

REVELATION

Introduction:

The Book of Revelation is beyond doubt the most fascinating, the most difficult to interpret, and the most poetical of all the books in the Bible. All the lines of biblical prophecy seem to converge in it, bringing the whole of the Old Testament to an apotheosis of divine purpose.

C. S. Lewis once spoke on the subject: "Is Theology Poetry?" His answer is found in his collection *The Weight of Glory*. The Book of Revelation answers the question in the positive, if we understand correctly what is meant by poetry. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "poetry," rather incompletely, as: "metrical writing." When we say that Revelation is a book of poetry, we do not suggest that it draws away from reality into a realm of illusions. To the contrary! If we characterize poetry as the taking of pictures in the color of reality, we may conclude that theology is, in fact, poetry of the highest order and the Book of Revelation is a prime example of it. Revelation depicts the reality of God, the reality of the existence of man, and the reality of the flow of history more precisely in its use of poetic illustrations than human realism could ever achieve. The seals of God's book, the breaking of which call up the horsemen and their horses, the trumpets sounded by the angels, and the bowls of God's wrath, represent more clearly the essence of events to come than any objective analysis could. In a sense, poetry is more realistic and is reality itself.

The essence of the Book of Revelation is a picture of the struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan, resulting in the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ.

Although the greater part of the book deals with a period in world history, which the Lord Jesus calls the "great tribulation,"¹ the theme of the book is not the revelation of the Antichrist. It is, as the opening words of the first chapter state: "The revelation of Jesus Christ."

The section that deals with "the great tribulation" can easily be divided into three sections, each of which is subdivided into seven parts. We read about seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls of God's wrath. In my considered opinion, we are not dealing with three consecutive periods in world history, but with one that is pictured three times. It is as if John points his camera three times at the same scene, each time using a different filter. Admittedly, the figure of speech "camera" is an anachronism in this context. The appearance of the Antichrist upon the world scene and the years of the great tribulation, as represented under the pictures of the seals of a book that are opened, depict the acts of men. The Antichrist is a human being, who pretends to be the savior of the world. The retake of the same scene, depicted as the sounding of seven trumpets, describe the activities of demons during that period. The Antichrist called upon the devil and his horde to help him establish his reign over the earth. The demons come to his help but they do not leave when they are no longer needed. The third take, depicted as the pouring out of seven bowls of God's wrath, indicates that God's rage over human depravity is demonstrated in this great tribulation. In brief, Man does it; Satan inspires it; and God allows it as a punishment for man's sin.

Authorship:

Scholars have debated who the author, who calls himself John, may have been. Some believe him to be an elder of a church in Asia Minor, but the oldest testimony of the church fathers points to John, the apostle. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "Clear external testimony begins with Justin Martyr about the middle of the second century; he refers to 'John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied in a Revelation made to him that the believers in our Christ should spend a thousand years in Jerusalem' ... Irenaeus, in the latter half of the second century, knew the book well, quoted it largely, and plainly attributed it to the John who leaned on Jesus' breast ...; he also appeals to genuine and ancient copies, as well as to others in which the text had already become corrupt ... Explicit statements that the Apostle John wrote the Apocalypse are also found in Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, and many later Fathers."

Outline of the Book:

The major lines of the book are clearly visible: there are three main divisions. After an introduction of eight verses, there are seven letters, which the Lord of glory dictates to John for the seven churches in Asia Minor. This covers Ch. 1:9 – Ch. 3:22. The greater part of the book, from Ch. 4:1 – Ch. 19:21 deals with a description of the struggle between God and Satan. This is the part most difficult to interpret. But the

¹ Matt. 24:21 (NKJV)

lines that depict the development of the struggle are easily discerned. We see three series of seven: seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls of God's wrath. The last three chapters, Ch. 20:1 – Ch. 22:20, describe the renewal of all things after the war is over. We will follow this outline:

- I. Introduction** - Ch. 1:1-8
- II. The Seven Letters** - Ch. 1:9-3:22
- III. The Struggle Between God and Satan** - Ch. 4:1-19:21
 - 1. The Seven Seals** - Ch. 4:1-8:15
 - 2. The Seven Trumpets** - Ch. 8:16- 15:4
 - 3. The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath** - Ch. 15:5-19:21
- IV. The Renewal of All Things** - Ch. 20:1-22:21

- I. Introduction** - Ch. 1:1-8
- We distinguish here between the heading and the opening.

A. The Heading - Ch. 1:1-3

The message of Revelation cannot be understood if we do not give serious consideration to the meaning of the opening words. It has been said about the books of the Bible that the key for each of them hangs at the door. The revelation of this book is "The revelation of Jesus Christ." It is not, as some assume, merely a description of the end times. It is not a revelation of events but of a person, Jesus Christ. This is the theme of the book and the meaning of all the events described in it. Jesus did not write the book but the book is about Him.

The second part of the opening sentence seems to contradict this. It sounds as if God, the Father, merely allowed His Son to take a peek at future events in order to know what was going to happen. What is meant, however, is that the Father gave the Son the gift to reveal Himself in the events of the future. This is confirmed by the whole composition of the book.

The intriguing feature in all this is that it emphasizes Jesus' humanity. It evinces the same principle as in Jesus' words in John's Gospel: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."² The revelation is the Father's gift to the Son, who became man in order to save mankind. The future events have, of course, their bearing upon the revelation. The book is meant "to show his servants what must soon take place." This refers to political, social, and economic events. These events are not the content of the reality; they are merely the vehicles. This is the reason the events are expressed in images. The events the people experience on earth, that which we call "the facts," are actually images, expression of another reality.

The word "revelation," therefore, has a much deeper meaning than only of showing what will happen. The Bible uses the word to describe God's intervention in man's thinking, logic, and understanding. It means a supernatural transfer of data to our understanding, not contrary to logic but circumventing logic. God's revelation projects the actual content and meaning of events to the screen of our brain, without the means of images and symbols. The Holy Spirit used this principle in causing the pregnancy of the Virgin Mary. God impregnates our intelligence and understanding outside the common means of communication.

We find this illustrated in various ways in Scripture. When the leaders of Israel refused to accept Jesus' message, we read: "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.'"³

Upon Peter's confession of faith, "Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'"⁴

And in His last prayer for His disciples, hours before going to the cross, Jesus stated: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they

² John 5:19

³ Matt. 11:25

⁴ Matt. 16:17

have obeyed your word.”⁵ Paul testifies about his understanding of the Gospel: “I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”⁶ Every one of these instances concerns an act of God. None of this came about by human initiative or was achieved by human means. That is why these experiences are always accompanied by a blessing for man. We will never be able to understand the Book of Revelation without God’s revelation to us and without a personal fellowship with the Lord. We will only recognize Jesus Christ in this book if we know Him already.

It is “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him.” As was stated, this emphasizes the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. This statement could hardly be formulated this way if it pertained to a manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity. This emphasis throws a new light on the content of the book. In a way, it is an answer to David’s question: “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?”⁷ In the Book of Revelation, we see him: “crowned ... with glory and honor,” and “everything under his feet.”⁸

It had been God’s plan from the very beginning that man would bear on his shoulder the government of creation. It is only a man who can open the seals of the scroll of God’s ordinances. A man is seated on the throne of heaven, because this man healed the break with God by dying for the sins of His fellowmen.

We must look at facts that are described in this book in that light. The important part is not the manifestation of the Antichrist, or a report on what the devil does on the earth, but the acts of Jesus Christ on, what Isaiah calls “the day of vengeance of our God.”⁹ For us, who live in “the year of the LORD’s favor,”¹⁰ it is often difficult to imagine what life would be under the different circumstances of another dispensation. Also, the fact that the devil is named as the executor of many of the acts described in this book, complicates matters. The question arises: Who is responsible for all the horror of the events. We must hold to the truth that God is not the author of evil. The fact that seven angels pour the bowls of God’s wrath out over the earth does not mean that God creates evil. The basic elements of God’s wrath are intrinsically good. Those who have turned themselves against God and all that tries to separate God’s creation from the Creator, experience this wrath as harmful. Our planet, for instance, could not exist without the law of gravity, but to the person who falls, that same law becomes his enemy. So it is with the laws that govern God’s righteousness. The full responsibility for all evil lies with those who have broken the bond with God.

The purpose of the revelation of Jesus Christ is “to show his servants what must soon take place.” Although this allows man to take a peek into the future, we maintain that the primary purpose of this revelation is not the satisfaction of man’s curiosity but the disclosure of the glory of our Lord.

It is hard for us to imagine what it must have meant for John to become a partaker in the glory of his Lord. His reaction at the end of this chapter explains some of this. In a preface to his translation of the Book of Revelation, J. B. Phillips writes that he was under the impression that John actually wrote while in a Holy Spirit induced “a trance.” It must have been an awesome experience for the apostle. There is an angel who plays a role in the transmission of the message, but he seldom comes to the foreground. At the end of the book, he declines the worship John wants to give to him, saying: “I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book.”¹¹

B. The Greeting – Ch. 1:4-8

⁵ John 17:6

⁶ Gal. 1:12

⁷ Ps. 8:4

⁸ Ps. 8:5,6

⁹ Isa. 61:2

¹⁰ Isa. 61:2

¹¹ Rev. 22:8,9

We who are the recipients of this book, who hear the Word of God and obey it, may also partake in this glory. John pronounces blessed those who hear the words of this prophecy and take them to heart. The word he uses is *makarios*, which is the same word used in Christ's Beatitudes.¹² We should actually read the words "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy" as "O, the blessedness of him who reads...!" John's blessing is more than a benign wish that has no practical effect. It is a triumphant shout that opens this book for us. The same kind of shout Jesus utter when He said: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."¹³

This reminds us what our attitude toward the Word of God ought to be. We must take it very seriously. We must realize that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."¹⁴ The opposite reaction to God's Word is illustrated in the acts of King Jehoiakim who burned the scroll with the prophecies of Jeremiah that were read to him. We read: "Whenever Jehudi had read three or four columns of the scroll, the king cut them off with a scribe's knife and threw them into the firepot, until the entire scroll was burned in the fire."¹⁵

It sounds strange to us, who live about 2000 years after John wrote, to read: "take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." If we understand this to mean that John thought that Christ's physical return to earth was about to occur, we can only conclude that the apostle was wrong. Then we can hardly maintain that this book is part of the inspired Word of God that is infallible. On the other hand, it is difficult to assume that John would have spoken of a time 2000 years in the future, as a time that was near. We may find an answer to this impasse if we consider Jesus' words to the Jews of His day: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad."¹⁶ Since our Lord used the past tense, we cannot understand this to mean that Abraham witnessed Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection, looking down from heaven. During his life on earth, Abraham experienced these greatest of all events in world history in the birth, death, and resurrection of his son Isaac. These events in Abraham's life were pictures of the facts of salvation, from which they derived their content and meaning. Because Abraham's experiences would have had no meaning in themselves if Jesus Christ had not become man, and had not died, and risen from the dead. But because the events in Abraham's life were pointers to what God was going to do in this world, Jesus could say: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day." So it is with the Lord's return and the revelation of His glory which will take place on our planet. Christians have anticipated this event for almost 2000 years. But in every century, there have been occurrences in the lives of individuals that derived their meaning from the expectation of the revelation of Jesus Christ. As Abraham saw Christ's day 2000 years before He came, so is the time near for us. It is important for us to understand the meaning of our experiences.

If we interpret the book of Revelation as having meaning only for the end of the world, we put severe limitations on its contents. John, undoubtedly, took his own time, the reign of the emperors Nero and Domitian, as a point of reference when he wrote. For those who lived through the Nazi regime of Hitler, or Stalin's Gulags, or the cultural revolution of Mao Dze Dung, the contents of this book has been of great relevance. They understood that "the time is near."

On the other hand, we are also wrong if we believe that Revelation only means to offer comfort in a subjective way in times of persecution. The book deals with facts that will take place on earth, concrete facts in world history. The millennium is not merely a symbolic concept to convey to us the thought that God is still on the throne. Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were, undoubtedly types of the Antichrist, as were Antiochus Epiphanes, Nero, and Domitian. But if no real Antichrist would ever appear upon the world scene, there could not be a type of him either. There would have been no day of Christ for Abraham, if Christ had not come. At every time in world history "the time is near" for every person alive. The shadows will only fade away on the world's last night, when the light appears and reality dawns upon us. One day will be the last day. When that will be, I do not know.

¹² Matt. 5:3 ff.

¹³ Luke 11:28

¹⁴ Deut. 8:3

¹⁵ Jer. 36:23

¹⁶ John 8:56 (NKJV)

The second part of the introduction consists in John's greetings to the reader. Verses 4-7 are the words of a human being, of a man to his fellowmen, of a brother to brothers. No one was so well suited to describe the revelation of Jesus Christ as "the disciple whom Jesus loved."¹⁷ Part of the doctrine of Inspiration of the Bible is the fact that the Holy Spirit prepares the writer of a particular book for the task of writing down the Word of God. The apostle John is a convincing proof of this doctrine.

We may interpret the seven churches in the province of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea to be symbolic for the whole of the body of Christ on earth. The number seven is, clearly, an image of divine perfection. Although I always feel some hesitation toward interpretation of Scripture that focuses on numerals, there is no denying the spiritual meaning of these figures. What Jesus said to these seven churches, He says to the whole church throughout the ages.

The content of the blessing is representative of the content of the whole book. The revelation of Jesus Christ is the revelation of Him, "who is, and who was, and who is to come." These words are a projection of eternity upon time. Eternity is, of course, more than the past, present, and future. But this is the way we, who are bound by time and space, would imagine eternity to be.

The words are also a reference to and an elaboration upon the name YHWH, "I AM WHO I AM." What is so amazing to us is not so much the three phases of time: past, present, and future but the immutability of God's character as it is being projected upon time. For us, time is the indicator of change, which cannot be reconciled with immutability. Past, present, and future are, for us, pointers to growth and change. Yet, according to the author of Hebrews: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."¹⁸ This part of John's greeting, therefore, emphasizes the divine character of our Lord.

"Grace and peace" are the Greek and Hebrew forms of greeting, expressed as *charis* and *shalom*. They express in an international fashion the blessing God gives to all who seek fellowship with Him.

The Holy Spirit is presented here as a seven-fold unity. This does not mean, of course, that there would be seven individual Spirits in God. But the figure seven is used to express divine perfection.

Next, the human nature of Jesus Christ is emphasized in the words: "the faithful witness," who reveals to us the secrets of the invisible God. In his first epistle, the apostle John calls the Holy Spirit a witness to God's truth. We read: "And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth."¹⁹ What is probably meant in that context is the Spirit's testimony in the heart of the believer. It is the witness of the Spirit that makes us aware of the truth. When Jesus is called "the faithful witness," the term is used as a complement to the "I am" statements in John's Gospel. He is the objective source of truth, which the Holy Spirit applies subjectively in our life. This testimony is at the core of the Gospel. It became flesh and blood in the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. Those facts are a testimony to God's acting in this world.

The three things John states about Jesus give us a complete picture of the purpose and content of the incarnation. The testimony of Jesus Christ stands for the whole of God's revelation of Himself in Jesus. He is the Word that became flesh, who pitched His tent among us, as is revealed in His character, His acts, and His words. He is God's intervention in fallen creation. He is the man whom the Father called to bring back under the authority of the throne everything that had fallen away from God. His is the essence of humanity. God always intended man to have this position of restoring what Satan had dragged away from God in his fall. I am convinced that this was God's prime purpose in the creation of Adam. Adam should have restored to God's authority what Satan had embezzled. Jesus Christ accomplished that which Adam had failed to achieve. We rarely understand how deeply man fell when he committed his first sin. Instead of dedicating his life to the service of God, Adam not only did not take upon himself the responsibility of restoring what Satan had taken, but he joined the enemy in his rebellion. Jesus' position as "the ruler of the kings of the earth" is not a reign over like-minded ones but it is a putting down of an insurrection.

At the same time, this is a prophecy about the rehabilitation of man. The key to this understanding is in the words: "the firstborn from the dead." I do not know how the resurrection rates in God's overall plan for His creation, but as a human being who is born in this sinful world, and who lives in the shadow of

¹⁷ John 13:23

¹⁸ Heb. 13:8

¹⁹ I John 5:6

death, the resurrection is the most glorious event I can imagine. It is almost too good to be true. That is why the disciples, on the day of Jesus' resurrection, shouted to one another: "It is true! The Lord has risen!"²⁰

The hymn "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father-to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen" represents one of the most wonderful songs of adoration that can be found in all of Scripture. I remember how this was sung in the revival meetings I attended in Wuppertal, Germany, shortly after the end of World War II. The hymn demonstrates in an incomparable way what our Lord has done for us and what the contents of our worship ought to be. It is regrettable that the older reading of the verse is lost in more modern translations. I strongly prefer the reading: "To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood..."²¹

Both spiritually and grammatically the emphasis is upon the last part of the hymn: "to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen." These words are akin to the doxology of Psalm One Hundred Fifty, the ultimate hymn of praise. We do well to pay attention to these rules of grammar. For us, however, the emotional emphasis is upon the first part of this verse, upon the love, redemption, and restoration. Thus heaven and earth are united in this verse. The adoration belongs to heaven; the redemption and rehabilitation belong to earth. Love forms the bridge between the two. Love is the source and the reason for what happens. Redemption is the way that shows how it happens. The kingdom and the priesthood are the result. This is the victory that was intended. But the ultimate goal, the "raison d'être," that which gives meaning and purpose to all is the eternal glory and power of God. God's glory and power would have existed immutably, even if the universe were wrapped in darkness. The fact that adoration wells up from our souls does not add or detract any from the absolute character of God, but it makes us more human. No one will ever be able to look at this mystery without being changed and renewed by it.

Verse seven expresses in one sentence the whole content of the book. But, in a way, we can say the same about the 6th verse. This verse shows the way in which Jesus' revelation comes to us. "He is coming with the clouds," says it all. There is also a sharp contrast between both verses. The first speaks of the blessedness of those who worship Him, the second of the despair of those who reject Him. It is, of course, true that "every eye will see Him," including both the saved and the lost, but the emphasis seems to be on "those who pierced him." Those are, first of all, the ones who were responsible for His physical death, the Jews and the Romans, but also all who reject Him as Lord over their lives. The Second Coming will awaken in every human being a sense of reality regarding sin and the rejection of Jesus Christ.

This verse is the first of a series of paraphrases of Old Testament prophecies. This is an adaptation of Zechariah's prophecy about the one they have pierced: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, and all the rest of the clans and their wives."²²

By changing the mourning of the different clans into the mourning of all the people of the earth, John places the prophecy in its right light. The Holy Spirit convicts people of the sin of unbelief. The lament is not so much about Jesus Christ as about themselves because they did not believe in Him as their Messiah. Part of the revelation of Jesus Christ will be that the whole world will recognize that mankind as a whole is responsible for the crucifixion of the Lord of glory. In the same way as the conviction of their crime came to Joseph's brothers when they stood before him, so will all human beings face reality on the day of Jesus' coming. The prophecy Jesus spoke before the Sanhedrin laid the legal basis for His crucifixion.²³ The members of the Sanhedrin who pronounced the death sentence at that time must, meanwhile, have come to the realization that they were wrong. The words: "I am the Alpha and the Omega" occur three times in the

²⁰ Luke 24:34

²¹ NKJV

²² Zech. 12:10-14

²³ See Matt. 26:64-66; Mark 14:62-64

Book of Revelation.²⁴ In the KJV (and NKJV) the words also occur in 1:11, but they are not found in more modern versions. The expression in this verse is generally understood as referring to God, the Father. It seems, however, more logical to assume that the two Greek letters, Alpha and Omega, refer to the Second Person of the Trinity, to the Word of God. In the context of other verses it seems that the expression refers to the beginning and end of all things. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the beginning and end of all things because He is the Creator of all. All things owe their existence to Him.

