They are effective, they work hard, and they persevere. They do not tolerate sin in the church, and they hold to true doctrine. They endure opposition without becoming weary. They seem like a model church!

However, in Jesus' sight, the church had fallen. They had lost their love for God. He demands deep repentance and a return to the devotion to God they had at first. The condition of the church was so bad, Jesus doesn't warn them of discipline. Instead, he threatens that he will simply cut off the entire church.

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Jesus finishes by again recognizing what is good in their faith. They hate the false teaching and practices of a group called the Nicolaitans. Jesus hates their practices as well.

To those who emerge victorious, Jesus promises to allow them to eat from the tree of eternal life. Adam and Eve had been banned from the tree because of their sin (*Genesis 3*), but Jesus has restored access to it for those who overcome.

The church in Ephesus expected praise, but it found itself severely rebuked. Good deeds, hard work, perseverance, and sound doctrine are the overflow of love for God, but they are not a substitute. The church became so focused on doing right and hating sin that they forgot why they did these things in the first place. The satisfaction of hard work and accomplishment replaced gratitude and love for the One who died in order to call them out of darkness.

Questions

Jesus' threat to cut off an entire church might sound like hyperbole. Would he really cut off the largest and most effective church in the region?

Smyrna—Faithful and Persecuted

Smyrna lay 40 miles to the north of Ephesus. Next to Ephesus, it was the largest commercial center in the region and a city of great beauty. A shrine to Roma, the god of Rome, was erected there in 195 BCE. Smyrna claimed to be the first city of the region, first in beauty, in literature, and in loyalty to Rome, and civic pride ran high. The city was famous for its grape vines, and Dionysus, the god of wine, was very popular. Mythology held that Dionysus had died and been raised from the dead, a theme portrayed in public plays each year.

⁸“Write to the angel of the church in Smyrna: The first and the last, who was dead and came to life, says this—⁹I know your affliction, poverty (yet you are rich!) and the blasphemy of those claiming themselves to be Jews and they are not, but they are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Fear nothing of what you are about to suffer. Behold! The Devil intends to throw some of you into prison in order to test you, and you will have affliction for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹“He who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who emerges victorious will surely not be harmed by the Second Death.”

Jesus introduces himself as first, and also as last. Smyrna may have claimed the distinction, but its claim would not stand up over time. He also introduces himself as having been dead, but he came back to life. Myth held that Dionysus had died and raised from the dead; Jesus had conquered death and was seen by eyewitnesses, including John.

Jesus starts by recognizing the trials that the church endured. By refusing to participate in the city's worship, the Christians made themselves pariahs at great personal cost. In the world's eyes, the Christians were poor and foolish; Jesus sees them as having true riches. He also exposes the religious “Jews” who prompt hostility towards the church through their slander. They claim to serve God, but in reality they serve Satan.

Jesus tells them the persecution will get worse. The Devil's goal is to destroy the church by causing the Christians to renounce their faith. Ten symbolizes trials and testing; ten days indicates that the time of testing would be intense but short.

Jesus gives two commands and a promise: Do not be afraid of suffering. Be faithful, even to death. You will receive the victor's crown of life.

To those who emerge victorious, Jesus promises that they will be kept safe from the Second Death. Better to endure death at the hands of persecutors in this life than to experience death in the life to come.

Jesus attitude toward the church in Smyrna was exactly the opposite of his attitude towards the church in Ephesus. The church in Ephesus worked hard and was effective, yet Jesus rebuked them

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for lacking love. The church in Smyrna was poor and afflicted, yet Jesus commended them and encouraged them to stand firm in their faith. God desires faithful devotion above all else.

Questions

What does Jesus think about people who claim to be religious and yet mistreat others?

Jesus called the church to endure, even to the point of death. Do you believe your faith is worth dying for?

Pergamum—Faithful but Soft

Pergamum lay 30 miles north and 15 miles east of Smyrna. Its king, upon his death in 133 BCE, left the city and his kingdom to Rome. In 29 BCE, a temple was erected to Roma and Augustus, the first temple built in honor of the emperors. Pergamum was the Roman provincial capital and the center of government activity. Above the city was a ledge in the hillside, which looked like a giant throne. On the ledge sat an altar for Zeus.

¹²“Write to the angel of the church in Pergamum: He who has the sharp, double-edged broadsword says this—¹³I know where you live, where Satan’s throne is, and that you hold fast to my name. You did not deny the faith about me, even in the days of my faithful witness Antipas, who was killed among you, where Satan lives.

¹⁴“However, I hold a few things against you. You have some there who hold fast to the teachings of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a snare before the sons of Israel, to eat food sacrificed to idols and to fornicate. ¹⁵In the same way, you also have those who hold tight to the teachings of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Therefore, repent! But if you do not, I am coming to you soon. I will make war on them with the broadsword coming from my mouth.

¹⁷“He who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who emerges victorious, I will give him some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is written, which no one understands except the one who receives it.”

Jesus introduces himself as holding the sharp, double-edged sword. To the Romans, the sword was a symbol of authority and of the right to pronounce a death sentence. In this city that claimed Roman authority to punish, Jesus claims absolute authority.

Jesus begins by commending the church for their faithfulness. Satan took great advantage of the Roman presence in the city to oppress the church. Antipas was likely a church leader, called into court and executed when he refused to renounce his faith. In Smyrna, the Jews lead the persecution; in Pergamum, the authorities do. In both places, the real source of the persecution is still Satan. Through all this, the church remained faithful.

Jesus then warns the church that they were tolerating sin in their fellowship. Jesus refers to some who follow a false teaching that promotes idolatry and sexual immorality. Balaam was a sorcerer who encouraged Balak, king of Moab, to involve the Israelites in immorality so that God would turn against them (*Numbers* 22-25, 31.8, 16) The Nicolaitans' teaching leads to similar behavior. The church leaders are failing to take a strong stand against these people by demanding repentance or expelling them from the fellowship.

Jesus makes an ultimatum: the leaders must confront those in sin, or he will.

To those who emerged victorious, Jesus makes two promises. First, he will provide them with the hidden manna. God gave the Israelites manna to eat in the desert after they left Egypt, when they were facing starvation. In the same way, Jesus will provide for all the needs. He also promises to give them a white stone with a secret name written on it. Such stones served as guest passes to special events. White symbolizes purity. A name represented a person's character; a new name indicates that Jesus would provide them with a renewed character. Only the one who is given the stone will know the name, indicating its completely individual and personal nature. This new name is not generic and impersonal, like the name of a city that its citizens bore. Jesus will give each individual a new, personalized name.

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The leaders of the church worked hard to maintain the faith and devotion of the Christians in the face of persecution. As they worked to encourage and build up, however, they became soft in confronting false doctrine and the sinful behavior that accompanied it. Possibly, they were overlooking the behavior of these people. More likely, they taught against the false doctrines and sins, but they were unwilling to take the step of openly confronting those promoting them and expelling those who refused to repent. They may have feared a reaction from fringe members whose faith was already weak.

Jesus commanded the leaders to repent and to take strong action. He was far more concerned with the effects of sin within the church than he was with people's reactions. If the leaders refused to take action, then he would. Jesus didn't specify how he would deal with those in sin, but it would no doubt be severely disruptive to the church.

Questions

What would you think if a leader in your church was convicted and sent to prison because of preaching the gospel?

What is your attitude when leaders in your church confront members who refuse to repent of sin?

Thyatira—Faithful but Compromised

Thyatira lay 40 miles southeast of Pergamum. It was a plain but wealthy manufacturing town, dominated by its trade unions. Membership in a trade union was necessary to work in a trade, and the idolatry associated with the union membership presented a major challenge to the church.

¹⁹“Write to the angel of the church in Thyatira: The Son of God, who has eyes like flames of fire and feet like polished bronze, says this—I know your deeds, love, faithfulness, service, and your perseverance, and that your last deeds are greater than the first.

²⁰“However, I hold against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and leads my servants astray to fornicate and to eat meat sacrificed to idols. ²¹I have given her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her prostitution. ²²Behold! If they do not repent of her deeds, I will surely throw her and those who adulterate themselves with her onto a bed of great affliction. ²³I will kill her children with pestilence². Then all the churches will recognize that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and that I will give to each of you according to your deeds.

²⁴“But I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, as many as do not hold to this teaching, everyone who has not acknowledged the ‘deep things of Satan,’ as they call them. I put no other burden upon you, ²⁵only that you hold tight to what you have until whenever I will come.

²⁶“He who emerges victorious and who keeps my deeds until the end, I will give him authority over the nations, ²⁷and he will shepherd them with an iron staff like clay jars that are smashed, ²⁸just like the one I also received from my Father, and I will give him the morning star. ²⁹He who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Jesus introduces himself as having eyes that penetrate to the heart and feet capable of trampling his enemies into the ground. He can expose and destroy those who claim his name but don't live according to his ways.

Part of the church is doing well; their love, faith, service, and perseverance produce good deeds. Not only that, but they are doing more than when they started.

However, the church leaders had allowed a prominent woman to gain substantial influence. Wealthy women frequently hosted house churches. This woman had used this as an opportunity to support false teachers, possibly from among the Nicolaitans.

²Typically, this word means “death”. It also means “pestilence” or “disease” when it refers to the cause of death.

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Jesus calls her “Jezebel”. Jezebel was the notorious foreign wife of Ahab, king of Israel. She was a devoted idolater, and she used her influence to promote Baal worship and to destroy the worship of God in Israel (*I Kings* 16.29ff, 21.25)

The trade unions pressured members to participate in idolatry, and, presumably, sexual immorality was part of it. “Jezebel” taught that the grace given in Christ covered such sins, since the Christians were acting like this only to preserve their livelihood. Her message became popular with many of the Christians, so that the leaders of the church lost control of the situation and the church split into factions. The Jezebel faction mocked those who rejected this teaching, saying that they were ignorant of the deeper truths of God.

Jesus simply calls the faithful to continue in their faith and devotion. He will deal with “Jezebel” and her followers. He patiently gave her opportunity to repent, but she refused. Therefore, he will cause her and those whom refuse to repent of her ways to suffer intensely, and he will strike dead those who teach her ways to others. He will bring such a judgment on them that the other churches will see and take warning.

To those who emerge victorious, Jesus promises that they will rule as kings, just as God gave the same privilege to him. The mention of an iron staff smashing pottery to pieces is a well-known reference to *Psalms* 2, where God makes this promise to his Son. Jesus also promises to give them the morning star. The meaning here is obscure. The morning star refers to Venus, which appears very bright just before dawn. In chapter 22, Jesus will refer to himself as the morning star. The significance may lie in its beauty and that it represents the hope of a new day.

In Pergamum, the leaders were tolerating false teaching and sin. Jesus commanded them to take strong and immediate action, or he would step in himself. In Thyatira, the leaders did an excellent job shepherding the faithful, but they failed to take strong action in a similar situation and had lost control. Leaders must take strong action against sin and false teachings when they first arise, and the Christians must support their leaders in taking action.

