

The End
for which
We Hope

*A Systematic Approach to the
Study of the Last Days*

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The End for Which We Hope

Introduction

You have a place in history. You were born into this time in history by the intention and plan of God. The time in which you live is the most remarkable period of history to date. The Kingdom of God has come on earth, and if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you have been created to be part of it. You are living in the last days, and history is moving toward a glorious conclusion. Everything that has happened before has been in preparation for the time in which you now live. Of this time Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it” (Matthew 13:17).

Yet few Christians truly understand the times in which we now live, and so fail to be humbled and awed by the great privilege it is to live in them. We struggle to find our place in the grand scheme of things simply because we do not understand the grand scheme of things. Eschatology is the study of the last days, but more than this, it is the study of how the world, from its very beginning, has been leading up to these last days. When we understand what God is doing in this last period of history, we will better understand the reason he has made us to live in this time, and better see the work he has called us to.

A number of years ago, I was peacefully reading a book in bed at the end of the evening. My wife, Tracy, was beside me reading the first in a series of fictional novels on the end times. After a while, she interrupted my reading with a question that went something like this, “I’m confused. I thought that when Jesus returned it would be the end of the world, that he would separate the sheep from the goats, but in this book the world keeps on going after the sheep and goats are separated.” I tried to explain that the book she was reading was based on an interpretive theory called premillennialism, which supposes that after Christians are raptured into heaven the world continues on. She then asked what the other theories were, and I tried to explain as briefly as I could. I did want to get back to my book. Yet the more we talked, the more I realized how little I really knew about the last days. After a string of questions I couldn’t answer, I pleaded ignorance in hopes to get back to my reading, but she replied, “Well, you’re the Pastor. Don’t you think you should know these things?”

The next morning I was in my study with my desk covered with books, hoping to find quick answers to my wife’s questions, and some questions of my own. Among these books I found some interesting similarities. First, nearly all of them started with the Book of Revelation, which is the last book of the Bible to be written, and worked backwards through the books of the Bible that were written earlier. This didn’t make a whole lot of sense. Second, few of them explained the reasons for the conclusions they

made, or if there were reasons presented, they were not very convincing. I spent a few hours poring over these books, trying to find the one I liked best, and came to the conclusion that I didn't like any of them. So I made a decision: I would find out for myself. I figured that the disciples didn't know much about the last days when they started following Jesus, but did at the end. I reasoned that if I put myself in their shoes I could follow the course of their developing understanding. I decided I would read through the New Testament with that singular purpose, consulting commentaries only when necessary. I pulled down an unmarked Bible from my shelf, and with highlighter in hand, started one of the most exciting journeys I had even been on. The result is this book.

There were a couple things I discovered along the way I did not expect. I had no idea of the importance of interpretive rules. The ten rules listed in chapter one were developed as I progressed in my work. To the reader, this may be the driest chapter in the book, but in fact it is the most essential. I am convinced that if you employ these rules faithfully you will arrive at the same or similar conclusions that I did. I also had little idea of how important historical research is to a correct interpretation of the Scriptures. I never cared much for history. I do now. I especially care for the rich and wonderful history of the early church. I also realized that my initial plan to follow the course of the disciples' understanding required me to understand what their own expectations for the future were from the writings of the Old Testament. Truly this was turning out to be a much bigger project than I ever expected. Once I had finished my research, I began to write, and in the process, for the sake of simplicity, I pared away a great deal of information. In the course of my study I came upon numerous theories and interpretations of many passages, all of which I found interesting. However, instead of listing every possibility, I chose to present only the one that seemed most probable. My purpose in this work was to present a single and succinct explanation of the last days for my wife. I'm sorry it took so long.

Chapter One

Rules of Interpretation

The study of the Bible, like any other discipline, requires the use of rules. Choosing the right set of rules is like selecting the right guide for a wilderness adventure. If you choose the right rules, your journey will be a happy one and you will see things you never saw before. If you don't pay any attention to the rules you select, you may waste all of your time wandering around in circles. The study of eschatology is a complex discipline, and so we are going to have to begin by giving careful attention to the rules we will employ. While to some, the notion of following rules is thought to be dull and boring, impinging on freedom and creativity, when it comes to handling the Word of Truth, the knowledge and use of rules is essential. Without them, our interpretations will be limited by our own finite understandings and skewed by our own inclinations. When pressed to defend our conclusions, we will only be able to say, "Well, anyway, that's what I think it means." There is a much better answer. When we use a logical, organized, interdependent set of rules, our findings will be more centrally based on what the text itself has to say, and our own interests and inclinations will be safely set aside. There will undoubtedly be times when we will have to say, "This is what I think it means," but the more we employ sound rules of interpretation, the more we will be able to say, "This is indeed what the text says and means, and this is why."

In truth, everyone who reads the Bible uses rules to interpret it. Even someone who gives no conscious thought to the use or even existence of rules uses them in spite of their negligence, albeit rules that are thoughtlessly employed result in rather thoughtless conclusions. For example, one might decide, "Whenever there is a passage I can't understand, I'll assume that no one else can understand it either and simply move on," or worse, "Whenever there are two apparent interpretations of any single text, I will always choose the one that sounds most fantastic; the Bible is already dull enough as it is." Conclusions drawn from rules such as these will no doubt be of the same character as the rules that generate them. In this work, we will begin with ten basic rules of interpretation that are sufficient for the unique body of literature we intend to study. As we progress, we will not only feel confident that our study is well guided, but may also discover that our conclusions will come to us rather easily.

The rules of interpretation employed in this study are as follows:

1. Pray.

The Bible is unlike any other book written in that its writers were carried along by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul wrote, "All Scripture is inspired by God (lit. God-breathed) and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Peter likewise wrote, “No prophecy came about by the prophet’s own interpretation, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21). Also, just as the Holy Spirit was the generating power behind the writing of Scripture, he is also the power behind the interpretation of Scripture. Jesus said, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). St. Paul further elaborated on the agency of the Holy Spirit in our ability to understand God’s truths.

“The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:10b-14)

The truths of God are available to those who are led by the Spirit of God, without whose help, the treasures of the kingdom can never be fully discerned. Therefore, before we can understand the truths of the Bible we must first commit ourselves to prayer, asking that the Holy Spirit guide us and illuminate us. We must yield to God even the motive for our study, not seeking truth to be used for our own purposes, but seeking to educate ourselves in order to become more effective in his service.

2. Be aware of your own presuppositions.

Whenever we read the Bible, we interpret it based upon a system of beliefs we already hold to be true. Whenever we study the Bible, we do so with a set of expectations about what we hope to find. These preconceived notions are called presuppositions, and we cannot escape them, yet they are not intrinsically bad. If we believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, we will read it as such, and the Spirit of God will lead us to spiritual discernment. If we believe the Bible to be a book of merely human origin, flawed and limited in its ability to convey truth, we will read it as such, and in our hardness blind ourselves to the spiritual truths God would wish to show us. More subtly, our presuppositions can slant our findings even if we believe the Bible to be the Word of God.

Before we begin, therefore, we must ask ourselves some basic questions to determine if our preconceived notions will in any way skew our conclusions. We must ask ourselves if we are approaching our study from an objective point of view or if we are using the Bible to prove a conclusion we have already made. We must consider if we will allow ourselves to be fully informed by the biblical text, or if we will intentionally avoid

passages we find troublesome or offensive. To a certain degree, we cannot avoid being directed in some way by the presuppositions we hold. Even someone who has never read the Bible before will approach it with some notion of what he or she expects to find. The relevant question is whether or not our presuppositions will blind us from accepting certain biblical truths once we see them, or make us cold toward the conclusions to which the biblical text seems to be directing us. The degree to which we yield our expectations to the progress of biblical ideas is the degree to which we will be carried by those ideas to sufficient conclusions.

3. Interpret Scripture in light of other Scripture.

The Bible is actually a compilation of numerous books written over many centuries by persons from all walks of life. The common thread that binds all of these works together is the role of the Holy Spirit who generated them. If all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, then it is necessary for us to consider the full scope of the Scriptures in the examination of any particular topic. If we neglect to do so, though our interpretation of a single passage might be correct, our conclusions regarding the larger topic will be found wanting. If, for example, we want to understand what the Bible has to say about the antichrist, we will have to examine every passage regarding that topic. This means that our initial interpretation on any single passage may need to be adjusted by what other passages bring to bear. This process of adjustment will go on until we have exhausted every passage in the Bible that deals with that topic. Only then can we say with any authority that what we have concluded is in fact what the Bible does teach.

4. Interpret obscure passages in light of those more explicit.

It is often the case, especially in the study of eschatology, that we will find two passages on the same subject that seem to direct us to opposite conclusions. On the one hand, there is an obscure passage, perhaps with visionary qualities, that seems to be implying one thing, yet on the other hand; there is an explicit passage that implies the opposite. Common sense dictates the choice of the explicit over the obscure. This is not to say that obscure passages have nothing to offer, but that they need to be examined in light of passages that can be more safely and plainly interpreted. Obscure passages, therefore, need to be integrated into a larger body of more explicit material. By concentrating first on to what is spoken in simple terms, we avoid undue speculation, and direct ourselves toward more reasonable and realistic conclusions.

5. Interpret Scripture according to the literary device used.

The interpretation of any biblical text must be informed by an examination of the literary device used by the author. Where the author speaks literally, we must interpret him literally, but where he uses metaphor, we should interpret him metaphorically; where he uses allegory, we should interpret him allegorically; where he uses symbols, we should

interpret symbolically, and so on. Take, for example, Jesus words, “If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out” (Matthew 18:9). Jesus’ intention is not that followers would say, “Yes Lord,” and start gouging their eyes out. He is using hyperbole, an intentional exaggeration, to make a point. We are to understand that Jesus does not want his disciples to do violence to their bodies, but rather wants them to get serious about eradicating the sin in their lives.

Serious problems arise when we fail to recognize that the author is using a literary device that must be interpreted a certain way. Problems also arise when one literary device is interpreted according to the rules of another. This often happens in eschatology in the study dreams and visions, where what is seen in the realm of the spirit represents realities in the natural world. Should we fail to interpret these passages symbolically, the essential message of what the visions are designed to convey is lost. The result of interpreting symbolic passages literally is conclusions that sound like science fiction. By carefully considering the nature of the literature we are reading, therefore, whether symbolic or otherwise, we can keep ourselves from making such a simple yet critical mistake.

6. Interpret Scripture in light of its literary context.

To achieve a full understanding of any passage of Scripture, we must consider the literary context in which it was written. Is the passage in question an isolated unit which stands alone, such as one of the proverbs which illuminate a single truth independent of the surrounding text, or is the passage intrinsically connected to a larger body of Scripture, the examination of which will lead us to a deeper and fuller meaning? A pertinent example of how this rule can change our perception is the story of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15:11-32. To most people, the central truth this parable conveys is the abundant grace of a loving father bestowed upon a repentant son. While this truth is certainly conveyed by the story, when we examine its literary context, we find that the event that prompted Jesus to tell the story was the judgmental attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the law directed toward the “sinners” Jesus entertained (Luke 15:1). From this fuller literary context we see that the central truth the story was designed to convey is the need for the righteous to rejoice when sinners repent. Thus by examining the literary context, our final interpretation will have a fuller and richer meaning.

When it comes to the study of eschatology, sensitivity to this rule becomes acutely necessary. When we study the Book of Revelation, for example, it will be important for us to see that the entire book was written primarily to the seven churches of Asia Minor. These churches were the first to endure a wave of persecution enacted by the Emperor Domitian that was about to unfold. We conclude, therefore, that the visions contained in Revelation must first be interpreted in light of the unique circumstances of its initial recipients. By examining passages of Scripture in light of their literary context, we are more readily able to perceive the reason why they were written in the first place, and by

understanding their purpose, we are better equipped to understand their essential meaning.

7. Interpret Scripture in light of its historic context.

In order for us to correctly understand what the Bible has to say to us today, we must first understand what it had to say to its initial recipients. The only way to do this is to perform sufficient historical research. We must avoid the temptation to believe that because we live in a technologically advanced society we must consequently know more about the Bible than did those who first received it. Quite the opposite is true. Because we live later, and are separated from the language, culture, and context of the biblical authors, our interpretation of their writings is much more problematic. Unlike those who first read the Bible, we must research the political climate, cultural customs, and historic consciousness of the people to whom the Bible was first addressed. Without question, this is tedious work. Yet the study of eschatology requires this of us. The passages we will study were written in a period of intense political hostility. Because of this, some of passages were written in code. Without an appreciation of the historical context of these writings, an accurate interpretation is simply impossible.

8. Use and define terms in the same way they were used and defined by the biblical authors.

When we employ biblical language in our interpretations, we must be careful to employ the correct, corresponding biblical definitions. In much of the study of eschatology today, biblical terms are altered according to modern interests and inclinations. For example, the terms “the end times” or “the last days” are used today in a way the biblical authors never intended. When we use these terms, we are commonly referring to a period in our future into which we believe we are about to enter. However, the writers of the Bible defined these terms according to their own perspective on history, not ours. Therefore, before we begin to use the term “the last days,” we must first know what the biblical definition of this term is. Only when we adopt the same definitions as the biblical authors can we hope to share in their understandings. Additionally, we must be careful not to add to our own vocabulary words or phrases that are not used in the Bible, such as the term “the rapture.” This term does not occur in the Bible at all, yet because of its prominent and frequent usage, it has been raised by many to the level of inspired writing. Any study that seeks to portray biblical truth will avoid the redefining of biblical words or the addition of novel terminology.

9. Adopt the same emphasis as the Scriptures

Our first inclination in any biblical study is to begin with what is interesting to us, which is of course only natural. Yet when we realize that the biblical authors had their own ideas of what was important, the focus of our study makes an important shift. When we

are willing to set aside our own inclinations and take the focus off of what tickles our own fancy, we can allow ourselves to be trained by the Bible to understand what is truly important. We must keep ourselves, therefore, in the mainstream of biblical thought. When we do this, we free ourselves from getting sidetracked into endless deliberations on obscurities, seeking answers to questions that the first century Christian would have never even thought to ask. When we approach the Bible allowing ourselves to be guided by what the text itself holds as important, we will more readily find the answers the Bible was written to provide.

10. Interpret Scripture in Light of the Developing Biblical Canon.

The Bible was not written at once, but over time. Many of the truths it contains were likewise not revealed in their fullness at once, but progressively. Earlier writings provided the framework upon which later writings were developed. When it comes to the study of eschatology, sensitivity to the developmental nature of the biblical canon is important. It enables us to decide where to begin given the wide scope and diverse nature of biblical literature that concerns the end of the world. Our choice is pivotal, and will determine not only the course of our study, but also the sufficiency of our conclusions.

The essential problem in much eschatological commentary today is that this rule is either not understood or is entirely ignored. Commentators who begin with the Book of Revelation and work backward through the biblical canon face the impractical task of attempting to reconfigure the structure of earlier writings to their own speculations. The building of a house requires that the foundation be laid first before the walls and roof are set in place. After this, the windows are put in, the walls are covered, and finally the owner decorates the interior. No one builds a house the other way around.

In this work, we will consider the progressive development of eschatological thought by beginning with Old Testament prophecy. This will be the foundation upon which we will examine New Testament writings. In the New Testament, we will begin with the Gospels, and examine Jesus' synopsis on the end times in an address known as the Olivet Discourse. Moving to the epistles, we will see how the ideas expressed in these works were simply developments of Jesus' essential teachings. Finally, as we look at Revelation, we will interpret its visions and symbols in light of the truths already written and disseminated regarding the nature of the last days. By employing this simple methodology, we will find that the study of the last days was not as hard as we expected it to be. Moreover, at the points where truth once seemed to be elusive, we will instead find beautifully logical conclusions.

Chapter Two Defining Terms

If eschatology is the study of the end times, the first thing we must do is define what we mean when we say “the end times.” Is this a period in our future, or are we living in them now? When do the end times begin, and what unique challenges do they present to those who live in them? To answer these questions, we must first look to the Bible itself to find out what words are used to describe this last period of history, and to determine how the people who used these terms defined them. As we examine each term and its accompanying definition, we will improve our understanding of the focus and scope of biblical eschatological thought.

The Day of the Lord

The most widely used eschatological term in the Bible is “The Day of the Lord.” In the Old Testament, the definition of this term is rather nebulous, at times referring to a specific judgment or visitation of God’s wrath about to occur, and at other times referring to the final Day of Judgment at the end of the world. In a very broad way it means “the day when God will set things right.” When this term was used in the prediction of specific judgments, it was often accompanied by language that concerns the end of the world. The use of this kind of language implies that the wrath of God about to be poured out foreshadows the final and climactic judgment against all mankind. An example of this is found in the book of Isaiah where we find a prophecy directed solely against Babylon, yet the language which follows describes the final Day of Judgment:

“The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw...Behold the day of the LORD is coming, cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; and He will exterminate its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellation will not flash forth their light; the sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity...Behold, I am going to stir up the Medes against them.” (Isaiah 13:1, 9-11a, 17a)

In using language relating to the end of the world, Isaiah implies that the coming devastation of Babylon will be as certain and inescapable as the final judgment against all mankind, and in it the world will have a foretaste of God’s coming wrath. Although the expectation of judgment against those who do evil would naturally mean liberation for those who obey God, the prophet Amos admonishes against longing for this day to come.

“Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled

from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the LORD be darkness not light— pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?” (Amos 5:18-20)

This is pretty dismal from the perspective of the hope we now have in Christ, yet the final meaning ascribed to this term in the Old Testament does in fact contain a ray of hope for the people of God in light of the coming of the Messiah. The prophet Malachi writes,

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful Day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6).

We know the coming of Elijah to be appearance of John the Baptist, and so we see here that from the historical perspective of the prophets, the life and ministry of the Messiah from beginning to end was seen as a single event, The Day of the Lord. In Jesus, therefore, we see the fulfillment of the eschatological hope of the Old Testament, yet from their own perspective, the Hebrews could not have foreseen how beautifully God would set things right. The coming of the Messiah did in fact mean judgment for those who practiced evil, as we see in Jesus’ condemnation of the religious leaders whose hypocrisy corrupted the nation, yet it also meant grace and peace for those who turned to God, as we see in his acceptance of repentant sinners. Thus, in the New Testament, while the definition of this term retains an element of dread at the thought of the judgment of a holy and righteous God, its definition is expanded to include joy and peace for those who follow God in light of the salvation made possible through Jesus Christ. Here are Peter’s words of his second epistle which sound very much like Isaiah’s oracle, but ends on a different note:

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up...but according to His promise we are looking for a new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:10,13)

So we see that as the truth of God’s plan of salvation was revealed, the concept of the Day of the Lord was likewise transformed. By the time Paul was writing, the term “The Day of the Lord” had become “The Day of the Lord Jesus” and these terms were used interchangeably.

“For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end; just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus.” (2 Corinthians 1:13-14)

The reason for this addition stems from Jesus' own teaching. Jesus had said, "The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). Throughout his ministry, Jesus spoke many parables which revealed that he himself would judge the earth. Though his stories maintain the idea that the Day of Judgment will certainly be a day of wrath and condemnation for the enemies of God, they also show it to be a day of pardon and liberation for those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord. In Jesus, therefore, the day of greatest calamity is transformed into the day of greatest victory.

The Last Day

Another term used by Jesus in the New Testament, "The Last Day," is an offshoot of the Old Testament term "The Day of the Lord." While the definition of "The Day of the Lord" is rather general, denoting the judgment of God against unrighteousness, the term "The Last Day" is quite specific. It refers to the last day of human history in which the inhabitants of earth, both living and dead, would be judged. The righteous would inherit eternal life in the Kingdom of God while the wicked would be cast out. Martha used this terminology, perhaps echoing Jesus' earlier teachings, when she spoke of her hope to some day see again her deceased brother Lazarus, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." To this Jesus responded, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:24-25). The subsequent raising of Lazarus from the dead reveals the source of resurrection power that will be displayed in the last day. The Father has entrusted the power of eternal life to the Son, and in the last day Jesus will speak his words of resurrection and those who believe in him will be raised to eternal life. Jesus used this term in explaining the purpose of his ministry when he said,

"For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:38-40)

The Last Days

Another term, "the last days," sounds similar to the above terminology yet has a very different meaning. It is this term that will be most helpful to us as we shape our study of eschatology. In Hebrews 1:1, the author defines the unique characteristic of the last epoch of history saying, "God, after he spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son." The last days are therefore the days in which the ministry of the Son replaces the ministry of the prophets. No longer is the message separated from the messenger, but God himself in human flesh bears the message of his own love. Peter used this term on the Day of

Pentecost as he explained to a puzzled crowd the ability of the disciples to speak in other languages.

“But this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘and it shall be in the last days, God says, that I will pour forth my Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of my spirit and they shall prophesy.’” (Acts 2:17-18)

Jesus therefore continues to speak in the last days through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit enables the believer to relate to God in a way that is superior even to what the disciples of Jesus experienced during his earthly ministry. Whereas the spiritual growth of the disciples was subject to the physical presence of Christ, and thus the moment he was taken from them they were scattered in fear and confusion, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the believer can remain in perpetual fellowship with God. Whereas Jesus’ teachings were not always immediately understood by his disciples, the Holy Spirit now speaks directly to the believer’s heart. The fact that God has established this wonderful and intimate relationship with us by the presence of his Holy Spirit does not mean, however, that everyone will desire it. In Paul’s second letter to Timothy he states that in the last days there will continue to be those who will assume religious pretense, yet continue in godless practices:

“But realize that in the last days difficult times will come, for men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these.” (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

James likewise chastised those who were practicing evil by withholding just payment from their workers, and couched his reprimand in a historical framework that identifies the time in which he was writing as the last days.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.” (James 5:1-4)

This continuation of evil in the last days is due much to the delay of Christ’s return. After Jesus ascended, the world appeared to return to normalcy, and as days, months, and years

passed, those whose hearts were not fully devoted to him returned to worldly ways of living. The delay of the end, however, is not without purpose. In Peter's second letter, the true believers are encouraged to continue faithfully, understanding the plan of God in the face of the mockery of those who had fallen away:

“Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation...But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:3-4,8-9)

From these passages we are able to ascertain the true nature of the last days. It is a period of time that began with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God by Jesus Christ, and will end when he returns. They are the days in which the Holy Spirit is poured out upon those who serve God and acknowledge Jesus as Lord, yet they are also the days in which those who reject him will continue in worldly ways to their own destruction. These days are offered to us by a patient God, who does not wish anyone to perish, but has put off the day of his judgment in order to extend grace to those who would repent of their sins. The last days are therefore not to be squandered, but are to be lived in with the understanding that God has provided the world the time it needs to repent. Yet there is an end coming, which will fall upon the world suddenly and unexpectedly.

