

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Ten: The Lamb's Protection (Revelation 7)

After the first six seals have been opened, there is a pause before proceeding with the revelation about this world. Temporarily, the four winds of the earth are held back from doing harm. Those who know God are protected with a seal that will protect them spiritually. Those who trust in the Lamb can always be certain to know God and belong to him.

This World As It Is (Review Of Revelation 6)

The opening of the first six seals (Revelation 6) portrays in imagery the real nature of this world. The first four seals are usually called "The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse", and are traditionally referred to as the earth's ills of Conquest, War, Famine, and Death.

The first seal (white horse) represents more than mere conquest, including also the world's craving for rivalry and competition, with its sad legacy in hatreds and anger. The second seal (red horse) represents war as well as violence, because many outbursts of violence come from the same base instincts that cause war. Although the third seal (black horse) is usually assigned to famine or pestilence, its full significance is to represent economic disaster and oppression*, with famine and the like being the kind of devastation caused by manipulators of the markets. And the fourth seal (pale horse) is simply death, an all-encompassing fear.

* Its rider is holding a scales to weigh out commodities so as to charge every penny.

The fifth seal reveals the many human spirits who have suffered unjustly, especially as martyrs* for God. This has always been a part of the world, in every place and time. The sixth seal signifies the frightening upheavals that will always come from time to time in this world - physical disasters, financial disasters, sudden developments in power structures.

* The word 'martyr' originally simply meant a 'witness', someone who affirmed truth no matter what.

All of these sad ills have always been a part of this earth. We may all face some of these in this life, no matter how well protected we are. Yet if we stay close to God, our hearts and spirits will always be protected against the world and its horrors.

Yet the saddest thing of all that we read in this constant state of the world, is that so many persons are calling out, "Hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne." Because God's truths must necessarily expose our false security and our false idols, the flesh will hate hearing his voice. But in truth, we never should fear what he says to us - and yet so few, even among believers in him, can call themselves to seek and trust whatever he says to them.

Holding Back The Winds (Revelation 7:1-8)

Four angels in charge of the four winds of the earth are about to unleash them upon the earth. First, another angel comes with the seal of God, and calls for the others to hold off until the seal is given to the faithful. In this scene, we also have the appearance of 144,000 believers being sealed, just another reminder of the continuity and completeness of God's design through history.

In the imagery, with the terrors just released by the six seals, there are four angels holding onto the 'four winds', restraining them as long as possible (7:1). These winds from each direction are a simple image of the force of winds, which can never be stopped by human hands. They are forces unstoppable on earth to cause physical or many other problems.

Yet the seal of the living God is brought by an angel, who calls out for the other angels to hold to the winds a bit longer (7:2-3). He carries with him the precious seal of the living God, which is described in the New Testament* as the Spirit of the Living God, and as our deposit or our guarantee of life forever with God.

* See 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, Ephesians 1:13-14, and Ephesians 4:30.

The Spirit of the Living God is given to God's faithful, not always to protect them from outward harm, but always to protect them from having their hearts harmed by the world's violence and destruction, and especially to be protected from the dark forces of the world - jealousy, hatred, prejudice, and anger. The spirit's protection is so much more important to God.

So when the angel commands the others to not harm the earth until the faithful ones are sealed with the Spirit, it is not referring to one occasion when they will all be sealed at once. As each believer comes to God, she or he will be given this special blessing at that time. It is one of the special ways that God is so aware of each heart and each soul. The Spirit will live in each heart to, "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13).

And next a figurative number of faithful believers are sealed with the seal of God (7:4-8). This well-known number, 144,000, is an abstract expression of '12 x 12', the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles, just as the '24' elders represented God's faithful in an earlier scene. Multiplying by 1,000 - three times multiplied by 10 - simply signifies that God has accounted for the full number of faithful souls who belong to him. This also recalls the foundation of Israel's tribes.

Except for the list having Judah at the head of the list, after that the accounting of the tribes of Israel is also non-literal, because at the time this was written, the descendants of these tribes could no longer determine their ancestry*. And there are several differences between the list and the accounts always kept in Old Testament history**. Many commentators have speculated in vain to develop any meaningful explanation.

* Ten of the tribes (except for Judah, Benjamin, and Levi) had lost their identity hundreds of years before Jesus, during the Assyrian exile and were assimilated. And in AD 70, Judah and Benjamin underwent this same fate. Yet this is entirely in keeping with God's views of the nation.

** The list in Revelation omits Dan and Ephraim; and it includes Levi (not counted in OT censuses) and Joseph (who was accounted for by his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim).

The simplest point is that the national identities of these tribes has now been lost, and it reminds us that Israel has already become a seed for the church of Jesus. No one in Jesus truly has an identity that can be tied in earthly ancestors or to worldly organizations or nations.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kinds of dangers would the 'four winds' represent? Are they only physical dangers? How can we know what God's seal is, and what it will do for them it is given to? Why is this more important than physical protection? What is symbolized by the 12 tribes, and included in an erroneous list?

A Multitude In White Robes (Revelation 7:9-17)

We now have a broader look at the multitude that has been given the seal of the living God. They do represent every corner of the world, not only the literal pattern of tribes. They have washed their robes, and worship God and the Lamb. For the Lamb will forever be their shepherd, and he will always guide them into God's presence.

John has just heard the number who have been sealed (verse 4), and now he looks and sees a vast multitude from all over the earth, 'that no one could count'* (7:9-12). This is the same group of the faithful, who John can see more clearly. People of every nation, every tribe, every people and every language, a vivid picture of the true nature of God's people. The nation of Israel was the earthly home for the Lamb, and then it was time for God's spiritual kingdom to be opened to every seeker of him, from every place and time.

* This is because God can count every soul who belongs to him. But no one earth can ever know this number, because we can ever come up with rules or guidelines that would apply.

The multitude is clothed with white robes and holding palm branches, as in the days when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem for the last time (John 12:13). Yet now these faithful ones have a much better concept of what Jesus represented*, for they are praising God and his Lamb for bringing them lasting spiritual salvation, instead of worldly conquests.

* In the first century, palm branches were strongly associated with earthly victories, military or athletic. But after the founding of Christianity, it became a symbol of peace and eternal life.

We now see the multitude joined by the angels, elders, and living creatures, who fall on their faces and join the multitude in worshipping God. Here the elders are those now with God in heaven, and the multitude who are here in this life, being one together in their shared hope.

John is now asked a question about the multitude - where did they come from? (7:13-17). One of the elders encourages John to ask him, for he knows. The elder explains two things - they have come out of the "great tribulation" and that they have washed their robes to cleanse them.

The idea of a 'great tribulation' acquired an unfortunate and misleading meaning. The worldly mind always associates the worst risks and disasters with physical events. But to God, the worst and most dangerous situations are those that we can go through are the spiritual ones. We have dangers we face in this life that may seem harmless or even desirable, and the life experience calls us to look through this world's rewards to find God. The great multitude has successfully survived the greatest of the world's tribulations, in finding their soul's way to God.

Having come out of the world's truest great tribulation, and have called out to Jesus for grace, the multitude has washed their robes in Jesus blood. Sin is red (Isaiah 1:18*) and blood is red, but Jesus' blood will turn our robes white.

* "let us reason together . . . though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow . . ."

The multitude are on earth, and they have no special building that belongs to them, yet now they serve God day and night in God's temple - that is, they can live in his presence. Any time that they want to be with God, they only may see him "with the eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18). The truest blessing of belonging to God cannot be seen with the eyes, but reach to our hearts.

Revelation quotes from Isaiah in the things that are the truest blessings, including satisfying spiritual hunger and thirst:

*In the time of my favor I will answer you, [L SEP]
and in the day of salvation I will help you; [L SEP]
I will keep you and will make you [L SEP]
to be a covenant for the people, [L SEP]
to restore the land [L SEP]
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,
to say to the captives, Come out,
and to those in darkness, Be free!
They will feed beside the roads [L SEP]
and find pasture on every barren hill.
They will neither hunger nor thirst, [L SEP]
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them. [L SEP]
He who has compassion on them will guide them [L SEP]
and lead them beside springs of water.
I will turn all my mountains into roads, [L SEP]
and my highways will be raised up.
See, they will come from afar -
some from the north, some from the west, [L SEP]
some from the region of Aswan*

- Isaiah 49:8-12

Isaiah often used this imagery, as did the psalmists, to illustrate the desire that lives deep within us to need God, and to be with him, and to need his grace and Spirit to protect us from spiritual harm. Isaiah foreknew many centuries before Jesus, the blessings and sacrifice Jesus would bring.

And we shall always be comforted by the Lamb, our Shepherd. Jesus made peace between us and God, and he allows God to dismiss charges of sin against his faithful ones, and it enables God to wipe away the tears from our eyes. And he will take us to living waters, the Holy Spirit. Whatever we must undergo in this life, we are always welcome to talk with God and ask him to listen to us and to show us that he is there and always cares.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What characteristics are spiritually important about the great multitude? Why does an elder ask John where they came from? What do the answers mean? How does being in God's presence protect the faithful? What spiritual needs are promised by never going hungry or thirsty?

- Mark Garner, May 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Eleven: The Seventh Seal & The Trumpets (Revelation 8 & 9)

After the frightening visions from the first six seals, the seventh seal instead gives a pause. But soon it is followed by seven trumpets, which provide further warnings about this world. The seals had revealed the destruction that human sin does to others, but now the first four trumpets will remind us of the fragility of this earth. But even after that, the "three woes" are announced.

Danger To The Flesh, Protection For The Spirit (Recap Of Revelation 6 & 7)

The first six seals reveal the nature of the world as it is (Revelation 6). It depicts the many sinful attitudes of human nature, and the ravages that they inflict on one another. The appearance of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" is preceded by the call to them to, "come". For they are the results of the weakness of human nature - yet they are part of free will. Without the capacity to do harm, then it would render meaningless God's hope for us to truly choose him.

We then see that the faithful are protected by the Lamb (Revelation 7). This is done to protect them from the spiritual threats of the events in this world. It is a sad world because of the ways that the humans hurt each other, yet it is worse that these things can even ruin their souls and spirits, and this can only be healed by grace. And so the sealing of the "144,000" is the sealing with the Spirit of God.

Silence, Prayer, & Rumbings (Revelation 8:1-6)

The seventh seal reveals only a profound and deep silence in heaven. As God prepares to hear and respond to the pleadings of the faithful, he does so in complete silence. Then the angels appear, and present the many prayers of pleading for God's salvation as a burnt offering. This is then followed by ominous rumbings in heaven, which will herald the trumpets.

The silence revealed in heaven when the seventh seal is opened is filled with drama, but it is even more full of meaning (8:1). After revealing the sin and cruelty of this world, God now pauses. He is about to hear the prayers pleading for relief from the world's evil ways (Revelation 6:10) - but he thinks it over in complete silence. God is giving his full attention to their prayers, and he has asked for silence as the inhabitants of heaven await his will.

The angels offer a special burnt offering just to show their support for the faithful on the earth (8:3-5). The prayers of God's people are mixed with incense, an image itself for prayer. As the prayers go up before God, the angel suddenly fills his censer and hurls it down to the earth. And the earth resounds with lightning and thunder, to call attention to God's response. Yet God's message is not one of punishing the faithless for punishment's sake. They are a reminder of another aspect of this earth - in the hope to help some of them turn to him.

The seven trumpets that now appear will form a complement to the seals (8:2 & 8:6). The seals were a way of revealing the truth, and they called attention to human destruction, particularly of others. But the trumpets have a different function and call attention to a different point. Trumpets are announcements, and they will proclaim the world's fragility.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: While God gives his attention to the prayers, what other implications are there? Why would an angel want to offer the sacrifice of prayers? What significance might this have?

Proclamations Of Earth's Fragility (Revelation 8:7-13)

The first four trumpets announce the fragility of this earth, in terms of physical danger and the problems that will always affect 'someone else'. Yet, using the "one-third, one-third ..." idea from Ezekiel's prophecies, the trumpets will give due caution to everyone on earth. And more, the three fearsome "woes" from the trumpets are yet to come.