Compromise with the world is an open door for Satan. “Jezebel” gained influence only because so many of the Christians were unwilling to completely commit their physical needs into God’s hands, and they were unwilling to accept the possibility that righteousness might require poverty. Second and third century Christians generally viewed wealth as a trap and actually encouraged wealthy converts to give away their possessions, so they wouldn’t be tempted during times of persecution.

Questions

If your profession required you to openly sin, would you compromise?

Sardis—Faded Glory

Sardis was a city with a glorious past. Located 30 miles south and slightly east of Thyatira, it was it was the former capital of the very wealthy kings of Lydia. Built on a ledge of a mountain, it was surrounded by a 1,500 foot sheer cliff, with only a narrow connection to the mountain itself. Its location made it a natural fortress. On two occasions, however, its kings had taken refuge in it, with their enemies camped at the base of the mountain. Both times, someone had found a seam in the cliff and managed to sneak into the city by night and open its gates, allowing it to be taken. By the first century, the city had lost its significance.

3¹“Write to the angel of the church in Sardis: He who holds the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars says this—I know your deeds; you have a reputation that you live, and you are dead. ²Wake up! Strengthen what remains, which is about to die, for I have not found your deeds to be complete before my God. ³Therefore, remember that which you have received and heard, guard it, and repent! But if you do not stay awake, I will come like a thief, and you surely will not know in what hour I will come upon you.

⁴“However, you have a few individuals in Sardis who have not soiled their clothing, and they will walk with me in white, because they are worthy.

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⁵“In the same way, the one who emerges victorious will dress in white clothing. I will surely not erase his name from the Book of Life, and I will confess his name before my Father and his angels. ⁶He who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Jesus introduces himself as holding the seven spirits and the seven stars. The seven spirits indicate that Jesus is all seeing; the seven stars indicate Jesus holds the fate of the churches in his hand. He can see the true condition of the church; they had best take his warning seriously.

Sardis was a city living on its past reputation, and the church there was also. Jesus knew their reputation; he also knew they were no longer living up to it. The kings who once lived in the city became complacent and were conquered. In the same way, the church had become complacent and dull. They had begun with good deeds, but then they slacked off. Jesus’ warning is clear: realize your condition, repent, and grow, or you will be cut off.

In spite of the general dullness of the church, a few individuals maintained their faith, as represented by keeping their clothing clean.

Jesus promises the few that they will be dressed in white clothing. White symbolizes purity, and this new clothing will stay pure for eternity. He also promises that he will not erase their names from the book of life, implying that he has already erased many other names. He also promises to confess their names before God and the angels. Many Christians found themselves standing in the arena before a huge crowd, where the governor would give them one last chance to deny Jesus. Instead, they would proudly own Jesus as Lord. In the same way, Jesus would proudly own them before the heavenly court.

In spite of the sorry state of the church, Jesus had not given up on them. He challenges them to wake up and rebuild, starting with what they have left.

Questions

Do you find yourself living according to the people around you, rather than the standard Jesus set?

Philadelphia—Victory at Hand

Philadelphia was located 28 miles southeast of Sardis. The city lay along a major trade route, bringing great wealth. However, it was a city living with insecurity. An earthquake in 18 had devastated the city, which was not unusual for the region. However, strong aftershocks had continued for years, causing many of the residents to move to the open areas around the city. By the time of the letter, the city had regrouped, but the fears remained.

⁷“Write to the angel of the church in Philadelphia: The holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, the one who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this—⁸I know your deeds. Behold! I have placed an open door before you that no one is able to close, because you have little power and you kept my word and did not deny my name. ⁹Behold! I will surely give to those of that synagogue of Satan, the ones claiming themselves to be Jews and they are not, but they lie... Behold! I will make them come and worship at your feet, so that they should understand that I loved you.

¹⁰“Because you kept my word about perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing that is about to come upon the entire inhabited world, to test those living on the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon. Hold tight to what you have, so that no one may take your victor’s crown.

¹²“I will make the one who emerges victorious a pillar in my God’s sanctuary, and he will surely not go outside any longer. I will write my God’s name upon him, the name of my God’s city, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God, and my new name.

¹³He who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The Jews claimed to be holy and true, as opposed to the Christian heretics, with David as their king. Jesus introduces himself as the One who is holy and true, and the one who received the promises made to David. No one can oppose Jesus’ will, and no one can do anything he opposes.

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The church diligently strives to preach the word, but the Jews oppose them, making their efforts relatively ineffective. At the same time, the Jews claim to be the true heirs of God and condemn the Christians as a misguided sect. They point to their own wealth and influence as proof of God's favor.

In spite of this, the church perseveres in doing God's work. Jesus tells the church that he sees their efforts. They have little power, but he will open a door for them, and no one will shut it. In addition, he will expose the Jews for what they were, servants of Satan, not heirs of God.

Just as the city had spent decades living in fear of another catastrophe, the church in the city lives in fear that the opposition against them would grow even more intense. Jesus reassures them that, since they have kept his word with perseverance, he will keep them from experiencing intensified opposition.

Jesus has one admonition: they must continue doing what they have done so far. They are running a good race, now they must cross the finish line.

To those who emerged victorious, Jesus promises to make them a pillar in God's sanctuary, and there will be no need to ever leave it. No earthquake or other calamity will ever shake them, and they will never feel the need to flee. Jesus will also write God's name, the name of the new Jerusalem, and his own name on them. Slave owners would place a mark on their slaves to show ownership. In a positive sense, God and Jesus will not hesitate to "own" those who overcome. In addition, the victorious will be given citizenship in the heavenly city. Citizenship was highly prized and difficult to obtain, and some Christians have forfeited theirs because of their faith and unwillingness to practice idolatry. They will become citizens of a far greater city than any other, greater even than Rome itself.

The Philadelphia church stands in sharp contrast to that in Ephesus. The Ephesian church was dynamic, powerful, and in deep trouble. The church in Philadelphia was powerless, praised, and spared from further testing. Jesus examines the heart and the effort, not the results.

Questions

What do you respect most in the Christians you admire?

Laodicea—Rich and Deceived

Laodicea lay some 45 miles southeast of Philadelphia. The city was notorious for its wealth, pride, and independence from Roman authority. In 60, an earthquake destroyed the city, along with Hierapolis and Colossi. The citizens pointedly refused assistance from Rome and rebuilt the city entirely from their own resources. At time of the letter, the city had just finished rebuilding its walls, including a huge triple gate. The city leaders would lock the gates at night and refuse to admit Roman couriers who arrived too late.

A nearby school of medicine produced a widely used eye medicine. A special breed of sheep produced soft, glossy black wool. Trade and banking brought great wealth to the city. Laodicea was a popular retirement spot for the affluent.

The valley in which Laodicea lay also contained Hierapolis and Colossi. The valley had abundant supplies of water, but volcanic activity causes much of the water to be tainted. However, Hierapolis had hot springs that were excellent for dying cloth, while Colossi had a hidden spring with cold, clear water. Laodicea had neither of these benefits; its water was warm and could cause vomiting if it was not allowed to sit and cool.

¹⁴"Write to the angel of the church in Laodicea: The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the architect³ of the creation of God, says this—¹⁵I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor boiling hot. I wish that you were cold or boiling hot! ¹⁶Consequently, because you are tepid and neither boiling hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.

¹⁷"Because you say, 'I am rich, and I have become wealthy, and I need nothing,' and that you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, impoverished, blind, and naked, ¹⁸I advise you to

³Greek, arche. The word means either the beginning or origin of something, or ruler. Here, Jesus has both ideas in mind when he refers to himself. Arche-tekton means ruler of the builders; Jesus ruled over the process of the creation.

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buy from me gold refined in fire, so that you might be rich, and white clothing, so that you might dress and not expose your shameful nakedness, and eye ointment to rub on your eyes, so that you might see.

¹⁹”As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. Therefore, be zealous and repent! ²⁰Behold! I stand at the gate and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I also will come in to him, and I will eat with him, and he with me.

²¹”I will allow the one who emerges victorious to sit with me on my throne, just as I also emerged victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²He who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Jesus introduced himself as the Amen, the “so be it.” He is never indifferent or uncertain. He stands out as a witness to God’s glory. He is the source of all creation. No one has anything that he did not provide.

This is the only church about which Jesus had nothing good to say. He compared them to the local water. The hot water in Hierapolis was good for business; the cold water in Colossi was good to drink. All the tepid water in Laodicea did was cause people to vomit.

The Christians in Laodicea were extremely proud. They saw themselves as wealthy and not needing anyone’s assistance. Jesus saw them as impoverished, naked, blind, desperately needing help. They needed to exchange their “wealth” for true riches.

Jesus made clear that he loved them and wanted a relationship with them. His tough warning was intended for their good. They needed only to repent, and all would be forgiven. However, they had locked Jesus out of their hearts and refused to acknowledge his authority, even as he patiently knocked at their door.

In *Ephesians* 2.8-9, the Apostle Paul said, “For it is by faith that you have been saved, through grace. And this did not come from you; it was God’s gift, not the result of deeds, so that not anyone should boast.” While they did it with quiet voices, the church did nothing but boast about themselves. Meanwhile, the Devil left them alone, since he did want them to think about the danger they were in from God. Fortunately, Jesus was willing to give them a much needed wake up call.

The image of Jesus wearily rapping on the gate, waiting for a response, is amazing. The Romans exercised total authority over the city, and the city had no right to lock out its messengers. How much more impudent for the Christians to lock Jesus out of their hearts.

Questions

What does, “Jesus is Lord,” mean to you?

When you hear the knock of conviction, how long do you take to respond?

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Section Two: God's Wrath Against The World (4.1–16.21)

The second section of the letter first introduces God, portraying him as holy and worthy of all honor. At the same time, the Church is portrayed as a royal priesthood that is part of the God's inner circle. Next, it introduces Jesus as the Lamb. He shares God's glory because he submitted himself to death in order to redeem mankind from sin.

Now that Jesus has fulfilled his role as Redeemer, he is worthy to assume a new role, as Judge. God hands him a scroll filled with judgment but locked by seven seals. One by one, Jesus breaks the seals, bringing devastating judgments on the world. As he breaks the seventh seal, seven angels with trumpets appear, with the sounding of the seventh trumpet, seven angels will bowls filled with wrath appear. Finally, as the seventh bowl is poured out, God's judgment against the world is completed.

The judgments take the form of natural disasters, famines, and invasions by foreign armies. However, seven symbolizes something full and complete, while three symbolizes divine nature. The three sets of seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls show that these judgments are both divine and complete.

The key message of this section is that God and Jesus utilize these events as judgments on a hostile and stubborn world. On the other hand, there is a limit to God's wrath. He also shows restraint, so that mankind will not be destroyed, at least not until the distant future.