The Last Hour

Another term similar to “the last days” is “the last hour,” found in 1 John 2:18 where the apostle writes, “Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have appeared; from this we know that it is the last hour.” The Hebrew day was divided into twelve hours; the last hour was that in which the day was soon to be over, and rest was anticipated. As in the parable of the vineyard of Matthew 20, the laborers are paid as soon as the day is over. Thus when John uses the term, “the last hour,” he implies that the time of labor for the servants of God is almost over, and payment is about to be rendered. The appearance of antichrists is confirmation of this fact. Jesus had said that there would be those who would come after him, who would introduce false teaching and lead many astray. John is writing in a time when this had begun to happen, and in the presence of opposition, gives words of encouragement to the true believers. The use of the term “the last hour” evokes feelings of profound expectation in the midst of persecution, as well as feelings of great joy in the anticipation of Christ's imminent return.

The End of the Age

The Hebrews believed that the age in which they lived would end with the appearance of the Messiah and the establishment of the eternal Kingdom of God, after which the people of God would enter a time of eternal blessedness. Jesus used the term “the end of the age” in the parable of the weeds of Matthew 13, in which an enemy sowed weeds among the wheat. Both the wheat and the weeds were allowed to grow together, after which the wheat was gathered into the barn and the weeds were burned. Jesus concluded the parable saying:

“So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:40-43)

The purpose of this parable was to teach that the righteous and the wicked would live side-by-side until the final Day of Judgment when they would be separated. The disciples expected to witness the end of the age with the establishment of an earthly kingdom they assumed Jesus had come to institute. They became confused when Jesus began to speak of calamities and distress that would befall Jerusalem after he had established the kingdom. It was not until after Jesus died and rose from the dead that he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45), enabling them to see the structure of history from the perspective we now have. The disciples then understood that the end would be necessarily delayed while the kingdom expanded. Even though this would be a period of unexpected trouble and tribulation, Jesus taught his disciples that the end was still most certainly approaching, and as part of his Great Commission gave them a wonderful promise saying, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

The End Times

Oddly enough, the term “The End Times” which is most commonly used today to refer to a period in our future, does not appear in the New Testament at all. The closest we find to it is the phrase, “the time of the end” found in the Book of Daniel, which was used to refer to the time of the fall of the Greek Empire and the days after it, which from Daniel’s perspective were in the distant future. Today this term is used by many who assume that there is a time coming in our own future in which many signs of biblical prophecy will begin to appear in rapid succession by which the believers will know that the end is drawing near. This period is commonly called “the end times” and is set apart from the common era of the church. In the Scriptures, however, no such distinction is made. The

age of the church is the last age, and it will be brought to a close by the sudden and unexpected return of Jesus on the Day of the Lord.

Hence we can see the necessity of using biblical terminology. Revisiting the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, “Are we living in the end times?” it is easy to see that the answer depends largely on how one defines that term. Yet the term itself is not biblical. A better question is to use biblical terminology and ask, “Are we living in the last days?” Here is a question we can answer clearly and definitively. If the apostles understood themselves to be living in the last days, then most certainly so are we. The last days is a period of history after the ascension of Christ and before his return, after which human history as we know it will be drawn to a close, and the new age of a redeemed humanity and a restored creation will begin.

Chapter Three

Messianic Expectations

Now that we know the rules we will employ, and the terms we will use in our study, we are ready to get started. Our first inclination in the study of eschatology would be to approach the Bible looking for events we think will happen in our future. This is only natural. After all, the life we now live is our primary concern, and those who lived ages ago have passed on to glory. This inclination to view everything from our own perspective, however, is the very thing that will blind us to much of what the Bible has to say. The Bible speaks to us from its own unique historical perspective, a perspective we must understand before we can correctly interpret it for our day. As we begin to look at the Bible from its own perspective, we should recognize two sweeping movements in its overarching eschatological scheme: the Old Testament, in which the people of God are prepared to receive salvation through the work of the coming Messiah, and the New Testament, in which the salvation of God is realized, and the eternal Kingdom of God is established. The eschatological hope in the Old Testament is based upon the coming of God's anointed deliverer; the eschatological hope of the New Testament is based upon the culmination of his work. In order for us to fully understand the work of the Messiah in New Testament times, we must first trace the course of messianic revelation in the Old Testament.

From our own perspective, we can see clearly how the life of Jesus satisfied the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. We know this because we have the writings of the New Testament to explain it to us. Without these resources, however, the nature of the life and ministry of the Messiah would be mystifying to us, as it most certainly was to the people of Israel in the days of Jesus' forerunner John the Baptist. In the dialogue between the Baptist and the teachers of the law sent to interrogate him recorded in John 1:19-28, we see three general messianic expectations encapsulated. The teachers of the law asked John if he were the Messiah and John denied it. They then asked him if he were Elijah, out of a tradition that expected a literal fulfillment of the prophecy in Malachi 4:5, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes." The common expectation was that the prophet Elijah, who had been taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire, would himself return. Even Jesus' own disciples questioned him about this tradition after seeing Elijah themselves on the Mount of Transfiguration, asking why the teachers of the law said Elijah had to come first. Jesus replied that Elijah had indeed come, and identified him as John the Baptist, but that the teachers of the law had not been able to recognize him (Matthew 17:10-13). John's second denial before the Jerusalem emissaries was therefore a denial of their overly simplistic interpretation; he was not the literal Elijah come down out of heaven. Their third question, "Are you the Prophet?" was born out of an interpretation of Deuteronomy 18:18 where God promised, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you (Moses) from among your own brothers." In Jesus' day, as we will later see, the general assumption was

that there would appear a prophet like unto Moses who would lead God’s people as the first Moses had. When John gave his third denial, the puzzled emissaries of Jerusalem asked him why he baptized if he was not the Messiah, Elijah, or the Prophet, revealing the simplicity of their assumptions. Elijah was indeed before them, and the Messiah was indeed about to appear, but their poor interpretation of Scripture led to a spiritual stupor that made it impossible for the leaders in Jerusalem to correctly identify either of them.

To be fair, part of the difficulty had to do with the nature of prophetic revelation. Although the prophets of the Old Testament were given numerous details about the life of the Messiah, they were not given all of them, nor were they provided with a chronology of his ministry. Thus, from their perspective, every aspect of the Messiah’s reign, from his birth to the establishment of his kingdom, to his judgment of the earth, were looked upon as a single event: the coming of the Messiah. We might graphically contrast our own perspective with the perspective of the prophets in the following figures.

Fig. 1 Our Perspective

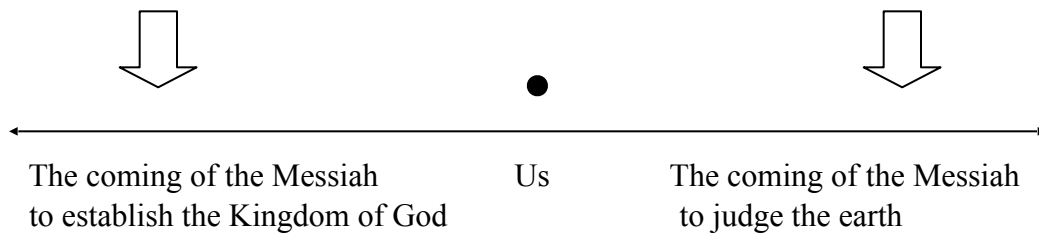


Figure one depicts the life and work of the Messiah from our own time perspective as we live in the midst of God’s expanding kingdom. We see in our past the Messiah’s work in the establishment of the Kingdom of God, and look to our future in expectation of its final culmination at his second coming to judge the earth.

Fig. 2 Perspective of the Prophets

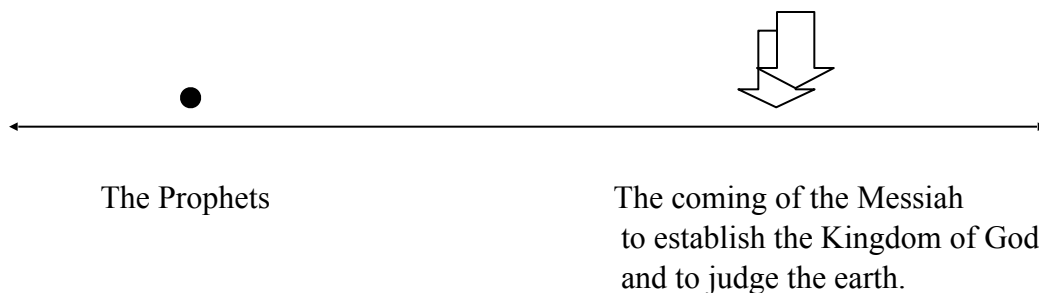


Figure 2 depicts the life and work of the Messiah from the vantage point of the Old Testament prophets, from which perspective the distinctions we so clearly see are not considered as relevant. This explains the fluidity of messianic prophecy, that is, how the prophets could speak of the various aspects of the Messiah's life that we now know to be separated by many years, without any apparent concern for chronology. It also explains the inability of many people in Jesus' day to accurately identify him. It was not until his work to establish the kingdom had been accomplished that an accurate understanding of the chronology of God's plan would be possible. Thus it was necessary for Jesus to continue his earthly ministry after the resurrection, explaining to his disciples everything that was written about him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms and opening their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44-45).

Yet in spite of this limitation in perspective, the more general aspects of the Messiah's reign were nonetheless understood by most of the people of Jesus' day, even though the exact form of their fulfillment was elusive. In order then to understand the Messianic hope of Israel, which led the multitudes to hail Jesus as their Messiah, a brief overview of these larger and more general expectations is in order.

The Second Adam

The first eschatological hope found in the Bible is in the prophetic word of God pronounced in response to the fall of mankind. Adam and Eve had fallen into sin, and as the man blamed the woman, and the woman blamed the serpent, God in turn issued a threefold curse beginning with the serpent and ending with the man. Before receiving the curse that would mean their expulsion and ultimate death, the man and the woman heard within the curse upon the serpent a hope for the future that would enable them to endure the horrific consequences of their own disobedience. After God described a general animosity that would exist between the races, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed;" the language of God deliberately changes to the singular, "He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Genesis 3:15). Here, therefore, is reference to a single human deliverer who would confront the serpent once again some time in the future. The head of the serpent, which represents his power, would be crushed, and in this second confrontation the man would emerge victorious, even though wounded perhaps unto death.

In the subsequent narrative of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden, we are given a new piece of information that reveals the greater part of God's plan for the future of the human race. There is a second tree in the garden, the Tree of Life, which has the capacity to impart eternal life to those who eat of its fruit. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which was the object of Adam and Eve's temptation, was placed in the middle of the garden while the existence of this second tree was kept from them. Thus we might theorize that Adam and Eve's condition in the garden before the fall was temporary regardless of the outcome of their temptation, and that the test of obedience was an

inescapable part of their spiritual maturation. If Adam and Eve would not fall into disobedience by the temptations of Satan himself, there would be no further source to generate disobedience. Access to the Tree of Life could then be immediately granted, and Adam and Eve would then live forever in perfect, willful, obedient relationship with their Creator. Should they fall, however, they would have to be expelled from the garden lest they, “take also from the Tree of Life and eat, and live forever,” becoming permanently fixed in their fallen state (Genesis 3:22). The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden was therefore an act of mercy by which God set humanity on a course that would lead to their later redemption through the coming offspring of Eve.

The fact that Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, however, does not mean that access to the Tree of Life is permanently denied, but rather that the way is now long and mired. It is not until the conclusion of the Book of Revelation that we are given a vision of the Tree of Life to which all of the redeemed have perpetual access.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

Furthermore, access to the Tree of Life is an intrinsic part of the final blessing or curse pronounced upon every member of the human family. Revelation concludes with Jesus words, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the Tree of Life and may go through the gates into the city”, and finally, “if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the Tree of Life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Revelation 22:14). Access to the Tree of Life is therefore at the foundation of the Biblical story of redemption. It is the starting point of the Bible’s story of salvation, and the focal point of its conclusion. Should each of us follow the way of God’s deliverance, then each of us will some day taste of its fruit. So will Adam and Eve.

Access to the Tree of Life, which was denied because of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, is granted through the work of the prophesied seed of Eve. The Messiah is therefore considered in New Testament writings to be a second Adam, one who through a representative obedience would restore humanity. Paul explains that the first Adam was a model of a greater figure to come, and that just as Adam’s disobedience meant condemnation for all men so Jesus’ obedience meant justification for all (Romans 5:14-19). He further writes, “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 5:22). This is why the miracles of Jesus had a meaning far beyond their intrinsic value; they marked Jesus as the second Adam through whom God would crush the power of sin. In the casting out of demons, Jesus demonstrated he had overcome Satan’s temptations in the wilderness, and had succeeded where Adam and Eve

had failed. He then explained his power over the satanic realm saying that, “no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house” (Mark 3:27). Furthermore, because of his faithfulness, the Father gave Jesus authority to overturn the effects of the curse. Jesus healed chronic illnesses, cured disabilities, and even raised the dead, all of which were inescapable effects of the curse. In Jesus, therefore, we find the fulfillment of the eschatological hope prophesied by God in the Garden of Eden, and the first fruits of a restored humanity.

Moses the Prophet

Throughout the Old Testament, God continued to reveal greater details about his plan of deliverance by raising up individuals whose life of faith in some way typified the life of the coming deliverer. These biblical types (events or persons that prefigure a future reality) would enable God's people to recognize the Messiah when he appeared, and having recognized him, to enter into the victory he would achieve. One of these figures was Moses. After Moses delivered the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt, he brought them to stand at the foot of Mount Horeb where God spoke to them the words of his commandments. Upon hearing the voice of the God, the people trembled in fear, and approaching Moses, asked him to intercede for them, saying, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen, but do not have God speak to us or we will die” (Exodus 20:19). The Lord responded:

“What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.” (Deuteronomy 18:17-19)

Although God's words were first understood to refer to the lineage of prophets, of whom Moses was the first, as the nature and work of the Messiah came into sharper focus, rabbinic tradition interpreted these words to pertain not only to the prophetic office in general, but the work of the Messiah in particular. The Messiah would lead Israel as Moses did, speaking the Word of God to the people, serving as a judge over them, providing for their needs, and interceded for them when they went astray.

When Jesus performed the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, the reaction of the people was indicative of this messianic expectation. When they saw the miracle, they made an immediate connection between the multiplied bread and the manna God provided in the wilderness through Moses. They said, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world” (John 6:14). So certain were they of Jesus identity that they intended to take him and make him king by force, so that Jesus, knowing that his time had not yet come, had to withdraw to a secret place.

Melchizedek the Priest

Melchizedek was a contemporary of Abraham, and was presumably offering sacrifices to God even before Abraham was called. He was also King of Salem, which later was to be called Jerusalem. When Melchizedek died, his priest hood ended, not being passed on to any descendant. Although little is known about Melchizedek's life, what is most significant is that Abraham worshipped God through him. The Israelites had an understanding that no descendant was greater than their forefather, and that the lives of the ancestors defined the nature and purpose of the lives of their descendants. Instilled then in the religious consciousness of Israel was the understanding that the entire nation, represented in the body of Abraham, had worshipped once before through a greater and superior priestly office, an office that had inexplicably ended. During the time of David's kingship, the necessity of a future and greater priesthood became part of the nation's corporate messianic expectation, when in speaking of the coming of the Messiah, David prophetically wrote:

"The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek." Psalm 110:4

David's prophecy that identified the Messiah as a priest in the order of Melchizedek meant that the Messiah would offer a greater sacrifice than any which had been offered through the Levitical priesthood. Not only would his sacrifice be sufficient to take away sins, it would atone for the sins of all those who worship the true God, Jews and Gentiles alike.

In the second year of the reign of King Darius the Mede, a further prophecy regarding the Messiah's priestly role was given to the prophet Zechariah. Zechariah had a vision of Joshua, the current high priest of Israel, standing before God. The name "Joshua" translated into Greek is "Jesus." Satan stood before God to accuse Joshua, but God rebuked him, gave to Joshua a new set of clothes, and told him that his sin had been taken away. Then God gave a charge to the high priest and said,

"Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch ...and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day." (Zechariah 3:8-9)

When an angel of the Lord appeared before Joseph of Nazareth to encourage him to take Mary as his wife, he gave the instruction that the child was to be called Joshua, (or in Greek, Jesus) because, "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The name of Jesus, therefore, identified him as the servant of God prophesied in Zechariah through whom the Lord would remove the sin of the land in a single day.

Later, Zechariah 6:9-15, the prophet is told to make a crown of gold and set it on the head of Joshua the high priest and make a prophetic proclamation that Joshua was the Branch, who would sit on a throne, and that through him there would be harmony between the offices of priest and king. Throughout Israel's history, these offices were intentionally kept separate; but the crown Zechariah made was to be kept as a memorial in the temple of the Lord to remind the people that there was coming a time when a future deliverer sent by God would unify them, serving the Lord not only as high priest, but also as king.

David the King

There was a time in Israel's history when the people of God were led only by the Word of God spoken through the prophets. Later, however, the Israelites began to compare themselves with the nations around them and longed to have a visible king to rule over them and lead them in battle as the other nations did. When the prophet Samuel was old, the people approached them asking for just such a king, and although the prophet was grieved, God spoke to him saying, "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king." (1 Samuel 8:7) Samuel warned the people that a king would take their sons to serve as his soldiers, their daughters to serve as his servants, that he would demand taxes, and take the best of their flocks and cattle as his own, but the people remained insistent. Israel's first king, King Saul, more than fulfilled Samuel's prophesy. After Saul had displayed contempt for the Word of God in numerous ways, God began to look for someone else to rule in Saul's place, someone whose heart was steadfast and whose obedience was true. God found David and instructed Samuel to anoint him.

The term "Messiah," which means, "Anointed One," harkens to the anointing of David. The Messiah would not be chosen because of his stature or abilities, but because of the purity and faithfulness of his heart. He would trust in God as David did, and would lead God's people in perfect obedience to the will of God. Furthermore, the Messiah's reign would never end. Isaiah wrote,

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

The people of Jesus' day used the terms, "Son of David" and "Messiah" interchangeably. When Jesus began to demonstrate his power by healing the sick and casting out demons, the people were astonished and asked, "Could this be the Son of David?" (Matthew 12:22) When Jesus entered Jerusalem during the last week of his life, the people

rejoiced, and hailed him as king shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matthew 21:9). Although the people misunderstood the nature of the kingdom Jesus came to establish, hoping that he would liberate them from Roman oppression just as David liberated Israel from the Philistines, they nonetheless had identified him correctly. Jesus was indeed the Son of David come to reign as king over God’s people.

Daniel’s Visions

In the Book of Daniel, written at the time of the Babylonian Exile, we find some of the most remarkable messianic prophecies. God revealed to the prophet Daniel the very time the messiah would appear to establish the Kingdom of God. The first of these kingdom visions is found in chapter 2 where King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream in which there stood before him a statue composed of four metals. Its head was of gold, its chest and arms were of silver, its belly and thighs were of bronze, and its legs were of iron mixed with clay. While he stood watching, a rock that was not cut by human hands struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay. The image was demolished into fragments that the wind blew away. The rock then grew to become a huge mountain that filled the entire earth. Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by the dream, and sent for his wise men demanding that they first tell him what he saw before offering any explanation. None of them could, and Nebuchadnezzar, in a fit of rage, ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. Arioch, commander of the king’s guard, spoke with Daniel, an Israelite exile serving as one of the king’s advisors, who after a night of prayer, approached the king with both the dream and its interpretation.

The four metals of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream represented four world empires of which Babylon was the first. The subsequent empires we now know to be Media-Persia, Greece, and Rome. At the time of the fourth world empire, Rome, a new kingdom would appear, one that would not be merely another social-political structure instituted by man and subject to human design, but a kingdom fashioned by divine hands. This kingdom, the Kingdom of God, would fill the whole earth and endure forever. Nebuchadnezzar’s vision was the first to set the establishment of the Kingdom of God in an historical framework, and interestingly enough, it was given to a pagan king.

In chapter 7, Daniel himself saw a vision of these same four great world empires represented as four great beasts: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and an unidentified beast of terrifying features which devoured all of its victims. This last beast had ten horns, one of which began to speak boastful words. As Daniel watched, he saw a vision of the throne room of God, where the Son of Man appeared to take his rightful place of authority over all the nations. This vision we now know to be of the ascension of Jesus from heaven’s perspective. The disciples saw Jesus ascend to heaven; Daniel saw him arrive. When Jesus therefore referred to himself using the phrase, “the Son of Man,” it was not to imply his essential humanity, but to instead declare himself to be the fulfillment of Daniel’s vision. Daniel asked the angel that was with him the meaning of the vision he was

watching, especially about the last beast and the one horn that waged war against the saints until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment against him. In the explanation, Daniel is told that the horn represented a king of this last empire who will wage war against the saints for three and a half years until the court of God sits and strips him of his power. After this, authority over the nations will be handed over to the saints. As we will later see, the persecution of the church under Nero from November of 64 AD until his death in June of 68 AD fulfills this prophecy. This second kingdom vision describes the violent oppression the saints will experience under the authority of the last world empire as the newly inaugurated Kingdom of God extends throughout the world.