The first four trumpets are full of details that all have the same point (8:7-12). The four announce disasters against, in order, the earth with fire, the oceans, fresh water, the sun and moon. This is a representative of natural disasters that can occur, and the idea of talking about one-third being struck comes from Ezekiel 5:2 and 5:12*; in which the idea was that three different portions of one-third of Judah would face different trials. That is, someone will face one or other of these things. Or, every part of the earth faces its own serious risks that someday will fall to.

* They were represented by hairs that Ezekiel shaved, and represented death by plague or famine, by being killed by Babylonians, or by being taken captive and dispersed. There was also a small portion (v. 3-4) that would be a remnant, thought they too would experience torment.

This world is then inherently fragile. While it is has things that can meet our needs and is full of other things that we don't even need, we must face the awareness that this earth will not always be here. And at some point in our lives, we are likely to face an upheaval or three of them that will shake our spirits to the core, unless we have come to the acceptance to seek God's presence as the only source of genuine truth and salvation.

And so when an eagle appears and chants, "Woe! Woe! Woe!," the truest greatest ordeals, or indeed tribulations, are waiting (8:13). Because the real woes are those that will test or torment our spirits and our hearts. This has ever been true.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How are trumpets a way of calling attention to natural dangers? What does this call each of us to understand? Why would the 'woes' be even more critical than these things?

The First Woe - The Self-Torment Of The Soul (Revelation 9:1-12)

The fifth trumpet announces the descent of the Destroyer into the Abyss, where he will deliberately release a world full of sins and temptations that will torment human souls. They are presented as images of locusts of a particularly fearsome kind. And they will use their "stinger" to use the power of selfishness and sin to damage human spirits and hearts.

When a self-willed star* falls to earth, a new and far more spiritually dangerous force is unleashed (9:1-3). This star, the Destroyer, will open up the Abyss to release the darkest forces known to the universe. These are horrid locusts with stingers like scorpions, and they are about to fill the earth. But these are simply our sins and our selfish nature, craving for earthly possessions and pleasures. This is indeed the darkest force we will truly face.

* Verse 11 calls him Abaddon (Hebrew for Destroyer) and Apollyon (Greek for destroyer).

These locusts who sting* have a limited but terrifying ability (9:4-12). They cannot kill, but will torture the soul of their own source. They will ruin the life of anyone who does not turn to God to seek the seal (spiritual protection) of his living Spirit. And they will themselves find themselves desiring to die and end their lifelong struggle against self and sin, by permanently giving themselves over to the Destroyer. For this, sadly, will give them only temporary 'peace', by denying for life the need to seek God's grace.

* The prophetic imagery comes from Joel, from passages in Joel 1:1-2:11, which in itself used locusts to represent an outward event of the time, and also to represent the ongoing struggle against sin and self.

"The sting of death is sin" (1 Corinthians 15:56). That is, while sin leads to spiritual death, death also itself carries the sting of sin. Our mortality will always harass us until we come to God and accept his grace, truth, and his presence as the truest blessings we can have (Hebrews 2:14).

Questions for Discussion Or Study: Why would God have allowed this to happen? What impression does this image give us of the source of our sin? Why would we be so tormented by our desire to be self? What other things would distract us from the truth?

Preview Of The Other Two Woes (Overview of Revelation 9:13-11:19)

A basic overview of the rest of this section in Revelation -

Sounding Of The Sixth Trumpet - Second Woe Begins (9:13-21)
Seven Thunders & A Little Scroll (10:1-11)
Conclusion Of The Second Woe (11:1-14)
And The Third Woe (11:15-19)

This entire section reminds us that God's desire above all will always be the same. This series of images reminds us ever that we have a God who has done everything to call out for us, to deliver us from danger and death into his gracious hands. And the more fearsome this world seems, it just reminds us all the more to seek God humbly, to receive his grace and to see other spiritual blessings that will far outshine the world's gifts.

"I called to the Lord, who is worthy of praise,
and I have been saved from my enemies.
The cords of death entangled me;
the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me.
The cords of the grave coiled around me;
the snares of death confronted me.
In my distress I called to the Lord;
I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears.
The earth trembled and quaked,
and the foundations of the mountains shook . . . "

- Psalm 18:3-7

- Mark Garner, May 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Twelve: Two Woes & More (Revelation 9:13-11:19)

These chapters complete the sounding of the trumpets, and describe the last two "woes". Yet the third woe is no woe at all for those who love God. We might not be able to cover everything this week, but this outline will help to show how the images in these chapters tie in with each other. We shall finish this outline next week, if needed.

Heaven's Perspective (Brief Review Of Revelation 6:1-9:12)

The first six seals illustrated the destructive aspects of human nature (Revelation 6). Those who were faithful to God were sealed with God's Spirit, which would not always protect them in this world, but would always protect their hearts (Revelation 7).

The seventh seal brought on a deep silence in heaven, to show the heavenly that God would always give his full attention to hear the prayers of those he made in this world. Then the first four trumpets announced the earth's inherent fragility, which would always threaten everyone, whether faithful or not (Revelation 8). The first woe saw the Destroyer release the sinful forces in the Abyss that is within each of us, to bring self-torment of the soul (Revelation 9:1-12).

Self-Inflicted Plagues (Revelation 9:13-21)

The sixth trumpet will now release the pent-up forces held back by the four angels. This will release the effects of the bad side of human nature given by our self-will. But there is a particular reason for this, as it even reflects God's compassion, in spite of the agony that will be caused to humans. This is the first part of the second woe, which will conclude in chapter 11.

The sixth trumpet calls to the "four winds" (Revelation 7:1) to release the malevolent forces caused by human nature, which have been held temporarily by the angels (9:13-16). They are now summoned from the Euphrates river, which represents the source of human civilization*.

* The Euphrates is usually considered (with the Tigris) as the place on earth where human civilization originated. Also, in Genesis 2:14, the name is used as one of the rivers flowing from Eden.

When a huge horde of ghastly mounted troops is released, human nature still resists (9:17-21). Through this assault, only a third of humanity dies, so that many survive this part of the second woe*. But the survivors will not turn away from their sinful practices, or from their idolatry of their own works. Their hearts will not change, thinking they can continue avoiding to be confronted with the nature of their own lives and sins.

* That is, opposed to the first four trumpets, which showed that various third portions of the earth would be afflicted, indicating that no one could escape these natural hazards.

The description of the second woe is now set aside, and will be continued in Revelation 11:1-14.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What conclusions to the second woe might be possible? What might the overall lesson of the second woe be?

An Angel Stands On The Sea & The Land (Revelation 10:1-7)

A "mighty angel" comes down from heaven, plants one foot on the sea and the other foot on the land, confirming God's dominion over the whole earth. He has come to do three things, to let John hear the voice of the seven thunders, to announce that there will be no more delay to the fulfillment of God's "mystery", and, as we shall then see, to give John a little scroll.

The 'mighty angel' comes to the earth, puts his feet on the sea and the land, and releases a shout like a lion's (10:1-4). The two proclamations will apply as final judgments for the entire earth, both sea and land. But the first one comes from the "seven thunders", and John is told not to write it down after hearing it. Though we cannot ever in the world what the seven thunders said, we know that it was, in general, details about final judgment on the physical beings on the earth.

It should make no difference to us to know what will happen to bring the universe to an end, or when it will occur. This would simply show what Paul said, "knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1).

The angel's next announcement is easier to understand, that there will be no more delay before the mystery* of God is fulfilled, the way to God is through Jesus and grace (10:5-7; which is explained in Revelation 11:15-19). The angel indicates that this has always been announced to the prophets. This announcement will be made clear, because it has to do with the spiritual future, not merely the physical.

* See, for example, Romans 16:25, 1 Corinthians 2:7, Ephesians 1:9, Colossians 1:26-27, Colossians 2:2. The good news of Jesus and grace is a 'mystery' because it is not the way to God that any human mind would have conceived of.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why cannot we ever know the things that the "seven thunders" might be? Why are they called thunders? Why is the mystery simply the truths of the good news about Jesus?

The Little Scroll (Revelation 10:8-11)

Now John is given the little scroll that the angel has been holding all this time. John is told that it will taste thoroughly sweet, but that when it gets to his stomach it will turn sour and unpleasant. For this little scroll represents the gift of God's Words, which are being given to John. We are called to "eat" or consume God's Word.

We noticed the little scroll* in the mighty angel's hand, while he made the first two proclamations; and now John eats this scroll (10:8-11). The Old Testament used this image to illustrate God's Words as nourishment and a call to share them (Ezekiel 2:6-3:3). So John is simply ingesting the Word of God, or Jesus (as in John 6:53-58).

* The word in the original text is a diminutive form that would literally mean 'booklet' or 'scrollette'.

Except this time John learns that God's words will taste as sweet as honey, but will be sour (or bitter) in his stomach. This is always how the words of God will be to those who will live by its truth. The word will taste satisfying like pure sweet honey, because when we realize what the words are for, that they are to save us by grace, then everything they say will seem pleasing. But afterwards come the harder part, for not even believers will see what they really need or accept it.

In John 6:53-70, John himself recounts the teachings of Jesus that we must consume so much of him that we will become him. And many who believed in Jesus turned away from that lesson, without even having to sacrifice anything or risk pain. The worldly mind is able to believe in God but not able to accept what God calls us to. Yet, the person who truly lives by grace will not become angry with those who do not want to accept this, but will ever feel the pang of sadness every time others do not see their need for God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is all meant to be included in what John 'ate'? What does it mean if we always find God's word to satisfy us in what we believe and do?

Two Olive Trees - Conclusion Of Second Woe (Revelation 11:1-14)

The two witnesses, the 'olive trees', are now called to speak the truth to the world. Their message causes torment to the worldly, but it is not physical pain - rather, the olive trees will expose the souls of the worldly to them. They are a plague to them because they are revealing the true nature of all the things they seek in this world. They are then killed as part of the second woe.

First, John is asked to measure the temple*, and to separate the outer court from faithful believers (11:1-2). This is not literal, because the temple is simply God's presence. It simply symbolizes the protection of the Spirit, with which the faithful have been sealed. The Lord knows who are his, and though they will face trouble in this world, he will always keep their hearts in his care.

* The 'measuring' uses imagery from Ezekiel 40.

The two witnesses are identified with the two olive trees and the lampstands in Zechariah 4, which now unleash 'plagues' to those who don't want to hear their message (11:3-6). The imagery from Zechariah comes from the start of rebuilding the temple, which in the New Testament corresponds to God's presence. The olive trees were in Zechariah described as being, "the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth" (Zechariah 4:14), which merely represent those who speak the truth in Jesus' name and in his grace.

During a period of 42 months or 1260 days, representing the period of Jesus' ministry (3 1/2 years) on earth, the two olive trees will take away the rain (see Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1) and will inflict plagues (compare with Moses) for those who reject their message. Yet there is no earthly destruction involved, but merely teachings that the worldly will refuse to accept.

The words of God will expose the false security and false meaning in the world's achievements, material possessions, and pretenses to authority. And the plagues will expose the folly of pursuing worldly pleasure and worldly significance with clever stratagems. God's words will relentlessly expose the many flaws in worldly thinking, from the feeling that getting just 'one more thing' will satisfy them, or the belief that it gives their beliefs prominence from being renowned or wealthy in this world.

When the olive trees are soon slain, there is false joy for the worldly (11:7-14). This does not necessarily mean anyone being martyred, but simply the false hopes that the world often gets from the feeling that really there isn't a God after all. The false victories that seem to glorify worldly accomplishments and worldly talents will be met by great worldly celebration. They will celebrate to the point of trying to convince themselves that they are really right, and really have found the answer to life. And, even Christians who indulge in boasting about their own achievements, or who feel driven to competition, fall into the same trap.

But three and a half days later, the world finds that the message cannot be silenced. Metaphorically, the olive trees are called up to heaven after coming back to life. Throughout history, the teachings of Jesus have always been proclaimed, even though very few can truly accept them. The second woe is now completed. Every hearer has been shown, in full detail, the failure of their worldly perspectives and desires.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What kind of 'plagues' might come on the worldly? What plagues might be given on the religious, even Christians, from God's Word?

God's Temple Is Opened (Revelation 11:15-19)

When the seventh trumpet announces the third woe, it will carry different meaning according to how everyone has or hasn't responded the message of grace and truth. Even though the world as not changed much outwardly, the reign of God and his Messiah began forever when Jesus had completed his earthly ministry. God's temple has been opened to all, and it calls for a response.