Many specific lessons are sprinkled throughout this section. Some deal with specific aspects of God's judgment, while others show God's provision for his people and his call to persevere.

In the midst of God's judgments, the Devil will make his appearance. In his fury against God, he will attack the Church, turning Rome into terrifying beasts for this purpose.

The Divine Court (4.1–4.11)

In a vision, John sees God seated on a throne in glory, with the Church portrayed as a royal priesthood around him.

4¹After these things I looked, and behold! A door was open in Heaven. The first voice, which I had heard like a trumpet speaking with me, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after these things." ²I was immediately in the Spirit, and behold! A throne was there in Heaven, and One sat on the throne.

In a vision, John ascends into the presence of God, where he will be shown the details of what is about to happen. The trumpet-like voice sounds a warning and a call to action. The expression "in the Spirit" marks this as the beginning of a new section of the letter.

³He who sat on the throne resembled a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance, and there was a rainbow around the throne that resembled an emerald in appearance. ⁴All around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on these thrones sat twenty-four elders dressed in white clothing, and on their heads were golden victor's crowns. ⁵Lightning, sounds, and thunder went out from the throne, seven fiery torches burned before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God, ⁶and before the throne was something like a sea of glass that resembled crystal.

In the midst of the throne and around the throne were four creatures, filled with eyes front and back. ⁷The first creature resembled a lion, the second creature resembled a young bull, the third creature had a face like a man, and the fourth creature resembled an eagle flying. ⁸Each of the four creatures had six wings apiece, and they were filled with eyes all around and within, and day and night they have no rest, saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and who is, and who is coming!"

⁹Whenever the creatures give glory, honor, and thanksgiving to the One who sits on the throne, who lives to the ages of the ages, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall down before the One who sits on the throne and worship the One who lives to the ages of the ages, and they lay their victor's crowns before the throne, saying, ¹¹"Our Lord and God, you are worthy to receive glory,

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honor, and power, because you created all things and through your will they existed and were created.”

God is seated on a throne, showing his ultimate authority over all things. John describes God only in terms of flashing colors of precious stones. The rainbow over the throne symbolizes God’s mercy and restraint.

Surrounding God is the Church. The thrones indicate royalty, twenty-four symbolizes priesthood, white clothing purity and righteousness, and the golden crowns represent victory.

From the throne come signs of judgment and wrath. The seven blazing lamps completely light all things that would hide in darkness; the seven spirits see all things, ensuring that no one will go unnoticed. Before the throne is sea of purity, separating God’s holiness from anything impure.

Four creatures surround the throne, one on each side. Their many eyes ensure nothing approaches without their knowledge. They are fearsome and powerful defenders, who continually proclaim God’s holiness.

As the creatures declare God’s glory, the Church joins in giving praise. They bow down and lay down their crowns, showing complete deference and giving the credit for their victory entirely to God. They acknowledge God’s right to rule, based on the fact that he created all things.

God is portrayed here as sovereign, glorious, and ready to pass judgment, but the main emphasis is on his complete holiness. Nothing that is less than completely pure can come near him. He can have only one response to a sinful world that has rejected his offer of forgiveness: judgment. However, the coming judgment will not destroy the world, as did the flood; he will show restraint.

The Church is pictured as a royal priesthood, clothed in righteousness, victorious over sin and the world, in close fellowship with God.

Questions

The Church is portrayed as royal priests, wearing victor’s crowns, and sitting on thrones in God’s presence. Do you imagine yourself one day being honored in the presence of God?

As the four creatures proclaim God’s holiness, the Church falls down and worships. Is praising God a part of your daily prayer?

In verse 11, the Church claims God is worthy because he is the Creator of all things. Does the Creator have the right to set out laws for his creation and to enforce them?

Only Jesus is Worthy to Bring Judgment (5.1–5.14)

God holds a scroll filled with judgments against the world; however, no one is found worthy to open it. Jesus receives a grand introduction to the Divine Court. He receives special honor, and he is worthy to bring judgment because he submitted himself to be sacrificed to save mankind from their sins.

5¹Then I saw, in the right hand of the One who sits on the throne, a scroll with writing inside and on the back that was sealed with seven seals. ²I also saw a strong angel proclaiming with a great voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and to breaks its seals?” ³However, no one was able, in Heaven, on earth, or under the earth, to open the scroll or to look at it. ⁴I began to weep profusely, because no one worthy was found to open the scroll or to look at it. ⁵One of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold! The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has emerged victorious to open the scroll and its seven seals.

John sees a scroll in the hand of God. The scroll contains writing front and back. Typically, scrolls were made with only one smooth side. So much is written on this scroll that it overflowed. Seven seals show that the scroll is completely shut up.

A mighty angel calls for any to step forward who is worthy to break the seals, but none is found who can even look inside. John weeps over the situation. Fortunately, there is one who is worthy: Jesus. He is referred to by Old Testament titles for Christ, as the Lion of Judah and the heir of David, a great warrior-king. These titles sharply contrast with the description that follows.

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The scroll undoubtedly contains word of judgment against the world and victory for the Church. The seals must be broken before this good news can come to pass. John mourns deeply that the suffering of the Church will be prolonged. This buildup shows that Jesus is far greater than any other.

⁶Then I saw a little lamb as if it had been slain, standing in the midst of the throne and the four creatures, and in the midst of the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God that had been sent into all the earth. ⁷He came and received *the scroll* from the right hand of him who sits on the throne.

⁸When he took the scroll, the four creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb; each one had a harp and golden bowls filled with incense (these are the prayers of the saints.) ⁹And they sang a new song, saying,

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and by your blood you purchased some from every tribe, language, people, and nation for God, ¹⁰and you made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth.”

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the sound of many angels around the throne, the creatures, and the elders, and they numbered ten thousands of ten thousands and thousands of thousands, ¹²saying in a great voice, “The Lamb who was slain is worthy to receive power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and praise.” ¹³Then I heard every creature in the sky, on the earth, under the earth, on the sea, and those in them, all saying, “The praise, the honor, the glory, and the might be to the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, to the ages of the ages.” ¹⁴The four creatures began saying, “Amen!”, and the elders fell down and worshiped

Jesus is pictured as a lamb offered as a sacrifice. Seven horns and seven eyes indicate the Lamb is all-powerful and all-seeing. His willingness to submit himself as a sacrifice to save mankind makes him worthy above all others. Because of his humble submission, he now shares the worship reserved for God alone.

Even though Jesus is all-powerful, he is not portrayed as the Ram, butting and fighting to the end, but as the Little Lamb, who willingly gave himself as a sacrifice. Peter was willing to die fighting in Gethsemane, but he was unable to go quietly with Jesus to the cross. Jesus set an example that Christians should lay down their lives, not in rebellion, but with quiet submission.

Questions

John wept because the salvation of the Church was delayed. How do react when you see the church struggling?

Jesus was worthy because of his humble submission to God. How have you been trying to make yourself worthy?

Jesus Unleashes Judgment—The First Six Seals (6.1–6.17)

Jesus breaks the seals on the scroll, releasing God’s judgment on the world.

6 ¹I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, “Come!” ²I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest. ³When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

⁵When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “A quart of wheat for a day’s wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

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⁷When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" ⁸I looked, and there before me was a pale green horse! Its rider was named Plague⁴, and the Grave⁵ was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine, and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

The Lamb begins breaking the seals of the scroll, unleashing God's judgments against the world.

The first seal brings forth a rider on a white horse, carrying weapons of war and wearing a victorious conqueror's crown. The picture is of a Parthian warrior, the enemies of Rome, who lived to the east of the area of the churches. This rider is Jesus, enemy of the sinful world, coming to bring judgment. White symbolizes his holiness and that his judgments are just. Furthermore, Jesus is determined, and the world will not withstand him.

The other three riders follow him; they are under his control and cannot act apart from his will. War, famine, and plague are not outside of God's control. Instead, God allows them in order to bring judgment, and God has given Jesus authority over these judgments.

The second seal brings forth a blood red horse carrying a rider with a large sword. This rider is War. He will take peace from the earth, bringing violence and leaving chaos and suffering.

The first century was a peaceful time for the province of Asia due to Roman dominance. However, in the previous century, the region suffered helplessly through the Roman civil wars, which included a Parthian invasion into the nearby province of Syria. The citizens of Asia knew that peace could easily evaporate if the Romans faltered, as they nearly had only ten years earlier.

The third seal brings a black horse with a rider carrying a set of scales. This rider is Famine. Drought and other calamities will cut the food supply, forcing people to spend their day's wages just to eat. However, luxury items will still be available in abundance, so that the lifestyles of the wealthy will not be affected while many starve.

This sort of situation occurred in the Roman Empire, especially during the 40's. Egypt produced much of the empire's grain, and that grain was earmarked for Rome. A crop failure in Egypt could produce food shortages around the empire. At the same time, grape and olive harvests in other parts of the empire would be entirely unaffected.

The fourth seal brings out a sickly colored horse, whose rider is Plague, with the Grave following close behind to swallow the souls of the victims.

In ancient times, war, famine, disease, and other natural disasters were a chilling fact of life. People generally attributed these things to the arbitrary and spiteful whims of the gods. This passage emphasizes God's sovereignty over all events and portrays calamities as God's judgment against the world. In addition, God has given Jesus authority to bring these judgments and to have control over them.

Christians should keep "natural disasters" in perspective. They are not random events, indicating a lack of control or indifference on God's part. They are the inevitable response of a holy God to the sinfulness of the world.

This is not to say that God or Jesus directly cause these things to happen. The first rider does not himself wreak havoc on the world. The point is that God and Jesus are completely in control, and that they allow these things to happen in a measured way. On the other hand, they also prevent these events from running out of control.

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw, underneath the altar, the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰They cried out in a great voice, saying, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" ¹¹Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

⁴ Or, Death. The Greek word has both meanings. In this context, the less commonly used but more specific idea of disease bringing wide-spread death seems to capture the meaning.

⁵ Greek, Hades. Generally, the abode of the dead where souls exist without human sensations.

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The fifth seal shows the souls of those already slain because they steadfastly confessed Jesus as Lord. The ashes of burnt offering fell through grates underneath the altar; these souls are pictured as having offered their lives to God. The world meant their deaths to be gruesome and humiliating, but God views them as the ultimate expression of their devotion and accepts them as offerings to be treated with reverence and respect.

They cry out to God, complaining about his delay in bringing justice and avenging their wrongful deaths. However, they were simply clothed in white robes and told to be patient. More of God's people must join the ranks of the martyrs first.

The suffering souls of the saints remind us that the world fully deserves judgment. The judgments unleashed by the first four seals are terrible, but they are justified. Furthermore, God is not hasty or impetuous. Even though his restraint means more suffering for the Church, it also means God will have more opportunity to sift out those who will repent, and to ensure that judgment for the rest is fully deserved.