Finally, in chapter 9, Daniel is made to know the very year of the establishment of the Kingdom of God and of the Messiah's appearing. During the first year of the reign of Darius the Mede, Daniel had come to understand from the Scriptures that the seventy years of Israel's exile had been completed. He therefore began to pray that God would fulfill his promise to restore the people to their home. While he was still praying, the angel Gabriel appeared to him with a fantastic message: not only would the people be restored to the promised land and worship God again in the holy city Jerusalem, but 483 years after the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem, the Messiah would appear. (This is the 7 weeks of years plus the 62 weeks of years prophesied in Daniel 9:25.) We now know the decree to restore Jerusalem was issued by Artaxerxes in 457 BC. The addition of 483 years brings us to 26 AD, the very year we now know Jesus was baptized!

As we read further in Daniel 9, we are told of a tragedy that will follow the Messiah's appearance, that is, that he will be cut off, and have nothing. The people of the ruler that will come will destroy the holy city and its sanctuary, and the land will be laid desolate. This prophecy of destruction ends with verse 27, a passage that has been problematic for interpreters.

He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him. (Daniel 9:27)

My observations are as follows: The person confirming a covenant with many at the beginning of the verse may be safely interpreted to be the Messiah. Although the identity of the person confirming the covenant is not specified in the immediate phrase, from the greater context we can see that the sevens spoken of are periods of years in relation to the coming of the Messiah. The sentence that speaks of the destruction of the sanctuary by a ruler who would come is merely an interruption of the discussion of the period of weeks in order to explain how it is that the Messiah could be cut off and have nothing, an idea that would be mystifying to any Hebrew reader. Verse 27 finishes the discussion of the period of weeks or "sevens" of the Messiah, that he will confirm a covenant with many people in this last seven-year period, and in the middle of it, that is, three and a half years

after his appearing, he will put an end to the sacrifice and offering. This prophecy was fulfilled in Jesus' sacrificial death, three and a half years after his baptism, in which he consummated all offering and sacrifice in himself.

Lastly, we are told that on a wing of the temple there will come an abomination that causes desolation until the end that is decreed for the city is poured out. This last phrase of verse 27, "and on a wing of abominations one causing desolation," (kenaph shikkutsim meshomem) is obscure. The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures made by Jewish scholars approximately 250 BC, interprets this phrase, "and on the temple shall be the abomination of desolations." At the very least, therefore, we can interpret this verse to mean that after the Messiah puts an end to the sacrifice and offerings, an abomination that causes desolation will appear in conjunction with the destruction of the sanctuary. [Note: If you are reading the NIV, the text note on this verse is more accurate than the NIV text itself, which interprets the one confirming the covenant as the very one who sets up the abomination.] This final prophecy was fulfilled when Titus, son of the emperor and general of the Roman legions that surrounded Jerusalem, desecrated the temple in its final destruction. We will examine this event later in greater detail.

Through these visions we see the remarkable resources responsible for the Messianic expectations of the people of Jesus' day. Through their extraordinary detail, the people knew that God was most certainly about to bring to fulfillment his promise to establish the Kingdom of God, and through it, bring the long-expected deliverance of mankind.

The Events of Jesus' Birth

Finally, in addition to all these incredible prophecies, the events surrounding Jesus' birth brought messianic hope to a peak. On the day Jesus was born, some shepherds near Bethlehem were visited by angels, and having been told of the Messiah's birth, went to worship him. They then went about the region of Bethlehem spreading the word about what they had heard and seen. Eight days later, Jesus was presented at the temple for circumcision when Simeon, a well-respected figure in Jerusalem, took the child in his arms and gave a blessing that identified Jesus as the Messiah (Luke 2:29-32). While he was speaking, a prophetess named Anna, a widow eighty-four years of age who never left the temple but continually served God there, also gave thanks. From then on she continued to speak of Jesus to all those in Jerusalem. Some time after this, Wise Men from the East appeared at Herod's palace asking to see the newborn king. Not only was Herod agitated, but the Bible also records that so was all Jerusalem. In an attempt to preserve his throne, Herod had every child in the region two years and under executed. This appalling response to the rumor of the Messiah's birth proved that Herod perceived a real and genuine threat to his throne. This horrific massacre of innocent lives left an

indelible impression on the memory of the people, and the indelible memory that Herod had done this because he believed the Messiah had been born.

Let us then reconsider the ministry of John the Baptist, and his response to the Jerusalem emissaries. Thirty years after Herod's massacre, John reawakened the people's hope that the Messiah was indeed among them, and people from all over Jerusalem, Judea, and the region around the Jordan came to John to receive a baptism of repentance in preparation for his appearing. Then one day Jesus himself came to be baptized. As he came up out of the water, a voice came from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased. John immediately identified Jesus as the Messiah saying, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Then, after spending forty days in the wilderness, Jesus immediately began to teach, and demonstrated his authority with many signs and wonders. The Messiah had indeed come, and the Kingdom of God was indeed at hand.

Chapter Four

The Kingdom of God

The concept of the Kingdom of God is distinctly Hebrew, born out of a unique history of a chosen people. The birth of the Israelites was unlike that of any other nation, for the children of Abraham grew into a great nation in captivity in Egypt. When the time was right, God led them out of Egypt with a mighty hand displaying his power with undeniable signs. So great was Israel's deliverance that even after the people wandered for forty years in the wilderness, the inhabitants of Jericho melted in fear when they heard that the Israelites had finally come against them. Unlike the nations around them, the Israelites were not led by any human authority; but instead, their God was their King. Yet after settling in the Promised Land, Israel's heart grew cold, and they began to yearn to be like the other nations around them who had visible kings to rule over them and lead them in battle. Although reluctant, God granted their request, and the corruption of the kings that followed brought Israel more misery than blessing. Yet God did not abandon his people to forever bear the consequences of their rebellion. Through the word of the prophets, God foretold of a future king, the Messiah, which means "the anointed one," who would remedy all monarchical corruption, and raise Israel once again above other nations so that her righteousness would shine as an example for all people.

The people of Jesus' day were waiting for the coming of this Messiah, and at the center of their expectation was the hope to see the creation of a new political order that would be centered in Jerusalem and extend throughout the world. When Jesus appeared, however, he taught them that the kingdom he had come to establish was of a much higher order than anything they had ever anticipated. This kingdom would not bear the limitations of a human monarchy, but God himself would reign in the heart of each of its citizens by the indwelling of his Holy Spirit. The kingdom would be constituted with power over Satan, sin, and death, demonstrating the intention of God to restore humanity from its fallen state. Citizenship in the kingdom would be made available to all people through repentance of sin unto righteousness, and although it would coexist with the kingdoms of earth, the Kingdom of God would continually advance until it would fill the whole earth.

The Kingdom as a Present Spiritual Reality

When Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus at night to interview him, Jesus proclaimed, "No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Although one might take these words to mean that no one can see the coming, future, eternal kingdom unless he is born again, when we examine the larger context we can see that Jesus was talking about a present reality. Jesus went on to elaborate, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit" (John 3:6), meaning that a present spiritual rebirth enables one to see and participate in the kingdom. When the Pharisees

asked when the Kingdom of God would appear, Jesus replied, “The Kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘here it is,’ or ‘there it is,’ because the Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21). When standing before Pilate, Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). Later, St. Paul reiterated the spiritual nature of the kingdom saying, “I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50).

Earthly kingdoms are subject to the limitations of their sinful human leaders and the inevitable erosion of time; the Kingdom of God is led by an incorruptible head, and subject to no temporal limitation. Its spiritual qualities supersede the material characteristics of earthly kingdoms at every single point. Jesus came to establish just such a kingdom, one that was eternal and would transcend all other earthly powers, even the very religion in which it was conceived. This spiritual transcendence made it very hard to be perceived by fleshly human beings, even by the Israelites, who should have been able to understand it. To the Pharisees, who could not see the kingdom unfolding before their eyes, Jesus said, “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the Kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it” (Luke 16:16). To his own disciples Jesus said, “Some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matthew 16:28).

A Kingdom Constituted with Power

The Kingdom of God is constituted with power. After overcoming the temptations of Satan in the wilderness, Jesus returned with power to cast out demons at will. When the Pharisees claimed that Jesus drove out demons by the power of demons, he responded:

Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand? But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Matthew 12:25b-26,28)

Jesus then sent out seventy-two of his disciples with instructions to heal the sick and preach that the Kingdom of God was near. The seventy-two returned rejoicing and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name” (Luke 10:17). In casting out demons, Jesus showed himself to be the deliverer God had promised to Adam and Eve in the garden. In sending out the seventy-two, Jesus demonstrated that his own authority could be conferred to his followers, and that not even Hell itself could prevail against them. When we therefore use the words, “in Jesus’ name,” we are invoking the authority

of Christ with the affirmation that we are citizens of his kingdom, and acting on his behalf.

Jesus also demonstrated that the Kingdom of God was established with power to forgive sin. After Jesus was baptized, John declared, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). When a paralytic was let down through the roof where Jesus was teaching he said, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." Knowing that the teachers of the law were grumbling at this, Jesus said to them, "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . ." he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home" (Matthew 9:2-6). Jesus then conferred authority to forgive sins to his apostles saying, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:23). This awesome authority granted to his apostles was not given so that they might act in accordance with their own will, but that they might act as Ambassadors of Christ, working as Jesus did to bring the world into reconciliation with God. Before conferring this authority, Jesus spent time training his disciples to think and act as he did. Peter once asked how many times he should forgive his brother. "Seven times?" he asked. Jesus replied, "I tell you not seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). He also said to them, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him" (Luke 17:4). The forgiveness offered by Christ is therefore intrinsically linked with the acts of forgiveness of his followers. When members of Christ's body forgive, they are not only acting in accordance with the will of the church's head; they become the very means of his forgiveness. St. Paul explained the mystery of the church's representative work in this way.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

Finally, Jesus also demonstrated that the Kingdom of God was constituted with power even over death itself. In the miracles of the raising of Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9:23-25), the young man from the town of Nain (Luke 7:11-15), and his own friend Lazarus (John 11:14-44), Jesus exercised the authority given to him by God to overturn the ultimate effect of sin. In his own resurrection, Jesus put the final nail on death's own coffin, confirming his own words that, "as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26). And once again, just as the authority over Satan and sin was conferred to his apostles, so also was the authority even over death. In Acts 9:36-41, Peter raised Tabitha from the dead, and in Acts 20:7-12, Paul

raised Eutychus from the dead. The Kingdom of God established by Christ is therefore presently constituted with all of its essential powers and characteristics, each of which will find fullness when the kingdom is consummated at Christ's return. Satan and his followers will be eternally cast out, sin will be blotted out of human nature, and death will be no more. Through the kingdom's present constitution, therefore, Christ gives to his followers a foretaste of what is yet to come, allowing them access to his powers as ambassadors until the time comes when they will become like him, (1 John 3:2), and reign beside him" (2 Tim 2:12).

A Kingdom Accessible to All Through Repentance unto Righteousness

Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was accessible to all people. He ate and drank with tax collectors and prostitutes, calling them to follow him; he took little children in his arms and blessed them, saying that the Kingdom of God belonged to such as these; he said to the thief who was dying on the cross next to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Yet this simple characteristic that would seem so obvious to us, was not immediately understood to the people of Jesus day. When Jesus ate and drank with sinners, he did so much to the consternation of the scribes and Pharisees; when parents were bringing their children to Jesus to have him bless them, his own disciples rebuked them; and on the other side of a cross hung a thief that mocked Jesus to his own eternal demise.

The reason it was so hard for the people to understand and receive Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God was that it stood in stark contrast to what the religious leadership of Israel had taught. The Pharisees had created a system of religion that demanded strict observance not only to the commandments of God, but the law of human traditions designed to prevent the divine law from being broken. God had said that the Sabbath Day was to be a day of rest; the Pharisees created an extensive series of human traditions designed to prevent the people from working. Their additions, though perhaps initially well intentioned, fostered the assumption that the righteousness of God could be attained by external observances, which in turn led to a system of religion where true piety was of secondary consequence. In criticism of this legalistic system Jesus said to the crowds, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:20). His word shattered assumptions that were universally held, even by those who were rejected as "sinners."

Jesus blatantly attacked the legalism of the day. He healed on the Sabbath when the teachers of the law told the people to come and be healed on any other day (Luke 13:10-17). He instructed his disciples to glean wheat to eat when the Pharisees had said it was unlawful for them to do so (Matthew 12:1-14). He lashed out against religious hypocrisy in the temple courts, declaring woes against the teachers of the law and

publicly humiliating them, calling them “whitewashed tombs.” He said that in regard to the law, they would strain out a gnat to swallow a camel. He condemned them for traveling over land and sea to find one convert, only to make him twice as much a son of hell as they were themselves (Matthew 23). The people rejoiced to hear the condemnation of a system of religion that no one but the religious leaders themselves could keep. The religious leaders were so embittered that some of them began to plot how they might kill Jesus. Yet when surrounded by those labeled as “sinners,” Jesus spoke in the most endearing of terms of a Heavenly Father whose heart yearned for his lost children, saying that there was more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repented than over ninety-nine righteous person who did not need to repent (Luke 15:7). In doing so, Jesus defined a true piety of the heart grounded in repentance of sin and humility before God. He turned the religion of the day upside down by declaring repentance the sole qualification for entrance into the Kingdom of God. The “sinners” jumped at the opportunity, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law sat and grumbled. To these he said,

“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” (Matthew 21:31-32)

Thus Jesus defined the essential and qualifying characteristic of the Kingdom of God, and since that time, salvation by the unmerited grace of God bestowed on repentant sinners has been the church’s essential message. The moment any person, group, or church begins to add or substitute any other qualification for salvation, they stand apart from the teachings of Christ and his apostles, and in league with the legalism of the Pharisees. They not only muddy the waters so that others cannot see, but obscure their own vision. The moment, however, any sinner receives the grace of God offered freely through Christ, he or she becomes a permanent member of God’s eternal family.

The Kingdom’s Final Consummation

The earthly ministry of Jesus established the Kingdom of God with all its essential power and character. Because of his sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection, an ever-increasing number of repentant souls are embracing the forgiveness of their sins. The boundaries of the kingdom continue to expand as people from all nations are turning to Christ, and Satan’s house continues to be plundered as his power over sinners is shattered. Yet although the kingdom is firmly established, it is yet to come to its final consummation. Jesus explained this best in the parable of the weeds, which showed how those who serve God and those who serve Satan would live side by side until the Day of

Judgment. Jesus likened that day to a day of harvest, where the wheat would be gathered into barns and the weeds destroyed with fire (Matthew 13:24-30).

Even though Jesus taught clearly that the final consummation of the kingdom would be delayed, as time passed the believers of the early church began to lose heart. Some even began to doubt there would be a resurrection. To these, St. Paul explained that the kingdom was in the process of being built up, and that only when it was finished would Christ hand it over to the Father.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28)

So we see that the establishment of the Kingdom of God is twofold. First there was its initial establishment by Christ in his earthly ministry, but second, there is yet to come a final consummation at his return. The time between the kingdom's inception and consummation is one of great longing and expectation, likened unto a time of engagement with the church being referred to as the bride of Christ (Revelation 19:7). Even creation itself, we are told, waits with eager expectation for the day of Christ's return when the true followers of God will be revealed (Romans 8:19). This is the period in which we now live, and the kingdom's final consummation to be accomplished at Christ's return, is the end for which we hope.

Chapter Five

The Olivet Discourse

Matthew 24:1-25:46

Mark 13:1-37

Luke 21:5-36

The Olivet Discourse, recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is a synopsis of the last days given by Jesus to his disciples a few days before his arrest and crucifixion. In it Jesus provides for his followers teachings necessary for their survival in the period between his ascension and return. A study of the Olivet Discourse is therefore an essential part for any valid eschatological study. It is the frame upon which the house is built, without which the walls would inevitably fall apart. The later information about the end times provided for us in the epistles is merely a development of the various tenets of this address. As we examine this discourse carefully, we will find that many of the prevailing questions circulated today regarding the nature and structure of the end times have already been plainly answered by our Savior.

The problem with much modern eschatological study is that this discourse is denied its rightful and central place. Instead, the Book of Revelation is most often used as the source of an eschatological framework, and the words of Jesus given in this address are unduly cut from their context to fit into a speculative scheme developed out of Revelation's visionary material. This is poor interpretive methodology. If we want to know the basic structure of the last days, Jesus has already given the answer. While the Book of Revelation does indeed hold an essential place in any eschatological study, it must be remembered that John recounts his visions to the churches in Asia Minor based upon an understanding of the last days that had already been widely disseminated through the teachings of the apostles. The people who first read the Book of Revelation would have naturally interpreted this later work in light of what was already confirmed in former apostolic writings. So must we also.

A further tactic that will greatly aid us is to examine the Gospel records simultaneously. As we move through each section and subject, each one of the Gospels has something unique to offer. While the process of comparing these accounts may be time consuming and tedious, the end result will be a clear and concise picture of all that Jesus had to say to his disciples regarding the last days, and from this what he has to say to us about the time in which we live.

The Context

The Olivet Discourse is given in response to a question posed by the disciples after Jesus had retired to the Mount of Olives after a day of teaching in the temple complex. Our first job is to understand what prompted them to ask the question that sparked Jesus' lengthy response. Jesus had just entered Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and was hailed by the people as their new king. He had recently raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany, just two miles outside the city, and some of the crowd gathered that day had been eyewitnesses of this miracle. The rest of Jerusalem, having heard about it, came out to see Jesus, causing the Pharisees to lament, "Behold, the whole world is going after him" (John 12:19).

There was good reason for the Jewish hierarchy to worry. Jerusalem was at this time ruled by a very careful balance of political powers. Pilate was governor of Judea by direct appointment of the Emperor Tiberius, but the people tolerated his authority only because he had the Roman legions at his command. Herod was king, but only because he was also submissive to Roman authority. Caiaphas was high priest and ruler of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council and highest court, but even he held his position by Roman appointment. Each of these, though continually rivaling each other for authority over Judea, cooperated out of the fear of what the emperor would do if this careful balance of power were upset. The authority ascribed to Jesus by the masses threatened to do just this. There was no room in the established political structure for a Messiah. Therefore, as Jesus entered Jerusalem and was hailed as its king, some Pharisees in the crowd understandably demanded that Jesus rebuke his disciples. Jesus responded that if his disciples did not cry out, the stones would.

The disciples saw the Pharisees' reaction, heard the resoluteness of Jesus' response, and so were expecting Jesus to do what the Pharisees feared and what the crowd had long anticipated: to establish a new political order in Jerusalem. Throughout his ministry Jesus had taught his disciples numerous times about the spiritual nature of his kingdom, even stating explicitly that the Kingdom of God was not a political order that would come with visible signs, but was an inner reality that had already arrived. The disciples were nonetheless slow to learn. Their desire to see Jerusalem liberated from foreign rule was so strong that it clouded their perception of the spiritual nature of the coming kingdom. They had even argued among themselves about who would be the greatest in the new order. The mother of James and John had come to Jesus asking him to place her sons in positions of highest authority when he entered into his kingdom, one on his right hand and one on his left. Jesus, doubtless thinking of his coming crucifixion, responded that she didn't know what she was asking. Even after the resurrection the disciples' expectation of an earthly kingdom in Jerusalem lingered, as they asked him, "Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) Therefore, on the day Jesus entered Jerusalem, receiving the people's praise without reservation, the disciples

entered into the exuberance of the crowd, sharing in its expectations and envisioning themselves as leaders with Jesus in the establishment of a new and revolutionary political order. Jesus further confirmed their expectations when he entered the temple and drove out the moneychangers. He had not come simply to teach; he had come to act. Each day Jesus returned to the temple complex, not only teaching the people about the Kingdom of God, but attacking the hypocrisy of the scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the law.

The Disciples' Question

Matthew 24:3

Mark 13:4

Luke 21:7

Not everything Jesus said and did, however, fit in with what the disciples expected. In fact, their expectations were soon to be demolished. One day, as they were leaving for the Mount of Olives, the disciples remarked about the beauty of the temple, admiring the stunning size of its stones. Jesus answered them by stating that the day was coming when the temple would be utterly destroyed. The disciples were stunned. After all, the Messiah was the Son of David, the heir to David's throne. The first thing David did once he established Jerusalem as his capital was to bring the Ark of the Covenant from Kiriath Jearim. His intention was that the worship of God and the administration of God's people might be accomplished in the same place. David made plans to build the temple as a perpetual house for God's Name and a place of prayer for all nations. Once built, the temple became the center of Jewish ritual worship as well as the symbol of Jewish nationalism. Here was the new king saying the temple was to be destroyed. Why would he allow this to happen? When would this take place? Would Jesus assume the throne immediately, or was there something else yet to happen? All of these questions must have been racing through the disciples' minds. They waited until they got to the Mount of Olives, then Peter, Andrew, James, and John approached Jesus asking, "When will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?"

The Delay of the End

Matthew 24:4-8

Mark 13:5-8

Luke 21:8-11

The disciple's question was born out of a distinctively Hebrew understanding of the nature and structure of human history. The Hebrews thought of history as consisting of two distinct ages: the age in which they lived, which was defined by the reign of evil and the corruption of creation as a result of the Genesis curse, and the age to come, in which

the power of evil would be destroyed and the curse would be lifted. Their hope for the future was therefore characterized by the anticipation of a sudden and climactic transition from one age to the next, initiated by the establishment of the Kingdom of God through the work of the Messiah. Much of Jesus' teaching could have easily been interpreted to confirm this dualistic understanding of history. For example, in the Parable of the Weeds, Jesus taught that the righteous and the wicked would continue to grow together until the end of the age. At that time he would send out his angels with instructions to gather together those who seek after righteousness, and bring judgment and destruction upon those who do evil. Jesus concluded the parable by saying that once this had been accomplished, the righteous would "shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father" (Matthew 13:40). The disciples accordingly saw no distinction between the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the end of the age. They therefore naturally assumed that because the Kingdom of God was about to be established, the end of the age was upon them. Because of their perception, before Jesus could answer their question regarding the destruction of the temple, he first had to help them to see the coming of the Kingdom of God and the end of the age as distinct events. Although God's kingdom was indeed about to be established, it would first exist in opposition to the kingdom of the world. The end of the age would come much later.

