
First Electronic Edition

Our Victorious Lamb

A Manual for the Study of the Revelation

Dr. James Heller

OUR VICTORIOUS LAMB
A Manual for the Study

of

The Book of Revelation

by

James J. Heller

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The late Dr. James J. Heller was Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Prior to that, he was Professor of Biblical Theology at Moravian Theological Seminary. He holds the B.A. in Philosophy from Texas Christian University and the B.D. and Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary.

Dr. Heller's interest in eschatology, or the doctrine of "last things," was of long standing. At Princeton he was awarded the Fellowship in New Testament Biblical Theology for his paper "Man's State After Death According to the New Testament," and his doctoral dissertation was on the topic The Resurrection of the Dead. More recently he has developed a series of illustrated lectures on the Book of Revelation highlighting, in addition to its message, representative selections of music and art inspired by the apocalyptic visions of St. John. His lectures have been offered through the Lay Academy of the Greater Lehigh Valley and as a part of Moravian's Mobile Seminary in the Western District and in the Southern Province. In the Summer of 1979 Dr. and Mrs. Heller traveled to Greece and the Aegean Islands. They visited Patmos, where John received the visions recorded in Revelation, and also the ruins of Ephesus in Asia Minor (now Turkey).

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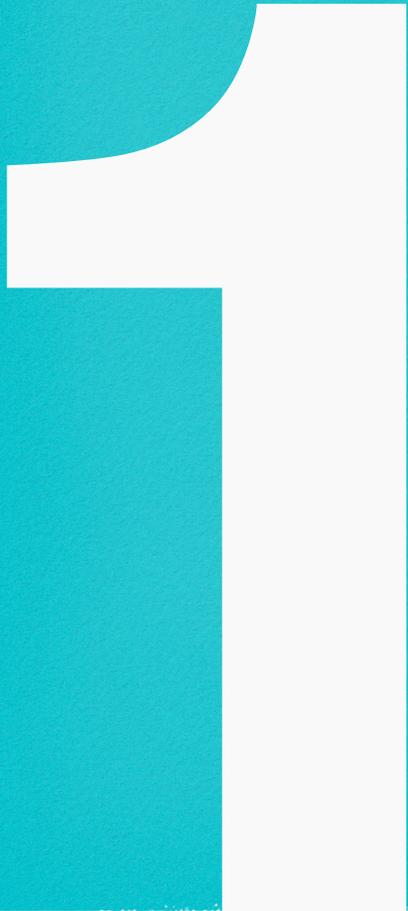
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Session 1



There are several persons in the New Testament by the name of John. How many can you name? The author may have been one of them or another early Christian named John.

CHRIST IN THE MIDST OF THE CHURCHES

Outline

1:13 Title: "The Revelation Of Jesus Christ."

1:4-11 The opening words of John's letter to the seven churches.

1:12-20 The vision of Christ in the midst of his churches.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Session 1.

Helps and Clues

1:1 Revelation or, in some Bibles, Apocalypse (from the original Greek)-hidden secrets or mysteries now revealed. Both Jews and early Christians wrote numerous books called "apocalypses," but the spiritual and literary power of the last book of the New Testament puts it in a class by itself.

1:1,2 Note the steps by which Revelation comes to us: God_Christ_Angel_John_Churches. And today we could add: translator_printer_book seller_reader.

1:3 He who reads . . . those who hear. The reference is to reading aloud in a gathering of believers, but the blessing is not limited to any one time or place. This means that as we begin this study we may claim the blessing as our own.

1:4 John. There are several persons in the New Testament by this name. How many can you name? The author may have been one of them or another early Christian named John. The tradition is that the author was John the Apostle. But that view was challenged by scholars as early as the third century and the majority today do not accept it. This much we do know: his name was John, his race Hebrew, and this Revelation of Jesus Christ came to him in visions while he was a political prisoner of the Romans on the island of Patmos.

The seven churches. The number seven is used 49 times (7 X 7) in Revelation and always refers to something that is complete. The seven churches, therefore, include all churches in all times-our Moravian Church, your congregation and mine.

1:5 Note the titles given to Jesus, declaring him to be proclaimer of God's truth, conqueror of death, master of all, and king of kings.

1:5,6 To him who loves us . . . This verse puts the whole gospel in a nutshell. Can you think of any other verses in the Bible which do the same?

1:7 Behold he is coming. It will not be until the final chapters of Revelation that we shall see the advent of Christ in triumph and glory.

1:8 Alpha and Omega . . . who is . . . was . . . is to come. The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Our beginning, our end, and all that lies between are bound up with God. He is everything in life from A to Z.

1:9 Patmos. A small, rocky island off the coast of Turkey used in New Testament times by the Romans to imprison political dissidents-of whom John was certainly one. Cruise ships stop at Patmos to show tourists the dungeon where legend says John wrote Revelation and also the 11th century monastery

which bears his name. Perhaps someone in your congregation has visited Patmos on such a trip. Ask for a firsthand report.

1:10 In the spirit on the Lord 's day-that is, caught up in a trance on a Sunday. This is the only reference in the Bible to the "Lord's Day" as the Christians' day of worship. The Romans, who called their emperors "Lord," used to set aside certain "Lord's Days" in honor of them.

1:11 Write what you see. Revelation is not the record of a mad-man's hallucinations, as some would have us believe. It is rather a series of authentic visions which John experienced and faithfully described in response to our Lord's command.

1:13 One like a son of man. Here, as in Daniel 7 and Ezekiel 1, "son of man" refers to God in human form. The vision, therefore, is of Christ as the incarnation of God.

For the rest of the vision, Christ gives to John and therefore to us, the important clues we need: lampstands equal churches and stars equal angels.

Comments and Questions

In order to grasp the central message of this first Session of Revelation we must consider the conditions under which Christians lived at the end of the first century in Asia Minor. Congregations at this time were small and in many cases met in homes or in any buildings they could acquire.

Christians in the Roman Empire

Christians for the most part belonged to the lower economic and social classes. Some were slaves. Most were Jewish in background. Although the common spoken language was Greek, the world around the Mediterranean Sea was ruled by the Romans.

Rome had done much to unify the various peoples which made up its empire and had brought many benefits by way of trade, sea travel, roadways, a postal service, great engineering feats, and a system of law which usually protected the rights of individuals.

The Religions of the Empire

Religions of a bewildering variety abounded everywhere—cults originating in Persia, Egypt, and in other countries Rome had conquered. Among these many religions were Judaism and its recent offshoot Christianity. Present everywhere was the Roman cult which hailed the emperors as divine beings and set up temples in every city for the populace to worship them.

Most of the emperors from Augustus on down did not take this business of their own divinity seriously. They recognized the Roman cult for what it was—a means of assuring the allegiance of the populace. The claim to divinity was more a political device than a religious statement, except for Caligula, who quite liter-

ally went mad with the thought that he really was a god. Those of you who saw the PBS series "I Claudius" will remember him.

And then there was Domitian, who reigned from A.D. 81-96. He was not mad but apparently also believed he had become a god and insisted that everyone acknowledge his divinity. All his proclamations began: "Our Lord and God Domitian commands . . ." Domitian went so far as to put to death members of his own family who had become Christians and refused to worship him.

The Breakdown of Civilization

We should not conclude, however, that there was widespread persecution of Christians at this time. That was to come later. But it was a time of great apprehension and fear of what loomed ahead. All the signs seemed to be pointing to a breakdown of some sort. The empire itself was threatened by fearsome powers to the East and by moral decay within.

The little band of Christians scattered here and there were caught in the web of Rome's debauchery, treachery, and vulnerability to destruction; they wondered what would become of them when the Empire collapsed. Was God giving any thought to their fate or had he forgotten? And what of the promise that Christ would soon return and set up his kingdom of peace and righteousness on earth?

The Occasion and Purpose of Revelation

It was to speak to such times and conditions as these that John recorded the visions which came to him while a prisoner on the isle of Patmos and sent descriptions of his mystical experiences by courier to seven congregations near the western shore of the nearby province of Asia. Tradition says that he was aided by a scribe named Prochorus. The year, as nearly as can be determined, was A.D. 96.

Against this background we can understand and appreciate the message of John's first vision-Christ in the midst of the candlesticks. It is a word of assurance to believers that the living Christ is present among them to cheer and comfort them in the midst of their poverty and suffering, their anxiety and their fear of the unknown future.

And What of Christians Today?

Now it is your turn to consider in what ways the times and conditions under which we live are anything like those of John's day. To get you started, consider that the Romans enjoyed a great labor-saving system called "slavery" but lived in fear that the slaves would revolt and take over. We also have a great labor-saving system called "technology" and live in fear that our technology will run out of control and destroy us all. What other anxieties and fears do we have which seem to parallel those of

the first century? How can we know that the living Christ still walks among us and gives us assurance of ultimate victory?

The Book of Revelation is, in a sense, an epic of the day that is after tomorrow. In the midst of sorrows, stress, anguish, and calamity, it bids us look ahead. Think not just of where we are now, but of our destiny with God, for he will still have the last word.

There is a moving Welsh hymn which beautifully expresses the message of this chapter and of the whole Book of Revelation:

*This is my Father's world;
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.*

*This is my Father's world,
The battle is not done,
The Lord Who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and heaven be one.*

(No. 165 in the Moravian Hymnal)

Session 2



The days in which we live are not unlike those which the Church faced when it was just two or three generations old.

LETTERS TO THE CHURCHES

Outline

2:1-29 The letters to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira.

3:1-22 The letters to Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapters 2 and 3.

Helps and Clues

2:1 To the angel . . . write. Throughout the seven letters a common a pattern can be traced with the following phrases or elements found in each one:

1. A command to the angel of the Church to write.
2. The phrase "the words of" followed by a descriptive phrase drawn from the vision of the risen Christ in Chapter 1.
3. The words "I know" followed by a description of conditions which Christ finds in the Church-both good and bad.
4. An exhortation to repent or to persevere.
5. The phrase "he who has an ear, let him hear . . ."
6. The words "To him who conquers I will . . ." or "He who conquers shall not . . ." followed by a promise of divine protection or blessing.

Angel-a heavenly guardian assigned to each of the churches.

Ephesus-the foremost metropolis of Asia noted for the famous Temple of Diana (also called Artemis)-one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Today the ruins of Ephesus are among the most impressive of any in the Near East, with sev-

eral miles of marble streets and mosaic sidewalks, a threestory library, and a great amphitheater seating 24,000- the very one where the silversmiths made their attack on the apostle Paul (Acts 19).

2:4 You have abandoned the love you had at first-that is, by their excessive zealousness in ferreting out evildoers and false doctrine (see verse 2).