The apostle Paul expresses this beautifully in his Epistle to the Colossians: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”²⁵

He is also the beginning of the new creation because He is “the firstborn from among the dead.” The end points to the goal of creation and recreation. Paul, in his first epistle to the Corinthians mentions this, saying: “For he ‘has put everything under his feet.’ Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.”²⁶ This is the meaning of the letter **O** (Omega): Jesus is the glorification of God, the Father. The words: “who is, and who was, and who is to come” are found twice in this introduction to the book. As we saw above, they constitute a projection of eternity upon time; they are also a reference to the meaning of the Name YHWH. When God revealed Himself to Moses, He called Himself “I AM WHO I AM.”²⁷ John states in the prologue of his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”²⁸

We could say that the content of the whole book of Revelation can be summed up in the statement: “He comes!” This projection from eternity upon time is worked out in the events that mark the end of times. The two characteristics of God that are emphasized in this verse are His eternity and His omnipotence. The message of Revelation, therefore, is: “He has all power in heaven and on earth and He comes.”

C. The Vision of the Risen Lord – Ch. 1:9-20

This section, particularly verses 12-20, is to me one of the highlights in the Bible. I have committed this portion to memory. We must understand that John was not taken out of reality into a dream world, but that he was taken out of the illusion that sin has spun around us and awakened to a reality that is more real than what we commonly call reality. The prophet Zechariah describes a similar experience as he received one of his visions and said: “Then the angel who talked with me returned and wakened me, as a man is wakened from his sleep.”²⁹ Entering into the presence of God is as a waking up out of a dream.

John describes his circumstances as a captive on the island of Patmos. Without uttering any complaint about his condition, he identifies himself with others who suffer persecution because of their faith in Christ. He knows that he is not alone and he feels a common bond with suffering fellow believers. Three keywords are important: “suffering,” “kingdom,” and “patient endurance.” He shares these with other believers. We do not know exactly what the word “suffering” stands for in this context. John wrote this during the reign of the godless emperor Domitian, who was the one who demanded divine adulation for himself. Over against this, John places the kingdom of Jesus Christ, which gives him the courage and perseverance to hang on. Persecution stands for the circumstances, kingdom for the vision, and endurance

²⁴ See 21:6; 22:13. The words “I am the First and the Last” are also found in 1:17; 2:8 and 22:13.

²⁵ Col. 1:15-18

²⁶ I Cor. 15:27,28

²⁷ Ex. 3:14

²⁸ John 1:1

²⁹ Zech. 4:1

for the result of the two preceding entities. All persecution is demonically inspired. Ever since the days of Cain, those who refused to eat from the tree of life have persecuted those who ate from it. A human being, created in the image of God, which allows him to freely choose to have fellowship with God, endeavors to destroy that image in his fellowman by trying to force him to do what he does not want to do. In a way that is beyond our comprehension, God uses this demonic plan to purify and complete His image in His children.

Jesus reserved His most precious beatitudes for those who are persecuted because of righteousness. He said: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."³⁰ Peter states that persecution forms the ideal soil for the growth of God's grace within us. We read: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." And: "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God."³¹ And Paul writes to the Romans: "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."³²

John acknowledges that he had received his share in suffering for Jesus' sake. But he also states that the Lord had given him grace to persevere. What matters in suffering is not our strength of character but the measure of our surrender to Jesus Christ. Perseverance is His; we may dip in to that and draw from it as much as we need.

In connection with John's words, we think of the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar, who saw the statue that was crushed by a stone, which turned into a mountain that filled the whole earth.³³ John must have had this stone before his eyes in the period of persecution by the Roman Empire. He concluded from this that it was not worth it to give in to this mixture of iron and clay to experience only temporary relief from suffering. Those who await an eternal kingdom cannot take temporary kingdoms too seriously.

John describes his vision with the words "I was in the Spirit." We don't know what is exactly meant by the expression, whether it means being in trance, or being filled with the Holy Spirit. John's experience probably differed from Ezekiel's who states that he was physically transported and felt his visions as a physical reality.³⁴ The apostle Paul states about his vision that he didn't know "whether it was in the body or out of the body."³⁵ John seems to say here that the experience was not a physical one. Whether his spirit left the body or not is not clear.

What is meant with the expression "The Lord's Day" cannot be determined clearly either. It may be Sunday, the day on which the Lord's resurrection is commemorated. It could also refer to the Sabbath as the Old Testament day of rest. John may also point to the contents of his book, as the day on which God's judgments are put into effect.

John's statement that he turned around to see the voice that was speaking to him seems to constitute a physical act. This turning around is presented as a kind of conversion. Even though John was in prison "on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," he had to change his attitude before he could see what the Lord wanted to show him. If this is really what John experienced, it shows that we can be in prison because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus and yet live with our backs turned to God. We may have to look at John's "death and resurrection," as described in vs. 17, in this light.

³⁰ Matt. 5:10-12

³¹ I Peter 1:6-7; 2:19,20

³² Rom. 5:3,4

³³ See Dan. 2:1-49

³⁴ See Ezek. 2:2; 3:12,14

³⁵ II Cor. 12:2,3

It is clear that the seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, stand for more than seven local churches. These seven symbolize the body of Christ on earth. It could be that John was particularly ordered to focus on these churches because he was responsible for that district.

Some commentators see these churches as representing seven phases of church history. It is a sobering thought that in the region where these churches flourished then, at present almost every trace of Christianity is wiped out. It has been stated that in present-day Turkey one cannot find more than a few dozen Christians.

John's encounter with Christ must have been an indescribable experience for him. He had known Jesus intimately as a human being on earth. But here he meets Him on a level and in a manner for which he was not prepared physically or emotionally.

First of all, John sees Jesus standing among seven golden lampstands. We must ask the question whether these lampstands are an image of the seven churches, or whether the churches are a picture of the lampstands? Where do we find the reality, in heaven or on earth? It is a glorious discovery to understand that reality belongs to Christ and that what we see on earth are merely shadows. We often distort matters by turning them upside down and by believing that what we see with our mortal eyes is the ultimate reality. The essence of every church on earth is the golden lampstand, that shining lamp that is kept burning by the Holy Spirit in the presence of the Son of Man. Essential in every church is the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the fellowship and love of people who are saved.

The clothing John describes reveals Jesus' inner glory. As in Jesus' transfiguration, His glory became visible in the transformation of His clothes. Matthew describes this: "His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light."³⁶ John does not give us a detailed description of the clothes Jesus wore. He states the length and mentions the golden sash as an expression of simplicity and majesty. In this case clothes do not make the man, but the man makes the clothes!

In saying these things we are speaking after an earthly fashion. We live in a world in which there is a contrast between inner beauty and its outer manifestations. As a result of sin, content and form are often each other's opposites. In heaven, such is no longer the case. In the Incarnation, Jesus became in outward appearance like sinful man, but inwardly He was perfect and without sin. In heaven form and content are identical. John sees Jesus as He is. That is what overwhelmed him so much. He had known about Jesus' glory, but He had never seen this glory manifested in this way. The glory he describes is definitely divine. Yet, John also states clearly that he sees Jesus as a human being. It is impossible for us to sound the depth of this mystery. In Jesus the goal of God's creation has been reached. God and His creation have become one as a pledge toward that day in which God will be "all in all."³⁷ The glory of God John sees is human!

John describes Jesus in terms of absolute purity and holiness, as "white fire." As in Isaiah's vision, God's holiness and glory are identical.³⁸ The voice of Jesus is like the sound of a mighty waterfall that breaks through the sound barrier of human hearing. The Word He speaks is compared to a sharp double-edged sword. The writer of Hebrews uses the same image for the Word of God: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."³⁹ The sword stands for the result of God's Word. The Word is both creative and curative; it dissects man's motives. The image emphasizes the majesty and the power of Jesus' Word.

In between the images of the "rushing waters" and the "sharp double-edged sword" we find the "seven stars," representing the pastors or the "angels" of the seven churches. They are in the hollow of Jesus' hand, surrounded by His Word in all its majesty and power. It is important to realize that God's Word is both creative and re-creative. If it is true what some theologians believe that there is a gap between the first two verses of the Book of Genesis, that Satan's fall into sin occurred between those two verses and that God restored His creation by the agency of His Word, then we find this fact both at the beginning and at the end of the Bible. The creation of heaven and earth was an act of God's majesty; the creation of light and the

³⁶ Matt. 17:2

³⁷ See I Cor. 15:28

³⁸ See Isa. 6:3

³⁹ Heb. 4:12

separation of land and water was an act of God's holiness, brought about by the analytical penetration of the two-edged sword of the Word. God created these "stars," these righteous ones by His Word and He also sanctifies and glorifies them by His Word. We read their description in the Book of Daniel: "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."⁴⁰ Obviously, the criterion for a pastor of a church is his testimony that leads people to repentance and to faith in Christ.

The most overwhelming feature in Jesus' manifestation of Himself to John was the blinding light: "like the sun shining in all its brilliance." As it is impossible for a human being to stare into the sun without damaging his eyesight, so it is impossible for us to behold God's glory. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually we are unfitted for this. John collapses completely and falls at Jesus' feet "as though dead." We have little notion of what glory actually is.

John's collapse reminds us of the reactions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Daniel, particularly, describes how the experience left him completely drained of all energy and how he only regained his composure by a supernatural intervention: "So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground. A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said, 'Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you.' And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling."⁴¹

Evidently, the result of this kind of swoon is fear. For the inhabitants of heaven who have no experience of the effect of the Fall, such a reaction must be incomprehensible. Even for us who know a certain measure of intimacy with God, it may be difficult to understand that we might react to glory in this manner. Even if we are not afraid in our spirit, like Adam was after he sinned, our body reacts in a way we cannot control. We are physically unable to take what we accept spiritually.

Jesus puts His right hand upon the disciple He loves. This was a purposeful touch, otherwise John could not have stated so specifically that it was Jesus' right hand. For most people the right hand is the more important of the two. Twice in this section, Jesus' right hand is mentioned; first as the hand in which He holds the seven stars and then as the hand which He puts on John's shoulder. It is the hand that holds the stars that touches John. Thus John is taken into that protective custody of which his Gospel speaks: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."⁴² "Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. If God is for us, who can be against us?"⁴³ John must have been conscious of this as Jesus laid His hand on him. This imposition of the hand is accompanied by words of Jesus' own resurrection from the dead. Jesus places Himself next to His beloved friend to tell him that He went through this same kind of death and came out victoriously. Thus, John's resurrection was linked to Jesus', which made it real.

Jesus' words express, first of all, His love. "Do not be afraid" fully satisfies John's emotional needs. As we saw, fear was the actual reason for John's collapse. Healing begins when Jesus speaks to him and touches him. God's Word of love has healing power.

Then Jesus indicates that the legal basis for restoration is in His incarnation, His death, and His resurrection. Because this occurred in our world and before God, man has the legal right to live. The apostle Paul calls Jesus: "The last Adam" and "the second man."⁴⁴ This may be the explanation of Jesus' words: "I am the First and the Last." As the last Adam, He brought closure to the fall of man that began with the first Adam. In His death "He had provided purification for sins."⁴⁵ As the second man, He rose from the dead and

⁴⁰ Daniel 12:3

⁴¹ Dan.10:8-11

⁴² John 10:28,29

⁴³ Rom. 8:39,31

⁴⁴ I Cor. 15:45,47

⁴⁵ Heb. 1:3

became the head of a new creation. Jesus had the right to say to John: "Do not be afraid." He had paid for these words. As always, His Word is creation; it creates in John the peace that is needed to live.

As with all human beings, John owed his resurrection to the fact that Jesus is who He is. We may classify Jesus' words under the category of "I AM" as we find it in John's Gospel. "I AM" represents the Name YHWH, with which God revealed Himself to Moses.⁴⁶ Inasmuch as we exist because Jesus is who He is, so we will be raised from the dead because He rose from the dead and is the Living One. Jesus' revelation of Himself is overwhelming: "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!" The way Jesus says this indicates that He Himself is still amazed about it. It is as if the resurrection has never lost its surprise and glow for Him.

The NIV unfortunately omits the little word "behold," or "see," which is found in the Greek text. This word is an invitation to John to confirm by sensory perception the fact of Jesus' resurrection. In John's own words: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."⁴⁷ "The Lord is risen indeed."⁴⁸ There is proof of it. It is the ultimate reality.

Jesus' possession of the keys of death and Hades is the direct result of His resurrection. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews states that the devil "holds the power of death."⁴⁹ This evidently means that Satan used to have the keys of Hades. When Jesus died and entered the realm of the dead, He took those keys away from him. Satan must have thought that this Lamb of God, laden with the sins of the world, was an easy prey for him, but the manifestation of Jesus' own sinless nature must have been to him like a blinding light. If Gehennah is the place where "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched,"⁵⁰ then Jesus Christ must have been the only person who could not be touched by the fire because in Him there was no worm. What happened outside the tomb, that the guards fled and the stone was rolled away, happened in a spiritual sense inside the kingdom of death. Satan dropped his keys and took to his heels. Jesus picked up the keys, opened the gate, and walked out, taking others with Him. As David prophesied in one of the psalms: "When you ascended on high, you led captives in your train."⁵¹

The command John receives to write what he sees covers in broad lines the contents of this book. The Book of Revelation deals with the heavenly reality in the past, the present, and the future. It demonstrates also the principle of inspiration of the Word of God. It is the Word that links things in heaven with things on earth. What will take place only covers one third of the whole. If we approach the Book of Revelation with the idea that it deals primarily with what will happen during the end time, we are on the wrong track.

"What you have seen" is the glory of the risen Lord. "What is now" is the lampstands, the stars, and the throne of God and Him that is seated on it. These are of vital importance to the church of the past and of the present. It is indispensable for the members of the body of Christ to constantly keep their eyes fixed on the glory of the body. The church will only be able to shine in this dark world if it sees itself as a burning lampstand at the side of the Lord who holds her pastors as stars in His hand.

Jesus calls the existence of the lampstand and the stars a "mystery." This corresponds with Paul's words in his Epistle to the Ephesians, where he states: "That is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."⁵² The mystery of the church is the born-again person, the new creation, in which all social differences and

⁴⁶ See Ex. 3:14

⁴⁷ I John 1:1

⁴⁸ Luke 24:34 (KJV)

⁴⁹ Heb. 2:14

⁵⁰ Mark 9:48

⁵¹ Ps. 68:18

⁵² Eph. 3:3-6

gender differences have fallen away. As Paul writes to the Colossians: “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”⁵³ And to the Galatians he writes: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁴ David states in one of the psalms: “The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him.”⁵⁵ The prophet Zechariah saw this mystery take shape in the vision of the gold lampstand and the two olive trees that fed their fuel organically to the lamps.⁵⁶ In Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus used parables to teach about the church, He said to His disciples: “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.”⁵⁷

The person who has died with Christ and is raised again in His resurrection forms a vital part of the Kingdom. In letting our light shine in fellowship with one another, we are instruments that are used to bring this fallen world back under the authority of God, till God will be “all in all.” Our prayer is: “Your kingdom come!”⁵⁸ When we think of the devil, we should never forget Paul’s words that “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under [y]our feet.”⁵⁹

II. The Seven Letters - Ch. 1:9-3:22

A. To Ephesus 2:1-7

The apostle Paul planted the church of Ephesus, approximately thirty years before the Book of Revelation was written. We find the record in Acts Chapter Nineteen. During his second missionary journey, Paul went back and forth between Europe and Asia Minor and so he came to Ephesus, which at that time was an important harbor. The church began with a dozen disciples of John the Baptist. After Paul’s prayer and imposition of hands, they were filled with the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰ This was followed by a great spiritual revival in which the city was cleansed of demonic spirits. People came for deliverance of their bad conscience, for forgiveness of sin, and to burn their magic books.⁶¹ Paul spent approximately two years and three months in this celebration of a spiritual springtime. Luke records: “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul.”⁶² We are reminded of the festive beginning of the church when we read the letter that Jesus dictated to John, in which He speaks of their “first love.”

Jesus presents Himself to the church of Ephesus as the One “who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” It is the Lord of the church who speaks to His church. As we saw before, the stars and the lampstands represent a heavenly reality of which the conditions on earth are a shadow. The copy on earth is here compared with the reality in heaven. The question that comes up in this comparison is whether the church on earth is what she is supposed to be. Does the supernatural light of the lampstand shine through the people on earth? Are the church leaders like shining stars? This comparison between that which is on earth and what is in heaven does not only serve the purpose of providing a means of moral and spiritual improvement, it is also the “umbilical cord,” the lifeline of the church. The body of

⁵³ Col. 3:9-11

⁵⁴ Gal. 3:28

⁵⁵ Ps. 25:14 (NKJV)

⁵⁶ See Zech. 4:1-6

⁵⁷ Matt 13:11

⁵⁸ Matt. 6:10

⁵⁹ Rom. 16:20

⁶⁰ See Acts 19:1-7

⁶¹ Acts 19:18,19

⁶² Acts 19:11

Christ on earth only functions well when it constantly compares itself to its original. The wind and the Holy Spirit both always stream from a maximum to a minimum.

The full emphasis in this first letter is upon the essence of the church as a testimony to the light. The church in Ephesus consisted of a human organization filled by the Holy Spirit. As such, the church functions as two-in-one, as a combination of body and soul. Without the supernatural element the organization on earth would be nothing but a dead body. This is what Jesus meant when He said: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."⁶³

Standing before the Lord there is always a form of judgment. This judgment is instantaneous and we always initiate it. What I mean is, that, if we are placed as a copy next to the original, our own mouth will condemn us. Thus Isaiah condemned himself when he saw the Lord and cried: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."⁶⁴

In this case, however, it is the Lord who speaks first. He begins by mentioning three positive features in their character: 1. Their intolerance toward the wicked, 2. Their spiritual discernment, 3. Their perseverance. Their zeal for truth is impressive. There has been, however, a change in motivation. Their zeal used to be based upon their love for the Lord. That is no longer the case. How can a building remain standing when that foundation shifts or is replaced with something else? Why do we sometimes keep on doing the same thing but change the reason for doing it?

The words "first love" are often interpreted as an indicator of time. That interpretation suggests that love between human beings, husband and wife for instance, is always of a better quality in the beginning than in the end. It is true that love, which is fresh and spontaneous in the beginning, can, in some instances, turn cold and sour. Both often love grows deeper and more precious as the years go by. If I must choose between the puppy love of young people who hardly know whom they love and the mature love of the older ones, I prefer the latter. This brings me to believe that Jesus does not mean here that the Ephesian Christians had to return to "being in love" as they were before. Loving God is always a matter of priority. The law states: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."⁶⁵ Jesus adds to this: "and with all your mind."⁶⁶

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: "G. Campbell Morgan relates this passage to Paul's words of warning to the Corinthian church: 'For I espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve in his craftiness, your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity that is toward Christ'... The elements of first love then are simplicity and purity... The love of the Church to Christ is typified by the love of the wife for the husband. What then is the love of Christ to the Church? Unselfish love, love in which there was no single thought of self. What then is the Church's love for Christ? The response of love to the mystery of love, the submission of love to perfect love. First love is the love of espousal. Its notes are simplicity, and purity, marital love, the response of love to love, the subjection of a great love to a great love, the submission of a self-denying love to a love that denies self. First love is the abandonment of all for a love that has abandoned all."

God must occupy the first and overriding place in our love. This is the "first love" God demands for Himself. The Ephesians demonstrated this love spontaneously when they came and confessed their sins and burned their books of sorcery.⁶⁷ They rejoiced in their newfound freedom and redemption. This kind of love only cools down when the relationship with God becomes blocked because of a lack of spiritual purity and confession of sin.

⁶³ Matt. 5:14-16

⁶⁴ Isa. 6:5

⁶⁵ Deut. 6:5

⁶⁶ Mark 12:30

⁶⁷ See Acts 19:18,19

We see the relationship between the shining testimony of the stars and the lampstand and this first love. The Holy Spirit who caused the lampstand to burn is the Spirit of love. The lamps are not kept burning by some impersonal kind of fuel but by the third Person of the Holy Trinity. The best proof that the Spirit of God is a Person is in the fact that He is the Spirit of love. Love is the proof of personality "par excellence." We forsake our first love when the influence of the Holy Spirit over our life diminishes.