The disciples were expecting to soon enter a time of eternal blessedness; Jesus needed to prepare them to serve him in an age defined instead by conflict. Because the end would be delayed, it would be a natural temptation for any hopeful disciple to falsely interpret the rise of some great personality or the occurrence of some cataclysmic event as the sign of Jesus' imminent return. This is why Jesus began his address with the warning, "Watch out that no one deceives you." Jesus goes on to say that a great number of events would take place, all of which should be considered as birth pangs. There would be false messiahs who would lead many astray, wars among many nations, and natural disasters that would lead many to assume that the end of the world was fast approaching. Jesus cautioned his disciples against jumping to any such conclusion. Jesus' warning is instructive for all ages of the church: no political tragedy, natural disaster, or any other calamity is to be interpreted as a sign that the end is approaching. Though the entire world may be distressed, and even the people of God assume that the end is upon them, the time of the end cannot be predicted. Jesus later said, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36). If Jesus himself did not know the time of his return, we should not expect that such knowledge would be given to us. Also, when Jesus said, "the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Matthew 24:44), he was speaking not to the unbelieving masses, but to his own close disciples. These statements therefore preclude any attempt to discern the day or time of Christ's return.

Although Jesus' instruction ought to be plainly understood, today his words are largely ignored. Today, books are continually written which interpret some political tragedy, natural disaster, or technological terror as a sign that the end is at hand. For example, in

the 1970's there were a number of books written that identified OPEC, the middle-eastern oil conglomerate, as the Beast of Revelation, and concluded that the end was soon to come. The oil crisis passed, the end didn't come, and the books were placed on the discount rack. Recently, many modern fictional works foster a similar atmosphere of fear and anxiety. One pastor told me that just before the year 2000, a prominent family in his church became obsessed with end times fiction, and interpreted the pending Y2K computer crisis as a sign that the world was about to be plunged into chaos out of which would rise the Antichrist. The parents quit their professional jobs, sold their home, moved from the east coast to Iowa, bought a small farm, built a hidden bomb shelter, and on New Year's Eve cowered in the dark and waited for the end of the world. The end didn't come. Had they simply read Jesus words carefully, they would have been spared such an indelible embarrassment.

Of Tribulation and Witness

Matthew 24:9-13

Mark 13:9-13

Luke 21:12-19

The reason it was necessary for the disciples to understand that the end would be delayed and relinquish their hopes of becoming witnesses to the establishment of the eternal kingdom is that Jesus was calling them to be witnesses of another kind. God's plan of restoration did not begin with the judgment of the wicked, but the extension of grace to those who upon hearing the message of salvation would turn from their wickedness. This message would face certain opposition, and those who carried it would be persecuted. The Greek word for persecution is "thilipsis" which also means tribulation, trouble, anguish, and affliction. The bearers of the message would therefore have to endure a period of great tribulation that would test their physical and emotional endurance. They would be flogged in the synagogues, and brought as prisoners before governors and kings, but all of this would be part of God's plan to create opportunities for witness, and thus increase his kingdom.

In preparation for the task ahead, the disciples are given the unique instruction not to prepare beforehand what they were going to say. Instead, they were to trust that the Holy Spirit would give them words in the moment they were to be spoken. Statements prepared in advance are generated out of what the speaker knows and feels at the time. They contain thoughts or express feelings that are rooted more in human defensiveness than in the will of God. More than this, because the plans of God often remain undisclosed until the critical moment, only in that moment can the speaker be fully aware of all that God is doing. A perfect illustration of this is found in the Book of Acts, where Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin, the same Jewish ruling council that sentenced Jesus

to death. Realizing that the council was composed of both Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection of the dead, and Sadducees who did not, he immediately saw an opportunity for witness, and called out, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6). The Pharisees, then considered Paul to be one of their own, and began defending him against the attacks of the Sadducees. The ensuing dispute became so violent that Paul had to be removed by the Roman commander in charge of his arrest. By raising the issue of the resurrection, Paul brought out into the open the critical theological distinction between these two separate parties, and in doing so not only saved his own life, but also created an occasion for the Pharisees on the council to hear the message of Jesus with an open heart. All of this had been mapped out by God in advance. The Holy Spirit, who searches the deep things of God, communicated God’s will in the critical moment. Had Paul merely relied on a speech he had prepared in advance, he would have failed to see what God was doing, and consequently missed the opportunity set before him.

Essential to faithful witness in the last days is a simple trust in God. We are instructed to have faith that God has not abandoned us to persecution, but through persecution is creating for us an opportunity to bear witness to our faith. God has not given us his message only to leave us alone to face the daunting task of communicating it to a hostile world, but it is he himself who engineers each and every opportunity of witness. By believing this, we are empowered to see God’s very hand at work and become participants in the expansion of his kingdom.

The Gospel to the Gentiles

Matthew 24:14

In Matthew’s account, Jesus ends his synopsis of the end times by stating that the Gospel would be preached throughout the whole world before the end would come. Our first impulse upon hearing these words would be to conclude that because Jesus has not returned, this prophecy has not yet been fulfilled. There are indeed countless multitudes across the globe that have never heard the message of the Gospel, and so it would be natural for us to assume that God is only waiting for everyone on the planet to have the opportunity to hear the message of salvation before bringing human history to a close. While it is possible that this is God’s intention, as we bring other passages to bear on this subject we find that the phrases, “throughout the whole world” and “to all nations” meant something different to the first century believer than they do to us today. For example, in Colossians 1:23b we find Paul claiming, “This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” In Acts 17:6, we see that when the Jews of Thessalonica brought Jason and some of the other believers before the city authorities they shouted, “These men who have upset the world have come here also.” Furthermore, at the end of Paul’s letter to the

Philippians, he sends greetings on behalf of members of Caesar's own household. From the first century perspective, Jesus prophecy had been fulfilled. The Gospel had been proliferated throughout the known world, and people from every station, culture, and race were responding to it.

The Abomination of Desolation

Matthew 24:15-22

Mark 13:14-20

Luke 21:20-24

After providing a synopsis of the end times, correcting the disciples' false perceptions of the nature of The Kingdom of God, Jesus goes on to answer their primary question regarding the destruction of the temple. He begins by referring to a previous desecration that occurred in 175 BC. Antiochus Epiphanes, a ruler of the Seleucid Dynasty whose Syrian kingdom had expanded over Palestine, strove to assimilate Jerusalem into Greek culture. He attempted to destroy the Jewish religion by outlawing the observance of the Sabbath and the practice of circumcision. He then made possession of the Hebrew Scriptures a capital crime. When the people rebelled against these statutes, he attacked the city, put its inhabitants to death, and sold its children as slaves. In a final act of malice, he sacrificed a swine on the altar of the temple, and set up in its place an altar to Zeus. A Jewish rebellion ensued, and after the Jews once again took possession of Jerusalem, the temple was cleansed and rededicated by Judas Maccabeus in 164 BC. This desecration and subsequent rededication had become an intrinsic part of the Hebrew historic consciousness, remembered in the Festival of Lights, or what is known today as Hanukkah. The prophecy of Daniel 11:31 regarding an Abomination of Desolation set up by the forces of the king of the North refers to this event.

When Jesus said to his disciples, "When you see the Abomination of Desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place," he is telling his disciples that in a short number of years they will see a similar desecration that will signal the temple's final destruction. In the ninth chapter of Daniel, the prophet foretold that the Messiah would appear 483 years after the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem (this is the 7 weeks plus the 62 weeks of years in Daniel 9:25). After appearing, however, the Messiah would be cut off, and the people of the ruler who would come would destroy the city and the sanctuary, setting up a second Abomination of Desolation. Having been recognized by the masses of Jerusalem as the Messiah, Jesus is now instructing his disciples about what to expect in this forthcoming destruction.

There are two keys in the Gospel accounts that enable us to accurately identify the fulfillment of this prophecy. The first is in Luke, where instead of the phrase, "the abomination of desolation," Jesus is recorded as saying, "But when you see Jerusalem

surrounded by armies.” Jerusalem was surrounded by armies in 70 AD when the Romans laid siege to the city after four years of suppressing the Jewish revolt. Vespasian, a respected Roman general, had embarked on a carefully planned campaign against the Jewish nation after rebels had risen up in arms. In the midst of the war, the emperor Nero died. His rule was followed by a quick succession of self-appointed emperors, none of which was fit to govern or able to maintain the throne. Vespasian was the most stable political figure at the time, and in response to public demand, he relinquished command of the campaign to his son Titus, and returned to Rome to accept the crown. Ironically, it was Passover, and as the Roman legions advanced against the city, vast numbers were herded through the city gates. The siege against Jerusalem lasted 134 days, and the following destruction was greater than any that had preceded it. Josephus, a Jewish historian, recorded that more than 1,100,000 people perished, while 97,000 were taken as slaves. The magnitude and severity of this siege cannot therefore be overlooked.

The second key to unlocking this prophecy is the editorial comment in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14, “let the reader understand.” These words instruct those who would be reading the Gospel to an audience not to change what would appear to them to be a copyist’s error. In the original Greek the word for “abomination” is neuter and the verb for “standing” is masculine. The Greek language requires that subject and verb be of like gender, thus any reader would assume the masculinity of the verb to be an error and correct it as he or she spoke. This editorial comment informs the reader that the dissimilarity between subject and verb is intentional and should be read as written. The intentional error of these verses is significant because it identifies the abomination Jesus spoke of not as a thing but a person. An expanded paraphrase might be, “So when you see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the place where he does not belong, in the holy place, then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” The Abomination of Desolation is therefore a man.

When the temple fell to the Romans, Titus entered the complex to survey the damage. Seeing that the soldiers had set fire to the outer rooms of the Temple building, he entered the sanctuary and stood in the Holy of Holies, the place where no one but the high priest was permitted to enter, and this but once a year. Seeing the value of the temple, which no one had been able to relate to him, he issued commands that the building be saved, but the soldiers were now venting their fury from a long and frustrating campaign and could not be restrained. The temple was burned and utterly destroyed. In a final act of sacrilege the soldiers brought into the temple their ensigns, which were the objects of their oaths and worship, and offered sacrifice to them, praising Titus as their supreme leader. This pagan worship echoed the desecration of Antiochus Epiphanes centuries earlier.

The reason Jesus offers this prophecy to the disciples is to prevent them from investing their hope in the restoration of Jewish rule in Palestine. The disciples had been hoping to see the kingdom restored to Israel, but Jesus is here telling them that the coming war

against the Romans was not going to be won. In addition, Jesus is providing the early church with a very simple instruction of what to do once Jerusalem succumbed to the Roman siege. Instead of remaining in Judea in the hope that God would bring final victory to the remaining Jewish rebels, the Christian community was instructed to leave Judea and hide in the hills. Interestingly enough, this is exactly what they did. Once the temple had been desecrated, the Christians of Judea fled to the transjordan mountains. The city of Pella, a Gentile city close to the eastern shore of the Jordan, became a center for Christianity for a period of time following the destruction of Jerusalem.

Jesus ended his discussion of the destruction of Jerusalem by saying that the tribulation that would follow would be greater than any experienced before, and would never be equaled again. These days of tribulation would be shortened so that the church might not perish along with the Jewish nation. In Luke's account, Jesus states that Jerusalem would be "trodden down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). The simplicity of this verse is often confounded by those who would hope to make it say something more than it does, believing it to imply that once the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled, rule of Jerusalem would be returned to the Jews. The text, however, does not say this. What is this "time of the Gentiles?" Jesus has already told us. It is the time in which the Gospel would be preached to all the nations so that the Gentiles too might have a share in the Kingdom of God. What will happen after this time? Jesus has answered this also: the end will come. After the Gospel has been preached to the Gentiles, Jesus will return to judge the nations and to gather his elect from the corners of the earth. Through these words, therefore, Jesus is telling his disciples to abandon the hope of ever seeing Jerusalem freed from Gentile rule. Jerusalem will continue to be subject to the Gentiles until the very end of the age.

In the epistles, St. Paul further elaborates on the relationship of Jews and Gentiles saying that, "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved." (Romans 11:25b-26) The words, "all Israel" refer to all those whom God has chosen to receive salvation. Again, many see here an inference that once the full number of Gentiles comes in that the Jews will no longer be hardened and turn to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Once again, however, the text does not state this. Instead, Paul addresses the issue of those who have been hardened by saying that, "if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again." (Romans 11:23) The partial hardening of the Jews therefore had a singular purpose. It occurred in the first century and was quickly rescinded once the Gospel had gone out to the Gentiles so that everyone, even those who had been hardened, could share in the gift of salvation. Furthermore, from God's perspective there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile. (Romans 10:12) The dividing wall that surrounded the temple, preventing the Gentiles from entering upon pains of death has been broken down. (Ephesians 2:14) Nothing in Scripture even remotely suggests that God will once again erect the barrier he has so effectively and purposefully destroyed

False Messiahs

Matthew 24:23-28

Mark 13:21-23

After answering the disciples' question regarding the destruction of the temple, Jesus returned to the subject of the coming of false messiahs. His purpose is to instruct his disciples regarding the time they would appear. Following the destruction of Jerusalem, numerous false messiahs and prophets would take advantage of the devastation of the Jewish people to advance their own causes. They would be like vultures gathering over a dead body. Jesus had previously warned his disciples not to be alarmed at their appearance, but simply to be prepared, even though these false teachers might appear to have the power to perform miracles and amass great followings. Just as Jesus said, immediately following the fall of Jerusalem a whole series of false messiahs appeared, using the devastation of the city as a platform upon which to build their own pockets of resistance. The Romans crushed them all. In contrast to the rise of these false messiahs, Jesus said that his own return would be an instantaneous event, as sudden as the lightning that flashes from one side of the sky to the other. He would appear in the clouds, and all the nations would recognize him, as he sent forth his angels to gather his elect.

The Coming of the Son of Man

Matthew 24:29-31

Mark 13:24-27

Luke 21:25-28

Having turned now to the subject of his own return, Jesus stated, "But immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken." These astronomical signs were first spoken of in Isaiah 13:9-13 in the context of an oracle against Babylon. Before speaking of the coming destruction by the Medes, Isaiah spoke of the coming wrath of God against all the world for its evils, and included language about the disruption of the heavenly bodies as part of his prophecy. Jesus used this same language in reference to his own coming. Later, in the Book of Revelation, the apostle John saw these same signs in a vision of the breaking of the sixth seal of the scroll (Revelation 6:12-17). Immediately after the seal is broken, these signs appear. The peoples of the earth hide themselves in fear, calling on the mountains to fall on them to shield them from the day of the wrath of God and of the Lamb. The second coming of Christ will therefore be most unlike his first appearance. The heavenly bodies will be disrupted and all the nations of the earth will behold his return in all his power and majesty. He will send out his angels to gather up his elect from the ends of the earth.

Human history will be drawn to a close, and the full redemption of the people of God will be completed.

The astronomical signs that accompany the return of Christ are said to immediately follow the days of tribulation. What are these days? Jesus has already defined them: they are the days in which his disciples would be flogged in the synagogues and delivered up to Gentile rulers to bear testimony to the Gospel; the days in which brother would betray brother, and even children would rise up against their parents; the days in which the temple would be destroyed and false prophets would arise to lead many astray; the days when the Gospel would be preached throughout the whole world before the return of Christ. Once again we see confirmation that there will be no future epoch of peace in which the kingdom would be restored to Israel. The Gospel would go out, and then the end will come. With this description of the dramatic and climactic end of human history, Jesus finished his explicit teaching in answer to the disciples' question about the future.

The Parable of the Fig Tree

Matthew 24:32-36

Mark 13:28-37 (Ends Mark's Record)

Luke 21:29-36 (Ends Luke's Record)

Although Jesus has answered his disciples plainly, common to his teaching was the use of parables that enabled his hearers to better remember his words. The parables that follow Jesus' teaching on the end times serve the additional and essential function of instructing the disciples what to do in response. Jesus was teaching his disciples in a grove of trees, and he found there an immediate object to serve as a visual reminder of all he had just said. As the leaves of the fig tree were harbingers of summer, so all the events he has just described are harbingers of his return. His words, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place," are problematic only for those who interpret them apart from their larger context. Numerous commentators stumble at this point trying to redefine the word "generation" in light of the fact that Jesus did not return in the first century. They fail to see the forest through the trees. What it is Jesus says will happen in the current generation? Everything he has just spoken of: the deliverance of the disciples to persecution, the betrayal of brother against brother, the coming of war and natural disaster, the abomination of desolation and the destruction of the temple, the coming of false christs and the proclamation of the Gospel to the world. All of these would occur within the current generation. Jesus, however, went on to provide a single exclusion: the time of his return is unknown. Not even he himself knows the day or the hour, but only the Father in heaven, and so this single event is to be excluded from the things the disciples should expect with certainty to witness. Simple.

The Sign of Noah

Matthew 24:37-41

Jesus went on to describe the nature of his return by identifying the Genesis flood as a biblical type foreshadowing the coming judgment at the end of the world. God had revealed his plan to destroy mankind to Noah, a preacher of righteousness, who believed God and obeyed his instructions to build the ark. But Noah began building without any idea as to when the flood was to occur. It was not until seven days before the rains began that he was given warning to make final preparations. The flood caught the rest of the world unawares, and only Noah and his family were saved. As it was with Noah, so it will be at Jesus' return. God has revealed his plan to us, and calls us to prepare ourselves for an event that will catch the world off guard. We know that it is coming; we just don't know when. When Jesus finally returns, each person, righteous and unrighteous alike, will be about his or her business without the slightest inkling of what is about to happen. Two men will be working in a field, two women grinding at the mill, two people sleeping in the same bed, but in a single moment, one will be taken while the other is left. Essential then to being found worthy to be part of the coming kingdom is to remain in a perpetual state of readiness.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13

In the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus teaches that discernment and wisdom are essential parts of preparing oneself for his return. It is somewhat troubling to recognize that in this parable all of the maidens are invited to the banquet, and all of them wish to participate, yet only five received what they were hoping for. Also, all of them fell asleep, so that the sudden call that the bridegroom was approaching caught all of them off guard. Each one was resting assured she would be part of the celebration, yet five awoke to the sudden and panicked recognition that they might indeed be excluded. They had not considered this as a possibility. This is what separated the five wise from the five foolish. The wise had considered beforehand the possibility that they might not have enough oil should the bridegroom be delayed, and acted accordingly. It was therefore not the mere receipt of an invitation that qualified the maidens to enter the celebration. This they all possessed. Instead, it was careful preparation that enabled five of them to fulfill that invitation.

So it is with us. It is not enough for us today to merely believe that God has extended his invitation; we must act on that belief to make certain that we will be well prepared when he arrives. We must ensure that the light of our love and devotion for Jesus should never be allowed to go out. A day ought not to go by when we do not consider that Jesus might

momentarily return. If there is sin in our lives, we must be actively rooting it out. If there is something we lack in our daily walk, we must be actively pursuing its acquisition. Though Jesus will return at a time none of us will expect, we must prepare ourselves so that the sudden surprise of his appearing will not followed by the dreadful recognition of our own exclusion.

The Parable of the Talents

(Matthew 25:14-30)

In the parable of the talents, the delay of the master's return serves the purpose of revealing the worthiness of those to whom he had entrusted his wealth. The servants are given the remarkable responsibility of possessing the master's resources in his absence, yet they are not simply to maintain them, they are to use them. Although there is no instruction as to what needs to be done, the servants understand the heart of their master, that he "reaps where he does not sow, and gathers where he does not winnow." The master uses his absence as an opportunity to allow his servants a hand at exercising authority in his place. He is wise in the distribution of his wealth, entrusting his property to his servants according to each one's ability. He is also wise in withholding any specific instruction so that each servant might use what he is given creatively. Those who used their talents well were commended at their master's return. Their reward was his pleasure with their performance.

Just as Jesus was about our Father's business, so are we. As Jesus did, we are to work for the expansion of the Kingdom of God so that others might be saved. God does not give us work that is beyond our ability, but calls us only to use the abilities he has given. This work is not to be drudgery to us, but we are given freedom to direct our energies toward those things that give us delight. We are entrusted with the administration of God's own kingdom, which is a great privilege, and in the process we become more like our Master, enabled to better understand his heart and mind. The reward we receive is to hear those words that are the highest treasure of the soul, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

There are, however, those to whom this privilege is given who will never hear those words. The one who does nothing will receive nothing in return. As it was in the parable of the virgins, it is unsettling to realize that the one who was cast out was not an enemy, but a servant. He was in the master's house to do the master's bidding, even entrusted with the master's property. But he did not share in the master's heart. He saw the master's absence not as an opportunity to advance his own good standing, but as an occasion to slack off. His prearranged defense, which he expected to be convincing, was immediately shown to be fraudulent. If he were really afraid of disappointing the master, he would have at least deposited the money in the bank. It is also troubling to hear that the one talent taken from the slothful servant is given to the one who now has ten. This

does not seem to us to be democratic. We forget, however, that the Kingdom of God is not a democracy, but a theocracy. God is King, and distributes reward as he wishes. Those who demonstrate themselves to be most responsible are given the greater measure of reward.

The Sheep and the Goats

Matthew 25:31-46

While the parable of the virgins illustrates the need to keep watch, and the parable of the talents illustrates the need to be at work in the kingdom, the parable of the sheep and the goats defines what work is to be done. Everything Jesus lists: the feeding of the hungry, the giving of drink to the thirsty, the welcoming of strangers, the clothing of the naked, and the care of the sick or imprisoned, is done for the benefit of others without any thought of reward. These acts of kindness reveal a humility and sincerity of the heart Jesus deeply values. He considers himself to be the beneficiary when acts of kindness are performed for those he loves. Those who perform them will have long forgotten them by the time of Jesus returns. Not only will they be surprised by Jesus' unexpected return; they will be surprised at the reward they receive. Conversely, those who fail to have compassion will be surprised when they are cast out. Entrance into the kingdom is therefore determined not merely on the grounds of one's confession of faith, but on how that faith is validated by actions of mercy in accordance with the nature of Christ. On the Day of Judgment, there will undoubtedly be many who will be surprised at how they receive commendation, as well as many who will be surprised at their own condemnation.