2:6 Nicolaitans-a group of people within the early Church who compromise their faith by continuing to practice pagan customs.

2:8 Smyrna. For a brief description of this city and the others consult a one volume dictionary of the Bible.

2:10 Crown of Life-reminiscent of the wreath bestowed on victorious athletes in Olympicstyle games for which Smyrna was famous.

2:12,13 Pergamum . . . Satan's throne-so called because it was a stronghold of emperor worship. Its temple of Asclepios-sometimes called the "the Lourdes of antiquity." It was the closest thing the ancients had to a hospital.

2:17 White stone-possibly an amulet or charm inscribed with a secret name referring to Christ.

2:20 Jezebel-a woman whose corrupting influence put one in mind of the infamous wife of King Ahab in the Old Testament.

3:14,15 Laodicea . . . Neither cold nor hot . . . I will spew you out of my mouth. The water supply of Laodicea came by an aqueduct from hot springs some distance from the city. By the time the waters reached Laodicea they were no longer hot but lukewarm and unpalatable.

3:17 You say, I am rich. Laodicea was a renowned financial center.

3:18 White garments to clothe you. Laodicea also prided itself on its clothing trade.

Salve to anoint your eyes. And finally, Laodicea was famous for the manufacture of a medicinal salve which it exported widely as a remedy for diseases of the eye.

3:19 In place of the usual phrase "to him who conquers . . ." Christ says, " those whom I love, I reprove and chasten."

Comments and Questions

As we approach the year 2000 and the beginning of the third millennium of the Christian era, sometimes it seems to us that the world has never been in such a state. We are besieged with problems which lie completely beyond our control. Not just threats of wars-such threats have always been with us-but now threats in which the instruments of war can bring about unimaginable destruction of life. Then we must live with the knowledge that our willful greed may exhaust the natural resources of the

earth, upon which life itself depends, and with it all, the attending specter of starvation for a vast number of people. Then, from time to time, nature itself reminds us of the unpredictable with the eruption of mighty volcanoes, devastating earthquakes, and violent storms.

Ominous Signs of Danger and Decay

Indeed, the days in which we live are not unlike those which the Church faced when it was just two or three generations old. Wise men knew that Rome was dying of internal decay. All Romans feared the eastern block of nation states united in the fearful Parthian army, poised to march against Rome. Then, there was that persistent belief, or superstition, that Nero, who supposedly had committed suicide in A.D. 68, had in fact fled to Parthia and was about to lead those dreaded battalions of cavalry against Rome.

And remember, it was not many years earlier that Mount Vesuvius had erupted with results more far reaching than the destruction of Pompeii. For the news of that catastrophe paralyzed people all over the ancient Roman world and the ashes of the volcano were blown by the wind as far as Egypt and Asia.

John Writes to Seven Churches

And so it was at this time that John, from his prison grotto on Patmos, was instructed by the risen Christ to write a brief mes-

sage to each of the seven congregations in nearby Asia Minor. (We say Asia Minor today to distinguish this region from the vast continent of Asia as it now exists.) No doubt there were special reasons for selecting these seven churches, but in writing to seven, rather than to six or eight or ten, it is clear that the messages were meant for the whole Church, since the number seven, as we have noted, indicates completeness.

A major theme of Revelation is the impending tribulation and judgment of the world. Before John is given these visions of woe and terror (Chapters 6-19), however, Christ commissions him to write to the churches as though in confirmation of Peter's admonition that "judgment begins with the house of the Lord" (1 Peter 4:17). Believers are also about to go through their hour of trial and must be prepared for what lies ahead.

The Letters Dealt with Specific Situations in the Churches

In reading these seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, one thing is unmistakable. Each one was written to very specific situations and conditions in the life of a particular congregation. Some of the allusions are to local events and persons known only to "insiders" who lived there at the time and our attempts to interpret them are little more than speculation. Who were the Nicolaitans of Ephesus and Pergamum? Why were Christians in Smyrna about to be imprisoned? Wouldn't you like to know more about Antipas and his martyrdom at Pergamum? And

what of the woman called Jezebel? How did she come to wield such sinister power over the church in Thyatira?

While there are many details in these letters which leave us puzzled, the conditions which Christ finds in his seven churches of old are present in his Church everywhere and in all ages. We have all seen orthodoxy taken to such extremes that compassion is smothered (Ephesus). Do you know of congregations today which in years past were thriving centers of Christian commitment and are now spiritually moribund and lifeless shadows of their former vitality (Sardis)? And how often have we seen new congregations with open doors of opportunity for witness and outreach before them like Philadelphia?

The Letter to Laodicea

And then there is Laodicea, perhaps more like the Church today than any of the others. In some ways the letter to Laodicea is the most remarkable because historians and archaeologists have been able to shed so much light on the particular conditions which prevailed there. In the first place, Laodicea had a reputation for bad water. Cold water, as we know, is refreshing and quenches our thirst. Hot water has healing properties. But the water of Laodicea was tepid and nauseating and so, charges this letter, were the Christians of Laodicea. In their profession of Christ they were just like lukewarm, unpalatable water. In one of the most offensive statements attributed to Christ, he says to the Laodiceans, "I will spew you out of my mouth."

And we recall how Christ said to his disciples, "He who is not with me is against me" (Luke 11:23).

The Laodiceans were far too complacent in their material wealth, fancy garments, and celebrated medicine for diseases of the eye. Christ says that what they really need is the spiritual treasure of true commitment to him; the white purity of righteousness to cover their sin; and, a heavenly salve to open their eyes to the truth of his presence among them, calling them to repentance and zealous devotion to his will.

Christ at the Door of the Heart

In his final words at the end of Chapter 3, Christ speaks to all of us and to each of our congregations:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me.

This verse is beautifully represented by Holman Hunt's painting "The Light of the World," which shows Christ standing outside the door. No latch is visible; the door can only be opened from within. Christ knocks at the door of our hearts. He will not force his way in. The latch is on our side. We must open the door for him

*O Jesus, thou art standing
Outside the fast closed door,
In lowly patience waiting
To pass the threshold o'er;*

*We bear the name of Christians,
His name and sign we bear,
O shame, thrice shame upon us,
To keep him standing there!*

*O Lord, with shame and sorrow
We open now the door;
Dear Savior, enter, enter
And leave us nevermore!*

(Hymn No. 314)

Session 3

3

When John attempts to describe what he saw, all he can do is pile one impression of color, light, and sound upon another---jasper, carnelian, emerald, rainbow, lightning, voices, thunder.

THE VISION OF GOD IN HEAVEN

Outline

4:1-2a John is caught up into heaven.

4:2b-6a The throne of God and the 24 elders.

4:6-b8 The four living creatures.

4:9-11 The "Oratorio of Creation."

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapter 4.

Helps and Clues

4:1 After this-marks the beginning of a new vision as the letters to the churches (Chapters 2 and 3) are concluded and John turns his eyes heavenward.

In Heaven an open door. This is the third door mentioned thus far in our study of Revelation. Can you find the other two in the earlier chapters? What do you think each signifies? Here, the open door into heaven is the entranceway to the revelation John is about to receive.

At once I was in the spirit-i.e. out of the body in a state of ecstasy.

4:2 A throne stood in heaven-the sign of God's sovereign power over creation.

One seated on the throne. But when John attempts to describe what he saw, all he can do is pile one impression of color, light, and sound upon another-jasper, carnelian, emerald, rainbow, lightning, voices, thunder.

4:4 Round the throne . . . twentyfour thrones . . . twentyfour elders. There has been much speculation about the identity of the elders. The surest clue comes from John's vision of the heav-

only Jerusalem in Chapter 21: 12 and 13. Who then are these elders?

Clad in white garments-the symbol of cleansing from sin in a redeemed state.

4:6 Four living creatures. The number "four" is the cosmic number, as in the four seasons, the four corners of the earth, and the four winds of heaven. Here, the four creatures symbolize all living beings in creation.

Lion . . . ox . . . man . . . eagle. Tradition has also identified these creatures with the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

4:10 They cast their crowns before the throne. Since the elders themselves sit on thrones and wear crowns, they, too, have power and authority. They acknowledge, however, that their authority derives from God and they gladly hold it in subjection to him.

Comments and Questions

We are devoting our entire lesson to Chapter 4 and the next one to Chapter 5 because these two chapters are so central to the message of Revelation and essential to our understanding of the Christian faith. They describe what few mortals have ever beheld-a heavenly vision of God, the Creator, and Christ, our Redeemer.

In John's day the world appeared to be controlled by the tyrannical powers of kings and emperors like Domitian, whose authority and power seemed absolute and irresistible. And so it has seemed time after time in the ensuing course of history right down to such tyrants as Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin. Dark figures of cruelty and tyranny continue to threaten mankind today. Can you name some of them?

How Can We Picture God?

In his vision of heaven John beholds that authority which is above every human authority, that throne which stands above all earthly thrones. He is, in short, taken into the presence of the Creator and Ruler of all that exists.

When a person has seen God face to face, how does he describe him to others who have not shared his vision? Artists depicting this scene in John's vision of God on the throne of the universe have represented him as an old man with a beard. But this is not in any sense the way John describes him. All he does is to heap one impression of color, light and sound upon another, creating in us a feeling of awe rather than giving us a picture of a manlike deity.

The poet Dante does the same thing in the 33rd canto of his *Paradiso*:

*Fixing my gaze upon the Eternal light
I saw enclosed within its depths,
Bound up with love together in one volume,
The scattered leaves of all the universe:
Substance and accidents, and their relations
Together fused in such a way
That what I speak of is one simple flame.
Within the luminous profound subsistence
Of that Exalted Light saw I three circles
Of three colors yet of one dimension
And by the second seemed the first reflected
As rainbow is by rainbow, and the third
Seemed fire that equally from both is breathed.*

As John looks closer into his vision he sees on each side of the throne four living creatures who never cease to sing:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come!

These words, of course, were the inspiration for the wellknown hymn we sing today. See how closely the text of the hymn follows Revelation. Compare this second stanza with Revelation 4:8:

*Holy, holy, holy, all the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea;*

Cherubim and seraphim falling down before Thee,
Who wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.*

(Hymn No. 151)

The vision then concludes with a mighty anthem which has been very appropriately called the "Oratorio of Creation."

Is John an Impractical Dreamer?

But stop a minute and think. Of what practical value is John's vision of the heavenly throne of God with the elders and beasts continually praising him to men and women who are suffering persecution under the earthly throne of Domitian? Why doesn't John do something more practical like writing a letter to Domitian defending the Christians and demanding that he stop the harassment and persecution? Is John not open to the charge of being just an impractical dreamer? As his readers are suffering real earthly woes, he writes only of a vision he had of heaven.