In connection with this "first love" there are two important words the Lord uses: "forsaken" and "fallen." The word "forsaking" implies that a certain amount of energy and time is needed to keep things going. This concurs with the definition of love as given in Deuteronomy, requiring "all your heart and all your soul and all your strength."⁶⁸ Our love for God will diminish and deteriorate if we do not work on it. In this respect also, the rule is: "Use it or lose it." We need only to neglect God's love in order to lose it. We are in a position where we fall if we do not hang on. We only climb up to greater heights if we confess our sins, ask for forgiveness on a daily basis, and deny Satan every inch of our life. If we do not do this, we fall.

We must, however, not simply write off the Ephesians as people who only routinely followed the letter of the law and not the spirit of it. Jesus testifies about them: "You have not grown weary." This proves that they were not completely shut off from the source of life. A person who only leans on his own strength will, eventually, grow weary. Only those who wait upon the Lord do not grow weary. We quote Isaiah's beautiful words: "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."⁶⁹ Ephesus' problem was evidently not a simple matter. There is a fine line between the right and the wrong motives. Yet, the difference between love and not-love is immense. It is the difference between a living church and a dead one, between the presence of the Holy Spirit and His absence, between the light of the lampstand and darkness. It is like the difference between the temple of King Jeroboam in Bethel and the temple in Jerusalem. When the apostle Paul writes: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up,"⁷⁰ he refers to the light of the lampstand: God's revelation.

There are many churches from which the supernatural element has disappeared. The reason for the removal of the lampstand is always the forsaking of the first love. One commentary on Revelation understands the "first love" to refer to the relationship among the believers in the church in the early stages of the life of the church. It is, of course, true that love for Jesus finds its expression in love for fellowmen and especially fellow believers. Jesus said in Matthew's Gospel: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."⁷¹ But we know that the basis for all mutual love is the love of the Lord. One can only love his neighbor as himself if he loves God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. We, therefore, stick to our interpretation that the "first love" is the love of priority, not of chronology. The "first love" is the love that lets God come first.

Returning to the first love requires an act of repentance. In order to put God again in the center of our life we must confess our lack of love as a sin, as well as all other sins that evolved as a result of the broken relationship.

Jesus had used the words "He who has an ear, let him hear" in the Gospels in connection with the parables about the Kingdom of Heaven.⁷² The words are based upon Isaiah's prophecy, where God says: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving ... make their ears dull ... Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."⁷³ That whole prophecy is actually quoted in the same chapter of Matthew where the parables are found.⁷⁴ In Isaiah's prophecy the connotation is negative but in the context in which Jesus uses them it is a

⁶⁸ See Deut. 6:5

⁶⁹ Isa. 40:29-31

⁷⁰ Gal. 1:11

⁷¹ Matt. 25:40

⁷² See Matt. 13:9,43

⁷³ Isa. 6:9,10

⁷⁴ See Matt. 13:14,15

positive exhortation. The ear meant here is not the organ on both sides of the human head; there we find two. It is the single ear of the heart; the organ with which the soul listens. God gives us the ability to understand spiritual matters. He gave us an organ and we must use it. We are responsible for our own spiritual insight. Again, it is a matter of “use it or lose it.” The ear compliments the lampstand; the two go together and function together.

Each of these seven epistles finishes with the words: “To him who overcomes . . .” God places us in this world for the purpose of gaining the victory, and so making it possible for the Kingdom of Heaven to come. In the letter to the church of Laodicea, the Lord connects our victory with His own victory (“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne”). The victory Jesus refers to is His own death and resurrection. The victory Jesus wants us to achieve begins with our identification with His death. The final result is that the church on earth will be conformed to the church in heaven. The image must again resemble the original. For us, this means, primarily, a removal of all negative elements. Only by dying to self through identification with the death of Jesus Christ in our stead can the resurrection power of our Lord be realized in our life. The Lord does not demand that we raise ourselves from the dead by any superhuman effort, but that, by means of a constant and complete surrender of ourselves, we allow the Holy Spirit to make His resurrection a reality in our lives.

The promise connected to this victory is wonderful and glorious. Jesus puts us back in paradise in front of the tree of life. We may stretch out our hand, eat of its fruit and live eternally. History repeats itself although not on the same level. This is not the Garden of Eden on earth but the paradise of God. The garden in which Adam found himself was a shadow; this is the reality. If I understand this correctly, the conditions in paradise were a picture of a sublime choice man could make. Adam stood between two trees: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eating from the tree of life would have meant an unconditional, loving surrender to God. We all know what happened when the first two human beings ate from the tree of knowledge. The fact that the tree of life is found in the paradise of God means that we will be able to constantly surrender ourselves to God in love. Evidently, this surrender is not “once for all,” it stands to be repeated. The first surrender may be a crisis experience for us more than the following ones, but real love always keeps on surrendering. Jesus Himself gives us the example in that, when the last victory is won, He will submit Himself to the Father. The apostle Paul writes: “When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.”⁷⁵ The fact that the tree of life that is found in the New Jerusalem bears fruit every month makes us understand that eternal life is not an automatic process. We will live eternally because we eat eternally.

B. To Smyrna 2:8-11

This is the shortest letter of the seven. The Lord has only positive things to say about this church. They pass through a difficult period of persecution and poverty. It is a moving feature of this epistle that Jesus introduced Himself as: “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” Thus the Lord identifies Himself with them. When He says: “I know your affliction and your poverty . . .” He does not mean that He knows because He is omniscient, but that He knows experientially. He went through this Himself. There is no pain or want that Jesus did not first suffer Himself. As the writer of Hebrews states: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”⁷⁶ The implication is that sin is not related to our circumstances.

If Jesus, being “the First and the Last,” as we saw before, points to what Jesus did with human sin, which came into the world by way of Adam’s disobedience, then this introduction must have been a great encouragement to the brothers in Smyrna. They must have realized that the circumstances in which they found themselves were abnormal. The powers that unleashed this persecution were enemies that had already been defeated. Their demonstration of might was illegal. The very fact that all power in heaven and on earth legally belongs to Christ made this repression bearable for them. The devil will have to give account for all tyranny. Persecution and poverty are, by their very nature, incompatible with the Christian life. The redeemed of the Lord are kings. Persecution and poverty form a denial of this royal dignity. The sole consolation we have in those circumstances is that fact that our Lord went ahead of us in all this.

⁷⁵ I Cor. 15:28

⁷⁶ Heb. 4:15

Jesus states, though, that the Christians in Smyrna are actually rich. They possess the true riches of which material possessions are merely an image and sometimes they are not even that. Earthly possessions in themselves have no value. In the conclusion of the parable of the rich fool who died on the day of his retirement, Jesus says: "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."⁷⁷

Part of their persecution was psychological. The brothers were being slandered. Jesus mentioned this kind of hardship in His Sermon on the Mount. He said: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."⁷⁸ This last of the beatitudes deals with calumny for Christ's sake. In the case of Smyrna, this may refer to the controversy about circumcision as we find it reported in the history of the early church in the Book of Acts and the Epistle to the Galatians.⁷⁹ The Christians of Smyrna were accused of not being genuine Christians because they had not obtained salvation in Christ by way of becoming first members of the people of Israel through circumcision. Jesus has words of sharp condemnation for such accusers and He calls them: "a synagogue of Satan." He also denies those people the right to call themselves "Jews," since their hearts had never been circumcised. This means that these uncircumcised pagans in Smyrna worshipped by the Spirit of God, gloried in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh, to quote the words of the apostle Paul.⁸⁰ In his Epistle to the Romans Paul defined circumcision as follows: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."⁸¹

From a human viewpoint, the consolation Christ offers these people is rather bleak. He announces things that most people would try to avoid at all cost: suffering, persecution, imprisonment, and ultimately, death. If all our efforts are geared to keep out of harm's way, which is our natural tendency, then the Lord has nothing to say to us.

Yet, Jesus' words are meant to be an encouragement. In the first place, they place the condition of the believers in Smyrna in the right light. A good deal of our human problems stem from the fact that we have the wrong perspective. We believe that death is the worst that can ever happen to us. C. S. Lewis depicts this problem superbly in the last volume of his series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, entitled *The Last Battle*. There is the door of a stable behind which Tash (the prince of demons) is said to devour his victims. For those who waited for Aslan, the door turned out to be the entrance to the glorious realm of light of a new country.

The Lord does not take away suffering but He takes away fear. Jesus also mentions that the real reason for persecution is testing. This is not the intention of the devil in putting people in prison. He means to destroy but God allows the fire to burn in order to purify. In stating this, our Lord again draws a parallel between Himself and the believers. At the onset of His earthly ministry, the Holy Spirit led Him into the desert to be tempted by the devil.⁸² He went before us through death and through the life that would lead to death.

This whole letter stands in the shadow of death. But death is not the final defeat; it is the ultimate sacrifice we bring to God. About this death the psalmist says: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."⁸³ This death is a victory over Satan. Those who are willing to give their lives for the Lord have overcome the devil. The real death is the second death. The first death is merely the laying off of the mortal body as a step to take possession of the resurrection body. The second death is eternal decomposition, the total separation from God, and the eradication of His image in man. That horror will never befall us. The second death cannot harm us. We are immune to it. We will live as He lives.

⁷⁷ Luke 12:21

⁷⁸ Matt. 5:11

⁷⁹ See Acts 15 and the whole of Galatians

⁸⁰ See Phil. 3:3

⁸¹ Rom. 2:28,29

⁸² See Matt. 4:1

⁸³ Ps. 116:15

C. To Pergamum

2:12-17

The most prominent feature of this letter is the confrontation with the Word of God. Jesus introduces Himself to the brothers in Pergamum as the One “who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” As we saw already, the image emphasizes the psychoanalytical quality of the Word of God in our lives. We read in Hebrews: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”⁸⁴

There are several factors in the church in Pergamum that needs to be examined if we want to understand what the Lord’s reproof of them means. There was in Pergamum, what Jesus calls Himself: “the throne of Satan.” The city was a center of idolatry. It was also one of the oldest places of emperor worship. This means that there was intense demonic activity in that place for which the believers were not properly prepared. The tone of the epistle leads us to believe, however, that more was lacking than spiritual discernment. The Word of God separates the spirit from the soul, that which is spiritual from what is carnal. Some of the sins of the believers in Pergamum were nothing but manifestations of “the flesh.”

We may see in this a parallel with the condition of Israel in the days of Haggai. When the Israelites were forced to cease the rebuilding of the temple because of outside pressure, they availed themselves of the opportunity to build houses for themselves, which they embellished elaborately.⁸⁵ The persecution that resulted in the death of Antipas may have furnished these people with an excuse, not only to cease witnessing of their faith, but also to pay a little more attention to “the flesh.” Satan, evidently, had found kinks in the Christians’ armor and he directed his commandoes against this.

In the story of Balaam, sin came in through the backdoor when the front door turned out to be closed. For the person who knows himself to be weak, it can be frightening to be confronted with demonic powers. In order to oppose the devil one needs more than the assurance of forgiveness of sin, although this assurance is, of course, essential. The sword that comes from Jesus’ mouth is double-edged. It serves not only to penetrate the human soul but also to attack the enemy. In the verse of Hebrews, quoted above, it serves as God’s lancet in our lives; in Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, the same sword is directed against the enemy. In recommending the Christian to arm himself with God’s armor, Paul writes: “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”⁸⁶

Jesus not only knew where the believers in Pergamum lived, He Himself had chosen their place. In this He not only intended to put them to the test in order to purify them, but also for them to be His representatives who would be instrumental to dethrone Satan in that city. God uses human beings to crush Satan. Paul writes in Romans: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”⁸⁷ And in Revelation we read: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”⁸⁸ It is true, however, about most believers what Corrie ten Boom once said about missionaries: “Many have given their all to the Lord, but they have not taken all from the Lord.” Once the sword has done its work in our lives, God wants us to take the sword and use it.

Balak’s hope had been that Balaam would curse Israel and that he would thus be able to defend himself and his nation against them. This plan failed in that, when Balaam opened his mouth, only blessing poured forth. Evidently, Balaam advised Balak to invite Israel to a feast of sacrifice for Baal Peor, by which the men of Israel became involved in sexual immorality and idolatry. Thus the protection of God’s blessing over Israel would be undone. We read the story of Balaam in the Book of Numbers.⁸⁹ When Israel raided

⁸⁴ Heb. 4:12,13

⁸⁵ See Hag. 1:2,3

⁸⁶ Eph. 6:17

⁸⁷ Rom. 16:20

⁸⁸ Rev. 12:11

⁸⁹ See Num. Ch. 22-25; 31:1-16

Midian, some of the men spared the lives of the women. Moses protested against this. We read: “ ‘Have you allowed all the women to live?’ he asked them. ‘They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the LORD’s people.’ ”⁹⁰ This seems to be the only verse in the Pentateuch that explains Balaam’s role in enticing Israel to sin. It is to this verse that our Lord refers in this letter to Pergamum.

God’s protection does no longer cover us when we allow ourselves to get involved with the enemy. There are some features in the story of Balaam that are difficult for us to understand as Christians in modern times. We consider Balaam more to be like a spiritualist medium than an Old Testament prophet. In Balaam, however, two opposing features seem to run together. We do not know how such a thing is possible. Balaam may merely have been a person with para-normal abilities. He had access to the supernatural, but the moral integrity needed to make him a man of God was lacking. In his second letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul speaks of people: “having a form of godliness but denying its power.” He advises Timothy: “Have nothing to do with them.”⁹¹ Balaam seems to have had the power, but not the form. This allowed Satan to exercise his power over the man. Balaam had never died to himself; he was covetous. The only thing that interested him was the price Balak would pay for his prophecy. He was willing to murder, to commit idolatry, and to destroy for that. Supernatural power that does not remain in the hands of Jesus Christ will turn itself against our own life. In his second epistle to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul writes: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”⁹² It is dangerous if the treasure is not kept in a jar of clay. What Paul writes does not speak of our humility but of our protection.

Jesus speaks of “the teaching of Balaam.” This suggests that, not only had Balaam fallen into the trap Satan had set for him, but he had also elevated his own failure to a philosophy of life. Some people today lump all spiritual powers together, as if it makes no difference whether the power originates in God or in the devil. We call this: “tolerance.” It is possible that the Nicolaitans practiced some kind of tolerance. They shook hands with those who were of other religious persuasions. People who are bent on maintaining their independence from God often appear to be tolerant and considerate. A confrontation with the Word of God will reveal the real motives. Jesus says to the Nicolaitans in Pergamum that the Holy Spirit will apply the Word of God in their lives, not as creative, healing, and renewing, but as judging, reproofing, and destroying. When a person stands naked before the living God, in whose image he was created, all pretenses will fall away.

There appears to be progression in the promises Jesus gives to those who overcome. Eating of the hidden manna is the third step on the way of becoming like Christ in His perfection. Spiritual life begins with eating from the tree of life, which represents loving surrender to God.⁹³ Then follows life out of death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁹⁴ This is followed by the daily experience of being fed supernaturally. Jesus expounds on this way of life in the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel in His great sermon about the bread of life. Manna was the daily food the Israelites fed upon in the desert, which they acquired not by means of their own effort; they did not grow it themselves, it was God’s gift to them. It “grew” in a desert in which nothing can grow. The greatest emphasis is upon the intimacy of a relationship with God. This fellowship consists of “eating the flesh of Jesus and drinking His blood.” In John’s Gospel Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”⁹⁵ One immediate result of the victory in which He places us is the complete identification with His sacrifice on the cross as a daily experience.

It is difficult to determine what is the meaning of the white stone. No two commentators agree on this. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “It is supposed that by the white stone is meant pardon or

⁹⁰ Num. 31: 15,16

⁹¹ II Tim. 3:5

⁹² II Cor. 4:7

⁹³ Rev. 2:7

⁹⁴ Rev. 2:11

⁹⁵ John 6:53,54

acquittance, and the evidence of it; and that there is an allusion here to the custom observed by judges in ancient times, who were accustomed to give their suffrages by white and black pebbles; those who gave the former were for absolving the culprit, those who gave the latter were for his condemnation.” Some believe that white stones were used as “tickets” for some gatherings to which people were invited. *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* observes: “It is impossible to fix the meaning of the symbol with any certainty. The following are some of the principal views: The Urim and Thummim concealed within the High Priest’s breastplate of judgment. This is advocated by Trench, who supposes that the Urim was a peculiarly rare stone, possibly the diamond, and engraven with the ineffable name of God. The new name he regards as the new name of God or of Christ (Rev 3:12); some revelation of the glory of God which can be communicated to His people only in the higher state of being, and which they only can understand who have actually received.” This explanation includes the figure of the “new name,” which evidently stands for the renewal of the whole man through the process of dying and resurrection.

D. To Thyatira 2:18-29

To this church Jesus introduces Himself in His three-fold position as the Son of God, with eyes like blazing fire and feet like burnished bronze. In appearing to John in the previous chapter, Jesus presented Himself as a “Son of Man,” here as “Son of God.”

The most important feature of this letter is again judgment. “I am he who searches hearts and minds.” The Greeks read literally: “I am he which searches the reins (kidneys) and hearts.” In a way this letter covers the same ground as the one to Pergamum, but it goes one step further. Jezebel was farther along on the road to destruction than Balaam. This is the reason the Lord reveals Himself in His divine majesty and glory. Only a confrontation with God’s glory will bring conviction of sin. Jesus’ eyes are like blazing fire. When the mirrors of God’s soul shoot fire, man falls under judgment. In this the wrath of God is being revealed. Few people realize that “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”⁹⁶

Yet, the Christians in Thyatira fare better than, for instance, the ones in Ephesus. Jesus testifies about them that they possess love, and faith, and perseverance, and that they have grown in these things since their conversion. We read: “I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.” He does not reproach them that they commit sin but that they tolerate sin. The problem presents itself that the Lord seems to favor a church split, but at the same time, He threatens those who commit sin with punishment, not as outsiders but as members of the body of Christ.

We do not know precisely what the sin of Jezebel was. It is not clear whether it was a matter of idolatry or that the sexual immorality was in fact a physical affair. It may have been a combination of the two. Idol worship in the temples was often accompanied by ritual sexual intercourse. Jesus, evidently, expected the church to use her spiritual authority to cut off the offenders from the fellowship of the body and to deliver them over to the powers of darkness, as Paul suggests in his first epistle to the Corinthians. Paul wrote: “Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”⁹⁷ Inasmuch as the church had not used her prerogative to bind and loose,⁹⁸ the Lord considers the sin to be part of the church. Jesus respects and upholds the authority He has given to us.

It is also clear from this letter that it is dangerous to meddle in the occult. The believers in Thyatira were so preoccupied with their study of the strategy of the enemy that they fell into his snares. We are not called to analyze Satan but to crush him. Jesus Himself hardly ever allowed the evil spirits that possessed people to speak.

According to the Book of Kings, Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians.⁹⁹ She was responsible for the fact that Israel ultimately perished in idolatry of the worst kind. There can be no doubt about it but that Queen Jezebel had completely dedicated herself to Satan. Both in Samaria as in

⁹⁶ Heb. 10:31

⁹⁷ I Cor. 5:3-5

⁹⁸ See Matt. 18:18

⁹⁹ I Kings 16:31

Thyatira, she must be considered to be a “fifth column” in the service of the devil to destroy the work of God. Yet, Jesus does not treat her as a demon but as a human being. He gives her an opportunity for repentance. This means that she was still the object of God’s love. Her immorality stands for more than sexual license only. Jezebel represents the person who has abandoned his first love, who has given the love that is God’s due to someone else. We can hardly imagine how much God suffers from our infidelity.

Every sin has its own built-in punishment. The same bed on which Jezebel commits her adultery will become her sickbed. The sin man commits will turn against him. All things only work for good for those who love God.

Outwardly, there is a great similarity between the brothers in Smyrna and the erring ones in Thyatira. They both pass through a great tribulation. In the first instance it is an attack by the enemy that the Lord permits in order to test and purify His children; in the other case it is a punishment for sin. Whether this tribulation in Thyatira consists of sickness, followed by death, is not clear. Jezebel will become sick herself but it is not stated that her followers will meet the same fate. “I will strike her children dead” may not refer to physical death. Things are rarely black and white in everyday life. Yet, we ought to be able to distinguish clearly between one kind of tribulation and another. We will only understand the difference in the light of the Lord. C. S. Lewis says: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, He speaks to us in our circumstances, but He shouts to us in our pain.” It is important for us to know what God is saying to us.