Note that the souls are not told to stop complaining. They followed Paul's admonition, "Do not avenge yourselves; instead, make room for The Wrath. For it is written, 'To avenge is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." Instead, they are told to wait a little longer until God makes right the wrongs they have suffered.

¹²I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake, the sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, ¹³the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind, ¹⁴the sky receded like a scroll rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

¹⁵Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

The opening of the sixth seal brings forth disaster as if the universe itself would be destroyed. God's judgments touch every corner of the earth, and no one, great or small, escapes. All are dismayed; better to be buried beneath the mountains than endure the outpouring of God's wrath.

Six seals have been broken, only the seventh remains. The breaking of the seventh seal will completely reveal God's judgment.

In ancient times, the wealthy and powerful often seemed immune to the effects of calamities. However, no one, no matter what their wealth or power, would escape the full force of God's judgment.

No where else in the New Testament is God presented in such Old Testament ways. But it is Jesus who is breaking the seals, and the world is equally fearful of the wrath of the Lamb. The God of Jesus is the God of the Old Testament, and Jesus is the exact representation of his being, both in mercy to those who repent and in wrath to those who do not.

Questions

This chapter states that wars, disasters, and death are not just random events but are the expression of God's judgment against the world. Do you believe God is just in bringing judgment in this way?

In what ways did God show mercy and patience in the Old Testament? In the gospels, how often did Jesus talk about judgment?

Interlude: The Church Protected During Judgment (7.1–7.17)

Jesus waits to break the seventh seal until angels place protective marks on the Christians, shielding them from what is to come.

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7 ¹After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ²Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ³"Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." ⁴Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: one hundred forty-four thousand from all the tribes of Israel.

⁵From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand were sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,
⁶from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,
⁷from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,
⁸from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand.

Only the seventh seal remains. Four angels stand at the four corners of the earth, holding back the judgment that is about to come. They hold back any wind from the earth, causing an eerie calm, as before a storm. Another angel appears to place a mark on the people of God. 144,000 is 12 x 12 x 1,000, meaning the full number of God's people, in large number. The mark will distinguish between God's people and the world when the last seal is broken. The idea is similar to the passover in Egypt in *Exodus* 12. The Israelites placed the blood of a lamb on the tops of their doors, so that the plague on the firstborn would not touch them. In the same way, the Christians will be spared during the breaking of the last seal.

The listing of twelve of the tribes of Israel clarifies the meaning of 144,000 as twelve 12,000's. That this is not intended to mean the nation of Israel specifically is emphasized by the inclusion of Joseph in place of Ephraim and the exclusion of Dan.

This does not mean the Church won't experience hardships as judgment is completed, nor does it mean that the world will stop persecuting them. The Christians must patiently endure as the world around them is punished.

⁹After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰And they cried out in a great voice, saying,

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

¹¹All the angels were standing around the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²saying:

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

¹³Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

¹⁴I answered, "Lord, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. ¹⁶Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun

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will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

The scene shifts to the throne of God and the Lamb, where the victorious saints are assembled before God and Jesus. They are clothed in purity. The palm branches refer to the Feast of Tabernacles, where all Israel would give thanks to God for the harvest. Those who overcame the trials of life on earth now celebrate before God and give thanks for their salvation. Never again will they suffer hardship, and God himself will comfort them, as a father comforts his children.

The Christians are called to patient endurance. Those who persevere will overcome their struggles and be made completely pure and holy through Jesus' blood, and God and Jesus will gather them together in perfect fellowship and blessing.

Questions

God promises to protect us (spiritually) as he brings judgment on the world, but we will suffer along with those around us. What will your attitude be during such times?

God is shown caring for the overcoming Christians as a father cares for his hurt child. Do you see God caring for you during hard times?

The Seventh Seal—Seven Trumpets Warn Of Greater Judgment (8.1–9.21)

Jesus breaks the seventh seal on the scroll. God shows his justice and restraint by providing seven warning judgments before his wrath is fully poured out. In this section, angels will sound six of the seven trumpets; several other scenes must play out in the following sections before the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

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

³Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense in order to offer up the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne.

⁴The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. ⁵Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

⁶Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.

In chapter 6, Jesus broke the first six seals, and God's judgment began. In chapter 7, angels marked God's people to set them apart from those for whom the punishment was intended. Now, Jesus can break the final seal and fill up God's judgment.

As Jesus removes the last seal, God's sentence is fully revealed. All become silent as they take in the full implications. Seven angels are given trumpets. They stand in the presence of God, indicating they are of the highest rank. The trumpets symbolize warnings; judgment will start with a complete set of warnings. God will give the world opportunity to repent before his full wrath is fully poured out.

These warnings demonstrate God's justice and mercy. God is holy, and his holiness demands that he punish sin. But he will warn the world first, giving all those who are willing the opportunity to repent and escape the full outpouring of his righteous wrath.

⁷The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.

⁸The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, ⁹a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

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¹⁰The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water—¹¹the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.

¹²The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.

¹³As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!"

The first four trumpets unleash supernatural disasters. They strike the earth, the sea, the rivers and lakes, the sun and moon and stars. Nothing in creation remains untouched. However, only one third of each is affected, indicating this is only a partial punishment, a warning from God. Full punishment will follow if the world refuses to repent.

An eagle, watching from far above the earth, warns that the remaining trumpets will bring worse things than the first.

9¹The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. ²When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. ³And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. ⁴They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. ⁶During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.

⁷The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. ⁸Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. ⁹They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. ¹⁰They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. ¹¹They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Destroyer.

At the sounding of the fifth trumpet, a star falls to earth; this fallen star is the Devil. He is allowed to open a gateway from his domain, so that choking smoke billows out over the world. Out of the smoke come destructive locusts capable of harming, but not killing, people who do not belong to God. These represent sin, which affects only the unrepentant and brings tremendous harm on those involved in it. During the time of Noah, God flooded the world for five months, during which the earth was purified of sin. Now, the Devil unleashes a new flood of rampant sinfulness onto the world.

The description of the locusts describes sin:

- Battle horses show how it wages war against humankind.
- Something like victor's crowns indicate that it appears to be the means to success, but that the success is not real.
- Human faces, representing intelligence, show that a tolerant attitude towards sin seems sophisticated.
- Hair like a woman's represents its allure.
- Lions teeth show its destructive power.
- Breastplates of iron symbolizes how difficult it is to overcome.

The result of getting swept up in this flood of sin is torment.

The name of the ruler of the locusts is Destroyer. This is another name for the Devil; he uses humankind's inclination to sin to destroy them.

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Jesus is in the process of revealing God's judgment against the world, but this is still the warning phase. Part of this judgment/warning process is to allow the Devil to remove all restraint against sin. Historically, Rome was in a long period of decline in traditional values, particularly among its aristocrats. As moral standards were put aside, so were inhibitions against sin. As people gave in to sin, they also learned of the its destructive consequences.

Sin is attractive to those ignorant of its true nature. Deception and corruption seem to be the way to success, but they often lead to great fall. Traditional values are easily ridiculed once the reasons behind the values are forgotten. An attitude of acceptance toward sin appears sophisticated and intelligent. Sin is often pleasurable, at least at first. But sin is destructive. It devours, it is difficult to overcome once one becomes entangled in it, and it torments those involved in it. The Devil uses it to destroy mankind.

This flood of sin does not mean that God has lost control or that the Devil has gained some sort of new power. Instead, because mankind chooses to reject God, God pulls back his hand and gives the Devil some freedom. This is one of the ways God punishes mankind for their sinfulness; it also causes some to realize how much injury sin is causing them and to turn to God.

¹²The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come.

¹³The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. ¹⁴It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶The number of the mounted troops was twenty thousand times ten thousand. I heard their number.

¹⁷The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. ¹⁸A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. ¹⁹The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury.

²⁰The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

The sixth trumpet releases four angels who have been waiting at the Euphrates river. The Euphrates lay to the east of the province of Asia. During the late first century, it was the boundary between the Roman and Parthian Empires. Without Rome's protection, Asia was in real danger of a Parthian invasion. The Parthians were known as great horsemen. The imagery plays upon that danger.

The four angels indicate that God is ultimately in control. The army is held back until the exact time that God has decreed, and the angels lead this vast and fearsome army of supernatural power. Ten thousand was the largest number in the Greek language; twenty thousand times ten thousand is simply an enormous number. This army is sent to kill mankind. One third again indicates this is only a partial punishment, a warning. The first four plagues affected all of nature, the fifth brought torment on man, and this one brings death at the hands of invaders.

In spite of the suffering and warnings of worse things to come, the world refuses to repent.

God's warnings are complete. While each warning did not have full impact, every aspect of creation was affected. No one could have failed to notice nor to understand the significance of what was happening. God has given mankind warnings and opportunities to repent, and they have refused. He is now fully justified in completing his judgment.

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Questions

The fifth trumpet describes sin as a plague brought by God to punish men. How has sin been a plague in your life?

What images would you use to describe sin?

Interlude: John Is Called To Reveal God's Judgment (10.1–10.11)

The stage is set for the completion of the outpouring of judgment on the world. The scene shifts away to John, who is again commissioned to reveal this judgment.

10¹Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. ²He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ³and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. ⁴And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down."

⁵Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. ⁶And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay! ⁷But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets."

⁸Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land."

⁹So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey." ¹⁰I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. ¹¹Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings."

The seventh seal has been removed, and six trumpets have provided complete warnings to the world. At the sounding of the seventh trumpet, God's judgment will be fully revealed and his wrath fully poured out.

A mighty angel appears. He is clothed in clouds, representing judgment. The rainbow above the angel's head signifies that, although God's anger against the sin of the world is great, he will be merciful and his judgment restrained. The angel holds a small scroll, containing the details of the sentence about to be passed down. The scroll lies open, indicating that the things written will soon come to pass.

At the angel's shout, seven thunders respond. Seven indicates something full or complete and thunder symbolizes judgment. These describe the full judgment of God. John wants to record all of this, but a voice commands him not to. John is to reveal only what is written on the small scroll.

John is given the little scroll to eat. It tastes sweet, but it makes his stomach sour. The news of God's judgment sounds good. The Christians will be proved right in their faith and their persecutors will be punished. However, the reality will involve hardship and suffering for the Christians as well. The real blessings will come only in the life to come.

The symbolism makes clear that what the letter John wrote reveals only a small part (what could be written on a small scroll compared to what seven thunderous voices could say) of God's judgment. The early Christians believed that Jesus would come and bring about the end of the world during their time. This is an indication that, while Jesus would indeed come quickly to bring judgment, this judgment would not bring about the end of the world.

This passage raises an interesting question. The letter clearly instructs the original audience not to expect the end of the world; it only contains a small portion of God's total judgment against

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mankind's sin. Is the rest of God's judgment stored up for one final conflict, or are the events happening during the time of the original audience part of an ongoing series of similar events? The answer may well be, "Both."