A friend once said to Alfred Lord Tennyson, "My dearest hope is to leave the world a better place than I found it." "And mine," replied the poet, "is to have a clearer vision of God." The world has long forgotten that friend, but Tennyson himself has become immortal. For he knew, as did the writer of Revelation, that those who are most conscious of the wonder and power and love of God also, in the long run, will do the most for the healing of humanity's ills.

What John Is Really Saying to the Churches

It is as though John is saying to his first century readers, but also to us:

"God, not Domitian or any other earthly tyrant, is the ruler of this world and nothing which Domitian or his likes can do to you will keep you from joining with the whole family of God and all creation about the throne of the universe in a song of praise to him who created all things and is worthy to receive glory and honor and power."

The world may appear to be chaotic and diabolical now, but the God whose heavenly kingdom John beheld in his vision is still in full control of history and one day will extend his perfect order over all creation. If we bear in mind that the 24 elders in all probability represent the 12 patriarchs of the old covenant and the 12 apostles of the new, can you see that this chapter might also have a powerful message for our Jewish brethren in regard to the holocaust which they experienced in World War 11?

To my mind there is one hymn above all others which perfectly captures the spirit of the fourth chapter of Revelation. It is a great Welsh Presbyterian hymn which, happily, has been included in our Moravian Hymnal. This hymn has no direct quotes from Revelation and yet it seems to say precisely what John is trying to tell us in his vision of God, the Creator of all that is.

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,*

*Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great Name we praise.*

*Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Nor wanting, nor wasting, Thou rulest in might;*

*Thy justice like mountains high soaring above,
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.*

*To all life Thou givest, to both great and small;
In all life Thou livest, the true life of all;*

*We blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree,
And wither and perish; but naught changeth Thee.*

*Great Father of glory, pure Father of light.
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;*

*All laud we would render, O help us to see
'Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee.*

(Hymn No. 163)

*This is the name Isaiah gives to the six winged creatures who surround the throne of God. In Isaiah's vision the creatures also sing "Holy, holy, holy." (See Isaiah 6: 15.)

Session 4

4

The Almighty holds in his hand a scroll. Soon enough we shall learn its contents. It is, in fact, the book of human destiny, the book of the unfolding purpose of God for mankind and his final judgment of the world.

THE VISION OF THE VICTORIOUS LAMB

Outline

5:1-5 The scroll with seven seals.

5:6-8 The victorious Lamb will break the seals and open the scroll.

5:9-14 The "Oratorio of Redemption."

The reading for this lesson is Chapter 5.

Helps and Clues

5:1 A scroll . . . with seven seals-actually, seven separate scrolls, each sealed and packed one inside the other. They are sealed because until this time the messages have been kept secret.

5:5 Lion . . . of Judah, the Root of David. These Old Testament designations were interpreted to mean the Messiah that would come from the tribe of Judah and from the house of David.

5:6 A Lamb. Christ in his death is, of course, thought of as the Christians' Passover Lamb.

Violent death.

Standing-that is, obviously alive.

As though it had been slain-bearing the obvious marks of a

Seven horns-all powerful.

Seven eyes-all seeing, signifying complete knowledge and wisdom.

5:9 New song. Since it is through the Lamb that redemption has been won, it is appropriate that his victory be celebrated with a new song.

5:11 Angels . . . beasts . . . elders. And now the full chorus of heaven breaks forth in the "Oratorio of Redemption."

Comments and Questions

At our last session the scene of John's vision was set in heaven where the twentyfour elders and the four living creatures surrounded the throne of God. John tells us now, however, of a new development in the divine drama. The Almighty holds in his hand a scroll. Soon enough we shall learn its contents. It is, in fact, the book of human destiny, the book of the unfolding purpose of God for mankind and his final judgment of the world.

The Appearance of the Lamb

John senses that awesome mysteries are about to be revealed. But when, for a moment, it appears that there is no one worthy to break the seals and open the scrolls John expresses his great frustration with tears. Then, suddenly, in the midst of the scene a Lamb appears, whom the great angel declares worthy to open the scroll. The Lamb, "looking as though it had

been slain," reminds us, of course, immediately of the moving 53rd chapter of Isaiah:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.

The reference to Christ as the Lamb in John's vision has nothing to do with meekness. It is not Jesus mild and gentle but Jesus the conqueror of death and the grave. The reference is to Christ's sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection. It is this image of Jesus which inspired the symbol of the early Church depicting Christ, the Lamb, bearing the banner of victory and wearing the crown of kingship.

This emblem of the victorious Lamb was especially precious to the Unitas Fratrum and was transferred to the Renewed Moravian Church when David Nitschman was ordained as a bishop in 1735 by Daniel Ernst Jablonsky, who was himself a bishop in the Unitas Fratrum. The symbol is now represented in the magnificent "Moravian" seal surrounded by the words, "Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him" (or, in Latin, "*Vicit Agnus Noster Eum Sequamur*").

The Anthems of Heaven

As the victorious Lamb takes the scroll the elders and the living creatures break forth in a new song of exaltation to the Lamb

for the salvation he has wrought through his death, ransoming people "for God from every tribe and nation" and making them "a kingdom and priests to our God. "

This new song is then answered antiphonally by a choir of innumerable angels singing, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and light and honor and glory and blessing!"

And then it seemed as if "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea" joined in this praise of the Lamb in one glorious ascription: "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and light forever and ever"-the praise of God and the Lamb coalescing in one mighty doxology. And the four living creatures in one voice cry "Amen." Truly this is an "Oratorio of Redemption. "

In the music of mere mortals this oratorio is given its most powerful expression in the final chorus of Handel's Messiah "Worthy Is The Lamb."

Let someone in the group bring the record of the Messiah and play this magnificent chorus. Now that you have studied Revelation 5, the conclusion of Handel's Messiah may take on new meaning to you whenever you hear it.

The Man of Our Destiny

The message of this 5th chapter is this: Jesus Christ is the man of our destiny; he is the one who comes to us in our brokenness and our sinfulness and makes us whole and restores us to our place in the family of God.

This passage has inspired one of the most cherished and moving hymns of the Moravian tradition. It was written in 1841 by James Montgomery, many of whose hymns are sung by Christians of all denominations. By studying the words and phrases of this chapter in Revelation we may learn the meaning of John's vision of the Lamb, standing as though he had been slain and about to open the secret scrolls. But if we are also to capture something of the emotion he experienced, as he saw it and wrote about it, we could do no better than to sing or read James Montgomery's hymn "Come Let Us Sing the Song of Songs" with its lilting refrain to each stanza "Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain! "

*Come, let us sing the song of songs,
With hearts and voices swell the strain,
The homage which to Christ belongs:
"Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain! "*

*Slain to redeem us by His blood,
To cleanse from every sinful stain,*

*And make us kings and priests to God;
"Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain!"*

*To Him Who suffered on the tree
Our souls, at His soul's price, to gain,
Blessing, and praise, and glory be;
"Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain! "*

*To Him, enthroned by filial right,
All power in heaven and earth proclaim,
Honor, and majesty, and might;
"Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain!"*

*Long as we live, and when we die,
And while in heaven with Him we reign,
This song, our song of songs shall be:
"Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain!"*

(Hymn No. 207)

Session 5

5

John no doubt earnestly believed that the events of his own day were the beginning of the terrible time which would shortly come upon all the earth before the battle of Armageddon-that final conflict between good and evil to be followed by the victorious return of Christ.

THE SEVEN SEALS

Outline

6:1-8 The "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. "

6:9-11 The faithful martyrs are secure with God.

6:12-17 The sky falls in.

7:1-8 The sealing of the 144,000.

7:9-17 The countless host of the redeemed.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapters 6 and 7.

Helps and Clues

6:2 A white horse, and its rider had a bow. The first of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse represents triumphant militarism. In John's day the rider on the white horse may have represented the fearsome Parthian army to the east, famous for its bowmen. "A Parthian shot" to this day means a final devastating blow to which there is no answer.

6:4 Another horse bright red . . . to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another. The second horseman represents revolution, internal strife, rebellion, brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor.

6:5 A black horse, and its rider had a balance. This image goes back to the Old Testament, which speaks of days of famine as times when grain is so scarce that it must be weighed in a balance.

6:6 Do not harm oil and wine. Oil was needed for lamps; wine was the only potable beverage available. To destroy vineyards and olive trees at this early stage of tribulation would be premature.

6:8 A pale horse, and its rider's name was Death. The last horseman represents pestilence. When the Black Plague came

to Europe it was readily identified with the rider on the pale horse in the Book of Revelation.

6:9 Under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God. Believers who are killed in the first days of tribulation will be held secure under the altar of God.

6:11 White robe-symbolizes the purity which comes with Christ's redemption.

6:17 The great day of their wrath has come. The sixth seal, which begins at verse 12, describes a devastating earthquake and other terrors of nature. It is the "day of wrath" foretold by the prophet Zephaniah (1:14-18). In the liturgical tradition of the Church this is known as the *dies irae*, which is simply the Latin for "day of wrath. "

7:3 We have sealed the servants of our God. This chapter begins the first of four interludes in the unfolding drama of divine judgment. The last phrase of Chapter 6 asks the question, "Who can stand before the great day of wrath?" And Chapter 7 says, "God's people can, that's who." And why? Because God has sealed his servants.

7:4 & 9 A number of the sealed, one hundred and fortyfour thousand . . . a great multitude which no man could number from every nation. Most interpreters believe that these two references describe Christians in the last days, whom God pre-

serves through the turmoil of the great tribulation at the end of the age.

7:15-17 One of the most moving descriptions of heaven in all of Scripture—a passage which we hear frequently at funeral services.

Comments and Questions

We move now to the central and most obscure parts of the Book of Revelation. The heavenly visions of grandeur and beauty which we saw in Chapters 4 and 5 suddenly explode into a fearful panorama of judgment and woe.

John Expected the End to Come Soon

John no doubt earnestly believed that the events of his own day were the beginning of the terrible time which would shortly come upon all the earth before the battle of Armageddon—that final conflict between good and evil to be followed by the victorious return of Christ.

His only error was one of timing. He did not see the long march of time through successive centuries during which the forces of evil would clash again and again, leaving Christians in each age wondering if the end were not about to come. Today people understandably ask the same question.

The Evils John Describes Are With Us Still

The forces of destruction which John saw already at work in his time are still with us-rampant militarism (the white horse), internal rebellion and revolution (the red horse), famine and starvation (the black horse), and pestilence, that is widespread disease and death (the pale horse). Pause a moment now and see if you can give illustrations of each of these forces represented by the Four Horsemen in terms of what you know about conditions throughout the world today. Why do you think that Francis Coppola called the movie he directed a few years ago "Apocalypse Now"? What is the meaning of the title of Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth*?