With this sobering thought Jesus ends his discourse on the last days. In his explicit teaching, as well as in the parables that follow, he provides his disciples not only with an answer to their initial question, "When will the temple be destroyed?" but equips them with all they need to live victoriously in the last days. Throughout this discourse the common thread is the understanding that the end will be delayed, and in this delay, God will do a mighty work. His kingdom will expand throughout the world, and many will be saved through the message of the Gospel. As we continue our study, we will find that Jesus' words in this discourse provide a base upon which all later writings are attached. As we study these connections, we will find that the Bible presents a single and integrated picture of this last chapter of human history.

Chapter Six

Opposition to the Kingdom

In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus taught his disciples that as the Kingdom of God expanded it would face certain and inescapable opposition. There would be false messiahs, who would lead God's people astray, political figures that would pressure the church from without, and false teaching that would distress the church from within. After Jesus' ascension, the apostles reminded the church of what he had said, and identified more specifically the forms of opposition as they appeared, as well as offered the specific tactics needed for the church to respond adequately. As we interpret these writings, we will gain a greater appreciation of the conflict of the last days between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the World. As we examine these conflicts in their historic setting, we will not only gain an appreciation for the great challenges our spiritual ancestors faced, but also find meaningful similarities between their struggles and ours.

False Messiahs

The Words of Jesus

(Matthew 24:4-5,23-28; Mark 13:5-6,21-23; Luke 21:8)

Jesus came to reconcile the world to God. By his sacrificial death he made payment for the sins of the world, and by his resurrection he is able to offer eternal life to all who come to him. At his ascension, Jesus entrusted the message of what he had done to his apostles, who having been empowered by the Holy Spirit, brought this message to the world with such effectiveness that even within the first generation of believers, members of Caesar's own household had become Christians. As this message spread, however, other voices began to proclaim a different deliverance. False messiahs came pronouncing that the true salvation of God was not from the bondage of sin through an atoning sacrifice, but instead from Roman oppression through violent revolution. The common expectation among the Hebrews had always been that the Messiah would establish an earthly kingdom centered in Jerusalem to which all nations would then become subservient, bringing the world under a single authoritarian rule. It seemed obvious then that the first thing the Messiah would have to do was deliver the Hebrew people from Roman domination. When Jesus made it clear that his kingdom was not of this world, those who were looking for political deliverance simply looked elsewhere, and with so many looking for revolution, it was easy for revolutionaries to find a following.

Jesus had warned his disciples that they should not to be alarmed at the appearance of false messiahs, but simply to be prepared. They should not be distracted even though these imposters might appear to have the power to perform miracles and amass great followings. Just as Jesus predicted, many false messiahs began to appear after the church

had been founded and the Gospel spread across the known world. Theudas, Manahem, Simon bar Giora, Jonathan, and Simeon bar Kochba, are among the list of numerous persons who presented themselves as the Messiah and promised deliverance from Roman rule. The Romans killed them all.

Jesus' chief concern was not that his followers expend their energies in opposition to these false messiahs, but that they simply stay clear of them. His words, "do not go out" (Matthew 24:26) express the urgency of a Good Shepherd who knew that there would be those who would try to steal his sheep away. They would attempt to imitate his voice, and if his followers did not remain alert and vigilant, they might very well be deceived. In contrast to the appearance of these false messiahs, Jesus said that his own return would be an instantaneous event, as sudden as the lightning that flashes from one side of the sky to the other. He would appear in the clouds, and all the nations would recognize him as he sent forth his angels to gather his elect. There will therefore be no question of Christ's identity when he returns. Jesus' final description of these false messiahs was offered after he predicted of the fall of Jerusalem and the devastation that would follow. They would be like vultures, preying on the hopes of a devastated people. "Where the corpses are," Jesus said, "there the vultures will gather" (Matthew 24:28).

By understanding this particular tactic of Satan to draw attention away from the work of the true Messiah, we are able to discern his similar activity today. As it was in the days of the early church, Satan continues to use dynamic personalities to fill people with false hope and divert them from a good, proper, and productive relationship with Jesus Christ. In our own time we can think of many people who have presented themselves as a divinely appointed deliverer, and consequently led many astray. Even those who have not claimed to be the Messiah, but have nonetheless claimed divine appointment, are used by Satan to accomplish the same purpose. Our current historical circumstances may be different from that of the early church, but the tactic Satan employs is the same: a false prophet presents himself as a messenger from God and attempts to acquire the reverence, honor, and adoration that is due Christ alone. Because we live in the last days, we must be vigilant against those who would seek to exalt themselves and exploit the church for their own purposes.

The Man of Sin

Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians *(2 Thessalonians 2:1-12)*

The letters to the Thessalonians were written by Paul primarily to encourage the Christians in Thessalonica and advise them concerning the dissemination of false teachings. The first letter addresses a falsehood that had spread among the church that those who died would not see the Lord at the same time as those who were alive when he

returned. Paul stated that this was not the case, but that the living would be caught up with the dead to “meet the Lord in the air.” (1 Thessalonians 4:17) The second letter addressed the more outlandish rumor that the Lord had already returned. In response to this, Paul reminded the Thessalonians of the teachings they had received while he was with them, that Jesus would not return until the rebellion occurred and the Man of Sin was revealed. This Man of Sin was future political figure who would oppress the saints of God as never before, and whose coming had already been prophesied.

As we consider Paul’s words, we will find them particularly difficult to interpret because Paul had already taught the Thessalonians at length about the last days and here only reminds them of some of the major points, calling on them to remember the rest. Because we do not have his initial teaching, it will be necessary for us to try to fill in the gaps. The only way we can do this is by carefully placing these letters in their historical context, and trying to understand what must have been in the mind of Paul as he taught. When we do this, the portions of these letters that are initially confusing can in fact become quite intelligible.

2 Thessalonians 2:4, “He (the man of sin) will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”

In the Gospel records, Jesus never spoken of a single individual that would come to oppress the church, but spoke only of numerous false teachers who would lead many astray. Our first question, therefore, is to ask where Paul could have heard of this Man of Sin. When we consider Paul’s personal history, that he had been trained as a Pharisee and knew the Scriptures well, we might suppose that he is not here offering any new word of prophecy, but is rather drawing from prophecy that had already been spoken. In the Book of Daniel, we find the most likely candidate. In the seventh chapter of this book, Daniel spoke of a powerful ruler who would wage war against saints of God at the time of the fourth great world empire, which we know to be Rome. Rome was an empire composed of ten provinces, each ruled by a governor appointed by the emperor. In Daniel’s vision, the beast that represents Rome has ten horns, and as Daniel watched, a little horn with eyes and a boastful mouth emerged from among them. He spoke arrogantly, and waged war against the saints for three and a half years until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment against him, casting him into a blazing fire. We can be sure that Paul knew this prophecy well, and so can further conclude that when he speaks of the Man of Sin, he is referring to the little horn of Daniel’s prophecy.

What is novel in Paul’s letters is the statement that this Man of Sin would exalt himself over everything that is worshipped. While this arrogance might seem astonishing to us, to the people of the Roman Empire it was not. Emperor worship had become part of the empire since Julius Caesar had been deified after his death. As time progressed, the deification of rulers gradually moved from the dead to the living. Augustus, Julius Caesar’s heir, was declared to be “the son of a god,” and although Augustus never

demanded worship, he never rejected the title. Incidentally, when the Roman soldier who stood beneath the cross declared, “Truly this was the son of God,” he is undoubtedly speaking in contrast to this imperial claim. By the time Paul’s letters were written, the mad emperor Caligula had declared himself to be divine, had a temple erected to himself, and demanded to be worshiped throughout the empire. He even went so far as to command that a statue of himself be erected in the temple at Jerusalem. Even though this edict was never carried out, and Caligula’s reign was rather brief, a precedent had been set. Although the current emperor Claudius was a much more rational man, in writing of the Man of Lawlessness who was to come, Paul is predicting that the world would have to face a second tyrannical demagogue. Paul had good reason to make his prediction, and as we examine the political events that were immediately unfolding, we will not only gain a sense of the urgency with which Paul writes, but also come to the inescapable conclusion that he expected the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy to be imminent.

2 Thessalonians 2:6-7, “And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.”

Paul’s writing is intentionally vague because he is addressing a mass audience in a climate of political volatility. In order to understand what he is taking about, we will need a little history lesson. In 41 AD, the emperor Caligula died and was succeeded by Claudius. The new emperor had grown up among the imperial family as a social outcast. He spoke with a stutter, his knees buckled when he walked, and he was the continual butt of jokes. Yet in spite of the wild instability of Caligula’s reign, and the anxiety Claudius must have felt being the subject of continual ridicule, he nonetheless grew to be an intelligent and thoughtful person. When Caligula died and imperial rule fell to Claudius, he rose to the occasion. He reinstated the policies of religious tolerance observed under the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. He passed laws for the fair and just treatment of slaves. He judged the cases brought before him with a refreshing equity. He even sought to give conquered peoples representation in the Senate. In short, the former butt of jokes quickly endeared himself to the masses.

The reign of Claudius, however, was not without its own intrigues. There were always those who eyed the imperial throne with covetous eyes and secret ambition. Among the imperial family there was a woman who held such an ambition, not for herself, but for her son through whom she hoped to reign. Her name was Agrippina, Claudius’ niece, and the sister of Caligula with whom he had committed incest. When Claudius had his wife Messalina killed for her adulterous affairs, Agrippina quickly sought to fill her place. She seduced her uncle, and despite public outcry, Claudius married her. Once Empress, she persuaded Claudius to adopt her son and name him heir to the imperial throne. His name was Nero. Nero was an incurable egomaniac and a know rabble-rouser. All of the empire knew of Agrippina’s intrigues; the only person in the dark seemed to be Claudius.

The empire had seen unrestrained imperial rule under Caligula. Now it was clear they could only expect more of the same. In 54 AD, less than four years after he had adopted Nero as his heir, Claudius was murdered, poisoned by his wife Agrippina. Nero became emperor of the world at age sixteen.

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians were written in 51 and 52 AD, in the midst of this unfolding political tragedy. If we put these events in a simple time line, we will see how strongly they must have played in the mind a Paul, himself a Roman citizen.

Claudius' wife Messalina dies.	48 AD
Agrippina made Empress	49 AD
Claudius adopts Nero	50 AD
Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians	51-52 AD
Claudius Murdered	54 AD

The people who received Paul's letter knew exactly what he was talking about. Paul says so. The intrigues of the imperial family were as widely known as any world news item today. The secret power of lawlessness was the motive of Agrippina to see her son on the throne whatever the cost, and perhaps on a deeper level, the working of Satan to raise up a ruler who would oppose the advancement of the Kingdom of God. The restraining influence was the reign of Claudius, who while he was alive, was able to curb the excesses of his adopted son. Because the succession of Nero would not be certain as long as Claudius was alive, Agrippina had him "taken out of the way."

2 Thessalonians 2:8, "And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming."

Nero was most certainly a lawless man, whose rule was the epitome of tyranny. He murdered anyone he perceived as a threat: not only numerous prominent citizens, but his brother Britannicus, his wives Octavia and Poppaea, his teacher Seneca, and even his own mother by whose very conniving he had attained emperorship. The turning point in his reign occurred in 64 AD when the city of Rome burned. Rumor spread that Nero had ordered the fire with the intention of rebuilding the city in his own design. To turn public animosity from himself, Nero blamed the Christians, who were already looked upon with general suspicion because of their refusal to worship the Roman gods. The Neronian persecution that lasted from 64 AD when Rome burned to July of 68 AD when Nero died, a period of three and one half years in fulfillment of Daniel's prophecy. The Roman historian Tacitus recorded the event from the point of view of one who, though showing no interest in seeing Christianity advance as a movement, felt pity on the Christians as individuals because of the horrifying manner in which they were persecuted. Nero opened the circus, and had the Christians executed in what Tacitus referred to as "the utmost refinement of cruelty," showing mercy to neither women, nor children, nor the

elderly. He had many crucified. Others he had sewn up in the hides of beasts to be torn apart by wild dogs. A wide variety of horrifying tortures were administered for the indulgence of public bloodlust. To cap off the spectacle, Nero had his own grounds opened up for public display and illumined the night by having Christians nailed to a post, covered in oil, and set on fire. The measure of his sadistic cruelty served to be too much even for the war hardened Romans. Paul's term, "the man of lawlessness," can hardly begin to describe the degree of Nero's malevolence.

The hope Paul offers is that even though this man of evil would attempt to exalt himself, and persecute the saints of the true God, his reign would end in judgment. It is essential to note here that when Paul speaks of the downfall of the Man of Sin, he is not predicting the time of our Lord's return. Jesus had made it abundantly clear that no one could know the day or hour of that day, "not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Matthew 24:36) That final day is therefore hidden in the mind of the Father, and will come as a complete surprise to everyone. Paul knew this. Instead, in these verses we find Paul confirming a judgment that would occur in two parts. First, Jesus would "overthrow him by the breath of his mouth;" that is, he would speak a word of judgment against him that would result in his downfall. This is the judgment that was part of the vision in Daniel chapter seven of the four great beasts and the boastful little horn.

"As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom." (Daniel 7:21-22)

Daniel saw this event in the realm of the spirit. Its earthly fulfillment is found in the events that led to Nero's death. The second judgment would occur when Jesus would "destroy him by the splendor of his coming;" that is, at his return Jesus would assign him to the place of final destruction. In speaking of this second condemnation, Paul is simply continuing a theme he had started in the first chapter of the same book when he spoke words of encouragement to those who were already being persecuted.

"God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed." (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10a.)

Here Paul is not promising the Thessalonians immediate divine retribution against those who were persecuting them, but is challenging his readers to adopt a greater perspective, knowing that judgment would ultimately be rendered on their behalf when Jesus returned. When Paul subsequently speaks in the same letter of the destruction of the Man of Sin at the return of Jesus, he is speaking in the same fashion. Paul is not predicting the return of Jesus Christ immediately after the reign of the Man of Sin; this would contradict Jesus' teaching that no one would know the time of his return. Instead, Paul is simply stating that having been overthrown by Jesus, the Man of Sin would consequently receive everlasting destruction at Jesus' final return. From all this, it is clear that Paul's predictions were not his own. He was simply reiterating words of prophecy that had already been spoken, saying that they were about to be fulfilled. It is also clear that these prophecies found their fulfillment in Paul's immediate future under the Neronian persecution. Paul himself was executed by Nero's order.

Yet while this specific prophecy was fulfilled in the first century, we can also conclude that this same tactic of opposition to the Kingdom of God through political persecution is still being used in the world today. Because we live in the last days, and the Kingdom of God continues to expand, the opposition of Satan likewise remains. We can see throughout history, even to our present day, the rise of political powers bent on the church's destruction. The hope the church has in the presence of this continuing opposition is the same hope it has always had. Soon the work of the church will be finished, and the Father will send his Son to bring judgment on those who persecute God's people and deliverance to those who have remained faithful to him.

The Antichrist

The Letters of John (1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11)

The term "antichrist" comes from the Greek word for messiah and the prefix "ante," which means both "the opposite of" and "in place of," so that the word denotes both contrast and substitution. The antichrist is therefore a power of evil that works in opposition to Christ and seeks to take his place. The most unique characteristic of John's letters is the exclusive use of this term. Although John may not have coined this phrase, he is the only biblical author who uses it. While today, most people use the term "antichrist" to signify a man of sin they expect to appear sometime in our future, a simple reading of John's letters will show he has something different in mind. John is not concerned with the coming of any future personality, but is writing about a very present crisis that involving numerous persons. By the time John had written his epistles, the dilemma the church faced was not the coming of false messiahs who attempted to draw believers away from the true Christ. These had already begun to appear, and because of Jesus' warning, the church had recognized them for who they were. Also, the Neronian

persecution had ended, and even though there were political persecutions yet to come, at the time these letters were written Christians were more or less tolerated. Instead, the new struggle the church faced was with numerous false teachers who began to fracture the body from within. As we examine John's letters, we will not only be able to understand who these antichrists were and what they taught, but in the process also gain valuable insight into how this same spirit of falsehood, deception, and confusion is at work in the church today.

1 John 2:18, "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour."

John begins his discourse on the antichrist by identifying the period in which he was living as the last epoch of human history. Using the metaphor of the last hour of the day, a time when the work has been finished and the worker is anticipating rest, he implies that the major work of God has been accomplished, and there remains only a brief time before God would bring his people into their eternal rest. Yet in contrast to the worker's last hour, the last hour for the church is a time of intense conflict, as the powers opposed to Christ manifested themselves.

The striking element of John's letters is not the prediction of the coming of the antichrists, but rather their actual identification. Essential to a correct interpretation of these letters is the understanding of a simple linguistic device. Throughout his letters, John uses the singular and the plural interchangeably when referring to the antichrist. A parallel example might be if I were to say, "When the Jehovah's Witness comes to your door, be prepared to discuss with him the nature of Christ's divinity." I would have used a singular term, but had the plural in mind. I would not be thinking of any specific individual, but an entire group, all of which hold to the same teaching. This is exactly what John does. He uses the singular term "antichrist," but is actually thinking of an entire group.

1 John 2:19a, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us."

The conflict that generated John's letters had already taken place by the time of his writing. There were those who had come into the church, but were not of the church. In contrast to the modern notion that the antichrist can be easily recognized, the antichrists of John's letters employed a spirit of deception that few understood. By the time the true believers were able to make sense of what was happening, a great deal of damage had already been done. The church had been unexpectedly forced to expend its energies on infighting rather than evangelism, and after it was all over, many of those remaining weren't exactly sure what had happened and why. The confusion that remained was the very reason John was compelled to write.

1 John 2:22, "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist--he denies the Father and the Son."

1 John 4:3, "but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

2 John 1:7, "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist."

In these passages, John specifically identifies those who are the antichrist. In order for us to fully understand his words, we again need to take a brief history lesson, once again setting the words of the Bible in their historical context.

As the message of Jesus was brought to the Greek world, it did not enter a vacuum, it met with Greek ideas. While there were many Gentiles who were indeed willing to abandon everything they had known in order to accept Christ, there were also those who attempted to conform the message of Jesus to their own worldview. At the time the Gospel was first preached, the reigning Greek philosophy was one we now refer to as Gnosticism. The term "Gnostic" comes from the Greek word for knowledge. The Gnostics were Greek philosophers who believed that there was a divine knowledge or wisdom that human beings could receive and by which they could be enlightened. They held a dualistic view of the universe, believing the material world to be evil, and the spiritual world to be good. Hence the Gnostics also had a dualistic view of human life, believing the body to be evil, and the spirit to be good. A widely held mythology undergirded their philosophy. Human beings were thought to be the offspring of a fallen deity, and therefore existed in a fallen material state, yet within each person remained the spark of original divinity. While most humans lived their lives without any thought to their divine origins, there were some (the Greek philosophers having themselves in mind) who through their own wisdom were able to attain divine illumination and rise above the state of common humanity.

Those Greeks who heard the message of Jesus and desired to participate in this new teaching, yet refused to abandon their Greek worldview, simply put a spin on the idea of a Messiah. Rather than adopting the Hebrew understanding of the Messiah as a savior and king, one who would redeem Israel from its sin and then establish an eternal kingdom, the concept of the Messiah was redefined as one who would first receive divine knowledge and consequently lead others to enlightenment. Hearing the story of Jesus' life, the Gnostics highlighted those events that fit most easily into their preexisting worldview, while simply ignoring those that did not. For example, reinterpreting the Gospel narratives, the Gnostics falsely identified the coming of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism as the moment he received divine illumination, and identified his words on the

cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” as the moment the divine knowledge or force had left him. They ignored the words of John the Baptist, “Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world,” and the soldier’s words at the cross, “Surely this man was the Son of God.” In drawing a distinction between Jesus the man, and the Christ, which they interpreted as the divine knowledge he had achieved, the Gnostics departed from the non-negotiable doctrines upon which the church had been founded. In 1 John 2:22, when John identified the antichrist as those who deny that Jesus is the Christ; that is, that he is the Messiah according to the Hebrew understanding of the term, he is thinking of those who drew this distinction.

The apostles had clearly portrayed Jesus as one who is both fully human and fully divine. He is the God-Man. Even at his birth, his divine nature was understood, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit. The central purpose of his coming was not to provide humanity with enlightenment to the divine will; human beings had once understood the divine will, yet had chosen to rebel against it. Instead, Jesus’ purpose was to die for the sins of the world, making it possible for those who would accept his atonement to be restored to a right relationship with God. Apostolic teaching made the atonement its foundation; Gnostic teaching rejected it.

As the conflict between these two irreconcilable viewpoints continued, a further distortion presented itself. There were those who with good but impracticable intentions, attempted to reconcile the two. These persons, known as Docetists, began to teach that Jesus was indeed the singular Son of God, but that he had never actually come in the flesh. He was a deity that only appeared to be human, wearing his humanity as a cloak. With this teaching, the Docetists hoped to satisfy those in the apostolic tradition, who insisted that Jesus was thoroughly divine, and also satisfy the Gnostics, who held to the belief that the body was inherently evil. The problem with the Docetists’ teaching was that it rendered the atonement ineffectual. In order to pay for the sins of humanity, the Messiah had to die, and in order for him to die, he had to be human. In 2 John 2:17, when John identifies the antichrist as those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, he has the Docetists in mind.

One can imagine the confusion of a new Christian who witnessed a debate between these warring parties. All sides professed belief in Jesus, and all sides drew their arguments from available Scriptures. To those who could see little difference, and therefore could not choose a side, or to those who were ready to dismiss the debate as irrelevant, John’s letters would strike like a lightning bolt. The apostle, one of two brothers Jesus nicknamed “Sons of Thunder,” wasted no time in pleasantries or diplomacy. He proclaimed anyone who departed from the original teachings of the apostolic witness to be the antichrist, pure and simple. Having said this, however, John goes on to contrast those who are led by the spirit of the antichrist with those who are led by the spirit of the true Christ. The anointing of the Holy Spirit teaches those with genuine faith so that they are able to distinguish between what is true and what is false. All that is required is that

they remain in Christ. They are not instructed to wage a hostile campaign; the presence and power of Christ is sufficient to guard against the presence and power of deception. The church's task is to lift up the truth of Christ, and to continue to live and labor in love.