Questions

What major events might be viewed as part of God's judgment against mankind's sin? If they were part of God's judgment, how would that affect your response to them?

John was given the task of preaching God's word. The words tasted sweet, but they turned John's stomach sour. How have challenging times affected your attitude toward God?

Interlude: Physical Persecution, Spiritual Victory (11.1–11.13)

A second interlude discusses the issues of persecution, suffering, and the ultimate victory of the Church. This is a commentary on the events that had taken place in the decade before the letter was written, with Rome at the center of it.

11 ¹I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the sanctuary of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. ²But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for forty-two months. ³And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for one thousand, two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth." ⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lamp-stands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. ⁶These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

John is called to measure the temple and count the worshipers there. This resembles the sealing of the Church in chapter seven, which occurred before the breaking of the seventh seal. Now that the seventh trumpet is about to sound, the Church is again set apart.

This passage plays upon the fall of Jerusalem. There, the sanctuary was destroyed first, followed by the rest of the city. The Church, symbolically called the Holy City, will be trampled by the Gentiles. However, God will not allow the Gentiles to touch the inner courtyard, with the altar and the sanctuary, as he did in Jerusalem. God will not abandon his people, even if he tolerates their persecution. Outwardly, they will suffer, but inwardly, he will protect them. Furthermore, 42 months, or 3 ½ years, indicates that this situation will be temporary.

During this period of intense persecution, God empowers two witnesses. Two confirms their role in providing reliable testimony. They represent the evangelistic efforts of the Church. Sackcloth indicates the suffering and mourning of the Church, and the olive trees supplying oil for the lamp-stands symbolizes the Church supplying light for the world.

In spite of the persecution, the evangelism of the Church is powerful and effective. No one can stand in the way of the message, so the Church continues to grow. The fire, drought, and plagues point back to Moses and Elijah, who prophesied during times of persecution and who did similar miracles.

This passage makes several important points.

- God allows, or tolerates, the world's violent behavior toward the Church. Therefore, hardship is simply a part of Christian life.
- The fact that Christians endure hardship does not mean that God is not protecting them.
- Hardships, generally, do not go on forever; they are temporary.
- Persecution does not hinder the Gospel message; in fact, it promotes it.

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While this message is hardly encouraging on the surface, it was a real part of the daily lives of many early Christians. The positive side, that God is in control, that his purposes are being fulfilled, and that suffering is temporary, would bring great comfort.

Persecution never stopped the spread of the message or the growth of the Church. In 197, Tertulian, a Christian apologist, wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." The fact that Christians were at their best when they were being treated the worst was a powerful testimony.

⁷Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them and overpower and kill them. ⁸Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. ¹⁰The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.

After the period of persecution mixed with great evangelistic success, a beast rises up to kill the witnesses. The churches in Asia would identify the beast and the great city as Nero and Rome. Nero had ravaged the church in Rome for several years, to the point where many must have doubted whether the church there could survive. He is described as a beast coming up from the home of the Devil's legions.

Rome is described by three places. First is Sodom, a place that epitomized corruption and wickedness. Egypt used its power to hold God's people in slavery and to oppress them cruelly. The third is Jerusalem, where Jesus himself suffered crucifixion.

Three and a half days indicates a short, temporary time, during which the world celebrates the ruin brought upon the church. Refusing burial and leaving the bodies exposed expresses complete contempt for their victims as they celebrate.

The events in Rome during the time of Nero, followed by the destruction of Jerusalem, no doubt shook the faith of all Christians and left them with deep-seated fears. The letter bluntly acknowledges those events and the apparent defeat they represented.

¹¹But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. ¹²Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.

¹³At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

In the midst of the world's celebration, God resurrects the witnesses and takes them up into heaven in the same manner that Jesus was taken up. The church suffered terribly, but this attack did nothing to stop it or to threaten the salvations of the faithful. This terrifies the world, as they realize they have no real power to stop the witnesses or their proclamation of the good news.

God strikes back at the evil city because of their persecution and gloating. Seven thousand indicates a large, complete number. For a moment, terrified, the world gives glory to God.

Immediately after Nero's persecution, Rome fell into a wrenching civil war. This passage presents this as a judgment from God on the city.

Not even Satan in his most brutal attacks can stop the Church from spreading the message and growing. Any setbacks are at worst temporary, as God will strengthen, protect, and glorify his people and his kingdom. Furthermore, God will also strike those who persecute the Church. He is not indifferent to the suffering of his people.

Questions

Would you be willing to suffer physically, knowing that God will protect you spiritually?

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The evangelism of the Church is portrayed as suffering a tremendous setback, as the two witnesses lay dead in the streets. Shortly after, however, God raised them back to life and took them into heaven. When you hear news of persecution, do you doubt and become discouraged, or do you look forward to seeing God's power revealed?

The Seventh Trumpet Sounds (11.14–11.19)

The last trumpet sounds, bringing forth the fullness of God's wrath.

^{11.14}The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon.

¹⁵The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."

¹⁶And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷saying:

"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. ¹⁸The nations were angry; and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great—and for destroying those who destroy the earth."

¹⁹Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.

The first woe was the Devil unleashing a flood of sin onto the world. The second woe was the invasion of a supernatural army bringing death on mankind. The last woe is about to be released.

The seventh trumpet sounds, setting the stage for the completion of judgment. The Church glorifies God as the time draws near where their faithful devotion to God will be justified. The revealing of the Ark of the Covenant indicates that God will now fulfill his promises to bless the faithful and punish the wicked. Tremendous expressions of wrath and judgment come from God's temple.

God was patient, warning the world of this impending judgment while allowing his people to suffer for a time. The warnings are complete; the time for judgment has come. The world considered itself wise and sophisticated as it plunged into sin and persecuted the Church. The faithful Christians appeared to be foolish and ignorant as they preached an unpopular message and submitted to death. The wisdom of the world will soon become folly and the faith of the saints will soon be justified.

Questions

In verse 18, the Church praises God for bringing justice and rewarding those who remained faithful. Is a reward in Heaven worth sufferings on earth?

Interlude: The Devil's War against God's People (12.1–14.20)

The judgment sequence is again interrupted to discuss the Devil's attack against the Church in detail. The Devil's reasons for attacking the Church are explained, his methods are exposed, and then Jesus' victory is revealed.

The Devil's Rage against God's People (12.1–12.17)

Jesus brings about the Devil's downfall; the Devil rages against the Church.

12 ¹A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars. ²She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. ³Then another sign appeared in

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heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems on his heads. ⁴His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. ⁵She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for one thousand, two hundred and sixty days.

The scene flashes back to the pre-Christian era. The woman represents the faithful among the Jewish nation; the promise of the coming of the Messiah, or Christ, is about to be fulfilled. However, the Devil, pictured as an enormous red dragon, has no intention of letting this come to pass. Seven heads symbolize great intelligence, ten horns represent his power to bring trial and sufferings. Seven diadems show his complete royal authority; he is the truly the Prince of the world. He stands ready to destroy the Christ the moment he arrives. However, God intervenes on behalf of the Christ, and he provides shelter for the faithful, although this protection, 1,260 days or 3 ½ years, is temporary.

⁷And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. ⁸But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. ⁹The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the Devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. ¹¹They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. ¹²Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the Devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."

With the coming of the Christ, the Devil's power is broken. Heaven's forces prevail against him and cast him down out of heaven to the earth. This is the first time, in this section of the letter, that the Devil is referred to by name. His names, "Diabolos" in Greek and "Satan" in Hebrew, have similar meanings. In Hebrew, "satan" means adversary or one who opposes. The Greek word "diabolos" can refer to someone who brings accusations for legitimate reasons, but also one who does so to ruin relationships. The Devil earned his name by his constant efforts to destroy mankind's relationship with God, frequently by encouraging humankind to sin and then bringing it to God's attention.

Fortunately, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross gave the faithful victory over sin and broke the Devil's power. However, the faithful paid a price for the victory. The Devil, broken and banished, is now confined to the earth, and he intends to do everything in his power to take away the believers' victory. They would have to continue to publicly own Jesus' name, even if it led to death, to overcome.

This is a good point to address an important question. To what extent did the early church take this passage, and others like it, literally? We know that some took the letter quite literally and expected literal fulfillment of certain events in their times. Certain splinter groups, such as the Montanists, placed heavy emphasis on the letter and the expectation of literal fulfillment. Others rejected these interpretations, leading to controversy. Over the next few centuries, some church leaders wanted to exclude *The Revelation* from the canon because it tended to lead to unsound doctrines. Overall, the mainstream interpretations seemed to focus on the symbolic lessons of these passages while avoiding founding doctrines around them.

The imagery of the Devil being cast out of Heaven focuses on three main ideas. First, Jesus' willingness to die and his resurrection broke the Devil's power. The angels are pictured as unable to defeat the Devil until the coming of Christ. Second, those who have died are completely safe in Heaven. The Devil has absolutely no power over them. Third, it illustrates the Devil's intense

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motivation for attacking the Church. He is defeated, humiliated, desperate, and he has nowhere else to go.

¹³When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. ¹⁵Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. ¹⁶But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. ¹⁷Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

Defeated and knowing his ultimate fate is destruction, the Devil turns on God's people. His initial efforts are blocked through miraculous intervention, so he storms off in a rage and makes plans for war on God's people.

The scene illustrates two important points. First, the Devil's rage is against God, not against men. His only interest in attacking the Church is to attack God. He cannot be appeased, and he will use any tactic, no matter how cruel, in his attacks. Second, the defeat in heaven illustrates that the Devil has no power in the heavenly realms. Those who die faithful are completely safe. However, he still has great power over those still on earth, to bring suffering. The Church must not underestimate that power.

Questions

Does the Devil care if anyone worships him?

The Devil Raises Up Rome to Attack the Church (12.18–13.18)

The Devil, defeated, cast out of heaven, and filled with rage, unleashes his attack on the Church.

And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.

13 ¹And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. ²The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power, his throne, and great authority. ³One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. ⁴Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?"

⁵The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. ⁶He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name, his dwelling place, and those who live in heaven. ⁷He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. ⁸All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb, the One slain from the founding of the universe.

⁹He who has an ear, let him hear.

¹⁰If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

The Devil raises up a hideous beast from the sea to do his work. The sea represents the nations of men, tossed and turbulent, and a beast represents a great empire. This beast is Rome, with all its

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power; the Devil will empower Rome to make war on the people of God. Seven heads indicate great intelligence; ten horns with diadems indicate royal authority and power to bring suffering on the Church. Blasphemous names refer to the divine titles given to and adopted by the emperors.

The fatal wound that was healed refers to the death of Nero and the civil war that followed. Nero was the first emperor to actively persecute the Church. After his death, civil war broke out. At the same time, the Jews were holding out for years in Jerusalem. Rome seemed on the verge of losing its grip. Suddenly, Vespasian seized control of Rome, his son, Titus, destroyed Jerusalem, and Rome was more in control than ever.