The Wrath of the Lamb

As the sixth seal is broken (6:12) a great earthquake erupts and the very order of nature gives way to utter chaos so that great and small, rich and poor, free and slave cringe with fear and seek to hide themselves in the caves of the earth. But note that the greatest terror is to come face to face with God and to feel "the wrath of the Lamb." The point is that these horrors are not just accidents of nature but are expressions of divine judgment.

Immediately the question comes to us, "How could a God of love do such things, or even allow them to happen, to creatures whom he has made in his own image?" Isn't all of this a far cry from the teachings of Jesus and the Gospels? Sometimes we

forget that Jesus spoke of the coming judgment in much the same way as John writes of it in the Revelation. Read aloud, for example, Mark 13:19-27.

The Place of Judgment in the Bible

There are several things which we should note concerning the place of judgment in the Bible:

1. Wrath and judgment must be seen as integral parts of the biblical message. They cannot be ignored without distorting the message itself.
2. God does not directly will war, famine, suffering, and death. These are, instead, the inevitable consequences of ignoring and transgressing those principles and laws on which God, in his wisdom, established the universe.
3. The wrath of God, or of the Lamb, should not be thought of as unrestrained, malicious, vindictive fury. It is, rather, the other side of God's love-the form which his love takes when men steadfastly set their hearts against him. It is the urgent cry of warning from one who is not willing that any should perish (II Peter 3:9).

A Legend

There is an old story of a country ruled by a righteous and compassionate king who often encountered among his subjects up-

rising and rebellion. To deal with such disturbances the king kept a company of fierce warriors three days journey from the capitol. When the uprisings threatened to get out of hand he would announce to the rebels that he had sent for his warriors to come and to destroy them, but if they would repent and become obedient to him once again he would send another messenger to intercept the warriors and turn them back. In a way we should look at all of the pictures of judgment and devastation in Revelation, and in the Bible as a whole, in much the same way. Compassion and wrath, like two sides of a coin, are actually the two sides of God's love.

A Hymn of Judgment

We do not have many hymns about judgment and those that appear in our hymnals are seldom sung. But just to remind ourselves that ignoring the judgment of God will not make it go away, read aloud together or sing Hymn 559, which is fittingly set to music in the minor key:

*That day of wrath, that dreadful day
When heaven and earth shall pass away!
What power shall be the sinner's stay?
How shall he meet that dreadful day,

When, shriveling like a parched scroll,
The flaming heavens together roll,*

*And louder yet, and yet more dread,
Swells the high trump that wakes the dead?*

*O on that day, that wrathful day,
When man to judgment wakes from clay,
Be Thou, O Christ, the sinner's stay,
Though heaven and earth shall pass away.*

The Sealed of God

But judgment is not the only message of this lesson. Throughout Revelation John interrupts his depictions of woe with scattered interludes in which he assures us that no ultimate harm will come to the people of God. The vision of the fifth seal (6:9-11) shows us those who suffered martyrdom safe beneath the altar in heaven.

In Chapter 7 the faithful are represented symbolically as numbering a perfect 144,000 (12 x 12 x 1,000), and, later, as "a great multitude which no man could number." They are given a seal on their foreheads as a sign of God's protection.

Finally, in 7:15-17 we find one of the most moving and beautiful expressions found anywhere of the blissful and joyous life of heaven awaiting those who have fought the good fight and whose rest is won. Ralph Vaughan Williams has captured this vision in his great hymn "For All the Saints Who from Their Labors Rest."

*For all the saints, who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy Name, O Jesus, be for ever blest. Alleluia, alleluia!
Thou wert their Rock, their Fortress, and their Might;
Thou, Lord, their Captain in the wellfought fight;
Thou in the darkness drear, their one true Light.
Alleluia, alleluia!*

(Hymn No. 560)

Session 6

6

During the Middle Ages in Europe interest in the Book of Revelation loomed large. And little wonder with a high percentage of the population of Europe wiped out by the Black Death, that is, bubonic plague.

THE SEVEN TRUMPETS

Outline

8:1-5 The seventh seal.

8:6-9:21 The first seven trumpets.

10 Interlude: the angel with the little scroll.

11:1-3 The measurement of the temple.

11:4-14 The two witnesses.

11:15-19 The heavenly liturgy.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapters 8-11.

Helps and Clues

8:1 Silence in Heaven. The sounds of heaven are silenced so that prayers of the saints ascending to the throne of God may be clearly heard.

8:2 Seven angels . . . seven trumpets. These are the seven archangels of Jewish tradition. Two of them are mentioned by name in the New Testament. Who are they?

8:7 A third of the earth . . . a third of the grass. If we took the fractions literally, the earth would have been destroyed many times over. Partial destruction rather than total destruction is what is meant here because there are many judgments yet to come and also so as to leave room for repentance before annihilation becomes complete.

8:8 A great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea—possibly an allusion to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79.

8:11 Wormwood. Like the bitter plant from which its name comes, the star Wormwood falls on the waters of earth and makes them poisonous.

8:12 Their light was darkened. This could refer to the pollution of the atmosphere.

8:13 An eagle . . . in mid heaven. This is actually a vulture, an eater of flesh, and, therefore, a harbinger of disasters yet to come.

9:1 The bottomless pit-the abode of demonic powers.

9:3 Locusts on the earth. Destruction of vegetation by swarms of locusts was common. These locusts, however, attack mankind-definitely not your common garden variety of locusts. See 9:71 O.

9:10 Hurting men for five months-the months of spring and summer. the usual time for locusts.

9:11 Abaddon . . . Apollyon. These words mean respectively destruction/destroyer and are, therefore, appropriate names for the demonic angel who is described as the King of the Locusts.

9:13 Angels . . . bound at the . . . Euphrates-Rome's frontier with the Parthian kingdom.

9:16 Troops of cavalry-perhaps a reference to the army of the Parthians.

10:4 Seal up. . . the seven thunders-with the result that we shall never know what they signified.

10:9 Take it [the little scroll] and eat. A prophet must make God's word a part of him, just as if he had eaten it like food.

Bitter. . . sweet. It is a pleasant thing to receive a word from God. But when that word is judgment, it is also grievous and bitter.

11:1 Measure the temple of God. The literal temple in Jerusalem was destroyed 25 years before John wrote these words. John uses the temple here to mean the people of God. And when he is told to measure the temple, this is, in effect, the same thing as the sealing of 144,000 to protect them from harm (Chapter 7).

11:2 Forty-two months-a special reference to prophetic time, drawn from the Book of Daniel and referring to onehalf of a final period of great tribulation before the coming of Christ. This period of prophetic time is also referred to us in Revelation as 1,260 days and as "a time and times, and half a time."

11:3,4 Two witnesses . . . two olive trees . . . two lampstands. The reference in each case is to Moses and Elijah who represent the early Christian Church, especially in its calling to witness in the last days.

11:6 What clues does this verse provide for the identification of the two witnesses as Moses and Elijah?

11:7 The beast that ascends from the bottomless pit. This is the Antichrist about whom we will read more in Chapters 13 and 17.

11:10 Make merry and exchange presents-the Devil's Christmas party.

11:13 A tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake-a very precise reckoning. At the time Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70 it had a population of 70,000 onetenth of which would be 7,000.

11:19 Ark of his covenant. The earthly Ark of Covenant was lost when Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. The reference here is to "God's temple in heaven" and to a heavenly counterpart of the Ark, symbol of God's presence with his people and the sign of his promise.

Comments and Questions

This is a long and difficult passage we are dealing with in this lesson. Chapter 11, in particular, is one of the most perplexing sections of the entire Book of Revelation. Time will not permit us to go into the various interpretations. The best that we can do is simply get an overview of the message.

Like the seven seals, the seven trumpets also introduce judgments which come upon the earth. In the first four trumpets of Chapter 8 the world is assaulted by the elemental forces of na-

ture. At each blast a different part of the world is attacked-earth, trees, grass, seas, the inland waters, and, finally, the lights in the sky.

Terrors of the Supernatural

With the beginning of the fifth trumpet in Chapter 9, however, the terrors which come are not from nature but beyond nature; they are the elemental demonic forces which arise from the abyss of the underworld.

During the Middle Ages in Europe interest in the Book of Revelation loomed large. And little wonder with a high percentage of the population of Europe wiped out by the Black Death, that is, bubonic plague. In central France there is an enormous, natural aperture in the earth 100 feet in diameter and 300 feet deep leading to an underground river and enormous caverns. The name given to this natural phenomenon by the people was *Gouffre de Padirac*-the Abyss of the Demons. Many literally believed that this was the bottomless pit of Revelation. Today visitors can go down into the great pit by a series of elevators and travel the course of the river on a barge until it empties into the unexplored, inky darkness.

In John's visions strange looking locusts arise from the pit, attacking not vegetation but man himself. The locusts are then followed by a demonic cavalry of lionlike horses numbering 200,000,000 who go out and kill a third of mankind. John re-

minds us that the purpose of all of these terrors is that men should repent, but laments in verse 20 that "the rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues did not repent."

At this point it might be useful to give an illustration of how not to interpret Revelation. One interpreter, for example, suggests that when John says of the locusts that "the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle" he was predicting the Cobra helicopter used in Viet Nam, and that the sting of the locust was a kind of nerve gas sprayed from the tail of these helicopters. Similarly, Hal Lindsey noted that the estimated size of the Chinese army today is 200,000,000 and concludes from this and other questionable evidence that the Red Army is to be identified with the demonic cavalry.

John's Prophetic Commission Is Confirmed

Chapters 10 and 11 constitute another interlude. The vision of the mighty angel with legs like pillars of fire who gives John a little scroll, not to be read but to be eaten, is, in effect, a confirmation of John's prophetic ministry. He is urged not to falter in his witness and is given the assurance that the end of all things is very near and will not be delayed.

The Faithful Are Measured and Called Upon to Witness

The measuring of the temple in Chapter 11, as we noted in the Helps and Clues, is very much like the sealing of the 144,000. That is to say, it is another way of assuring Christians about to enter into tribulation that no ultimate harm will come to them, even though they may give up their lives.

Two witnesses appear, bearing a resemblance to Elijah and Moses of the Old Testament. They are killed by a beast but are raised again. This section is an admonition to the Church to be faithful in its witness, confident in the belief that God can bring life out of death for all who belong to him.

The Liturgy of Heaven

Finally, in the last paragraph of Chapter 11, we are back with the 24 elders surrounding the throne of God and listening to the liturgy of heaven, where time does not proceed on a straight line from past to present to future, but grasps all things in an eternal now. The 24 elders, therefore, can sing "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" because it views that final state, which is still future to us, as though it had already taken place. You may recall that those words are included in The Litany of the Moravian Church (bottom of page 6 in the Hymnal) but because we look upon Christ's ultimate victory from the time-bound standpoint of earth, the editors of The Litany have changed the tense of Reve-

lation 11:15 from the past (has become) to the future (shall become).

