

Persecution
in
The Book of Revelation

The Privilege of
Martrydom

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Martyrdom

by Dave Hagelberg



2013

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This study is dedicated to the persecuted.

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Preface

Are you experiencing persecution in your life as a Christian? Are you tempted to leave your ministry because of threats? If so, then you need to hear afresh the words of the Book of Revelation on the problem of persecution because the Book of Revelation graphically and powerfully encourages persecuted Christians to stand firm in their faith and continue in their ministries. It is hoped that this volume will bring that encouragement to the hearts of those that are tempted to give up because of the persecution they experience.

In this book selected passages of Revelation considered most relevant to the suffering church are explained. Remember that although most of the persecution and martyrdom described in the Book of Revelation will only come to pass in the coming Seven Year Tribulation, a great deal of what it says about persecution and martyrdom is very applicable in today's world.

Most of this book consists of excerpts from the author's two volume commentary on the Book of Revelation, which can be consulted for more detailed explanation.

All the passages set like this in italics are simply historical fiction. They describe how the persecuted congregation in Smyrna might have responded to their first hearing of the Book of Revelation.

Dave Hagelberg
June 2013

Introduction

Recipients of Revelation

Each of these seven congregations shown on the map on the right had their distinct characteristics, and the Lord draws upon those distinct characteristics as He sends the messages to those seven churches. These were real people in real churches in real cities.



As a part of the Bible, this book was also written to all Christians (Revelation 2:7, 17, 29, etc.).

Date of Writing

The Lord's message to the congregation in Smyrna indicates that they had been and would be persecuted. Also, in Pergamum, a man named Antipas had already been martyred. John had been exiled to Patmos. Many scholars believe that it was not until the reign of Domitian, who reigned from 81-96 AD, that Christians outside of Rome were persecuted because they would not participate in the worship of the emperor.¹ Domitian frequently had himself called *Dominus et Deus noster* ("our Lord and God"). For this and some other reasons, conservative biblical scholars usually date the writing of this book at about 95 AD, but it is a timeless book with prophecies about the end of the age that shed valuable light on our own age.

Purpose

The Book of Revelation was written and then sent to the Christians of seven congregations (and to all believers in Jesus Christ) so that seeing who the Lord really is in chapter one, and reading how He responds to the seven churches in chapters two and three, and learning what He will do when He returns in the rest of the book, they will obey the commands He gives in chapters two and three.

For the faithful that are persecuted, the Book of Revelation reminds them of the suffering of Christ and His victory at the Cross, encourages them to be steadfast, and shows them how they will be rewarded, if they will be faithful until death.

Historical Context

In the Roman province of Asia the worship of the emperor was strong. Refusing to worship the emperor, to burn the incense and to say “Caesar is Lord,” could easily result in death or banishment to a prison island, depending on the official’s whim. There had been persecution against Christians before the book was written (Antipas’s martyrdom is mentioned in 2:13) and directly after it was written (in 2:10). When Revelation was written, worship of the Emperor Domitian was often required as a sign of political loyalty.

Early on the morning of July 19 in the year 64 there was a fire at the Circus Maximus (where chariot races were performed). For five days the fire burned in Rome. According to some eyewitnesses there were people who added wood to the fire, and people who hindered the firefighters. According to rumors, Nero had the fires started because he wanted to build Rome again according to his own dreams. Nero accused the Christians of starting the fires, and cruelly punished them. Some were crucified, some were dressed in animal skins and thrown to hungry dogs, and some were smeared with tar and lit like torches. According to strong tradition, the

Apostles Paul and Peter were martyred during the persecution that Nero ordered.²

Interpretation

Although there are several other ways to try to interpret the Book of Revelation, this author is convinced that chapters one, two and three tell about a vision that the Apostle John had of Christ, and about His seven messages to seven churches in that era. Then chapters 4-22 are prophecies that will come to pass sometime in the future, at the end of the age. News about the coming of the Lord Jesus is relevant for each generation of God's people because that news comforts God's people who are faithful, and brings fear to the unfaithful. Just as people do not go on a picnic as storm clouds are gathering, so also we do not live for ourselves when the Word of God says "Blessed is he who... obeys what is written in it, because the time is already near."

As bewildering as the Book of Revelation might seem in some passages, understanding that chapters 1-3 took place in John's time and chapters 4-22 are prophecy about what will happen when the Lord returns follows the plain and simple approach, as is made clear from 1:19. It is the standard guarding the unity of the structure of Revelation.³

Even though Revelation contains many symbols, that does not mean that each text has to be interpreted figuratively or allegorically. A "literal interpretation" can acknowledge and even celebrate the use of symbols. So, in this commentary, the author uses the "literal interpretation," meaning that whatever can be interpreted in a literal way should be interpreted in a literal way. And whatever does not make sense to interpret literally has to be given a figurative meaning. For instance, the "seven stars" which the Lord holds in His hand should not be interpreted as literal stars,⁴ and Revelation 12 is clearly full of figures of speech.

Key Verse

Revelation 1:3, which says “Blessed is the one who reads and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near,” is the key verse of the whole Book of Revelation. The blessing will come to each one who obeys the Book of Revelation. Those blessings or rewards are explained in Revelation 2:7, 10-11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 11-12, 21; and 6:11, among many other passages.

Overview and Structure

If we desire to experience the blessing promised in Revelation 1:3 then we need to “keep those things written in it.” But this is not as simple as it might seem: only commands can be “kept” or obeyed. In the Book of Revelation the commands are only in chapters two and three. From chapter four to chapter 22 there are basically no commands for us to keep.

Revelation 1:19 is the key to understanding the structure of the book:

“Write, therefore,
the things you saw,
and the things that are
and the things that will be after these things.”

The Lord is clearly telling John to write three things, and the book has three parts. That helps us a great deal as we interpret the book!

The following diagram shows this overall structure of the book. The first three chapters are about things in John’s lifetime, and chapters 4-22 are about the end times.

In summary,

1. chapter 1, The Vision that shows who Jesus Christ is
2. chapters 2-3, Seven Messages that demand obedience and promise rewards
3. chapters 4-22, The Victorious Return of Jesus Christ in which He will defeat every enemy and give out those rewards

Bauckham⁷ suggests that the seven messages of chapters two and three are seven different introductions to the rest of the book! This would mean that the message to the persecuted congregation in Smyrna serves as their introduction to the prophetic section, in which they will see the fate of their oppressors and the great rewards awaiting those that faithfully endure persecution.

Outline

I. "What you have seen" (1:1-20)

- A. Introduction (1:1-8)
- B. The Vision (1:9-20)

II. "What is now" (2:1-3:22)

- A. Message to the church in Ephesus (2:1-7)
- B. Message to the church in Smyrna (2:8-11)
- C. Message to the church in Pergamum (2:12-17)
- D. Message to the church in Thyatira (2:18-29)
- E. Message to the church in Sardis (3:1-6)
- F. Message to the church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)
- G. Message to the church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

The messages to the seven churches follow this basic pattern:

1. The Recipient
2. The Characteristic of Christ
3. Praise for the Church
4. Criticism
5. Demand
6. Warning
7. Promise

III. "What will happen after this" (4-22)

- A. Vision of Throne Room (4:1-5:14)

B. Time of Torment (6:1-20:3)

1. Seven Seals (6:1-8:6)

First Insertion: 144,000 People Sealed (7:1-8)

Second Insertion: Many people... who come out of the great tribulation (7:9-17)

2. Seven Trumpets (8:7-11:19)

Third Insertion: Scroll (10:1-11)

Fourth Insertion: Two Witnesses (11:1-14)

Fifth Insertion: The Woman, the Child and the Dragon (12:1-17)

Sixth Insertion: First Beast (13:1-10)

Seventh Insertion: Second Beast (13:11-18)

Eighth Insertion: 144,000 People (14:1-5)

Ninth Insertion: Three Angels (14:6-13)

Tenth Insertion: Harvest of the Earth (14:14-16)

Eleventh Insertion: Harvest of Grapes on the Earth (14:17-20)

3. Seven Bowls (15:1-16:21)

4. Babylon as a Prostitute (17:1-18)

5. City of Babylon Destroyed (18:1-24)

6. Rejoicing in Heaven (19:1-10)

7. Christ Returns (19:11-16)

8. Christ Defeats the Beast and his Army (19:17-21)

9. Satan Defeated (20:1-3)

C. The Millennium (20:4-15)

1. Those who Reign with Christ for 1000 Years (20:4-6)

2. Final Rebellion (20:7-10)

3. White Throne Judgment (20:11-15)

D. The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5)

1. Introduction: New Jerusalem (21:1-8)

2. Walls and Gates of the New Jerusalem (21:9-21)

3. Glory of the New Jerusalem (21:22-27)

4. River of Life and Servants of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (22:1-5)

E. The Conclusion of the Vision (22:6-17)

F. The Conclusion of the Book of Revelation (22:18-21)

Exposition

I. “What you have seen” (1:1-20)

This section is the core and basis of the whole book, because it is the vision of the Lord Jesus. The other parts of the book connect back to this core. In effect, if the congregation in Smyrna could just respond properly to what this vision shows them concerning the Lord Jesus, they would have no need to read any further. However, they and we will need help in responding rightly to this section, and that help will be found in the remainder of the book.

A. Introduction (1:1-8)

John orients his readers before plunging in to the revelation. This is accomplished in the introduction, verses 1:1-8. The author tells us a little about himself and greets his readers.

1:1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His slaves what things must happen suddenly. He made it known by sending it through His angel to His slave John,

This verse is a serious statement about the authority of the Book of Revelation: it comes from **God** and is given to His **servants** via an entirely reliable process. This verse describes the process of **revelation: God gave the revelation to Jesus Christ who made it known by sending it through His angel to His slave John** who is to give it to God’s **slaves**, people who believe and obey Him, either in the seven churches or holy people of other times and places!

The Lord does not want the book to become merely a subject for academic study or debate. He reminds us that all these things **must happen suddenly**, so we must be ready. In accordance with the primary purpose of Revelation stated above, **what things must happen suddenly** need to be shown to His servants so their lives can be conformed to the truth of His coming.

1:2 who testified to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which he saw.

This statement serves as a validating signature: John **testified** that this is a valid revelation, so to reject this revelation one must reject

John’s **testimony**. In John 21:24 he likewise **testified** to the validity of the Gospel of John. Persecuted believers can trust this **testimony**.

1:3 Blessed is the one who reads, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near.

This theme of blessing is very important in the Book of Revelation. The blessing is for the one **who reads** the book to the congregation, and for those that obey it. The seven blessings of the book refer to special end-of-the-age happiness for obedient people.

- 1:3 **Blessed** is the one who reads, and **blessed** are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near. (In English the word “blessed” appears twice in this verse, but in the Greek it is there only once.)

- 14:13 Then I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write: **Blessed** are the dead that die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they can rest from their toil, because their deeds follow them.”

- 16:15 “Look, I am coming like a thief! **Blessed** is he who stays alert and guards his clothing, lest he have to walk about naked and people see his shameful state.”

- 19:9 And he said to me, “Write, ‘**Blessed** are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb!’”

- 20:6 **Blessed** and holy is he that has a part in the first resurrection. Upon them the second death has no authority, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ and they shall reign with Him for a thousand years.

- 22:7 “And look, I am coming suddenly! **Blessed** is the one keeping the words of the prophecy of this book.”

- 22:14 “**Blessed** are they that do His commands, so that the right will be theirs to the tree of life, and that they might enter through the gates into the city.”

According to Bauckham,⁶ the seven blessings of the book are the essence of the purpose of the book. The blessings are given seven times because the happiness of everyone that obeys this book is a perfect happiness.

Those that obey will be **blessed**. This is a key verse for the book. Each of the seven messages that make up chapters two and three includes a blessing for obedience, although the word **blessed** does

not appear in chapters two and three. We are to obey this book because soon He that is revealed in its first section, that is, He that speaks in the second section, will return, be victorious, and give out the rewards that He has promised to His obedient ones, as is described in the third section.

If we yearn for this blessing, and continue to read this book in order to obey and be blessed, we may find ourselves very frustrated. So much of this book is about visions of the future, terrible judgments and heavenly events – what are we to obey? This simple question points us to the great importance of chapters two and three, for that is where the commands are found in this book. In obeying those commands we will be **blessed**.

1:4 John, to the seven churches in the province of⁷ Asia: Grace to you and peace from God⁸ who is, and who was, and who is coming, and from the seven spirits before His throne,

According to these greetings, this book is addressed to the **seven churches** in the Roman **province of Asia**. In effect, the book is like a letter sent to them. They are **seven** literal **churches** whose locations are mentioned in 1:11.

The **seven churches** that were chosen were all located along a Roman postal road. Anyone wanting to communicate with the churches of the **province of Asia** would sail into the harbor of Ephesus, and then follow that Roman postal road from Ephesus to Smyrna, and on to each of the other churches, in the order given in Revelation 2-3. However, all through the ages there have been churches like those **seven churches**.

1:5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and has washed us from our sins by His blood,

Since it is often **the kings of the earth** that persecute people, it will also be a great comfort to know that, despite all appearances, the **Lord Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth**. When the name of the **Lord Jesus** is mentioned, praise overflows from John's heart. Further, it is He that **loves us and has washed us from our sins by His blood**. In the original language the word "love" is in the Present Tense, meaning that the Lord Jesus continually **loves us**.

His love was most perfectly proved when He **washed us from our sins by his blood**. This is the Gospel, a Gospel not just of forgiveness, but also of cleansing **from our sins**.

1:6 and has made us to be a kingdom, priests before God, even His Father – to Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever! Amen.

The wonderful thing is that here in Revelation 1:6 what had been a blessing that required obedience to the Law of Moses (note Exodus 19:5-6) is now a blessing *already* given to *us*, based on the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

1:7 Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Yes, amen.

The congregation in Smyrna is mourning as they read these words, but the day will come when they will rejoice, and all the unbelieving **tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him**.

1:8 “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is coming, the Almighty.”

The expression **Alpha** and **Omega** speaks of God’s supremacy throughout all time. Maybe today He would say “A and Z.” **God** already existed before the beginning and will still exist after the end. In 21:6 the same expression is used and is completed with the words “the Beginning and the End.”

The use of the expression, **the Lord God the Almighty** speaks of the sovereignty of **God**. This emphasis on God’s sovereignty is closely tied not only to the judgment that will fall upon the earth in the last days, but also to the commands given to us in chapters two and three.

B. The Vision (1:9-20)

1:9 I, John, your brother and partner in the affliction and kingdom and endurance in Christ Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus Christ.

John introduces himself as their **brother and partner in the affliction and kingdom and endurance in Christ Jesus**. Perhaps to encourage the original readers, who were already suffering or

would soon suffer persecution, John just uses his name, without any reminder of his high prestige as apostle. The Lord **Jesus**, who already suffered and won the victory over death, gives His word to the original readers through the Apostle *John*, who also suffered.

The theme of **affliction** and **endurance** comes up here, and will be a major ongoing theme in the book.

The **island** of **Patmos** and its harbor are on the sailing routes between Rome and Ephesus. John was there **because of the word of God and because of the testimony of Jesus**. Some might say this means he was there to evangelize, but that is unlikely, given how out of the way the place was. In accord with later traditions,⁹ the most natural understanding of this text was that he was exiled there because of his Christian ministry.

1:10-11 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and behind me I heard a loud voice like a trumpet, saying "That which you see, write on a scroll and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamum, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

John is commanded to record the visions that he will see. This book is not the result of John's environment or situation. It is the result of actual visions given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ. It is reliable, not because John was a great man, but because it is a revelation from Jesus Christ!

What follows is the core of the revelation of Christ, around which the entire book revolves. This vision is the most recent biblical "portrait" of the Lord Jesus Christ, and is worth studying with great care. There are details of this "portrait" that are hard for us to understand, but some of them are clarified in 1:20-3:22.

1:12 And then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. And turning I saw seven golden lampstands,

As the Lord Himself explains in 1:20, the **seven golden lampstands** symbolize the seven churches mentioned above. This symbol is appropriate because the lamp, as a source of light, is set on a lampstand so its light can fill the surrounding space. In the same way, the church is not a source of light but the place from which the light shines.

1:13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands, someone like a son of man, wearing a full-length robe with a golden sash wrapped around His chest.

Verses 13-18 are the background for the descriptions that the Lord uses of Himself in the beginning of all but one of the seven messages of chapters two and three, descriptions that are appropriate for the special needs or characteristics of each of the churches.

Verse 13 is interpreted with the help of verse 20 where the Lord Jesus says "the seven lampstands are the seven churches." So this text means that the Lord Jesus is **in the midst of** His churches. He is **in the midst**. How true this is! The Lord walks **in the midst of** the churches, He is present. We must always remember this, or we will grow cold in our hearts, even if we continue to outwardly serve Him well as happened the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2:1) when they left their first love.

1:14 Now His head and hair were white as wool, as white as snow, and His eyes were like a flame of fire.

The congregation in Thyatira was warned that His **eyes are like a flame of fire**. That was perhaps because the leadership there had tolerated sin, and needed to be told that He tests people's hearts (2:23). So it would seem that **eyes like a flame of fire** emphasizes that He is able to see into people's hearts.

1:15 His feet were like bronze burning in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters.

Metal that is heated in a furnace until it is **burning** or glowing is dangerously hot. The Lord Jesus is worthy of being a judge. Just as His eyes can test the hearts of men, in the same way **His feet** can enforce the judgment He makes. For this reason, the congregation in Thyatira was warned concerning **His feet**, which **were like bronze burning in a furnace**. Individuals and congregations that do not deal with sin are warned!

1:16 And in His right hand He had seven stars, and coming out of His mouth there was a sharp double-edged sword. And His face was like the sun shining in its power.

The Lord Jesus has the **seven stars** in **His right hand**. In 1:20 we learn that the **seven stars** refer to the **seven** angels or messengers

from the **seven** churches. Having them in **His right hand** might mean He has power over them, or that He is protecting them.

If the incident with the **double-edged sword** in Joshua 5:13-15 can be used to help interpret this passage, it means the Lord can help, and He can oppose, depending upon the character of the people He is dealing with. Take care, that **sword** is **double-edged**, so it can be used against enemies or against followers, if there is need!

We read here that **His face was like the sun shining in its power**. Apparently His glory was so amazing that **His face** could not be looked upon any more than you might look upon **the sun shining in its power**.

1:17 **When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead, and He set His right hand on me saying, “Do not fear. I am the First and the Last.**

This is the most appropriate response to the glory of the Lord Jesus. Indeed, others that have experienced something like this also have fallen **at His feet as though dead**.

In the midst of this glorious vision we read, too, of the grace of our Lord. See how He **set His right hand on** John and told him not to **fear**. Here in one verse the glory and mercy of God are powerfully portrayed for us. This is indeed part of the uniqueness of our faith – that we should know such a glorious God, but a God that would approach us and put **His right hand** upon us. The same **hand** that holds the seven stars can be placed upon John’s shoulder in an assuring and comforting way. What a God of wonders we know!

The expression **I am the First and the Last**, also used in the Old Testament in Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12, is used of the Lord Jesus. This emphasizes His divinity. He is not merely an exceptional man, and He is not merely one of the many gods of the nations. This expression is like 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” 2:8 “the First and the Last,” 21:6 “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,” and 22:13, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” If these four texts are summarized, we see that the Lord Jesus is the eternal God.

1:18 I am the Living One; and I was dead, and look, I am alive forever and ever, amen. And I have the keys of death and Hades.

The title “The First and the Last” is expanded in this verse: He is **the Living One**. This title is often found in the Old Testament¹⁰ and New Testament.¹¹ He is the **Living** God, the Eternal One.

The Living One has accomplished the incomprehensible: the Eternal One was **dead**, and now He lives, **forever and ever**. Having accomplished this, He holds **the keys of death and Hades**. He has authority over **death and Hades**, which in the past had authority over us because of our sin. This verse is remarkable. In just a few words, the Lord gives the outline of all His work on the cross and in the now empty grave.

This One who **was dead**, and is now **alive forever and ever**, has those **keys** that God never surrenders to any human ruler! Those readers that were threatened by the Roman Empire, fearing its power over their lives, need fear no longer, because their Lord and Savior holds **the keys of death and Hades**. For a few of the seven churches that would receive this Revelation, this would be vitally important.

All of this is glory enough for us to base our lives upon, but it is too hard to understand. In the next section, the Lord will take several of these descriptions about Himself, and use them in His messages to emphasize certain aspects of His character or being. So do not feel like all this is beyond you – it should be beyond you, but the Lord does want you to apply *some* particular parts of it in your life.

1:19 Write therefore what you saw, what is now and what will take place after these things.

As was discussed in the section entitled “Overview and Structure,” this verse gives the outline of the entire book. It was a command for John to write the vision that he just **saw**, as well as the revelation that was to follow, concerning **what is now and what will take place after these things**. As we shall soon see, that expression fits perfectly with what he will see about the situation of the seven churches in his day (chapters two and three) and the end time prophecies that follow (chapters 4-22). There are hard things to understand about the Book of Revelation, but the broad outline of

the book and many specific applications to our lives are not at all hard to understand!

1:20 The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in My right hand and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

The symbol of **the seven golden lampstands** is a wonderful image, because **lampstands** do not shine, but they provide a place for the lamp that does shine. In the same way, Christ shines in the midst of the **churches**.

With this, the vision of the Lord Himself reaches its climax. All that will be said in the remainder of the Book of Revelation has its roots here in this vision of the Lord. The commands of the book are based on the Lord as He is revealed here. The most appropriate attitude for a follower of the Lord is to respond well to this vision.

II. “What is now” (2:1-3:22)

The function of this section

This section explains and applies the details of the vision we just read about, details that were hard to understand and apply on our own. The commands that must be obeyed in order for us to obtain the blessing promised in 1:3 are only found here in this section. This section is crucial for us to read, understand, and obey, if we are to be blessed, and if the Book of Revelation is to have its purpose fulfilled in our hearts.

The contents of this section

This section contains seven letters to seven churches. These are seven local churches, in seven different cities. In every age somewhere in the world, there have probably been churches very much like each of these seven churches. At any rate, in this era there are certainly churches that resemble each of these seven churches. That is probably why each message contains the exhortation, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Since you have an ear, you need to listen to the messages to the seven churches; if you want to be blessed, you need to obey the commands of the messages. The same, of course, applies to your church!