The faithful now give thanks, for this is no woe to them (11:15-18). The message is now simple for everyone, without reference to their birth or culture or nation -

Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone - an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

And when we see God's temple in heaven opened, it reminds us that the curtain of the temple on earth was torn apart (11:19). The opening of God's true temple is simply to be with him in his presence. This will be a joy to those who love God for his own sake, and who know that -

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does Jesus' grace offer everyone the way into his Father's temple? Why is this a woe for those who do not accept Jesus and his grace?

- Mark Garner, May 2014

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

- Acts 17:24-27

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Thirteen: Spiritual Forces In Conflict (Revelation 12)

In Revelation 12, we see the familiar figure of the devil depicted as a dragon. The dragon is in conflict with God's angels in heaven, leading him falling to the earth. Before taking a look at this, we shall review the last few chapters we have studied, to see how all these images fit together. We shall also look carefully again at Revelation 11, which we introduced last week.

Heaven's Perspective (Brief Review Of Revelation 6 through Revelation 10)

Two Olive Trees - Conclusion Of Second Woe (Revelation 11:1-14)

God's Temple Is Opened (Revelation 11:15-19)

For these sections, see the notes for last week's class.

The Dragon Attacks The Woman (Revelation 12:1-6)

The images of the woman and the child, who are being attacked by the dragon, represent the conflict between basic spiritual forces or beliefs. The basic conflict teaches us things on a couple of levels. The woman and child are completely vulnerable to the dragon's assaults, and they will have to trust for God to provide on way or another to protect them.

The woman and her child can be seen as either Israel*, the church, or Mary, and Jesus (12:1-2). Yet either meaning will help us to see some spiritual realities. The literal details are not meant to correspond on a literal or chronological level. The woman and Jesus pose the greatest challenge to the dragon's abilities on earth**. As soon as Jesus was born, the dragon sought to kill him (Matthew 2:16-18).

* The twelve stars can represent the twelve tribes of Israel (or perhaps the twelve apostles).

* The sacrifice of Jesus provided the grace to permanently diminish Satan's spiritual abilities (see verse 11).

We can also learn some other lessons in that there is a basic parallel with each individual believer who has been born of the Spirit, and who will suddenly receive a new kind of attack from the dragon. Old sins have been rejected, yet will be replaced with new temptations - especially those like pride, division, and selfish ambition.

The fanatical depth of the dragon's hatred is entirely clear (12:3-4). But why does he lash out at no one who has hurt him or offended him? Because he has no love for anything else God created except for himself. Even to those humans who the dragon has gained as worshipers of him, he still hates them and wants to hurt them. And he will eagerly attack those who believe in Jesus.

The woman and her child are protected by God against the dragon, expressed by a couple of different images (12:5-6). The child was protected by God taking him to his throne, which is simply another example of the non-chronological nature of Revelation. Jesus was taken to return to his Father's throne once he had been killed by the dragon and his followers. The most extreme act of murder was followed by the ultimate act of triumph.

God's believers also have to fear the pain of death, but do not have to fear going to God's side -

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death - that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Meanwhile, the woman flees into the wilderness, for 1,260 days*. The basic idea is that God's people, the church, are often brought low in this world by the dragon by their need to flee from his attacks. The dragon will tend to target anyone who he perceives as a threat.

* This is approximately 3 1/2 years, as in Revelation 11:2-3, which is a symbol for living the life of Jesus.

But the deeper meaning is in the humility in this life, which is the real defense we have against the devil. The humble believer is especially close to God. "Humble yourselves . . . that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6). While easy to hurt in this life, the humble believer will be almost impossible to persuade to leave God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What about Jesus is included in this passage? What does it tell us about our life here with Jesus? What about the woman's experience?

The Dragon Thrown To Earth (Revelation 12:7-17)

The basic idea in these verses is familiar to many Christians. We cannot know what the fighting in heaven would have looked like, because the nature of that realm defies our human language. Yet this scene and the images carry some significant spiritual lessons. And not in their irrelevant application to the 'end times', but rather to our own nature and our own spiritual needs.

The description of fighting in heaven between the dragon and his angels, and Michael* and God's angels, is deliberately vague (12:7-9). While we might want to know more about it, that is idle curiosity compared with the awareness of how this affects us - the dragon was not strong enough to stay in heaven, and so he was thrown to the earth.

* Although volumes of speculation have been written about Michael, the archangel ((Jude 1:9), nothing is known about him or what an 'archangel' really involves. Nor is it important.

For now have come the salvation and the power of grace and redemption (12:10-12). This also marks the kingdom of God and Jesus on the earth. No kingdom without borders or possessions, for "my kingdom is not of the world" (John 18:36). For the fate of the accuser being hurled down to earth, was a "triumph through the blood of the lamb". For all these things refer to the same victory of Jesus over death and sin.

While we don't know in what exact form the new limitations on the accuser took, we do know that he once had some kind of access in heaven, which he was allowed to exercise through making accusations (for example, Job 1-2 and in Zechariah 3). The real power from the dragon is not his ability to kill the body, but the one who kills the spirit. And when Jesus fulfilled his sacrificial ministry, the power to accuse directly to God was curtailed.

But there is woe to the earth and the sea, the whole earth, because the dragon has only here to try to dominate, and to do so in a short time. He has lost his bid to control God and to control things in heaven. And his will to dominate reminds us that this is a deadly temptation he may offer us all the time. For he is in contrast with God, who grants humanity their own free will, to choose

him or not. And those who serve God should always remember never to force things on others, whether or not they are 'right'.

We now see the dragon's wrath described with various images (12:13-17). During the struggle on earth, the woman is now carried away on an eagle, the same image for the deliverance from enslavement in Egypt (Exodus 19:4). And her stay in the wilderness, the woman is there for "a time, times, and half a time*", another image used by Daniel, once again a 3 1/2 year period symbolizing living the life of Jesus.

* 'a time' = 1, 'two times' = 2, plus one half; totaling to 3 1/2.

But aside from the dragon's efforts to turn the earth itself against God's faithful believers, the struggle on earth is really the dragon's attacks against those saved by grace. He can nevermore deliberately accuse them in God's presence, and all he can do is to do other things to hurt them, hoping that they will decide to choose some other way instead of living by grace. And as sad as it may be, he succeeds a lot of the time.

But God will always be there to redeem anyone from even the bleakest or most polluted lives of the earth. The dragon can inflict many earthly punishments, leaving many spirits broken and sad. They may come from all over the world, as each of the redeemed has his or her story, because their healing can only come from humbly asking God for his grace.

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

LSEP *his love endures forever.*

Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story -

LSEP *those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,*

those he gathered from the lands,

from east and west, from north and south.

Some wandered in desert wastelands,

LSEP *finding no way to a city where they could settle.*

They were hungry and thirsty,

LSEP *and their lives ebbed away.*

Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,

LSEP *and he delivered them from their distress.*

- Psalm 107:1-6

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What things indicate that the dragon's fall occurred when Jesus completed his ministry on earth? Is there any chronology here? Why is this a woe for the earth? Can we describe in any detail what Satan may or may not do here? In what ways might God deliver 'on an eagle'? What ways is he protecting us?

- Mark Garner, May 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Fourteen: The Great Beast(s) (Revelation 13)

In this vision, the scene changes. The two beasts that emerge from the sea and the land are working together, and so in a sense they are the same 'beast'. Neither beast represents any one person, or any nation, or any one thing, but an important idea, that will oppress and harm souls in any time, any place on the earth. Some of their threats are obvious, others more subtle.

Out Of The Sea (Revelation 13:1-10)

The first beast, who comes out of the sea, is the easiest one to understand. This beast has many similarities to the creature that Daniel saw in his vision in Daniel 7. This beast has often been mis-identified with some cruel villain or some hated country, only because we have a tendency to think that those we perceive as our enemies should be labeled as especially 'evil'.

The fearsome creature from the sea arises under the approval of the dragon, as he stands on the seashore (13:1-2). The beasts from the surging of the sea was one of Daniel's best-known visions, and this 'great' beast has parts of all the empires in Daniel's prophecy (Daniel 7:2-7*). Yet this beast includes all earthly empires and much more in this incarnation. It includes all human (earthly) power, human force, human will and ability. These things have been used in every time and place to oppress the spirit, on a grand scale and to crush individual souls.

* These beasts represented, in order, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. They presented an image of the empires to come, under which the Israelites would be dominated until the coming of Christ, who would 'destroy' their empires by dying to redeem humanity from their sins.

The ancient concept of the "Great Beast" was familiar at the time from Plato, about four centuries before Jesus. Plato's description of the "Great Beast*" is everything about humanity that compels the other to adopt conformity to worldly beliefs and rulers and authorities. Plato envisioned this as including even nations or beliefs that were antagonistic to each other, because they allowed humans a small number of approved beliefs. He described it as being necessary to 'feed' the Beast** in order to obtain earthly privilege or honor or rewards.

* His description is found in Book 6 of Plato's "The Republic".

** Simone Weil once described a Pharisee in terms of Plato's beast - "A Pharisee is someone who is virtuous out of obedience to the Great Beast."

So people worship the beast from the sea, and worship the dragon, who delegated his power and authority to the beast (13:3-4). Although the beast's 'fatal wound' that was healed has often been associated with various rogues through history, it does not apply to any one person. It simply represents the numerous repeated appearances of notorious (though worshiped) persons who, though they may seem superficially interesting, are really just another dreary example of the shallow souls who crave the world's most superficial prizes.

Yet the shallow minds of this earth are always filled with wonder by the latest hero, the latest 'solution' to their problems, the latest sense of 'justified' vengeance. All of these are some of the

many forms of worshiping human power, human force, and human will or ability. This beast expresses the human craving to have its will, no matter what.

And so it is inevitable that the beast attacks the faithful (13:5-10). He will attack them for 42 months, the familiar symbol for the span of living like Jesus on this earth. For all of our lives we serve Jesus, the worldly powers and self-willed shall be full of blasphemies and slander. This by no means refers to foul language. It means the constant re-assertions to put your trust in human ability, to take what you can get on this earth, to stand up for you desire and 'deserve'. Such feelings, especially from believers, are blasphemous ways of disregarding what God has told us.

Everyone on the earth will worship the beast and his dragon, except for those whose names are in the book of the Lamb. Worshiping Satan has nothing whatsoever with foolish satanic rituals and 'sacrifices', no matter what harm they may cause, for these things make Satan laugh. The things that really delight Satan are the people who believe in the Lamb and yet who are right in line to get the things they can from this world, and who are eager to conform and accept the things that the world tells them are important.

For everyone on this earth, including the faithful, there are only two conditions - death or captivity (Jeremiah 15:2). Spiritual death, letting one's spirit die to live only for the flesh, is what releases the world's domineering persons from the spiritual side of their nature. Everyone else is captive here, held in a place that can never fulfill their truest needs. The only difference is that those who are in the Lamb's book can resist the lure of worshiping the Great Beast, and endure the captivity here. Those who believe, yet who do not seek God for his own sake, are too focused on the things of the earth that can still lead them to worship the beast.

Our response to be in captivity on this earth is patient endurance and faithfulness. We must not retaliate with the world's weapons, no matter how badly they hurt our hearts. The message of grace and truth must speak through the Lamb's followers. And the love of material things, which sooner or later leads us to worship the Beast, must not remain in our hearts.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. - 1 Timothy 6:10-11

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Knowing 'who' or 'what' the first beast is, what terms - such as worship of human power, or every earthly force - can best describe it to you? Why does this beast include so much more than mere earthly rulers and empires? Why must endurance and faithfulness be our only response to earthly force?

Out Of The Earth (Revelation 13:11-18)

The beast from the earth is not as easy to understand, because he is especially dangerous to those who actually believe in God. Because this beast too, represents much more than one person or one thing from any time or place. This beast will also work closely with the first beast and the dragon. Then we see the notorious number of '666' given to humans.