If those chapters of Revelation leave you puzzled, with more questions than answers, you may take comfort in the knowledge that scholars who have studied Revelation for years feel the same. Happily, for the most part, things become a little clearer as we move from this point toward the end of the book.

Session 7

The British writer C. S. Lewis says that there are two errors we generally make when we think about the devil. The first is to deny that he exists at all, which delights him no end. The second is to entertain a pathological interest in his activities and become preoccupied with the occult, satanism, exorcism and all sorts of debasing practices. Either error suits the devil's purpose admirably.

THE CHURCH IN CONFLICT

Outline

12:1-6 The woman, the child, and the dragon.

12:7-12 War in heaven.

12:13-17 The dragon pursues the woman and the rest of her children.

13:1-10 The beast from the sea-the Antichrist.

13:11-18 The beast from the earth-the false prophet.

14:1-7 The 144,000 with the Lamb on Mount Zion.

14:8-20 The reaping of the earth.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapters 12-14.

Helps and Clues

12:1,2 In heaven, a woman-not the Virgin Mary, but the faithful Jewish community, which was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah and which subsequently became the early Christian Church in Jerusalem.

12:3 Red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns. The dragon is, of course, the devil. The seven heads represent his vitality. Kill one, two, three heads and the monster still lives. The ten horns and the diadems represent power.

12:5 She brought forth a male child . . . but her child was caught up to God. The reference here is to the birth of Jesus, after which we skip completely over his life, death, and resurrection to his ascension.

12:6 And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God. The early Church fled from the city of Jerusalem just prior to its fall in A.D. 70 and found asylum in a little town across the Jordan.

12:7 War arose in heaven. This passage appears to be a flashback to the dawn of time and is the basis of the myth which Milton used so effectively in *Paradise Lost*. Satan, who was himself once an "angel of light," determined that he would rather

rule in hell than serve God in heaven and so was cast down to the earth by the Archangel Michael.

12:10-12 A loud voice in heaven. The voice proclaims that Satan's ancient expulsion from heaven is now confirmed by Christ the Lamb who has conquered him by his death and resurrection.

13:1 The beast rising out of the sea-not to be confused with the dragon, even though this beast also has seven heads and ten horns. At first the beast appears to represent the Roman Empire and the heads of the beast are the different emperors. But as the vision develops the beast itself is actually seen as one of the emperors who is, in effect, an incarnation of the dragon. As Christ is the incarnation of God, so the beast is the Antichrist, the incarnation of the devil.

13:3 One of its heads. . . a mortal wound . . . was healed. When the mad Emperor Nero committed suicide by plunging a dagger into his throat, there was great rejoicing throughout Rome. Shortly thereafter, however, at least three impostors arose claiming to be Nero and a rumor spread throughout the Empire either that Nero had not really died, or, that he would come to life again and lead the dreaded Parthian army of the East against Rome. This rumor appears a number of times in Revelation through the reference to the head with the mortal wound which was healed.

13:11 Another beast . . . out of the earth. The reference appears to be Loathe Roman religious cult of emperor worship which induced people to believe in the divinity of the emperor and to follow him. Later in Revelation this second beast is called the false prophet.

13:18 The number of the beast. In most languages letters are also used as numbers. The letters in Aramaic which spell Nero Caesar, when used as numbers, equal 666. Whether or not this is the appropriate clue, most scholars agree that the reference is to Nero and his rumored return, or perhaps reincarnation in a later emperor such as Domitian.

14:1 On Mount Zion . . . the Lamb . . . one hundred and forty-four thousand. Once again we are assured of God's protection over his own.

14:4 First fruits for God and the Lamb. This verse was the inspiration for the painting by Valentine Haidt entitled "First Fruits of the Gospel," which hangs in the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem.

Comments and Questions

Chapter 11 in the lesson last month proved to be one of the most difficult in Revelation. Chapter 12 may be the most bizarre. It begins with a vision in the sky of a woman in the pangs of delivery. A great sevenheaded dragon is set on devouring the

baby as soon as it is born. Fortunately, the child—a boy—is caught up to the throne of God before the dragon can harm him. But the dragon then chases the woman until she is given the two wings of a great eagle and is carried off to a place of refuge where she is safe.

The Story of Early Christianity

Now what this is all about is really the story of Christianity from the birth of Christ to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The woman is ideal Israel from which the Messiah comes. She then represents the early Jewish Christian Church, which fled the devastation that befell Jerusalem and took refuge under God's protection in the little settlement of Pella beyond the Jordan River.

War in Heaven at the Dawn of Time

Buried in the middle of Chapter 12 is another story which takes us back to the very dawn of time when Satan, himself a created being, declares war in heaven and is cast down to earth by the Archangel Michael and his angels. Presumably, this is before man had ever made his appearance on earth.

These days we don't give much thought to angels and devils. But in medieval times the Archangel Michael was held in highest honor as the conqueror of Satan and the mightiest of all spirits. At one point he rivaled the honor paid to the Virgin herself or even to Christ. He was the patron saint of France and his greatest monument is one of the medieval wonders of the world—the towering cathedral of MontSaintMichael rising from a tiny island off the coast of Brittany.

The Origin of Evil

It is tempting to dismiss the whole story of Michael casting the devil out of heaven as a primitive myth which no longer serves any useful purpose. In fairness, however, we must recognize it as a serious attempt to deal with a great intellectual problem that has always challenged Christian thinkers. It tries to answer for us the profound question, "How did evil enter into the world God created?"

The story of the fall in Genesis 3 gave us only a provisional answer. But, remember, in that story the serpent, the very embodiment of evil, was already there in the Garden. This gives us the clue to what John is saying, namely, that when God created man he placed him in a world already in a state of rebellion against the Creator. The late Swiss theologian Emil Bruner insisted that the existence of Satan and his powers in opposition

to God is a necessary condition of our proper understanding of what the New Testament means by redemption. He quotes a maxim of Martin Luther, "*Nullus diabolus, nullu redemptor.* " Or "No devil, no redemption."

The British writer C. S. Lewis says that there are two errors we generally make when we think about the devil. The first is to deny that he exists at all, which delights him no end. The second is to entertain a pathological interest in his activities and become preoccupied with the occult, satanism, exorcism and all sorts of debasing practices. Either error suits the devil's purpose admirably.

You certainly don't have to believe in the devil to be a Christian, but you will have a clearer understanding of the nature of evil in the world and the meaning of redemption in the New Testament if you do. But as Emil Bruner says again, the most important thing that Christians should believe about the devil is that Jesus Christ has conquered him and at last will remove every vestige of his influence from the universe.

What Do You Make of All This?

What do you think about all of this as you consider the meaning of the Christian faith? Do you give any credence to this whole realm of the demonic and to the thought that there may be in some sense a personal power of evil against which you as a

Christian must contend as you seek to follow Christ day by day?

Jesus was very much aware of what it meant to struggle with the devil. He finally was able to say, "Get thee behind me Satan." Compare also what he says to his disciples in Luke 10:18 with the declaration of the heavenly voice in Revelation 12:10-12. And Martin Luther had such a vivid awareness of the devil that he once threw his inkwell at him!

The Satanic Trinity

When we turn to Chapter 13 the scenery begins to get crowded with more dragons and beasts than we can keep track of. It may help, however, to recognize that what we have here really is a satanic trinity remarkably parallel to the Holy Trinity. There is first the dragon, the archenemy of God the father, and then his incarnation in the form of the first beast, the Antichrist, and following that, a second beast who corresponds to the Holy Spirit of the Holy Trinity and moves people to worship the Antichrist. Just as Christians are sealed in their faith by baptism, so those who belong to the Antichrist must be sealed with the "mark of the beast."

Beyond the bizarre and fantastic images of this chapter there is a profound truth. Man appears instinctively to worship what he

believes to be absolute power. When he fails to recognize the Triune God as the real power behind the universe, he seizes upon a substitute which tends to be a curious evil caricature of the true God.

In John's day men worshiped the god of power, incarnate in the Roman Emperor, propagated by the emperor cult. A generation ago a god of power appeared in the myth of Aryan supremacy and was incarnate in Adolph Hitler, whose movement was propagated by the Nazi party. Similar parallels could be drawn in other eras of history. What instances in modern times do you see of this tendency of man to worship what he believes to be ultimate power and of that power to become incarnate in historical figures?

The final verses in Chapter 14 contain some of the most offensive images in the Book of Revelation and, as a matter of fact, in the Bible anywhere. Here we find the traditional description of hell as fire and brimstone, burning day and night for all eternity, in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. This, of course, led to the perverse medieval notion that one of the joys of heaven will be seeing the damned burn in hell!

Symbols Are to Be Taken Seriously

There is, however, one thing we must keep in mind. Virtually everything we have seen in Revelation is symbolic. There is, therefore, no reason for us suddenly to take these descriptions

of the state of unbelievers literally. That does not mean, however, that we are not to take them seriously.

Remember what we said in the last session, that wrath and judgment are the other side of God's love and that their very purpose is to induce men to repent and accept God's love. Francis Thompson has a wonderful poem called "The Hound of Heaven" in which he sees God pursuing man down the labyrinth of his years in a desperate effort to overtake him with divine love and forgiveness.

The Meaning of Hell

So, in the final analysis, judgment and hell are not punishments and woes directly willed by God. They are the inevitable result of human beings rejecting God's love. Because, you see, in his pursuit of man God stops short of just one thing: he will not force a person against his will. Hell, then, is what everyone has a right to choose if that is really what he wants. It is ultimately self-imposed, self-incurred, self-perpetuated. Hell is the only alternative left to those who steadfastly refuse to accept the loving purpose of God for their lives. But God gives us ample warning of just what this alternative will be like, and he does so because he loves us.

Session 8



By now you are probably completely bewildered, wondering if the man who said "Revelation either finds a person mad or leaves him so" may not have been right after all.

THE SEVEN BOWLS

Outline

15:1-4 The song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

15:5-8 The seven angels with the bowls of God's wrath.

16:1-11 Plagues upon the earth.

16:12-16 Preparation for the battle of Armageddon.

16:17-20 The destruction of Babylon.

17:1-6 The vision of the great harlot.

17:7-18 The explanation of the vision.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapters 15-17.