To those who have remained faithful to the Lord, Jesus says: “I will not impose any other burden on you.” Those words are borrowed from the letter the council in Jerusalem wrote to the church in Antioch.¹⁰⁰

The words: “Hold on to what you have” refer to their faith in the forgiveness of sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and a life of holiness through the filling of the Holy Spirit. Nothing else and nothing more is necessary. Added to this, the Lord holds out to them the promise of His coming. It is remarkable that His coming is presented both as a threat and as a promise. In the letter to Pergamum, we read: “Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth,” and here for those who love Him and await His coming: “Only hold on to what you have until I come.” The foundation of our life as Christians is the forgiveness of our sins through the unmerited favor of God, which is called “grace.” Our fellowship and all our spiritual authority are based upon this. In order to maintain the right perspective, we must constantly return to this basis, intellectually and emotionally, for our spiritual purification. We must never forget what we were and how we began; otherwise we get the wrong picture of what we are now.

The conclusion of the letter sounds strange to our modern ears. First of all, it is difficult for us to place ourselves in the dispensation of wrath, because we still live in the time of grace. We tend to think that the love of God makes it impossible for people to be punished for their sin.

We must also understand who is meant by “the nations.” The Greek word *ethnos* usually means, by implication, “pagan.” The KJV renders it “gentiles,” or “heathen.” Who are these pagans? They are obviously not merely non-Jews, but people who persevere in their rebellion against God and who reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ words are a quotation from the Second Psalm: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”¹⁰¹ The words pertain to the authority of the Christian to demolish strongholds that are erected against the work of the Holy Spirit and to end demonic resistance. This authority is based upon our sharing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is also referred to in the above-mentioned psalm. That is, probably, also the meaning of “the morning star.” In the end of this book, Jesus Himself is called: “the bright Morning Star.”¹⁰² The brightness of the star reminds us of what the Book of Proverbs says about the future of the believer: “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.”¹⁰³ The meaning of this promise of the Lord is that we will become part of Jesus Himself; we will share His authority and His resurrection.

¹⁰⁰ See Acts 15:28 (KJV)

¹⁰¹ Ps. 2:8,9

¹⁰² Rev. 22:16

¹⁰³ Prov. 4:18

The letter to the church in Thyatira teaches us that it is dangerous to use the gifts that are given to us to merely study and analyze the Evil One. The purpose is that we conquer and destroy him.

E. To Sardis 3:1-6

Better than in any of the other letters, we see in this one the difference between “the flesh” and the spirit. This church had the reputation of being a living church, but they were spiritually dead. Outwardly, they looked very good, but the essential element was lacking. Jesus presents Himself to them as the One who possesses the seven spirits of God, which is the Holy Spirit. This description of the Holy Spirit is not found in the picture John paints of the risen Lord when he first sees Him. He does mention the seven spirits before the throne in his greeting, and in Chapter Four, the Spirit of God is represented under the image of seven blazing lamps. It is clear that the Holy Spirit is part of the revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit and He communicates with the church by means of the Holy Spirit.

The believers in Sardis, however, do not have the Spirit of God. They had obviously received the Spirit before, since their names were written in the book of life. But they do not enjoy the fullness of the Spirit. Their clothes are soiled and thus the Spirit had departed from them. They had fallen asleep and they departed from the grace they had originally received.

We could use this epistle and tell Calvin that, obviously, not all saints persevere. God is faithful and eternally immutable, but if we receive the pardon of our sins and then fall asleep, our life is endangered. It is as dangerous as falling asleep with fire in our hands.

There is a step we must make after conversion by which we burn our bridges behind us and make our relationship with God irrevocable. The church in Sardis had the reputation of being alive, but they were dead.

The fact that Jesus mentions the seven starts in this context suggests a relationship between the condition of the leader of the church and the state of the church. Spiritual death had entered the church via its leader.

Jesus says to these people: “I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.” The measure they had used to evaluate their own deeds was not the measure of the glory of God but their own human standard. They had compared themselves with other churches and other pastors of churches, and they had come to the conclusion that they were not doing too poorly. Whoso looks at himself in someone else’s mirror always sees a flattering image. Thus they acquired the reputation of being alive. Now, we know that it is humanly impossible to measure up to the glory of God. In order for our deeds to be complete in the sight of God, we must be perfect like God is perfect, and no one is sufficient to that. Therefore, God expects us to fall down before Him and confess our impotence to Him in order for His Holy Spirit to fill us. Only the Holy Spirit of God can perform deeds that are complete in the sight of God. We can only entertain the illusion that we are not doing too poorly if we lose sight of the glory of God. Loss of that vision produces all kinds of distorted images for us, which leads us along the wrong paths in life. It is important for us to be able to say about God what David said about him: “I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.”¹⁰⁴

The sad part of not being filled with the Holy Spirit is that the chain of God’s grace is broken. Those around us who, in the words of the Book of Proverbs, are “being led away to death,” and “those staggering toward slaughter”¹⁰⁵ will not be held back and rescued by the love of God if they do not see it shining through our lives. The rich man, who suffered the pains of hell in Jesus’ parable, came to the realization that he had never bothered about his five brothers who were also on their way to hell. The traffic goes in two directions: when we fall asleep we will not be bothered by the fate of others; and we will disregard the warning the Book of Proverbs gives us: “If you say, ‘But we knew nothing about this,’ does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?”¹⁰⁶ These who say: “But we knew nothing about this” are liars. It always boils down to the same thing that if we love our neighbor as ourselves, we will recognize the need of

¹⁰⁴ Acts 2:25

¹⁰⁵ See Prov. 24:11

¹⁰⁶ Prov. 24:12

his life. And a lack of love for one's neighbor can always be traced back to a lack of love for God. The beginning and the end is always the "first love."

Dr. Robert Jaffray, a missionary with the Christian and Missionary Alliance in China, Singapore, and Indonesia, had a burden for the lost people of the Far East. His vision in the early decades of the twentieth century accounts for the fact that the Gospel penetrated the island of Bali, the jungles of Borneo, Celebes, and New Guinea. That is the kind of neighborly love the Lord expects from us. The Second Coming of Jesus will take us by surprise if the Lord finds us busy with all kinds of futile self-interests. Jesus always calls us back to the beginning, to the moment our eyes were opened to reality and we realized that God had forgiven our sins in the death of His Son. To forget this reality will soil us morally.

Walking with Jesus, dressed in white, does not mean that we have become perfect by means of a superhuman effort. This is effected by the application of our pardon to our daily life. At a later point in this Book of Revelation, John speaks about people who "have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."¹⁰⁷

The Lord gives three simple instructions to repair the damage: "remember," "obey," and "repent." The NIV's "obey" is the translation of the Greek *tereo*, which means: "to guard," or "hold fast." We find the same word in Jesus' words: "If you love Me, *keep* My commandments."¹⁰⁸

"Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard." The apostle Paul says basically the same things in his Epistle to the Galatians: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing-if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?"¹⁰⁹ It is always salutary for us to remember the beginning. This first reaction when we met the Lord and gave up what we were doing, surrendering ourselves to what we heard, must always be repeated. Although we may not fall back into the same sins, there is always some deterioration, some weakening or confusion from which we must be delivered through confession and forgiveness. Sometimes we have to rid ourselves of some theological baggage that hinders our vision of the Lord, such as was the case with the church in Galatia, who, after their conversion and being filled by the Holy Spirit, began to adhere to the doctrine of circumcision.

Our first impressions at the time of our conversion are often quite correct. How do we keep that? In C. S. Lewis' book *The Silver Chair*, the children are ordered to repeat the signs for themselves, every morning and evening. Things go wrong for them, however, because they forget to do this and, consequently, they do not recognize the signs when they see them. Repeating the signs in Lewis' book corresponds to our being occupied with the Word of God. We obey the message as we have received it by daily reading the written Word of God. Moses could not have been more right when he said: "They are not just idle words for you--they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."¹¹⁰ The Lord Jesus Himself gives us the example in His knowing and handling of the Bible. He shows us what it means to keep it and obey it. Our reaction to the hearing of the Word of God must be that we orientate our life in accordance with it; that we do away with disobedience and allow ourselves to be cleansed from all spiritual pollution.

The Lord links the warning in this letter to His return. The words: "I will come like a thief" are borrowed from the Gospels. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him."¹¹¹ Paul refers to the same picture in his Epistle to the Thessalonians, where he says: "Now, brothers,

¹⁰⁷ Rev. 7:14

¹⁰⁸ John 14:15 (NKJV)

¹⁰⁹ Gal. 3:1-5

¹¹⁰ Deut. 32:47

¹¹¹ Matt. 24:42-44

about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness."¹¹² Sin tends to dim our vision and make us lose sight of the right perspective. We often act as if the circumstances of the present will remain eternally the same and as if the things God loaned to us for our use are our private possessions. For those whose minds have been dulled by sin, the coming of the Lord Jesus will be the ultimate embarrassment. For those who are longing for the coming of the Lord it is the fulfillment of all hope. "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"¹¹³

The words: "He who overcomes" can be, in a sense, misleading. The victory is like Jacob's victory at Peniel, when he wrestled with the angel and begged for his favor.¹¹⁴ He who struggles with his own conscience and loses is a winner. Here also, those are the victors who have washed their garments and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. That is to say, they asked for forgiveness of their sins and received it.

The names of those who have allowed themselves to be cleansed are written in heaven. This registration is first mentioned in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus says: "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."¹¹⁵ I don't know if it is possible for a name that has been thus entered in the books of heaven to be erased again. We could ask why the Lord would make this statement if that were not possible. This may sound strange, but I believe that the question whether a person can lose his salvation does not have much practical importance. Those that ask the question, usually try to sail very close to the wind. Those who know themselves to be eternally safe will also persevere. After all, perseverance is not what we do, but what we know God will do for us.

The words "[I] will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels" also have their antecedent in the Gospel. We read in Matthew: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven."¹¹⁶ From these quotations we may conclude that overcoming also consists of confessing the Lord Jesus before our fellowmen. If we tell other people that we know Jesus Christ, Jesus will say to the Father that He knows us. I try to imagine what it will be when the Lord takes my hand and places me before the throne of glory, before Him who had the appearance of jasper and carnelian and that He will say: "Father, this is My brother, John Schultz." The angels in heaven will demonstrate the same joy as on the day of my conversion.

F. To Philadelphia 3:7-13

This letter, together with the one to Smyrna, is the most positive of all seven letters. Jesus had nothing negative to say about the brothers in Philadelphia, maybe with the exception of the fact that they had "little strength."

Jesus introduces Himself in the opening words as the One "who is holy and true, who holds the key of David." This title is again a demonstration of how completely human Jesus is. Holiness is the most indefinable of God's attributes. As human beings, we can only come up with negative definitions such as "without sin," "uncontaminated." In that sense, holiness is God's most "un-human" characteristic. The seraphs in Isaiah's vision equated holiness with glory. We read: "And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.'"¹¹⁷ Maybe we can define holiness as the sum of God's infinite perfections, as the whole of God's eternal attributes. Jesus is holy because He is God.

¹¹² I Thess. 5:1-5

¹¹³ Rev 22:20

¹¹⁴ See Hosea 12:4

¹¹⁵ Luke 10:20

¹¹⁶ Matt. 10:32,33. See also Luke 12:8,9

¹¹⁷ Isa. 6:3

Furthermore, “holy” is used for everything that belongs to God. This is the original meaning of the Hebrew word. The words *qadowsh* and *qadash* have the meaning of “being set apart,” as in the verse: “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.”¹¹⁸ In that sense of the word, we as human beings can be called “holy,” inasmuch as we are God’s property. From a linguistic point of view, the word “holy” clarifies nothing, because only God is holy and “holy” means: “that which is God’s.” This does not say anything, and yet, it says it all!

The same thing can be said about “true.” But “truth” and “true” are concepts that are closer to home for us. We use the word “true,” however, exclusively for events and words. A person speaks the truth when he relates what really happened. Incongruity between words and facts, we call “a lie.” In daily life, we use the concept of truth exclusively within this framework. We seldom realize that truth is an absolute. Truth evinces itself for us in a comparison between word and fact. The measuring stick in the comparison is the fact. In reality, however, truth comes only truly to light in a comparison with God. He is the ultimate measure, the absolute standard. God, therefore, is the only Person who can say: “I am the truth.” This makes “truth” for us, who bear the image of God, a moral factor. We are only true inasmuch as we, as copies, resemble the original.

Jesus speaks as the Second Person of the Trinity when He says: “I am the truth!” He is the truth because He is the source, the measure, and the content of truth.

The expression “the key of David” is most interesting. Jesus’ words are the quotation of a rather mysterious verse in Isaiah, a prophecy about Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, which reads: “I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”¹¹⁹ “The key of David,” which is obviously the same as “the key to the house of David,” is the power of the resurrection from the dead. It stands for Jesus’ authority over death and Hades. In the most literal sense of the word, it is the key to victory over everything that has risen up in rebellion to God. Death is both the first and the last enemy.

Now, what does David have to do with this? The prophet Samuel called David “a man after [God’s] own heart.”¹²⁰ To a superficial Bible student, this seems to mean that God thought David to be a nice boy. We often little understand that God compares everything and everybody with Himself. God saw in David an image of His own Son Jesus. Our value consists in the fact that we reflect God’s reality. If we resemble God’s image and our acts reflect God’s deeds, we have eternal value. King Saul of old, to whom Samuel addressed his prophecy about David, had no notion that the royal dignity God had bestowed upon him was ultimately meant to conquer death. David, however, must have had an inkling of this, because he wrote in one of his Psalms: “Because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”¹²¹ David had the key! Later on in Revelation, Jesus calls Himself: “the Root and the Offspring of David.”¹²² It is amazing to see how God has linked David’s name to His own divine character. David himself must have been amazed most of all. God honors the person who honors Him. It always comes back to the fact that God created man in order to rule over all of creation and that He clothed him with glory and honor for this purpose. If Adam had not tried to take a “shortcut” to this glory, which became his downfall, all of this would have been the most natural for us. Now we can only look with respect and amazement to this key of David.

In connection with this, we should not neglect to hear Jesus’ words to Peter in Matthew’s Gospel: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”¹²³ Here Jesus defines holding the key as being able to bind and loose. In the parallel passage in John’s Gospel, we read: “And with that he breathed on them and

¹¹⁸ Gen. 2:3

¹¹⁹ Isa. 22:22

¹²⁰ See I Sam. 13:14

¹²¹ Ps. 16:10,11

¹²² Rev. 22:16

¹²³ Matt. 16:19

said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."¹²⁴ There, the key is the Person of the Holy Spirit and the authority connected to that is described as the power to forgive or not to forgive sin. When Jesus reveals that He has the key of David, He demonstrates that He is a human being in the fullest sense of the word. Jesus uses this key to open the door of forgiveness. This key fits on all the doors of forgiveness, resurrection, and redemption from the bonds of the devil. Jesus' key-position in this, "the year of the Lord's favor," is the power to save. We must understand that the power to bind or loose, to forgive or not to forgive, does not mean that we can keep people who want to repent of their sins from entering the Kingdom of Heaven. We loosen the bonds of those who were bound by the devil. The door we close is the door we slam shut in the face of Satan.

The door Jesus opens for the believers in Philadelphia is not only the door of freedom for themselves, but also the opportunity to bring in others by means of their testimony. We could say that the Lord has left the key in the lock.

Jesus does not necessarily compliment the Philippians for the fact that they possess little strength. If that strength is their own, it has little or no value and the strength of God is never little. "Little strength" means that they did not take full advantage of God's omnipotence. The Philippians may have given their all to God, but they had not taken His all for themselves. The church in Philippi was not as good as she could have been but there are no sins among them that the Lord has to mention.

Jesus states two things about them that are compliments: they have kept His Word and they have not denied His Name. This means that they went through tribulation, and they did not yield to the temptation to take the easy way out, as Peter had done. It also means that they had not trusted their own strength to withstand the devil. They had not stated, like Peter, that they were ready to die with Christ.¹²⁵ But when they were pressed hard, "they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress."¹²⁶ Such experiences make us the more appreciate the grace of God. The realization that we could have perished but that the Lord intervened, builds up faith. In the words of Jeremiah's Lamentations: "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."¹²⁷ As the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians: "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."¹²⁸ And to the Corinthians he wrote: "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."¹²⁹

Jesus says to the Philippians: "You have kept my word." "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."¹³⁰ There are many blessings bestowed in the Gospel upon those who receive the Word of God and obey it. Those who take the Word of God seriously become partakers of the divine nature. In John's Gospel, Jesus makes the stunning statement: "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came-and the Scripture cannot be broken- what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'?"¹³¹ These are the people who, in the Parable of the Sower, are compared to the good soil that receives the seed and produces fruit.¹³²

In Jesus' last conversation with His disciple, just before going to the cross, He emphasized the importance of obeying the Word, stating that it is the basis for the coming of the Holy Spirit. We read in

¹²⁴ John 20:22,23

¹²⁵ See Matt. 26:35

¹²⁶ See Ps. 107:6,19,28

¹²⁷ Lam. 3:22,23

¹²⁸ Phil. 4:13

¹²⁹ II Cor. 12:10

¹³⁰ Luke 11:28

¹³¹ John 10:34-36

¹³² See Matt. 13:23

John's Gospel: "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."¹³³ Obedience to the Word of God will make us realize God's eternal love for us. We read again in John's Gospel: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, 'But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?' Jesus replied, 'If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.'¹³⁴ The image of the vine and the branches represents the person who knows fellowship with God because he obeys God's Word. It is our obedience to the Word of God that forms the limitations and limitlessness of our prayers. As Jesus said: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."¹³⁵ It safeguards our remaining in the love of God. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love."¹³⁶ And it generates in us love for our fellowmen. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."¹³⁷ Truly: "Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and obey it."¹³⁸

Jesus promises the believers in Philippi some sensational conversions of Jews who, initially, rejected the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This seems to be the conclusion we may draw from verse nine: "I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars-I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you." Those people were probably Jews in the physical sense of the word, who were Judaists, who persecuted Christians as Saul of Tarsus had done. Jesus states that they belong to the synagogue of Satan and that their claim to be Jews is false. We are reminded of Paul's words in Romans: "No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."¹³⁹ And in Philippians: "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh."¹⁴⁰ That makes us who believe in Jesus a Jew. I am related to the Lion of Judah because I have been born again through Jesus of Nazareth. My heart has been circumcised and I await the return of Him who is the hope of Israel, the light of the world. How much more Jewish can one be!

These pseudo Jews would recognize that Jesus loved the brothers in Philippi. Paul says that Jews demand miraculous signs, but he continues: "we preach Christ crucified."¹⁴¹ Whether these Jews were convinced by a supernatural demonstration or whether they understood that the death of Christ was the seal of God's love, we do not know. Maybe both! Maybe the "little strength" of the Philippians turned into a mighty power when they read the letter that is addressed to them in this book. Their faith may have broken through the limitations of their little strength and they were swept away by God's omnipotence. Outsiders saw this and were attracted to the demonstration of God's love among these people and the strength of their fellowship with one another. That must have been what happened.

¹³³ John 14:15-17

¹³⁴ John 14:21-24

¹³⁵ John 15:7

¹³⁶ John 15:9,10

¹³⁷ John 15:12

¹³⁸ Luke 11:28

¹³⁹ Rom. 2:29

¹⁴⁰ Phil. 3:3

¹⁴¹ See I Cor. 1:22,23

As people who subscribe to the dispensational theology, what do we do with Verse Ten? Does this mean that part of the church will go through the Great Tribulation and part will be taken up in the rapture? This verse could cause as many problems to the theology of the rapture as verse five could to the doctrine of eternal security. We observe, though, that in either verse, the Lord does not mention an alternative. The positive message is that those who wait upon the Lord will be kept from temptation. This throws a new light on the prayer: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."¹⁴²

To those Christians who lived two millennia ago, Jesus says: "I am coming soon." If we take these words to pertain to the Second Coming, the word "soon" seems out of place. It remains true, of course, that we ought all to live as if Jesus died yesterday, rose from the dead today, and is coming back tomorrow. It remains a problem, though, that these people all died before the Lord's return. For a believer, death has the same effect as the Second Coming in the sense that it frees us from physical suffering and from the power and the presence of sin. Whether we will sense the resurrection of the body, which is one of the main events that will take place at the Second Coming, as something missing, I do not know. In a way all Christians who have died up to the present time are like the Old Testament believers of whom the writer of Hebrews states: "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect."¹⁴³ The solution may be in the fact that the Lord considers all believers to be like one body. Thus the Second Coming cannot take place without one member, not without us. In the same way as the Old Testament believers did not receive what God had promised to them in their lifetime, so most New Testament Christians die before the promised Second Coming occurs. Yet, Jesus said about Abraham: "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."¹⁴⁴ I do not believe this to mean that Abraham looked from above with joy when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but that Abraham, in the various episodes of his life on earth, experienced the reality of redemption and incarnated this reality, as, for instance, in his faith in God's call and promises and in his sacrifice of Isaac. Is it possible that we can also, in like manner, experience and exhibit facets of the Parousia in our days on earth? That would in no way take away anything of this historic value of the future event.