When we see the second beast come out the earth*, it looks like a lamb because of its two little horns**, yet it speaks like a dragon (13:11-12). It looks like a lamb because it talks about God, religion, morality, justice, and other things that it makes it sound noble and righteous. Like a dragon, it uses these things to make everyone worship the first beast. Again, there are many persons and institutions in every time and every place, who have found Christianity and religion a very convenient way to get what their flesh desires in this world. "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." (Matthew 7:15)

* The earth, in contrast, simply serves as a companion to the beast from the sea. The sea was used as a symbol of the world's constant conflict and strife. The earth has no special other significance here, except perhaps the origin of this beast from human 'civilization' with its endless efforts to justify everything it does.

** Most types of lamb have two very short, harmless-looking horns.

This beast from the earth performs powerful great signs, but not of a tangible nature (13:13-15). This beast uses these 'miraculous' signs to deceive the earth to follow the first beast. He even persuades them to set up an image of the first beast who 'was wounded by the sword and yet lived'. The second beast creates elaborate theology and philosophy to make the shallowest things seem most important, and evil things sound righteous. Every time we pause to worship a 'great' human being, we are erecting an image. Humans are meant to be loved, not worshiped.

So beast 'number two' is everything and everyone who worships any human ideology, any human religion, any human philosophy. This includes those who worship Christianity as an entity in itself, worshipping its doctrines and sects and accomplishments. The second beast has many forms, in which it displays its miraculous gifts.

The beast can make vengeance sound like 'justice', it can make greed sound like 'reward'. It can convince a nation full of 'Christians' to attack a nation and kill its inhabitants, pretending that this violence is justified by something the leaders of that nation did. And this beast can persuade Americans that Christians are 'in the right' and Islamists are 'in the wrong, and deserve to be punished' - while the beast convinces others of the opposite. These two beasts work together, even while they deceive persons in different parts of the world - because this is all to their benefit.

And the two beasts force everyone to receiving a mark on the forehead or the hand, to have basic permissions in the world (13:16-17). There is nothing mysterious about this mark, because it is nothing tangible; it is just in contrast with the intangible mark of the sealing of the Spirit (Revelation 7). And buying and selling privileges are just a metaphor for being a "member of the club," someone given a stature and privileges in this world. This can be useful to the beasts, because it forms a good way to force everyone to compete, even thereby generating further envy, division, and anger, which will always give people another excuse to worship the beast.

And so the number of (a) man*, 666, again does not apply to any one person or group of persons (13:18). The number 666 represents a man or a woman's nature, not anyone's name or anyone's especially evil deeds. It describes what a man or a woman are all about.

* The original text translates as either one. There is no indefinite article in Greek (that is, the word 'a' or 'an'). It could either mean of 'of man', as the whole species, or 'of a man', as in 'of any man'. Moreover, the word in this verse is used as a human (or humans) of both genders. It is the word "anthropos".

This use of the number 666 is original to Revelation. But there was another number, 8 or 888, that was used by the early Christians to stand for Jesus, for Jesus' kingdom, or for the hope of eternal life. The number 8 was associated with Jesus because 7 symbolized the day on which God created the earth, and so '8' was the symbol of rebirth in Jesus. And so, the number '6' merely suggests the image of human nature, before it is regenerated.

What fills and pre-occupies our human flesh? Ourselves, our desires, our attempts to rationalize and justify our rampant desires. The number 666 simply means 'man man man' or 'woman woman woman', or perhaps 'want want want', our flesh's preoccupation with self. This fleshly nature can only be healed by grace through Jesus, which can instantly rid us of the burden of our sins and allow us to start life anew.

The nature of our lives here following Jesus, our '42 months' here, can supply us with the antidote from being caught in the '666' mindset that will destroy hearts and spirits (2 Corinthians 4:1-18). We must set forth the truth plainly, proclaiming only God's forgiveness of our sins so that we can be with him. The treasure we carry in jars of clay* is of infinite value compared to the trash of this world. We are called to carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus, as an example to others. And we must always fix our eyes on what is unseen and eternal.

* The 'jars of clay' simply refers to our fragile, short-lived earthly bodies.

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (2 Corinthians 4:7-12)

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

Questions For Discussion or Study: What is so bad about this beast? Why is it so wrong to use religion to justify our fleshly desires or to support worldly powers? How would you best describe this beast? How can we resist its temptations to use religion or ideology to serve ourselves?

- Mark Garner, June 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Fifteen: The Harvest (Revelation 14)

After we have seen the two great beasts, we next see a series of visions that will point us toward the idea of the "harvest" of souls. The two beasts will, of course, work against our spirits in this life. But we are strengthened by our awareness of the need to be with God, and the Lamb also puts a "new song" in our hearts for us to sing.

The Two Beasts (Review Of Revelation 13)

The beast that comes out of the sea makes everyone worship the dragon (13:1-10). This beast personifies the worship of human force, human power, and human self-will. These idols in turn represent the worship of self, via worshiping an image we have set up ourselves. "I will pronounce my judgments on my people , because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshiping what their hands have made." (Jeremiah 1:16)

This beast has a 'fatal wound' that is healed, to signify the restless return of human nature to keep coming back to their old idols, which they believe can always be given life that they can never have. The hopeless belief that they have in their own self-will.

The beast from out of the earth works closely with the first one (13:11-18). This beast looks like a lamb but acts like a dragon. It uses its power to make others worship the first beast. This beast is the worship of human ideology and human religion. It has the 'miraculous' power to convince everyone that what is bad is good, and vice versa. To serve this beast, everyone must have its mark in place of the seal of God's Spirit. And it carries the number 666, glorifying human nature.

Singing A New Song (Revelation 14:1-5)

The 144,000, which is the same as the great multitude, now appears singing a new song. For knowing their need for God, they have been redeemed by the Lamb. They have neither defiled themselves nor have they lied - or have they? Because it is the essence of the gospel that we can know God only by his grace.

These saved souls have the name of the Lamb and the name of God on their foreheads (14:1). This is again nothing tangible, for it contrasts with the mark of the beast in the same place. The mark of the 144,000 is the seal of God's Spirit (Revelation 7:2), which will protect their hearts and spirits, even though their bodies will remain vulnerable to this world. The names remind us of whom to these people belong, for God and the Lamb are very glad to claim them.

This is followed by an unusual sound from heaven (14:2, see also 19:6). The loud sounds of rushing water and thunder are combined with the delicate sounds of harps. These images suggest a sound that accompanies the singing of the "new song", with a loud sound to remind you of the source of water and thunder, with the gentle comfort of the harps.

Their new song is not identified with words or tune, because the important aspects we can already know (14:3-5). The new song represents their new attitude on life, their new perspective on what really matters in life and what really means something. So only this multitude of the

redeemed can learn this song, because to others it will seem strange that they are so joyful about just being with God himself, for no other reason.

The 144,000 are recognized for never having defiled themselves ("with women") and never having lied. Yet this superficially moralistic statement is not at all literally true. For many of the men and women in this multitude have been guilty of these specific or other sins. So the meaning is different, given by grace.

Women are often used in the Old Testament as images of spiritual forces*, either good or bad. So this choice simply means to choose the 'right woman', to choose to follow God's Spirit instead of worshiping the things of this earth. They have been cleansed freely of their sins, having been purchased from the world and from spiritual death, by the Lamb - who used his blood.

* For example, in Proverbs 9:1-2 and 9:13-14 women are used as contrasting spirits, of wisdom to represent God's Spirit, and folly, the choice to follow the flesh and Satan.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what ways is it significant to have the names of God and the Lamb on their foreheads? What do the sounds suggest, accompanying the "new song"? What does a new song mean? In what sense have they avoided defilement?

Three Angels & . . . (Revelation 14:6-13)

Three angels now appear in the air, issuing proclamations about the human souls living in the earth. The good news of Jesus' grace is now the universal call to anyone who seeks God. The second angel's very brief announcement is a preview of the visions in Revelation 17-18. The third angel and the following voice give us some aspects to consider.

The first flying angel reminds the earth that the good news about Jesus is now for all (14:6-7). It is being proclaimed to every nation, tribe, language and people. For the way to God is now open to all, to anyone on the earth who wants to know the truth or to know God. The way to God is not a matter of performing the correct rituals of a particular nation or culture; it is not a matter of knowing the right facts. It involves calling out to God in humility, and he will respond. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32).

The second angel proclaims that "Fallen is Babylon the great" (14:8). This announcement will be explained later in Revelation; and so it is only necessary to note now that Babylon does not mean one nation, but every nature and force and power in this world. "Babylon" provides the world with its 'maddening wine', that intoxicates so many persons to pursue things of no value that will lead them to spiritual death.

The third Angel proclaims the torment of those who worship the beast (14:9-12). To drink the wine of God's fury or wrath is a common symbol of the logical and natural consequences of one's own evil behavior*. And the image of "the smoke will rise forever" is used in prophecy as simply emphasizing the lasting ongoing evidence of this kind of self-retribution, as in Isaiah 34:10. So this image of ongoing torment will include the afterlife, but it is also in this life.

* See, for example, Isaiah 51:17 and Jeremiah 25:15-16.

This calls for patient endurance on our part, too. For our lifetimes in this world, we are not often going to see obvious and clear retribution for sin. We will have to look more closely at those

who live to worship themselves. For their hearts and spirits are already being tormented - even though they may not know it - by the fading of the spark of life in their heart, and by the rapidly eroding sense of satisfaction they have in their possessions and accomplishments.

Then a voice from heaven calls out "blessed are the dead who die in the Lord" (14:13). To which the Spirit's reply suggests, that from then on their toil against their own human nature and all of the temptations and sin in their hearts, will end and now give them rest.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the significance of each proclamation? Has each one been made previously? What does the torment forever mean?

The Harvest (Revelation 14:14-20)

In this vision, two different harvesters come with a sickle and harvest the earth, for two different purposes. Each half of this vision parallels similar themes, with two reapers and two angels who call to them to resume. Yet we can also see the dramatic implications of the two harvests that we see in these images. And again this includes more than the last day.

In each harvest, the call comes to "take your sickle and reap" (14:14-16). In the first part, we see "a Son of Man" with a gold crown, for this harvest will be made by Jesus. After he is called* to reap, there is a completely understated description. He just swings his sickle and harvests the earth, with no more fanfare and ado. For Jesus 'reaps' his souls with gentleness as he goes along.

* There isn't anything anomalous about Jesus being called by an angel, for the angel is just a messenger.

Yet in the next stage, when the call comes, the grapes are ripe (14:17-20). Yet to gather the clusters of grapes carries a connotation in the Old Testament imagery. Gathering the grapes is an image for pressing out the blood (Isaiah 63:1-6, Joel 3:12-14). For, "because the life of every creature is its blood" (Leviticus 17:14). And so here too, this imagery also includes the self-torment everyone who does not love God will endure. The ongoing ebbing away of one's life, whether it is noticeable or not.

Many who believe in God never really come to love him. For they misunderstand the nature of God and the nature of being with him. We can take a look at what lies beyond, in Hebrews' contrast of a mountain of fear and a mountain of joy (Hebrews 12:18-29). The old fear of approaching God's mountain, compared with the joy of coming into the presence of thousands of angels, along with God and Jesus.

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can these images only refer to the last day? Can they have some other meaning as well? What is the symbolism in gathering the grapes? Why is the first harvest described so briefly?

- Mark Garner, June 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Sixteen: The Seven Last Plagues (Revelation 15)

Earlier in Revelation, we have seven seals opened, and we have seen seven trumpets sounded. Now we are about to see seven golden bowls to be poured out on the earth. Yet first we are told some things about this 'set of sevens'. This series of plagues will be the last way in which God's wrath will be expressed. Yet it is not 'last' in terms of chronology.

Seven Angels With The Last Plagues (Revelation 15:1-4)

This series of seven plagues is described as 'last', for 'with them God's wrath is completed.' But this 'last' not chronologically, but rather in terms of the completion of the picture of life on this earth. After being alerted to the coming of these plagues, we see those who have proved faithful, singing praises for 'God's righteous acts'.

So in God's expression of 'wrath*', just one more thing remains (15:1). This is not a final step, but the remaining integral piece of the picture of living on this earth. With these 'plagues*', God's wrath will be now completed. This again is not an end-of-times prophecy, but rather another thing about our lives here to be revealed to us.

* The idea of 'plague' in the Old Testament is often associated with what happens when someone unclean comes into the presence of God. And 'wrath' can be considered as the feeling God has at this situation. See below.