Helps and Clues

15:1 Seven angels with seven plagues. Chapters 12-14, which we considered in our last session, were in a sense a long interlude. We return now to the next in the series of seven judgments. In this case it is seven angels with seven plagues later identified as "bowls of the wrath of God. "

15:3 Song of Moses . . . song of the Lamb. Before this judgment comes, however, John listens to the singing of two songs. The first is the song contained in Exodus 15 which Moses sang after he led the children of Israel across the Red Sea. In other words, John likens the tribulations through which the saints will go to the plagues of the exodus.

15:5 Tent of witness in heaven. This is the tabernacle of the Old Testament containing the Ark of the Covenant, which the Israelites carried through the desert. Here John sees a heavenly prototype of this structure which no one is allowed to enter until the judgments have been completed.

16:1-11 Bowls of the wrath of God. The first five bowls of wrath or plagues are remarkably like the plagues of Egypt: Sores and boils, waters of the sea turning into blood, rivers and springs becoming blood, scorching fire, thick darkness.

These plagues also remind us of the terrors which came from the seven trumpets, but in that case the destruction was limited to a third of the earth. Here it appears to be total.

16:12 The great river Euphrates. This river, which now runs through the country of Iraq, formed the boundary between the Roman Empire and the kingdom of the Parthians.

Its water was dried up-as did the Red Sea, and later the Jordan, when the children of Israel were on their way to the promised land.

16:13 From the mouth of the dragon . . . the beast . . . the false prophet . . . foul spirits like frogs. Here we have again the complete satanic trinity preparing for the last great battle of history.

16:16 Armageddon. Although the word literally means "mountain of Megiddo," it probably refers to the Plain of Megiddo between the mountains where many great battles of ancient times were fought.

16:17 A great voice . . . from the throne, saying "It is done!" As the seventh angel pours out his bowl, the final blow of judgment is struck.

16:19 And God remembered great Babylon. Babylon is John's code word for Rome, the epitome of corrupt civilization organized against God. Babylon has fallen, but John will continue to

expand upon this terrible event throughout the next three chapters.

17 This chapter is exceedingly difficult not only because its content is so bizarre, but because even John seems confused about the meaning of the various elements of his vision. He tries to help us by explaining the meaning of the symbols. The trouble is, things don't stay put. It is almost as though John's visions keep going in and out of focus.

The great harlot of 17:1 and the woman . . . arrayed in purple and scarlet of 17:4 both refer to the city of Rome. The many waters of 17:1 and the scarlet beast of 17:3 both refer to the Roman Empire. The seven heads of the beast are in one place (17:19) said to be seven hills on which the woman is seated (that is, the city of Rome), but in the next verse it is said the seven heads are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come. This is a symbolic reference to seven emperors of the Roman Empire, five of whom lived before John's day. The one who is, of course, is Domitian, who will shortly be followed by another.

17:11-14 The beast has now changed from being the empire to one of the emperors who was and is not; that is to say, an emperor who once lived but died and in some sense is also an eighth and will go to perdition. Here we have again the persistent rumor that Nero will rise from the dead and lead the ten kingdoms of Parthia against Rome. The Parthian kingdoms, inci-

dentally, are represented by the ten horns of the beast. In verse 16 John says the ten horns . . . and the beast will hate the harlot; they will . . . burn her up with fire, which means Nero (the Antichrist as John understands him) will come back to Rome with his Parthian cohorts and, arsonist that he is, he will burn the city of Rome again. Then Nero and his army will turn on the Christian Jews in Palestine but the Lamb will conquer them for he is Lord of Lords and King of Kings. This is, of course, a reference to the return of Christ and defeat of the powers of evil at the battle of Armageddon, about which we read in Chapter 16 and will read again in Chapter 19.

Comments and Questions

By now you are probably completely bewildered, wondering if the man who said "Revelation either finds a person mad or leaves him so" may not have been right after all.

Various Interpretations

This chapter provides a good illustration of just how divergent interpretations of Revelation can be. In the Helps and Clues the general view of most biblical scholars was given as follows:

The Harlot = Rome

The Beast = Roman Empire

The Eighth Head = Nero returned to life

The Ten Horns = the kingdoms of Parthia

In the strictest sense this prophecy was never fulfilled. Nero did not rise again and bring the Parthians against Rome and destroy it.

Another view, popular among the leaders of the Reformation, was the following:

The Harlot = the Pope (note the scarlet robe he wears)

The Beast = the apostate Roman Catholic Church

The Ten Horns = the secular nations

The People of the Lamb = the Protestants

(The Catholics, of course, said that Luther was the Beast).

Finally, there is the view of some popular prophetic teachers:

The Harlot = the current apostate church represented by the World Council of Churches

The Beast = a revived Roman Empire

The Ten Horns = the European Common Market

All of the above will gang up on faithful Jews during the tribulation but Christ will come again and defeat them in a literal battle of Armageddon.

Today we might develop still other scenarios due to the War on Terror! The Revelation speaks to every generation of Christian in the context in which we find ourselves. Editor

The Outcome Is Clear: The Details Are Unknown

It is the opinion of the writer of this study manual that the first view is the correct one, but that the meaning of the passage is by no means exhausted by the events which did or did not happen in John's day.

As Christians we still look to the future to an ultimate confrontation between the powers of evil and the powers of God and to the return of Christ which will bring final victory at last. The exact details of just how this will happen are at this point not known to us. As someone wisely said, "The veil which hides the face of the future is woven by the hand of mercy. "

Why do you think John writes "Babylon" when it is so obvious that he means Rome? What might have happened if he and his readers had gone about predicting the fall of the Empire?

Do we understand Revelation correctly to mean that every age has its Babylon(s)? Where should we look for Babylon today?

Session 9



The Babylon of John's day was indeed Rome. John was wrong in supposing that Rome was the final expression of Babylon in the world. But he was certainly right in his conviction that before the New Jerusalem, the city of God, can become a reality on earth Babylon in all its manifestations must fall.

LAMENT OVER BABYLON

Outline

This whole chapter is a lament on the occasion of the fall of Rome.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapter 18.

Helps and Clues

Rather than comment verse by verse, it may be more helpful for this particular chapter to give a commentary on the city of Rome as it existed in John's day. As you read these descriptions, mostly quotations from Roman authors themselves, look for parallels and similarities in modern society. Do you see in this description of Rome anything of the values and lifestyles which make up the daily diet of television and motion pictures?

Keep in mind that by this time Rome had conquered the lands and country surrounding the Mediterranean Sea and far beyond. It had exacted tribute from all of these countries and was enormously wealthy. The orator Aristides says of Rome:

Merchandise is brought from every land and sea, everything that every season begets, and every country produces, the products of rivers and lakes, the arts of the Greeks and the barbarians, so that if anyone were to wish to see all these things he would either have to visit the whole inhabited world to see them-or to visit Rome; . . . you may see such great cargoes from the Indies or if you wish from the blessed Arabias that you might well conjecture that the trees there have been stripped naked; . . . everything flows to Rome; merchandise, cargoes, products of the land . . . the product of every art . . . everything that

is begotten and everything that grows. If there is anything you cannot see at Rome then it is a thing which does not exist and which never existed.

Each emperor tried to outdo the other in wild extravagance and opulence. They would bathe in costly perfumed oils and invent all sorts of unnatural varieties of food. One of the common ostentations was to take a large pearl, dissolve it in vinegar, and make a great show of drinking it in front of one's guests.

It was an age of extraordinary gluttony, featuring such delicacies as peacock brains, nightingale tongues, pike livers, and the milk of eels. One banquet is described as featuring a great boar on a platter with baskets of sweetmeats hanging from its tusks. As a huge bearded hunter pierced the boar's side with a knife a flight of thrushes flew out from the wound.

The Romans had passions for silver from the mines in Spain, fine linen from Egypt, and silk imported from far off China at great cost, so that a pound of silk was equal in value to a pound of gold.

One must also remember that at this time there were approximately 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. "Use your slaves like limbs of your body" as one ancient writer expressed it. Some slaves were beautiful youths; others were freaks, dwarfs, giants, cretins; and some were simply close at hand at banquets so that guests could wipe their soiled hands on their

hair. Many slaves were, of course, highly intelligent Greeks who served as tutors of the children of wealthy Romans and also as managers of their estates.

This, then, is the Rome of John's day to which he refers by the code word "Babylon," because it was like ancient Babylon in its extravagance and wickedness and also so that the Romans would not know that he was predicting their doom.

Comments and Questions

Toward the end of Chapter 16 we read of the fall of Rome with the ominous voice from the throne of heaven saying, "It is done." Then in Chapter 17 we had still another account of the fall. Here Rome was likened to a harlot whose flesh at the end was devoured and burned up by the beast and the ten "horns" (kings from the East).

"Fallen, Fallen is Babylon the Great"

In Chapter 18 we have once again a description of the fall of Rome. This time it is in the form of a prophetic dirge or "doom song" pronounced over the wicked city. This chapter is strongly reminiscent of various dirges which prophets in the Old Testament pronounced over corrupt kingdoms. From a literary point of view it is one of the most powerful chapters in the whole Bible and is indeed a landmark of literature of this kind in any language. It requires little explanation. One needs only to read it

aloud to sense its power and pathos. And this is exactly what I am going to ask you to do for this session. Either have one of the members of your group who reads especially well with careful expression read the entire chapter or divide its verses among all of you and read it aloud. In any event, read slowly, let the thoughts sink in. Ask yourselves, "Is John speaking only of ancient Rome or are many of the things he says true of the world in which we live today?"

Because John has seen the fall of Rome in his vision, he reports it as though it had already happened. As a matter of fact, Rome did not fall in John's day; it went on for hundreds of years and in time adopted Christianity as its official religion. The largest single branch of Christianity today calls itself the Roman Catholic Church. In the end, of course, Rome did fall, but it was not for some 400 years after John's predictions in Revelation.

Where is Babylon Today?

Does all of this mean that John's prophecies were discredited? By no means. Throughout the Bible, from the Tower of Babel in Genesis to Babylon the mother of harlots in Revelation, the pagan city appears as the sinister symbol of secular civilization organized in opposition to God. The godless powers of this world all stand under the judgment of God.

John knew from history that the divine judgment had already fallen on Egypt, Philistia, Syria, ancient Babylon, Persia, and

Greece. In his day it seemed that all the evils of these kingdoms of the past were now fearfully concentrated in Rome. His only error was in supposing that Rome was the last godless power. Since his time many kingdoms have come and gone. In our day Babylon has reappeared in the form of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperialist Japan. In each case, as in times past, the mighty Babylon fell into ruins.

Today many see in atheistic communism a new emergence of Babylon—a civilization organized apart from and in opposition to God. But let us never forget that wherever a civilization loses its spiritual foundations it becomes increasingly evil and moves toward its own self-destruction. Let us beware, therefore, of the Babylon in our own midst as well as the Babylon behind the Iron Curtain!