This beast receives authority for 42 months (3 ½ years); the time of his power is limited. During this time, however, no one will be able to oppose his power. The entire world will turn to him and worship him, except for those who put their faith in Christ.

Roman authorities will put some in prison and put others put to death. The Christians are called to accept this situation with faithful submission.

Defeated, desperate, and enraged, the Devil begins his assault on the Church. He chooses Rome to carry out his plan. For more than 100 years, Rome and its emperors had been the sole authority over the Mediterranean world. Now, the Devil turns this superpower against the Church.

The call to the saints is clear. Accept the situation, knowing that in the end God will destroy both Rome and the Devil. Remember that a Christian's hope is not in this life, but in the life to come. Do not give way to fear.

¹¹Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. ¹²He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and he made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. ¹³And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. ¹⁴Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. ¹⁶He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, ¹⁷so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

¹⁸This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is six hundred sixty-six⁶.

A second beast rises up from the earth. In some ways it looks like a lamb, but it speaks like a dragon. As God made man from the dust of the earth, so this beast also comes from the earth, indicating it is of human, not spiritual, origin. Its appearance mimics that of Christ, the Lamb, but the overflow of its heart is like the Devil. The second beast requires everyone to worship the first beast and persecutes those who refuse, even putting them to death. It takes the vast power of the first beast and exaggerates it to supernatural proportions, doing what appear to be miracles to impress the world. The second beast also uses an image of the first beast as visible focal point of the worship.

Just as God marked the Church to set them apart during judgment, this beast marks its followers. This marking also would have some sort of literal fulfillment, as the authorities would be able to check for these marks and use them to hinder those who refused to receive them from doing business.

John now calls the hearer to stop and think, indicating that the symbolism that follows is less than apparent. The sea beast is just a nation of men with a powerful army, but the earth beast seems to

⁶ First century Greek did not have a system of numerals, so numbers were written out. Furthermore, "6" and "9" are European forms of Hindu-Arabic numerals, which were invented in India around 500 CE and introduced to Europe around 900 CE. All this makes it very unlikely that "666" was actually "999" written upside down.

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be of supernatural power and origin, a god. The “number” of the beast refers to its nature. John states that this “beast” is just a man.

His number is six hundred sixty-six, three sixes. The outward appearance is three. Three symbolizes divinity, as in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The inner nature is six. John already stated that this must represent man, and man was created on the sixth day. Therefore, this “god” is nothing but a man posing as a god.

This beast represents the formal worship of Rome and its emperors, which the Devil will use to supplant the true worship of God. As the Devil raised up Rome through its military, so that everyone worshiped its power, so the Devil will rise up a official state religion. Rome’s power and rumors of great miracles will cause the world to embrace this religion.

We must keep in mind the special circumstances in the province of Asia. The ungodly there were particularly prone to view Rome and its emperors as gods. The Devil was about to take this tendency and turn it into a weapon.

Who was this beast? When the letter was first read in the churches around 78, no one knew. Christians no doubt thought of Nero, but he had died ten years before. By 93, no one in Asia had any doubt. It was Domitian, and they were being intensely persecuted by the governors he appointed.

Years after writing *The Revelation*, John wrote other letters to the churches in Asia. In two of them, he mentions the anti-Christ. John said many false teachers were anti-Christ, but he also said that the anti-Christ was coming, and that the churches were in the last hour. While the early Christians certainly understood the beast and the anti-Christ to be the same, *The Revelation* never uses the term anti-Christ. It does not want to treat this man as if he might have any supernatural powers. He is just a man, and he will stand before God at judgment along with everyone else.

Questions

The Roman authorities only required people to acknowledge Caesar as a god, allowing individuals to maintain their own beliefs. Why did the early Christians refuse to make this compromise?

How do you react when people pressure you to compromise your convictions?

Jesus Leads the Way in Judgment (14.1–14.20)

Jesus takes the lead in bringing judgment on the world.

14 ¹Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ²And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. ³And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as first-fruits to God and the Lamb. ⁵No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.

Chapter 13 ends with a man claiming to be a god, murdering those who refuse to acknowledge his claims. Chapter 14 opens with the Son of God who became a man, saving those who acknowledge him. The roar of waters and thunder symbolize the judgments that are ready to be unleashed with the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

With him are 144,000 bearing the Lamb’s and God’s name. 12 times 12 times 1,000 represents the full, large number of all the people of God. They sing a victory song to God. Only they can learn the song; the world cannot understand the cause for their perseverance or joy. They have kept themselves pure from the gross immorality around them. They follow Jesus everywhere. They were purchased and offered as sacrifices to God. They have not lied by acknowledging the emperor’s claim to be divine; they have kept themselves blameless.

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Rather than the mark of the beast, these Christians have the names of God and of the Lamb. They have chosen righteousness and eternal life over escaping passing hardship at the hands of the Devil. They follow the Jesus wherever he goes, even to the cross. Jesus paid for their sins by shedding his blood, and in the same way they willingly offered their own lives to God. When put to the test by the authorities, they confessed Jesus as Lord, not Caesar. They were treated like criminals because they confessed only Jesus, but they are completely blameless before God.

A new song is heard from heaven, proclaiming God's salvation for the faithful and judgment on the world. Only the saints can learn the song; the world cannot understand suffering on earth in order to gain a greater reward in heaven.

⁶Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. ⁷He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water."

⁸A second angel followed and said, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries."

⁹A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, ¹⁰he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. ¹¹And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name."

¹²This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.

¹³Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'"

"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them."

The scene switches to three angels flying high over the earth, proclaiming messages to the world below. The first brings with him the eternal gospel, and he exhorts men everywhere to turn to God. The second angel proclaims the imminent fall of Rome, represented as the great city of Babylon. Just as the city of Babylon was taken in a single night, so Rome and emperor worship will suddenly fall. The third angel proclaims a warning. Anyone who renounces Christ and worships the beast will experience the wrath of God, which is about to be poured out. The temporary suffering inflicted by the Roman authorities cannot compare to the everlasting punishment coming on those who turn against God.

The Christians are exhorted to patiently endure what is about to happen. Those who lay down their lives will be blessed, for God will give them rest and remember their good deeds and reward them.

The first angel reminds the world of God's grace and mercy. Even in the midst of judgment, it is not too late to turn to God through Christ.

The second angel proclaims that Rome will soon fall. In the Old Testament, Babylon was the capital city of the empire that destroyed Jerusalem. The city was magnificent and its huge walls made it almost impossible to attack. However, the Medes-Persians managed to enter the city and capture it in a single night. In the same way, Rome, which seemed invincible, would be brought low.

The last angel's warning is for the Christians. They will receive a great reward if they persevere, but great punishment if they give up.

¹⁴I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one "like a son of man" with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is

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ripe." ¹⁶So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

¹⁷Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." ¹⁹The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great wine press of God's wrath. ²⁰They were trampled in the wine press outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of one thousand six hundred stadia.

The scene switches again, showing one like a son of man, wearing a golden crown and carrying a sharp sickle, sitting on a white cloud. This is Jesus, wearing the conqueror's crown. He carries a sickle, indicating he will bring in the harvest. The white cloud represents purity and judgment. Jesus will harvest the wicked of the earth and punish them.

The scene changes slightly to a picture of the grape harvest. The wicked of the earth are pictured as clusters of grapes, which are gathered and thrown into a huge tub. As grapes are stomped by workers in the tub, crushing the grapes into juice and pulp, the wicked are trampled, so that an immense river of blood flows from the press. A stadia is one-eighth of a mile; the river flows for 200 miles.

Jesus is about to bring about God's righteous judgment. This judgment is described in graphic terms. No one should doubt God's resolve or thoroughness in punishing the wicked.

Questions

Verse 9 contains a stern warning against compromising in the face of pressure. What are the greatest temptations to compromise you face as a Christian?

How does the image of Jesus as judge fit with your ideas about him?

Seven Bowls of Wrath—The Completion of Judgment (15.1–16.21)

God's wrath is fully poured out on the world.

15 ¹I saw another great and marvelous sign in heaven: seven angels with seven plagues, the final ones, because with them God's wrath is completed. ²And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing near the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast, his image, and the number of his name. They held harps of God ³and they sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb.

"Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. ⁴Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."

In chapter 11, an angel sounded the seventh trumpet of the seventh seal of the scroll of God's judgment against the world. Now, seven angels appear to complete the outpouring of God's wrath.

The scene shifts to a sea of glass, mixed with fire. In chapter 4, a sea of glass represented an expanse of holiness, separating God from anything impure. Here, fire represents the trials and sufferings that refined and purified the hearts of the saints, making them holy. The Christians, having stood firm in the face of the Devil's attacks, stand victorious beside the sea. They sing the song of Moses, who parted the Red Sea and led the Israelites out of Egypt, and of Jesus, who enabled them to overcome.

The Christians are called to view the upcoming trials as an opportunity to purify their faith and glorify God. Those who persevere are assured victory.

⁵After this I looked, and the temple, that is, the tent of the Testimony, was opened in heaven.

⁶Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean,

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shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. ⁷Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. ⁸And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

The scene returns to the seven angels, who are given seven bowls full of the wrath of God. Previously, seven trumpets were sounded to provide warning, and only a third of the earth was struck. Now, the wrath of God will be poured out in full measure.

16 ¹Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth." ²The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.

³The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.

⁴The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:

"You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, that you have so judged; ⁶for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink, as they deserve."

⁷And I heard the altar respond:

"Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments."

⁸The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. ⁹They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify to him.

¹⁰The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony ¹¹and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

¹²The 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. ¹³Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. ¹⁴They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

¹⁵"Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed."

¹⁶Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Harrmagedon.

¹⁷The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, "It is done!" ¹⁸Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the earthquake. ¹⁹The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found.

²¹From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.

The seven bowls contain plagues similar to those of the six trumpets. The earth, the seas, the rivers, the sun, even the air are struck, but this time the judgments come full force. Throughout this tribulation, the world curses God, but they refuse to repent.

The sixth bowl enables the Devil to send out messengers to gather together the kings of the earth in his war against God and the Church. The Euphrates River formed the boundary between the Roman Empire on the west and the Parthian Empire on the east. The scene draws on the fears of a

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Parthian invasion, which was prevented only by the presence of Roman armies. They gather the kings at Harmagedon, a Greek rendering of the Hebrew name Har Megiddo or Mount Megiddo. Megiddo, located in the northern part of Israel, was the sight of several Old Testament battles.

With the seventh bowl of the seventh trumpet of the seventh seal, divine judgment is complete. Rome and the nations are thrown into turmoil, and tremendous disasters strike the earth. In spite of their suffering, men refuse to repent; instead, they openly curse God.