Then we see a sea like glass (or crystal, see 4:6), mixed with fire (15:2). On the shore stand those who were victorious over the beast and the number of its name. This image recalls the times when crossing a sea or river was a key historical and spiritual event (in particular, crossing the Red Sea, which represents deliverance). This sea is made of glass, allowing the faithful to walk across by God's grace. Yet they have been faced with fire, too.

But now they are given harps, and sing the 'Song of Moses and the Lamb*' (15:3-4). They praise God for his holiness, his truth, and his glory. They again rejoice that all nations have been allowed to come to God. Yet at the end, they praise God that his "righteous acts have been revealed." And this is in large part refers to the 'plagues' and 'wrath' that he is about to release.

* The song in these verses has pieces of Deuteronomy 32, Jeremiah 10, and several Psalms.

This is no craving for vengeance or punishment. It is an intrinsic aspect of God seeking the sick spiritually. These plagues will accompany God's presence on earth.

Questions For Discussion O Study: In what sense are these plagues 'final'? What does the glass sea and the fire represent? How are God's wrath and plagues righteous?

Out Of The Temple (Revelation 15:5-8)

The seven angels now come out of the temple in heaven, and they are given the golden bowls that contain the 'wrath of God'. Then, as the angels are preparing to pour out their bowls, the temple is filled with the smoke of the glory of God. So no one will be able to enter the temple until the seven last plagues are completed.

So out of the temple come seven angels (15:5-6a). The temple, or "the tabernacle of the covenant law", represents God's presence. So the angels who will release these plagues come directly from God's presence, which suggests again that these plagues are inherently "righteous". God and God's presence are holy, and so there will be inevitable contact with uncleanness.

The angels and their bowls are again, this time, entirely of God's making (15:6b-7). Their shining linen and golden sashes give us an image of their purity and cleanness, along with a reflection of God's glory. One of the living creatures* comes and gives them the plagues, which are contained in golden bowls filled with God's 'wrath'. So, as another aspect of spiritual reality, these plagues will be poured out, as opposed to the seals revealing something or the trumpets announcing something.

* See Revelation 4:6-8, and the notes from week six.

No one can enter the temple for a while, as the plagues are poured out - this actually helps to identify what the sequence of plagues will represent (15:8). The temple will be filled with smoke of the glory of God, which will make entrance prohibited for the time being (Exodus 40:34-35, 1 Kings 8:10-11). Because they will be struck down with God's glory, not as a vindictive action, but as the inevitable result of uncleanness contacting God's holy glory.

So they cannot enter the temple until they have experienced the plagues on earth, which will be less painful than the alternative. When we look at these plagues in Revelation 16, we can see that they generally come from God's holy presence in being on the earth*, as he seeks us with his presence. And so this helps us to see that God's 'wrath' is not an expression of hatred or vengeance, but rather a display of his righteousness, for he cannot have contact with sin.

* There are some general similarities with the results of the seven bowls with the seven trumpets.

So God's wrath is an inevitable result of living on this earth. It is, like the seven seals and the seven trumpets, something that we must see and endure for a time. But it comes on earth only because God is seeking us. And his presence on earth offers us our true hope, that when we are cleansed of our sin by the blood of Jesus, our hearts can no longer be harmed by anything, even if our bodies must suffer in this world.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is the temple where the angels come out of? What does this tell us about the source of the plagues? How would they differ from what was released by the seven seals? So what is a plague, in this vision? What does it mean that entrance into the temple will be temporarily prohibited? What does this tell us about what God's wrath means?

- Mark Garner, June 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Seventeen: The Bowls, Their Contents, What They Mean (Revelation 16)

Now the angels hear a voice call them to pour out the seven bowls of God's 'wrath' upon the earth. But this is not a vindictive or punitive wrath, for it is part of the compassion he shows to the world, as he patiently reaches out to them. He is trying to bring them into his presence. As with so many things about God, it comes back to the things that mean the most to him.

The Bowls Of God's 'Wrath' (Revelation 16)

The 'last' series of plagues begins. These plagues come with God's desire to have his presence on the earth, in order to give people the chance to know him. And so, contrary to all appearances, this 'wrath' is an act of compassion by God. As the seven bowls are poured out, they will turn everything on earth into something that blesses but that also strikes back at human uncleanness.

As the first bowl is poured out, the first plague strikes the land, that is, the earth or soil (16:1-2). The literal description in each of the seven plagues is simply to describe the way that the elements of earth are given a double-edged sense. The soil and the land are basic to human living, and yet they can constantly strike back at people, either through natural disasters (such as earthquakes and volcanoes), but even more directly by making human life hard, too.

Indeed, this was the first curse pronounced by God on an inanimate object (Genesis 3:17-19). The people were warned that forever more they would have to toil hard to make the earth produce the crops they needed.

The second bowl releases the second plague, which strikes the earth's seas (16:3). The seas supply many resources for human life, and are beautiful in themselves. Yet they contain many dangers, the lives that have been lost at sea, and the ways that the sea can even strike on land.

The plague released by the third bowl strikes the rivers and other sources of fresh water (16:4-7). For rivers, though vital, will once again take human lives in numerous ways. That they must drink blood is not literal, yet it is quite appropriate that this is the image used*. For as water is the symbol of source of life, so is blood equal to human life, to God. So the source of life, sent from the holy God, will turn into blood (symbolically) when it touches the unclean.

* Exodus 7:14-24 describes the Nile River, a source of life for Egypt, being changed into blood by Moses. And the plagues inflicted on Egypt, again illustrate the conflict between holiness and uncleanness. For in the days of Moses, God had chosen to come to Egypt and establish his presence among the Israelites.

The contents of the fourth bowl strike the sun (16:8-9). The sun provides us with light and warmth, yet it again can cause pain and, when its heat and light are not given respect, can harm human in numerous ways. Next, the fifth and sixth plagues will strike things basic to humanity, and then the seventh plague will strike one last time on a natural element of the earth.

With the plague poured out by the fifth bowl, we have to look a little deeper to ask what it really strikes (16:10-11). It is said to inflict a plague or a cure on the "throne of the beast". So, keeping in mind that all of the 'targets' of these plagues are very basic things, then what does this throne represent? What does the beast 'sit on', that is, what allows him to have most people worship

him? His throne is self. This plague strikes the human self, which if it is given to God is a blessing, but that when it worships itself, is one of the worst sources of harm and evil.

Having a sense of self based on the wrong things, on one's own ability, position, possessions, or accomplishments, can make someone feel very good about themselves; yet it leads anyone down a path of delusion, a heart full of envy, selfish ambition, and jealousy that will sap life away even as the self-worshipping person seems outwardly to thrive. (James 1:10-11).

The sixth bowl strikes the Euphrates River (16:12-16). The Euphrates, and its partner the Tigris River, are often considered as the site of the founding of human civilization*. And so the sixth plague strikes human culture or human civilization. And the form the curse takes is vividly portrayed by the tumultuous imagery in these verses.

* But it is just used as a symbol, with no literal significance. The Euphrates was used similarly in Revelation 9:14. And in Genesis, it is depicted as one of rivers flowing from Eden.

The images of the beast (from out of the sea) and the false prophet (the beast from out of the sea) leading the nations into violence and combat, illustrates this side of human 'civilization'. And this ends up in one of Revelation's symbols that is most often misused to represent any number of speculative places and events. Yet Armageddon, or Megiddo, was simply the site of two famous battles known throughout the ancient world. One of them* is depicted in 2 Kings 23:29-31, in which Egypt defeated Judah and killed the reformer king Josiah.

* Several centuries earlier, Megiddo had been the site of the first international battle that is now known, between Egypt and a coalition of the nations in the area today occupied by Syria and Israel. Incidentally, Megiddo was again the site of a large battle in World War I, and covered a front of over 60 miles.

The seventh bowl comes back to striking a natural target, the air (16:17-21). The air is our most basic earthly need, yet it can strike us through any number of deadly storms. This completes the 'last plagues', and completes the picture of life on this earth. Its inherent fragility, the sin and evil of human nature, and the risk of God's wrath when he makes his presence known in the world.

Yet all of these things are a result of God's compassionate desire to be with us, and they lead to us being refined in all kinds of trials - that is, if we turn to God (1 Peter 1:3-9). And so we still rejoice, and we love Jesus, even though we have not seen him with our physical eyes. For it is our desire to receive salvation by being born again, by imperishable seed (1 Peter 1:23-25).

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

- 1 Peter 1:3-9

- Mark Garner, June 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Eighteen: The Scarlet Beast (Revelation 17)

Now we meet another dubious beast, the "scarlet beast". This creature represents the world's abundant opportunities for fun, pleasure, and personal satisfaction. The woman riding and the beast she rides, are together this "scarlet beast", for they need each other to have the worship and power that they seek in this world.

A Woman Of Mystery (Revelation 17:1-6, 17:18)

The scarlet woman intrigues the world with her aura of mystery and the invitation to serve self. This image resembles a circus, or worldly toy store, full of seeming promise, but is in truth no real mystery. The woman and the beast represent only an empty promise for to indulge every whim of the flesh, which can only lead to a dead end.

The woman in scarlet is a "city" that sits by many waters, and is given the name Babylon*, yet this is only figurative (17:1-2). When we saw the doom of Babylon pronounced (see Revelation 14:8), she was said to have "made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries". And it is described as intoxicating the inhabitants of the earth. For this scarlet rider and the scarlet beast show us the way that the world falsely looks to the worldly, an ever-open invitation to enjoy nothing but fun and pleasure, whatever the self considers to be fun and pleasurable.

* This is the way Babylon was sometimes described in Old Testament prophecy (Jeremiah 51:13). But note that the city of Babylon had already long since fallen by the 1st century AD.

The scarlet woman dresses up in outward splendor, for this is how everyone in the world manages to convince one another of how good everything will be when they get it (17:3-5). The blasphemies and adulteries are equally misunderstood by most believers. For our response to seeing these things around us should rouse our pity, for they are above all foolish, because the idols of pleasure and fun have self-evidently have no power to save anyone (Isaiah 44:14-19*).

* See also Isaiah 40:19-20, 41:7, 44:9-19.

Note also that "adultery" here includes not only the literal practice, but anything in this world that will pull our hearts away from God. For it is not just literal adultery, for there are many other glittering things that conceal danger (1 John 2:15-17). For *"If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them."* Everything we will disappear, and only God will remain forever.

Yet she is drunk on the blood of even those who believe (17:6). For her deceitful wares will always entice many Christians, and will drain them of life. The woman in scarlet holds no real mystery at all. She just confuses us to think that the things of this world are sophisticated or intriguing, when they can only lead to death.

So what city is she? (17:18). She is every city that thinks it is great, every city that thinks it is fun. It is the world's pleasure dome, where people expect a never-ending stream of useless items and achievements, and irresponsible behavior.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What makes people intoxicated by the scarlet woman and her wares? How can they even drain the life out of believers?

Her Pet Beast (Revelation 17:7-14)

The beast that the scarlet woman rides on supports her. And it should be no surprise that it closely resembles the "beast out of the sea", with its horns and heads, and with its apparent ability to resurrect itself. For along with the woman riding it, will continuously assault those who follow the Lamb - but not with physical force, with a wide range of temptations.

The mystery of the woman and her pet, the scarlet beast, is that she needs him to be able to prosper in her works (17:7-8). For this she does need the force and will that the beast can offer her in support. For the mystery comes from raw appeal to the self-will of humanity, not intelligence, not true faith, and not even to beauty. And even on a larger scale, the world's most overly indulgent societies will always rely on a massive arsenal of weapons to defend their own possessions, to deny others less fortunate the possibility to share them.

The other aspect of the scarlet beast's allure is that it "once was, is not, yet will come", the appearance to resurrect itself (see Revelation 13:3). For every possession, achievement, entertainment, or person that the world sets up as an idol, will eventually topple, and will then be scorned. But it will only take a moment for a new 'craftsman' to supply what the world craves for, so they will always remain in delusion over the weakness of their idols.

The details of the vision do not have special significance, as the seven heads, the seven hills*, the ten horns, are just to give us an idea of the beasts earthly power and force (17:9-14). Some kings fall, some kings rule for an hour. There is always a new 'king' coming to the scene, claiming his right to rule and dominate. Many commentators have plunged themselves in the effort to 'prove' some convoluted theory. Because the real point is the true nature of chaotic is the use of human force and power, and especially when it is expressed in violence.