The structure of this section

The seven messages of this section are structured according to a careful seven-fold pattern:

1. The Recipient
2. The Characteristic of Christ
3. Praise for the Church
4. Criticism
5. Demand
6. Warning
7. Promise

There are, however, exceptions to this seven-fold pattern. Where we would expect to find a note of praise for the congregation in Laodicea, we find none. Where we would expect to find a note of criticism for the congregation in Smyrna, we find none.

In five of the seven messages, the very first words after the Lord introduces Himself are “I know your deeds.” These exact words are

used each time. These words probably had a different effect upon the various congregations. For those congregations whose heart and whose deeds were pleasing to the Lord, this would have been an encouragement.

Throughout chapters two and three, victors are those that will gain the blessing that is promised in Revelation 1:3. They gain that blessing by “keeping those things written in the words of this prophecy.”

A. Message to the church in Ephesus (2:1-7)

In the message of the Lord Jesus to the church in Ephesus, we read that He is pleased with the purity of their doctrine, and He also acknowledges their deeds, but those deeds do not spring from a heart full of love, as they ought. To motivate them, He threatens that if they do not return to their first love, He will remove the church from Ephesus, which would make their labor useless. But if they return to their first love, then He will give them the special privilege – which will not be given to every believer – to eat from the tree of life that was long ago forbidden to Adam.

A Major Interpretational Issue:

The issue of rewards is crucial to the overall purpose of the book. We should all be victors. We should all be believers that actually obey Christ. This is required. It is imperative. No Bible teacher would deny this, but the difficulty appears as soon as we discuss what happens if believers do not obey. Some would say that if we do not obey, we are probably showing that we never really had “saving faith,” that our faith was “mere intellectual assent.” Others would say that if we do not obey, then sooner or later we might lose our salvation.

So many things are offered to victors at the close of each of these seven messages. Are they meant for all truly born-again believers, or are they special rewards for obedient believers?

Those that hold to Lordship Salvation (which teaches that we must submit to the total lordship of Christ if we expect to be saved from hell, as, for instance, John MacArthur has taught) and those that believe in the Perseverance of the Saints (that all true believers *will* persevere in good works all their days, as strong Calvinism teaches),

will tell us that there is no such thing as a born-again Christian that seriously sins, and does not get back on track and become a faithful Christian. They do not leave room for the idea of a carnal¹² Christian, as discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

Those believing that serious sin causes loss of salvation tend to believe that if you can finish your life as a saved Christian you are also a faithful Christian, because if not you would have lost your salvation.

As different as those two positions are, neither of them allows very well for three kinds of human beings:

1. solid faithful born-again believers: they will be rewarded with the promises described in the Book of Revelation
2. saved believers not serving God, and full of unconfessed sin: as carnal Christians they will be saved but not rewarded
3. unbelievers: they are neither saved nor rewarded

But verses like 3:11 “I am coming suddenly. Hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown” (crowns can be taken, so beware, they are not guaranteed), 2:10 “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (death by martyrdom is not required of all Christians, but it is a mark of especially strong faith), 2:26 “To the victor who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations,” and 3:4-5 “But you have a few people in Sardis who have not dirtied their clothing and they will walk with Me, clothed in white, because they are worthy,” say quite clearly that these rewards are not for all believers, but only for believers that faithfully follow the Lord Jesus.

It is the view of this interpreter that victors here in Revelation are believers that do God’s will to the end, are faithful until death, and serve Him obediently. Not all born-again believers will be victors, but those that fulfill these requirements will be richly rewarded. As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot lose our salvation, but we can lose these rewards. This issue is discussed further in the appendix.

B. Message to the church in Smyrna (2:8-11)

1. The Recipient and the local situation (2:8a)

2:8a **And to the messenger of the church in Smyrna write:**

The city of **Smyrna** is still inhabited today, but its name is “Izmir.” **Smyrna** had, and still has, an excellent harbor. **Smyrna** was famous as a wealthy and beautiful city. The residents of **Smyrna** considered their city to be the most beautiful in the province. Hemer¹³ notes that the idea of crowns comes up quite a bit in the study of ancient **Smyrna**. Such crowns or wreaths were presented as awards for civic service, athletic victory, or other honors.

In **Smyrna** there were temples for the worship of Sybil, Apollo, Asklepios, Aphrodite, Zeus, and of course Caesar. In fact, they considered themselves to be the most committed to the worship of Caesar in the whole province. In 195 BC **Smyrna** was the first city to build a temple to the honor of “The Goddess of Rome,” and in about 23 BC **Smyrna** outdid ten other cities in the province to gain the permission of Rome to build a temple to the honor of Tiberius.¹⁴ Thus believers in **Smyrna** could see the extravagance of the religions of Greece and Rome all around their city.

The duty to worship Caesar was a serious threat for believers. Even before the worship of Caesar became mandatory, it was already fairly popular. Rome did not want its Caesars worshiped for religious reasons, but for political reasons. The Roman Empire was vast, and included many different nations and people groups. Although many were quite content under Rome (certainly there were benefits like peace, good laws, and good roads to distant markets) among so many there were others that wanted independence, and would fight to gain it. The Roman government took this as a serious problem, and Caesar worship was meant to help. Some worshiped “The Goddess of Rome” spontaneously, and Caesar worship was simply a more concrete expression of the same worship.

During the reign of Domitian, that which was spontaneous and voluntary became mandatory: every man was required to burn the incense and say “Caesar is Lord” at least once a year. Once he did that, he was given a certificate. The Roman government did not require this to test the spirituality of its people, but to test their loyalty to Rome. After doing the required worship, people were free to leave and worship any god or combination of gods they pleased. However, the congregation in **Smyrna** rightly was not willing to use the title “Lord” for anyone but the Lord Jesus. They may have actually been the most loyal subjects of Rome, with whom Rome should have

been very pleased, but the law demanded of them the one thing they could not give.

Polycarp was bishop of **Smyrna**, and he had been a disciple of John the Apostle. He may have been a young man in the congregation in **Smyrna** when they received the Lord’s message. His own letter to the congregation in Philadelphia repeatedly brings up the themes of suffering and resurrection, perhaps reflecting the emphasis of those themes in the Lord’s message to **Smyrna**.¹⁵ About sixty years after Revelation was written, he became the twelfth martyr of **Smyrna** and Philadelphia.¹⁶ It was a holiday in **Smyrna**, and a mob was calling upon the authorities to seize Polycarp and require him to worship Caesar. The mob, including Jews (even though it was a Sabbath day), gathered wood for the fire. He was told he must either burn the incense and say “Caesar is Lord,” or be burned alive. His response still echoes in the hearts of those that love the Lord Jesus: “Already eighty and six years I have served Christ, and He has never wronged me. How could I possibly blaspheme my King who has saved me?” After he was tied to the firewood, he prayed, “I praise you that You by Your grace consider me worthy to receive such as in this morning and at this hour is happening, so that I may be brought into the group of martyrs, in Your cup.”¹⁷ Faithful Christians would die like Polycarp rather than worship Caesar. However there also were those that renounced Christ.

Look again at the words of Polycarp as he was dying, the words of this disciple of John. Did he think that all believers would be given to sit on the thrones of Revelation 20:4, which mentions the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus? Or did he understand that only those who were faithful until death would sit on those thrones?

The following two letters were written around 112 AD. The first letter was written to the emperor Trajan by Pliny, the Governor of the province of Bithynia, in the north of Asia Minor.¹⁸

Pliny’s Letter to the Emperor Trajan

It is my practice, my lord, to refer to you all matters concerning which I am in doubt. For who can better give guidance to my hesitation or inform my ignorance? I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the

practice to punish or investigate, and to what extent. And I have been not a little hesitant as to whether there should be any distinction on account of age or no difference between the very young and the more mature; whether pardon is to be granted for repentance, or, if a man has once been a Christian, it does him no good to have ceased to be one; whether the name itself, even without offenses, or only the offenses associated with the name are to be punished.

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.

Soon accusations spread, as usually happens, because of the proceedings going on, and several incidents occurred. An anonymous document was published containing the names of many persons. Those who denied that they were or had been Christians, when they invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ--none of which those who are really Christians, it is said, can be forced to do--these I thought should be discharged. Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be, some three years before, others many years, some as much as twenty-five years.¹⁹ They all worshiped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.

They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food--but ordinary and innocent food.²⁰ Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with your instructions, I had forbidden political associations. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by

torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but depraved, excessive superstition.

I therefore postponed the investigation and hastened to consult you. For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. But it seems possible to check and cure it. It is certainly quite clear that the temples, which had been almost deserted, have begun to be frequented, that the established religious rites, long neglected, are being resumed, and that from everywhere sacrificial animals are coming, for which until now very few purchasers could be found. Hence it is easy to imagine what a multitude of people can be reformed if an opportunity for repentance is afforded.

Trajan's Letter in Reply to Pliny

You observed proper procedure, my dear Pliny, in sifting the cases of those who had been denounced to you as Christians. For it is not possible to lay down any general rule to serve as a kind of fixed standard. They are not to be sought out; if they are denounced and proved guilty, they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshiping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance. But anonymously posted accusations ought to have no place in any prosecution. For this is both a dangerous kind of precedent and out of keeping with the spirit of our age.

Other passages that emphasize the theme of persecution include 2:2-3, 10, 13; 3:8-10; 6:9, 11; 7:14; chapters 12-13; and 17:6.

Related to the worship of Caesar, the choices of God's people were very limited. They could deny Christ, but many of them knew they would lose their heavenly reward for doing so. Or they could try to flee. Even Polycarp left his home and went to a farm to hide, but he decided to flee no farther and was betrayed by a tortured slave. Or they could become martyrs.

So let us examine the attitude and faithfulness of the church in **Smyrna** at a time when the luxury of idolatry is contrasted with the difficulties of faithfully worshiping Christ.

2. The Characteristic of Christ (2:8b)

2:8b ...**this is what the First and the Last, Who was dead and Who lives, says:**

He **Who was dead and Who lives** is a particularly vital expression to those that are facing martyrdom. This expression is also used in 1:17. Since He **is the first and the Last**, He existed before the world was created and will be there after the earth is destroyed. He will always be there, and He is worthy of their trust, even in the extreme pain of persecution. Their relationship with Him will outlast their pain.

To a person under persecution, it is very important to remember that the Lord Jesus is victorious over death. He is the one **Who was dead and now lives**. Death is the final earthly result of persecution, a final result which He experienced and overcame.

If a preacher that has never suffered persecution calls upon us to stand firm and suffer for the name of Christ, he does so only with the authority of the Word. However, the Lord Jesus has even more authority than that. He has the authority of the Word, and He has the authority of personal experience. He has been through it, so He is much more able to call others to it.

3. Praise for the Church (2:9)

2:9 **I know your deeds and afflictions and poverty²¹ – but you are rich! I know the slander of those saying they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**

The man that brought the scroll from the island of Patmos had been reading it along the way back to Smyrna, so he was quite eager to read it to the congregation. As he read these words to them, perhaps many sighed and smiled, deeply pleased that the Lord really does know exactly what has been happening in their midst, and that He would say they are “rich.” He knew, too of the painful accusations they faced from the synagogue.

He knows their **deeds** and their **afflictions**. He knows all about the **Jews** that cause them trouble. These statements assure them that even though He is allowing them to suffer, He has not forgotten them. He knows. Many have asked through the ages, if He knows,

why does He not act to relieve the suffering? The answer that is given in the Book of Revelation is simply, “Be patient and faithful in your suffering, and you will receive a crown. You will reign with the King of Kings. Believe and prove your faith with steadfastness.” The Book of Revelation shows us all that it is worth it to believe this and act upon it.

Because the city of Smyrna was a rich city it is at first surprising that the congregation would be poor. Their **poverty** was very probably due to the seizure of their possessions (Hebrews 10:34).

According to the Lord Jesus, despite their **poverty** they are actually **rich**. He is referring of course, not to worldly wealth but heavenly wealth. Their being poor and yet **rich** is in stark contrast with the congregation in Laodicea, which was physically wealthy but spiritually poor. This same teaching is often found in the New Testament,²² but this heavenly perspective is an important aspect of the Book of Revelation, which teaches us the truth hidden by the lies of the world. Despite all that the world teaches us, **poverty** because of Christ means riches; not Caesar, but Christ is Lord; dying for the Lord is victory; and powerlessness because of Him brings authority in the coming age.

The Lord acknowledges the **slander of those who say they are Jews and are not**, and says they actually **are a synagogue of Satan**. Apparently some or all of the Jewish population of Smyrna opposed the Christians. As noted above, years later when Polycarp was martyred, the record shows that Jews were involved.²³ Here the Lord rejects their Jewishness as inauthentic. This seems to be like the Jews of John 8:31-47 and Romans 2:28-29. Physically they were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but in a spiritual sense they had abandoned their right to be called Jews when they rejected the Jewish Messiah. The Lord’s criticism of them is quite strong: they are **a synagogue of Satan**.

4. Criticism

Smyrna and Philadelphia alone go uncriticized by the Lord Jesus Christ. Although this is not the same as saying they had reached some sort of sinless perfection, it is very encouraging to see that the Lord is satisfied with them, and does not see any need to bring up any of

their sins. This too must have been very encouraging for the believers there in Smyrna.

5. Demand (2:10a)

2:10a **Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you might be tested, and you will have affliction for ten days. Be faithful until death...**²⁴

After reading this to the congregation, the reader paused. Many were asking in their hearts: if He knows that imprisonment is about to happen, why does He not prevent it? One man asked that question out loud, and the one reading the message responded gently saying, "We will all see that there is much more to our suffering than meets the eye. Please be patient, you will soon understand."

This might seem like it is better called a warning, and placed in the next section, but it is not a warning because there is no "If you do not do what I demand, I will do this to you." It is just a fact that they will have to **suffer**. The demand is brief: they are required to **be faithful, even to the point of death**.

The Lord Jesus tells them that they will suffer persecution. Some members of their church will be **thrown into prison**. In that era, if someone was put in **prison** normally they would be tortured, or they would be left there awaiting trial or execution.²⁵ It is likely this persecution was related to the worship of Caesar in Smyrna. Their condition was difficult, but the Lord Jesus asks that they face it with faithfulness and that they not be afraid. The foundation of this command is the suffering of the Lord Jesus Himself. In other words, "How is Jesus so bold to ask them to be faithful until they are killed?" He is that bold because He Himself was faithful until death and He lives again. The Lord Jesus is all the more able to command faithfulness like this because of His death on the cross.

Are we ready to **be faithful until death** if we are persecuted? We can be, if we remember that the Lord Jesus became the foremost example for us by submitting to **death** and then conquering **death**.

Even though there is a real supernatural person named Satan that is behind the persecution, God has a certain purpose in their suffering, that is **so that you might be tested**. The victors, those who will be victorious over their challenges and suffering, will be given great rewards; for instance, they will be seated with Christ on his throne (see 3:21). So it is fitting that they be **tested** to make certain they fulfill the conditions of faithfulness. The victors will be chosen by the Lord Jesus to rule the nations with Him during the Millennium. This is His promise: “To the victor who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations” (2:26).

There are many interpretations of **ten days**, but it is better for the student to stay with the basic normal meaning of an expression unless the context forces the reader into a figure of speech. The words **ten days** may simply mean **ten days**! Even so, God tells them so they will understand that the suffering they will experience will be limited to **ten days**. He motivates them to endure the **ten days**, without being defeated or denying Him.

Anyone who obeys the command to **be faithful until death** is a “victor who keeps My deeds to the end” (2:26). The condition that must be met to receive the reward is faithfulness. This command is very high and very difficult, but the promises that accompany it are glorious and very beautiful.

6. Warning

Smyrna alone receives no warning or threat from the Lord (though the “warning” to Philadelphia is very mildly stated). There was no need to threaten the congregation in Smyrna with the negative consequences of ongoing disobedience, because they were not being disobedient.

7. Promise (2:10b-11)

2:10b-11 **...and I will give you the crown of life. The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The victor will not in any way be harmed by the second death.**

The hearts of many in that congregation were drawn to the crown of life. Many wondered if for them it would be days, or months, or years of being faithful until the death that would have to precede that crown. Some were not sure they could endure.

There is irony here, because in exchange for their **death**, they will receive **the crown of life**. Furthermore, physical **death** will be painful for those that are martyred, but **the second death will not harm them in any way**. As people threatened with persecution, they were surely thinking about, and perhaps afraid of, the first **death**. The Lord's words here put those concerns into proper perspective.

Just as the church in Smyrna was considered poor by the world but called rich by the Lord, here He says if they are faithful until **death**, He **will give them the crown of life**. The city of Smyrna often held athletic competitions, and the victors received temporary crowns. But victors in the Lord receive a **crown** that does not fade. The **crown of life** is prepared specially for the believers that are "faithful until death." The Lord did not promise this reward to believers who backslide because of persecution. He promises eternal life for each one who believes, but the **crown** here is for the believer who is faithful until death.

The **crown of life** is also promised in James 1:12, "Blessed is the one who endures in trials because when he is approved, he will receive a crown of life promised by God to whomever loves Him." Both the Word of God and experience witness that there are believers that do not "endure in trials" or love God. The **crown of life** is a reward for the believer who endures, who is faithful, who does the work of Christ to the end (2:10 and 2:26).

Here and throughout chapters two and three, victors are those that will gain the blessing that is promised in Revelation 1:3. They gain that blessing by "keeping those things written in the words of this prophecy."

We see in 20:14 and 21:8 that **the second death** is clearly eternal hell. At first this verse seems strange to us, because we know that not a single believer in Jesus Christ will **be harmed by the second**

death. However, as we look more closely at this passage, we see that the **not in any way** in Greek is a double negative, so that it is very emphatic. Very loosely translated, this passage tells us, “The victor will not in any way be harmed by the second death. In fact, rather than being harmed by the second death, I will give him a crown of life!” This is a figure of speech used in the Greek language. The Greek author that wanted to emphasize that something is big might say that it is not small. This figure of speech is used in English as well. When we say, “This meal is not cheap!” what we are really saying is that this meal is very expensive! In the same way, perhaps they will experience the first **death** but they will not at all experience **the second death.** On the contrary, they will receive beautiful and eternal rewards.

The church in Smyrna, faithful in difficulty, is told that they are going to suffer persecution. The wealth of this world is not promised to them. They are asked to endure suffering. The Lord Jesus promises a beautiful reward, the **crown of life**, if they are faithful in that persecution.

This reward is specially worded for those who are facing persecution and perhaps **death** at the hands of God’s enemies. He does not tell them how they might escape that pain. Instead He tells them that in giving up their physical life, they will gain a **crown of life.**

Other verses promising various crowns for special faithfulness would include 1 Corinthians 9:25; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:2-4; and Revelation 3:11.

C. Message to the church in Pergamum (2:12-17)

The church in Pergamum had already suffered deeply when they received this message from the Lord. They were faithful even when a faithful brother named Antipas was killed in their midst. The Lord understands their difficulties and He values their determination. But in the same congregation, there was false teaching and immorality that needed to be dealt with in order to avoid the terrifying discipline of God. If the leader of the church did not deal with those problems, God Himself would surely deal with it in some way. To those that are faithful, He promised rewards that are very pleasing.

D. Message to the church in Thyatira (2:18-29)

In the message to the congregation in Thyatira, the Lord Jesus speaks to a congregation that is generally healthy, but is stained with the presence of a false teacher, her followers, and their evil practices. The message of the Lord is so balanced and just. Towards those that do evil, He is strict: He requires repentance, and He threatens suffering. However, to those that have remained faithful, He brings encouragement, and He promises an extraordinary reward: authority over the nations. The great beauty of the city where they will exercise that authority is described in Revelation 21:9-22:5.

E. Message to the church in Sardis (3:1-6)

The congregation in Sardis was thought to be spiritually mature, but the Lord had another “opinion.” He tells them that most of them are nearly dead spiritually, and He threatens to come as a thief in the night. But to those in the congregation that are spiritually alert, He promises He will give them white clothing and He will confess their names to the Father. The spiritually lethargic there needed to become alert and get refreshed. His threat and His promise have the same intent: that they all have a healthy relationship with Him, so that their character and activities reflect His glory as portrayed in the vision in chapter one.

F. Message to the church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

Some of Philadelphia’s five promises may seem strange to us in the 21st century, but they are beautiful promises, and they are meant to motivate us to the life and ministry the Lord has for us, or to steadfastness in that life and ministry. The congregation in Philadelphia did not feel that it was very strong, but it was given unusual opportunities to serve in an unreached area. They were faithful and steadfast in the trouble they experienced, so they were not threatened or told to repent like most of the other congregations.

G. Message to the church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

In the last of the seven messages we are reminded that the witness of Christ is always true and faithful (a very appropriate reminder for those of us that doubt the goodness of His will). Based on the pattern used in all these letters, the reader expects the congregation to be praised for something. But in Laodicea the Lord found nothing for which to praise them. They were harshly rebuked (but reminded that this rebuke was a sign of His love). Like the other churches, the rebuke was accompanied by a demand. They were commanded to face their spiritual poverty and see the worthlessness of the worldly wealth that they prided themselves on. He threatened that He would spit them out of His mouth. Finally, in a promise that is similar to but more beautiful than the other promises, they were told that if they became faithful they will sit with Him on His throne. God is patient and good, even in dealing with those who have disappointed Him.

In the beginning, (Genesis 1:28), God gave Adam and Eve their task: to be fruitful, fill the earth, subdue it, and rule it as His images, His representatives. Adam and Eve did badly, and we their descendants have done badly. Now another, a true son of Adam, is going to fulfill the task God gave so long ago to them. And we, redeemed by Christ's sacrifice and given glorified bodies at the resurrection, will be invited to join Him in that task – if we are faithful now! In that way, what has seemed like the dreadful failure of God's plan to create a wonderful world shall, in fact, turn out not to be dreadful at all, but wonderful – and especially wonderful for every believer who decides to turn away from that ancient serpent, and instead follow the Second Adam in obedience and in victory. Will you be there, standing among those victors, enjoying the fulfillment of God's design for this earth and receiving the wonderful promises of the Book of Revelation?