From John's letters we can gain important insight not only into the challenges facing the early church, but also the challenges the church today continues to face. We must understand that because we too are living in the last hour, we are also faced with this same force of deception. As it was in John's day, there are those who are in the church, yet are not of the church. Who is the antichrist today? It is any person or group claiming to follow Jesus but proclaiming a different Jesus than the one preached by the apostles. How can we accurately identify these persons, given the nearly endless doctrinal differences among various churches? It is the doctrine of the atonement that enables us to determine who is standing in the apostolic tradition, and who is not. The doctrine of the atonement is the understanding that Christ's primary work was to save the world from its sin, and that by dying on the cross, he is able to offer grace and reconciliation to all those who would receive his free gift. The church may differ on many points, but it can never differ on this one. Any person or group that teaches that Jesus' primary work was something other than what he accomplished on the cross place themselves in direct opposition to the apostles. Additionally, any person or group that adds to the apostles' essential teaching, saying that one must not only accept Jesus as Lord in order to be saved, but also believe some additional doctrine or perform some extra duty, likewise distort the message of salvation. As it was in John's day, the spirit of the antichrist is still at work. How should the church relate to such persons or groups? It must do exactly as John instructs.

In the fourth chapter of his first letter, after giving to the church the responsibility of identifying false teachers, John begins to speak of the excellency of love. If God has loved us, so we must love each other. The church to which John is writing had been subject to terrible discord and strife. John reminds them that there is no place for hatred within the church of Jesus Christ. Whoever abides in love is shown to be abiding in God. It is therefore not through debate that the ultimate victory is won, but it is through love that the true children of God are revealed. Thus the presence of opposition within the church becomes an opportunity. Not only through it can believers become more like Christ, suffering yet loving, but also through their actions the love of Christ himself can be made manifest even to those who oppose him. This is perhaps why, in the circumstance to which John refers, those who had propagated lies finally left. With a brief letter from the apostle, clarifying what had happened and providing words of encouragement to those who remained downhearted, the church was able to return to its appointed mission, calling all persons to experience the love of God through Jesus Christ.

An Important Conclusion

In each of these forms of opposition, we see the work of Satan as he attempts to counter the expansion of the Kingdom of God. In fact, just as the redemptive work of God is Trinitarian, the Father establishing a kingdom, the Son redeeming humanity, and the Spirit giving new life, so the work of Satan to counter the work of God is likewise threefold. As God the Father establishes a spiritual kingdom that extends throughout the world making many people his sons and daughters, so Satan works through worldly empires to bring people under his own rule and dominion. As the Son redeems humanity by his sacrificial offering, making it possible for mankind to be delivered from the captivity of sin, so false messiahs distort the message of salvation claiming that the true deliverance is of another character. As the Spirit of Truth moves among the church bringing spiritual enlightenment and unity to the body, so the spirit of the antichrist moves among the church bringing confusion and creating division. Everything God does, Satan mocks. Satan's power, therefore, is not to create, but to pervert. Because we are living in the last days, and the work of God has not changed, we must recognize that neither do the tactics of Satan. Throughout history, and even to the present day, we see evil political powers bent on the church's destruction, false prophets who offer a false deliverance, and a spirit of deception within the church that brings confusion and creates division. Essentially, nothing has changed.

The reason it is important for the church to understand this is that the church must be prepared to respond to opposition in whatever form it presents itself. Should we, for example, become so engrossed in imagining our future that we forget to keep our eyes on the present, we could very easily fail to see the present form of opposition employed by Satan against us. Having failed to see it, we would likewise fail to effectively respond to it. We might fail to acknowledge the political oppression of our brothers and sisters in other lands and consequently fail to come to their aid. We might ignore the work of some false prophet leading many astray. We might neglect to address a very real and present spirit of false teaching spreading through the church like cancer. By our ignorance, we might fail to do the work of Christ. Jesus calls us to live with our eyes wide open, to understand the times in which we live so that we can effectively serve him. He calls us not to live by a spirit of fear and anxiety about what our circumstances might be, but to live with confidence and respond with boldness to what our circumstances indeed are. It is for this very reason he has equipped us with his Word; that we might press on in the face of whatever opposition we encounter, and continue to participate in the work of his ever-expanding kingdom, the Lord himself being our helper.

Chapter Seven The Book of Revelation

Introduction

The Book of Revelation is a gift to the church. It is the means by which we are able to understand our lives within the full scope of God's history. It enables us to live victoriously in these last days with the faith that God is with us, and that the eternal kingdom of which we will be a part is glorious beyond all earthly understanding. Through this understanding of Revelation's visions, we can find a courage and hope we could not have without the gift of this remarkable book. Yet a full understanding of Revelation's visions is not easily achieved. This is an extremely difficult book to interpret for a number of reasons. First of all, one of its most unique characteristics is that the entire book, save its brief prologue, is an accounting of visions. No other book of the Bible, including the Book of Daniel, presents visions with such exclusivity. The interpretation of visions is much like the telling of dreams. The person who has the dream may understand its meaning perfectly, but the person who is told the dream will have a much harder time appreciating it. Something is lost in translation. So it is with the telling of visions. Someone once said that trying to explain the book of Revelation is like trying to nail jell-o to the wall. Its visionary qualities do not adapt well to a structured systematic analysis.

Another difficulty lies in the fact that Revelation lacks a corresponding historical narrative by which the visions of the book might be more easily interpreted. Even when an angel explains to John what he is seeing, the explanation itself needs to be interpreted. This is due to the politically volatile climate in which the book was written and the fact that John writes it from the prison island of Patmos. If the visions were to be explained explicitly, John might face retribution. Thus even the few editorial comments John himself offers to us, such as the statement instructing us to calculate the number of the beast, are written in code.

A further difficulty has to do with our limited capacity to interpret visions of such length. Because the visions of Revelation are so long, we can easily get lost in them. Even though we might begin with the intention to interpret symbols symbolically, the deeper we read into the book, the more easily we can succumb to our natural tendency to interpret writings literally. We have to keep reminding ourselves that most everything of which we read is symbolic of realities in the natural world. For these and other reasons, this is an extremely difficult and complex book to interpret correctly. To do so, we are going to need some help.

Keys to Interpretation

There are a number of keys that will help us unlock Revelation's true meaning. They are outlined as follows:

1. Prepare a sufficient foundation.

Revelation holds an important place in the Bible's larger eschatological scheme. Note, however, that it holds an important place, not the central place. Revelation has an important story to tell, but it tells it upon the platform of a greater eschatological framework that already existed through the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostles. Because Revelation is chronologically the last book of the Bible, our study of former writings is fundamental to a correct interpretation of this later work. The people who first read Revelation already had an understanding of the last days born out of the dissemination of apostles teaching and the circulation of their writings. Thus when John wrote Revelation, he did so in awareness of what the church already knew. Therefore, the work we have done in attempt to reconstruct what must have been the church's earlier understanding enables us to more faithfully and accurately interpret this later work.

2. Identify its initial recipients

Although the Bible was written for all believers throughout the ages, each letter or book of the Bible was written to a specific audience and addresses specific circumstances. The Book of Revelation was written primarily to seven churches in Asia Minor regarding an approaching dilemma. In the first verse of the first chapter, John states that the visions regard "what must soon take place," and in his salutation, specifically addresses the letter to these seven churches. Although John must have known his writings would have been circulated to other Christian communities, as was customary with the writings of the apostles, his primary purpose is to be obedient to Christ by providing the believers in the province of Asia with specific instructions regarding their immediate circumstances. The book's primary purpose, therefore, was to equip these believers. What this means is that we must first uncover the circumstances of these believer's lives before we can ever hope to accurately interpret this book for our day.

3. Correctly date the book.

In order to understand the sociopolitical context in which Revelation was written, we must first date the book. The means for doing this are contained in the text itself. In the 17th chapter there is a vision that concerns the Roman Empire. In it John saw a woman on a scarlet beast that was drunk with the blood of the saints. He also saw that the beast had seven heads and ten horns. The angel who is with John gave the following explanation:

“The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.” (Revelation 17:9-11)

The city of Rome rests on seven hills. The empire of Rome was divided into ten provinces, each ruled by a governor who answered directly to the emperor. At the time Revelation was written, five Roman emperors had died: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Nero died on July 9 of 68 AD, so Revelation must have been written after this date. After he died, there was a quick succession of persons who attempted to maintain the throne but failed, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. It is most probable that the reign of these emperors, which lasted months and not years, would be excluded from Revelation’s chronology of kings. The next successful emperor after Nero was Vespasian, the Roman general who by order of Nero had begun a campaign against the Jews. From the text itself, it is most likely that this is the emperor reigning at the time John saw his visions. The one who is yet to come, but will remain only a little while, would then be his son Titus, who reigned but two years. The eighth king, who is represented as a beast, is therefore most certainly the emperor Domitian, who was the first to persecute the church throughout the entire empire. Thus this vision provides us with the information we need not only to understand the climate of political hostility in which Revelation was written, but also the essential purpose of the book.

4. Understand the political context in which the book is written.

The first persecution of Christians by Rome was under Nero. When Rome burned in 64 AD, its citizens blamed the emperor, who had lamented its poorer sections and had made plans to reconstruct a new palace in one of its sectors. To shift attention from himself, Nero blamed the Christians, who were looked upon with suspicion as members of a new and secret cult. Horrible as Nero’s persecution was, it was essentially localized to the city and surrounding countryside. It was also relatively brief, lasting only a period of three and a half years. As we delve deeper into Revelation’s visions, it will be necessary for us to explore in greater detail this first wave of persecution. After Nero died, however, the persecution against Christians was more or less relaxed until the reign of Domitian. Domitian’s attempt to revive the national religion brought to light the Christians’ refusal to worship any God but their own. Domitian saw the church as a threat to the unity and security of the Roman state, and enacted policies of persecution that would affect Christians throughout the empire. His determination to exterminate the church led even to the execution of his own cousin Titus Flavius Clemens, a high ranking official, and the banishment of Titus’ wife, Flavia Domitilla, the emperor’s own niece. The churches of Asia Minor were the first to face Domitian’s policy of empire-wide persecution and may have been subjected to its most extreme measures. The Book of

Revelation was written to prepare the believers in Asia for the persecution soon to befall them. Through the visions recounted in this book, God provided his people with the hope that although the powers of Rome might be turned against them, Christ would give them final victory, and Rome, the great persecutor of the Church, would inevitably fall. This is Revelation's most fundamental theme, and the foundation upon which all valid interpretation must rest.

5. Understand the nature of revelatory visions.

The next key to correctly interpret Revelation is to understand the nature of revelatory vision. There are two basic kinds of visionary experiences presented in the Bible, visions of spiritual parallel and visions of spiritual sign. As we understand how these forms were presented and interpreted in other biblical literature, we will better understand the visions of Revelation. The first type of visionary experience, visions of spiritual parallel, is an experience in which someone in the natural realm is enabled to see realities in the spiritual realm. The Bible presents to us the understanding that there is more to the world than what meets the physical eye; there is a realm of the Spirit that exists in the same time and space with the natural world, but cannot be perceived by human senses. This is the realm in which God and angels exist; it is also the realm in which Satan and demons exist. While many falsely believe that the abode of God is somewhere in the sky, the Hebrews understood that the abode of God was in their very midst. The temple itself was understood to be a reproduction of the temple in heaven that existed in the space and time as its earthly copy (see Hebrews 9:24). When they worshipped God in the temple, therefore, they believed that actual presence of God resided in the inner chamber of the Holy of Holies. Thus we can better understand the visionary experience of the prophet Isaiah, who going up into the temple in Jerusalem, saw the spiritual presence of God and angels instead of seeing its mere physical interior. It was through this experience he was called to serve as God's prophet (Isaiah 6). Other similar visionary experiences occurred when the veil that separated the spiritual world from the natural world was pulled aside, and human beings were given the capacity to see and hear the spiritual realities around them. When the servant of Elisha was fearful of the horses and chariots of the King of Aram that had surrounded the city, Elisha prayed that his eyes would be opened. The servant then saw the horses and chariots of God surrounding and protecting Elisha (2 Kings 6:8-17). When Ezekiel was sitting with the elders of Judah in Babylon, an angel appeared and took him by the hair to Jerusalem to see the city's corruption and hear of its coming destruction. He then was brought back to the elders in exile to give an account of what he saw. In each of these cases, the vision was of contemporary realities in the spiritual realm.

The second type of visionary experience is a vision of spiritual sign. The person who is shown the sign is typically dreaming or else is drawn into the realm of the spirit in order to see it. The sign is a symbol of something that exists in the natural world or of an event that is soon to happen. The prophet Ezekiel was taken by the Spirit to a valley full of dry

bones. As he watched, flesh came upon them and they stood up alive, a vast army. Ezekiel was then told that these bones were the house of Israel, and that even though they were saying that their hope was gone, God would bring them back to their land (Ezekiel 37). The prophet Daniel was dreaming when he saw a vision of four great beasts and was told that these beasts represented four great kingdoms that will rise. Even though the last beast waged war against the saints of God, Daniel was told that its doom would be sure (Daniel 7). Peter was on his rooftop when he saw a vision of unclean animals let down from heaven in a sheet. Three times he was told to take and eat, and each time he protested. Finally a voice from heaven told him not to call unclean what God had made clean. Just then, some men from the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius came to the doors asking for Peter (Acts 10:9-18). In visions such as these, the persons or objects seen in the vision are not 'real,' any more than the objects or persons we see in dreams are real. They are merely symbols of things that exist in the natural world. The purpose of these visions is to provide the people of God with an understanding of the meaning and purpose of the events in history. God offers them so that his people can respond to their circumstances in accordance with his will. The visions of Revelation are both visions of spiritual parallel and of spiritual sign. Our correct interpretation will depend upon our ability to understand the nature of each vision.

6. Examine the literary structure of the book.

The last key to a correct interpretation of Revelation is an understanding of its literary structure. Contrary to what most people assume, Revelation is not a series of chronological visions that paint a single and succinct picture of the events of the last days from start to finish, but is instead a series of five distinct sets of visions that are in some ways connected but are not necessarily chronological. These five sets of visions are separated by linguistic cues given to us by the author at the beginning of each set. They are as follows:

"On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet." (Revelation 1:10)

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

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head." (Revelation 12:1)

"I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues--last, because with them God's wrath is completed." (Revelation 15:1)

“One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.” Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.” (Revelation 17:1)

Each of these statements precedes an independent set of visions. Some of the visions in each set may be presented chronologically, but the sets themselves are not necessarily chronological in relation to each other. Thus, given the above verses of introduction, the basic structure of the book runs something like this: “First, I was in the Spirit, and I saw and I saw and I saw. Then I was brought up to heaven, and I saw and I saw and I saw. Then a great sign appeared, and I saw and I saw and I saw. Then another sign appeared, and I saw and I saw and I saw. Finally, I was brought into the desert, and I saw and I saw and I saw.” Within each of these sets lies at least one interpretive clue, such as that of the five fallen kings, which enables us to understand the other elements of the related visions within each set. The trick to interpreting Revelation, therefore, is to identify each individual set, as we have already done, and then locate the interpretive clues within each one. Once we have located and correctly interpreted these clues, the related elements can be interpreted according to what we already understand. This work is tedious and time-consuming, but once we understand this process, the interpretation of the book is simply a matter of patience and determination.

7. Be willing to accept probable conclusions.

In the study of the Bible, there are passages that are easily interpreted and clearly understood, and there are other passages that are difficult to interpret and not so clearly understood. Nearly all of Revelation fits into this latter category. The obscure passages of Revelation can indeed be interpreted, but our interpretations must be prefaced with a statement to the effect that this is what we believe the text most probably means, yet we can't be 100% sure. To interpret Revelation faithfully, we are going to have to get used to the idea of probability. Otherwise, an interpretation of the book as a whole will be impossible. Yet when we go forth with the idea that there will be certain passages whose meaning will escape us, we will nonetheless find that much of the book, both its large sweeping movements as well as specific details, are indeed quite comprehensible.

Synopsis of Later Conclusions

This use of these interpretive keys will unlock many doors and lead us to conclusions we would otherwise not be able to make. Were we, for example, merely to make our best guess at the meaning of each vision, we would no more hit the target of truth than if we

were to shoot an arrow in the dark. Because the use of this kind of interpretive methodology is novel to so many people, I thought it best to provide a brief synopsis of the conclusions this methodology will lead us to in hopes that you the reader will appreciate the ride a little more if you know where we are headed. As you read over the statements, it will be easy to see how drastically different the conclusions of this systematic and historic approach are from the conclusions of much of modern interpretation.

- The primary concern of Revelation is not the end of the world, but a crisis that was pending at the time of its writing. This is why the book was written primarily to the seven churches of the province of Asia. The visions of the end of the world are offered to give hope to those who would face this crisis.
- The breaking of the seals on the scroll of chapter six relate to events that began to unfold at the ascension of Christ and continue throughout the last days of which we are a part.
- The Great Tribulation is the conflict between the expansion of the Kingdom of God and the resisting Kingdom of the World. The worldwide persecution of Christians under the reign of Domitian, typifies the Great Tribulation on a much smaller scale.
- The first great beast is Rome, and the second beast is the emperor Domitian.
- The number 666 is part of John's editorial comment whereby we can confirm the previous interpretation by a simple calculation.
- The mark of the beast is a spiritual mark placed on those who are compelled to worship roman deities under Domitian's policy of persecution.
- The 144,000 saints are those who refused the mark of the beast and were put to death, yet brought to life again and now reign with Christ.
- The two witnesses, who uttered prophecies, were put to death, came alive again, and ascended into heaven, are most probably Peter and Paul.
- The bowls of wrath refer to the wrath of God poured out against the city and empire of Rome, which would ultimately be destroyed.
- The millennium is the reign of the saints of God and the expansion of the Kingdom of God after the fall of Rome.

- The New Jerusalem is the final dwelling place of the people of God and is contrasted with the evil city and empire of Rome.
- All of this was written to give the Christians who would endure Domitian's policy of persecution the hope that God had not abandoned them, but was enabling them to bear witness to the truth for the glory of the Kingdom of God. These believers are comforted with the knowledge that God would ultimately bring the church to victory and Rome to destruction.
- The book is written to us secondarily because we are also living in the last days and can endure similar persecutions. Yet the time of the return of Jesus Christ is unknown and cannot be predicted, as set forth by Christ's own teachings. The Book of Revelation was never intended as a means of doing so.

These are some of the general conclusions a systematic and historical approach will yield. The arguments that support them are not only convincing, but fascinating as well. It is only by employing a correct method of interpretation that we can ascertain the spiritual truths Revelation was written to convey, and only by doing this can we glean from it valuable spiritual resources to be used in application to the age in which we live.

The Vision of Christ and the Letters to the Churches

(Revelation 1:10-3:21)

John begins the account of his first vision by explaining that on the Lord's Day he was "in the Spirit" (1:10). This is to say that he was in the state of existence that enabled him to become aware of spiritual realities. It is not specified whether John is bodily assumed into the realm of the spirit or that he is merely able to perceive spiritual realities with his physical senses. It is apparently the case that at times even the one having the experience does not know (see 2 Corinthians 12:3). When John heard a voice behind him and turned around, he saw Jesus in his glorified appearance. Around Christ were seven golden lampstands, and in his hands were seven stars. John was told that the seven lampstands are the seven churches in the province of Asia, and that the seven stars are seven angels of the churches (1:20). Hence at the outset we are provided with the essential interpretive methodology by Christ himself. We have entered the realm of the spirit and are about to be shown visions of spiritual sign. We are also given a taste of how difficult the subsequent visions will be to interpret. Had Christ not given the explanation that the lampstands are the churches and the stars are the angels of the churches, we would have never been able to come to such a conclusion ourselves. As John remains in the realm of the spirit throughout the entire narrative of Revelation, the signs he sees will relate to the

immediate circumstances of these seven churches. Our job is to interpret these visions accordingly.

The letters given to the seven churches of Asia provide us with a good picture of the challenges the early church faced. Contrary to what some Christians today assume, the early church was far from idyllic. In most of these letters Jesus commends the churches for what they have done well, but then points clearly to their failures and calls them to repent. A brief synopsis of the seven letters is as follows:

1. Ephesus is commended for enduring hardship and recognizing false apostles, but is chastised for having forsaken its first love.
2. Smyrna has endured slander and afflictions, yet is about to suffer even greater persecution. Some will be imprisoned and others will be put to death.
3. Pergamum remained faithful even though one of its members was martyred; yet it allowed sexual immorality and idolatry among its members.
4. Thyatira continued to grow in faith and service, but it also allowed sexual immorality and idolatry by tolerating the teachings of a false prophetess.
5. Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but was spiritually dead.
6. Philadelphia was the only church that fully kept the word of God, and therefore would be kept from the coming trial.
7. Laodicea, in its wealth, had become lukewarm and was in danger of being thoroughly rejected by Christ.

It must have been hard for each of these churches to hear Jesus' words, and embarrassing for their failings to have been so widely publicized, yet Jesus ends his letters with words of encouragement for all:

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (3:19-22).

This last statement, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," is for the general church in all places and times. Although this letter is written primary to the seven churches of the province of Asia, they were also written for the

whole church to see. These letters are therefore a blessing to us because they provide us an understanding of the character of Christ as he relates to his church in the last days. Through them we can gain a clear sense not only of what Jesus requires of individuals, but how he relates to bodies of believers. In the letter to Ephesus we see that Christ walks among the churches in spite of their struggles and failures, and that he is acutely concerned with their spiritual life. In the letters to Sardis and Laodicea we find that Christ requires those who follow him to be zealous, and even the presence of sexual immorality or idolatry do not prompt so severe a condemnation as the offense of having become lukewarm. We also see that Jesus holds a great reward for those who persevere and are faithful. To those in Smyrna he said, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10b). To the church in Thyatira he said, “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations” (2:26). In each of these seven letters the phrase “to him who overcomes” precedes the reward for faithfulness.