Accepting Christ as the Lord of our life forms the basis for all God's blessings upon us. Without such a basis, blessings would have no effect. Speaking about this basis, Jesus says twice: "Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."¹⁴⁵ The first time Jesus makes this statement, He speaks about seeing the Kingdom of Heaven and understanding its secret. The second time, the context is our responsibility in connection with the return of the Lord. The foundation in both cases is the same. If our life is surrendered to the Lord, we will understand and act accordingly. In this sense we must understand the words: "Hold on to what you have."

What does the crown mean? The image of God within us is the royal dignity of our humanity. As the flower is folded in the bud and the tree in the seed, so God, at the time of creation, has put in us the crown. In the life of the person who is not born again, this seed does not germinate. Even after the Holy Spirit has transformed our lives, this crown can be lost. Why would Jesus otherwise say: "Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown." If the danger were not real, the warning would be redundant. In The Parable of the Sower, we see that there are factors that can stunt and hinder the growth and fruit bearing of the seed. These same factors can be applied without modification to our obtaining of the crown. Jesus uses two parables to illustrate the factors which lead to the obtaining of the crown. In Luke's Gospel is the story of the ten slaves who each receive one mina.¹⁴⁶ Everyone receives the same, which exemplifies the grace of God. We find the second parable in Matthew's Gospel, where the talents are given according to the person's ability.¹⁴⁷ This speaks of the spiritual gifts God gives. The enemy can take the crown away. As the

¹⁴² Matt. 6:13

¹⁴³ Heb. 11:39,40

¹⁴⁴ John 8:56

¹⁴⁵ Matt. 13:12; 25:29

¹⁴⁶ See Luke 19:11-27

¹⁴⁷ See Matt. 25:14-30

birds eat the seed that falls on the wayside, so the devil can rob us of our crown. We can apply the points of The Parable of the Sower step by step to this situation. There is refusal to be broken, the worries of this life, and the deceitfulness of wealth. All these can cancel out the crowning of our salvation. The only legal way to lose our crown is to cast our crowns before the throne of God and exclaim: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.”¹⁴⁸

In this warning, Jesus emphasizes the fact that these people already have a crown. The point is not to obtain one but not to lose the one we have.

Jesus makes the conqueror a part of God’s temple, that is part of the spiritual house of worship. The victory mentioned here is, undoubtedly, the same as the ones mentioned in the previous letters. In connection with Sardis, we stated that the victory was as the victory of Jacob at Peniel. That is the only victory possible. It means receiving a blessing by pleading for grace. It is the victory of the tax collector in the temple of whom we read: “He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”¹⁴⁹ At that moment, the tax collector became a pillar in God’s temple. The temple is built with this kind of people.

Jesus’ promise: “I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name” involves more than an engraving in stone. He promises that we will bear the Name of God. That means that God will make us partake in what He is. Other creatures will look at us and call us by the Name of God. They will say: “He is God.” This sounds so unbelievable that I cannot grasp it. It also sounds so dangerous that I feel I could lose my sanctification because of it. But that does not make it less true. The name of the New Jerusalem is the name of the church, the fellowship of believers. It makes us realize that this tremendous transformation is not merely a personal matter; it is an experience that befalls us as members of the body of Christ. The name of the New Jerusalem is also the Name of God’s glory. Toward the end of this book, we read about the New Jerusalem: “It shone with the glory of God.”¹⁵⁰ The streets of gold, the foundations of the city, the walls and the gates are nothing else but images of God’s glory.

The last name Jesus mentions is the secret Name Jesus received Himself from the Father. John says about this: “He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.”¹⁵¹ This must be the name of the only real human being, the one who has gained the real victory. It represents the summit of what the man of God can achieve. This new identity, Jesus is willing to share with us.

G. To Laodicea 3:14-22

This last letter is the saddest of all in the series. The condition of this church expresses, at the same time, the church’s dismal condition and the Lord’s deep compassion and eternal love.

As in the other epistles, the introductory words are important because they reveal the points of comparison between the character of the Lord and of the church on earth. Jesus calls Himself: “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” The “Amen” stands for the confirmation of all God’s promises. The apostle Paul gives the following explanation: “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.”¹⁵² Jesus is proof of God’s reliability.

All of the trouble in which the church of Laodicea finds herself, all of her spiritual poverty, can be traced back to her lack of vision of God’s trustworthiness. The words: “the faithful and true witness” are repeated from the introduction of this book.¹⁵³ John the Baptist said the same things about Jesus. We read: “The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks

¹⁴⁸ Rev. 4: 11

¹⁴⁹ Luke 18:13

¹⁵⁰ Rev. 21:11

¹⁵¹ Rev. 19:12

¹⁵² II Cor. 1:20

¹⁵³ Rev. 1:5

as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful.”¹⁵⁴ In that sense, Jesus is the bridge between that which is natural and supernatural.

In the context of the Book of Revelation, this means, undoubtedly, that it is Jesus who is the giver of the revelation. The emphasis is on Jesus’ words, His instructions as we read them in the Gospels. The NIV reads: “the ruler of God’s creation.” It renders the Greek word *arche*, “ruler.” Most translations read: “beginning.” The expression “The Beginning of the creation of God” corresponds probably to: “the firstborn from the dead” in the first chapter. It is also true that the physical creation owes its existence to the Word. “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”¹⁵⁵ But the emphasis in this section seems to be more on the restoration of fallen mankind. What matters here is life out of death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was what was lacking in the church of Laodicea. They were spiritually dead. There was a total lack of the joy of new life. Jesus is the faithful and true witness, but they were not. He was dead and is alive for ever and ever; they are still dead.

The question arises why Jesus still addresses them as a church. The lampstand has, undoubtedly, already been removed from their midst. The Holy Spirit has left them. There is no supernatural element in their midst to be found. Yet, the people in Laodicea boast in their riches. The church may have had a glorious past. They were proud of their heritage, but the personal relationship with God which their parents possessed, which is the foundation of their heritage, was foreign to them. It is possible that Jesus addresses them as a church because of their parents’ faithfulness.

The sin of which Jesus accuses these people is the sin of indifference. They demonstrated neither love nor hatred; they had become so tolerant that it was repulsive. They must have been “hot,” though, about matters that pertained to themselves. They were as the Israelites in the first chapter of Haggai’s prophecy, who had some pious excuses for not rebuilding the temple, but who were busy with their own, well-paneled, houses.¹⁵⁶ The point in Jesus’ reproach is that they were lukewarm in connection with the Lord and the Kingdom. “Would that you were cold or hot!”¹⁵⁷ The Lord, probably, respects “honest atheists,” people who cannot bring themselves to entrust themselves to a spiritual reality they cannot see. But for those who have seen and tasted that the Lord is good and then “draw in their horns” He does not show any respect.

Indifference toward God always demonstrates itself in indifference toward fellowmen. Loving God with all that is in us always goes together with loving our neighbor as ourselves. The tepidness of Laodicea cannot have meant anything else but apathy toward their neighbors. When Jesus lived on earth, He demonstrated deep compassion with the lot of men, often being moved to tears by their suffering. The Laodiceans are condemned on an earthly level, in the relationship from man to man. God expects us to be what Jesus was during His life on earth, consumed with zeal for God’s house.¹⁵⁸

Jesus’ loathing of the Laodiceans is as deep as is His love for them. But love does not change the harshness of judgment. Love takes the punishment of sin upon itself, but it does not weaken the horror and the repulsion of sin. Love only covers sin if there is confession and asking for forgiveness.

The Greek has twice the word *hoti*, “because” in the text, once in verse sixteen and once in seventeen. The NIV omits this in the second instance. The first “because” is followed by Jesus’ repugnance for the attitude of these people. We must be well advanced in our Phariseeism if God feels loathing toward us. The second “because” is followed by a three-fold warning.

The opinion of the people in Laodicea about themselves was: “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” This could have meant a very positive and profound confession of faith. It is quite possible for a materially poor person to be rich in God. These are the only riches that ultimately count. But such a confession can only be based on faith. Unless we have come to the point where, in the surrender of ourselves, we learn to dip into God’s riches, our riches are an illusion. There are Christians who are richer than they themselves know, and there are others who are much poorer than they think themselves to be. The

¹⁵⁴ John 3:31-33

¹⁵⁵ John 1:3

¹⁵⁶ See Hag. 1:2,3,9

¹⁵⁷ Rev. 3:15 (RSV)

¹⁵⁸ See John 2:17

latter are by far the most to be pitied. It is probable that the riches mentioned here are material wealth. It is possible that these people were blinded by the fact that they had accumulated possessions. Riches always creates an illusion of power. But, as in the Parable of the Sower, the thorns and thistles choke the seed of the Word of God. It is also possible that the Laodiceans intended to lay hands on God's spiritual riches, without meeting God's conditions of surrender and love.

A person without God has little notion of his real condition. Some of the Stone Age tribes we worked with on the mission field called themselves "the real people," a notion that seemed ridiculous in our Western eyes. The Papua Jali tribes people called themselves "Lords of the earth." We must remember, however, that few of us escape from the trap of having inflated opinions about our own race. Not only do we consider ourselves to be more than we are, but often we believe that we are the opposite of what we really are.

The Laodiceans thought themselves to be rich, while in reality, they were "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." How terrible to live with such an illusion! What a shock it must be when, all of a sudden, our eyes are opened to our real condition. Jesus advises these people to buy gold from Him. It is not stated how much they would have to pay. We think of Isaiah's invitation: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."¹⁵⁹ We also see the picture of the human being who is bankrupt and has to sell himself into slavery in order to stay alive. The gold is ours, if we give ourselves to the Lord. Our poverty will be a thing of the past, our nakedness will be covered, and our eyes will be opened.

The words "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" seem to stand outside the context of this letter. But a closer look makes clear that this is not the case. In the first place, Jesus says that He loves these people. We see here the same mixed emotions as evinced in the Gospel, where Jesus meets with opposition by the Pharisees and Sadducees. We read in Mark's Gospel: "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts."¹⁶⁰ We find the same distress here. If Jesus had not loved the people in Laodicea, He would have let them be. But now He sends them hardship and persecution in order to shake them up from their illusion and bring them to a condition of genuine repentance and conversion. This verse is a clear indication of the relationship between God's love for us and our being tested. There are lessons we can only learn when our lives are put under pressure. C. S. Lewis says: "God shouts to us in our pain."

Verse 20 is a classic picture of conversion. The Lord stands at the door of our heart and knocks to be let in. He does not break down the door. The Lord respects our personality much more than we respect ourselves. He never coerces us. Whether the door is opened or not depends on us. This also indicates that the initiative does not belong to us but to Him. If we invited Him in, it is only possible because He has knocked and He is obviously eager to be let in.

At Adam's creation, God expected that man would himself take the initiative and approach the tree of life in order to eat the fruit thereof. That would have initiated the same feast of love and fellowship as the one Jesus mentions here. Adam's choice of the tree of knowledge did not annul God's feast. God's table has remained spread. The difference is that now man can no longer take the initiative of love. The chasm caused by sin is unbridgeable for us. If God does not take the initiative for us, we are lost for eternity. God's great act of reconciliation is, of course, the atonement by the blood of Jesus Christ. The approach here consists in the application of atonement upon the life of the individual. This knock on the door is the ultimate expression of God's love. We often look upon this as the image of a stranger who comes in as a guest. As if it would take an act of kindness on our side to let in the visitor. We must not forget that Jesus Himself made the door on which He knocks. He is the creator and owner of the heart in which He wants to enter. We understand the emotional tension a little better if we reverse the image and we let the prodigal son knock on the door of his father's house. The same emotions are present here. The difference is that it is the Father who does the knocking.

The words "If anyone hears my voice" do not merely reflect the act of hearing but they imply paying attention, acting upon what is heard, and obeying. Conversion is always an act of obedience. We are powerless to change ourselves. But we can pay attention to the voice of God and let Him in, so that He can renew our life. The key to the door of our heart is in our own hand. It is within our power to open or to keep closed. Jesus' entering into our life is not an act of "irresistible grace." Obedience is the choice to subject our will to the will of God. Jesus will only come in if we want Him to.

¹⁵⁹ Isa. 55:1

¹⁶⁰ Mark 3:5

Who can adequately describe the scene of the Lord of glory entering the human heart? He is clothed in holiness, love, and life. He will sit at our table and eat with us, as if that is the most common thing in the world. Eating is, in fact, a daily activity. The Lord says that, from that moment on, He wants to do the everyday things with us together. If we learn to do the common things together with Him, the extraordinary will appear also.

In my conversations with persons who are willing to ask Jesus as their Savior into their lives, I often use this verse. At that point, the overriding factor is usually emotional. It is believed that if Jesus' entering into our heart is emotionally measurable, conversion has taken place. This verse, however, gives us Jesus' promise as the only certainty. "I will come in." If it penetrates our minds that this Word of God is reliable, even if our feelings are miles removed from the event, then we have made our first experience of faith. This lays a firm foundation for what is to come.

The sole remedy for the unreality of sin in which the people in Laodicea lived, is this dinner with the Lord Jesus Christ. Healing of a lukewarm lack of love and illusions of grandeur is found in doing the mundane things of daily life together with the Lord. What is meant here is, of course, not merely the consumption of food in the physical sense of the word. After all, natural food is merely an image of the spiritual reality with which we must feed ourselves. "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."¹⁶¹ We must not separate the image from the reality. If we learn to eat and drink with Jesus, we will also be able to pray and sing praises with Him. The latter, somehow, seems easier than the former.

What constitutes victory for the Laodiceans other than the opening of the door? Here also, no superhuman effort to oppose the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune is required. It is simply a matter of acknowledging our own impotence. We invite the Lord into our lives because we realize that we cannot cope alone. It is this admission of defeat that the Lord calls victory. This is the only way to the throne. In this manner, Jesus Himself gained the victory; He conquered by dying. This paradox is the secret to all real power and authority.

By drawing a line from His victory to ours, the Lord indicates what is the real meaning of our opening the door. It begins with our death. It is not finished until we have died completely. Only then victory is complete. This places us, together with the Son, at the side of the Father, in the center of all power in heaven and on earth.

H. The Conclusion

It is interesting to make a comparison of the seven epistles. Everyone follows the same pattern. They are all addressed "to the angel of the church." It is clear from the context that this "angel" is not a supernatural being. He is a member of the church, because he shares in the praise and rebuke. We agree with most commentators that this "angel" is probably the pastor of the local church.

– Jesus reveals Himself in each of the letters with one specific characteristic, as part of the image with which He showed Himself to John. This revelation relates to particular good or bad points that are found in the local church. Every local church discloses part of the total picture. No one local church presents the whole picture. Each one is a member of the body, not the whole body itself.

– Every letter begins with the words "I know..." In the letter to Smyrna, we read: "I know your afflictions..." in the one to Pergamum: "I know where you live..." in some of the other epistles we read: "I know your deeds."

– This is followed by criticism in a positive or negative sense; first for the good, then for that which is lacking. In the letter to Smyrna, we find no negative criticism; neither in the one to Philadelphia, unless we consider the words: "I know that you have little strength" to be a critical remark. Nothing good is mentioned in the letter to Sardis and Laodicea. But Sardis had some individuals that did not come into judgment. The church as a whole, however, did not meet the standards.

– This is followed by promises to those who are victorious and a warning to pay attention to the voice of the Holy Spirit. The mention of the ear is a reference to Isaiah's prophecy, in which God tells Isaiah to say to the people: "'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with

¹⁶¹ Deut. 8:3

their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”¹⁶² We find references to Isaiah’s prophecy also in the Gospel of Matthew.¹⁶³

There is a sevenfold promise of recompense to those who gain the victory:

- 1) Eating from the tree of life (Ephesus);
- 2) Not being hurt at all by the second death (Smyrna);
- 3) Receiving of the hidden manna and also a white stone with a new name written on it (Pergamum);
- 4) Receiving authority to rule and break the nations, as well as the morning star (Thyatira);
- 5) Being dressed in white, a guarantee that their name is written in the book of life, and confessing their name before the Father (Sardis);
- 6) Being made a pillar in God’s temple with a permanent guarantee and inscription of the Name of God, the name of the New Jerusalem, and Jesus’ new Name (Philadelphia);
- 7) Sitting with Jesus upon God’s throne.

Thus ends this section of the book of Revelation.

III. The Struggle Between God and Satan - Ch. 4:1-19:21

A. The Seven Seals Ch. 4:1-8:15

1. Before the throne of God 4:1-5:14
- a. The praise before God’s throne 4:1-11

John introduces himself again at this point in the imagery of the book. This is the second time our attention is drawn to his person; the first in the introduction when he pronounces a blessing and describes his circumstances, and now in this spectacular transit from earth to heaven. The focus is not upon the important role he plays, but rather serves to put in perspective what follows.

John says: “There before me was a door standing open in heaven.” Isaiah had once exclaimed: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down.”¹⁶⁴ That happened when “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”¹⁶⁵ After His victory over death, our Lord Jesus Christ returned as King of glory to His glory in heaven. David saw this door from afar and he sang: “Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.”¹⁶⁶ This is the reason John sees this open door in heaven by which he can enter. A door is opened for us in heaven by means of the key of David. No one can close this door.

The same voice that had dictated the seven letters to John, the voice of Jesus, invites him now to come in. In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul describes a similar experience when he states: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-God knows. And I know that this man-whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows- was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”¹⁶⁷ Paul, however, acknowledges that he could not talk about it. Fortunately, John does not have this limitation imposed upon him.

John must have been a very balanced person. This is evident from his openness toward Jesus’ love and from his exceptionally deep insight into the significance of Jesus’ coming into the world. And here, when he proves to be far ahead of Paul, when he can speak without emotional and psychological hindrances about what he has seen and heard.

¹⁶² Isa. 6:9,10

¹⁶³ See Matt. 13:9,14,15

¹⁶⁴ Isa. 64:1

¹⁶⁵ John 1:14

¹⁶⁶ Ps. 24:7,9

¹⁶⁷ II Cor. 12:2-4

It is interesting to compare the experiences of Ezekiel, Paul, and John. Ezekiel's visions were experiences that affected him physically. The Holy Spirit took him up bodily.¹⁶⁸ Paul admits to being confused at this point. He acknowledges not to know whether it was in the body or apart from the body. John does not leave us with any doubt. He enters into a trance and his body remains in Patmos while his spirit enters through the eternal gates of glory. He must have regretted deeply the fact that, shortly after this, he had to return to earth. Now he has entered for good.

David asked the question: "Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?" He answers it himself, saying: "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false."¹⁶⁹ In the remainder of that same psalm the ascension of the Lord is prophetically depicted. The lesson implied in this is that the righteousness needed for this moral climbing of the mountain is acquired through the accomplished work of Jesus Christ. We obtain this purity by means of His death and resurrection. This topic is the actual theme of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, in which we read: "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it."¹⁷⁰ That which we receive as a free gift, God imputes to us as a greater achievement than the climbing of Mount Everest on earth.

For John, the going up occurs by his "being in the Spirit." God's Spirit picks him up and places him on a rock that is higher than he is. As David had prayed: "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I."¹⁷¹ The purpose of John's ascension is to acquire knowledge and insight of the future.