* The hills are just a common symbol of power. But the city of Rome came to occupy a site that was sometimes refer to as 'seven hills', just as Babylon was said to be 'by many waters'. And so there is probably a deliberate echo of both of these cities in the depiction of the scarlet beast.

Yet the harshest 'war' against the Lamb and those who are faithful to him is spiritual. For the temptations of the world are many and often take insidious form. For the human mind finds it so easy to justify that God just want his believers to enjoy themselves and have anything they want - as we have seen the beast of the earth practice, dragging many souls to their destruction.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does the woman need the beast? Why does it need her? Can this tell us how to resist their attacks on us?

Mutual Resentment (Revelation 17:15-17)

Yet the scarlet beast is at odds with itself. For by its own nature, neither partner wants to be dependent on the other. And this is by their own nature, which God has put in their hearts. The impulse ever to compete, ever to seek power, ever to be completely independent, is the weak point of the scarlet beast is hat will ever and again expose its ugly side.

The waters we saw at first have a second meaning (17:15). For the scarlet woman is now sitting on the waters, which represent people from every nation, crushing them with her temptations.

The rider and the beast succumb to the uncontrollable impulse to dominate (17:16-17). Because each one wishes to be all-dominant, the pet turns on its 'master'. This simply symbolizes the many ways that the beast's own 'parts' or 'members' turning on each other, whether through literal

war or through the more ruthless competitions we see among the worldly. This is a never-ending cycle, for the contestants for world champion can never give second place to another.

The false appeal of the worldly and its pleasures can only lose its grip when we awake from the false dreams of this world (Psalm 73:1-5, 20-28). Consider the lessons of this psalm -

*Surely God is good to Israel, L
SEP*
to those who are pure in heart.
*But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; L
SEP*
I had nearly lost my foothold.
*For I envied the arrogant L
SEP*
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
They have no struggles;
*L
SEP their bodies are healthy and strong.*
They are free from common human burdens;
*L
SEP they are not plagued by human ills.*

They are like a dream when one awakes;
*when you arise, Lord, L
SEP*
you will despise them as fantasies.
When my heart was grieved
*L
SEP and my spirit embittered,*
I was senseless and ignorant;
*L
SEP I was a brute beast before you.*
Yet I am always with you;
*L
SEP you hold me by my right hand.*
You guide me with your counsel,
*L
SEP and afterward you will take me into glory.*
Whom have I in heaven but you?
*L
SEP And earth has nothing I desire besides you.*
My flesh and my heart may fail,
*L
SEP but God is the strength of my heart*
and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish;
*L
SEP you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.*
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
*L
SEP I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; L
SEP*
I will tell of all your deeds.

- Psalm 73:1-5, 20-28

The false allure of worldly attractions is strictly superficial and short-term, for they will all soon be lost. So those who live for fun and pleasure will see their hearts and lives turn to stone and dead wood. Yet God is the strength of our hearts, and our portion forever. For when the world loses everything, God will still be there for us to guide and nourish us with true blessings.

- Mark Garner, July 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Nineteen: Laments, Woes, & Rejoicing (Revelation 18)

The scarlet beast, 'Babylon', the world's pleasure dome, has fallen. Its fall brings laments and woes from most of the world, yet there is also rejoicing from those who understand it. So, what does the scarlet beast's fall mean? Is this a one-time worldwide fall, or something that can mean something to each person's heart?

The World's Gloom & Shock From The Beast's Fall (Revelation 18:1-19)

The sudden fall of the scarlet beast has put the worldly into gloom and shock. But this fall of 'Babylon' is not a one-time event, nor is it any moment world-wide. The fall of the idols from this Pleasure Dome will come to anyone experiences God's compassionate wrath, when an idol's uselessness is exposed. So the real question is, what should we do next?

The downfall of the scarlet woman and her beast was inevitable from her plagues overtaking her (18:1-8). She was filled with uncleanness and spiritual adultery, as depicted in the image of her playing host to every kind of demon and impure spirit and unclean animal. For these things will inevitably rouse God's wrath. Yet God's wrath is compassionate. For the effects of wrath will not be inflicted on the scarlet woman, who is no one person or no one city; she is just a symbol.

For God's wrath will be felt by those who commit spiritual adultery with her wares and amusements. So we are urged to "come out of her" (see below) before it is too late, as we experience the false hopes and disappointment that we get from sampling her.

The fall of the scarlet beast happened so fast, that everyone is shocked (18:9-19). Her doom in one hour suddenly made her pleasures seem so different, so worthless. Because this beast's doom only signifies those occasions when one of our prized idols in this world is suddenly revealed to be meaningless, or even worse (Ecclesiastes 1:14, 2:1, 2:11). So the beast and its instant gratification will always be there, but to one person at a time they will be exposed for what they are, shabby and shallow and extremely full of selfishness.

So great mourning and woe is heard from those who enjoyed her spiritual adulteries and who profited from their dealings with her. But all they miss is the thrill of fleshly feeling of experiencing their own fun. Even when we read over this long list of what the pleasure dome can hold for us (verses 12-13), even the believer's heart may sigh in regret for missing all those lost treats.

Were they really so bad? Yes, if we took our purpose in life by enjoying or always longing to have more of them. And were they really so good? Not at all, for the worldly will always rationalize their habit of indulging to excess, and will deceive one another of the empty and meaningless nature of their worldly means of self-satisfaction (Isaiah 41:7), which can never satisfy them or provide any genuine lasting benefit.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what ways may the meaningless nature of worldly pleasures suddenly become clear to us? How can some of these things suddenly appear as destructive to our hearts as they really are?

Released From This World's Judgment (Revelation 18:20-24)

Amidst the woe for the loss of this world's playthings, there is a joyous call to rejoice, to take to heart the message in the scarlet beast's fall. From time-to-time, the empty nature of the world's pleasure dome is exposed. When we are shown the emptiness of this world's fun and pleasures, it is a call to look to God and to seek him for himself, not for the things he gives us on this earth.

For the scarlet beast has been judged with its own judgment (18:20). Because the world's pleasure dome will always appear as so tantalizing, as to make everyone feel as if they are losing out on its toys and games. For it is one trick of this beast to make everyone feel its false mystery, always desiring more while always getting less in return. So only by rejecting the world's expectations can we become free from the world's oppressive forms of judgment (Romans 12:2), such as their peer pressure and competitiveness.

So our proper response when our idols are exposed is to throw them into the sea (18:24). For like a millstone they will deservedly sink (Matthew 18:6-7). For Jesus pronounced doom and woe on those who will lead his children into stumbling into spiritual adultery by luring them in by their superficial feelings of fun. So we are called to come out of her, to escape from the world's promise of living for ourselves and our flesh (Revelation 18:4, 2 Corinthians 6:17).

We are called, figuratively in all that it conveys, to seek no more adulterous music, the things that allure us to waste our lives in pleasure, possessions, and worldly accomplishments. And we are urged to involve ourselves no longer from our adulterous weddings by uniting our spirits and hearts with the things of this world. Instead we are to seek joy in God instead, simply by being with him and finding our joy in being with God for his own sake.

For as we shall see in Revelation 19:7-9, we were created to be the bride of the Lamb, made fit for uniting our spirits with God himself, who will meet our true needs through his grace and other spiritual blessings. But too often the scarlet beast is full of the blood of God's people, by sucking the lifeblood out of their lives and hearts with her superficial excitement and fun.

God has carried us since we were born (Isaiah 46). All of our idols are burdens that we carry around, giving them their false appearance of life and allowing them to sap our spirit. But God has always carried us since he created us. The things he gives us require nothing from us in return except our willingness to be with him.

To whom will we compare God? He brings near us his righteousness of grace, which puts to shame the world's incessant efforts to prove themselves worthy by their meager talents and achievements. And the moment when we humbly ask him to save us, by his grace alone, his salvation will not be delayed in coming to us through his Son's sacrificed blood.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How can we 'throw into the sea' our indulgence in worldly things? How can we 'topple' them as our idols? How can we help others to 'topple' their idols? What would constitute an adulterous spiritual 'marriage'? In what ways do our idols make us carry them around?

- Mark Garner, July 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Twenty: We Belong To Our God Alone (Revelation 19)

The book of Revelation has exposed the useless nature of the objects of this world and of the empty boasting of the things our flesh accomplishes. And now it is time for each 'beast' to be destroyed - that is, for each of us to rid our hearts of them. For the message of Revelation has nothing to do with end times or prophecy, but a call to give ourselves to God alone.

Pledged To The Lamb (Revelation 19:1-10)

The sudden fall of the scarlet beast will open our hearts to allow the Lamb to come in. For each of us was pledged to the Lamb when we entered this world, but God will always in his grace allow us to choose whether to give ourselves to his Lamb. And we are all invited, to come to him at any time that we are humble enough to give our trust only to him.

As the faithful praise God, the smoke going up from the scarlet beast's remains will last forever (19:1-3). Even the faithful have often been tormented and tempted by the scarlet beast's wares of spiritual adultery and spiritual prostitution*. All the idols of this world will each gorge themselves on the blood of saints, just as well as unbelievers. None of us is innocent of spiritual adultery. Only Jesus' precious blood has cleansed us and brought us back to God.

* These terms are common in Old Testament imagery, and there is probably no major difference. There may be a sense between adulterous relationships with things of the world because of fleshly enjoyment, compared being involved for some kind of worldly reward or benefit. Both are equally ugly to God.

The image of the smoke "lasting forever" is that the lesson of its fall will remain in the heart and mind of anyone who perceives it. In Isaiah 34:10, Isaiah used the image concerning the fall of Edom, the neighboring nation that stabbed Judah in the back when Babylon attacked Jerusalem*. Edom's fall will be remembered by the lasting smoke of its treachery.

* Edom was descended from Israel's (Jacob's) brother Esau. Its treachery against Judah is described in Isaiah 34:8-17, and in the book of Obadiah.

So after the collapse of the scarlet beast, comes the wedding supper for the Lamb (19:4-10). The roar of rushing waters, from the multitude who came through the great tribulation of their own sins and self, calls out Hallelujah, and praise God for who he is. And when someone's eyes are opened to the useless nature of the things of this world, they are ready to be one with the Lamb.

The Lamb's bride is now ready, now purified from the spiritual adulteries of the world's pleasure dome. The Lamb's bride is clothed in fine clean linen, not because it was so clean; but it has been cleansed by the Lamb's blood. The Lamb's supper is open to all, yet only all who know the Lamb. For we belong to our God alone, and each of us is pledged to God alone through Jesus. For at his supper he will allow us to feed on his best spiritual blessings (see Matthew 22:8-14).

As the angel said, these are the true words of God. When John is overcome and kneels before the angel, he is reproved; for to God alone we all belong. For all glory belongs to God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does the scarlet beast's fall open the way to becoming a 'bride' of Jesus? Who else is 'invited' to the wedding? What will we 'eat' there? Is there a reason why this can take place before the other beasts fall too?

The Fall Of The Beasts (Revelation 19:11-21)

We see the spiritual forces of God, led by Jesus, called Faithful and True, opposed by the assembled forces of the beasts and the proud and strong of this world. But there is not even a battle. Jesus simply captures the beasts, for indeed he has already exposed them for what they are. Because this image has nothing to do with chronology, for it talks about things within us.

The rider on a white horse is easy to identify as Jesus* (19:11-16). His eyes were blazing with fire when he was introduced in Revelation 1:14; and his robe is dipped in blood. And his name is the Word of God (John 1:1). Yet we were told that no one could no his name - but he himself knows his name, and those who have given themselves as the Lamb's bride are now in him.

* This is not the same as the rider on the white horse in Revelation 6. That was one of the 'horsemen of the apocalypse', whereas this horse will 'win' the spiritual battle.

As he prepares for a "battle", we also see a sharp sword coming out of his mouth (Isaiah 49:2). For this is not a bloody sword, nor even a literal sword. The words out of Jesus mouth are powerful enough to show the truth that will expose the weakness and emptiness of every idol and every pretender who claims to know God by their own goodness. For no beast of any kind can lay a true claim to anything or anyone in this world.