God showed restraint by giving the world a complete set of warning judgments, but the world refused to repent and joined in persecuting the Church instead. Some may have taken God's restraint as a sign of weakness, but God now gives the world the judgment they have fully earned, and it is devastating.

The Devil cares nothing about the punishment poured out on those who followed him; his only concern is to press his attack on the Church. In fact, God's judgment on the world opens doors for the Devil to regroup and find new ways to attack God's people. The spiritual war is on. The Devil is gathering his forces, and God is pouring out judgment on those who join with him. The time is fast approaching for a showdown, where God will put an end to the Devil's scheme.

Note that this is not the end of the world, even though God's judgment is fully poured out. This judgment dealt with the sinful world at a specific time and place. The world goes on, despite the vivid portrayals of utter devastation. The final Day of Reckoning is still in the future, as we will see.

Questions

Is God justified in bringing such devastating judgments?

As God poured out righteous judgment on the world, the world cursed him as they suffered. As Christians, God disciplines us for our good. Do you appreciate and respond to God's discipline, or do you curse in your heart?

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Section Three: God Judges Rome, Final Judgment (17.1–21.8)

The second section ended with God's wrath fully poured out on the world, but the Devil and his scheme are still intact, and the Devil raising a great force in his war against the Church.

In the third section, Rome itself is judged, a specific emperor is identified as "the beast," and Jesus brings the Devil's plan to an end. The Devil himself is bound up for a long time, and the martyred saints are resurrected to reign with Jesus.

The Devil is again set free and raises up an even greater army to threaten the Church. This time, he is completely defeated and he is cast down to eternal punishment. All those who died outside of Christ are raised to stand before God for judgment; they are sentenced to be punished along with the Devil.

After the judgment, God renews all things, and the Church is presented in glory.

The Identity of the Beast Revealed (17.1–17.18)

A great prostitute is described, wealthy, alluring, and degraded, representing the wealth and self-indulgence of Rome. The identity of "the beast" is revealed as an emperor who has yet to reign. Within 15 years, no one in Asia would have any doubt as to the identity of this emperor.

17 ¹ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. ²With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."

³Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. ⁵This title was written on her forehead:

Mystery

Babylon The Great

The Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth

⁶I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

The scene shifts as John is again carried away in the Spirit. This time, he is taken to a desert place, indicating that what he is about to see has nothing to do with God or heaven.

A third aspect of the Devil's attack against the Church is introduced. A prostitute is pictured who has seduced the nations. She is tremendously wealthy, living in luxury and sensuality, and she is drunk on the blood of God's people. She rides on a scarlet beast similar to the one the Devil raised up from the sea. This is the materialistic, debauched, and immoral aspect of Rome, personified as Babylon. She rides on the beast, indicating that Rome derives all its wealth from its imperial power.

Roman behavior is described in the crudest terms. Not all the emperors encouraged such behavior, but a few openly led the way. Nero, who ruled immediately before the writing of the letter, was infamous for his extravagance and his cruel amusements. Toward the end of his reign, he dipped Christians in pitch and used them as torches at public celebrations.

While the Christians could avoid emperor worship and conflict with Roman authority most of the time, the gross excesses encouraged by Rome's example presented daily temptation. The overflow of this behavior resulted in the death of God's people, often as a spectacle for the amusement of the world. The Christians would be tempted to doubt the wisdom of a righteous life, denied of the common pleasures enjoyed by others, when that righteousness could lead to a brutal death.

I was amazed, staring with great amazement. ⁷Then the angel said to me: "Why are you amazed? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has

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the seven heads and ten horns. ⁸The beast that you saw once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

⁹"This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. ¹⁰They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. ¹¹The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

¹²"The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. ¹³They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."

¹⁵Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. ¹⁶The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. ¹⁷For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled. ¹⁸The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."

John stares in amazement at the woman, both attracted and repulsed, until the angel reprimands him.

The hearer is again called to stop and consider. In chapter 13, one of the heads of the beast was described as appearing to have been killed, and the wound healed. Here, the beast is described as having been, not currently existing, and about to come back from the abyss to its destruction. The seven heads are described as seven hills on which the woman sits. Rome is called "the city on seven hills."

The heads represent seven kings. These refer to the emperors of Rome. Five have fallen: Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero. Nero was the first real persecutor, and he enjoyed receiving divine honors; he is the "beast who was." The one who is refers to Vespasian. This dates the letter between 69 - 79, most likely in the late 70s. His older son Titus ruled for two years after him, "a little while." Vespasian and Titus had no regard for emperor worship, thus the beast "was not" during their reign.

After Titus, Vespasian's younger son Domitian became emperor. Rumors claimed that Domitian was Nero resurrected from the dead. As he went mad, he called himself a god and enabled emperor worship in Asia and brutal persecution for those who refused to participate. His reign of terror in Rome led to his assassination. He was the one coming up from the Abyss and going to destruction.

In *Daniel* 7.7-11, a similar beast is described, which symbolized Rome and should correspond to the beast described here in *The Revelation*. However, that beast had ten horns, then added an eleventh. The eleventh uprooted three of the previous horns. The beast here starts with seven horns, and adds an eighth.

The difference lies with Otho, Galba, and Vitellius. *Daniel* mentions them, then notes that they really don't count. *The Revelation* simply ignores them, since they died before it was written.

Many contend that these cannot be the emperors of Rome, because Julius Caesar is not counted. Experts on Rome disagree about whether Julius was really an emperor. However, the Christians in Asia would certainly have understood the count provided and the reasons for not counting Julius or the other three. The point is not whether the count is "right", the point is what the audience would have understood.

The ten kings represent governors and other local authorities who will join in supporting emperor worship. Ten indicates that they will bring trial to the Church by enforcing the worship of the emperor. These are the real source of persecution for the saints in Asia. Christ will overcome them as well, ensuring the safety of his people.

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The beast and its minions will turn on the prostitute and devour her. The next chapter will describe the results in detail.

Questions

Imagine living as a Christian at the time Domitian began his rule, knowing that his behavior would start a systematic persecution against your church. Imagine hearing rumors that Domitian had gone mad and was calling himself a god. Imagine living at the height of the persecution, praying for God to intercede and for strength to stand firm. How far would your current walk with God take you before your faith started to fail?

Judgment Against Rome (18.1–18.24)

The fall of Rome is proclaimed. The saints are called to separate themselves from her, or they will share in her judgment.

18¹After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. ²With a mighty voice he shouted:

"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. ³For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries."

⁴Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

"Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues; ⁵for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes. ⁶Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup. ⁷Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself. In her heart she boasts, 'I sit as queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn.' ⁸Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

⁹"When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. ¹⁰Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:

"'Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!'

¹¹"The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more—¹²cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble; ¹³cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh, and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and the bodies and souls of men.

¹⁴"They will say, 'The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.' ¹⁵The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn ¹⁶and cry out:

"'Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls! ¹⁷In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!'

"Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. ¹⁸When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, 'Was there ever a city like this great city?' ¹⁹They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:

"'Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!'

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²⁰"Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and Apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you."

²¹Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:

"With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again.

²²The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again. No workman of any trade will ever be found in you again. The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again. ²³The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world's great men. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. ²⁴In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth."

The end of chapter 17 warned that the beast will turn on and devour the prostitute. Chapter 18 describes the fall of decadent Rome. The city and its emperors had enriched themselves at the expense of the rest of the world, living in wild extravagance. As high as the city had lifted itself, even to claiming divinity for its rulers, so now God would bring it low. The reason was that Rome, in its sensuality and debauchery, had committed violence against the people of God.

God's people are called to separate themselves from Rome's sins, so they would not share its plagues.

The merchants of the world stand at a distance and mourn. They care nothing for Rome, but they had grown rich supplying it. Now their source of wealth will be cut off.

This chapter does not foretell the physical destruction of Rome but only of God's punishment of the most wealthy. Domitian ravaged the aristocracy in Rome. Not only did he force them to treat him as a god, which the Romans found abhorrent, but his paranoia and greed led him to kill hundreds of the most wealthy and to add their estates to the treasury. For several years, the wealthy and powerful in Rome lived in terror, bowing down before Domitian and hoping they would not be his next targets.

Did the Christians in Asia believe that Rome would be completely devastated? Most likely, some did. However, most understood these images as symbolic, making the point that those most guilty in Rome would be punished for their sins, even if they seemed invulnerable.

This passage has strong parallels with *Jeremiah* 51, in particular verse 37: "Babylon will be a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and scorn, a place where no one lives." (NIV) Historically, the Medes-Persians captured Babylon without a fight. Only the Babylonian king, Belshazzar, died. The city wasn't damaged at all, but the Babylonian Empire came to an abrupt end. These sorts of prophetic writings can contain substantial hyperbole.

Questions

Rome is portrayed as tempting the world with its wealth and pleasures, and the Christians are warned to separate themselves from such things. What aspects of the world tempt you?

Do you believe that God could bring a rich and powerful nation, such as the United States, to its knees?

Victory over the Devil and His Plot (19.1–20.6)

Heaven rejoices over God's judgment against Rome. The Church is presented as a bride made ready for Jesus. Jesus goes out to battle against the two beasts raised up by the Devil and hurls them into a lake of fire. The Devil is bound for a long time. Those who died for their faith are raised to reign with Jesus.

19 ¹After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, ²for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth

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by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants." ³And again they shouted, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever."

⁴The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried, "Amen, Hallelujah!"

⁵Then a voice came from the throne, saying, "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great!"

⁶Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting, "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. ⁷Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. ⁸Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

⁹Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "These are the true words of God."

¹⁰At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

In chapter 16, the Devil was gathering his forces for a spiritual showdown at "Harmagedon," even as God was punishing Rome and its human leaders. Now God will turn and deal with the spiritual forces behind the Roman persecution.

A scene of rejoicing in heaven briefly interrupts the sequence of judgment scenes. All give praise to God, who has poured out his wrath on the persecutors of his people.

Now that the Church has emerged unstained by the sin of the world, she can be given to Christ as his bride, gloriously clothed in the righteous deeds of the saints done in the face of persecution by the Devil and his followers.

During the time of persecution, Christians may have been tempted to doubt the wisdom of following Jesus. While the world partied, the Christians suffered. Now, the wisdom of following Christ is made clear. The saints rejoice while Rome and her followers are punished.

¹¹I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many diadems. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

¹³He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. ¹⁴The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

¹⁵Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron scepter. He treads the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

The scene shifts to Jesus riding as a warrior on a white horse. He is called faithful and true, showing that he will not fail those who rely on him. His blazing eyes uncover the truth. He wears many royal diadems, indicating that he king over all the nations and all the heavenly realms. The Dragon wore seven royal diadems, indicating his complete dominion over the world, and the Sea Beast wore ten, indicating royal authority to bring trial, but Jesus' royal authority far exceeds theirs. Only he knows his name, showing that the extent of his power, wisdom, and holiness, like that of God, is far beyond human comprehension. He wears a robe dipped in blood, as in a warrior returning from battle. His name is "The Word of God," with which God brought forth the creation.