The word "must" indicates that the coming events are inevitable. The same law governed the events that caused Jesus' suffering and death. When Peter reaches for his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus says to him: "But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"¹⁷² Evidently, God owes it to His own righteousness to give Satan every opportunity to plead his cause. All events that occur in this world, ultimately, relate to the question concerning who has the right to sit on the throne of the universe. The events that are described in Revelation will deny Satan the grounds to say that God had not given him a chance.

As John enters heaven, the subject of the cosmic struggle immediately comes into focus. He sees a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it. These words have eternal value. In the center of the universe stands a throne, the symbol of all power, and on the throne someone is seated. The word "someone" is a personal noun. The one who sits there is not an impersonal, nebulous unit, but a Person, the ultimate in personhood. I consider this verse to be the nucleus of all verses in the Bible. This is the peak of all mountaintops.

What John sees is, of course, indescribable in human words. What it says is merely an attempt to approach reality. We do not know how close he actually gets to it. But even from a distance the impression is overwhelming. John is the only one of all the prophets who makes an effort to describe the person of God. Isaiah does not go beyond stating that "the Lord [was] seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple."¹⁷³ Ezekiel mentions "an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal..."¹⁷⁴ and then he limits himself to the figures surrounding it. John compares God with jasper and carnelian, precious stones of millions of carats. A Dutch translation uses the word "diamond." This may not be a correct rendering but it sounds very attractive. The diamond is the queen of precious stones. I will never forget a diamond I once saw, years ago, at a dealer's in Amsterdam; it was then priced \$1200. No stone is so full of light and life as the diamond. I cannot image a better picture of God's glory. The diamond is alive with light. God's glory is brilliant. We do

¹⁶⁸ See Ezek. 3:12,14

¹⁶⁹ Ps. 24:3,4

¹⁷⁰ Rom. 9:30,31

¹⁷¹ Ps. 61:2

¹⁷² Matt. 26:54

¹⁷³ Isa. 6:1

¹⁷⁴ Ezek. 1:4

not know whether it was before this experience or afterward that John wrote: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."¹⁷⁵

The display of color in the description of God's character is overwhelming. The precious stones not only break up the white light into a spectrum of other colors but the jasper and carnelian, together with the rainbow, form a perfect unity with the One who created all color. We could just as well say: "God is color!" How gray and grubby do we, as sinful human beings, appear in comparison with Him who is the source of all color.

The colors represent God's character. The precious stones reflect God's holiness. The rainbow symbolizes His faithfulness in the covenant God made with Noah.¹⁷⁶ The carnelian probably speaks of God's love.

This is the only place in Scripture where God is described in such detail. Toward the end of this book, John mentions once more the presence of God, the Father, seated on a throne, but then he states: "Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them."¹⁷⁷

After this our gaze is diverted from the center to the perimeter. The remainder of this chapter deals with that which occurs around the throne. One cannot look too long at this glory. It is even a miracle that John was able to see this and tell us about it. He is probably the only human being who survived such an experience and was able to speak about it.

In the immediate vicinity of the throne, we see twenty-four other thrones on which elders are seated. We will probably never know with certainty who these elders are until we find ourselves before God's throne. Scholars have seen in them the twelve representatives of the Old Testament and the twelve representatives of the New Testament: the patriarchs and the apostles. This sounds plausible, if we understand that these creatures are not a picture of Israel and the church on earth; they are the reality. What we see on earth is the shadow of heavenly things. We may see in these persons the self revelation of God, which is, after all, the essence of Israel and of the church. God wants to reveal Himself through Israel and the church to the world and to all creatures in the heavenly places. These people share in God's holiness, exemplified by their white garments. They depict His majesty in that they wear a crown on their heads. God is surrounded by righteous ones who bear His image.

Here we have to reach ahead to the end of this chapter in order to see what these elders do before the throne of God, so that we may gain insight into their identity. The Bible teaches that in all of God's creation, only man wears a crown. God created Adam to reign. This meant, probably, that it was Adam's task to bring back all of creation from the influence of Satan and his demons under the authority of God. This is the reason we read in one of the psalms: "What is man that you are mindful of him...? You ... crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet."¹⁷⁸ The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews emphasizes the exclusiveness of man's position by stating: "It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified: 'What is man that you are mindful of him...'"¹⁷⁹ This statement helps us to understand that we are looking here at human beings, not at angels. Furthermore, we may conclude that we are looking at redeemed human beings. They were sinful from the time of conception and birth¹⁸⁰ and they experienced the grace of forgiveness in Jesus, either in the form of the Old Testament sacrifice, or in the reality of the blood of the Lamb of God. I cannot imagine another reason man places the crown he wears before the throne of God. What would be a more fitting act of gratitude than to give back to God the glory and honor He gave us?

We could call this the paradox of worship. The question is, is God right when He gives a crown to the person who conquers. As human beings, we often emphasize, of course, the fact of unmerited grace. We

¹⁷⁵ I John 1:5

¹⁷⁶ See Gen. 9:8-17

¹⁷⁷ Rev. 20:11

¹⁷⁸ Ps. 8:5,6

¹⁷⁹ Heb. 2:5,6

¹⁸⁰ See Ps. 51:5

do as if God plays some kind of comedy and does as if we merit a crown, whilst in reality we do not merit it at all. We cannot fathom God's motives, but I believe that this crown is an expression of God's justice and the giving back of it to Him is not a sham. Otherwise, the giving back of it to God would also be an empty gesture. We would only give back to Him what does not really belong to us. But if this glory and majesty has really become an integral part of our being, then the giving up of it represents an emptying of our soul and spirit that can be compared to the emptying of Himself that Jesus underwent in His incarnation. On the other hand, nothing is so securely our own as that which we constantly give up. Inasmuch as we place the crown before God's throne, it will be planted more firmly on our heads. It is precisely in giving up his crown that a person proves he is worthy of it.

This exemplifies the principle that eternal life consists in the losing of our life. Only the presence of God can bring a creature to the place where he is willing to do this. God's presence will inspire this constant surrender of love. What man does in this is nothing else but following God's example. God constantly gives Himself away; that is the secret of His fullness. The devil is the epitome of self preservation, which leads to his perdition. God proves His love in the giving of Himself. That makes Him eternal and immutable. That is why He is worthy "to receive glory and honor and power..." Or maybe we should say that God constantly gives of Himself because He is eternal.

In this ode of praise, God is worshipped as the creator. He is the source of all that exists. There is no separation between God's creative power and His love. He is at the same time God and Father. The fact that the elders place their crowns before the throne and speak the words they say is proof of this.

The throne is full of sound and energy. John describes this as a severe thunderstorm: "flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder." He tries to put the emotions he experiences in human words. A thunderstorm is always a very imposing spectacle. Luther made a vow to enter the monastery during a thunderstorm. Even if we are not afraid of thunder, we are always overwhelmed by it. Standing in the presence of God is like the experience of a continuous cloudburst.

The Holy Spirit is depicted here as a separate being, as seven blazing lamps. It is difficult for us to grasp how all these details fit together. We must try to catch all the particulars John describes for us in one single glance. The number seven was already used in regard to the Holy Spirit in the beginning of this book: "Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come and from the seven spirits before his throne."¹⁸¹ This cannot mean, of course, that the Holy Spirit would consist of seven separate parts, or that there would be seven different Spirits. We cannot but interpret the number seven here to symbolize perfection. The godhead does not consist in a "nine-ity": Father, Son, and Seven Spirits!

John also sees before the throne "what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal." The washbasin that stood in front of the tabernacle is sometimes referred to as "the sea," as is the laver in front of Solomon's temple.¹⁸² These were probably shadows of this sea that is seen before God's throne. This perfect unpolluted water is the source of all cleanliness and purity for all who appear before the throne. In the light of this observation, that is in connection with the necessity for purification, we note that John states at the end of his book: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea."¹⁸³

The first feature we notice in the four living creatures is their place. John sees them "in the center, around the throne." It is apparently difficult for him to determine where, exactly, they are positioned. John's confusion may be caused by the speed with which these creatures move. For some reason, we always think of something solemn and serious, something static and immovable, when we think of the presence of God. God is more alive than any of us; therefore, it is logical that He Himself and those who surround Him are moving constantly. It is quite possible that John's observation that these creatures "were covered with eyes, in front and in back" has something to do with the speed with which they move. This does not mean that the "abnormal number of eyes" would be an optical illusion, caused by the speed of the movement, but it could be that there seemed to be more than there really are. Our own two eyes allow us to see our world three-dimensionally. This determines the awareness of the surrounding in which we live and also our inner consciousness and the dimensions of our spirit. An increase in our number of eyes (suppose that our brain could handle such a thing) would then mean an expansion of our consciousness. These living creatures must

¹⁸¹ See Rev. 1:4

¹⁸² See Ex.30:17-21 and I Kings 7:23-26

¹⁸³ Rev. 21:1

live in a multi-dimensional state of awareness. This enables them to surround the throne of God and to praise Him. Their condition is a prerequisite for their praise.

We can hardly read this chapter without thinking of the similar vision Ezekiel describes in the first chapter of his prophecy. There are, however, as many differences as there are similarities between the two visions. Ezekiel sees four creatures with four faces and four wings. John counts six wings and one face for each of the creatures. The difference may be, at least partly, explained by the speed of their movement. It is also true that, in our human observations, we do not all see the same things for reasons within ourselves. No one is completely objective. It cannot be doubted but that Ezekiel and John saw the same creatures. Ezekiel saw the eyes all around in the wheels that were the means of transportation for the throne and all that belonged to it. It is quite possible that these living creatures have the power to transmit their abundance of vision to other living creatures with which they are connected. The fact that such things are supernatural and beyond our understanding does not diminish their reality. We hardly understand how matter functions in our own dimension. How then can we judge about the behavior of atoms in a multi-dimensional situation? We must remind ourselves that we are not looking at mechanisms, but at living creatures. These are living beings, who have a greater consciousness and intelligence and a greater form of awareness than we do. If they praise God, they do it because they want to and they understand something of His glory. They are not programmed to praise.

In the description of the heads of the living creatures, John only uses the word “face” for the one who is like a man. Ezekiel states about all four of the creatures: “In appearance their form was that of a man.” Obviously, there is something in the look of these creatures that is difficult to describe. There is also a strong suggestion of a symbolic significance. This does not mean that they would not be real creatures with physical characteristics. They seem to represent all of the creation of the sixth day.¹⁸⁴ As far as creation is concerned, they all belong to the same category. We may call them the antitype of that which we know here on earth.

The words of praise of these living creatures remind us of Isaiah’s vision.¹⁸⁵ It is quite possible that these are the same creatures Isaiah saw. Isaiah calls them “seraphs,” which means “fiery creatures.” Their cry: “Holy, holy, holy,” has rung unchanged throughout the ages. The Lord God Almighty speaks of God’s absolute authority over those in heaven and on earth. Isaiah adds to this the words of the seraphs: “the whole earth is full of his glory.” This is, obviously, a prophetic reference to the time when all will be brought back under God’s rule. “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”¹⁸⁶ “Who was, and is, and is to come” says the same. These words not only express God’s eternity but also His character, as well as the Second Coming and the restoration of all of creation.

It is difficult to define holiness. God’s holiness is the sum of all God’s eternal perfections. It is the quality that makes God, God.

It is interesting to observe how John uses different notions of time. This is not always clear in various translations. Evidently, most translators try to keep their text grammatically correct. But for everything pertaining to the four living creatures, John uses the past tense, and for the acts of the twenty-four elders, the future tense. This may be an effort to express the difficulty of translating eternity in terms of time. As earthbound human beings, we have no other way to give expression to eternity than to state that past, present, and future cannot span it, and that even our chronology cannot be applied.

Twice John uses the words: “Him who sits on the throne and lives for ever and ever.” This determines the relationship between God and all of creation. God sits on the throne and He is the only one who possesses incorruptibility and eternal life. Our life originates with Him.

It is impossible to do justice to the overwhelming majesty of this scene. It is He from whose presence earth and sky flee.¹⁸⁷ The importance of the revelation of this scene is in the struggle that goes on throughout the ages between God and Satan. The contestation is about who has the right to sit on the throne of the universe. Here, creation, and particularly redeemed creation confirms: “You are worthy, our Lord and God...” This last verse answers, at least partly, the question C. S. Lewis poses in his book *The Problem of*

¹⁸⁴ See Gen. 1:24-28

¹⁸⁵ See Isa. 6:2,3

¹⁸⁶ See Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14

¹⁸⁷ See ch. 20:11

Pain. It appears that pain and suffering are ultimately unavoidable parts of creation. It would have been impossible for God to create persons with a free will, without leaving open a door to wrong choices that involve suffering. Lewis correctly formulates that the question is not whether God would make a creation with or without suffering, but whether God would create or not. Lewis came to the conclusion that the fact that it is a perfect God who creates, provides the answer to the question. An Italian lady journalist, Orianna Falaci, has pushed human arrogance to the limit by seeing herself standing before the throne of God and asking: “How is that again, should I apologize to you or do you owe me one?” The answer is contained in the person of Him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever. It is of this God that creation testifies that He is worthy, precisely because He has created.

This does not explain everything to us who still live in the midst of this sinful world and who experience the suffering of it. But when we arrive at the point where we can add up the whole sum and draw the balance, we will agree with the apostle Paul who wrote: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”¹⁸⁸

It is difficult to leave this scene of glory behind us. We will never be able to say too much about it.

b. The Lamb, the Book, and the Psalm 5:1-14

This chapter is probably the one most pregnant with meaning in the whole of God’s revelation in creation. It is of the utmost importance in the battle between God and Satan.

We begin with the scroll, which contains God’s plan and strategy for the ending of the war. But it contains more than that; it also includes the strategy of the enemy! From a human point of view, this is impossible. We must begin by stating that the devil is no robot who could not possibly deviate from the programmed recording. Satan has perfect freedom of action, like all of God’s creatures. With greater accuracy than the most accurate computer, God has put on paper what His opponent will do. This does not mean that God dictates to Satan what to do. Because of His omniscience, He establishes as fact that which will happen. This does not make God morally responsible for Satan’s acts. The devil is to be blamed for all the plagues and suffering this world is subjected to. It seems that what happens in this world is only what Satan wishes. But this scene shows us that God had already registered everything in advance. The very fact that such is the case means a devastating defeat for the Evil One. What chance of winning does he have if his secret code is in the hands of his opponent? He cannot do anything that would be hidden from God.

The context of this chapter also demonstrates that the last battle cannot begin before a human being opens the seals of the book. How horrible it must be for Satan to fight such an adversary! All the secrets are on the side of God. The Almighty is the All-knowing One but the devil is not omniscient, although he is very intelligent. The scroll is sealed and Satan must be dying of impatience to know what will happen. God’s enemy thinks, of course, that he can take the initiative in the last battle. The discovery to be used as a pawn in a chess game is a defeat in itself.

For a moment it seems, though, as if Satan has yet the last word. No one in all of creation, among the redeemed in heaven, among those living on earth, or those in the kingdom of death, is found worthy to open the seals of the book. God has made the disclosure of His secrets subject to the condition of man. This is, undoubtedly, proof of the fact that God created Adam after the fall of Lucifer, and that the order to reign over God’s creation included the mandate to bring our planet, back from the influence of darkness, under the sovereignty of God. In bringing Adam over to his side, Satan scored an important victory. In his struggle for the soul of Job, the devil even presupposed that all of humanity was on his side. Here again, it seems as if he has won his case.

No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth dared to respond to the challenge: “Who is worthy?” In the presence of God, every human being will experience “instant judgment” on himself. The Bible shows us other instances in which people condemn themselves. In the story of the woman caught in adultery, all the men leave the scene when Jesus pricks their conscience by saying: “If any of you is without sin, let him be the first one to throw a stone at her.”¹⁸⁹ When Isaiah received his vision of the Lord in the temple, he cried: “Woe to me! I am ruined!” After that, however, he discovered that the lamb that was sacrificed on the altar made him worthy to respond to God’s call for volunteers, and he could say: “Here I

¹⁸⁸ Rom. 8:18

¹⁸⁹ See John 8:7-9

am, send me.”¹⁹⁰ In a sense, millions of people could have answered: “Here I am” when the angel challenged: “Who is worthy?” Every human being who has allowed himself to be washed in the blood of the Lamb is made worthy. This is imputed worthiness.

But if the devil had had the brazen courage to cry out: “You see! All creatures are in my power,” millions could have silenced him. But that cannot be done in the presence of Him who is the original conqueror. It would be hard to imagine, though, that the nagging doubt of our own worthiness, which so often silences us on earth, would also be present in heaven.

John bursts out in tears when it dawns on him that it could be possible to come to a stalemate in the battle between God and Satan. That would mean that no victory of light over darkness would be possible; that iniquity would never be eliminated. He realizes how far-reaching is the havoc caused by sin in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.

This breaks his heart. When the Word of God comes to us so that we pass it on to the others, it will never leave us personally untouched. God will take care that we will be personally involved, body and soul. Isaiah and Amos cried out when they received the message of judgment.¹⁹¹ Jeremiah wept over the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel lay paralyzed on his side for 390+40 days. Hosea experienced Israel’s unfaithfulness in his own marriage. God’s Word carries a very high price. John fulfills here the conditions of the second beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”¹⁹²

I wonder if we will ever weep in heaven; I believe we will. When I was a boy of thirteen, the Nazis imprisoned my father. When he was released and I met him at the corner of our street, I burst out in tears. Why then would I not weep for joy when all the repressed fears and anxieties of life on earth will be released in heaven, when I will see Jesus and He embraces me? Those, however, will be different tears from the ones John sheds here.

It strikes us how forgetful a human being can be. Why did John think not of Jesus himself? If anyone knew that Jesus is victor, it would be the disciple whom Jesus loved. He had stood at the foot of the cross when the Lord cried out: “It is finished!”¹⁹³ He was also the first one who saw the burial cloth and strips of linen that had been on Jesus’ body lying in the empty tomb, and believed that Jesus had risen from the dead.¹⁹⁴ Yet, for a moment, this memory fades till it leads to a jubilant and unshakable certainty.

We can imagine that, for a moment, it became deadly quiet when the strong angel cried out: “Who is worthy?” Then all eyes focused on Jesus Christ, and from the mouths of millions first came the whisper: “Jesus is worthy!” This swelled into a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

John is wakened from his sadness by one of the elders who comforts him with the words: “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed.” John’s sorrow was, in a way, a reflection of God’s, as is recorded by Ezekiel: “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.”¹⁹⁵ And in his being comforted, he portrays the comfort of God, as Isaiah states: “The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.”¹⁹⁶

Jesus is God’s man; He is the only man after God’s own heart. He is complete man in the fullest sense of the word. No one is so human as our Lord Jesus. We are all inferior to Him, not only in our abilities, but also in our humanity. We have believed the satanic lie that being human equals being weak.

¹⁹⁰ Isa. 6:5-9

¹⁹¹ Isa. 6:11; Amos 7:2,5

¹⁹² Matt. 5:4

¹⁹³ John 19:30

¹⁹⁴ John 20:6,7

¹⁹⁵ Ezek. 22:30

¹⁹⁶ Isa. 59:15^b,16

This is a reversal of reality. The man of God is strong; he is a lion! Jesus is the only human being, who, in the face of the destruction and degradation caused by the devil, roared, attacked, and conquered. Amos' words: "The LORD roars from Zion"¹⁹⁷ are not only an image of God's wrath and rage about sin, but they mark also the beginning of victory over sin. Jacob had this in mind when he blessed his son Judah, saying: "You are a lion's cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness--who dares to rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."¹⁹⁸ Judah's coat of arms was a lion. Jacob pointed to "Shiloh," the one to whom belongs authority, who is worthy to reign.

It is interesting to note that, in the New Testament, both the devil and the Lord Jesus are represented with the emblem of a lion. Peter paints Satan as a lion because of the gluttonous appetite with which he devours human souls.¹⁹⁹ Jesus is depicted here as a lion because of His great strength and courage. This heroism is the valor of Gethsemane and Golgotha. As Paul states: "the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."²⁰⁰ Jesus won the victory with his hands and feet nailed to a cross and with a body that was totally exhausted, with a soul that had passed the limits of despair. In one of the airs of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*, the alto sings: "It is finished! The hero of Judah conquers with great power!" The way in which victory was won goes completely against the grain of human nature. Jesus, first of all, gained the victory over Himself, and he who gains victory over himself is stronger than he who conquers a city.