So death will come to the remaining beasts, by a bloodless sword (19:17-21). But before the 'battle' the birds are invited a great supper themselves, as a grim parody of the joyous supper that the faithful will attend. And the end comes as an anticlimax, as the beasts are rounded up with ease through the power of the 'sword' from Jesus' mouth.

The two beasts are thrown into a fiery lake, as in the image of the kingdoms in Daniel 7:11. For the power and force of human will, and of the self itself, are refuted only by the power of the Word of God. And afterwards the birds will feast on the leftovers, as prefigured in Ezekiel 39:17-20. For this represents the humiliation that God will bring upon the proud and lofty, to throw the remains of their ego and arrogance to the humble birds to feast upon them.

This victory will happen in each human life whenever the truths of God will become clear to the eyes of our hearts. Because each of us must see, that even the self within us must be put to death, and we must not worship self even through the guise of these beasts. These enemies were much more powerful than we were, and they always found it easy to rule our lives. We can only escape from sin and from our captivity to death lies and idols, through Jesus' death and his blood of grace.

We were rescued by him because he delighted in us (Psalm 18:1-19). Our enemies were stronger, but Jesus went to the greatest possible lengths to rescue our souls, because he wanted us to be one with him. His Word has exposed the truth of everything, and has laid the content of our hearts before God, along with the truth of what we worship, whether it is self or God.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the difference between Jesus here and the white horse's rider in Revelation 6? What is symbolized by his sword's power? How can we know this is not a literal battle? What does the birds' 'great supper' symbolize?

- Mark Garner, July 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Noted For Week Twenty-One: The Books Are Opened (Revelation 20)

Despite the complicated imagery, Revelation 20 again actually teaches some spiritual truths. The images explain the limitations that Satan faces in his attacks on us. While he is much more powerful than we are, his power is nothing compared to Jesus' power. We also see the lake of fire, an image that is used to represent the sadness of being separated from God.

The First Resurrection (Revelation 20:1-6)

The complicated details in this passage become clearer if we remember that Revelation does not follow a chronological pattern, but a thematic one. Most of the visions in Revelation 20 parallel some of the visions earlier in the book, rather than depicting events that come chronologically later. And again, they teach us spiritual truths, rather than futuristic theories.

John sees Satan, the dragon, captured and bound securely for 1000 years, limiting the dragon's power (20:1-3). An angel comes with a chain and a key to the abyss, and yet without too much trouble he is able to seize the dragon. So again we see the many ways in which Satan is subject to the constraints God puts on him*.

* The only constraint that God never seems to take away is Satan's free will. Even with Satan, God seems almost to have been willing to bear with him so long, in vainly hoping for a change of heart?

The dragon is now locked and sealed in the Abyss. In Revelation 12:10-11, we saw the drastic curtailment of his powers at the birth of Jesus. And this imposes even further constraints on him, when someone comes to Jesus. Part of his power over them has been broken by Jesus' death (Hebrews 2:14-15), by Jesus breaking the power of death of those who come to know him.

John then sees the godly ('those beheaded') coming to life and reigning in glory during this 'thousand years' (20:4-6). This also is not a literal future event, and indeed no earthly kingdom could ever bring the spiritual fulfillment and assurance that Jesus brings to our souls. The prospect of a glorious earthly kingdom is much less exciting to those who fully appreciate the real blessings that Jesus brings. As Christians, we have already been raised from the dead, since our old lives in this perishable world have already ended.

We already reign with Christ spiritually in this world, not in any earthly sense, but as the children of the King of the world (2 Timothy 2:12). And as Revelation says, we are also priests of Christ in this world (1 Peter 2:5, 2:9). Living the first resurrection means to live a new hope by the resurrection of Jesus himself (1 Peter 1:3). So even now, we are able to be with God as often as we want to, and we no longer have to be deceived by the world's lies.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why would the image of being chained in the Abyss be an appropriate way of representing the constraints on Satan? What constraint on Satan does God never remove? Why would John see the faithful (who are still alive) as having been 'beheaded'? In what sense do we reign now with Jesus?

Another Anticlimax (Revelation 20:7-10)

The unleashing of Satan is again not a separate chronological period, but rather reminds us that Satan's attacks against us are sharply limited by Jesus' authority. Once more, as we saw in Revelation 19, Satan enlists his allies among the worldly, here represented by 'Gog and Magog'. Finally, Satan joins the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire.

John watches as Satan is 'released', and sees him respond in a predictable manner (20:7-8). Once again he is deceiving the nations, yet this deceiving takes a more subtle and dangerous form. Because one of Satan's deadliest forms of deceit is to deceive us into thinking that we just have to be 'good enough' to live by our own power. Yet all of us have sin in our lives, and this will always necessitate our dependence on God's grace (1 John 1:8-10).

Satan attracts another gang from the nations, this time led by 'Gog and Magog', a byword in the ancient world for an alliance of heartless and amoral rulers* (see also Ezekiel 38:1-6). This is not a literal army, just the spiritual forces that Satan uses for the renewed attacks he is sometimes permitted to make. His attacks often seem overwhelming, because he is stronger than we are. We always need to be reminded of the importance of trusting in God's power, love, and grace.

* The name Gog came from Gyges, or Gugu, a cruel ruler of the ancient kingdom of Lydia, in present-day western Turkey. In Ezekiel, he is depicted as the leader of all the distant nations attacking God's people.

Their attack is short-lived and anticlimactic (20:9-10). As soon as they assemble and mobilize, they are devoured by fire that flows from God's holiness. This image comes from Daniel 7:9-10, part of his vision of the parade of world empires* that would all be 'overthrown' in a spiritual sense when Jesus exposed their futility, symbolized by this flow of fire from God's presence.

* This is the vision of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. The details of it are used as sources for the vision of the beast from the sea in Revelation 13.

So the devil is thrown into the lake of fire, using the symbolism of fire that accompanies God's holiness contacting the unclean. Yet note a curious aspect of Satan's fall. When each of the beasts fell, there was joyful celebration of their collapse. Each of those 'beasts' did not represent a literal individual or individuals, but personified the idolatrous and selfish desires within ourselves. When those are exposed within us, we should celebrate and praise God for toppling them. But the devil is an actual being, so there is even a sense of pity for his ultimate fate.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Since Satan's 'release' is not chronological, when or how does it occur? What do the hordes following Satan represent? In what sense are they devoured by fire? What does it mean that Satan is thrown into the lake of fire?

In The Presence Of God (Revelation 20:11-15)

The images in these verses are vivid and memorable. The earth and sky pass away, and all the dead come before the throne to be judged. Books are opened, and the book of life itself is opened. The lake of fire, the 'second death', swallows up those whose names are not found in the book of life, and it even swallows up death itself. But what does this mean, and when does it happen?

All of this vivid imagery is meant to call our attention to the momentous significance of the condition of our souls (20:11-15). What do all these images mean, in their details and when they occur? On one level, this gives us a stylized depiction of some aspects of the final judgment. But as with every other biblical descriptions of judgment, all of these symbols are not literal. And on another level, these images also symbolize present spiritual realities.

Before God's throne, the earth and the heavens flee from his presence, for "there was no place for them". Yet beyond the image of them disappearing at the end, this also conveys a sense of this earth and its contents have already been declared to be tainted with sin and uncleanness. Even in our lives here, these also have no place in God's presence, in our hearts they must 'flee' from God.

As the dead are standing before the throne, this reminds us of the importance of everyone's eternal destiny. Yet these dead also represent those whose bodies are still physically alive but are dead spiritually. For when the books are opened (recall Daniel 7:10, above), all the things written in them will be made known someday, yet they are all very well known to God right now.

Next comes the image of death and Hades themselves being thrown into the lake of fire (see also 1 Corinthians 15:54-56). Even our concept of 'Hades' or 'hell' will not exist itself at the final end of things. And even now, to those who have been redeemed by Jesus' blood, the fear of death has been removed by our release from the second death.

Yet the second death now hovers over those who have not come yet to know their God. We cannot truly know or understand what their fate in eternity will be. The lake of fire is just a symbol, yet it reminds us of the terrible sadness that would come from never being able to be with God. No matter how filled with sin or hatred or violence a soul may be, anyone who has truly come to know Jesus will not rejoice at their doom.

And think too, that this second death is already present in those for those who do not yet know God. Their lives may seem carefree and full of 'good things' in this world, but they must for every minute of their lives fight off the deepening sense of emptiness and lack of a true sense of purpose or meaning, except for the bleak purpose of worshiping themselves.

These images call us to see the true conquerors (Romans 8:31-39). For we can never truly become the type of glorious conquerors that our flesh wants us to be. Only God and Jesus are the ones who truly conquer the world and its forces. And they conquer not by force, but by God's love as it is shown in Jesus. The only sense in which we will ever be conquerors, is that in all things, whatever happens to us in this world and whatever will take place, is that nothing can ever separate us from God's unfailing love. And this will always come to us just by grace.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Since each of these details is not literal, explain what sense each of them will have in eternity. How do they each also apply to present spiritual realities? Can we tell anything about the second death will include? Can we see what 'heaven' will include?

- Mark Garner, July 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Twenty-Two: A New Heaven & A New Earth (Revelation 21)

With the old things taken away, we now see the new beginnings. There is now a new heaven and a new earth, and no more sea. And now we see the new Jerusalem, the Holy City. This chapter provides us with an extended description of this new city, but it is not a literal city, and this is not a literal description of heaven. Everything in this city is spiritual.

Making Everything New (Revelation 21:1-8)

Everything has been made new, because now God has allowed us to see everything as it truly is. Now we see the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, as it also truly is in God's eyes. God's dwelling place is now among his people, to fulfill the greatest of his many promises. This is accompanied by a caution - yet when we understand what it really means, it is a compassionate warning.

A new heaven and a new earth, and there is no longer any sea (21:1-5). Everything looks so different - but when is this? In Isaiah 65:17-18, the prophet foretold that there would be a day when we would see the heavens and earth through new eyes, blessed with greater understanding of what God has done. And then, "the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind." The things we used to consider important, will now seem empty. So this has already occurred for us who have been redeemed and have had our first resurrection.

Even after the first resurrection, there will no longer be a sea of trouble that we will have to cross to reach God. Although this sea still glows with its threatening fire (Revelation 15:2-3), now we must only cross it to leave this world; we can know that the sea underneath us is made of glass. As long as we rely on God's grace and Jesus' blood, he will carry us as we walk over it, as we must pass through the fire of the world.

When the time comes for us to see the second resurrection, we will of course not be surprised to see everything look so new and different. But it is impossible for us to know what this new realm will 'look' like, or even if that word has any meaning. So the only things we can count on to expect, are the spiritual truths that we can already sense and experience now.

And the one thing that we can count on most of all, is that God will dwell with his people. This has been God's greatest desire since the creation. Even as the Israelites were led to the 'Promised Land', he told them he wanted to be with them himself (Leviticus 26:11-13). Only a piece of earth would be nothing compared to the time when Jesus would open the way to the Most Holy Place for us. So as God says he is making everything new, his words are trustworthy and true.

God now announces his gracious invitation, and he adds a caution to it (21:6-8). To the thirsty, he calls to them to come humbly to drink from the spring of water of life*, without cost, as Isaiah had prophesied long ago (Isaiah 55:1-2). And those who are victorious over their own sin and self - which will occur only by accepting the grace and blood of Jesus - they will inherit all this, and especially to be with God forever.

* In John 7:37-39, Jesus makes the same invitation, referring to the 'living water' as the Holy Spirit. Another of God's greatest and most gracious gifts to us.

Yet God also cautions us to beware of the second death, which will befall the likes of the 'cowardly', the 'immoral' and the 'idolater'. He is addressing us who know him, and he is not referring to the crude literal versions of these things. 'Cowardly' refers to those with false bravery in the world's eyes, because they lack humility and the spiritual courage to die to themselves and to accept Jesus by grace alone (see Revelation 12:11)*. And the immoral here are spiritual adulterers, who find more pleasure in the things of this world than they do in God.

* This is what Jesus meant in saying, "whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it (Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24).