The Seven Letters to the Seven Churches

Address	Christ is...	Praise	Criticism	Demand	Warning	Promise
Ephesus	with them	pure doctrine	left first love	remember and repent	remove lampstand	tree of life
Smyrna	alive again	you are rich!		be faithful		no 2 nd death
Pergam.	sword	you did not deny	Balaam	repent	sword	hidden manna
Thyatira	eyes, feet	doing more	Jezebel	hold on	she will suffer	authority
Sardis	7 spirits	only a few	you are dead	strengthen	thief	white clothes
Philadel.	holy and true	kept His word		hold on	crown be taken	crown
Laodicea	Amen		lukewarm	buy gold	spit out	throne

III. “What will happen after this” (4-22)

Revelation 1:19 reads, “Write what you saw, what is now, and *what will take place after these things*.” Revelation 4:1 reads, “After these things I looked – and see! – an open door in heaven. And the voice which I first heard like a trumpet was speaking to me saying, ‘Come up here, and I will show you *what must take place after these things*.’” In the Greek the words “after these things” in both verses are the same. The only difference is that 1:19 uses the verb “will,” and 4:1 uses the verb “must.” Thus we are indirectly told that the third section of the book begins here. We enter now into the long section of the Book of Revelation that tells the story of the end of the age. Much of what is written there will be of great value to the persecuted church. There are on the one hand amazing rewards for faithfulness, and on the other hand utter destruction for their persecutors.

The first section, chapter one, was the vision of the Lord Himself. If only we had sufficient spiritual insight, we would understand and apply that vision to our lives, and we would need to read no further. We would be able to endure all persecution that is thrown against us. However, we need help. That vision was too difficult for us to understand and apply in our lives and our ministries. The second section, chapters two and three, helped us apply the vision of chapter one. If only we had sufficient spiritual insight and dedication, we would understand and consistently apply those seven letters appropriately to our lives and the lives of those we serve, and we would need to read no further. However, we need more help. This third section helps us to see that the promises of chapters two and three were not empty words, but indeed shall be fulfilled. This third section will encourage the persecuted among us, as it encouraged the congregation in Smyrna, to be faithful.

We are now living in the time between the third and the fourth chapters of the Book of Revelation. The seven churches are history (although there are many churches like them today), and the visions of the end times are yet to come.

This entire section is given not merely to educate us about the order of events at the end of the age, but more importantly to encourage

us to steadfast faithfulness. The insight we gain in reading this section should touch our hearts and encourage us to do what is necessary to be a victor, so we can join the ranks of the victors on those thrones described in 20:4. (Again, we join the redeemed by faith in Christ, but we join the victors by works that come from a vital living faith.) Let there be no doubt that He will make good on His promises to the victors, in a way that on the one hand is well-described here in the Book of Revelation, and on the other hand is more amazing than we can imagine. In this life victors may have to endure great pain, but the rewards offered are well worth that pain.

This section has the following parts:

- A. The Vision of the Throne Room 4:1-5:14
- B. The Time of Torment 6:1-20:3
- C. The Millennium 20:4-15
- D. The New Jerusalem 21:1-22:5
- E. The Conclusion of the Vision 22:6-17

Although all these passages are discussed in depth in the author's commentary on Revelation, only passages of special significance to the persecuted church are discussed in this book.

Right at the beginning of this section, in 4:1, John is transported to heaven. He is not taken to the edge of heaven, or to an intermediate level of heaven, he is taken to the very center of heaven, to the throne room of God. And he describes to us what he sees there.

What John experienced, what he wrote about in chapters four and five, is a kind of "hinge" section in the structure of the Book of Revelation, joining the seven letters to the opening of the seven seals of the scroll. On the one hand, these two chapters are strongly connected with the seven letters, especially regarding the rewards that are promised. In both sections, there are thrones, white clothes, and crowns. On the other hand, there are clear and strong connections with the opening of the seals, because in this section the scroll and its seals are introduced.

From the point of view of the churches of chapters two and three, it seems as though the enemies of the church freely threaten and oppress the churches of Christ on the earth. But according to the point of view of the throne room, pictured in chapters four and five, the One

who has absolute power is the Lord God, not evil powers on the earth.²⁶

A. Vision of Throne Room (4:1-5:14)

All of chapter four tells us about the setting: what the throne room is like, who is there, and the activity there, which is *worship*.

4:1 After these things I looked – and see! – an open door in heaven. And the voice which I first heard like a trumpet was speaking to me, saying “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.”

As was noted above, the wording of this verse, especially **what must take place after these things**, shows us that we have left the second section and are in the third section that was given to us in 1:19. Therefore, this verse moves us into the part of the Book of Revelation that tells about the future.

4:2 And right away I was in the Spirit, and look, a throne in heaven with Someone seated on it,

4:4 And all around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and upon the thrones were seated twenty-four elders, clothed in white clothes, with golden crowns on their heads.

Very soon in the description of the throne room we are told of the **twenty-four elders**. They are on **twenty-four thrones**. They are dressed in **white**. They have **golden crowns**.

Where else have we recently read of thrones, white clothes, and crowns? The nearer the context, the more important it is for interpreting. These elements are all mentioned in the near context, in chapters two and three! Who are these **elders**? They represent all the victors, who will all be receiving what was promised to them back in chapters two and three. These are the ones who obeyed and were “faithful until death.”

4:9-II And whenever the creatures give glory, honor, and thanks to the One who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will throw themselves down before the One who is seated on the throne and

worship the One who lives forever and ever, and they throw their crowns before His throne, saying:

**“Worthy You are, the Lord our God, the Holy One,
to receive glory and honor and power,
because You created all things,
and because of Your will they exist and were created!”**

The *scene* of the throne room is awesome, glorious and beyond human understanding. The *activity* of the throne room is *worship*. As a part of the continuing worship described here, the victors, here called **the twenty-four elders**, cast **their crowns before the throne**. This is not a one-time event. They somehow can do it **whenever** the four **creatures** praise Him, and those four **creatures** are doing that continually! This is the first description of the fulfillment of the promises to the churches of chapters two and three. Be faithful until death, and join in this scene of heavenly worship!

Chapter five is about the Scroll and the Lamb who is in the center of heaven, who is worthy to open the scroll.

In John’s era, wills or inheritance documents were written on papyrus scrolls that were sealed with seven seals.²⁷ Anyone preparing a will would call seven trusted friends, and they would bring their signet rings (rings that each had a stone on it, carved in some special way, perhaps with the owner’s portrait). The signet rings of those seven witnesses were then used to seal the rolled up scroll. Then when the man died, those seven trusted friends were called, and they each testified about whether that seal was his truly own untampered seal or not. Then the scroll could be opened and the inheritance distributed according to the will.²⁸

Anyone who had ever seen a will or who ever received an inheritance in those days in the Roman empire would surely remember the use of the seven seals to close and seal the scroll. Therefore the meaning of this seven-sealed scroll was very clear to them: someone would soon be given an inheritance.

At first the idea that “victors” will somehow “inherit” the earth seems difficult, because we think that someone has to die for an inheritance to be granted. That is not a problem in the New Testament, where the idea of inheritance is used to describe special promises for those that believe and obey the Lord. In Matthew 5:5 the Lord said,

“Blessed are the meek, for they will *inherit* the earth.” Remember that the meek are parallel to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. All of that becomes a rather complete picture of the ones that are called “victors” in chapter 2-3. In fact in 21:7 the connection between the victors of chapters two and three and the heirs that will enjoy the inheritance of this inheritance document is made explicit: “The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.” The victors are also the heirs! Therefore those that would be victors want very much for the inheritance scroll to be opened, because they are the heirs.

In Galatians 5:21 we read, “... envy, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I say ahead of time to you, just as also I have said ahead of time, that those doing such things shall not *inherit* the Kingdom of God.” Ephesians 5:5 is very similar. 1 Peter 3:9 says “not paying back evil for evil or insult for insult; but instead blessing, knowing that for this you were called, so that you might *inherit* blessing.” These passages do not say that born-again people that behave that way will not *enter* the Kingdom, only that they will not *inherit* it. One can enter a place, a home, for instance, without owning it. Indeed, those that have believed in the Lord Jesus as their personal Savior but have not gone on to follow Him, to be a victor as described in chapters two and three, will enter the Kingdom of God because they are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, but they will not be seated on any thrones, and will not be given any authority there. The congregation in Smyrna could compromise to escape persecution, and they would still enter the Kingdom, but if they are faithful until death they will enter and own the Kingdom!

So, the book centers on the victors and their rewards. In chapters two and three we learned about the demands that had to be met to be a victor, and we learned about the many promises made to victors. There were threats about the loss of rewards to those who would not repent and start living as victors.

Since the scroll is an inheritance document, this event has special significance for believers who are truly faithful and who obey what is written in chapters two and three. God has an amazing inheritance planned for the “overcomers,” the victors. All that remains is that the

scroll of inheritance be opened and that the inheritance be given to the victors.

In 5:1-3 the scroll is introduced. It was crucial to find someone that could open that scroll (5:4-5). When the Lamb takes the scroll He is worshiped (5:8), and the opening of the seven seals actually becomes the outline of the Book of Revelation, all the way through chapter 18.

5:1 And I saw in the right hand of the One who was seated on the throne a scroll written on the front and back, sealed with seven seals.

The victors' inheritance is very large, as indicated by the fact that the **scroll** containing that inheritance had to be **written on the front and back**.

5:2 And I saw a strong angel proclaiming in a loud voice: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to break its seals?"

It was illegal for unauthorized people to break a seal.

5:3 And no one in heaven above or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it.

This highlights the importance of this particular **scroll**. In all of God's creation there was not one person worthy to **open the scroll**.

5:4 And I was weeping a great deal because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

John knew what the **scroll** was, and he very much longed for it to be opened. If indeed it is the inheritance document for all the victors, John's tears are understandable. He longed for the end of the age, when God's Kingdom would at last be established and the inheritance would be granted to him and to all his partners in the afflictions and kingdom and endurance in Christ Jesus.

5:5 And one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep; look, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered. He is the One that can open the scroll and its seven seals."

Somehow John apparently had not understood that the Lord Jesus was in the throne room of God.

The word **conquered** and the word "victor" in Revelation 2-3 are the same Greek word in different grammatical forms. In fact, besides its

use seven times in chapters two and three, the verb “to conquer,” “overcome,” or “be victorious” is used in the following passages:

- 5:5 And one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep; look, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has *conquered*. He is the One that can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

- 6:2 And look, a white horse, and its rider had a bow, and he was given a crown, and he went away *conquering*, even so that he might *conquer*.

- 11:7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war on them and be *victorious* over them and kill them.

- 12:11 And they were *victorious* over him
by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
and they did not love their lives until death.

- 13:7 And it was given to him to make war against the saints and to *be victorious* over them. And authority was given to him over every tribe, and people, and language, and nation,

- 15:2 And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who were *victorious* over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing by the sea of glass, holding zithers from God.

- 17:14 They will make war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will *conquer* them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.

- 21:7 The one who *conquers* will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.

In these verses we see two radically different ideas about *victory* (or perhaps “success”), and the reader is in effect forced to choose one or the other definition of victory in his or her life. On the one hand the Anti-Christ is victorious, 13:7. On the other hand Christ was victorious on His cross, and the saints can be victorious if they follow His example in being faithful until death. The beast may be victorious as he persecutes believers, but at the same time, if they remain faithful, they will find they have experienced the Lord’s kind of victory!

Persecuted believers everywhere are invited to understand these two different ideas about victory, and pursue the same victory that the Lord won on the cross. Note that Paul was doing exactly that, according to Philippians 3:10, in which he tells us, “I want to know Him and

the power of His resurrection and the participation in His sufferings, becoming conformed to His death....”

Note Revelation 3:21, “To the victor I will give to sit with Me on My throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with My Father on His throne.” Because Jesus was victorious, He gained His throne, and He can **open** the **seals** of the **scroll** that contains the victors’ rewards! The Victorious One is about to **open** those **seals** and give the victors the right to sit on His throne with Him.

5:6 And I saw, between the throne and the four creatures, and among the elders, a Lamb standing, but looking as if it had been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

Finally John sees the Lord. John describes Him metaphorically as a **Lamb**, not a Lion. With figures of speech that carry profound Christian truth about Jesus and about our lives and ministries, the Lion triumphed by being a **Lamb**. His death as a **Lamb** is likened to the Old Testament sacrifices made to God. He is **standing**, risen from the dead.

The persecuted church might be tempted to take up a sword, and imitate the Lion of Judah, but they are invited to imitate the **Lamb**. Indeed, they may already feel that they are like lambs led to the slaughter. Paul brings up these truths in Romans 8:36-37, which says, “As it is written, ‘Because of You we are put to death all day long. We are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.’ But in all this we are completely victorious through the One who loves us.” There is great victory in living and dying for the Lord.

5:7 And He came and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who is seated on the throne.

When the Lord takes the **scroll**, He is finally doing what the Father invited Him to do in Psalm 2.

2:7 I tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, “You are My Son; today I have become your Father.

2:8 *Ask of Me*, and I will make the nations Your inheritance, the ends of the earth Your possession.

2:9 You will shepherd them with an iron staff; You will shatter them like a potter’s vessel.”

It is clear that this is an important psalm for Revelation, because verse 9 was already quoted in 2:27. But Psalm 2, written about 1000 BC, was not the only time in the Old Testament that this event was foretold. In about 500 BC, Daniel wrote, in Daniel 7:13-14, “I was seeing in a night vision, and look! – with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming even up to the Ancient of Days He reached and before Him He was brought, and to Him was given eternal dominion which shall not pass away, and His Kingdom which shall not be destroyed.”

This is the event that the persecuted church throughout the ages has longed for. After so many years, He finally asks, He finally approaches the Ancient of Days, asking for the nations to be made His inheritance. But not His inheritance only, also the inheritance of all that are faithful until death!

At the moment He takes up the scroll the uncertainty about the timing of His coming and the establishment of His kingdom is gone. The faithful ones are soon to be given their inheritance. Soon they will rule over the nations.

B. Time of Torment (6:1–20:3)

Chapters 6-18 take their structure, their backbone, from the opening of the seven seals of the scroll, the blowing of the seven trumpets, and the pouring of the seven bowls. In these chapters the events of the seven year Tribulation are prophesied. Eleven other events are told, but they are inserted into this “backbone.”

The following seems to be the simplest and the most natural way to understand the connection between the seals, trumpets, and bowls: The seventh seal contains all seven of the trumpets, and the seventh trumpet contains all seven of the bowls. This might be called the “Telescoping View.” See the chart just before the discussion of Revelation 1:1.

The seals, trumpets, and bowls become a narrative chain through the book. Into this narrative chain a few other things have been inserted. Each “insertion” becomes another motivation for the seven churches of chapters two and three to be victorious.

As the seals are opened, there is judgment upon those who live on the earth. This judgment originates in heaven, not from Satan or from the beast. God judges the earth. The scroll, which is the last will and testament for “the victors,” is opened by the Lord, not by Satan. This judgment might have been frightening for the members of the congregation of Laodicea, because they were so rich. Perhaps they were well connected with the mighty and powerful people that are to be judged, but to the persecuted church, this judgment is the vengeance of the Lord upon those that have caused them such pain. The Lord does not just say, “Be patient.” He calls for patience, but He also tells the church how He will repay their enemies.

6:9 And when He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been killed on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb which they were holding on to.

When the congregation in Smyrna first heard this, perhaps someone whispered, “Some of our friends are already there, and they were the best of us.” And after reading a verse or two more, one elder there said, “There are so many souls under the altar already...” He tearfully gave some names. “Why do they have to wait?” But the one reading said, “All this time we have been thinking He didn’t love us, or was angry because of our sins, or even that He was asleep like the gods we used to worship, but you will see that He has something else in mind. ‘The number filled up...’, it is almost like the brothers and sisters that have been taken from us were selected to receive a special honor.” For a minute he could not speak – he was thinking of his godly older brother whose refusal to burn the hated incense had cost him his life less than a year earlier.

This **seal** is different from the others because the opening of this **seal** does not bring judgment. With the **fifth seal** our attention is turned to the martyrs, who are very important in the Book of Revelation, as was already suggested in the letter to Smyrna, where the suffering church is asked to be faithful until death, and thus receive a crown of life.

From the viewpoint of those of us on the earth martyrdom is an accident, but from the viewpoint of heaven martyrdom is worship offered in ministry.²⁹ The persecuted church is asked to believe this.

6:10 And they cried out with a loud voice, saying “How long, Master, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who dwell upon the earth?”

When Stephen was killed (Acts 7:54-8:1) he prayed, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When the Lord Jesus was crucified (Luke 23:34) He prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” But these martyrs under the altar are not asking that their persecutors be forgiven. They ask instead, **How long, Master, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who dwell upon the earth?** Perhaps this striking difference is a matter of the heart motivation. When we on earth reject forgiveness for those that persecute us, and instead seek to be avenged, it is most likely motivated by our self-interest. But these martyrs in Revelation 6:9-11 left all selfishness behind the moment they died. They are instead purely concerned with the glory of their **Master**, who is **holy and true**, and they long for His holiness and righteousness to be displayed to the whole earth. As long as He has not yet judged evil on the earth, there are people who can say that the Almighty One is not **holy and true**. These martyrs long for the Kingdom of God to be established on the earth so that the earth is full of God’s holiness and righteousness like the water covers the sea. In 19:2 their prayer is answered.³⁰

6:11 And to each was given a white robe, and it was said to them to rest yet a while, until the number is completed of their fellow slaves and their brothers and those that are about to be killed, as also they were killed.

The reader will remember where he has read about **white** clothing already, and who it was that will be wearing it. It was given to the 24 elders and the “victors.” These are the ones that were “faithful until death,” mentioned in 2:10. Death is not the end of man, and believers that are faithful until death are given something special to show their faithfulness. When reading this, surely the members of the church in Smyrna were encouraged. When we understand the importance of rewards in this book, we are assured that they are very satisfied with what they have received from the Lord, because it is a token of their status as victors.

The total **number** of martyrs has been determined by God. That total **number** needs to be **completed** first, and then the Lord will come to earth to establish His Kingdom. The Lord is not interested in lowering the **number** of those that will die for Him. He gives the high privilege of this victory to a certain **number** of people. Note also Philippians 2:17 and 2 Timothy 4:6.

This verse reminds us that God truly values those who are martyred, so that their total **number** is very important to Him. Maybe the total number of the martyrs is related to the total number of the thrones mentioned in 20:4, which says, “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and authority to judge was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the word of God. And I saw as many as had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark upon their forehead or upon their hand. And they came to life and they reigned with Christ the thousand years.”

6:12-15 And I saw when He opened the sixth seal, a huge earthquake happened, and the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became as red, and the stars of heaven fell upon the earth like a fig tree dropping its summer figs when shaken by a strong wind. And the sky was separated like a scroll rolling up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place. And the kings of the earth, and the nobles, and the commanders, and the rich, and the powerful, and everyone – slave and free – hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains.

The seven types of people listed here reach all levels of mankind with an emphasis on the upper levels of society who resist the work of God on the earth. The list of people is repeated in 19:18 where the judgment that they fear actually befalls them. See also Isaiah 2:10, 19, 21 about hiding from God’s judgment.

6:16-17 And they said to the mountains and to the rocks, “Fall upon us, and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, because the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand against it?”

As these words were read in Smyrna, someone whispered “The governor will be there, that’s for sure.” Another said quietly, “That Commander Flavius will be hiding under one big rock, he stands so tall now!” Another said, “The officer that took my orchard last week just laughed at me and said, ‘Pray to your Lamb of God, if He loves you so much!’”

It is ironic that such powerful people should be so afraid, and it is ironic that they would be afraid of the **wrath** of the **Lamb**, since lambs are normally such gentle animals.

The Eleven “Insertions”

In all of the Book of Revelation there are about eleven “insertions” that the Lord placed into the framework of the book, that is, the series of seals, trumpets, and bowls. They seem to be independent from the seals, trumpets, and bowls.

Second Insertion: Many people... who come out of the great tribulation (7:9-17)

This great multitude is not the same as the 144,000 Jews in 7:1-8. This is clear because they are specifically “from every nation, tribe, people, and language,” and this group cannot be numbered, but the 144,000 are numbered.

7:9 After these things – and look! – a great multitude that no one was able to count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes, and with palm branches in their hands.

To show that this vision is distinct from the one in 7:1-8, John begins this section with the words, **after these things**.

This group was so large **that no one was able to count** them. They were **from every nation, tribe, people and language**. This does not mean that *everyone* from **every nation** will be gathered there. In fact standing in stark contrast, 11:9-10 tells us that people from “every people, tribe, nation and language” celebrate the death of God’s two witnesses.³¹

Here in 7:9 their **white robes** remind us of the **white robes** given to victors in chapters two and three. The **palm branches** they hold are connected to victory and purification in 1 Maccabees 13:51 and 2 Maccabees 10:7 in the Apocrypha. See also John 12:13.

7:10 And they are shouting out in a loud voice, saying “Victory to our God, seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Their cry is often translated “salvation to our God,” but a better translation would be **victory to our God...** This term means **victory** or “deliverance” in Luke 1:71; Acts 7:25; Hebrews 9:28; Revelation 12:10; and 19:1.

7:13-14 And one of the elders responded saying to me, “These clothed in white robes – who are they and where did they come from?” And I said to him, “My lord, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the Great Tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb!

One young woman said, “Are these the same as those under the altar? Will Alex be there, and Rose?” She was thinking of her two cousins that were martyred the year before. The one reading told her, “I think our people were earlier, this seems to be people that will, during the Seven Year Tribulation, suffer as our people have suffered. But look, the white clothes they'll have....”

The term, **the Great Tribulation**, could also be translated “the great suffering.” The use of the article says that the meaning is not suffering in general which God’s people experience from age to age, but **the Great Tribulation** that will happen at the end of the age. It is the time that is covered by Revelation 4-19, the seven year period that (as we learn from other books in the New Testament) begins with the Rapture of the church, and ends with the coming of the Lord Jesus to establish His Messianic Kingdom.

It is difficult to determine the relationship between those **coming out of the Great Tribulation** and those who are killed “on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb” that are “under the altar” and given **white robes** in 6:9-11.

Most likely they are the same people, martyrs that were killed in the **Tribulation**, especially since martyrs do play a large role in the Book of Revelation.

If indeed these are **Tribulation** martyrs, then their attitude in 7:10 is very interesting: they are not crying out about their own sufferings, but about the victory of the **Lamb** of God.

The statement that **they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb** is a very rich and powerful expression. If indeed these are martyrs, then their clothes were not stained with sin. Rather they were stained red with their own blood when they were, like Antipas mentioned in Revelation 2:13, killed for their testimony. From a human perspective they appeared horrific. But by being **washed in the blood of the Lamb** who Himself was slain, and was victorious, those horrific-looking clothes become **white**. With the **white robes** of the victors of chapters two and three, they can stand “before the throne and before the Lamb.” Here we see them standing in front of the throne upon which God the Father is seated, and in front of Jesus Christ, but later in Revelation 20:4 we will see them seated upon thrones, to rule and reign with Christ for a thousand years.