Jesus is also called here "the root of David." The expression is repeated in the last chapter of this book: "I am the Root and the Offspring of David."²⁰¹ The fruit does not carry the root, but the root produces the fruit. We can, therefore, say that, in a sense, David is Jesus' offspring as "the man after God's own heart." That is implied in what is said here.

John sees something quite different from what he expected. When we hear the word "lion," we expect to see a big strong animal, roaring and tearing apart his prey. What John sees is "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne." A lamb by itself would have been enough of a surprise; "a lamb, looking as if it had been slain" removes every trace of fear. But we are easily deceived; this is the form in which God's victory presents itself to us. I think of that magnificent masterpiece, *The Adoration of the Lamb* by the brothers van Eyck, which I saw in the St. Bavo Cathedral in Gent, Belgium. All of world history, everything in the universe, revolves around this Lamb. The expression comes from Isaiah's prophecy: "he was led like a lamb to the slaughter... so he did not open his mouth."²⁰²

This refers to Jesus' going to the cross. On the cross, He was slaughtered like a lamb. This only happened once. Looking like a lamb, however, speaks of the constant attitude Jesus adopts before the Father and all of creation. It refers, not only to the victory won, but also to the way in which it was won.

There is a sense in which Jesus still carries the sin of the world. This is the attitude of Jesus as intercessor before the Father in our behalf. As John Wesley's hymn states: "Five bleeding wounds He has, they pour effectual prayer. Forgive them, Lord, forgive they cry. Nor let the ransomed sinner die." Jesus' attitude reflects the two sides of this victory. It indicates that the power of sin is broken by His complete identification with us, and He took our sins upon Himself and became sin for us.²⁰³

This has its effect on us if we recognize the fact of our sin and truly lay our sins upon Him. The sinner in the Old Testament placed his hand on the head of the sacrificial animal and confessed that he had sinned and that this animal took his place. That which happened to the lamb, in a way, happened to himself. In this mutual identification between Jesus and us, we find the essence of victory. For Satan and his gang, the killing of the Lamb means the complete victory of God's weakness over their strength. This is the spot where the water breaks through the dike; it is through this gap that God's omnipotence rushes in.

¹⁹⁷ Amos 1:2

¹⁹⁸ Gen. 49:9,10

¹⁹⁹ See I Peter 5:8

²⁰⁰ I Cor. 1:25

²⁰¹ See Rev. 22:16

²⁰² Isa. 53:7^b

²⁰³ See II Cor. 5:21

The Lamb stands in the center of the throne, at the core of God's supreme authority. He has seven horns and seven eyes, symbols of the power, the knowledge, and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. The words "sent out into all the earth" remind us of verses in Second Chronicles: "For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him,"²⁰⁴ and Zechariah: "Then the man standing among the myrtle trees explained, '[The four horsemen] are the ones the LORD has sent to go throughout the earth.' And they reported to the angel of the LORD, who was standing among the myrtle trees, 'We have gone throughout the earth and found the whole world at rest and in peace.' Then the angel of the LORD said, 'LORD Almighty, how long will you withhold mercy from Jerusalem and from the towns of Judah, which you have been angry with these seventy years?' " The first verse speaks of the ministry of the Holy Spirit to those whose hearts are fully committed to the Lord. The second verse refers to God's act by which creation, which was completely ruined, is brought back to life again by the Spirit of God. Jesus came to destroy the devil's work.²⁰⁵ The dry bones will live again;²⁰⁶ the tree stump will produce shoots, branches and fruit again.²⁰⁷ The dead will rise from their graves. "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."²⁰⁸ The seven horns illustrate Jesus' words after His resurrection: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."²⁰⁹

The fact that we see the lion as the slain Lamb of God indicates that God mocks our illusions of grandeur. God's derision hit Satan more than anything else. The horns of the Lamb are more powerful than all the antlers of bucks and the horns, of goats, rams, and steer together.

There was a moment at the bank of the Jordan River that the man, Jesus of Nazareth, in His baptism by John the Baptist, openly demonstrated that He was willing to accept the burden God wanted to lay upon Him. He had come into the world as the Messiah and He had said to the Father: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased ... 'Here I am--it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, O God.'"²¹⁰ At that moment, He already took in principle the sins of the world upon Himself. Then He took the first step; here He takes the last. He accepts the authority to carry the matter through to the end. It is the same Lamb who carried away the sins of the world, who delivers the last blow to the author of sin. In this, He fulfills, first of all, the role that God had wanted man to take upon himself at his creation. Adam had been fully equipped to take the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. Here is, finally, a man who does what God had wanted man to do from eternity, who is what God wants him to be. Such is the importance of this moment.

The writing on the scroll is, for the greater part, the content of the Book of Revelation. When Jesus gave to John the revelation of Himself, He revealed Himself, more than anywhere else, in this moment of history. He shows, not primarily, what is going to happen in this world but how it will happen. Everything hinges on the fact that he has come and taken the scroll from the right hand of Him who sits on the throne. It is God who writes down what will happen and the Lamb who makes it happen by opening the seals one by one.

The Lamb's acceptance of the scroll is immediately celebrated with the singing of a psalm or cantata, which is especially composed to celebrate this occasion. Corrie ten Boom thought that Bach would direct the choir of angels in heaven. I want to say a heartfelt "amen" to this! The four living creatures, whose task it is to sing God's glory, throw themselves before the throne in worship before Jesus. The elders, who had placed their crown before the throne of God, come here with musical instruments and incense. The harp music represents the artistry of the human being, the creativity of beauty with which he can worship God. The last psalm of the Book of Psalms states: "Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with

²⁰⁴ II Chron. 16:9^a

²⁰⁵ I John 3:8

²⁰⁶ See Ezek. 38:1-16

²⁰⁷ See Isa. 11:1

²⁰⁸ Hab. 2:14

²⁰⁹ Matt. 28:18

²¹⁰ Heb. 10:5-7

the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.”²¹¹ We may add to this orchestra a long list of organs, pianos, violins, and clarinets, because all true art glorifies God. That is the reason for which sound and rhythm were created.

Together with the harps, the elders bring golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. Evidently, the prayers of redeemed people on earth are of vital importance in the fulfillment of God’s plan. Here, they are brought before God as the incense of adoration to the Lamb. Later on in this book, they appear to play an important part in the destruction of all demonic resistance on earth.²¹² As Amos stated: “Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.”²¹³ Here, the saints confirm Amos’ words. It is impossible to worship the Lamb without acquiescing the atonement of our sins.

It was the prayers of Elijah that brought about the great drought in the days of King Ahab.²¹⁴ Daniel’s prayer was the most important factor for the return of the Jews to Jerusalem.²¹⁵ Without his prayer, the Babylonian Captivity might never have ended. We may conclude from this that, without our prayers, the Kingdom of God will not be revealed. This is the reason Jesus teaches to pray: “your kingdom come,”²¹⁶ and we pray: “Come, Lord Jesus.”²¹⁷

How wonderfully fulfilling it is that, as human beings, we play such a pivotal role in God’s plan! This is self-realization in the fullest sense of the word. As such we participate in the singing of the cantata that was especially composed for this occasion. What a cantata! We have not heard the music of it yet, but we know the libretto.

It is amazing to see how the Book of Revelation is saturated with quotations of Old Testament prophecies. There are references to almost every Old Testament prophetic book. It is almost impossible that John would have such Scripture knowledge to be able to quote all from memory and to borrow so many words from the Psalms and the Prophets in his book. The expression “new song” comes from the Book of Psalm: “Sing to the LORD a new song.”²¹⁸ The same psalm from which these words are quoted also indicates that the saints are involved in carrying out the plan of God. We read: “To carry out the sentence written against them. This is the glory of all his saints.”²¹⁹

The content of this hymn indicates that the singers are in complete agreement with what is happening on the basis of what Jesus has done for the salvation of fallen mankind. In the previous chapter, the elders had sung to God the Father: “You are worthy,”²²⁰ here they address these same words, together with the living creatures, to the Lamb. In the first hymn, the basis was the creation; in the second it is redemption. Redemption consists of two parts: purchase and exaltation. With His own blood, Jesus bought people from every tribe and language in the world. It cost Him all He had. Like the merchant of pearls who found the perfect pearl and sold everything he had to buy it, so Jesus gave up all He possessed to purchase us.²²¹ He paid with His body, His very life. He was slaughtered. He bought us for God. Through this

²¹¹ Ps. 150:3-5

²¹² See ch. 8:3,4

²¹³ Amos 3:7

²¹⁴ See James 5:17,18

²¹⁵ See Dan. 9

²¹⁶ Matt. 6:10

²¹⁷ Rev. 22:21

²¹⁸ Ps. 149:1

²¹⁹ Ps. 149:9

²²⁰ ch. 4:11

²²¹ See Matt. 13:45

purchase, that which He bought became God's property. This is the actual meaning of the word "holy," "set apart for God." As Paul says to the Corinthians and to us: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."²²²

The result of this is our exultation. God purchased us in order to make us into His Kingdom, that is kings and priests. The Kingdom of God is "us."

The hymn distinguishes "every tribe and language and people and nation." This gives room to the anthropologist, the linguist, the ethnologist, and the politician. It is the task of everyone who works in this world to make this purchase by the Lamb as efficient and effective as possible. When they serve science, they serve God. This verse sets the limits to every discipline and, at the same time, it opens eternal horizons.

The purpose of redemption is the coming of the Kingdom, which is "God all in all."²²³ That fulfills man's destination. It makes man a priest with royal authority. The priesthood places man in the ministry between God and everything else; the royalty provides authority over demonic powers and all the rest of creation. Man was never created for the purpose of ruling over his fellowmen; that is the result of the fall. When the psalmist sings: "you put everything under his feet," he specifies: "all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas."²²⁴ Jesus bought us for the price of His blood in order to restore the image of God within us.

This chapter ends with the praise of millions of angels, of the living creatures, and the elders who blend their voices in a mighty chant of praise to the Lamb, followed by the praise of "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them." Every knee bows for Him who is Lord over all to the glory of God the Father.²²⁵

The praise of the angels and the elders constitutes, in the first place, a being in agreement with the plan of God. They all concur with what God is doing. This is very important. Satan accuses God but His own creatures justify God. They declare God to be just.

The words of the chorus do not *impart* honor and glory and power to the Lamb; He already possesses these and would possess them even without the hymn of praise. The song constitutes recognition of the fact and the confirmation of its correctness. Every testimony to an absolute norm is an affirmation of God's holy character. The evidence of an absolute norm consists in the proof of its relationship between certain facts and the character of God. Doing this glorifies God, but at the same time, it elevates the creature who does this. It is overwhelming to us to realize that we are made in such a way that we can do this. The essence of praise is the affirmation of facts.

One of the mysteries of worship is also that we, as mere creatures, can give something to God. This is no illusion. I do not know how a human being can add anything to omnipotence or glory to perfect holiness, but our adoration is not a travesty. Isn't it wonderful that we are able to do such a thing? This reminds us of Hannah's sacrifice to God of little Samuel.²²⁶ Worship never consists in words only. It is a giving of concrete things that God had entrusted to our care: our body, our children, our riches, our gifts, and the works of our hands.

John states in verse 13 that every creature joins in the chorus. How this fits into our present situation in which all its demons and the greater part of humanity curse God, I do not know. John may be reaching here toward the end of times (something that cannot be done in eternity), or it may mean that the hymn can already be heard now in all strata of creation, without necessarily encompassing all. Whatever the case may be, this adoration signifies a climax.

It is the third and last verse that is sung. The first verse was intoned by the living creatures and the elders, the second by all the angels in heaven, and the third by the whole universe. It is difficult to completely comprehend the ecstasy of this event. "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" To this the living creatures sound a resounding "Amen!" and the

²²² I Cor. 6:19,20

²²³ See I Cor. 15:28

²²⁴ See Ps. 8:6^b-8

²²⁵ See Phil. 2:10

²²⁶ See I Sam. 1:11;2:24-28

elders fall down prostrate before the throne in adoration. The message of the Book of Revelation is not, primarily, the coming of the Antichrist and the "Great Tribulation." The adoration of Him who sits on the throne and of the Lamb, of the Father and the Son, occupy the center. Revelation is a book of adoration.

2. The Opening of the Book 6:1-8:1
- a. The First Seal 6:1,2

At this point the difficult section of the book begins. If we interpret what is described as historical events, we get bogged down in all kinds of contradictions. Yet, it seems that John follows a certain chronology. Later, when the events recorded are historically behind us and we have passed the end of times, if ever we have an opportunity to read the Book of Revelation again, everything will, no doubt, make perfect sense to us. We will probably do more justice to Revelation now, if we treat it as a symphonic poem. The theme is treated like a spiral. The same events are repeated on different levels.

Some commentators believe that the Seven Seals, the Seven Trumpets, and the Seven Golden Bowls actually represent the same scenes. Some believe that the Book of Revelation opens up like a fan, from the middle outward. Others see in it only an effort by John to provide comfort to persecuted Christians by showing to them that God is still seated on the throne of the universe, and that the book makes no reference to any future events.

We see in the Old Testament that prophecies are hardly ever given in pure chronological order. We not only observe what may be called "the telescopic aspect of prophecy," by which certain events, that are in reality separated from each other by centuries, are depicted as following one another closely, but we also see that, in some cases, the order of events is reversed. It seems to us that the picture of a spiral in connection with these three series of seven in John's Revelation is a very fitting one. There is a repetition of facts, but the perspective is different in each of the series. It is as if the same scenes are filmed three times but with different filters on the lens of the camera. The emphasis in the image of the Seven Seals is on what man does to himself. The Antichrist is a man and the war he initiates is human warfare. The Seven Trumpets reveal the demonic aspect in the events. Man calls upon the devil to achieve his goal. Satan and his demons come in to help but they do not leave when man's goal is reached. They are there to stay. The third level, represented by the Seven Golden Bowls, demonstrates that what God allows to happen, the ascension of the Antichrist, and the involvement of Satan, is the expression of God's wrath over His creation that has severed the bond of fellowship with Him.

The transition of one cycle into the next is also important. We are under the impression that the Seventh Seal actually consists of the Seven Trumpets and that the content of the Seventh Trumpet is the Seven Golden Bowls of God's Wrath. How all these fit together, we do not profess to know. We know from other parts of Scripture that, in the last phase of world history, Satan will reveal himself in a human being called the Antichrist. The appearance and reign of this human being will mean the Great Tribulation of all who confess the Name of Jesus Christ. Jesus will overcome this Antichrist at His coming and He will establish the Kingdom of God. This is, in brief, the outline of events as we can expect them to occur. We may disagree about some of the details but Evangelical Christians are generally in agreement concerning the main line of events. The Seals, the Trumpets, and the Bowls fit, in one way or another, in the framework of events. All this may sound vague, but it is a starting point for our interpretation.

Now for the Seven Seals! Some commentators believe that the breaking of the seals is not the same as the opening of the scroll. The events that occur would then not reveal the content of the scroll but serve as an introduction to the actual content. That seems to be too literal an interpretation of the picture. If we want to be literal, we can say that as each of the seals are broken, the content of the scroll unfolds before us. It may be important to note that, as the NKJV states, "the Lamb opened one of the seals." The NIV reads: "The Lamb opened the first of the seven seals," which is not a literal rendering of the Greek text. This may indicate that the seal was not necessarily the first in chronology.

As the first seal is broken, we can read what God had written on the scroll. Part of the plan is being revealed. We proceed under the assumption that most of the events are the works of the devil. The mystery of evil, of which God is not the author, is being revealed. As one of the living creatures calls upon the first horse and its rider with a voice like a thunderclap, it does not mean that God created this scene or put it together. It is the shining of the limelight upon the plans of Satan.

The situation may be compared to Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Jesus had not invented the plot, but He was aware of it because the Father had revealed it to Him. During His transfiguration, we read: "Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which

he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.”²²⁷ When Jesus says to Judas: “What you are about to do, do quickly”²²⁸ He does not command him to betray, but He leaves him room to put into effect the devil’s plan.

The four horses here do not come out of God’s stable. Some commentators, however, see in the first horse and its rider one who proclaims the Gospel to all nations, corresponding to Jesus’ words in Matthew’s Gospel: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”²²⁹ Such interpretation denies all connection with the rest of this chapter. The pictures speak of war, hunger, and death. Outwardly, the first rider resembles the One in Chapter 19 of this book: Jesus Christ, the Word of God.²³⁰ But this rider does not possess the awesome glory of God. He is an imitation, the Antichrist. The devil’s plan is to introduce someone as the Christ, someone who acts as if he is the savior of the world. Jesus warns us against this person. We read in Matthew’s Gospel: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.”²³¹ And the apostle Paul reveals this person’s intention. We read in Second Thessalonians: “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”²³² We encounter him again in the thirteenth chapter of this book, where he is depicted as a beast with ten horns, coming out of the sea. His intent is world dominion. It is not clear from these verses where exactly he fits into the events of the end times, but he is obviously the central figure.

b. The Second Seal 6:3,4

Like the first horse and its rider, the following horses and their riders are also imitations of the real thing. They mimic God’s riders, whom the Lord sent out to go throughout the earth.²³³ They prepared the earth for the restoration of God’s revelation. These riders, however, bring destruction. They are the logical follow-up of the Antichrist. The horseman on the fiery red horse is called “war.”

Only God can give peace. Without Him the world falls apart like a body that decomposes when life has gone from it. Peace rules the earth on the basis of righteousness. In explaining the person of Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews states: “First, his name means ‘king of righteousness’; then also, ‘king of Salem’ means ‘king of peace.’”²³⁴ This is the correct order: “first ... righteousness; then ... peace.” When peace fails it means that the foundation of righteousness has been destroyed. This war begins spontaneously. It is not so that war breaks out and that, following that, peace takes to flight. It is because peace has been removed that war follows naturally. If light ceases to shine, darkness is the result. It does not begin from the top either; it is not those in power who declare war and then the masses follow. The battle begins on the lowest level; men are made to slay each other. As we said, this is the normal outcome of the absence of the Spirit of God and His righteousness. The opening of the second seal reveals the true condition of man. He swallows up his brother; he is a murderer and a cannibal.

c. The Third Seal 6:5,6

²²⁷ Luke 9:30,31

²²⁸ John 13:27

²²⁹ Matt. 24:14

²³⁰ See Rev. 19:11-13

²³¹ Matt. 24:4-6

²³² II Thess. 2:3,4

²³³ See Zech. 1:8-11

²³⁴ Heb. 7:2

The black horse and its rider represent famine. The rider holds a pair of scales in his hand. This indicates that food is scarce and must be weighed for equal distribution. It stands for food rationing, maybe even honest rationing. We are, however, familiar with some kinds of “honest distribution of wealth” under communism. All of this has the appearance of righteousness and honesty. The truth remains, as George Orwell, author of the allegory *Animal Farm*, states: “All sheep are equal but some are more equal than others.” The voice that comes from the throne unmask the travesty. The Antichrist emphasizes the justice of the system but God stresses the desperation of the needy. This shows God’s pity with the hungry. He weighs and calculates and determines that there is not enough to go around. People had to pay one denarius, that is one day’s wage of a laborer, for basic food. The Good News Bible renders this: “A liter of wheat for a day’s wage.” TLB reads: “A loaf of bread for \$20.” Scholars are divided about the meaning of the olive oil and the wine. Some believe it means that those items are not affected by the inflation, others think that the rich will not experience that times are bad. Others again see this as an expression for the scarceness of the items. These are so rare that no one will be able to afford them. It reminds us of the shortage of coffee during World War II, when coffee was sold on the “black market” by the bean.