And the reason for this caution is different than it may seem at first. The only blessing we can anticipate at the second resurrection is the greatest blessing we can have - being with God and Jesus forever. Yet if we are still more excited about our own idols (even our fleshly efforts to prove ourselves to God), we will be quite disappointed to undergo the second resurrection.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How does this world become "a new heaven and a new earth" to us in our first resurrection, when we are redeemed in Jesus? Why will there be no sea? How will it be a special blessing to have God dwell in us? What is the meaning of the caution in verse 8?

A City On A Mountain (Revelation 21:10-20)

The Holy City that comes down out of the sky is the Bride of the Lamb, simply the redeemed. For even now the body of Christ already seems glorious and beautiful to God and to Jesus. The description of the city is filled with imagery that represents spiritual truths. For this is a spiritual city, built entirely from spiritual things and built by the Spirit.

The bride of the Lamb is the new Jerusalem that we see now (21:10-14). It is a shining city, shining with God's own glory that cannot be hidden (Matthew 5:14). The glory of this city is not in the materials it is made of, for those are only images. It is in the true glory of Jesus' grace and compassion, who called us to come to him, to be cleansed with his blood, and to be one with him. The use of the symbols of the number twelve* also help us to see that this city is made up of his faithful redeemed.

* The arrangement of the gates in verse 13 is a reference to the setup of the Israelite camp in Numbers 2, to connect the tribes of Israel with the apostles.

The elaborate procedure described in the next few verses simply tells us that, "the Lord knows those who are his" (21:15-18), as Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:19. We saw a measuring rod in Revelation 11, to symbolize the distinction that God (alone) can always make between those who truly know him and those who don't.

The foundations of the city are made of every kind of precious stone (21:19-20). For we who are redeemed are what this city is built of. We are living stones, built up into a spiritual building (1 Peter 2:4-5). The many varieties of gemstones* is because every person God created is special and precious to him. God shows his unfailing love to each one (Isaiah 54:9-12), and every heart who comes to him in humility is a new and irreplaceable gemstone.

* Some of the stones in this list are usually given contemporary names in translation. Some of them went by names that are now used for different stones; and some of these stones are varieties of each other.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does the vision assure us that God knows those who are his? Why do the redeemed look like gemstones to God? What does this say about God? What matters the most to him?

No Temple & No Sun (Revelation 21:21-27)

This new Holy City has many other unusual characteristics. Its gates are made out of enormous pearls, and there is no temple, not even in a holy city. And there is no more sun and moon, because God will be the shining light ever more. And there is something more about the gates, for that they will never close. Everyone is welcome to come into this spiritual city.

The gates of this city are each carved from a single pearl (21:21). The true gate into the city is Jesus, our True Shepherd (John 10:7-9). And the gates made of pearl remind us of the priceless pearl in Jesus' parable (Matthew 13:45-46). For Jesus has indeed asked us to give up our life of self and worldly pleasure, in order to be made one with him.

God is evermore our light and our temple (21:22-27, see also Isaiah 60). There is no more need for a physical temple, because we now are able to be with God, in his presence, whenever we wish. And we now are able to walk by the true light, because God's light will even shine in the darkness (Isaiah 60:19-21). God replaces the sun, and Jesus replaces the moon that reflects the sun's light. For he is "the radiance of God's glory." (Hebrews 1:3)

As we saw in the city's foundations, receiving the splendor of the nations will also be their 'gemstones', the humble hearts that God always seeks (Isaiah 60:4-5). And in this city, the gates are always open (Isaiah 60:11). No intimidating bars on these gates, no iron locks. Everyone is welcome to come to Jesus, asking him only for his grace.

For we receive everything from God by grace, all by his grace, reconciliation through the cross and much more (Romans 5:1-11). For while we were sinners, Christ died for us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

- Romans 5:6-10

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How do the gates represent Jesus? Why might there be twelve of them? Explain why there is no more temple. Why was there even need for a temple in the first place? What does it mean that the gates are always open?

- Mark Garner, August 2014

THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Notes For Week Twenty-Three: Return To True Life (Revelation 22:1-11)

As the visions in Revelation come to a close, we see the return to full life, true life, that God has always desired to give his creations. This full life cannot come from the things in this world, and we can have a full life with only the spiritual blessings that come from our God. The images in Revelation 22 show us that we have closed the cycle, through Jesus redeeming us to be with God.

The Water Of Life & The Tree Of Life (Revelation 22:1-5)

Flowing through the Holy City is the river filled with the living water of life, with the tree of life along its shores. God is dwelling in the city, and he now allows his faithful to see his face. All of the images illustrate the return to true life that God has given us by grace. This true life comes from being with God, having becoming one with him, through the redemption by Jesus.

The new heaven and the new earth bring full life and healing from our spiritual wounds (22:1-2). The image of the river flowing with the water of life, and the tree of life, remind us that spiritual life is the flourishing life, for it also points us back to the beginning when God first created us and wanted to be with us. In Genesis, we saw the rivers flowing through the garden giving it life, and at the center of the garden was the tree of life (Genesis 2:8-14); and God was with his creations. Now the relationship has been restored by Jesus' redemption.

Now the relationship we now have with God is even better than it was in the beginning. For now we can eat the fruit of the tree of life (as Ezekiel 47:7-12 foresaw). Only Jesus' blood could ever obtain this closeness with God. And it is a comforting promise that the leaves of the tree will heal the nations. And it will mean even more to us when we understand that is the ability to heal of us the deadliest disease, endemic to every part of the world - our sins (1 Peter 2:24).

Another return to the beginning is the promise that there will be no longer any curse on those who have been redeemed by Jesus' blood (22:3-5). The first curses are now removed, to cure the relationships that were damaged by sin (Genesis 3:16-19) by now calling us not to dominate or compete with each other. God himself delights in now dwelling with his redeemed (Revelation 21:3-4), as his own relationship has been repaired, and more*. His name is now on our foreheads, to show that we will belong to him as long as we wish to be with him.

* For now the redeemed have made their choice to be with God, out of their own free will.

We have also seen before that there is no more night, no need for the sun (Revelation 21, see also Isaiah 60:19-20). For God's true light of life can guide our way even in this world full of darkness. All of these things will take their final spiritual form in eternity, but even they have already come to pass for the redeemed. We can often suffer on this earth, and we may struggle against our own sins; yet we already can taste the best of God's spiritual blessings, these imperishable blessings that we can never purchase or deserve.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is a river and a tree used as images? When do these things come to pass? Why are we now allowed to eat the fruit of the tree of life, when even Adam couldn't? Why are the curses removed now? How have they been removed? Why is God's name on our foreheads? What does it mean?

The Words Of Life (Revelation 22:6-11)

The visions John has seen in Revelation are trustworthy and true. They have revealed to us the deepest mysteries of God - but not the details of events in the future, for they have instead revealed the truth about this world, about ourselves, and about what God wants from us. All that we see in Revelation is near to us, since our God is near us if we will only reach out to find him.

Throughout Revelation, we have been assured that these things were coming soon; and indeed, they are already in place for those who have been redeemed (22:6-9). The things that must take place to make these blessings come to us, were described several hundred years earlier by Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1-9). The coming of Jesus, his gentleness, his sacrifice to release us from our chains to sin, which saved us and redeemed us entirely by grace.

These words have been proclaimed to all, and they are trustworthy and true. So truly blessed is the one who keeps them in their heart. And even as the angel cautions John, we are only to worship our God alone, and to see God alone as the source of life and light.

The words that have been proclaimed to all, are ready to hear now, and so John is told not to seal them up (22:10-11). The time is near, though this does not mean chronologically; it means now. The time when God's word comes near to each life, we do well to heed it when we have the chance (Isaiah 55:6-7). We do know that our God will always come and call us, over and over again, in his grace and patience. Yet at any moment, there is only our pride and our empty worldly things to leave behind.

So God patiently allows us to continue as we please. Let those who do wrong, let them continue doing wrong; and those who do right, let them continue doing right. This does not mean that God is indifferent to their choice or to their eternal fate, quite the contrary (Romans 6:23). He is just showing some more grace to his straying sheep, hoping that they will still come back to him. For the more grace he gives them will only help them have the chance to make the right decision. He will always graciously allow each of us to choose the course of our lives.

We have redeemed life, life that appeared in the desert, out of nowhere. For the life we have has always been by God's grace; and our new life in Jesus is even more "grace in place of grace already given". The spiritual joy, the peace with God, and our hope to be with God, are all ours by grace alone; so let us nevermore boast about ourselves or our works, but instead boast only in the cross of Christ and the flow of grace it brings us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean that these things will come soon? Why would John have been moved to bow down by the angel, and what should the angel's warning mean to us? Why would God allow the wrongdoers to continue in their ways? How can we tell that we have received all of these blessings by grace alone?

- Mark Garner, August 2014

**THE ALPHA & THE OMEGA:
LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF REVELATION**

Notes For Week Twenty-Four: Come! (Revelation 22:12-21)

As the book of Revelation and the Scriptures of God come to a close, Jesus and the Spirit leave us with some final thoughts. Above all, they want to leave with us their open invitation, Come! They will always offer to us the water of life, free and by grace alone; and they will always be calling us and asking to come to them.

The Beginning & The End (Revelation 22:12-21)

Jesus is coming soon, to each soul in every place and at every time. He is the Beginning and the End of all things, for life begins with God and was always meant for us to be with God forever. These final words are less abstract than most of Revelation, yet to understand them we must keep them in the context of the entire book of Revelation.

When Jesus comes, his reward is with him (22:12-16). For our greatest hope is to be with God forever. And when he says that he will give "to each according to what they have done," this is because the more we have delighted in God, the more we will appreciate being with him forever. So it will really be given to us according to our hearts (Psalm 37:4).

The gates are open all day and all night, so anyone can walk in. And truly blessed are those who go through the gates, who enter this Holy City by the gate of Jesus. Yet Jesus warns us that there are many who will stay outside the gates, including "dogs" (those who try to justify themselves by their deeds*), the immoral (spiritual adulterers), and idolaters (tangible or intangible idols).

* For example, Paul used this word in Philippians 3:2 of those who taught salvation by law.

Yet they are not kept outside just by a rule. Those who justify themselves by law or works, or who are in love with this world or with themselves, or who have idols such as material things or pleasures or accomplishments, could walk through the gates but could never recognize Jesus for who he was, could never accept or appreciate the spiritual blessings that Jesus wants to give us.

Now we hear the wonderful call from heaven, "Come!", asking the thirsty to come and drink the living water (21:17-21). The call to "come" should be welcomed by all whose souls thirst and to all who live in darkness in this world. The call to drink the water of life was also given by Isaiah,

*Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.
Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.*

- Isaiah 55:1-2

where we are offered to get this water for free, instead of laboring for things that can never truly satisfy us. And Jesus calls in John 7:37-39 reminds us that this living water will flow freely from the Spirit who lives within us.

The last cautions to us remind us not to add words to, or take words away from, the prophecies in the book. Yet these should be understood carefully. If anyone adds words to it, they will suffer from the plagues (Revelation 16). Yet remember that this is not a punishment; it is a natural consequence, a flare of God's compassionate wrath, to call us back to being close with him.

And if anyone takes words away, then God will take away their chance to share in the tree of life or to live in his Holy City. But again, what does this mean? If we take away a word of Jesus' blood, if we in the least take away from our absolute dependence on his grace, we have reverted to living on our own flesh. This would mean we are no longer eating from his tree of life. So these cautions are both intended to call us to stay on the path of God's grace and truth.

Jesus calls one more time, "I am coming soon." For he is coming to call out gently to each soul in this earth. And when he calls us, why would we not take all of his imperishable blessings, and humbly accept them by his grace?

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How will we be given "according to what we have done"? Why will "dogs" and others be unable to come in? What are we asked to "come" to? What does it mean to add or take away words, and what will happen as a result?

A Look Back At Revelation

Seeing Jesus Again (Revelation 1:12-16)

What Does Each Detail Mean, In The Description Of Jesus?

For The One Who Is Victorious (Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 3:12, 3:21)

What Does Each Of These Blessings Mean?

How Were They Victorious?

A Door Standing Open In Heaven (Revelation 4:1)

Worthy To Open The Scroll (Revelation 5:1-14)

What Did It Contain?

Why Could No One Else Open It?

Why Was The Lamb Worthy?

- Mark Garner, August 2014