7:15 Therefore they are before the throne of God, and they are serving Him day and night in His temple, and the One seated upon the throne will dwell with them.

When that verse was read in Smyrna, one of the elders marveled, saying “Martyrs will get to be that close to our God! They have suffered, but they will be so near Him!”

Their right to **dwell** in the **temple** of **God** reminds us of the right of the victors in 3:12, who “never again... go out of” the **temple**. In chapters two and three we read promises given to the believers who are faithful to death, and in these verses we also read of some of the fulfillment of those promises.

We are told little about **the One seated upon the throne** until the end of the Book of Revelation. It is as if His face is turned away from us. But here, for these people that came out of the Great Tribu-

lation, He is more personal. He **will dwell with them**. He does not hide His face from them. In fact, in verse 17 it is He that wipes away every tear from their eyes. Note also that in the New Jerusalem, in Revelation 21:3 His “home is with mankind, and He will live with them.” The closeness with God that these martyrs enjoy during the remainder of the Tribulation will be enjoyed by all the victors, living in the New Jerusalem, as described in Revelation 21:3.

7:16 They will hunger no longer, neither will they thirst any longer, nor will the heat of the sun fall upon them, nor will any burning heat,

During the persecutions they suffered in the Great Tribulation they had to flee their homes, and were subject to **hunger, thirst, and the heat of the sun**. All that is now past for them. These words surely comforted those of the seven churches enduring persecution, and should be a comfort today to all persecuted believers.

7:17 because the Lamb in the middle of the throne shepherds them and leads them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

The one reading the text added, “Our people also suffered hunger, thirst, and the heat of the sun during their final days here, what a rich comfort they will enjoy when the Lamb shepherds them and our God wipes away their tears!”

This is of course a reversal of roles. Normally a shepherd would lead a lamb, but in this case **the Lamb shepherds** the people. He **shepherds** them with so much goodness and kindness. Despite His exalted position **in the middle of the throne**, He **leads them to springs of living water**.

In 2:7 there is a special promise for the victors, that they will be given “to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of My God.” Most likely these **springs of living water**, offered to those who come “out of the Great Tribulation” are also located in that paradise.

Mounce³² writes that the tears that will be wiped **away** by **God from their eyes** are not tears of repentance for a life wasted on what was fleeting. Rather, these are like the tears that are on the face of a child who was sad and then suddenly joyful. The tears are still on their faces but the sadness has been forgotten and replaced with joy. The ones who come out of the Great Tribulation are like that. On their faces there are still tears from the heavy suffering that they experienced in the world before they were killed because of their witness. As noted above, **God Himself will wipe** these tears away. He is not distant and removed from those heroes, the martyrs from the Tribulation.

If indeed these are martyrs, then this statement is very significant, because it is not until the end of the thousand years that the same thing is said of all the redeemed (Revelation 21:4). In other words, this peaceful blessing that victors, like these Tribulation martyrs, receive right away only becomes the experience of all in the Kingdom *after* the Thousand Year Kingdom, at the beginning of the New Heaven and the New Earth. Two things are strongly implied in these words: one, the special blessings offered to victors are really worth pursuing at any and all cost, and two, failure to gain those special blessings, while certainly not like eternal hell, is very much to be avoided. See especially Luke 19:11-27, and the difference between the ashamed (and probably tearful) servant that just buried the mina, and the enemies of the king that are killed in front of him. That servant who is ashamed represents believers who will be ashamed at His coming – they receive a rebuke rather than a reward; the enemies of the king represent those that never believed in Jesus – they will be thrown into eternal punishment.

See also 1 John 2:28, which strongly implies that some of the readers, addressed as “dear children,” will be ashamed before Him at His coming. See 1 John 2:12-14 for proof that those “dear children,” and all the readers that John is addressing in 1 John, are believers.

8:1 And when He opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

There will probably be a great feeling of suspense during that **half an hour**, and nobody will dare to say a thing. What will the Lamb do now? Are these judgments upon those that dwell upon the earth

complete? Is the Kingdom of Earth (as the rabbis used to call it) ready to be “invaded” by the Kingdom of Heaven?

8:2-3 And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood beside the altar holding a golden censer. And a great deal of incense was given to him so that he might offer it up, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne.

A young voice asked, “Are our prayers there too?” “Yes, our prayers are most certainly there.” “Good, then I’ll keep praying.”

8:4 And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the hand of the angel.

So often we pray against evil, and we pray that righteousness will prevail, but we wonder if our **prayers** are even heard. Probably the church in Smyrna felt that way too. Some of our **prayers** seem to be stored up in heaven waiting for the day described here, because they are mixed with **incense**, and those **prayers** also mix with the **smoke** of that **incense**, and they rise up to God. This is a powerful picture of how God experiences our **prayers**. Our **prayers** are like the powerful smell of **incense** rising up, which cannot be ignored.

8:5 And the angel took the censer, and filled it from the fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth, and there were thunder, roaring, lightning, and an earthquake.

Four year old Josiah asked, “Will my prayers turn into thunder or an earthquake?” (They took away his father two years ago, and no one knows what happened to him.)

Apparently as an answer to the prayers of the saints, God has that **angel** take the **censer** of incense, which is somehow metaphorically related to our prayers, and that **angel** sends that fiery **censer** crashing down on the **earth**. It is as though God has gathered the prayers of His people, prayers against wickedness, into a great fiery ball, and

finally sends that blazing ball down upon the wicked! Your prayers, oh suffering congregation, will be answered.

In 6:10 those whose souls were under the altar asked “How long, Master, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who dwell upon the earth?” In this verse their prayers come before God and are answered. Apparently in response to the prayers of the saints, God who sits on the throne judges and avenges their blood with **thunder, roaring, lightning, and an earthquake**.

Just as the seal judgments were preceded by incense and prayer in Revelation 5:8, so the trumpet judgments are preceded by incense and prayer.

8:6 And the seven angels having the seven trumpets prepared themselves so that they might blow them.

These Trumpet Judgments are somewhat parallel to the ten plagues on Egypt in Exodus 7-11,³³ but the Bowl Judgments are even more closely parallel. Just as God judged the Egyptians that had oppressed His people before He inaugurated a new age, the age of Israel, so He will judge those that have oppressed His people before He inaugurates the age of the Messianic Kingdom.

In 6:9 John “saw under the altar the souls of those who had been killed on account of the word of God and on account of the testimony of the Lamb.” In 6:10 they cry out: “How long, Master, holy and true, will You not judge and avenge our blood against those who dwell upon the earth?” In 8:3-5 the prayers of the righteous before the altar begin to be answered. Apparently in this passage, those prayers continue to be answered. Again here the seven churches in Asia are reminded of the power of prayer.

Fourth Insertion: Two Witnesses (11:3-14)

In the insertions in chapter seven there were elements of witness and martyrdom. The insertion in chapter ten told about a prophet’s proclamation with its bitterness. In this next insertion also, there are elements of witness and martyrdom. This passage describes the two witnesses’ empowerment, as well as their ministry, their martyrdom, and their resurrection.

11:3 “And I will give My two witnesses even that they will prophesy for 1,260 days, dressed in sackcloth.”

In the midst of Jerusalem being trampled by the gentiles, God empowers **two witnesses** to **prophesy** for Him three and a half years. The Lord is doing His great work through these two men. In fact, the end of 11:13 describes great fruit from their ministry, in contrast to the lack of repentance from all the judgments that are poured out on those that inhabit the earth. Here we see the important idea that judgment does not bring people to faith, but Gospel witness does.

The identity of the **two witnesses** is often debated, but since the Lord did not clarify the identity of the **two witnesses**, there is no need for us to know their identity! Their clothing emphasizes their roles as prophets (Zechariah 13:4) calling people to repent (Jeremiah 4:8 and Matthew 11:21).

In the Book of Revelation, witness is powerfully effective in combination with the judgments of God. Without any witness, judgments have brought about little repentance throughout the book. Witness and martyrdom are certainly major themes in this book. See 7:9-17 and 10:11 as well.

11:4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that are standing before the Lord of the earth.

They are called **olive trees** and **lampstands**, terms also used in Zechariah 4. In the same way as Joshua and Zerubbabel in Zechariah were reminded of God’s resources as they completed their tasks, so we are reminded that the two witnesses will have God’s resources as well.³⁴ Just as **olive** oil makes the lamp produce light, so also the two witnesses of God can serve “not by strength, and not by might, but by My Spirit” (Zechariah 4:6). This verse emphasizes that the two witnesses serve in the power of the Spirit.

11:5 And if anyone wants to harm them, fire comes out of their mouths and devours their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, they must be killed in this way.

Their ability to call **fire** down upon any who would **harm them** is like Elijah’s power in 2 Kings 1:10-14, though the **fire** did not come out of Elijah’s mouth.

11:6 These men have the power to close the sky so that rain does not fall during the days of their prophecies. And they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they might want.

Their power to cause a drought reminds us of Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1. Their power to **turn the waters into blood** reminds us of Moses in Exodus 7. Whatever these men of God do to confirm their witness to the nations may be even more terrible than what was done by Moses or Elijah in the Old Testament, but Moses and Elijah become good models for the ministry of the witnesses of God in the final days.

Bauckham³⁵ observes that the plagues or judgments by themselves will not bring repentance, as emphasized in 9:20-21. In the ministry of the two witnesses there are two distinct elements that are not in the chain of judgments of the seals and the trumpets: the death of the witnesses, and the news that they tell. Plagues from God, if not accompanied by witnessing, will not bring people to repentance.

11:7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war on them and be victorious over them and kill them.

Without a lot of explanation, John introduces **the beast that comes up out of the abyss**. It seems that this person is the same as the **beast** which is “coming up out of the sea” in 13:1, known in other parts of the New Testament as the Anti-Christ.

The two witnesses will not be killed until they have **finished** their ministry. In fact, as the Lord explained in John 11:7-10, they could not be killed until they **finished** their ministry. This is comforting! We too will not be killed a moment before our ministry from God is completed. This was especially important for the congregation in Smyrna, and is today especially important for all persecuted churches. But witnesses like this, who according to 11:13 will be very fruitful, must be willing to die, just as the church in Smyrna was encouraged to “be faithful until death....”

11:8 And their corpses will be in the street of the great city that is spiritually called “Sodom” and “Egypt,” where their Lord was also crucified.

To not bury a body is a terrible offense, both in the Greek culture and in the Hebrew culture (as is clear in 1 Kings 21:23-24; Jeremiah 8:1-2; and 14:16.) The **city** where their bodies lie exposed and unburied is called **“Sodom” and “Egypt”** because it is the unrepentant Jerusalem, **where their Lord was also crucified.**

11:9 For three and a half days those from every people, tribe, language, and nation will look at their corpses, and it will not be permitted to place their corpses in a tomb.

Perhaps the **three and a half days** that their bodies are exposed to public and worldwide view is parallel to the three and a half years of their ministry, but this is not clear from the text.

11:10 And those who dwell upon the earth will rejoice over them and be delighted, and they will give gifts to one another, because these two prophets had tormented those who dwell upon the earth.

Bauckham³⁶ notes that this text is reminiscent of Esther 9:19 and 22, even though in that text it is the Jews rejoicing over a victory against evil, but in Revelation 11:10 it is Jew and gentile rejoicing over an apparent victory over God’s two witnesses.

11:11 And after three and a half days a breath of life from God entered into them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell upon those who were watching them.

The witness that is ready to die for his or her faith is a very powerful instrument in God’s hands! Surely this verse would impress those in Smyrna to whom the One “Who was dead and Who lives” said “be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.”

11:12 And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them: “Come up here!” And they went up into heaven in a cloud and their enemies watched them.

Note that just as the Lord Jesus ascended into a **cloud** while others looked on, so the two witnesses **went up into heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them.**

11:13 And in that day there was a major earthquake and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest became afraid and gave glory to the God of heaven.

Note that just as the resurrection of Jesus was accompanied by an **earthquake**, so the resurrection of His witnesses is accompanied by an **earthquake**. The **earthquake** causes a **tenth** of the city of Jerusalem to fall and **seven thousand** to die.

To give **glory to the God of heaven** is to truly repent and believe. It always means that in the Book of Revelation. See Revelation 4:9; 14:7; 16:9; and 19:7. It often means that in the Old Testament. See Joshua 7:19 and Jeremiah 13:16. See also Psalm 96:7-8; Isaiah 24:15-16; and 42:12. These were people that really repented, really believed, and really worshiped God in Christ.

To properly understand this passage we must understand that it is as though 1 Kings 19:18 were rewritten! In that passage only **seven thousand** are righteous, but here all except **seven thousand** are righteous. Having only **seven thousand** die, and the rest repent, is really wonderful when it is compared with the corresponding events in 1 Kings 19:14-18. In that passage, during Elijah’s ministry, **seven thousand** believed, and all the rest were idolaters. Besides that, a **tenth** is also used in the Old Testament (note Amos 5:3 and Isaiah 6:13) about the remnant of the people of Israel who did not experience judgment. But now **seven thousand** die, and all the rest repent. That is much more wonderful! This is the climax of the witness theme in the book, and highlights the importance of being a witness who is willing to die.³⁷

In summary, as opposed to the lack of results when judgments fall upon those who dwell upon the earth, when there is a witness that is willing to die and the power of God is present, the Old Testament pattern is turned upside down: rather than a few believing but most perishing, we see many believe and only a minority die. This is a great encouragement to Smyrna and Philadelphia – and us – to witness in the power of God, and see great results. It is also part of the on-going theme of martyrdom in this book.

The one reading this passage paused at this verse, and said, "Those of our number that have given their lives for the Lord were killed, as these two witnesses were killed, by those that hate the Good News. Now all we see are graves and sadness, but perhaps someday we will see that their witness, and our witness, has been effective, as was the witness of the two described in this passage."

11:15-18 And the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven saying:

**"The kingdom of the world
has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of His Christ,
and He will reign for ever and ever."**

And the twenty-four elders who are seated on their thrones before the throne of God fell upon their faces and worshiped God saying,

**"We give thanks to You, O Lord, God All-powerful,
the One who is and who was,
because You have received Your great power
and begun to reign.
And the nations were enraged,
but Your wrath has come,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and the time to give wages to Your slaves, the
prophets,
and to the saints and to those who fear Your name,
small and great,
and to destroy those who destroy the earth."**

The persecuted but faithful church will note that part of this rich and profound praise of God is that He will **give wages to His slaves, the prophets, and to the saints and to those who fear His name**. The rewards for those who **fear God's name** are strongly emphasized here. This should be an encouragement to the persecuted church!

God's judgment is not random. He left **the earth** in the care of mankind (Genesis 1:26-28), but man destroyed what was given to him. Because of this, unrepentant man will be destroyed.³⁸

Fifth Insertion: The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon (12:1-17)

Chapters 12-14 provide the broad heavenly perspective, portrayed in symbolic language, of the on-going war between God's people and His enemies, and also the victory of God's people who witness and are faithful until death. Chapter 12 tells about war: war on earth (12:1-6), war in heaven (12:7-12), and again war on earth (12:13-17). This insertion, with its heavenly perspective, gives the persecuted church a clearer idea of how it is that they are suffering as they are. There is an on-going war between heaven and earth, and they have shifted sides, and are on heaven's side in this war.

War on Earth (12:1-6)

12:1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

The word **sign** is prominent in this section. Its use reminds us that this chapter is full of symbols. The **woman** represents Israel, with the **twelve stars** represent the **twelve** tribes. In Genesis 37:9, the **sun**, the **moon**, and the eleven **stars** represent Jacob, Rachel, and eleven of the **twelve** sons of Jacob.

12:2 And being pregnant, she was screaming in labor pains, and struggling to give birth.

The woman is in **labor**. Israel is also pictured experiencing **labor pains** in Isaiah 66:7-11 and Micah 4:10.

12:3 And another sign appeared in heaven: look! A huge fiery dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads seven crowns.

As is made very clear in 12:9, this is the devil.

12:4 And his tail sweeps away a third of the stars of heaven and he threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman as she was about to give birth, so that whenever she gave birth he could devour her child.

In Revelation 9:1 and Job 38:7 angels are called **stars**. Another closely related text is Daniel 8:10. Apparently this text indicates that the devil brought one **third** of the angels with him in his fall from **heaven**.

From the beginning there was enmity between God's people and Satan, but this enmity reached a climax when the **Child** was about to be **born**. This is told in detail in the Gospel of Matthew, especially in the account of how King Herod sent the soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all male children under two years of age. In this vision the language is dramatic and terrible. These **stars** that have been thrown down to the **earth** hate believers, all the more do they hate faithful believers, victors!

12:5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who will shepherd all the nations with an iron staff. And her child was snatched away to God and to his throne,

The **male child** is clearly Jesus Christ. He will become King of kings. He **will shepherd all the nations with an iron rod**, and according to Revelation 2:26-27 the victors will be given the right to reign with Him. In this one brief verse the **birth** of Christ is mentioned, and His ascension, and His future reign, but this present age is totally omitted! The focus of this passage is the war between Christ and Satan.

12:6 and the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there they could care for her for 1,260 days.

The **woman**, Israel, is taken care of in the desert, apparently during the Tribulation.

War in Heaven (12:7-12)

In this section John tells about the war from the heavenly perspective.

12:7 And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels battled against the dragon, and the dragon battled, with his angels.

The angel named **Michael** appears in Daniel 12:1 as a protector of the people of Israel.

12:8 And the dragon was not strong enough to prevail; he could not even find a place for them any longer in heaven.

In the war in this section, Satan and the fallen angels are defeated. The word **them** probably refers to the dragon's fallen angels.

12:9 And he was thrown – the great dragon, the ancient snake, the one called devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole

world – he was thrown to the earth, and his angels with him were thrown.

Even though the **devil** has already been cast out of heaven as Isaiah 14:12-14 and Luke 10:18 describe, it seems that even now the **devil** still enters heaven, not with the status of legitimate resident, but to accuse, as in Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; and Zechariah 3:1-2. However, this verse tells of a point in time in the future when the **devil and his angels** will have no further access into heaven, and will no longer be able to accuse men before God. They will be completely ejected from heaven, and then, later, be completely ejected from **earth** as well.

In this vision, the **great dragon** is not only called **the ancient snake**, but also **devil** and **Satan**. The term **devil** is from the Greek word “accuser” or “slanderer.” The name **Satan** is from a Hebrew word meaning “adversary.” The use of the name **the ancient snake** reminds the reader that the one **thrown to the earth** is the same one that deceived Eve, and was cursed by the LORD God in the Garden of Eden.

12:10 **And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying,
 “Now the victory and the power and the Kingdom of
 our God
 and the authority of His Christ have come,
 because the accuser of our brothers,
 the one who accuses them day and night before our
 God,
 has been thrown,
 he has been thrown down.**

When the devil is **thrown** from **heaven**, the **victory** of **God** is that much more obvious, and the **Kingdom of God** is that much nearer. They are also praising **God** because the **accuser** can no longer accuse the people of **God**.

12:11 **And they were victorious over him
 by the blood of the Lamb
 and by the word of their testimony,
 and they did not love their lives until death.**

The one reading lowered his voice, and quietly said, "We here all have dear friends that conquered our enemy in this way. By willingly dying for their faith, they have proven that they did not love their own lives, even to death. But friends, the Lord has not yet returned. How will it be for the rest of us?" One older man answered, "Before I heard these things, I didn't want to follow my son (no one in the room needed to ask what he meant, and they all remembered his bitter and angry tears the weeks after his son loved not his life, even to death). But I see now that he won a great victory when he – when he – refused to compromise. His victory followed the pattern of the Victory of the Lamb. Pray for me, I want to win that same victory." He was crying again, partly because he missed his son so much, but also partly because he was sorry about the bitterness he had been holding on to.

After hearing about one aspect of Satan's defeat, in heaven, we now read of another aspect of his defeat, on earth. It is interesting to see these two aspects side by side, but we are not given any explanation concerning the relationship between these two aspects of his defeat. In any case, not only were he and his fallen angels thrown down out of heaven in their warfare with Michael and his holy angels, but at least some of the very people he accused were **victorious over him**.

This explanation of how people defeat the devil is very important in the Book of Revelation. Here the devil is defeated:

- **by the blood of the Lamb**, or perhaps by the declaration of that **blood**
- **by the word of testimony** of those who would defeat him
- and by being willing to face **death** for their faith

All three of these elements were illustrated by the ministry and **death** of the two witnesses in 11:3-10.

This strange victory is a very significant theme in Revelation. God uses their witness to accomplish what the chain of judgments in the seven seals and seven trumpets could not do – cause many to repent. In **death** they gain victory over the devil. What kind of a victory is that? It is a victory that means nothing to the cynical of this age that can only live for this life. It would sound very hollow in Sardis and Laodicea, but the congregation in Smyrna would understand exactly

what this means. They must have been greatly encouraged to learn that not only are they spiritually rich even though they are physically poor, but also they can be spiritually **victorious** while they are being defeated physically and even martyred.

This theme, that Satan will be defeated if believers are faithful, if they do not turn away and if they do not worship the representative of Satan, will come up again in 15:2-3.

The relationship between 12:7-8, the victory of Michael over Satan and his angels, and 12:11 where bold believers witness even to **death** and overcome Satan, is important. Chapter 12:7-9 is a report of what happens in heaven while 12:10-12 is a voice celebrating victory. Satan is defeated on two fronts, on two places of battle in the war. He is defeated by the angels in heaven, and he is defeated on earth by the believers who boldly witness. Holy angels and bold believers both have their roles in this war.

Those who defeat the adversary do not see their victory on earth. What they see with their eyes is only that they are killed because of their faithfulness and their witness. Awareness of the victory spoken of in this verse never comes by sight, but by faith. Note the comments on the use of the word “victory” in the discussion of 5:5.

**12:12 Therefore rejoice, you heavens and those dwelling in them!
Woe to the earth and to the sea
because the devil has gone down to you with great
anger,
knowing that he has little time!”**

Heaven should **rejoice**, not only because it is purged of **the devil** forever, but also because of the victory of the martyrs. But **woe to the earth**, he is not finished there yet. This does sound like the Tribulation! Because **time** is very limited for him, he will work intensely and fiercely. Chapters 13 and 17 tell how the devil gives vent to his fury in this **little time**.