Yet there is something more in these letters than Christ’s admonishment to be holy and faithful. In the letter to the church in Philadelphia we find a statement that reveals the plan of Christ concerning all of the churches throughout the world at this time. In commending the Philadelphians for their faithfulness Jesus said, “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” (3:10). Jesus therefore has in mind the intention to test the faithfulness of every believer on earth. He will do this through a trial of worldwide proportions, yet of limited duration. The purpose of Revelation is encapsulated in this single verse. Jesus is preparing the churches of Asia, which would be the first to face this test, by providing them with the spiritual insight they would need to pass through victorious. As we progress in our study of Revelation’s visions, we will see the nature of this time of trial, and even gain specific details as to the exact form of the test.

The Vision of the Throne Room, the Breaking of the Seals, and the Trumpets of Wrath.

(Revelation 4:1-11:19)

This first major set of visions begins with the Apostle John being called up into heaven to behold the throne of God. The whole of chapter four describes the awesome beauty and splendor of the glory of God. Chapter five concerns the scroll of God and the worthiness of the Lamb that was slain to break its seals and look inside. Before the Lamb appears, John wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll. As the Lamb appears, all heaven rejoices and sings of his worthiness. He is worthy because he has purchased men for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation, and made them to be a kingdom

to serve God as they reign on earth (5:9-10). Notice in this vision the fluidity of time in visionary experiences. John saw Jesus ascend into heaven years ago. Here he sees Jesus arrive. Chapter six then begins with the breaking of the seals on the scroll that is most probably the Book of Life which contains the names of all those who will inherit salvation. Two related passages bring us to this conclusion. When the seventy-two disciples returned from their commissioned work, they rejoiced in all the things there were able to accomplish in Jesus' name. Jesus responded, "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Also, later in Revelation we see a book finally being opened by Christ which is the Book of Life (Revelation 20:12). The first seal on this book, therefore, is broken upon Christ's ascension into heaven, and the last seal is broken immediately before the wrath of God is poured out upon the earth in judgment.

There is a remarkable correlation between the breaking of these seals and the events of the last days as summarized by Jesus in his Olivet Discourse. This similarity is the key to interpreting this set of visions. Observe this comparison as it is listed below:

The first seal: a rider on a white horse is given a crown and goes forth to conquer. (6:1-2)

"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed." (Matthew 24:6)

The second seal: a rider on a red horse is given power to take peace from the earth. (6:3-4)

(Also Matthew 24:6)

The third seal: a rider on a black horse is given the power of creating famine. (6:5-6)

"There will be famines and earthquakes in various places." (Matthew 24:7b)

The fourth seal: a rider on a pale horse brings death through the sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts. (6:7-8)

As above, Jesus mentions the coming of wars, famine, and natural disasters.

The fifth seal: the souls of the martyrs are seen beneath the altar. (6:9-11)

"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." (Matthew 24:9)

The sixth seal: astronomical signs precede the coming Day of the Lord, and the peoples of the earth mourn. (6:12-17)

"Immediately after the distress of those days, the sun will be darkened, And the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky,

and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. (Matthew 24:29-30a)

The seventh seal: the wrath of God is poured out upon the earth after the saints are taken into Glory.

The parables of Jesus in Matthew 25 concern the coming judgment of God upon those who do not prepare themselves for his coming.

This parallel between the breaking of the seals and Jesus' prophecy in the Olivet Discourse helps us interpret the vision correctly. They concern the same events, focus on the same period of time, and in fact, share a similar purpose. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus gave a summary of the last days in response to the disciples' false expectation that the end of the age was at hand. Jesus explained that while the Kingdom of God would indeed be established, the end of the age would be delayed. It was in this period his followers would face great challenges. Jesus outlined these challenges to equip his disciples to live victoriously. In the breaking of the seals, we see Jesus' same predictions in symbolic form. The breaking of the seals is offered to prepare the church to face a coming persecution that would challenge believers throughout the world. Many would lose their lives. Yet this vision, especially the vision of the martyred souls beneath the altar, would give them the assurance that their death was not in vain. In fact, by being faithful to God even unto death, they would earn a place of greatest honor.

The breaking of the first four seals reveals four riders on different colored horses, commonly referred to as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The origin of these images is the sixth chapter of the Book of Zechariah where we see similarly colored horses, red, black, white, and dappled, sent by God to the four corners of the earth (Zechariah 6:1-8). The vision in Zechariah relates to the main purpose of that book, that is, to communicate to God's people that he would call them forth from exile and bring judgment against the nation who had held them captive. In Revelation, the use of these same horses reveals the same or similar meaning. God's people are held captive by a pagan empire; in this case Rome, yet God will call his people out of captivity while pouring out judgment against the nation that oppresses them.

A brief overview of these horsemen from the perspective of the first century is in order. The rider on the white horse wears a crown and carries a bow. The crown represents a monarchy and the bow represents the chief means of doing battle. This rider therefore represents the Parthians who rode into battle on white horses and were the most famous bowmen in the world. The Romans feared the Parthians, and in 62 AD suffered defeat when the Roman army surrendered to them after an unprecedented military loss. This sent a shiver throughout the empire that Rome, the greatest cultural and military power

the world had ever seen, was not immune to defeat. It is significant that this event is represented in the breaking of the first seal, which means that it is only a foretaste of the calamities yet to fall. The second rider, a rider on a red horse, is given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. About the same time that the Romans were struggling with the Parthians, the empire showed signs of internal distress. In 61 AD a rebellion arose in Britain, and around 150,000 died as Rome attempted to regain its power. In 67 AD, war broke out between Rome and the Jewish nation. Nero died in the midst of this war, bringing the Julio-Claudian line to an end. The three subsequent political figures who attempted to take the throne died in the attempt. With the lack of internal order, there was much unrest. The empire looked to Vespian, who was not a politician but a Roman general in charge of the Jewish war, to return and stabilize the empire with the command of the Roman legions. The third rider on the black horse is the bringer of famine, which is the result of war. During Nero's reign, there were great famines that plagued the empire, yet the Emperor cared little for the suffering of the masses, and continued to indulge his appetite for luxuries. Once, a heavily laden ship from Egypt arrived in an Italian port. A riot ensued when the starving masses discovered that the ship did not contain grain, but sand for the floor of the Coliseum. This is the meaning of the phrase, "but do not damage the oil and the wine" (6:6). The poor would starve while the rich continued to indulge in luxury. The last rider on the pale horse brings death through the sword, famine, plague, and the wild beasts. These four judgments are the judgments of God against a disobedient nation as specified in Ezekiel 14:21. The truth communicated by the coming of these four is that God has poured out none of these judgments without cause or intentional forethought (See Ezekiel 14:23).

The opening of the fifth seal reveals the souls of the martyrs beneath the altar. They cry out, "How long!" and are told that they must wait a little while longer until the number of those who would be killed as they had was completed (6:11). There were two waves of persecution during this period of history, and Revelation was written between them. First was the Neronian persecution, which lasted 3½ years and was focused on the region of the city of Rome. Yet to come was the persecution under Domitian, which reached throughout the empire. The opening of the fifth seal assures those who had lost loved ones, and those who would yet face persecution, that God had not abandoned them, but that the number of those who would be martyred had been set. When this number was completed, God would unleash his wrath against the great power that had persecuted his saints.

The opening of the sixth seal begins the judgment of God. The astronomical signs are the same ones spoken of by Isaiah in an oracle against Babylon, "The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light" (Isaiah 13:10). In Isaiah, these signs show that the wrath and judgment of God against Babylon will be full and complete. Likewise the same

meaning is found in Revelation, which is later referred to as a spiritual Babylon (see Revelation 14:8, 16:19, 17:5, 18:2,10,21).

After the opening of the sixth seal, the servants of God are marked on the forehead. This marking follows the pattern of God's judgment found in Ezekiel 9:3-6, where as God was about to judge Jerusalem for its evils, he instructed an angel to put a mark on the forehead of those who fear God and kept his commandments. The angel did this, and those who were given this mark were kept from being destroyed. In Revelation, the same thing is done, and the number of the faithful is 144,000.

After this, and still part of the sixth seal, John saw a multitude that came through the great tribulation and who were the recipients of eternal life and all of its blessings. What is this great tribulation? It is the tribulation of the last days from start to finish, the tribulation of which we are all a part. Note that the multitude of those in white robes holding palm branches are those from every nation, tribe, and people. Note also that this is a number that no one can count, in contrast to the 144,000 who were sealed to be brought through a lesser tribulation. We find in verses 16 and 17 language that refers to the final place of glory. “

“Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:16-17)

From what we have examined so far, we can see how much the visions of Revelation draw from the images of former scriptures. The four horsemen, the judgments of sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts, the astronomical signs, and the marking of the foreheads of the saints have all been part of previous judgments in the Old Testament. From this, the recipients of John's letters would have known that God was about to pass sentence on the empire of which they were a part, an empire that had already begun to persecute the saints of God and would do so again in the near future, an empire known for its immoralities and idolatries, an empire that would surely fall under the judgment of a righteous and holy God.

With the breaking of the seventh seal, the judgment of God is anticipated. There is silence in heaven for about half an hour, as heaven and earth prepare themselves for the coming wrath. We then see seven angels with seven trumpets of wrath, and the devastation that follows the sounding of each one. It would be impossible for us to predict the exact nature of the events symbolized by the blowing of the seven trumpets, but most likely some of them have to do with astronomical events. It is important for us to remember that the visions John sees are signs that relate to events in the natural world primarily in meaning, and not necessarily in form. What we can say with certainty is that the events symbolized by the blowing of the seven trumpets occur after the return of

Jesus Christ and the assumption of believers into heaven, and are part of the terrible wrath of God that is reserved for those who refuse to honor the Son. The blowing of each trumpet wreaks havoc on the earth, and the great irony is that even though the human beings who are the object of God's wrath recognize the judgment of God, they still refuse to repent (Revelation 9:21).

Between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpet there is an important interlude which runs from Revelation 10:1-11:13. In this passage, John saw an angel coming from heaven that had an open scroll in his hands. When the angel spoke, seven thunders spoke, but John was not permitted to write what the seven thunders said. John is told to take the scroll and eat it, and then is given the instruction that he must prophesy about many peoples, nations, languages, and kings. John is then told to measure the temple and count its worshipers, but not to measure the court of the Gentiles, because it will be trampled upon for three and one half years. John is then told about the two witnesses, and how they will also prophesy for three and one half years before being executed. The inhabitants of the earth will rejoice in their death, and put their bodies on display, but then the witnesses came to life again, and were taken up into heaven. After this, a great earthquake struck the city, and it collapsed, killing seven thousand. The survivors gave glory to God.

This passage is one of the most perplexing of all the visions in Revelation. We arrive at the most probable interpretation as we imagine ourselves as Revelation's initial recipients, and think about what these images would mean to the people who first received them. It is important to note that the information John receives is not necessarily part of the blowing of the trumpets, and may therefore be considered apart from their chronological order. The trampling of the outer court of the temple might very well correspond to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, an event that would have left an indelible mark on the minds of Christians across the known world. Second, the two witnesses who prophesied in the great city may very well be Peter and Paul. At the time Revelation was written, the church had endured its first wave of persecution by the hands of the Roman Empire. Having blamed the Christians for the great fire of Rome, Nero put to death many Christian leaders. Peter and Paul were both martyred under Nero in the city of Rome, and the church must have been devastated by the loss of its two greatest leaders. In this passage, we once again see the beast. It is the beast who kills the prophets, giving credibility to the interpretation that these figures are indeed Peter and Paul. Those who sought to destroy the church would have certainly rejoiced at the execution of the church's two greatest leaders, and would have concluded that this new religion would certainly be doomed because of their loss. The vision of the resurrection of these two great prophets and their assumption into heaven would have given the church assurance that God was still in control.

Once this interlude is over, John's attention is turned once again to the blowing of the trumpets of God's wrath. Two of the last three, which are trumpets of woe, have been

blown, and only one remains. The seventh angel blows his trumpet and there is rejoicing in heaven. Here we find the verse that is the subject of the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's Messiah, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). The twenty-four elders whom John saw seated on thrones at the beginning of this vision in Revelation 4:4 are seen once again as the vision closes. They fall on their faces and worship God, declaring that the time had come for judging the dead. The vision then ends with the temple of God being opened, and the Holy of Holies with the ark of the covenant in its midst, laid bare for all to see.

The significance of this first great vision, which runs from the beginning of the fourth chapter to the end of the eleventh, is that it provides the Christian believers with view of the last days from heaven's perspective. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus laid out the general course of the events of the last days for his disciples; here we see this same period of history described in symbolic terms from heaven's point of view. The vision confirmed what the church already knew about the days ahead, as well as provided spiritual meaning to specific historic events, such as the execution and resurrection of the two witnesses. With this first great vision providing an overview of the struggle of the church in the last days, the later visions of Revelation enable the church to correctly interpret specific events within that framework.

The Woman, Her Child, the Dragon, And the Great Beasts,

(Revelation 12:1-14:20)

Here we find visions of spiritual sign in a drama of a woman who gives birth and whose male child is pursued by a wrathful dragon. This vision sets the stage for what follows by providing an historical backdrop for the visions of the great beasts. The woman is clothed with the sun and has the moon under her feet. She wears a crown of twelve stars on her head, which undoubtedly represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The dragon has seven heads with seven crowns and ten horns. The heads and crowns are the Roman emperors to date, and the ten horns are the ten provinces of Rome ruled by ten governors. These symbols have important implications: they show the sanctity and holiness of the nation of Israel contrasted with the satanic dominion of the empire of Rome. Verse four shows the power the dragon wielded over a portion of the heavenly host, and it is from this verse that we suppose that one third of the angelic host fell along with Satan. We also see in this verse the dragon's attempt to destroy the Christ child at the time of his birth, and we cannot help but remember Herod's attempt to destroy Jesus by killing all the male children of Bethlehem. Verse 5 tells of Christ's birth and his ascension to God's throne. Verse 6 tells of the woman's refuge in the desert for 1260 days or three and one

half years. We can speculate the meaning of this refuge by considering the historic circumstances in which the letter was written. Two events come to mind. First, The Neronian persecution lasted three and a half years. Second, after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Christians followed Jesus' instruction in Matthew 24:15-16 by fleeing to the transjordan mountains. The early church established its headquarters in the mountain village of Pella. Whatever the refuge refers to, the woman is preserved from the Devil's schemes. Verses seven through twelve suggest that there was war in heaven at the time of Christ's death and resurrection. The dragon is hurled to the earth, and frustrated by his failures, finally turns his attention toward the followers of Christ, that he might make war against them.

The purpose of this vision is to provide the recipients of Revelation with a very general yet meaningful rationale for the persecution about to befall them. Satan, though defeated by God, rages against the people God loves. Having failed in his war against Christ, he makes war against those who hold the testimony of Christ. At the end of this visionary introduction, the dragon then stands by the shore of the sea out of which will come a great beast, the first instrument of the dragon's fury against the people of God.

The keys to unlocking the meaning of the first great beast of Revelation 13:1-8 are first its ten horns and seven heads. As stated before, Rome was divided into ten provinces ruled by ten governors. The seven heads would represent its seven emperors. The second key is the beast's resemblance to a leopard, a bear, and a lion. In the seventh chapter of Daniel, these same beasts are seen representative of the first world empires: Babylon, Media-Persia, and Greece respectively. Daniel then saw a fourth great beast unlike any he had ever seen before, a beast we now know to represent Rome. These icons of empires were as widely known and understood by the ancient Hebrews as the icons of the eagle, the bear, and the dragon were to the people of the world during the cold war, representing The United States, The Soviet Union, and China. The unique characteristic of the vision that John sees, however, is that all of these beasts that were seen by Daniel as representing distinct empires, are now seen as part of the same creature. The reason for this is that John is viewing them from the opposite side of history. The empire of Babylon was assimilated by Media-Persia, which was assimilated by Greece, which was assimilated by Rome. Thus the beast of Revelation 13:1-10 carries the characteristics of all of them.

In verse 3, the beast seems to have a fatal wound that was healed. Immediately after Nero's death, the emperorship faltered. There was a quick succession of emperors, each of whom reigned a short period of months, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Everyone who attempted to rule died. Without an emperor, Rome might once again become a republic, and so the empire seemed to be fatally wounded. Then Vespasian, the Roman general in charge of the Jewish war, was called into power by the public outcry for order. Vespasian was the only person who could hold the respect of both the military and the senate. Upon his return to Rome from Jerusalem, he quickly established order and successfully took the

throne. Thus, the fatal wound of one of the dragon's heads was healed. Revelation was written some time during the reign of Vespian, the emperor who healed the wound and reigned from 69-79 AD. In verse 5 we see that the beast had been given authority to wage war against the saints for 42 months, or for three and a half years. This undoubtedly refers to the Neronian persecution that lasted from 64 AD when Rome burned to July of 68 AD when Nero died.

666 and the Mark of the Beast

The vision in Revelation 13:11-18 of a second great beast, however, looks to the future. Its purpose is to communicate to the Christians of John's day that there is soon to come another great persecution very much like that which took place under Nero. The second beast exercises the authority of the first beast, which is Rome, so we can assume this to be one of the Roman emperors. He orders an image of the first beast to be set up for all to worship or else be killed. He orders everyone, both great and small to receive a mark on his forehead or hand, without which they can neither buy nor sell. The number of this beast is 666 (or in some early manuscripts, this number is 616). The mark of the beast and the number of the beast have been the subject of much modern speculation, yet there are very simple and compelling historic explanations for both. Let's begin with the easier of the two, the number of the beast.

In the written language of ancient cultures, there were no numerals to express numeric value. Instead, the letters of the alphabet were assigned values. In such systems, the first letter of the alphabet was assigned the value of one, and then the following letters were assigned the next value up to ten. The eleventh letter was assigned the value of twenty, and then the following letters were assigned values in increments of ten up to one hundred. The letter after one hundred was given the value of two hundred, and so one until the end of the alphabet. Systems such as this made it possible for words, and especially names, to be assigned numeric value based upon their spelling. Thus when John asks his readers to calculate the number of the beast, he is not asking them to do something of which they were unfamiliar; they were well accustomed to this practice. It is also important to note that the instruction to calculate the number of the beast is not part of the vision John sees. It is John's own editorial comment by which he expects his readers to take a guess as to the beast's true identity, and then validate their assumption by calculating the number of his name. John expects his readers will be easily able to do this, and therefore, the identity of the beast must be a figure contemporary with John's writing.

If we begin with the assumption that the beast is Nero, as the Christians of John's day most certainly would have, then we ought to be able to find validation of our theory by calculating the number of his name as John instructs. In Greek, the name of Nero does not equal the number John gives, but in Hebrew, his official title "Neron Caesar" does. In

Hebrew, this name is written with the following letters: קסר נורנ - NRWN QSR -
Pronounced “Neron Kaiser.” The Hebrew numeric system is as follows:

80	pe	פ	9	tet	ט	1	aleph	א
90	sade	צ	10	yod	י	2	bet	ב
100	kop	ק	20	kap	כ	3	gimel	ג
200	resh	ר	30	lamed	ל	4	dalet	ד
300	shin	ש	40	mem	מ	5	he	ה
400	sin	ש	50	nun	נ	6	waw	ו
500	taw	ת	60	samek	ס	7	zayin	ז
			70	ayin	ע	8	het	ח

If we were to assign Hebrew numbers to Nero’s official title, we would do so as follows:

נ	nun	50	
ר	resh	200	
ו	waw	6	
50	nun	נ	
	100	kop	ק
	60	samek	ס
	<u>200</u>	<u>resh</u>	<u>ר</u>
Total		666	

In addition to this, the textual variant of 616 provides a further validation of this interpretation. In Latin, the last N in Nero’s name was dropped. If we were to drop the second nun, which has a value of 50, we would calculate Nero’s name with the value 616. This is the only explanation for the textual variant. From this we can come the most certain of conclusions that the first recipients of John’s letter believed the beast of his vision to be none other than Nero Caesar, the first emperor to persecute the church.

At the time of John’s writing, however, Nero had died, yet there was a rumor circulating among the Romans that Nero had not died, but had fled from Rome and would return sometime in the future. This rumor, widely spread, would compel the initial recipients of John’s letter to conclude that either Nero himself would return, or that some person like him would persecute the church once again as he did. A person like Nero did indeed take the throne. The emperor Domitian was cut from the same cloth as Nero. In fact, he was referred to by many as the baldheaded Nero. His official title in Greek was Autokrator Kaisar Dometianos Sebastos Germanikos, abbreviated A.KAI.ΔOMET.ΣEB.ΓE. These abbreviations are found on Roman coins at this time, and when added together number 666. From this we can see that this simple instruction given by John to calculate

the number of the beast, which is so mystifying to us without historical analysis, is actually quite simple from the perspective of the first century believer.

If the number of the beast provided those who read John's letter with the identity of the beast, the mark of the beast revealed the manner in which this Roman emperor would persecute the church. While the exact nature of this marking has in modern times been the subject of wild contemporary speculations (bar codes or computer chips inserted in people's hands and foreheads, for example), when we employ the simple rules of biblical interpretation, we will arrive at a much more credible and convincing conclusion. First, we must recognize that the marking of those who worship the beast in Revelation takes place in the realm of the spirit, and therefore must necessarily be interpreted symbolically, not literally. Second, a simple examination of other texts of the Bible reveals that this symbolic marking of individuals in the realm of the spirit is not unique to the Book of Revelation. In the ninth chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet Ezekiel saw a similar marking of individuals in regard to the fall of Jerusalem. An interpretation of this earlier text must therefore inform our interpretation of Revelation.

While sitting in his house with some of the exiled leaders of Judah, Ezekiel was translated into the realm of the spirit and transported to Jerusalem to see events that would immediately precede its downfall. As he stood before the temple, he saw the following vision:

Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it." As I listened, he said to the others, "Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion. Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple. Then he said to them, "Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go!" So they went out and began killing throughout the city. While they were killing and I was left alone, I fell facedown, crying out, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?" He answered me, "The sin of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of injustice. They say, 'The LORD has forsaken the land; the LORD does not see.' So I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done." Then the man in linen with the writing kit at his side brought back word, saying, "I have done as you commanded." (Ezekiel 9:3-11)

In this passage we see the marking of the forehead in the realm of the spirit. This same event, seen from the perspective of human history, is recorded in 2 Chronicles.