The Babylon of John's day was indeed Rome. John was wrong in supposing that Rome was the final expression of Babylon in the world. But he was certainly right in his conviction that before the New Jerusalem, the city of God, can become a reality on earth Babylon in all its manifestations must fall.

Session 10

10

We see now Christ coming as the warrior king, mounted on a white steed, who rides out to smite and destroy his enemies, leading in his train the armies of heaven... This view of Christ may seem a long way from the compassionate Jesus of the Gospels; indeed, it sounds more like the expectations the Jewish people had of the coming of the Messiah to conquer all of the enemies of Israel.

THE LAST BATTLE

Outline

19:1-6 The "Hallelujah Chorus."

19:7-10 The Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

19:11-16 The return of Christ.

19:17-21 The final conflict.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapter 19.

Helps and Clues

19:1,3,4,6 Hallelujah-a Hebrew word occurring throughout the Old Testament and usually translated "Praise God." In our English Bibles the word occurs in its original Hebrew only these four times in the 19th chapter of Revelation, sung by the mighty chorus of the multitude of heaven.

19:7 The marriage of the Lamb. One of the parables of Jesus begins, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son" (Matthew 22:2). Jesus is the bridegroom; the Church is his bride.

19:11 A white horse-not to be confused with the white horse of Revelation 6. The color, however, in both cases is one of triumph and victory and is reminiscent of Roman armies returning from victory with the commander leading the procession on a white steed.

19:11-16 Faithful and True, a name . . . no one knows, the Word of God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. All these are titles by which Christ is designated on his return to earth. The unknown name, like the unspoken name of God in the Old Testament YHWH, suggests that at the deepest level of his being, Jesus Christ is beyond our comprehension. As William Barclay puts it:

"His love we can experience; His Salvation we can appropriate; His help we can claim; but there remains in Him the divine mystery . . . beyond our understanding . . . before which we can only worship and adore."

A robe dipped in blood-not the blood spilt upon the cross, but rather the blood of his slain enemies.

From his mouth . . . a sharp sword. Compare with this the vision of Christ in 1:12-16.

19:20 The beast-the second person of the satanic trinity. the Antichrist (see Revelation 13:1-10).

The false prophet. This is the third person of the satanic trinity, the beast who comes out of the earth (see Revelation 13: 11-17).

Comments and Questions

Even though the Hebrew word "hallelujah" has become an allpervasive part of Christian worship, very few people are aware of its context in this chapter. It is an outburst of praise to God on the occasion of the total destruction of Babylon, the great secular city, even as the clouds of smoke ascend from its ruins. We should not, however, think of this Hallelujah Chorus in Revelation as a vindictive cry but rather of one which celebrates God's victory over all the powers of evil and the salvation he brings to those who are faithful to him

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

As the final hallelujah dies away we see coming into focus a joyous feast, identified in verse 9 as "the marriage supper of the Lamb." Jewish rabbis used to speak of a grand banquet which would be held when the Messiah came. Here we have a recurrence of the theme found often in both the Old and New Testament, namely the picturing of the relationship between God and his people as a marriage. John sees the Church as the bride of the Lamb. But, curiously, Christians, which make up the Church, are the invited guests. The image of the Church as the bride of the Lamb focuses primarily on such qualities as true love, intimate communion, joy, and fidelity.

The scene changes again. Suddenly we see a picture of that last great battle, referred to earlier in Chapter 16 as Armageddon, for which preparations were being made by the satanic forces. We read there of "demonic spirits...who go abroad to the kingdoms of the whole world to assemble them for the battle of the great day of God the Almighty." And that battle is now about to take place.

Christ, the Warrior King

We see now Christ coming as the warrior king, mounted on a white steed, who rides out to smite and destroy his enemies,

leading in his train the armies of heaven. This brings to our mind, does it not, the well known hymn "The Son of God Goes Forth to War" (Hymn No. 425).

*The Son of God goes forth to war, a kingly crown to gain;
His blood red banner streams afar. Who follows in his train?*

This view of Christ may seem a long way from the compassionate Jesus of the Gospels; indeed, it sounds more like the expectations the Jewish people had of the coming of the Messiah to conquer all of the enemies of Israel. Here's how one of the rabbis put it:

How beautiful is the King Messiah, who is about to rise from the house of Judah. He bath bound his loins and gone forth to war against those who hate him; kings and princes shall be slain; he shall make red the rivers with the blood of the slain...his garments will be dipped in blood.

But before we conclude that this vision of the conquering Christ has nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus, consider these two passages from the Gospels:

Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53)

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be

ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:38)

The Coup d'Etat

The account of the battle is surprisingly brief and we are never in doubt as to its outcome. Birds of prey are called to a grisley feast, in marked contrast to the marriage supper of the Lamb described earlier. The battle is over when the beast, that is the Antichrist, and his false prophet are cast into the lake of fire forever.

The cosmic struggle between good and evil is now drawing to a close. One by one the evildoers have been dealt with, except for the dragon, the prince of evil himself. His turn is about to come, as we shall see in our lesson next time.

It would not be surprising if you are repelled by some of the lurid details of this final battle. You may find it difficult to believe that this is indeed the way God will bring world history to a conclusion. Here, as elsewhere in Revelation, we must continually remind ourselves that God's truth is being conveyed to us through strange symbols and images, in many ways quite foreign to our way of thinking. What we read in Revelation is not so much prediction of actual events which are yet to occur as assurances of God's goodness and his power ultimately to prevail over every challenge to that goodness.

The Certainty of Christ's Return

That Christ will come again to the world he once visited and which he redeemed by his death and resurrection is firmly established in Scripture. The time and the manner of his coming, however, are beyond our comprehension and we are certainly not obliged to look upon John's vision as a literal glimpse into the future of world events.

How Christ will win the victory over evil we do not know. It may be helpful to recall, however, that one of the titles given to Christ is "Word of God" and that the sword he wields comes from his mouth. As the writer of Hebrews says, "The word of God is quick and powerful, sharper than any twoedged sword!" The warfare of good against evil is fought on many fronts by people in all walks of life and in a multitude of ways. Military conflict is only one way of representing that struggle.

The matter of allsurpassing importance is that Christ, who is our life, has in his death and resurrection already demonstrated his power over the kingdom of evil and that in his life and in the life beyond he will bring us at last with him to victory and peace. This is surely the meaning which John's readers at the end of the first century would have taken from his visions and it is the one which we still take today.

*Look, ye saints! The sight is glorious;
See the Man of Sorrows now!*

*From the fight returned victorious,
Every knee to Him shall bow;*

*Crown Him! Crown Him! Crown Him! Crown Him!
Crowns become the Victor's brow.*

*Hark, those bursts of acclamation!
Hark, those loud, triumphant chords!*

Jesus takes the highest station;

O what joy the sight affords!

*Crown Him! Crown Him! Crown Him! Crown Him!
King of kings, and Lord of lords.*

(Hymn No. 146)

Session 11



It has to be acknowledged that the doctrine of the millennium is hardly one of the central teachings of the Church. It is not mentioned in any of the principal creeds of the Church.

The terror of hell is not fire and brimstone, but rather separation from God. Will there be any in the end who prefer this separation to being exposed to the brilliant light and blinding purity of the holy God?

THE MILLENNIUM AND THE LAST JUDGMENT

Outline

20:1-3 The binding of Satan.

20:4-6 The thousand year reign of Christ on earth.

20:7-10 The devil's last stand.

20:11-15 The Last Judgment.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapter 20.

Helps and Clues

20:2 Dragon . . . ancient serpent . . . devil . . . Satan. Here at last John leaves us in no doubt about the identity of the arch-enemy of God.

A thousand years. As in all numerical symbols in Revelation, there is no need to take this figure literally. It simply refers to a long period of time.

20:4-11 These eight verses may well be the most controversial passage in all of Scripture. Here it will be possible to give only one of the many interpretations which have been made. The persons seated on thrones to whom judgment has been committed represent Christian believers of all the ages. Those who were beheaded for their testimony to Jesus hold a special place of honor. The first resurrection refers to the entire company of Christian believers, who have died, coming to life again. Although not specifically mentioned, it may be assumed that Christians living at the time are transformed and enter into the millennial kingdom with the others. The phrase "first resurrection" assumes that there is a second; this is a resurrection of nonbelievers to the judgment at the end of the millennial kingdom (verses 11-15). The phrase "second death" refers to final

spiritual death and presupposes a first death, which is, of course, physical death in this life.

20:8 Gog and Magog. Ezekiel in the Old Testament identified Gog and Magog with the people and the land to the north of the Black Sea. Here John uses the phrase to represent all the unrepentant enemies of God among the nations of the world.

20:7-9 The camp of the saints and the beloved city. During the millennium Christians have been ruling with Christ from the city of Jerusalem, the capitol of the millennial kingdom.

20:12 Books . . . Book of Life. The judgment proceeds with reference to these documents of record. The first chronicles all the deeds, good and bad, which each person has ever done. The other is the Lamb's Book of Life-with the names of all those who have professed faith in him and accepted redemption through his death and resurrection.

Comments and Questions

John appears to say in this 20th chapter of Revelation that, after Christ comes again and defeats his enemies at the battle of Armageddon, the power of Satan, while not eliminated, will be severely restricted. Under such conditions a kingdom of peace will ensue upon earth, during which Christ, along with those who have followed him, will rule over the nations of the world in righteousness and justice. This is the passage which has given

rise to the doctrine of the millennium---a Latin word meaning 1000 years.

The Millennium

There is ample evidence that in the early centuries of the Church Christians indeed were expecting Christ to return very soon and set up his kingdom on earth. As the centuries rolled on, however, this doctrine of the millennium was subject to many divergent interpretations. The Church father Augustine and, following him the Catholic Church, thought of the millennium as nothing more than the entire age of the Church. Most of the principal Protestant denominations have taken this same view. But, in reality, they have just ignored the notion of the millennium altogether.

Belief in the Millennium Today

During the last two centuries, however, Christian groups, sometimes identified as fundamentalists, both in the main denominations and independent of them, have taken a very lively interest in this doctrine of the millennium, as indeed have the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Many of these groups see in the events of our day signs of the end of the world, the return of Christ, and the establishment of his kingdom on earth. They are generally known as premillenni-

alists, believing as they do that Christ will come before the millennium.

Another millennial view which was popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries was postmillennialism, which means simply that Christ comes after the millennium. According to this view evil will be eradicated from the world through mass conversions of the people of earth to Christ. It was believed, for example, that World War I was the "war to end wars" and that the world could be won for Christ in one generation. With the onslaught of World War II and all the events that have occurred since then it is understandable that there are not many postmillennialists around today.

Is There Anything of Value Here?