War on Earth (12:13-17)

Here our attention is brought back to the war on earth. Israel, which has come to faith in the Lord Jesus, is opposed by the devil, but helped to escape. At that point the devil turns to attack other believers.

All these signs are written so the reader will understand that God has power over all of history, especially over the devil. This truth comforts His church as it is struck by Satan's violence.

12:13 And when the dragon saw that he was thrown to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.

It is not made clear here, but this does seem to be believing Israel, mentioned in Revelation 7:3-8. This fits with what Paul wrote in Romans 11:11-36. The day will come when the nation of Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, will repent and believe in the Lord Jesus. That generation of Israel will be "grafted back into their own olive tree" (Romans 11:24). And they will then be **pursued by the dragon**, who will at that point be unable to accuse the saints before God because he will have been cast out of heaven.

12:14 And the two wings of a great eagle were given to the woman so that she might fly into the wilderness, to her place where she can be cared for there for a time, and times, and half a time, away from the presence of the snake.

Just as Israel was protected in **the wilderness** for forty years, so also believing Israel will also be **cared for in the wilderness**.

12:15 And the snake spewed water like a river out of his mouth after the woman so that she might be swept away by a flood,

The devil tries to destroy Israel in the wilderness by spouting a **flood of water out of his mouth**. Maybe the **water** mentioned here is a literal **flood**, which could kill the people of Israel if they were in a valley in the wilderness.

12:16 and the earth came to the aid of the woman, and the earth opened up its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.

The people of Israel who believe in the Lord Jesus are pursued by Satan, and then saved by a miracle, so that the water coming out of Satan's **mouth** does not destroy them.

In Exodus we read about how God held back the waters of the sea until Israel was safe on the far side, and then let the waters return to their place, so that Pharaoh's army was **swallowed** up by the waters.

Here **the earth opened up its mouth and swallowed the river** so that Israel was safe.

12:17 And the dragon became enraged at the woman and went away to make war on the rest of her offspring, those keeping the commandments of God and holding to the testimony of Jesus.

After that was read one of the elders said, “As these persecutions against us have increased, I have often been surprised at the irrational intensity of people’s hatred against us. But here it is clear that the source of that intense hatred is the dragon.”

The **dragon**, unable to destroy Israel because she is miraculously protected, turns to destroy **the rest of her offspring**. The **dragon** would destroy all believers, but the Jewish believers are out of his reach, so then he tries to destroy the other believers. It seems like the expression **the rest of her offspring** is a figurative way of describing non-Jewish believers, the “other sheep” that the Lord Jesus mentions in John 10:16. They are further described as **those keeping the commandments of God and holding to the testimony of Jesus**.

The term the **testimony of Jesus** (which is used in 1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10; and 20:4) is the Word of the Lord **Jesus**.

Sixth Insertion: First Beast (13:1-10)

Here in chapter 13 the dragon’s two principal agents are introduced (although one of them was already mentioned in 11:7): the beast out of the sea, and the beast out of the earth. In this section Satan, who is called “the dragon,” is only mentioned in verses 2 and 4, but the beasts represent him.

13:1 And I³⁹ stood on the sand of the sea, and I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name.

This first **beast** is the Anti-Christ.⁴⁰ He seems to be an extraordinary human being who lives during this time period and serves the devil.

He comes from the **sea**, and will be “thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulfur,” according to 19:20.

The first beast’s description is remarkably similar to the dragon’s description in 12:3; both have **ten horns and seven heads**. But the **beast** has **ten crowns**, while the dragon has seven **crowns**. The number **seven** is often connected to the idea of “perfection” or “completion.”⁴¹ Here it may suggest that the Anti-Christ is completely evil, or it may suggest that he is an imitation of perfection.

It is best to understand this as a yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy. Today the church is not persecuted by the Anti-Christ, but as 1 John 2:18 makes clear there is the Anti-Christ that is coming, and also many anti-Christ’s active today in the world.

13:7 And it was given to him to make war against the saints and to be victorious over them. And authority was given to him over every tribe, and people, and language, and nation, Indeed, Anti-Christ can be **victorious** over the saints. Note the discussion of this significant term in the comments under 5:5. It is strange that the beast is **victorious** over the **saints**. This apparent contradiction is in fact a great irony, because although the devil is **victorious** over the **saints** in a physical victory, they are able to be **victorious** over him in a spiritual and eternal victory.

13:8 and all those who dwell upon the earth will worship him, those whose names are not written in the Book of Life of the Lamb who was slain since the foundation of the world.

The beast is very successful, and everyone that is not saved **will worship him**. This was already made clear in 13:4, where we read that “they worshiped the dragon who had given authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast.”

Sometimes we hear the idea that God is not just or righteous because He condemns people that never got a chance to hear the Gospel. It is said that perhaps they are seeking God, and would believe if they could hear the Gospel. This passage shows how wrong that idea is. People **will worship** the Anti-Christ without special help from God, but they do not worship Christ without the effective calling work of His Spirit. Unregenerate men are evil. The Apostle Paul takes the same view in Romans 1:18-32. All men will want to **worship** the

beast, except those whose hearts are touched by the Holy Spirit to bring them to faith in the Lord Jesus.

At the same time, divine election is also strongly stressed in this passage. God, who is sovereign, has already chosen the ones who will believe in Him, and their names have been written in the **Book of Life**. The names of those who **worship** the beast are not written there.

God’s sovereignty was a great comfort for those who were suffering under the Roman Empire at the time of John, and will be for those under the power of the Anti-Christ in the last days, as well as for each person in every age who suffers persecution because of the name of Christ.

13:10 **Whoever holds captives,
he will go away as a captive.⁴²
Whoever kills with the sword,
he must be killed.
Here there is the endurance and faithfulness of the
saints.**

The congregation in Smyrna knew exactly what this meant. They knew all about powerful men that hold captives, and powerful men that kill with the sword. They knew, too, that the justice these words promise is sure, but it is not swift. They understood that the words “will” and “must” in those words were binding. Their Lord was making them a firm promise. They also knew they were being asked to endure and be faithful.

In Revelation 22:12 there is a similar promise that the Lord will “give to everyone according to what he has done.” However, these promises do not bring immediate relief from pain, and so it follows that **there is the endurance and faithfulness of the saints**. The persecuted church is asked to patiently endure; it is asked to “be faithful until death,” and it is assured that justice will be done. There is no mention of an easy way out, no fire from heaven upon our enemies or other miraculous deliverance, and no guidance

on how to avoid pain. The Lord is calling for **endurance** and **faithfulness**.

Seventh Insertion: Second Beast (13:11-18)

With the introduction of the second beast there are three prominent evil beings central to this section. They might be called “The False Trinity,” because they imitate the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Just as Christ received power from the Father (Matthew 11:27), Anti-Christ receives power from Satan (Revelation 13:4); the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ (John 16:14), and the second beast glorifies Anti-Christ (Revelation 13:12); Christ works so that mankind will worship God (Revelation 1:6), Anti-Christ works so that mankind will worship Satan (Revelation 13:4); Christ has many crowns (Revelation 19:12), Anti-Christ has ten crowns (Revelation 13:1).⁴³

13:11 And I saw another beast coming up from the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb, and he was speaking like a dragon.

He **had two horns**, as opposed to the first beast with its ten horns. He appears like a **lamb** but truly he is more like a **dragon**, especially in his **speaking**.⁴⁴ He is **like a dragon** – he lies and deceives like Satan.

13:16 And he also caused everyone, small and great and rich and poor and free and slave, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead.

This is the opposite of the seal that the righteous have received in Revelation 7:3.

These three pairs of words, **small and great, rich and poor, free and slave** emphasize that no one will be free from the demand to have this **mark**.

13:17 And the result was that no one is able to buy or sell, unless he has the mark: the name of the beast or the number of his name.

It seems that this persecution will be carried out in a number of ways. The **beast** kills some who refuse to worship the image, and he also forbids buying and selling among those who do not receive this **mark**. This latter form of persecution is not violent, it is economic. Although it may be more systematic at the end of the age, in many

lands and in many eras believers that would **buy or sell** have been shunned by those that hate them and their faith in Christ.

In the end times persecutions, the Anti-Christ will exercise his economic control throughout the world, and it will cause great suffering for those that refuse to worship him. In this era, economic control is one of the tools that anti-Christ can use, even if their control is not as complete as what we read about in this passage.

Eighth Insertion: 144,000 People (14:1-5)

Chapter 13 was full of evil figures, but now our attention moves to Christ and those that worship Him. We, as readers, are comforted and strengthened because our King will surely be victorious, and He will be with His faithful people in all their struggles.

14:1 And I looked – and see! – the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him a total of one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and His Father’s name written on their foreheads.

The expression “redeemed from the earth” in Revelation 14:3 confirms that this is a heavenly **Mount Zion** and that these people are no longer living on the earth.

After being sealed on earth in Revelation 7:4-8, now here in chapter 14 apparently this same 144,000 Jews are safe in heaven, all accounted for, and none lost. If so, these are Jews who have repented, believed in Jesus Christ, and then were killed during the days of the Tribulation.

In contrast to the mark of the beast, these wear the **name of the Lamb**, and **His Father’s name, on their foreheads**. Despite all the economic and violent persecutions of the beast, these have not worshiped the beast or the devil and they are no longer threatened by Anti-Christ because they are with the **Lamb**.

The persecuted church today can take comfort from this passage, noting that not one of the **one hundred and forty-four thousand** are missing!

Ninth Insertion: Three Angels (14:6-13)

In this insertion, three angels bring up three themes: repentance, the judgment on Babylon, and personal judgment. This insertion ends with an encouragement to faithfulness.

14:9-10 And another, a third angel, followed them, declaring in a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives the mark on his forehead, or upon his hand, he himself will also drink of the wine of God’s anger that has been poured undiluted in the cup of His wrath, and he will be tortured with fire and sulfur before the holy angels and before the Lamb.

The punishment for those who “worship the beast and his image” is severe. The news from the angel with the “loud voice” becomes a reminder and an opportunity to repent.

This punishment is likened to drinking **wine... mixed undiluted**. When decent people drank **wine** in biblical times, they drank it diluted, so being given **undiluted wine** is a metaphor for the punishment prepared for worshipers of the beast and his image. The image is vivid. A person drunk from drinking **undiluted wine** had become shamefully incapacitated. Likewise, those that will suffer **His wrath** will be shamefully incapacitated. Lest anyone suggest that the drunkard does not mind, at the time, being drunk, it is further clarified that **he will be tortured with fire and sulfur**.

14:11 And the smoke of their torture goes up forever and ever, and those worshiping the beast and his image have no rest day and night, nor does anyone who receives the mark of his name.”

The third angel gives a very thorough warning of the consequences of siding with the Anti-Christ. There will be **no rest** for them from their tortures. There will, however, be rest for “the dead who die in the Lord,” according to verse 13.

Also, just as in 4:8 the four creatures praising the Lord **have no rest day and night**, so the judged, **day and night, have no rest** from their suffering. In fact, the exact same Greek words for that phrase are used in 4:8 and 14:11, although the word order is slightly different. This is clearly an intentional contrast.

In this verse, **the smoke of their torture goes up forever and ever**, and in 19:3 **the smoke of the torture** of Babylon also “rises from her forever and ever.” So we see that the worshipers of the beast and the city of Babylon receive the same punishment. The term **day and night** is also used in 20:10, so that it appears that the fate of the worshipers of the beast is the same as the fate of Satan and the beast. Eternal punishment is not a new theme in the Word of God; in Isaiah 34:10 **night and day and smoke that shall go up forever and ever** are mentioned, and the Lord Jesus Himself said that in hell “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48).

In 8:4 we read that **smoke** and incense mixed with the prayers of the saints go up; those prayers are answered in this verse. The persecuted church is assured that its enemies, that is, the Lord’s enemies, will be judged.

14:12 **Here there is the endurance of the saints – those who keep the commandments of God and the faithfulness of Jesus.**

As this was read in Smyrna, the congregation must have welcomed this encouragement. In the context of persecution it is no easy task to stay away from the compromise that eventually leads to worshipping the beast and his image.

At this point in this revelation **the endurance of the saints** needs to be emphasized. Then there is clarification about which **saints** are being spoken of: **those who hold to the commandments of God and the faithfulness of Jesus**. They do not take the mark of the beast or worship him in order to avoid persecution. They do not compromise.

The **saints**, meaning all who have been made holy by accepting the Lord Jesus as their Savior, are urged to join the ranks of **those who hold to the commandments of God and the faithfulness of Jesus**. In other words, this verse is a reminder, a call to be victors who patiently endure. This is, of course, a major theme in this book. As noted under Revelation 13:10, a similar passage, the Lord is asking

for endurance. He does not offer any “quick fixes.” However, in the very next verse, He does offer something....

14:13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write: Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they may rest from their toil, because their deeds follow them.”

After reading that verse, he said in a low voice, “Brothers and sisters, our dead are likewise blessed. They have rested from their labors among us, and their deeds will indeed follow them. Let us increase the fruitfulness of their deeds by following them in their faithfulness.”

This is one of the seven blessings of the book, which are always for obedient believers. Here they are called **the dead that die in the Lord from now on**. Since the setting being described is the Great Tribulation, during which the beast will be persecuting and murdering so many that are faithful to Christ and to God, most people that die faithful to **the Lord** will be martyrs. Here despite the pain of their martyrdom, they are said to be **blessed**. We will see them later in 20:4, on thrones, reigning with Christ for a thousand years. Here they are called **blessed**, they get **rest from their toil** (perhaps the **toil** of Gospel preaching during the difficult years of the Tribulation) and **their deeds follow them**. Do **their deeds follow them** so that they can be saved and enter the Kingdom based upon those **deeds**? Certainly not! **Their deeds follow them** so that they can enjoy rewards, inheritance, thrones, and crowns in that Kingdom. In 22:12 Jesus says, “My wages are with Me to pay out to each according to his deeds.”

John clearly teaches that it is not our good **deeds** but the blood of the Lamb of God that redeems and saves us. That said, God does not forget our good works. **Their** good **deeds follow** the saints and bring blessing. Thus the **voice from heaven** and the Holy Spirit Himself comfort the church in Smyrna, along with each believer who is persecuted and remains faithful to Christ.

15:1 And I saw another great and amazing sign in heaven: seven angels having the last seven plagues (they are last because in them the wrath of God is completed).

Here the last series of **seven plagues** is announced, but it is not immediately carried out.

15:2 And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who were victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing by the sea of glass, holding zithers from God.

Someone asked the one reading the scroll, “Do you think our victors are going to be there standing beside that sea of glass along with those that conquered the beast?” He answered, “I think they defeated the spirit of the beast, even if in their day they hadn't heard of the beast that is described in this prophecy. They took their stand.”

In 7:9-17 John sees a large group of people who have come out of the Great Tribulation, that have been victorious over all temptation, worshipping the Lord God. Only after worship were the seven trumpets described. So also in 15:1-4, before the explanation of the seven bowls is given, John sees **those who were victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name**.

People who die as martyrs without denying Christ are **victorious** over the Anti-Christ, because his goal is not to kill people, but to pressure them so that they will deny Christ and worship the **beast** or **his image**.⁴⁵ Morris notes that “in the early church the day of a man’s martyrdom was often called the day of his victory.”⁴⁶ Maybe the Apostle Paul was thinking of that same victory when he wrote 2 Timothy 4:18 which says, “And He will deliver me from every evil work, and He will save me into His heavenly Kingdom....” Paul’s concern was not whether or not he would be killed in ministry; it was whether or not he would be faithful until death, and thus ushered into God’s heavenly Kingdom as a victor. Barclay agrees, saying, “The real victory is not to live in safety, to evade trouble, cautiously and prudently to preserve life; the real victory is to face the worst that evil can do, and if need be to be faithful until death.”⁴⁷

In 14:1-5 the victorious 144,000 believing Jews stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb. Here in Revelation 15:2 **those who were victorious over the beast stand by the sea of glass**. Because in 4:6 the “sea of glass like crystal” is before the throne of God, we know that in 15:2 they also stand before the throne of God.

15:3 **And they sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying:**

**“Great and marvelous are Your deeds,
Lord God, the Almighty!
Righteous and true are Your ways,
King of the nations!**

Those for whom we feel sorry because they have been killed do not regret their death. Regret is far from their hearts. Their hearts are full of praises to the **Lamb** and to God.

The song here is called **the song of the Lamb** because **the Lamb** earned the greatest and best victory, as He said in 3:21, “To the victor I will give to sit with Me on My throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with My Father on His throne.” As victors over the beast and his image and the number of his name, they are able to sing this **song**. They do not seek glory for themselves. Instead, their attention is focused on the One they worship.

15:4 **Who will not fear You, Lord,
and glorify Your name, because You alone are holy?
For all the nations will come and worship before You,
for Your righteous acts have been revealed.”**

As a prelude to these last judgments, the victorious martyrs are given zithers, and they sing in praise of the **Lord** God, the Almighty. They emphatically proclaim that the day will come when **all the nations will come and worship before the Lord**. However, we know as well that judgment must first fall upon those that refuse to be made holy by the blood of the Lamb.

We are presently living in an era in which too few of **the nations come and worship the Lord**, and in which His **righteous acts** are often not **revealed**, but hidden. We need to consider this verse in light of the conditions of the seven churches in chapters two and three. The reactions of those who are rich physically but are poor spiritually, those who are persecuted, and those who are lukewarm,

will all be different. The rich may realize their poverty, the persecuted may be comforted, the lukewarm returned to devotion, and the faithful may be strengthened in their faithfulness.

16:1 And I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God upon the earth.”

16:4-6 Then the third poured out his bowl into the rivers and into the springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel of the waters saying:

“You are righteous – the One who is and who was, the Holy One – because You have made these judgments, because they poured out the blood of saints and prophets, so you have given them blood to drink. They deserve it!”⁴⁸

As in 16:2, there is a close relationship between the nature of a sin and the nature of the corresponding judgment. Beasley-Murray⁴⁹ and Mounce⁵⁰ explain that this relationship was not a foreign concept for the Jews. In Isaiah 49:26 it says that the ones who oppress Israel will eat their own flesh and drink their own **blood**. See also Revelation 22:18-19.

The angel in charge of the waters makes clear a connection which we (but not those in Smyrna!) might have missed: those that oppress God’s people will be avenged!

16:7 And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments!”

This is a figure of speech that is normally used in Hebrew and Greek literature. It is not **the altar** that speaks, but as in Revelation 6:9-10, “the souls of those under the altar.” After they see the judgment of this bowl, the souls under the **altar**, that is, martyred believers, are satisfied. This must have been a great comfort for the congregation in Smyrna.

16:15 “Look, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who stays alert and guards his clothing, lest he have to walk about naked and people see his shameful state.”

This surprising break in the flow of the narrative, in which the Lord Jesus Himself speaks, reminds us that the chain of Seal, Trumpet and

Bowl Judgments are closely connected to the seven letters to the seven churches. The whole book is tightly interrelated. **Look! I am coming like a thief!** is like what He said to Sardis in 3:3 “So if you do not wake up, I will come upon you like a thief...” There in Sardis they were certainly not staying **alert**, and felt no need to be guarding their **clothing**.

If it sounds strange that the Lord would compare Himself to a **thief**, the reader should remember that the point of comparison is that both come unexpectedly. This striking comparison is like the comparison of God and an unjust judge in Luke 18:1-8.

This blessing, about having **clothing** and not being caught **naked** and ashamed (like someone from Laodicea in 3:17-18), is in harmony with the other six blessings of Revelation, as mentioned in the discussion of 1:3. What is said here is not new, but in the context it reminds us of the importance of faithfulness. This reminder is similar to the one given to the people of God in 18:4.

16:17 And the seventh poured out his bowl into the air and a loud voice came out from the temple of heaven from the throne, saying: “It is done!”

To begin the final judgment, the **seventh** angel **poured out his bowl into the air**.

That **seventh bowl** brings its own judgment, unlike the **seventh** seal and the **seventh** trumpet. The judgment of the **seventh bowl** includes the destruction of Babylon and the cities of the nations. According to 16:19 the cities of the nations are destroyed along with Babylon, even though little or nothing is said about them in chapters 17-18, which give quite a bit of detail about the destruction of Babylon.

This final judgment from the **seventh bowl** is accompanied by the **voice** of God, coming **out from the temple of heaven from the throne saying: “It is done!”** Indeed the final plague, a terrifying storm, is not yet mentioned when He speaks but it has begun, and all that remains is to await its appearance. It seems that the prayers of God’s people in Psalm 79:12, “And pay back sevenfold to the laps of our neighbors their reproach which they hurled upon You, O Lord,” have been perfectly answered in this verse.

16:18 And there were lightning, roaring, and thunder, and there was a great earthquake – such as had never happened since man has been on the earth, so great was that earthquake.

The terrifying storm and **earthquake** spoken of in this verse are the result of the pouring out the seventh bowl.

16:19 And the great city became three parts and the cities of the nations fell. And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give to her the cup of the wine of the anger of His wrath.

The **great city** is **Babylon** in 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18, 19 and 21. This verse tells briefly what is then told in more detail in chapters 17-18.

The city of **Babylon** is not just ruined, it experiences **the cup of the wine of the anger of His wrath**. The arrangement of the words here gives the impression that the judgment falling upon **Babylon** is very great. Because **Babylon** “gave all the nations drink of the wine of her immoral passion” (14:8), so in the end God gave her **the cup** she must drink.

17:1 And one of the seven angels having the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is sitting on many waters,

In chapter 17 the city of Babylon is first written about using the metaphor of an attractive woman who is a **prostitute**. This **prostitute**, who is a metaphor for the city of Babylon, seduces people into sexual sin and materialism, sins that are obviously present in some of the seven churches of chapters two and three. Indeed, sexual sin and materialism are rampant in today’s modern cities.

17:6 And I saw that the woman was drunk from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. And I was astonished, seeing her, a very astonishing sight.

After he read this, he stopped and said, “We have known what this horror looks like from our point of view here on earth, but here we are seeing it from our Lord’s point of view. Let me read on, and you will see what will come of all this.”

Persecution experienced by Christians in the time of Nero and Domitian was not as horrible as the metaphors of this verse suggest. Like a drunk unable to control himself when wine is available, so also the great prostitute cannot control herself in persecution, in the pouring out of **the blood of the saints**. Like a drunk who is not satisfied with the wine that has been drunk, so also the great prostitute is not satisfied with the amount of **blood** already poured out.