“The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged. God handed all of them over to Nebuchadnezzar. He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD’S temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. They set fire to God’s temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.” (2 Chronicles 36:15-21)

The vision of Ezekiel 9 and its known historic fulfillment provide us with a model from which we can correctly interpret Revelation 13. In Revelation, however, we see some unusual twists. Here Satan mocks God by imitating the marking of Ezekiel 9. Just as God marked those who belonged to him in his holy city Jerusalem and destroyed those who did not, so Satan marks those who belong to him in his unholy empire of Rome, and seeks to destroy those who follow God. Furthermore, unlike God’s marking, which was simply a marking of those who followed him, Satan attempts to compel those who belong to God to receive the mark of the beast, robbing back from God those who profess to follow him. In the mark of the beast, therefore, we see the character of God and Satan contrasted. God never seeks to compel or force anyone to follow him. He sees the only valuable service as that which is offered freely. Satan doesn’t think like this. He doesn’t care if service to him is offered freely or not, and will apply whatever force is necessary to compel obedience.

Another interesting addition in Revelation is the marking of the hand. Though seemingly minor, this addition provides us with the critical information necessary to correctly identify the historic fulfillment of Revelation’s vision. The emperor Domitian attempted to strengthen control of the empire by making refusal to worship the Roman deities a capital crime. It was well known that Christians refused to worship any God but their own, and so Domitian perceived the Christians as a threat to national security, somewhat akin to an American citizen’s refusal to say The Pledge of Allegiance. He introduced a policy of persecution against all who refused to worship Rome or the emperor, and Christians were brought before Governors in mass and put to death for refusal to curse

Christ and worship the gods of Rome. The manner of the test reveals the connection with the marking on the hand, which John takes special care to note. Those accused of being Christian were brought before a statue of one of the Roman gods. In front of the statue there was a little fire and a plate of incense. To worship the deity, one simply took a pinch of incense and threw it into the fire. Christians were therefore told that they had a choice: they could either perform this simple act and be free to go their way, or they could refuse and lose their lives. Often, torture and other unspeakable acts were added to compel Christians to worship. The Christian community recognized the worship of any God other than the one true God a denial of the faith and a forfeiting of one's own salvation. Any Christian, therefore, who took up a pinch of incense in his hand would have to look at his own hand and what it was about to do. In that moment he would recognize spiritual ramifications of his choice: he was about to receive the mark of the beast on his hand and forfeit his own soul. John's specific mention that the mark of the beast is also put on the hand would make this recognition inescapable.

Further validation of this historic interpretation is found in what would happen after one would worship. Official papers were produced for those who chose to worship the Roman gods that would authenticate their decision. For a certain period of Rome's history, no one without these papers could buy or sell, in fulfillment of Revelation 13:17, "so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name." Thus we see that the recording of the vision of the beast and his power to give people his mark is no misty philosophical metaphor. It is given as a specific instruction regarding a time of testing that was about to be enacted. For those who would be compelled to worship pagan deities on pains of death, there would be no question as to what was happening to them and the consequence of their decision. Eternal life or eternal death was being set before them.

In Chapter 14, the 144,000 who have the name of the Lamb and the name of their Heavenly Father written on their forehead are presumably those who have been brought through the time of testing and tribulation, and now stand and worship before the throne. They are the first fruits of the kingdom of God, and their purity is celebrated. They are described as being virgins, and no lie is found in their mouths. Their virginity is undoubtedly symbolic of their refusal to worship any God but Yahweh. It is contrasted with the sexual morality of the citizens of Babylon, symbolic of Rome. We can be confident that these 144,000 are those who refused to bow to Rome's unholy demands because it is part of the discourse regarding the image of the beast. Verse 9 of chapter 14 continues to drive the point home that only those who overcome this testing will inherit eternal life.

If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their

torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” (Revelation 14:9b-11)

Finally, this set of visions is closed with a vision of the coming judgment of God (14:14-20). Christ is seated on a cloud with a sharp sickle in his hand. An angel from the sanctuary of God bears the message that the time has come to harvest the earth, which Christ then does. A second angel with a sickle appears, and yet another angel bears the message that the time for the harvest of God’s wrath has come. The angel with the sickle harvests the earth, and those who are harvested this second time are thrown into “the great winepress of God’s wrath” (v.19). The result is utterly gruesome: blood flows out as high as the horse’s bridles up to 180 miles (v.20). The magnitude of this judgment serves to give perspective to the wrath of the beast against the saints of God. Yes, the beast’s wrath will be great, and many will die, but there is no comparison of his ruthlessness to the holy judgment of Almighty God. Christians who went to their death could take heart. Though they would endure physical death, they would be the celebrated first fruits of the earth, holding a place of honor in the eyes of the Lamb and their Heavenly Father. They would also realize that there was a greater and infinitely more dreadful judgment yet to fall against the enemies of God.

The Fourth Vision The Plagues of Wrath

(Revelation 15:1-16:17)

This fourth vision has to do with the wrath of God directed against those who have oppressed his saints. They are similar in character but to be distinguished from the trumpets of judgment in Revelation 8:2-11:19 which have to do with the final judgment of mankind. These plagues are poured out upon those who received the mark of the beast, while those who were victorious over the beast and the number of his name look on (15:2). These plagues, therefore, are a foretaste of the final judgment against all mankind at the end of the age. They are a judgment in similar character, but on a smaller scale.

As these plagues are poured out, further evidence is given that they concern the judgment against Rome and not the end of the world. Consider the following verses: In 16:2, the painful sores break out on those who have received the mark of the beast. In 16:4-6, the angel that pours out the third bowl declares that God is just in these judgments, and gives the rationale, “for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.” In 16:19, the outpouring of the seventh bowl splits the great city into three parts, and we are told that, “God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. The symbol of

Babylon has already been established as referring to Rome. Finally, in the beginning of the fifth vision, which begins in chapter 17, one of the angels who poured out one of the bowls takes John to see the punishment of the great prostitute, who is none other than the city and empire of Rome. Thus we are to understand that this outpouring of God's wrath is directed against the powers of Rome and those who received the mark of the beast. The purpose for this vision is to assure those who would face trial and lose their lives that God would repay their persecutors in far greater measure.

It is also important to note that the outpouring of the bowls of wrath is similar to the wrath of God displayed in the plagues that came upon Egypt. In both cases the people of God were subjected to persecution at the hands of a pagan king. In both cases there is the refusal of the persecutors to repent. In the plagues of Egypt, the pharaoh refused to repent and let the people go. In Revelation, the people receiving the bowls of wrath refused to repent of what they had done and glorify God (16:8,17). We also see similarities in the character of the bowls of wrath when compared with the plagues of Egypt. In the outpouring of the first and second bowl, the sea and rivers turn to blood, just as the Nile did with the first plague upon Egypt. In the outpouring of the fifth bowl the land is plunged into darkness, just as Egypt was in the ninth plague. With the outpouring of the sixth bowl, three of the evil spirits assume the shape of frogs, which was the second plague upon Egypt. With the outpouring of the seventh bowl, great hailstones fell from the sky, which was the seventh plague of Egypt. By these similarities, a great spiritual truth is communicated. The captivity and persecution of the Christians by Rome is of the same character as that of the captivity and persecution of the Israelites by Egypt. Therefore, as surely as God delivered his people from Egypt, he will also deliver the Christians from the power of Rome.

The Fifth Vision

The Punishment of the Prostitute, The Fall of Rome,
The Millennial Kingdom, The New Jerusalem.

(Revelation 17:1-22:5)

The Punishment of the Great Prostitute (Revelation 17:1-18)

This fifth vision serves the purpose of fully solidifying the idea that the main theme of Revelation is the conflict between the expanding Kingdom of God and the existing pagan kingdom of Rome. At the beginning of this chapter, one of the angels who had poured out one of the bowls of wrath takes John to see their effect. John was carried by the Spirit into the desert where he saw a woman on a scarlet beast that had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was drunk with the blood of the saints. John is given the interpretation of this vision by the angel that brought him. The seven heads are seven

hills upon which the woman sits (17:9). There are also seven kings, five have fallen, one is, and one who yet to come. Rome is a city that sits on seven hills. As indicated before, the seven kings are Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespian, and Titus. The eighth king, who is represented as a beast, is the emperor Domitian. The ten horns are the ten governors of the ten provinces of Rome who will carry out the edicts of persecution enacted by Domitian and persecute the church on his behalf. The woman is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth, which can only be Rome (17:18).

*The Destruction of Rome, the spiritual Babylon,
and the Rejoicing in Heaven of her Demise.
(Revelation 18:1-19:10)*

As John is given to know the identity of the prostitute, he now hears the proclamation of her fall. An angel comes down from heaven, and with a mighty voice declares her ruin. A voice from heaven also is heard, calling the people of God to come out of her. The voice describes the manner of her fall, which will be sudden and complete. “In one day her plagues will overtake her” (18:8). We have already seen these plagues in the outpouring of the bowls of wrath. An angel picks up a boulder and throws it into the sea, declaring that with the same force and violence the city will be cast down (18:21). The rejoicing of a great multitude is heard in heaven at the judgment of God who has avenged the blood of his servants (19:2).

*The White Rider and the Millennial Kingdom
(Revelation 19:11-20:10)*

John saw heaven opened and a rider on a white horse that led the armies of heaven, Christ in his glorified state. The beast and the false prophet are thrown into the lake of fire, and the kings of the earth and their armies are destroyed. An angel comes out of heaven with a great chain. Satan is bound for a thousand years to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore. After this, he will be set free for a short time. Those who did not receive the mark of the beast came to life to reign with Christ for this period of time, and this is referred to as the first resurrection.

This thousand-year period is referred to as the millennium, and has become the focus of much eschatological theory in modern times. Today, many people use this passage as a starting point for their study, defining themselves as premillennialist, postmillennialist, or amillennialist meaning respectively that they expect Christ to return before the millennium, after the millennium, or that we are now living in the midst of the millennium. The notion of the rapture developed out of the premillennialist view, that is, that there is a rapture of the saints after which the world goes on first in opposition to Christ through the influence of the antichrist. After the antichrist’s destruction, premillennialists expect the establishment of political order centered in Jerusalem which

they say will last a thousand years. Such a view ignores the interpretive rule that requires symbolic writings to be interpreted symbolically, as well as Christ's very words that his kingdom is not of this world, that is, it is not a sociopolitical order. In addition to this, the premillennialist-postmillennialist-amillennialist debate ignores the rule of interpretation that directs us to adopt the same emphasis on as the Scriptures do. Here is a single passage of Scripture with visionary qualities that has become the focal point of the church's eschatological dialogue, in seeming denial of the wealth of Scripture in the Gospels and epistles that concern the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught at length about the Kingdom of God, and our understanding of the nature of that kingdom ought to begin with his words, and not with a single symbolic passage in a book that is difficult to interpret. Yet although this single passage has been given a disproportionate amount of attention, it still holds an important place in our eschatological understanding and must be interpreted correctly.

The key to its interpretation is the simple recognition that this is a vision that must be interpreted symbolically. The phrase, "a thousand years" is used elsewhere to symbolize a period of time of great but unknown length (see Psalm 90:4, Ecclesiastes 6:6, 2 Peter 3:8). Set in its literary context we can see that the millennium is therefore the period of history after the fall of Rome in which the church was then free to expand without the persecution a worldwide empire bent on its destruction. Those who had died refusing to receive the mark of the beast come alive in this period and reign with Christ in Glory.

The vision then casts its eyes to the end of this time when Satan will be released to again deceive the nations (20:7). The nations rise up against the church in order to destroy it, but they themselves are destroyed by God. The devil will then be thrown into the lake of fire, which is the final place of judgment for the enemies of God. Could we be at this place in history when Satan is released once again? Perhaps. Throughout the world Christians are being martyred in unprecedented numbers. The respect shown the church in past generations has greatly deteriorated through the work of aggressive secularists. Yet we have to remember that the final Day of Judgment is hidden in the mind of God, and there is no sense in attempting to make any prediction of the time of Christ's return. The final deliverance of God will come as a complete surprise both to the enemies of God as well as his own people.

The Day of Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15)

In this brief passage we are shown a picture of the final Day of Judgment and the things that take place on that day. The earth and sky flee from the presence of God. The Book of Life is opened, having had its seals broken as we have seen earlier in Revelation. There are other books opened as well, which are presumably the books of each person's life, for each person is judged according to what they had done. The final place of judgment for those who failed or refused to follow God is the lake of fire, referred to as

the second death. Each person who lives before the return of Christ dies a physical death, yet the lake of fire is a second death where the soul is in torment forever and ever. Anyone whose name is not written in the Book of Life is cast into the fire.

The New Heavens and New Earth
(*Revelation 21:1-22:5*)

In these chapters John is shown the final abode of those who follow Christ, the New Jerusalem. The promises of God and Christ are here fulfilled. There is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (21:4). What is it about the order of this world that passes away? First of all, the order of our present religion will pass away. There is no temple in the city because God himself is among his people (21:22). Also, the physical order of the world will also pass away, for we find that this new order transcends the physics of our present natural world. There is no need for the sun or moon, for the glory of the Lord lights the city (21:23). Further, we find that access to the tree of life is finally restored to humanity (22:2). In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden to prevent them from eating of the tree and living forever in a fallen state. Here, redeemed humanity is given access to the tree of life so that they might live forever. One of the Bible's most fundamental themes, access to the tree of life, is herein fulfilled. Finally, the curse that was rendered not only upon all of humanity, but all of creation, is lifted. In Genesis, mankind was cursed so that all people would return to the dust from which they were made, and the dust itself was cursed so that it would produce thorns and thistles. In the new creation, this curse is lifted, and the earth and mankind are together transformed into a glorified state. The last comment regarding this new creation harkens back to the conflict Revelation was written to address. In this new creation, the people of God will have God's name written on their forehead, and they will reign forever and ever (22:5).

Closing Remarks
(*Revelation 22:6-21*)

After seeing this great vision of the final home of the people of God, John is given a final instruction. In the book of Daniel, the prophet is told to seal up the words of his vision because they have to do with a later period of history. In John's case, he is told not to seal up the words of this prophecy because "the time is near" (22:10). This is to say that the words of this prophecy were for the people of John's own day. Jesus then offers his final words of instruction to the church:

"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the

*city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."
(Revelation 22:12-16)*

John's final words are warnings to those who will read his letter. Its message is so important that anyone who adds to it or takes away from it will lose his or her inheritance in the Kingdom of God.

Chapter Eight

The Final State of Humanity

The final state of humanity has always been a subject of interest to Christians. After all, the time we spend here on earth is but a breath compared to the time we will spend in eternity. It is only natural that we would want to know as much as we can about the world that is yet to be. Unfortunately, there is much misinformation and many peculiar notions of what eternity will be like. Childhood images of cartooned figures that, after having an anvil dropped on their heads, end up floating upwards into the clouds holding harps, make the hereafter seem boring. Some children I've known admitted they didn't want to go to heaven for this very reason. Mourners at funeral services gush bizarre sentimentalities, "I know he's up there right now in that great golf course in the sky." The family puts his favorite golf shoes and putter in the casket and says, "You're going to need these up there," yet the casket gets lowered into the ground, and six feet of earth gets filled in over top. Does anyone really think that if they dig the casket up, the same pair of shoes and putter won't still be there? No, but in the sadness of the moment, it was the best they could think of to say. Thankfully, there is much more to say. In fact, the Bible has much to offer us about the nature of the world to come and what it will be like to live there. The people of God ought not to live in ignorance of these truths, basing their hope on wishful thinking or wild mythologies, but instead on the truth of God's own word.

The Old Testament contains some remarkable stories about the life yet to come. Among these are the stories of two persons whom death never touched, Enoch and Elijah. We know very little about Enoch, only that he fathered Methuselah and that he lived 365 years. The Bible records that "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away" (Genesis 5:24). Enoch, therefore, did not die, but was translated directly into Glory. Elijah was a prophet of God who boldly proclaimed God's Word in spite of overwhelming opposition. Rather than having him taste death, it was God's will to assume Elijah directly into heaven. As he and his helper Elisha were walking along, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11-12). The conclusions we can draw from these two occurrences are simple yet essential. First, we see that death is not the final state of humanity; in fact, here are two people that death never touched. Second, the realm into which we will go is in some way physical, for both these two were taken in bodily form.

Another important story is the calling up of the prophet Samuel from the dead. Samuel was the first of a great line of prophets, and was advisor to King Saul. The prophetic voice of Samuel was the means through which God gave Saul directions that led to

numerous victories in battle against the Philistines. When Samuel died, Saul was at a loss as to what to do, for the Lord had rejected him for disobeying God's commands. When the Philistine army attacked again and Saul found that he could not invoke the Lord's direction himself, he consulted a medium and had the spirit of Samuel called up from the dead. Samuel was not happy about being called back to the world of the living, but says, "'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' (I Samuel 28:15). Samuel shows an understanding about what is happening in current history. Saul does not have to explain the situation to him, but instead Samuel gives interpretation of the events befalling Saul and Israel (verses 16-19). From this we conclude that those who die in the Lord enter a place of rest and peace, yet continue to be aware of the events in the ongoing world they left behind.

In the New Testament, we find the remarkable story of Moses and Elijah who appear before Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-12). Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain, and there he was transfigured into a glorious state. With him stood Moses and Elijah. The disciples were amazed and responded by suggesting that they build a shelter for each one. A cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him." When the cloud dissipated, there stood Jesus in his common, fleshly state. From this we understand that there is a physical state of existence that somehow transcends the basic physical properties of this earth. Also, this state is transcendent to our own; even light itself has different properties so that it can emanate from solid material sources. It also appears that the identities of those who exist in this state are immediately understood. The disciples didn't need to be told that it is Moses and Elijah that are standing before them. Finally, as it was with the story of the calling up of Samuel, those who have passed from death into eternal life continue to be aware of the ongoing course of human history, and in this case, even contribute to its progress.

Some of the stories of Jesus also offer us valuable information about the life to come. Jesus once told a story of a rich man who lived in luxury and a poor man who begged at his gate named Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). In the course of time, both men died. Lazarus was taken into paradise and the rich man was cast into hell, where he was in torment in perpetual fire. The rich man called to Abraham and asking for mercy, hoping that Lazarus would simply dip his finger in water so that the rich man might cool his tongue from the drops that fell from his finger. His request is denied; there is a chasm between heaven and hell across which none can pass. Finally, the rich man turns his attention to his brothers who are still alive, asking that Lazarus might return from the dead and implore them to change their ways. Again the request is denied; if they will not listen to Moses or the Prophets, they will not listen if one comes back from the dead. Once again we see these same truths expressed. Those who pass from one life to the next enter a transcendent physical existence. They live in a time parallel with the world they left, and are very much aware of what happens in it.

This truth is expressed beautifully in the 12th chapter of Hebrews. After having spoken of the great men and women of faith, from Abel to the saints of his own day, the author writes, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Hebrews 12:1). The allusion is to an athletic race, where the runner on the track is cheered on by a great multitude in the stands. In this case, it is the saints that have gone before who observe with great interest those who run the course at present. The reason for their interest is obvious. They paid a great price, even sacrificed their own lives, so that the message of God's salvation might be heard. Those who are now running the race are their spiritual offspring. The picture of heaven offered to us in this allusion is not of a mass of self-absorbed vacationers in paradise, but of a unified multitude whose full attention is concentrated on those who continue to carry the message they once bore.

Perhaps the most explicit passage in the Bible that concerns the final state of humanity is 1 Corinthians 15:35-54. Here it is in its entirety:

But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery:

*We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed-- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."
(1 Corinthians 15:35-54)*

When St. Paul says, “just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven,” he is offering us a key to understanding our future and final state. This final state is best revealed in the resurrection of Jesus, who is called “the firstborn from among the dead” (Colossians 1:18). Jesus is the first human being to enter into the final state of redeemed humanity. Paul earlier wrote, “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him” (1 Corinthians 15:22-23). If Christ is the firstfruits, then his resurrection appearances provide for us the best and clearest picture of what the future will hold for all those who follow him.

Perhaps the most important feature communicated in these stories is the similarity of Jesus’ resurrected life to his earlier existence. When Jesus appeared to his disciples, he did not come as a ghost or specter; in fact, when the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost, Jesus had to state openly, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). Not only does Jesus appear as a human being, but he even bears the very wounds of his crucifixion. Thomas puts his fingers in the holes on Jesus’ hands and his hand in the wound on Jesus’ side (John 20:27). In fact, it is the commonness of the resurrected Jesus that twice causes his followers to fail to initially recognize him. When he first appeared to Mary, she mistook him to be the gardener; when he later appeared to his disciples who had spent the night fishing, they did not recognize him until they tried to pull in the net full of fish. Therefore, the life of the resurrection may not be so far from what we experience in this life. What is certain is that we will not float around as ghosts, but will continue to live eternally as human beings.

Yet these same resurrection appearances also show us a life that is far beyond what we experience here. In the future, our humanity will not be negated, but instead enlarged. The physical laws of earth do not restrain the resurrected Jesus. The disciples are in a locked room and suddenly Jesus is among them (John 20:26). Two disciples are walking on a road and he keeps his identity from them (Luke 24:16). He is standing on the shore and still commands the fish to swim into the disciples net (John 21:6). Upon reading these stories, we might then quickly conclude that they are little different from the stories of Jesus’ earlier miracles, but perhaps the resurrection stories and the miracle stories are merely foreshadowings of the life yet to come. Jesus walks on water and stills the storm, heals the lame and makes the blind see, feeds the 5000 with a few loaves and fishes, and

raises the dead with the a few simple words. Perhaps all of these are merely hints of what is yet to come for those who follow Christ. St. John writes, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). What an astonishing promise! After all the pain, sorrow, and tears of this life are wiped away, there will be a rich, wonder-filled, and abundant life for us to live. The stories of Jesus only hint at what is yet to come. To know its fullness, we will have to wait and see. This is the end for which we hope.