Following him are the armies of heaven, also riding white horses and dressed in purity. These are the people of God, who share in Jesus' glory. The only weapon of this army is the great sword coming from Jesus' mouth. He is the ultimate authority over the nations; he will bring God's judgment on them.

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Before this wedding can take place, however, Jesus must complete the business of judgment. Rome and its emperors seemed to have unlimited power and authority, but Jesus exercises all authority in heaven and on earth. Now that reality will be made clear.

¹⁷And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, ¹⁸so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great."

¹⁹Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. ²⁰But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. ²¹The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

20 ¹And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ²He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore, until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

An angel appears, inviting the birds to come to a great feast. The battle about to take place will be final, with no mercy shown. Those who chose to side with the Devil will be destroyed. As soon as the battle starts, the sea beast and the land beast are seized and thrown into a lake of fire. Rome's military power and false religion cannot stand before Christ. He immediately destroys all those who followed them.

An angel comes from heaven, holding a great chain and the key to the abyss. In chapter 9 the Devil held that key, but it has been taken from him, so that he no longer has control. The angel lays hold of the Devil, binds him, and seals him in the abyss. The Devil's attack against the Church has completely failed. However, the Devil's confinement is not permanent. 1,000 years symbolizes a long time; it indicates the completeness of Christ's victory and that persecution will not soon be renewed. However, the door remains open for the Devil to return.

The results of the battle are devastating to all the Devil's followers, from the least to the greatest. The Devil, however, is barely touched. His confinement only symbolizes the complete failure of his current scheme. He will return with a new plot.

Generally, the early Church did not take the thousand years literally, although there were some who did; this led to contention and caused some to call for the exclusion of *The Revelation* from the canon.

The real significance to the early Church was that they would not see the end of the world, as they fully expected. They interpreted "The Last Days" to mean more than the end of the Jewish nation; they expected Jesus to return and bring about the final judgment. That was not to be the case.

Jesus would indeed return and bring judgment on Rome. This, along with the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and the end of the Jewish nation, would fulfill the Old Testament prophecies and Jesus' predictions. However, the end of the world was far off, and many, many generations would come and go. They needed to live out their lives, and to train their children to do the same.

⁴I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (⁵The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first

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resurrection. ⁶Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

The scene switches to something like a courtroom. Those beheaded because they proclaimed Jesus as Lord, rather than Caesar, are raised and found worthy. They did not give in to pressure to compromise their faith. They reign with Jesus and serve as priests in heaven until the final judgment.

The faithful are assured that they will not have to wait until the final judgment to receive their reward. Instead, they are raised and live as priest-kings with God and Jesus while they wait for the thousand years. On the other hand, the ungodly are not raised until the thousand years are over.

Questions

Do you view death as the end, or the beginning?

The Devil's Last Stand; Final Judgment of the Ungodly (20.7–20.15)

The Devil is released and gathers together a massive army. He is defeated and punished forever. All the dead outside of Christ are raised, judged, and punished.

⁷When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. ⁹They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰And the Devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹²And 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. ¹³The 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 he had done. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

After a time, the Devil is allowed to return. While no specific details are provided, he resumes his plan to attack the Church. Once again, he raises up a huge army, even greater than before, and leads them into battle. Once again, his army is completely defeated, but this time the Devil is thrown down into the lake of fire, along with the sea beast and land beast.

After this final battle, God comes in judgment. All the dead are raised and made to stand before God in judgment; no one escapes or is overlooked. Some believed that souls who died at sea were lost forever, but even they are found and brought to judgment. Each one is judged according to his deeds. Then Death and Hades, the home of the dead, and all whose names are not found in the book of life, are thrown into the lake of fire.

The Devil will rise up new persecutions against the Church, even greater than the one to be faced by the recipients of the letter. These too will fail. In the end, God will completely overthrow the Devil and punish him.

To the Christians to whom the letter was originally written, these “events” are in the distant future. Details are purposely omitted; much more will happen that does not concern those to whom the letter was originally written. In the end, God will judge the Devil, and he will bring everyone to face judgment. Even those who escaped judgment in their lifetimes will now face the full consequences of what they had done. Justice will be fully served.

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No mention is made of the faithful in this final scene. That is because they were already raised before the thousand years started. This symbolizes that the faithful will be treated completely differently than the ungodly. The faithful do not have to wait to receive their reward, and they do not have to answer for their sins.

Questions

According to the Bible, what must one do to have their name written in the book of life?
Do you believe that there will be exceptions?

The Great Renewal (21.1–21.8)

Everything is made new. The Church is presented as the new Jerusalem and as a bride beautifully dressed. All pain and suffering are driven out, and God comforts his people.

21 ¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

⁵He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

⁶He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

Following the final judgment, God completely renews the creation. The old heaven, earth, and sea are gone, replaced by a new heaven and new earth. The sea, often viewed as hostile and dangerous, is not replaced. The new Jerusalem, a holy city, comes down from heaven to grace the new earth, presented as a bride beautifully dressed. God will come down to live among his people in this new city, and he will comfort and protect them.

God himself declares that he has made everything new, and those that overcame in the first life will now receive their great reward, including eternal life as God's children. However, those who gave in to fear or lived sinful lives wound up in the lake of fire, the second death.

This is an Old Testament view of eternity. Rather than God's people ascending into Heaven to be with God, God renews the creation, establishes a new and holy city, and descends from Heaven to live among his children. To the people living in Asia, eternal life with God as citizens of a magnificent city in which there was no fear or suffering was the greatest thing they could imagine.

However, there was a price to pay. They would have to remain faithful in the face of the persecution to come. Cowardice in the face of the authorities, unbelief, and lying to avoid consequences are just as sinful as murder, sexual immorality, and sorcery.

Questions

Can you picture God comforting you and wiping away your tears?

Verse 8 says that cowardice and unbelief fall in the same category as murder and immorality. How deep are your convictions about these sins?

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Section Four: The Church in Glory (21.9–22.5)

At the end of the previous section, God has defeated the Devil, judged the sinful, and renewed all things. The Church was presented as the new Jerusalem and as a beautiful bride prepared for Christ. The fourth section builds on the themes of the Church as the bride of Christ and especially as the new Jerusalem. The number twelve is used repeatedly to symbolize the connection with the Church and God's people.

⁹One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." ¹⁰And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹²It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. ¹⁴The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb.

John is again carried away in the Spirit, indicating the start of a new section of the letter. This time, he is taken to a high mountain where he can take in what is happening before him.

Again, the new Jerusalem, a holy city, is pictured as coming down from Heaven as a beautiful bride prepared for Christ. The city is magnificent, and it is protected by high walls and deep foundations, and angels guard its gates. No enemy can climb over the walls or dig under the foundations; the city is completely secure from any threat.

The Greeks considered their cities the way modern people consider their countries, with immense pride and patriotism. Many early Christians were alienated from their cities, even losing their rights as citizens. God now promises them citizenship in a city far greater and more splendid than the world had ever seen. This promise had even greater significance because of the size and supposed splendor of Rome, which had caused so much suffering.

¹⁵The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. ¹⁶The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be twelve thousand stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. ¹⁷He measured its wall, and it was one hundred forty-four cubits, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. ¹⁸The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoptase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. ²¹The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.

The city is enormous; its walls form a square 1,500 miles on each side. In addition, the city is as tall as its sides. The three equal dimensions symbolize divinity and also speak to the immensity of the city. The walls are over 20 stories high. The city is splendid, even the foundations are decorated with precious stones. The gates are formed from huge pearls; pearls were extremely valuable. The main street of the city is made of pure gold.

The new Jerusalem is immense. The straight-line distance from Ephesus to Rome was around 850 miles; the city would have covered the eastern half of the Roman Empire.

The height of the city is even more prodigious, reaching to the heavens. The men of Babel attempted to build a tower that reached the heavens, but God thwarted them. Now, the new Jerusalem reaches higher than humankind could even conceive.

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²²I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Great cities had great temples, but the new new Jerusalem has no need for a temple, as God and Jesus themselves dwell in the city and illuminate it. The nations are pictured as walking in the light provided by the city, and their kings bring their treasures to it, displaying their complete submission.

City gates were closed at night for safety, but the gates of the new Jerusalem need never be closed, as there are no threats.

The new Jerusalem is completely pure, and only those who proved faithful in their lives on the old earth can enter it.

Ephesus boasted about its temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Domitian would soon expand the temple of Augustus and make it a center for emperor worship, which would be at the center of the coming persecution. The new Jerusalem is far greater, as God and Jesus dwell among the citizens.

The temple of Artemis was glorious, but it had a downside. The Roman Emperors recognized the temple grounds as a place of refuge. One of the emperors had expanded the temple grounds into a corner of the city, and criminals gathered there to escape prosecution. This area quickly became a center of organized crime. The new Jerusalem has nothing impure within it, for only those who followed Christ are allowed to enter.

22 ¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

Water was an issue in ancient cities, especially if the source of the water was outside the city. The new Jerusalem is well-supplied, with the source coming from the throne of God.

God had banned mankind from the tree of life in the garden, but now everyone has easy access to its fruit. The tree bears fruit every month, meaning that its fruit is abundant and available at all times.

In the old Jerusalem temple, God concealed his glory behind a thick curtain, so that only the chief priest could enter into his glory, and that only once a year. Now, everyone sees God face to face.

Questions

What would your perfect eternity look like?

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Closing (22.6–22.21)

The Christians are admonished and encouraged to listen to the letter, prepare, and stand firm in their faith.

^{22.6}The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place."

⁷"Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book."

⁸I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. ⁹But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you, your brothers the prophets and, all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!"

¹⁰Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. ¹¹Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy."

The audience is admonished not to dismiss the message contained in the letter. The message came from God and was delivered by angels. Those who listen to the message, understand it, and hold to its instructions will be blessed.

John again reports that he was the recipient of the visions, and he was awestruck by what he saw. He should not set the message aside, because the things of which it warns are about to happen. The wicked will continue in their wickedness, but the faithful should increase their resolve to be faithful.

The closing of the letter acknowledges that the message it contains might sound bizarre, but the message is from God, it is important, and it demands an immediate response.

¹²"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

¹⁴"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

¹⁶"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."

¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

Jesus summarizes the lessons of the book. The time is at hand. He is the ultimate and everlasting authority. Those who wish to receive eternal life, who are willing to purify themselves of sin through him, will freely receive the gift of eternal life. Those who refuse or falter will be shut out. The Spirit and the glorified Church gently beckon all to accept the invitation.

¹⁸I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. ¹⁹And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

²⁰He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

²¹The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.

The book ends with a stern warning: no one is to tamper with the content or the interpretation of this revelation.

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Questions

How would you react if a divine message told you that Jesus was coming soon?