17:14 They will make war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.”

One older boy said, “Why is He called the Lamb? We can see that He is a great warrior!” One of the older women nearby responded, “Yes, He is a great warrior, but He won His greatest victory on the cross as the Lamb of God, our sacrifice, dying in our place, so that we can live and love Him.”

It is as though the angel telling this cannot close the explanation about the great prostitute without noting that those ten evil kings will be defeated by the **Lamb**, though the victory mentioned here will be described in more detail in the next section (19:14).

17:16 And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these shall hate the prostitute and make her desolate and they will make her naked, and they will eat her flesh and burn her up with fire.

In the Book of Revelation evil appears in two forms: **the beast** along with the kings who conspire with him, and the city of Babylon along with the kings who “commit sexual immorality” with her. Anti-Christ uses violence and false signs so that people will worship him; Babylon uses the seduction of sexual sins and materialism to capture people. God’s people must be very careful about both of these strategies of Satan. Anti-Christ’s approach can be resisted with faith that Christ already experienced and defeated death. Babylon’s approach can be resisted by the realization that Babylon, who competes with Christ for our hearts, is vile and repugnant. Several of the seven churches in chapters two and three were threatened by the beast’s violence, and several were threatened by Babylon’s seductions.

17:18 And the woman which you saw, she is the great city that has royal rule over the kings of the earth.”

The angel explains that there really is no **woman** named Babylon. The **woman** is a figure of speech to help us realize what **the great city that has royal rule over the kings of the earth** is really like.

In chapter 17 we see, in apocalyptic style, the divine evaluation of hedonism and materialism. Chapter 18 pictures the character and fate of that hedonistic and materialistic society, centered in the city of “Babylon.” In chapter 17 we see the spiritual perspective on the city, but in chapter 18 the physical side is stressed. Babylon is seen from heaven in chapter 17, while in chapter 18, the same city is seen from the deck of a cargo ship!

For the believers in Smyrna, prophecies about Babylon’s fall simply confirm how right they were to side with the Lord, and not to compromise their faith for the sake of their property or their physical comfort.

18:1-4 After these things I saw another angel coming down out of heaven, having great authority, and the earth shined from his glory. And he cried out in a mighty voice, saying “Fallen, Babylon the Great, and she has become the dwelling place of demons, and a haunt for every unclean spirit, and a haunt for every unclean and hateful bird. For from the wine of the passion of her immorality all the nations have fallen, and the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have gotten rich from the power of her sensuality.” And I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, My people, lest you participate in her sins and lest you receive of her plagues,

Hearing this, one of the teenagers in the congregation in Smyrna quietly said to his father, seated beside him, “We left the pleasures Babylon offers a long time ago,” and his father nodded in agreement.

This is not the first time God has commanded His **people** to not participate in the **sins** of the people around them. In Revelation 2-3

He exhorts the seven churches not to **participate in the sins** that some have fallen into. Also, He threatens them with negative consequences if they do not repent, just as here He threatens **lest you receive of her plagues.**

18:5-6 because her sins have piled up to heaven and God has remembered her crimes. Pay her as she paid others, and double it for her, double in accord with her deeds. In the cup she mixed, mix for her double.

The evil city will be judged!

18:10-14 Standing far away for fear of her torment, they will say, “Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city, for in one hour your judgment has come.” And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn for her, because no one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, precious stones, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of fragrant wood, all kinds of objects made of ivory, all kinds of things made of rare wood, bronze, iron, marble, cinnamon, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, fine flour, wheat, sheep, cattle, horses, carriages, bodies and souls of people. “And the fruit of the desire of your soul is gone from you, and all luxury and radiance is lost from you, and you will never ever find these things.”

The one reading said, “Brothers, sisters, before our homes were pillaged by those that took advantage of our helplessness, some of us had some of these things. A few of us enjoyed this.... and that..... But is that the fruit of the desire of our souls? I think we have known, and are here reminded, that we lost nothing of value, and as the Lord said to us, we are poor, but we are rich. And the riches we now have will never be destroyed like what we hear about in this prophecy. In one hour, those riches will be destroyed, but our riches will endure forever. People say we are poor, but hasn’t our Lord been good to us!”

The expression **the fruit of the desire of your soul** is quite expressive. Their souls longed for material wealth. The reader of the Book of Revelation must not think that because cinnamon or pearls are mentioned among the cargos of the merchants of the earth who

mourn Babylon's fall, they must never taste cinnamon or own a pearl. The New Testament never makes a list of items and says, "These items are luxurious and therefore inappropriate for followers of the Lord Jesus." Rather, the New Testament teaches us what a wonderful Savior we have, and what wonderful things He has done for us, and that He would draw us into such a deep love for Him, so that there would be no place in our souls for a **desire** for physical wealth. Other religions offer various lists of Do's and Don'ts. Instead, the New Testament offers us a wonderful Savior, and we should love Him. He should be **the desire of your soul**. The congregation in Smyrna knew that full well, but how did the congregation in Laodicea hear these words? How do we hear these words?

18:20 Rejoice over her, heaven, and saints, and apostles, and prophets, because God has judged her with the judgment you got from her.

In other words, "Come, you who have been persecuted by the great prostitute, you whose blood she drank, this is your victory!" The use of **because** emphasizes that those who cried out and prayed in 6:10 and 8:3-4 are finally comforted. In 6:11 we read that those who are persecuted are told to "rest yet a while, until the number is completed of their fellow slaves and their brothers and those that are about to be killed, as also they were killed." Now here in 18:20 that number is finally completed, and there will be no more martyrs.

18:21-24 And one mighty angel took up a stone like a large millstone, and threw it into the sea, saying "In this way Babylon, the great city, will be thrown down in a violent rush, and will never again be found. And the sound of zither players and musicians and flute-players and trumpeters will never be heard in you again, and no craftsman of any craft will ever be found in you again, and the sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again, and the light of a lamp will never shine in you again, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again, because your merchants were the elite of the earth, because by your sorcery you have deceived all the nations. And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all those slain upon the earth."

Another reason for the heavy judgment is that the city of Babylon was responsible for killing the **prophets**, the **saints** and **all those**

slain upon the earth.⁵¹ If this prophecy is about a single great city that is called Babylon, then there is a figure of speech here, because that **blood** has been shed in many places throughout the earth. It seems to make more sense to say that the city of Babylon represents or signifies all the rich and powerful cities of the world, all of which have been guilty of martyring God's people through the ages. Even when a prophet or saint is martyred outside of the rich and powerful cities of the world, the guilt for that shed **blood** is in those cities. Their leaders and governments bear that guilt.

Again we see that the **blood** of the persecuted, which does not seem to be valued by God in chapters two and three, is actually of high value to Him.

This chapter emphasizes that wealth and luxury goods are temporary. All will be burned. The congregation of Laodicea that said of itself "I am rich and I have acquired wealth and I have need of nothing," but was in fact "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" will be motivated to reevaluate themselves and their wealth, because their wealth is fleeting.

On the other hand, the persecuted and physically poor congregation in Smyrna doubtless found great comfort in these words.

Christ has His promises to whomever is faithful until death, to whomever does His work until the End. The modern global city also has its promises of sexual and economic pleasure. Which will you choose to strive for?

19:1-2 After these things I heard something like the loud sound of a numerous throng in heaven, saying, "Hallelujah! Victory and power and glory belong to our God, because true and righteous are His judgments. For He has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her sexual immorality, and He has avenged the blood of His slaves from her hands!"

The one reading said, without anger, "So, do you see? We shall be avenged. There is no place for plotting revenge or harm for our oppressors. We shall be avenged."

Indeed, there are many reasons to praise God, but in this case, it is **because true and righteous are His judgments**. This is further explained by the words **He has judged the great prostitute... and He has avenged the blood of His slaves from her hands!** The kingdom of God on earth in our day is still in secret form according to the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 13. The kingdom of God certainly has not come with its glory fully revealed as long as Babylon still has "all the nations drink of the wine of her immoral passion" (14:8). However, once the Lord God **has judged the great prostitute** and once **He has avenged the blood of His slaves from her hands**, the way is open for the coming of His Kingdom in all its fullness.

19:5 **And a voice went out from the throne, saying "Praise our God, all His slaves, and all who fear Him, the small and the great!"**

All those who could be called **His slaves**, who **fear Him**, are invited to praise **God**. Remember in the context of the Book of Revelation, the entire congregation in Smyrna and the entire congregation in Philadelphia are counted among those who **fear Him**, but those words are not fitting for the church of Laodicea, unless they have repented. The condition of those that are not victors in chapters two and three, people that cannot be said to **fear Him**, is not a major theme in these chapters. We are told very little about what will happen to them. That is not a theme that is developed in the Book of Revelation. To the reader that is thinking, "I am a believer, but not a victor, and I sure wish this book said more about my future," this books says, "Never mind about that. Repent and be a victor!"

19:6-7 **And I heard something like the sound of a numerous throng, and like the sound of many waters, and like the sound of mighty thunder, saying "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, has begun to reign!**

**Let us rejoice and be glad
and give Him glory,
because the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and His bride has prepared herself.**

This verse tell us that **His bride has prepared herself for the wedding of the Lamb**. She has an active role in her preparation. That active role has already been explained in chapters two and three. The believers in Smyrna have been preparing themselves for this day.

As believers obey the commands of chapters two and three, the **bride** is preparing herself for **the wedding of the Lamb**. What a joy and a blessing that will be!

19:8 **And it was given to her that she might be clothed in radiant and clean fine linen” (for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints).**

The impression that this is the clothing of the victors of chapters two and three, especially 3:4, 5, and 18, is strengthened by the explanation given: **the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints**. This suggests that the bride somehow consists of the victors, with their **righteous deeds**. Indeed, did we not read in the previous verse that “His bride has prepared herself”? She prepared herself by doing **the righteous deeds of the saints**, as she was exhorted to do in chapters two and three.

19:9 **And he said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb!’” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”**

Someone asked, “Are we all going to be invited?” The one reading answered, “Remember how He said to us, ‘Hold on to what you have, so that no one takes your crown?’ If we are faithful, then we will be invited.” And someone else said, “Yes, but it’s hard to be faithful in Smyrna. It’s hard, but I can see that it will be worth every ache and every tear.” Three or four in the congregation quietly said “Amen.”

In order to determine who it is that will be **invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb**, it is essential to understand the use of the term **blessed** in the Book of Revelation. The seven passages that use this term in the Book of Revelation are explained under the discussion of 1:3. That discussion shows that **blessed are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb** refers in a special way to the “victors,” those who have believed in Christ *and* are faithful until death. Therefore the whole church of Laodicea is **invited**, but only if they repent according to the commands given to them in chapter three. So also those in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis are **invited**, but only if they repent. If not, they will not be **invited to the banquet of**

the wedding of the Lamb. As was noted in the discussion of 19:5, the Book of Revelation does not go into detail about the condition of those outside **the wedding of the Lamb** but still in the kingdom of God.

The command, **write**, stresses the importance of the next sentence **Blessed are those who have been invited to the banquet of the wedding of the Lamb!** This declaration of blessing is important, because as readers who are being persecuted hear and believe that they shall be **blessed**, they are strengthened to remain faithful. On the other hand, readers who are enjoying a comfortable life, like those in Laodicea, have to believe that what they enjoy is not a genuine blessing.

Chapter 19:1-10 is a heavenly chorus of praise that God has judged and avenged His martyrs, and prepared a feast. It is praise for the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls, and for the climactic judgment on Babylon.

Between the account of the great prostitute/Babylon (17:1-19:10) and the account of the Bride/the New Jerusalem (21:9-22:10), there is the account of the coming of Christ. His victory over all who oppose Him is strongly emphasized here. See how many of the things said about the Lord in these verses are drawn from chapters one, two, and three! This is the blessed hope of those that long for His appearing.

19:11 **And I saw heaven opened and look! – a white horse! And the One seated upon it was called “Faithful” and “True,” and with righteousness He judges and makes war.**

The name **Faithful and True** reminds us of 3:14, where the Lord calls Himself “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” The Lord Jesus does not judge randomly, He judges with **righteousness**.

19:12 **Now His eyes are a fiery flame and there are many crowns on His head. He has names written, and a name written which no one knows except He Himself.**

A number of elements here connect this section to the vision in chapter one, and to the first verse in each of the seven messages to the churches in chapters two and three. He is **Faithful and True**, and **His eyes are a fiery flame**. We need to remember that He who

rebukes and comforts us in chapters two and three is He who will come as Victor and Judge at the end of the age.

19:15 And from His mouth a sharp two-edged sword goes out, so that with it He can strike the nations. And He will shepherd them with an iron staff, and He Himself stomps the winepress of the wine of the anger of the wrath of God, the Almighty.

Three figures of speech, all taken from the Old Testament, the **sharp sword** coming from **His mouth**, the **iron staff**, and the **winepress**, all demonstrate that the Lord Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament's end times promises to Israel. Note Isaiah 49:2; Psalm 2:9; and Isaiah 63:1-6.

The world was created at His word. His enemies are also destroyed at His word. Isaiah 11:4 says, "...And He will smite the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will kill the wicked." Likewise 2 Thessalonians 2:8 tells us that the Lord will destroy the lawless one "by the breath of His mouth."

19:17-18 And I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out in a loud voice, saying to all the birds flying high in the sky:

**"Come, gather around for the great dinner of God,
so that you can eat the flesh of kings,
the flesh of commanders,
the flesh of mighty people,
the flesh of horses and those who ride upon them,
and the flesh of all, free and slave, small and great!"**

This banquet is different from the usual banquet that people arrange. It is not people who are invited, but birds; and it is not birds that are eaten, but people.

This prophecy must have been a great comfort to those in the church of Smyrna who were persecuted by **commanders** and **mighty people**.

A woman near the back of the congregation laughed out loud, and then was embarrassed to have laughed in a church meeting. But an elder said, “Go ahead, Julia, tell us what you are thinking.” So with some embarrassment she explained, “They came and emptied all my chicken coops, and gathered all my fat ducks, and all seven turkeys. They told me the mayor needed them all for a big party. And they ate them all – didn’t leave me so much as a chick. But the prophecy says the day will come when the birds will be eating them! I apologize, brothers and sisters, but that struck me as quite humorous.” An elder near her said, “Because of what we are hearing from this scroll, I imagine, Julia, the Lord smiled when you laughed!”

19:19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered to make war against the One seated upon the horse and against His army.

The preparations for this **war** are told in 16:12-16. Even though they **gathered to make war against the One seated upon the horse and against His army**, only the **One seated upon the horse** opposes them. The role of **His army** is to witness His victory.

19:20 And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet that performed the signs before him, signs by which he deceived those that received the mark of the beast and those that worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulfur.

It looks like “the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies” can gather, but they have no opportunity to demonstrate any battle strength. We read that **the beast** and the **false prophet** are **seized** and **thrown alive into the lake of fire**.

The **beast** and the **false prophet** are the first to enter the **lake of fire**. After that Satan (20:10), “Death and Hades” (20:14), and all evil people (21:8) are also thrown into it.

19:21 And the rest were killed by the sword which comes out of the mouth of the One seated upon the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves with their flesh.

This metaphor of a **sword** was used in 19:15. Once again, evidently **the sword which comes out of the mouth of the One seated**

upon the horse is a metaphor for the Word of Christ, with which He created all things, and with which He will kill those that “gathered to make war with the One seated upon the horse” (verse 19).

20:1-2 And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having in his hand the key to the abyss and a huge chain. And he seized the dragon – the ancient snake, who is the devil and Satan – who deceived the whole earth, and bound him for a thousand years.

The binding of **Satan** is not described in detail. He is not captured by God, nor by the Son of God, but by a nameless **angel**.⁵² Evidently there is not a prolonged battle. We only read that the **angel seized the dragon**. In the end it will not be a highly dramatic event.

The term **dragon** reminds the reader of chapters 12-13, but the term **the ancient snake** reminds the reader of Genesis 3:1-15. The beast and the false prophet are thrown directly into the lake of fire, but **the devil** is only put in “prison.” He has another role to perform in **a thousand years**. After that he, too, will be thrown into the lake of fire (20:10).

Let us understand that the expression **a thousand years** speaks about a literal **thousand** year period of time whose actual duration reminds us of its perfection. In the Bible the term “year” with a number modifying it is always literal. Even in the case of 2 Peter 3:8, which says “with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day,” the expression “a thousand years” does not mean “a very long period of time.” A real one thousand years is like a single day for the Lord.

20:3 And he threw him into the abyss and locked and sealed it over him so that he cannot deceive the nations again, until the one thousand years are brought to an end. And after these things he must be loosed for a brief time.

Satan is thrown into the **abyss**, and will be there for a **thousand years**. This description of Satan’s capture emphasizes the fact that he absolutely will not be able to **deceive the nations** at all during the Millennial Kingdom.

C. The Millennium (20:4-15)

The Thousand Year Kingdom is to be a literal kingdom that lasts one thousand years. It is to take place on this earth, and it is a time when the literal physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob receive the fulfillment of the promises God made concerning them so long ago. Of course, they will have repented and believed in Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. (See also Romans 11:11-32).

Besides being a time and place for the fulfillment of God’s many promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob concerning their descendants, during this Kingdom martyrs and other faithful people will reign with Christ, according to 20:4-6. This is the fulfillment of the promises to victors in chapters two and three, and other promises in the New Testament of special rewards for faithfulness.

20:4 And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and authority to judge was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the word of God. And I saw as many as had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark upon their forehead or upon their hand. And they came to life and they reigned with Christ the thousand years.

After reading about those thrones, he stopped and said, “So you see, those that we have wept over are perfectly assured of their place on thrones to reign with Christ for a thousand years. Yes, they missed some years here, and we miss them with deep anguish in our hearts, but look what they gained! Look what they gained. We have grieved over them. But I see that we must be faithful, so that they will not grieve at missing us among those thrones!”

This verse shows that God’s promises of **thrones** for the victors of the seven churches (and thus to victors in our generation), and to those who had **not worshiped the beast**, and to the martyrs in the Tribulation, is fulfilled during the **thousand years**. The victors will reign **with Christ the thousand years**. He promised, “Blessed is the one who reads, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near”

(1:3). Polycarp understood this blessing. Perhaps that was why he could receive his martyrdom with such peace and gratitude.⁵³

Remember that in 2:26 the Lord said, “To the victor who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations.” Here, near the end of the Book of Revelation, at the beginning of the Thousand Year Kingdom, that promise is fulfilled.

In Genesis 1:26-28 mankind was created and given dominion over the whole earth. Mankind has continually failed in that role. But during the Millennial Kingdom, and also in eternity, those who have been redeemed by the Lamb of **God** and do His will to the end (2:26) will carry out that role well. They will bring the earth under their dominion as they reign **with Christ**. One of the purposes of the Millennial Kingdom is to proclaim the glory of **God** on this earth. If there were no Millennial Kingdom, if this earth were destroyed without a righteous age, then it could be said that Satan was successful in ruining this earth, and **God** failed in restoring it.

20:5 (**And the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished.**) **This is the first resurrection.** **The first resurrection** speaks of the entire **resurrection** of the righteous. It comes in several stages, as explained in 1 Corinthians 15:22-24 (“For just as in Adam all die, thus also in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in its own proper order: Christ, the firstfruits, then those of Christ in His appearing. Then the end, when He shall turn over the Kingdom to God, even the Father, when He has destroyed all dominion and all authority and power”). Note also Luke 14:14 and Acts 24:15. What is described in 20:4 is a part of **the first resurrection**. It is a significant part of that **resurrection**, because in it the martyrs of the Tribulation are raised from the **dead**, apparently along with victors from other eras, including our own. As we know from 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, at the very beginning of the Tribulation, all saved people, living or **dead**, will be taken up to be with the Lord. As we have already seen, believers that do not walk with the Lord are not highlighted in the Book of Revelation.

In this text, we are told there are a **thousand years** between the two resurrections.

20:6 Blessed and holy is he that has a part in the first resurrection. Upon them the second death has no authority, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ and they shall reign with Him a thousand years.

Since all of the other six blessings in the Book of Revelation are given to those that obey what is written in the book (note the list of the seven blessings in the discussion on 1:3), it seems likely that this one, too, is for obedient believers. That raises the question as to whether carnal believers, saved but not obedient, will have **a part in the first resurrection**. However, as noted above, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 indicates that all believers will be in the Millennial Kingdom. Carnal believers will be in the Millennial Kingdom, but they will not **reign**. In fact, the victors will rule over them.

Just as there is a **first** and a second **resurrection**, so there is a first and a **second death**. The first **death** is the **death** that can be seen, physical **death**, while the **second death** is everlasting judgment.

20:7 And when the thousand years are brought to an end, Satan will be loosed from his prison

At the end of the **thousand years**, **Satan** is released and once more will deceive the nations. Satan does not free himself, but he is **loosed from his prison**, because the Lord God has a predetermined purpose.

20:8 and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog! – to gather them to war. Their number is as the sand of the sea.

In accordance with his character, the final work of Satan is to **deceive the nations**.

After the Lord Jesus Himself reigns on the earth for a thousand years, a golden era for mankind with a perfect environment filled with the wisdom and justice of the Lord Jesus, there comes a moment when many will join Satan and oppose Christ. This event proves that unredeemed human beings are inherently evil. The unredeemed human heart is always evil, even in a perfect environment. The problem is man himself, not his environment, his background, or influences from outside. Unless there is to be a long gap between 20:7 and 20:8, it appears that these people were easily deceived!

Who are those deceived by Satan in the Millennial Kingdom? It is strange that there are people who are willing to oppose Christ in the Millennial Kingdom. Those alive after the Tribulation, who believed in the Lord Jesus during the Tribulation, will enter the Millennium with their physical bodies, and they will be able to have children and grandchildren (Isaiah 65:20-25). A portion of their descendants will believe and stand with Christ at the end of the thousand years, but a portion will not believe, and at the end they will be deceived by Satan.

20:9 And they advanced over the breadth of the earth and encircled the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven from God and devoured them.

This is an amazing rebellion. It is massive, yet it is described in just one sentence. It is not difficult for the Lord to dispose of evil, because He is the Almighty. In our times it is rare for evil to be destroyed like this, but when the final rebellion arrives, He will deal with it easily.

20:10 And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Finally, the last deception of **the devil** ends with him being **thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur**.