It has to be acknowledged that the doctrine of the millennium is hardly one of the central teachings of the Church. It is not mentioned in any of the principal creeds of the Church. But before we assign the doctrine to theological limbo, it might be worthwhile to ask if beneath the fantastic speculations which have grown up around this concept there is not something of value. Does the notion of a coming kingdom of God, for example, have a place in a Christian philosophy of history? Do we have any reason to think that the purpose of God is to find realization in history and not just beyond history? Will the kingdom of God ever be more fully realized upon earth than it is now? If we give even a tentative answer of "yes" to some of those questions,

we are in some sense accepting the principle which lies behind John's doctrine of the millennium.

"Thy Kingdom Come"

What do we really mean when we say in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven?" And when shall the words of Isaac Watt's great hymn, "Jesus Shall Reign" be fulfilled?

*Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.*

(Hymn No. 203)

We should be careful to note, however, that the millennium is not the final state of perfection, but rather an intermediate kingdom preliminary to it. The millennium is not the house in which we shall live for all eternity, but the porch over which we pass to enter the house. But some say there is no porch on the house. If they are correct, then we shall simply step directly from the street where we now live into our Father's house, and there dwell with him forever.

The Final Eruption of Evil

Having come at last to the millennial reign of Christ with his saints in peace and righteousness, it would be natural to suppose that we are now finished with all the terrible visions of judgment and woe.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. Satan, you will remember, has not been destroyed; he has only been bound temporarily. This brings us to one of the most curious features of John's millennial vision---the final eruption of evil at the end of the thousand years. This last uprising is put down in quick order as fire from heaven consumes the remaining enemies of God. The devil then shares the fate of the two other members of his satanic trinity and is thrown forever into the lake of fire.

The Last Judgment

John now leads us on to an ominous scene, the great and final assize---The Day of Judgment. The imagery here is magnificent. The old order is finished and the new is about to begin. In a moment heaven and earth vanish away; and we see nothing but a great white throne, a center of light in the midst of nothingness. Everything has vanished except God himself and those who stand before him. Everyone who has ever lived on earth is brought before the great white throne of judgment.

The judgment proceeds by reference to two documents. The first is a series of books which record the good and evil deeds done in this life by every person. The second is the Book of Life which contains the names of those who have accepted Christ and the redemption that he brings. By looking at the books of deeds one should be able to tell also the names of those who appear in the Book of Life, for as Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16).

Is There Really a Hell?

The last verse of this chapter is a difficult one for us to accept: "And if any man's name is not found written in the Book of Life he is thrown into the lake of fire. " Such is the fate of all who to the very end resolutely refuse to accept the love of God. Some theologians have insisted that God's love will eventually conquer all. They may be right. But to affirm this as unconditionally predestined would be a denial of the free will which God has given us all. We cannot sweep away the doctrine of hell by an emotional appeal to the love of God. So long as humans are free to choose, hell remains a possibility. A person has a right to hell if that's what he or she really wants.

The terror of hell is not fire and brimstone, but rather separation from God. Will there be any in the end who prefer this separation to being exposed to the brilliant light and blinding purity of the holy God? Only the unfolding of time can tell.

What hell really means then is this: to be, by your own choice, separated from the God who made you for himself and with whom you are inescapably related. After all the warnings of woe and judgment to come, anyone who to the last day still rejects the love of God in Christ will have shown himself unworthy of the freedom God gave him. His will shall crystalize into a rigid form and the fate he has chosen will be sealed. Is this not what final consignment to the lake of fire must mean? What do you think?

Unanswered Questions

We leave this lesson with many unanswered questions. Do people who die without receiving Christ get another opportunity to do so after death? What of children who die in infancy? Of the millions who will live and die without ever having heard of Christ? Scripture gives no direct answers to these questions. We must simply trust in the goodness of God, his justice, and in the assurance which Scripture gives us that, "(God) is not willing that any should perish. "

Session 12

12

The central message of Revelation is for us the same as it was for that little band of persecuted Christians in Asia Minor. It is the message of God's unfailing purpose and of the final victory of righteousness over every form of evil.

VISIONS OF GLORY

Outline

21:1-8 The New Creation.

21:9-27 The City of God.

22:6-21 Concluding admonitions and promises.

The reading for this lesson is Revelation, Chapters 21 and 22.

Helps and Clues

21:1 New heaven . . . new earth. The Greek word for "new" means not just "another" heaven and "another" earth but an entirely "new kind" of heaven and earth.

The sea was no more. Among ancient people the sea was feared as the primeval waters of chaos. And in Revelation it was from the sea that the first beast, representing the Antichrist, emerged.

21:3 Dwelling-literally and originally "tent." And in the Old Testament it was the tentlike structure called the tabernacle which symbolized God's presence as the children of Israel journeyed through the wilderness. In the New Jerusalem God's tent, i.e. his dwelling place, is not lofty and remote but with his people.

21:9 The Bride, the wife of the Lamb. The Church, which was the bride at the marriage supper in Chapter 19, is now the Lamb's wife.

21:16 The city lies foursquare . . . twelve thousand stadia-that is, a cube, 12,000 stadia on each side. To translate these measurements into miles would miss the point. The number 12, like 7, designates completeness and 1,000 suggests something

large and spacious. The point is that in heaven there is ample room for all.

21:22 No temple . . . no need of sun or moon. Like the tabernacle of old, the temple signified God's presence. Since he continually dwells with his people, a temple is no longer needed. As the source and giver of life, God also renders unnecessary the heavenly bodies which are only reflectors of his light.

22:2 The tree of life-paradise regained. The curse which banished mankind from the Garden of Eden at the very beginning is now lifted. The fruit of the tree which brought death into the world now conveys healing and life.

22:21 The grace of the Lord Jesus. It is well to remember that although Revelation abounds with frightening descriptions of divine judgment, its last word is grace.

Comments and Questions

The new heaven and the new earth described in these concluding chapters of Revelation complete a grand redemptive process in which the word "new" has been crucial—new wineskins, new covenant, new Israel, new birth, and now new creation and new Jerusalem. The old order which at the time of the Last Judgment "fled away" (20:11) is now replaced by a new heaven and a new earth and a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. And overshadowing all else in importance is God's

abiding presence with his people—immediate, constant, and always accessible. All that has been a threat to man's joy and peace has now been removed; even the last enemy—death—"shall be no more. "

The City of God

In verse 10 the imagery suddenly changes and the bride of the Lamb, who represents God's people, is seen now as the holy city of Jerusalem. Whereas in this world we could never identify the Church with the ideal Jerusalem, in eternity this can now be done because the holy city of Jerusalem, symbolizing the whole company of the redeemed, comes down out of heaven from God and with God. This image reminds us that in the last analysis the kingdom of heaven is not something which we create or build or advance; like salvation itself it is given to us by God. The reference to twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles (21:12, 14) reminds us once again that the eternal kingdom must finally embrace Jew and Christian, the old Israel and the new.

Many people who saw the motion picture "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" found in the film apocalyptic overtones. Indeed, anyone who had read carefully this chapter of John could not help seeing in the enormous spaceship which lands silently at Devil's Tower something which brought to mind John's vision of the New Jerusalem coming down from the sky. Perhaps the filmmaker has succeeded, where painters and sculptors for the most part have failed, in expressing the sense of awe and won-

der we experience when we try to visualize John's descriptions of heaven.

Heaven Is Not a Materialistic Reward for Good Behavior

With his description of the jewels of the foundations of the city, the pearls of the gates, and the streets of transparent gold, John is not trying to overwhelm us with a crass materialism. His purpose is to show us that the splendor of God far exceeds the opulence and extravagance of the Roman world or any other world. John is definitely not trying to paint a picture of heaven as a luxury hotel in the sky.

Indeed, the Bible puts very little emphasis on rewards and punishments as a motive for Christian living. There is an old story from medieval days of a woman who goes through the world with a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When asked what she is doing, she says that she is burning up the pleasures of heaven and putting out the fires of hell so that people will love God for himself.

In the Old Testament the tabernacle, and later the temple, was always the symbol of the divine presence. Since in the new heaven God himself is present, there is now no need for such symbols. Neither is there need of sun nor moon to give us light since the source of all light is right in our midst. This, of course, is to be understood theologically and spiritually, not physically, just as the presence of light before the creation of the sun in

Genesis I was a theological statement rather than a scientific description.

Parables of the Beginning and the End

In Chapter 22 the River of Life which flows from the throne through the middle of the city, reminding us of the rivers which flowed through the Garden of Eden, points to the abundance and availability of life in the eternal kingdom.

The Tree of Life is here too. In Genesis 3 this tree in the Garden of Eden suggested that man was made for immortality. As a result, however, of his disobedience and estrangement from God he was cast out of the Garden and thus denied access to the Tree of Life. Man as he exists in this world is, therefore, a mortal being. But here in John's vision of eternity the estrangement between God and man has been overcome and the Tree of Life has once again been placed at man's disposal. The parable of the beginning of the world finds its culmination in the parable of the end.

The rest of Revelation 22 is a curiously disjointed epilogue. It is even possible that some of these final statements were added by scribes and monks who had laboriously copied the book by hand and wanted somehow or other to leave their mark upon it. The final words, however, are a promise of the certainty of Christ's coming again to the world which he created. As the

writer C.S. Lewis put it so well, "When the play is over, the author himself will appear on stage. "

The Drama Comes to Its Wondrous Conclusion

And so we come to the end of our brief survey of Revelation. A wondrous drama has unfolded before our eyes, a drama which reached back to the beginning of time itself when the Archangel Michael cast Satan out of heaven, a drama of woe and great distress, of war and conflict, of contention with sinister powers of evil, and finally a drama of triumph and victory.

The central message of Revelation is for us the same as it was for that little band of persecuted Christians in Asia Minor. It is the message of God's unfailing purpose and of the final victory of righteousness over every form of evil.

Throughout our study of Revelation it has been clear that John expected Rome to fall in his day. While this event did not occur just when or exactly how he conceived it, Rome did fall four centuries later. And out of its ruins the Christian faith survived and Christ's Church is alive today. Now as we look to the days and years ahead, we may take confidence from these visions John recorded for us in Revelation, knowing that the future belongs not to the beast but to the Lamb, not to Babylon but to Jerusalem, the city of God.

As a final prayer and benediction to this study we turn not to a concluding passage from Revelation but to Psalm 46, written a thousand years before John had his visions on Patmos. The words of the Psalmist somehow capture in a few moving lines the heart of John's message to us.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change;
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam; though the mountains
tremble with its tumult.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God will
help her right early.

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice,
the earth melts.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has wrought
desolations in the earth.

He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire!

"Be still, and know that I am God, I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!"