Thus the Thousand Year Kingdom is described. The **devil** will be freed, and will deceive all the unbelievers among those born to the people in the Thousand Year Kingdom that had regular bodies (people not resurrected or raptured into the Kingdom). They gather to somehow do battle against the King. Note that the King of kings does not hunt down His enemies to kill them. Instead they are gathered together to kill Him!

20:11 And I saw a great white throne, and the One seated upon it, from before whose presence the earth and the heaven fled, and no place was found for them.

After the final rebellion comes the final judgment. A **great white throne** appears, and heaven and earth disappear. The time of the Millennial Kingdom is completed. The judgment described here is for those who have never believed in the Lord Jesus. Based on their

works, they will be thrown into the lake of fire. They are judged and sentenced according to their deeds.

20:12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. And books⁵⁴ were opened, and another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged from what was written in the books, according to their deeds.

In 20:5 we read “And the rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were finished.” In this verse they have been raised in order to be **judged**. Here they are called **the dead, the great and the small**. They were not raised or “raptured” before the Great Tribulation (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). They are not those martyred because they would not worship the Anti-Christ. The martyrs’ resurrection was described in 20:4. The ones called **the dead** in this verse are those who never believed in Christ.

If this is true, will believers not experience judgment? In John 5:24 the Lord Jesus answers “The one who hears My word, and believes the One who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has been transferred from death into life.” There is a judgment for believers, but it is not to decide who can enter heaven. Its purpose is to assess each believer’s works to determine his or her rewards and crowns. That judgment is called the Bema Seat Judgment, named after the Greek word for the kind of seat Christ will sit upon when He assesses our works. Note Romans 14:10, “For we will all stand before the ‘bema’ of Christ” and 2 Corinthians 5:10, “For we must all appear before the ‘bema’ of Christ, so that each may be paid back for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”

Note the appendix for further discussion on the New Testament theme of rewards.

Those who are called **the dead** are judged **according to their deeds from what is written in the books**. Besides these **books** containing the records of **their deeds**, there is another **book**, the **book of life**, mentioned in 3:5. That **book** contains the names of all those that have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those who do not receive forgiveness through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God will be **judged according to their deeds**. The Word of God is very clear on this. See Psalm 62:12; Jeremiah 17:10; Romans 2:6; and 1 Peter 1:17.

20:13 And the sea gave up the dead in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and they were judged each according to their deeds.

In order for the judgment mentioned above to happen, the **sea and Death and Hades** must give up **the dead**.

20:14 And Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

Death and Hades seem to be the last power to be defeated by the Lord Jesus.⁵⁵ What is logically explained in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 and 15:54-55 is told in apocalyptic style in Revelation 20:13-14.

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

This verse appears to be a summary of the great white throne judgment. Here we learn that the only condition for being free from the **lake of fire** is that our name be **written in the book of life**. Those who do not have citizenship in the Kingdom of God will be **thrown into the lake of fire**. There is no other place for unbelievers.

The great white throne judgment stands between the Thousand Year Kingdom and the New Heaven and Earth. In preparation for that judgment, earth and sky or heaven flee. The New Heaven and the New Earth are not yet created. The New Heaven and the New Earth are never to be polluted with the evils of this era.

D. The New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5)

21:1 And I saw a New Heaven and a New Earth, for the first heaven and the first earth are gone, and the sea exists no longer.

This final vision is given after the Millennium and after the great white throne judgment. The old heaven and earth are no more. In this vision the New Jerusalem is revealed as the capital of the new creation. Very little is said of the New Heaven and the New Earth. In this revelation God tells us much more about the New Jerusalem.

It is *like* a bride. God’s actual presence among His people is celebrated; and His comfort is celebrated. Verses 5-8 are spoken by the One on the throne, God the Father.

Here in this final vision, the theme of rewards for faithful believers is carried forward. Only faithful believers, called victors in chapters two and three, will be allowed into the New Jerusalem. As the capital of the New Earth, it is the seat of its government, and it is where those that are given authority to rule will dwell. This understanding is most clear in 21:24 and 26, where we learn that there are nations outside the New Jerusalem that bring their tribute to it. Because they are saved, they are not in the lake of fire; but they are not rewarded. They are in the Kingdom, but they are not reigning with Christ in the Kingdom. They are citizens, not rulers. It is also quite clear in 22:14, the last of the seven blessings of the Book of Revelation, which reads, “Blessed are they that do His commands, so that the right will be theirs to the tree of life, and that they might enter through the gates into the city.” In line with the other six blessings (which are all for obedient believers), obedient believers have the right to “enter through the gates into the city.” This would make sense to the original readers. They knew that Rome was the capital of the Roman Empire. They knew that those that ruled over the nations lived in Rome, and that those nations paid their taxes to Rome. This is the great hope offered to the congregation in Smyrna. They are asked to be faithful until death, and the Lord will give them thrones and the crown of life.

21:2 I also saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

The **New Jerusalem** will be described in more detail later in 21:9–22:5. Though John sees the New Heaven and the New Earth, what the Lord emphasizes to him is the **New Jerusalem**. This is the second city and the second “woman.” The use of the words **Holy** and **New** reminds us that the city of Babylon, in contrast, was wicked and old. The **New Jerusalem**, which comes **down out of heaven from God**, seems to be a part of the New Heaven and the New Earth, which were just mentioned in the previous verse.

This city comes **down out of heaven from God**. It seems to be a piece of **heaven** that comes **down** to earth as a place from which victors will rule the New Earth.

The main purpose of the new creation is that in it God and His creatures can fellowship together in holiness. It is His victors, not simply His creatures, that will enjoy holy fellowship in the **New Jerusalem**. The situation of believers that are not victors is discussed under 21:24.

The term **like** reminds us that the **bride** is a figure of speech, just as 17:18 explains that the great prostitute was a metaphor for the city of Babylon.

21:3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Look! God’s home is with mankind, and He will live with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them.

This is the central point. This sentence, spoken **from heaven**, summarizes the purpose of the Book of Revelation, and the purpose of the history of mankind, which is the reward that each person who loves the Lord **God** longs for: **He will live with them.**

21:4 And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more, or mourning, or crying, nor will pain exist any more, because the first things are gone.”

Revelation 7:17 tells us, with almost exactly the same wording, that God **will wipe away every tear from their eyes**, but that passage concerns the martyrs. They wept because of the pain they endured as martyrs. But these tears, *after* the thousand years, in the New Heaven and the New Earth, are different. Who would still have tears to be wiped away? They must be those that believed in the Lord Jesus but were not victorious. Their trauma is also described in 1 Corinthians 3:15, which reads, “If someone’s work is burned up, he shall experience loss, but he himself will be saved, but as through fire.”

What is said in 20:14 is further developed in this verse, so that all difficulties, like **tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain** will be wiped away.

21:5 And the One seated on the throne said: “Look! I am making all things new!” And He said to me, “Write, because these are the faithful and true words of God.”

God the Father rarely speaks in the Book of Revelation. He is probably speaking in 11:3 and 18:4, and He does speak in 1:8 and

finally here in 21:5-8. But here His testimony comes forth loud and clear. The believers in Smyrna are to understand that this is not a fanciful book of stories. These are real promises to those in Smyrna, and in all places, that those that are faithful until death will certainly receive these special and wonderful rewards.

The **One on the throne** affirms that He will be **making all things new**, and that this is all **true**. The words **Write, because these are the faithful and true words of God** jar us back to our present situation and force us to respond: do we believe this is **faithful and true** or not? He writes about the *future* to help us *now*. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if someone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away. Look, all things have become new." That verse describes what has already happened to us as believers. It seems that the same thing will also happen to the whole universe, as affirmed by Romans 8:21, "even creation itself shall be set free from the bondage of decay into the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

We must be convinced of this truth, receiving these **words as faithful and true**. Only in that way will we be willing to struggle to win the rewards described in the Book of Revelation.

21:6 And He said to me, "I am here, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To him that is thirsty I will freely give from the spring of the water of life.

The Gospel is stated here with great clarity: **To him that is thirsty I will freely give from the spring of the water of life**. Note that God gives people to drink from one of two drinks in the Book of Revelation: this **water of life**, or "the cup of the wine of the anger of his wrath" in 16:19. Note too that this gift **from the spring of the water of life** is free. The man, woman, or child that is **thirsty**, that senses his or her need, is given this gift **freely**. The gift is eternal life. It can be given **freely** because the Lamb of God has already been sacrificed, bearing our sin. He paid, so God can justly give this gift **freely**.

21:7 The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son.

When he heard those words, an elder said, "I know that I am saved, but I also want to win that victory, to be that close to the loving God!" Some heads nodded in agreement, and they kept listening.

Right after the free Gospel is stated, the special blessings of diligent faithfulness are stated. The victors described in chapters two and three (and, by extension, all obedient believers) **will inherit these things**, meaning he **will inherit** the earth (as is promised in Matthew 5:5). Here we understand very clearly that victors are heirs, and heirs are victors.

The word for **son** here does not always refer to one born physically into the family.⁵⁶ It can refer instead to one who is chosen by the father and adopted as heir. Overcomers, victors, those who **conquer** (as the word is used in this book!) will **inherit** the Kingdom of God, and will have this special relationship with the loving **God**.

21:8 But for the cowards, unbelievers, sinners, loathsome people, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their part will be in the lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

These are all **unbelievers**. They never received the Lord Jesus as their Savior. They behave in accord with their lack of faith. And their judgment is sure: **their part will be in the lake burning with fire and sulfur**.

In these three verses, 21:6-8, the three options for all mankind are touched upon with particular clarity. There are those whom the Lord God freely gives from the spring of the water of life. Further, some of those, the victors, are given "these things" and the special status of "adopted sons" of the Lord God. But in sharp contrast, **unbelievers** are thrown into **the lake burning with fire and sulfur**. Be sure you have enjoyed drinking from that spring freely. Be sure, further, that you are a victor. And rejoice that having drunk freely from that spring, you will never experience that **lake burning with fire and sulfur**.

21:9 And one of the seven angels having the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the wife, the bride of the Lamb!"

This passage is a more detailed view of what is said briefly in 21:2. Just as the angel gave him a close view of "the Harlot," Babylon, now with very similar terminology he gets a close view of "the Bride," the New Jerusalem.

21:10-11 And he carried me off in the Spirit to a massive and high mountain and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down from heaven from God, having the glory of God. Its radiance is like the most precious jewel, like a jasper stone as clear as crystal.

At the resurrection we will be with the Lord. But that does not mean we will spend eternity in **heaven**. The idea that when believers die they go to **heaven** and spend eternity there is actually not supported by the Word of **God**. After the Lord returns to earth He is going to establish the Thousand Year Kingdom on this earth, and believers will be on the earth, not in **heaven**. This **city** comes to earth. We were created to live on and subdue the earth as God's representatives, and finally the victors will do that well.

In this city, the victorious Lamb is able to fulfill all His promises to the victors in Smyrna and in every congregation throughout the ages. Chapter 21:18 says, "and the city is pure gold." The church in Laodicea was told to "buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so that you may be rich" (3:18). Perhaps this "pure gold" is the same as that "gold refined in the fire." Revelation 22:2 mentions "the tree of life making twelve fruits according to the month." Note also how the Book of Revelation begins and ends with the same "tree of life." It is promised for victors in chapter 2 and it is described in the New **Jerusalem** in detail in chapter 22.

21:22-24 And I did not see a temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun nor of the moon that they might shine on it, for the glory of God shines on it, and the Lamb is its lamp. And the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth carry the glory and honor of the nations to it.

There are people that will not have the privilege of living in the city. They will bring tribute to it. Who are they? They cannot be the

unbelievers – we know where they are. They cannot be the victors – they are sitting on thrones in the city. They must be the citizens of the Kingdom, those that believed in Christ but did not become victors. They believed, but they were not willing to be faithful until death. At the time of their suffering, that seemed to be too high a price to pay. How wrong they were! They recently got their tears wiped away, but they are not heirs and owners of the Kingdom. We learn here that they **will walk by the light** of the New Jerusalem, and that their **kings will carry their glory and honor** to the New Jerusalem, but other than that, we are not told about their situation. It is not a theme upon which the Lord wants to dwell. They are saved, and thus not thrown into the lake of fire, but they did not get crowns and thrones. They are citizens of the eternal kingdom, but without rewards. They are outside the city, they enjoy the **light** from it and their **glory and honor** is carried to it, but they may not live in it. This book discourages believers from being satisfied with mere citizenship, offering instead rulership!

The idea that **the kings of the earth** will bring tribute to Jerusalem at the end of the ages is a major theme of Isaiah 60 and 61.

Isaiah 60:3 And nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your sunrise.

60:5 Then you will look and shine, your heart will tremble and swell; for the wealth of the sea will be brought to you, the riches of the nations will come to you.

60:11 And your gates will always be open; day and night they will not be shut, to bring you the riches of the nations – and their kings being led forward.

60:16 And you will suck the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts. And you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

21:25 **And its gates will never close by day (indeed there will be no night there),**

The first readers in Smyrna did not enjoy a feeling of safety. Their possessions and souls were threatened. Here in the New Jerusalem we know they are very safe because the **gates will never close by day**. There are no more enemies threatening them. Even the nations that walk by the light of the New Jerusalem are not allowed into the New Jerusalem. Closed **gates** do not keep them out. They do not go in

simply because they are forbidden to go in. They lost that privilege when they rejected the exhortations to become victors during the previous era, our era right now!

21:26 and they will carry the glory and the honor of the nations to it,

The idea of tribute from **the nations** is repeated here. It has been very common throughout human history for conquered peoples to have to pay tribute to their conquerors.

If the congregation in Smyrna had “accepted with joy the seizure of their possessions” (Hebrews 10:34), what an amazing contrast for them to receive of **the glory and the honor of the nations**.

21:27 and nothing defiled will ever enter into it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those written in the Lamb’s book of life.

This verse tells of the holiness of the New Jerusalem. It seems to be saying that **the Lamb’s book of life** includes information about who is a victor and who is not. In other words, **only those so written of in the Lamb’s book of life** may **enter into** the New Jerusalem.

Being **defiled**, or having done **what is detestable or false** in this age, disqualifies people, so believers that are not victors, who are called “dogs” in 22:15, are also disqualified from going into the New Jerusalem. They **will never enter into it**. They will live on the New Earth, but not in the New Jerusalem.

22:1 And he showed me the river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming out from the throne of God and of the Lamb, Even so, that which, in the future Kingdom, will flow from the **throne** is *now available* from the **Lamb** through faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior! Chapter 22:17 says “And let the one who thirsts come; let the one who wants receive the water of life freely.” This is what is sometimes called “the presence of the future.” That which can only be “tasted” through faith in Christ today shall be deeply experienced by those that obey His will and thus become victors, as expressed in chapters two and three.

22:2 in the middle of its main street, and on this side of the river and that side is the tree of life making twelve fruits according to the month, each month yielding its fruit. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

The main boulevard of that city will be beautiful! The various boasts of those seven cities of Asia Minor have long since faded away in our memory, but perhaps the original readers, residents of those seven cities, each with their particular boasts, were ashamed to have participated in the local pride of their place, once they began to realize how wonderful the New Jerusalem will be. Smyrna was, in its day, considered a beautiful city, although the persecuted believers there had little opportunity to enjoy its beauty. If they have been faithful to the Lord, they will have time to enjoy the glory of the New Jerusalem.

Victors will, according to 2:7, eat from **the tree of life**. Here at the end of the Book of Revelation we get a closer look at that which was promised to victors at the beginning of the book.

22:3 And there shall no longer be any curse, and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His slaves will serve Him,

The **curse** of God given in Genesis 3:14-19 will be removed. The existence of the “tree of life” also mentioned in Genesis 3 strengthens the connection between this passage and the **curse** in Genesis 3. Now that the **curse** is removed, the fruit of the tree of life can be eaten, as in 22:2 and 14. **His slaves** there in the New Jerusalem are the victors.

22:4 and they shall see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.

As Psalm 42:2 and Matthew 5:8 remind us, seeing **His face** has been the longing of godly people throughout the ages. This speaks of the close fellowship with God which is promised to the victors in chapters two and three. We also read the promise to the victors that the **name** of God will be written on them (3:12).

In 13:16 the followers of the beast had his **name on their foreheads**. Which **name** will you have written on your forehead?

22:5 And there will be no night, and no need of lamp and light, because the Lord God will shine on them, and they will reign forever and ever.

In 20:4 we learned that the victors are to **reign** with Christ for the whole thousand years of the Messianic Kingdom. Here the very last words of the very last vision expand that prophecy about the reward of those that do His will until the end, those that are faithful until death. Here we learn that they do not only **reign** for the duration of those thousand years. The last words of the last vision are **they will reign forever and ever**. Thus the promise to the victors becomes more expansive and beautiful. It is, in fact, everlasting.

Will you be a victor? How much will it cost you to obey the commands of chapters two and three? It might cost you a great deal. It might be very difficult for you. For the persecuted in Smyrna, it might have cost them their lives. However, the promise is that if you pay that price you will **reign** not only for the thousand years, you will be with **the Lord God**, reigning **forever and ever**.

If the victors **reign** there, over whom do they **reign**? What is clear is that they do not **reign** over those who did not believe in the Lamb, because those people are in the lake of fire. If so, there remains those who believe in Christ, who are redeemed, but were not “faithful until death,” and did not “do His will to the end.” People like that are rarely described in the Book of Revelation, not because they do not exist, but instead because the purpose of the Book of Revelation is to encourage us to be victorious, not to just “get by.” What is their situation? Surely what they were warned about in chapters two and three happened in their lives, but they “are saved ...as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15). If they are saved, then they are allowed to enter into the Kingdom of God and the New Earth, but very little is said about them.

It seems that saved people who are not victors will live on the New Earth, but they are outside the New Jerusalem. We are told what is outside the New Jerusalem in 21:24 and 26. In these texts, we read that “nations will walk by its light” (the city’s light) and “the kings of the earth carry the glory and honor of the nations to” the city. Those ruled by the New Jerusalem have to bring tribute to it. We know from 22:15 that they are not described in pleasant terms.

Very little is said about those who are saved but are not victorious, and very little is said about the place where they live, the New Earth. But much is said about those who are victorious (and their city, the New Jerusalem) because, along with the Lamb in the beautiful city, **they will reign forever and ever.**

E. The Conclusion of the Vision (22:6-17)

22:6 **And he said to me, “These words are faithful and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent His angel to show to His slaves what things must happen suddenly.”**

After the vision of the New Jerusalem, the close of the book has some statements that strengthen the vision and testimony.

This verse with its “chain of revelation” (the Lord, **His angel**, and **His slaves**) reminds us of 1:1. The similarity between 1:1 and 22:6 makes sense, in that we are drawing near the close of the book. Both the beginning and the end of the Book of Revelation are marked, like bookends, with various elements.

Again we here and now are reminded that these words are **true**. The congregation in Smyrna, and indeed all believers in every generation since then, can base their lives and lifestyles on these words. Because these words are **true**, we know that this book is not tricking the persecuted church into suffering uselessly. In that great Day absolutely no one will say, “Ha, I took the exhortations of the Book of Revelation seriously, and made major changes in my life, and it was all a waste. I’m sorry I ever did that.” There will be regret among some born-again men and women at the end of the age, but not that kind of regret. The regret they will have is that they did not “keep those things written in it, for the time is near” (1:3 and 22:7).

22:7 **“And look, I am coming suddenly! Blessed is the one keeping the words of the prophecy of this book.”**

After reading that, the man that brought the scroll from John on the island of Patmos said, "Can we too stand firm? What is the Lord asking of us, for which He will give us all this? He is asking us to be ready to give up our fields and our homes, yes, He is. He is asking us to be ready to give up our loved ones. Yes. He is even asking us to be ready to give up the years we might have here in Smyrna. But at the same time, do you understand all that He is offering in exchange? He has freely given us the gift of eternal life, which in obedience to the Father He paid a tremendous cost for. And now He is asking us to follow Him in that obedience. I want to stand firm for Him. I want what He is offering. And you?"

The Lord Jesus Himself assures us. With this expression He sharpens what was said in the previous verses, and He repeats the words of the original blessing in 1:3 "Blessed is the one who reads, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep those things written in it, for the time is near." Revelation 1:3 and 22:7 are also like "bookends" for this book. If you believe the Lord Jesus, you should believe the visions and promises that are made in **this book**, and be encouraged to faithfully endure persecution. This blessing is written out at two very prominent and crucial places, the beginning and the ending of the book. Is not the idea that He will come, conquer, and distribute rewards to those who obey **the words of the prophecy of this book**, especially in chapters two and three, the principal theme of the book? The Book of Revelation should not become material for speculation on things that do not have practical application to our lives. The Book of Revelation is meant to be applied so that its readers will reign in the New Jerusalem forever and ever.

22:11 **"Let the wrongdoer still do wrong, and let the filthy still be filthy. And let the righteous still do righteous deeds, and let the holy still be holy."**

The first half of this verse is a difficult text. These wrongdoers and **filthy** people contrast sharply with those of verse 17 who are thirsty. But this does seem to contradict the love of God. According to Beasley Murray,⁵⁷ this verse challenges people to correct themselves. The **wrongdoers** may **still do wrong**. Their judgment is already prepared. Those who are **holy** may **still be holy**. Their reward has

already been prepared. Man's evil does not frustrate the plans of the Lord God! In other words, "Do they want to continue in their sin? Let them. The Judge of the whole earth will not be undone by their sin." God does not *need* people to repent, and He does not *beg* people to please repent. Through the Book of Revelation, and the entire New Testament, He has made His will known. How will you and I respond? He is ready in any case.

22:12 "Look! I am coming suddenly, and My wages are with Me to pay out to each according to his deeds!"

Is not this another very powerful restatement of the principal theme of the book? The Lord Jesus will come, destroy His enemies, hand out rewards to faithful believers, and judge those who do not believe. All will be done according to their **deeds**. This is not to say that by **deeds** a person can erase the doom of damnation. That is done by the work of the Lamb who was slain. But the unbeliever will be damned **according to his deeds**, the believer who was nevertheless lazy like many of those in Sardis will not be rewarded, because of **his deeds**, and the believer who was careful to do the Lord's will to the end will be rewarded **according to his deeds**.

22:13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end!"

Does anyone challenge the Lord's right "to pay out to each according to his deeds?" That person should remember that He is **the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end**.⁵⁸

22:14 Blessed are they that do His commands,⁵⁹ so that the right will be theirs to the tree of life, and that they might enter through the gates into the city.

Two rights are promised to those who **do His commands**. The first is the **right to the tree of life**. The second is the **right to enter through the gates into the city**. These support the interpretation of this author above that the New Jerusalem is the dwelling place of the Father, the Lord Jesus, and those who are victorious; and that believers who are not victorious must live outside the New Jerusalem, but on the New Earth.

This verse is the last of seven expressions of blessing in the Book of Revelation. Whoever is victorious and does the work of God,

whoever is faithful until death, will enjoy the blessings described in those seven expressions.

Victors will enjoy this blessing, and will be allowed **into the city**. Others in the Kingdom may only walk in its light.

22:15 Outside are the dogs and the sorcerers and the sexually immoral, and the murderers, and the idolaters and everyone that loves and practices falsehood.

In 21:8 we read “But for the cowards, unbelievers, sinners, loathsome people, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their part will be *in the lake burning with fire and sulfur*, which is the second death.” But here people described with what seem to be similar words are said to be **outside** the city, the New Jerusalem.

Those in 21:8 never believed in the Lamb of God (nor did those in 9:20-21, which has a similar list of sins). They are called “unbelievers.” Those here in 22:15 did believe (that is why, of course, they are not in the lake of fire), but they never became victors. Note that unlike in 21:8 they are not called “unbelievers.” But they did not defeat sin in their lives. They did not love God. They are not allowed in the city, but they are in the Kingdom. They are citizens in the Kingdom by the grace of their Savior, but they are not rulers in the city.

To the great shame of those **outside**, they look a great deal like the unbelievers of 21:8. Note how similar the descriptions are in 21:8 and here in 22:15. This similarity is intentional. Let us not look like them!

Here at the end of the ages we can see quite clearly why He spoke so strongly to them in chapters two and three while there was still opportunity for them to repent. Let us be certain we are not among their number. Let us be victors, as the Lord so carefully described to us in those seven messages to those seven churches. Directly and indirectly, this exhortation is repeated throughout the text of the Book of Revelation.

22:16 “I, Jesus, I have sent My angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star!”

The identity of the One speaking in this verse is clear. He says that He sent the **angel** who testifies **to you about these things**, the

angel who accompanied the Apostle John through the visions of the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation does not have human origins. This verse emphatically reminds us of what is said in 1:1-2, that is, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His slaves what things must happen suddenly. He made it known by sending it through His angel to His slave John, who testified to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, which he saw.” Without certainty on this issue, perhaps no one in Smyrna would pay the price to be a victor. But with certainty on this one issue, obedience and faithfulness, despite the pain, is the clear choice.

22:17 And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one hearing say, “Come!” And let the one who thirsts come; let the one who wants receive the water of life freely.

In this verse the joyful expectation of the Lord’s return and promises for the victors overflow, so that **the Spirit and the bride say “Come.” The Spirit** and also the future inhabitants of the New Jerusalem, **the bride**, invite the Lord Jesus to **come!**

This book does *not* teach that we need to work to gain eternal **life**, but it does teach that believers that serve faithfully all their days will be richly rewarded during the Thousand Year Kingdom and after that in the New Jerusalem.

F. The Conclusion of the Book of Revelation (22:18-21)

22:18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to them, may God add to him the plagues written in this book.

This section is the conclusion of the Book of Revelation. In it there is a curse against anyone who would change these writings, he affirms the validity of these writings, and he closes wishing the Lord’s grace on God’s people.

Until the invention of the printing press, books had to be copied by hand, so they were subject to intentional and unintentional changes by scribes. Threats or curses like these two verses were not uncommon.

22:19 And if anyone takes away from the words of this book of prophecy, may God take away his part in the tree of life and in the holy city that are written in this book.

In the discussion of 2:7, it was explained that the right to eat the fruit of **the tree of life** is a reward for the believers who obey and do the will of Christ to the end. This right to eat from the fruit of **the tree of life** is not a sign of salvation, but obedience. In 22:14, we see that **the holy city**, the New Jerusalem, is inhabited by the victors. Those who believe in Christ but are not victorious are outside the New Jerusalem (22:15). This interpretation is strengthened in 22:18-19. Access to the fruit of **the tree of life** and **the holy city** are rewards given to all victorious believers. Note **the tree of life** and **the city** in the blessing in 22:14. If someone **takes away from the words** of this Book of Revelation, his reward is taken from him, but not his salvation. This interpretation is in accord with the understanding that salvation received by grace cannot be lost because it is based on the work of the Lord Jesus Himself on the cross. But rewards, which are received for obedience, can be lost.

John does not write a curse for eternal damnation for anyone who leaves out some of the words of the Book of Revelation. He does not pray that anybody who deletes words from this **book** be thrown into the lake of fire! But he does pray that they forfeit any status they might have as victors.

22:20 The one who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming suddenly!" Amen! Yes, come Lord Jesus!

The **Lord Jesus** Himself attaches His testimony to these words. They are certain. He wants His **coming** always to be in front of our minds and hearts so that we always remember the importance of obedience for our future.

22:21 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints. Amen.

Not too many Sundays after that, in the middle of their worship, the congregation in Smyrna heard the beating of horses' hooves, and then men dismounting. Orders were shouted. There was loud banging on the door. Some were frightened, but none cried out, none tried to hide. Some smiled, finally certain that they had been faithful until death. Spouses and children were kissed good-bye. That day the congregation of Smyrna won a great victory, and angels brought forth more of the white clothes, crowns, and thrones that were set aside for the victors of Smyrna.

Summary

Mankind was created as God's images to fill and subdue or rule the earth. Man failed to do that. But a Second Adam was sent, Jesus Christ the Perfect Son of Man, truly man, to do what the First Adam failed to do. He will succeed, and by the redemption which He has provided, we may be forgiven our sins, *and* we may join Him in His rule. To be forgiven our sin we only need believe, but in order to rule our faith needs to be mixed with good deeds that continue until death or until the Lord returns. Those that will rule are sometimes called "victors" in the Book of Revelation.

Reading Revelation chapter one, the words John recorded about the vision that he saw of the Lord Jesus while he was on the island of Patmos, we know that if we could make those words the cornerstone of our lives, our attitudes, our words, and our deeds, then our lives would be pleasing to the Lord, and He would give us His blessing at the end of the age. But we ourselves experience some bewilderment as we wonder how to understand those words, and how to live them. What are we to do with the fact that His eyes were like a flame of fire, and a sharp double-edged sword came out of His mouth? It was too much for us, we did not understand, or were afraid to understand.

As persecuted Christians read chapters two and three, they see that they do not need to repent and apply the fact that Christ walks among the seven golden lampstands, as did the congregation in Ephesus. But they begin to understand that they need to fully comprehend the amazing truth that He was dead, and He lives. Fully understanding that truth will certainly help them be faithful until death, which is all that He asks of them. Those believers may dare to wonder what it would be like to be a victor with Him, to overcome the all too real temptations and challenges they face, as He overcame death. But they are still disturbed, even frightened, and they need more help.

Persecuted believers that continue reading on into the visions that began in chapter four see that the Day will come when He will open the seven seals of an inheritance document, so that the victors will inherit the earth. They read about how the Lord God will be praised on that great Day. They read of such terrible judgments that will fall

on those that have never trusted Him as their Savior, once He begins to open the seven seals. Those judgments will continue relentlessly as one by one the seven angels blow the seven trumpets, and the Lord God showed His great power and perfect justice by judging those that have hated and opposed Him. They read of “the wrath of the Lamb,” and of the victory of those that died faithfully serving Him. They read about how our prayers are to Him like sweet-smelling incense that rises up to Him, and how He does answer those prayers. And in all this they are strengthened to take their stand as victors in the same victory that He earned so many years ago.

In the Book of Revelation there is a striking connection between the promises, for instance to the church in Thyatira in 2:26-27, “To the victor who keeps My deeds to the end, I will give authority over the nations” or to the church in Laodicea in 3:21, “To the victor I will give to sit with Me on My throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with My Father on His throne,” and the vision of the Thousand Year Kingdom, where the victors, those that were beheaded because of their testimony and because of the word of God, will be seated upon thrones and reign with Christ for a thousand years, and then, in the New Jerusalem, forever and ever.

This connection is very important in the purpose of the Book of Revelation. The demands and promises of chapters two and three do not stand alone without a connection to the present age, the coming Millennial Kingdom, and even the age of the New Heaven and the New Earth. So also, the prophecy about the New Jerusalem and the presence of Jesus, our Savior, is not simply a fact to be read and understood by believers. It is written out for us to become our hope and challenge. The key to life in this present age is in the connection between chapters two and three and 19:1–22:5. The beauty of the New Jerusalem is described so that this city becomes our hope. Thus we are strengthened to do what is commanded in chapters two and three, so we can experience the blessing introduced in 1:3 and elaborated upon all throughout the book.

We need to remember that these amazing visions were not given merely to satisfy curiosity. They were given to John to help the leaders and members of the seven congregations, and us, to follow the Lord. Some of them, and perhaps some of us, need to repent. Others of them, and others of us, need encouragement on the difficult path of

obedience. The section that begins with “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things” was there to meet all those needs.

The following is a survey of how the seven congregations might have responded to the Book of Revelation:

1. As the congregation in **Ephesus** read the central truth of the end times promises, that “God’s home will be with mankind, and He will live with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them” (21:3) they were spurred on to devote themselves to knowing and loving Him, and not just knowing His doctrines.

2. As the congregation in **Smyrna** read of the kings of the earth, the nobles, the commanders, the rich, and the powerful in 6:15-17, they saw that those that were presently persecuting them would one day crawl into caves and beg the rocks to fall upon them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb. The congregation was inspired to be steadfast despite persecution, as they read of the thrones in 20:4 and of the “souls of those who had been beheaded on account of the testimony of Jesus and on account of the word of God,” seated upon those thrones.

3. As the immoral members of the congregation in **Pergamum** read of the sexual immorality of the great prostitute, and of the “abominations and unclean things of her sexual immorality,” the end results of their immoral activities were vividly portrayed to them. We hope that they repented and abandoned their immoral activities.

4. As those in the congregation in **Thyatira** that had been led astray read that those that “had not worshiped the beast or his image” were given to sit upon those thrones in 20:4, they would be helped to burn the idols that had ensnared them, give up their immorality, and worship the Lord alone.

5. As the congregation in **Sardis** read of the unsurpassed glory of the Lord as an ever widening circle of beings worship Him in 5:8-13, so that “every creature which is in heaven and upon the earth and under the earth, and upon the sea, and those in them”

are all worshiping the Lord their Savior, they were helped to cast off their laziness, and pursue heartfelt obedience to the Lord.

6. As the congregation in **Philadelphia** read of the certainty of the victory of the Coming King, they were all the more careful that no one would take their crown, so that they could participate with Him in His victory.

7. As the congregation in **Laodicea** read of Babylon's attitude, revealed in statements like "I sit as queen and a widow I am not; I will never ever see grief," perhaps they came to realize that their own attitude, revealed in statements like "I have acquired wealth" and "I have need of nothing," was similar to Babylon's arrogance. We hope that they did realize that, and that they soon humbled themselves before the Lord.

May every lesson and meditation from this book encourage the people of God to love Him with an increasingly faithful obedience.

May He whose eyes are like flames of fire see and speak forth our secret sins; may He whose feet are like bronze destroy all sin inside of us; may He who walks among the seven golden lampstands refresh our hearts with His presence. May we all perceive our God as He really is; may we be counted worthy to receive white clothes, crowns and thrones. May we receive grace, wisdom, and faith to serve well now and thus to live in the holy city, the New Jerusalem, forever and ever. We lift this prayer in the name of the Lamb of God who was killed and raised to life again.

Appendix:

New Testament Teachings on Rewards

The concept that born-again believers who serve the Lord faithfully in this age will be rewarded in the age to come is clearly presented in the Book of Revelation, most notably in what is said to the victors or “overcomers” of Revelation 2-3. However, the concept of rewards is not at all limited to the Book of Revelation.

Speaking to both Jews and gentiles, and clearly speaking of the end times, Romans 2:6 tells us, that God “will give to each according to his works.” The same idea is discussed in such passages as Matthew 25:31-46; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Galatians 6:7-9; Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 3:24-25; and 1 Peter 1:17, all of which include believers. The difficulty with these passages is, of course, how they can be reconciled with the Gospel of grace, which as clearly states that believers will *not* be judged for their sins.

In other words, how can it be true that “the one doing evil will be paid back for the evil he has done, and there is no favoritism” (Colossians 3:25), and also that “to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Romans 4:5)?

Some have tried to reconcile these two ideas by saying that only true believers will be forgiven, and all true believers *will* persevere in good works, and because of those good works they will receive the rewards mentioned above. This view is called the Perseverance of the Saints. One of the problems with this is that Scripture tells us that many real believers will not persevere in good works.⁶⁰

Others try to reconcile those two ideas about salvation and rewards by saying that if a believer does enough evil, that believer will lose his or her salvation. So all that die as believers must have lived holy lives, and they will receive those rewards. The problem with this view is that Scripture never speaks of someone that is born again becoming

“un-born-again”! We are sealed with the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), and the death of Christ is certainly more than sufficient to cover all our sins (Hebrews 10:14). We cannot be separated from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35, 38, and 39).

Instead of those two approaches, the best way to reconcile the fact that all believers have escaped from eternal judgment, and yet every believer that “does My will until the end,” that is “faithful until death,” will be rewarded is to see that in the coming Kingdom of God there will be citizens, and there will be rulers. All believers certainly will, by the grace of God through the death of Christ, be citizens of the coming Kingdom. But only those that fulfill the requirements described in Revelation 2-3 will sit upon thrones in that Kingdom. There will be a judgment seat of Christ at the end of this age (Romans 14:10; and 2 Corinthians 5:10). During that judgment the Lord Jesus will determine rewards for believers. Then later, at the end of the Millennium, there will be the great white throne judgment, in which unbelievers will be judged (Revelation 20:11).

In Matthew 5:3-12 the Lord clearly speaks of more than entrance into His Kingdom for those that live in ways that please Him. He speaks of them *owning* His Kingdom!

In Matthew 6:2-4 the Lord tells us that when people give to the poor without fanfare, the Father, “seeing what is done in the dark,” will reward them.

In Mark 9:41 we learn that even giving a cup of cold water can earn us a reward.

In the Parable of the Minas in Luke 19:11-27 the Lord describes the end times situation of those that serve Him effectively (they are given ten or five cities to rule over), those that serve Him badly (they receive no reward at all, but instead are sternly rebuked), and those that hate Him (they are “killed” in front of Him).

In 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 Paul describes how each believer’s works will bring reward or loss to him, depending on the quality of that work. The reader should carefully note that the fire in this passage is not at all the fire of hell. Paul makes it quite clear that people that serve the Lord poorly will suffer loss, but will be saved, but “as through fire.”

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (and 2 Timothy 2:5) Paul compares our life to a race, in which one can win an imperishable crown, as opposed to the quickly wilting wreaths given to the winners of Greek athletic contests. Then Paul continues the same theme, shifting from a race metaphor to a boxing metaphor. He describes a boxer that beats the air, and says that unlike that boxer he is like a boxer that beats his own body, meaning he disciplines his own body, lest he be disqualified from winning the prize. Paul was not at all worried about losing his eternal salvation. He was concerned about losing the reward for which he had served long and well.

In Philippians 4:1 and 1 Thessalonians 2:19 Paul tells those believers that they are his crown. Because he had successfully served the Lord, as evidenced by those obedient congregations, he knew he would be receiving a crown from the Lord. In fact, 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; and 1 Peter 5:2-4 all speak of crowns to be given to all that love and serve the Lord.

In 1 John 2:28 and 2 John 1:8 the apostle encourages and warns his readers to continue, and to watch out, so that indeed they can be fully rewarded when the Lord returns, and not be ashamed. Note also 1 Timothy 6:17-19; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; Hebrews 11:35; and 2 Peter 1:11, as well as the discussion titled "A Major Interpretational Issue" after the discussion of Revelation 2:1-7 in this study

In short, the best way to reconcile the biblical statements that we will be judged with the biblical statements that we have been delivered from judgment is to understand that we will not be judged at the great white throne judgment, because our sins are forgiven, but our works will be evaluated to determine what sort of rewards, if any, we will receive.

So, the New Testament clearly teaches that salvation is by grace, which God can justly offer, because of the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. He paid it all. Our obedience is not a condition for keeping our salvation, and it is not a condition for being truly saved. However, only the obedient believer will receive the rewards promised in the Book of Revelation, and throughout the entire New Testament.

Endnotes

1 Mounce, p. 33.

2 Bruce, pp. 399-402.

3 A brief explanation and refutation of the other ways to interpret the Book of Revelation can be found in the author's commentary on Revelation.

4 Stars are very large, so a hand that could hold seven of them would have to be unimaginably huge, and yet in the next verse the Lord places His hand upon John. It is better to take the idea that He holds the seven stars in His hand as a figure of speech.

5 *Theology*, p. 14.

6 *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 30.

7 The words **the province of** are added in the translation because this refers to the Roman **province**, not, of course, to the continent.

8 The majority of the Greek manuscripts have the word **God** here, but three very ancient manuscripts lack that word. See the appendix of the author's commentary on Revelation for an explanation of how the various ancient manuscripts' differences have affected this translation.

9 Thomas, p. 87. Mounce, p. 75, notes that according to Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* iii.20.9) **John** was later freed by the Emperor Nerva (96-98 AD) and was able to return to Ephesus.

10 See for instance Josh. 3:10; Ps. 42:2; and 84:2.

11 For instance in Matt. 16:16; Acts 14:15; and Rom. 9:26.

12 The King James Bible uses the word "carnal" in 1 Cor. 3:1, and the NIV uses the word "worldly." The Greek word means "fleshly."

13 Pp. 59-60.

14 Mounce (p.91) cites Tacitus, *Annals* iv. 55-56.

15 Hemer, p. 65.

16 Mounce, p. 91.

17 Polycarp's words were recorded in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, whose author is unknown. It seems to have been a letter sent from the congregation in Smyrna to the congregation of a place called Philomelium. Eusebius, who lived about 263-339 AD, accepted the document as genuine.

18 Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, X. 96-97.

19 Twenty-five years before Pliny wrote this letter, the emperor Domitian initiated the persecution of Christians and the Book of Revelation was written.

20 Rumors that Christians were practicing cannibalism in their Holy Communion is almost certainly the background for these words of Pliny.

- 21 This word refers to the **poverty** of people that have nothing at all.
- 22 Thomas, p. 163, lists the following verses: Matt. 6:19-20; 19:21; Luke 12:21; 2 Cor. 6:10; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; and James 2:5.
- 23 Persecution of Christians by Jews was not uncommon in the New Testament era, as shown in Acts 13:50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5; 26:2; and 1 Thess. 2:14-15. Unfortunately, since then it has been people that call themselves Christians that have persecuted the Jews.
- 24 The faithfulness that Christ asks for with the words **until death** can have the meaning be faithful “as long as you live, until the moment of your death” (where **until** has to do with time, as in Rev. 2:25) or be faithful “in persecution until they kill you” (where **until** has to do with degree, as in Acts 22:4 and Rev. 12:11).
- 25 Mounce, p. 93.
- 26 Mounce, p. 131.
- 27 Roman law said, “for if the seals of seven witnesses are attached, the testamentary heir is entitled to demand possession in accordance with the will.” See Emmet Russell, “A Roman Law Parallel to Revelation Five,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115:459 (Jul 58) p. 260.
- 28 Collins, p. 1275; Barclay, 1976, p. 166; and Thomas, p. 377.
- 29 Mounce, p. 157.
- 30 Morris, p. 109.
- 31 Thomas, p. 488.
- 32 P. 176.
- 33 Beasley-Murray, pp. 155-156.
- 34 *Expositor's Bible Commentary*.
- 35 P. 277.
- 36 Pp. 281-283.
- 37 *The Climax of Prophecy*, pp. 278-279.
- 38 Ladd, p. 163.
- 39 There are variant readings in the ancient manuscripts in 13:1. The reader that is interested in the various readings of the ancient manuscripts should refer to the complete commentary on Revelation by this author.
- 40 The term “Anti-Christ” is never used in the Book of Revelation. It is only used in 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7, which speak of false teachers and a certain extremely evil person that is coming in the future.
- 41 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 405.
- 42 The words **as a captive** were not in the original, but were added as a clarification. This verse has many variations among all the manuscripts, but the translation given here is based upon the majority of manuscripts.
- 43 Mounce (p. 258), Beasley-Murray (p. 207) and Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (p. 284).

44 Beasley-Murray, p. 216.

45 Ladd, *Commentary*, p. 204.

46 P. 188.

47 Morris, p. 188.

48 The word translated here **They deserve it** is exactly the same as 3:4 which is translated “because they are worthy.” Just as certain people in Sardis are “deserving” of white clothes, the ones judged in 16:6 **deserve** to be given **blood to drink**.

49 P. 242.

50 P. 295.

51 Mounce, p. 335.

52 Morris, p. 235.

53 See the description of the killing of Polycarp in the discussion of Rev. 2:8.

54 In John’s era, long documents were recorded on scrolls. Actual books, bound in the basic format we still use today, were still uncommon at the time Revelation was written.

55 Beasley-Murray, p. 303; Mounce, p. 367; and Morris, p. 242.

56 There is another Greek word, often translated “child,” which can be used to refer to all born-again children of God. However, the Greek word here translated **son** often refers to the child that a father will select as his heir, making it especially appropriate for faithful believers, those who are often called “victors” in the Book of Revelation. Here we see that they **will inherit these things**.

57 Pp. 337-338.

58 Ladd, *Commentary*, pp. 292-293.

59 The two oldest manuscripts read “wash their robes,” but the majority of the ancient manuscripts read, **Blessed are they that do His commands**, which is in accord with the other blessings in the book. Actually, the reading “Blessed are those who wash their robes” also fits with the theme of the book because in 7:14 we read about Tribulation martyrs that “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” They will receive a special **right to the tree of life and the city**. For more on these textual issues, see the appendix in this author’s commentary on Revelation.

60 See Rev. 2-3 for several examples of believers that were not obedient. The Laodiceans would be the most obvious example. And yet they are a true congregation of Jesus Christ, who walks among the *seven* golden lampstands, one of which is in Laodicea! Note also 1 Cor. 3:1-15. The believer whose works are figuratively called “wood, hay, or straw” will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but as through fire!

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