This famine is, of course, the result of war, that is of the disappearance of justice from the face of the earth. Not only will the battles fought result in scarceness of food but human corruption, a lack of compassion and neighborly love makes people die of hunger. Countries like India and Biafra have a history of this where people died, not because no food was available, but because those who were in charge of its distribution were not concerned enough to pass it on. It makes little difference whether we are dealing with capitalistic or communistic systems. If people were good, both systems would work equally well.

d. The Fourth Seal 6:7,8

This is the last seal in which the four living creatures are involved. It unfolds the last phase of Satan’s plan. What happens here is again not the result of the devil’s initiative. For the last time we hear one of the living creatures call out: “Come!” It is the same kind of command as Jesus gave to Judas when He said: “What you are about to do, do quickly.”²³⁵ It is as if God is becoming impatient and He can hardly wait for this to be over. The horse and rider are called “pale.” The Greek word used is *chloros*, which may be rendered “greenish.” The English word “chlorine” is derived from this. *Vincent’s Word Studies of the New Testament* quotes a Greek scholar who states: “In Homer it indicates rather the absence than the presence of definite color.” *Robertson’s Word Pictures in the New Testament* states: “Homer used *chloros* ... of the ashen color of a face blanched by fear (pallid) and so the pale horse is a symbol of death and of terror.” This green color is not the green of spring but of a sickly green of nausea, mildew, and corruption. The rider is called “death” and his minions, that is Hades, the kingdom of death, follow him. They depict the final result of the break with God. These were born the day man fell into sin. Here they come to finish the work they then began. Their power, however, is limited. As God set limitations to Satan’s ability to harm Job, so He does here. They cannot go any further than the killing of one fourth of the world population. The means at their disposal are the sword, famine and plague, and wild animals. The first two are the result of what preceded, the second and the third seal. It is what man does to himself. The plague and wild animals belong to the spheres over which man was meant to rule, and over which he lost control when he broke with God. For Christians, death has been conquered in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our Lord has the keys of death and Hades. When Israel entered the promised land, the wild animals began to disappear.

As in the breaking of the second seal, the rider here receives power to kill. It is not stated to whom this power belongs. In the Book of Revelation it is often presented as if the disasters are the result of God’s direct intervention. We must hold to the truth, however, that destruction is ultimately always the work of the devil. James states: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”²³⁶ But the situation is very complicated and it is often difficult to discern a clear outline.

e. The Fifth Seal 6:9-11

²³⁵ John 13:27

²³⁶ James 1:17

The breaking of the fifth seal opens the eyes of John for a situation that may have existed earlier but of which he had not been aware. John sees under God's altar "the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained." These are God's martyrs. We are not told how long these souls had been there. They may be from different periods in world history. These are probably human beings who had given their lives for the sake of God and His righteousness throughout the ages. They may represent "all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah."²³⁷ Those who opposed God had killed these people because they had chosen the LORD's side. In some cases their killing had been an act of personal revenge, like Cain's killing of Abel. In other instances it was done in an effort to confirm the rule of a king, as Joash' killing of Zechariah.

It is important to note that the blood of these martyrs had been shed on God's altar. These were not merely victims of human tyranny; they had offered their lives as a sacrifice to God and their blood had been poured out at the foot of the altar that is in heaven. Because the soul is in the blood, their voices sound from under the altar. Murders that seem senseless when looked upon from down below, become meaningful sacrifices when looked upon from heaven above. The death of the apostle Paul seemed to be an act of Caesar Nero's capricious despotism; Paul himself qualifies it as "being poured out like a drink offering."²³⁸ He who understands the "why" of things will be able to accept the "how" of it.

The cry for revenge that is voiced by these souls under the altar, rings in a new dispensation: the "Dies Irae," the day of God's vengeance, which is the day that follows "the year of the LORD's favor."²³⁹ There is a reference to the Great Tribulation in these verses, but it seems that these martyrs are not necessarily those who were killed during that period of world history. All the seals point to the time of the Great Tribulation, when the rider on the white horse, the Antichrist, will appear. The martyrs of the Great Tribulation will fill for God the measure of iniquity. It appears that God has postponed the time of final judgment several times to, on the one hand, give people time for repentance, as was the case in Nineveh at the time of Jonah's preaching. On the other hand postponement served to take away from the devil any ground he could use to accuse God of misusing His omnipotence. In the case of the Canaanites, God waited 400 years before He executed judgment upon them through the descendants of Abraham.²⁴⁰ We see God's patience also in the Babylonian captivity, and later in the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. These martyrs, however, seem to lack some of God's patience. They cry out: "How long...?"

Some commentators emphasize the difference between the grace of the Lord Jesus who pleaded for pardon for those who crucified Him with Stephen who prayed for his executors, and this cry for vengeance by these martyrs. I believe that the contrast is more in the time factor than in the spirit of grace. There is a limit, both for sinners and martyrs that cannot be extended, without damaging righteousness. Humans can be forgiven, but the devil cannot. When it is no longer possible to draw the line, when men have sold themselves to do evil in the eyes of the LORD, the measure of iniquity is full and the day of God's vengeance has come. We must not forget that there is such a thing as the Lord's vengeance. As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews states: "For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."²⁴¹

The fact that these martyred souls were given white robes to wear may indicate that they were Old Testament believers for whom atonement had come under the symbol of animal blood. Here they are clothed with the reality of the blood of the Lamb. We meet the New Testament generation of saints in the next chapter. Those experienced immediately the fullness of atonement by washing their robes in the real blood of the new covenant.²⁴² We see those white robes again towards the end of the Book of Revelation where John

²³⁷ See Matt. 23:35

²³⁸ II Tim. 4:6

²³⁹ See Isa. 61:2

²⁴⁰ See Gen. 15:13-16

²⁴¹ Heb. 10:30,31

²⁴² See Rev. 7:14.

states: "Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints."²⁴³ According to my former theology teacher, Dr. Stearns, this should read: "Fine linen stands for the justifications of the saints." This indicates that "righteous acts," or "justification," is the work of the Holy Spirit in human life.

The three instances in which white robes are mentioned give us an interesting history of justification. 1) The robe is given to a person as a piece of clothing. 2) The purity of the robe is maintained by man's initiative. 3) The purpose of the wearing of the white robe is the perfect human being, created in God's image. As the Genesis account states: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."²⁴⁴

In this relationship, Jesus Christ is the man, the bridegroom; we are the bride. C. S. Lewis, in his book *That Hideous Strength*, lets one of his characters say: "What is above and beyond all things [God] is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it."

f. The Sixth Seal 6:12-7:17

It is not clear whether we should classify the seventh chapter under the heading of the sixth seal or consider it to be an intermezzo. The sixth seal introduces, what seems to be, a cosmic catastrophe. There is a tremendous earthquake, a total eclipse of the sun, and a most frightening meteor shower. According to Emmanuel Veliskovsky, author of the book *Worlds in Collision*, such a catastrophe occurred when the planet Venus entered our solar system as a comet. Not much is needed to destroy the fine balance of our cosmos irreparably. One star or planet leaving its orbit would be enough to throw everything out of balance. Old Testament prophets have foretold such events as outward manifestations of God's wrath.

At the moment of its occurrence mankind recognizes the phenomena as demonstrations of God's anger. They want to hide themselves "from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" The prophet Amos prophesied two years before the great earthquake that occurred during the reign of King Uzziah.²⁴⁵ The eclipse of the sun and the turning red as blood of the moon was predicted by the prophet Joel in connection with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon mankind.²⁴⁶ In the following verse of Joel's prophecy, we read: "And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."²⁴⁷ Joel's statement places this whole scene in John's Revelation in a different perspective. Evidently, even at this point, the door of grace is not yet closed.

The striking feature of these verses is that the ungodly recognize that the day of God's vengeance has broken upon them. Like the rich man in the story of "the Rich Man and Lazarus," who immediately and correctly interpreted his own condition,²⁴⁸ so here. Nobody has to tell these people that judgment is upon them. Those who are being accused by their own conscience announce the coming of judgment themselves.

Even more amazing than this understanding is the reaction of these people to these natural disasters. They make no effort to flee them, but they run toward them. A normal response of a person to an earthquake or any other natural disaster is to run to a place of safety. These people pray for the calamity to hit and cover them! This proves that people know that there are things that are worse than natural catastrophes. It also suggests that what happens in nature is a physical demonstration of a spiritual reality; in this case the wrath of God and of the Lamb.

This forces us again to look at these seals. The flight of these people seems to be the same as the flight of earth and heaven from the presence of God at the end of this book.²⁴⁹ It begs the question whether this sixth seal stands for the end of everything or the beginning. Some commentators identify this section

²⁴³ Rev. 19:8

²⁴⁴ Gen. 1:27

²⁴⁵ Amos 1:1

²⁴⁶ See Joel 2:28-31

²⁴⁷ Joel 2:32

²⁴⁸ See Luke 16:23-30

²⁴⁹ See Rev.. 20:11.

with what Jesus called: “the beginning of birth pains.”²⁵⁰ It may be that John sketches for us in these seals the outlines of the whole picture and that the following trumpets and bowls fill in the details. In that case, the sixth seal would, in fact, be both the beginning and the end.

3. Those who are sealed 7:1-8

These verses are probably among the most controversial and most abused ones in the whole Bible. Several sects have claimed the 144,000 as their own. There are several problems caused by the highly symbolic use of language. The first problem is the time. The question is whether it refers to a specific event that takes place between the opening of the sixth and seventh seal. Are these people sealed when the cosmic collapse has already started? The fact that John introduces four angels who maintain peace on the earth makes us think that John, probably, takes a few steps back in time here. The question is: “How many steps?” It seems that there are more than one or two. The seals of the scroll are broken one-by-one while this seal is being applied to the forehead of these people. In the breaking of the seals of the book, the secret strategy of the devil is being revealed. In the application of this seal, God’s secret with men is being confirmed. This is “the secret of the Lord.” As David sings: “The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him.”²⁵¹

This seal symbolizes, first of all, an intimate relationship with the Lord. The seal is also the symbol of the Holy Spirit, as Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”²⁵² And in Ephesians, the apostle states: “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.”²⁵³ So the seal symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

The seal is also the proof of God’s ownership. God puts His seal on those who have surrendered their lives to Him and who, consequently, are His. This is the actual meaning of the word “holy.” Holy is “that which belongs to God.”

The real message of this section, therefore, is that in the midst of apostasy and dechristianization, in the chaos of this world, there will be a group of people who belong to God, spirit, soul, and body; through whom God can reveal Himself. Such a group has existed throughout the ages. From Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Israel to Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God has been able to find a place to set His feet. This is symbolized in the seal.

The seal also represents protection. Those who belong to God know: “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.”²⁵⁴

Not many people interpret the number 144,000 literally. As far as we know, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are the only ones who believe it stands for a specific number of people who will enter heaven. These are, of course, all Jehovah’s Witnesses. The number is generally believed to stand for a combination of 12x12,000. The number 12 suggests the manner in which God has revealed Himself on earth. There are the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ. God had chosen Israel to be “a kingdom of priests”²⁵⁵ unto Him in this world. John uses the same expression in Revelation. In opening verses of this book, we read: “[He] has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”²⁵⁶ And later on: “You have made them to be a kingdom

²⁵⁰ See Matt. 24:8

²⁵¹ Ps. 25:14 (NKJV)

²⁵² II Cor. 1:21

²⁵³ Eph. 1:13,14

²⁵⁴ Ps. 91:7

²⁵⁵ Ex. 19:6

²⁵⁶ Rev. 1:6

and priests to serve our God.”²⁵⁷ We may say that the number 12 stands for the Kingdom of God. Twelve square, multiplied by 1000 suggests an infinite and unlimited number. God needs a body of people who can form a bridge between God and a lost world. The priest brings the sacrifice of atonement and praise and God uses the priest’s hands to bless. In general, Israel has understood little of her own calling in this world and the church of Jesus Christ has only sporadically performed her task and that only partially.

Many people take the name “Israel” literally in this section. It seems inconsistent, however, to take the numbers symbolically but not the name of Israel. Unless God would perform a miracle of recreation and would raise up children for Abraham out of stones, it would be a physical impossibility to gather 12,000 people from every tribe of Israel. This does not mean that Israel will not play a role during the time of the Antichrist and the Great Tribulation, but we do not believe that we can base this upon these verses. We believe that the name of Israel is primarily used here to indicate people who are victors because they “have struggled with God and with men and have overcome,” and have asked for God’s grace.²⁵⁸ They are the ones on whom the sun has risen at their Peniel.²⁵⁹ They are the ones who give a clear testimony of Jesus Christ in this world. Paul calls them “the Israel of God.”²⁶⁰ And, finally, they are the ones whose lives have been sealed with the Holy Spirit.

A remarkable detail is that the tribe of Dan is missing in the list of tribes. The total number of tribes is 12 because both Manasseh and Joseph are mentioned separately, but this total is maintained in an artificial way. The tribe of Joseph consisted of Ephraim and Manasseh. The way it is written, Manasseh is actually counted twice. The name Joseph, obviously, stands for Ephraim in this list. Hymenaeus explained the problem of the omission of Dan as proof that the Antichrist came from that tribe, but this is mere speculation. In the list of tribes in Ezekiel chapter 28, Dan is the first tribe mentioned in connection with the redistribution of the land. The most logical explanation seems to be that John left out the name on purpose to indicate that no literal Israel is intended.

4. The Great Multitude that No One could count 7:9-17

Some scholars believe that this multitude represents the result of the evangelization by the 144,000 converted Israelites in the previous section. If, however, we conclude that the 12 tribes are not to be interpreted literally, this theory also falls between the cracks. In his book *Revelation*, George Eldon, suggests that this group is the same as the one in the previous section, but that the perspective is different. It seems that these people are the church of Jesus Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit, “the Israel of God,” His people through whom He reveals Himself in this world, a multitude no one can count, from every tribe and language and people and nation. In the first part of this chapter, John sees them on earth in the midst of the storms of the Great Tribulation; here they are in heaven before the throne of God.

This is the third time we meet them in this book: they are the souls under the altar (Ch. 6:9-11), they are the 144,000 and the great multitude no one can count.

The mention that no one can count these people does not mean, of course, that God doesn’t know their number. For God the concept of something innumerable does not exist. It can, therefore, not be meant literally. John means that the human boundaries of that which is imaginable has been crossed. The definition of their origin as “from every nation, tribe, people and language,” breaks through the limitation of the confusion of Babel. In Jesus Christ, the walls of partition are torn down.

We will leave, for the moment, the question as to whether the church will go through the Great Tribulation. Rather than losing ourselves in dispensational speculations, we must look at what happens in these verses. An innumerable multitude from all over the world stands before the throne of God and confesses in a loud voice that God is the source of their salvation.

The question immediately arises. What is meant by “salvation” in this context? The Greek word *soteria* means: “rescue or safety.” According to *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*: “Soteria denotes ‘deliverance, preservation, salvation.’ ‘Salvation’ is used in the NT (a) of material and temporal

²⁵⁷ ch. 5:10

²⁵⁸ See Gen. 32:28-29; Hosea 12:4

²⁵⁹ See Gen. 32:31

²⁶⁰ Gal. 6:16

deliverance from danger and apprehension, (1) national, ... (2) personal, as from the sea, ... (b) of the spiritual and eternal deliverance granted immediately by God to those who accept His conditions of repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus, in whom alone it is to be obtained, Acts 4:12, and upon confession of Him as Lord, Rom 10:10; for this purpose the gospel is the saving instrument, Rom 1:16; Eph 1:13 ... (c) of the present experience of God's power to deliver from the bondage of sin, e. g., Phil 2:12, where the special, though not the entire, reference is to the maintenance of peace and harmony; 1 Peter 1:9; this present experience on the part of believers is virtually equivalent to sanctification; for this purpose, God is able to make them wise, 2 Tim 3:15; they are not to neglect it, Heb 2:3; (d) of the future deliverance of believers at the Parousia of Christ for His saints, a salvation which is the object of their confident hope, e. g., Rom 13:11; 1 Thess 5:8, and v. 9, where 'salvation' is assured to them, as being deliverance from the wrath of God destined to be executed upon the ungodly at the end of this age (see 1 Thess 1:10); 2 Thess 2:13; Heb 1:14; 9:28; 1 Peter 1:5; 2 Peter 3:15; (e) of the deliverance of the nation of Israel at the second advent of Christ at the time of 'the epiphany (or shining forth) of His Parousia' 2 Thess 2:8; Luke 1:71; Rev 12:10; (f) inclusively, to sum up all the blessings bestowed by God on men in Christ through the Holy Spirit, e. g., 2 Cor 6:2; Heb 5:9; 1 Peter 1:9,10; Jude 3; (g) occasionally, as standing virtually for the Savior, e. g., Luke 19:9; cf. John 4:22 (see SAVIOR); (h) in ascriptions of praise to God, Rev 7:10, and as that which it is His prerogative to bestow, 19:1 (RV)."

The word is, evidently, as illusive to define as the word "holy." Both are related to the character of God. The rich suggestion is that man is saved from being lost by becoming conformed to the character of God. Without the Lamb, salvation would be impossible. He is the way. This confession is made by trillions of people who have broken through the curse of Babel in the greatest act of God's justification we can imagine. When people confess God as the source of salvation, they confess their own salvation. They confess that they were lost when they were found. The person who has experienced salvation justifies God on the basis of His plan of salvation, which consists of the Incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension.

In Chapter 4, the adoration of God was based on the fact that God is the Creator of all. In chapter 5, the emphasis is upon the victory of Jesus Christ, which gave Him the dignity necessary to put God's decree into execution. In this chapter, the praise rises from those who were the objects of God's salvation. There is the most subjective of all reactions. "Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan!"

Their hymn brings that whole population of heaven to its feet: all the angels, the elders, and the four living creatures. How many billions would that be? They all fall flat on their faces and burst out in a seven-fold adoration. This is overwhelming to imagine. Their first word is "Amen." This means a confirmation, an oath, and an appeal to the truth as the perfect reference. Moral living beings call upon the perfect standard by which all things are judged, which is the character of God. They come to the conclusion that this character is just, true, and real. This is the perfect orientation, the full truth.

The text of their adoration is a poem. It exists in three groups of two words that belong together and the seventh word stands by itself. The three phrases form three layers that are built up systematically from the bottom to the top. In each group is one word that is a characteristic and another that shows the effect. The order changes. It is the praise creation brings to its Creator. Its glory is a created Word, a translation of God's most outstanding quality: His Holiness. We are reminded of the hymn of the Seraphs in Isaiah: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."²⁶¹ Holiness and glory are synonymous. Glory is the earthly translation of the heavenly concept of holiness. God is to be praised because He is holy and glorious. Wisdom is His and thanks is ours, His creation. We thank Him for His knowledge and insight and the practical application of it in creation. This pertains both to the forming and the maintaining, as well as to the restoration, among which is the plan of salvation. The honor goes together with the power. God's position on the throne of heaven brings with it the honor of the throne. God's omnipotence evokes in us respect, fear, and adoration. We acknowledge that He who sits on the throne has the right to be there. "O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel."²⁶² God's strength stands alone at the top of all. God is not strong sometimes, but always, forever and ever! What His love wants to bring about, His strength does not deny Him! The hymn ends with the same word that opens it: "Amen!" It is the truth.

²⁶¹ Isa. 6:3

²⁶² Ps. 22:3 (NASU)

The dialogue between John and one of the elders is a repeat of a similar conversation of Zechariah and the angel.²⁶³ There is similarity both in form and content. The prophet asks about the meaning of the candlestick he sees. Here the elder arouses John's curiosity by asking the question. The similarity is in the testimony of the candlestick by shedding the light of the Holy Spirit and the multitude in white clothes.

The elder calls them: "they who have come out of the great tribulation." If this refers to a specific period in world history, the time in which the Antichrist reveals himself, the sheer number of people is a tremendous victory for the Holy Spirit. But the reference, probably, surpasses all dispensations. What is said about these people can be said about all who experience persecution because of their faith. No Christian is excluded from this. The first result of persecution for a person who has surrendered his life to Jesus Christ is that he takes his sanctification seriously. In Ch. 6:10,11, we saw that the martyrs were given white robes. This represented the justification by which God imputes the righteousness of Jesus Christ to those who believe. In this chapter, man himself applies the blood of Christ to his life, by which the whiteness of the robe God has given him is preserved. Without persecution we would all take sin lightly. It is important to realize that we, as human beings, must take some initiative in this matter. God does not sanctify us against our will and without our cooperation.

The result of our attitude in life is expressed in the word "therefore" that begins verse 15. This reminds us of the description of salvation as given in the Psalms: "Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you."²⁶⁴ These are the ones who "serve him day and night in his temple." The temple is the place of God's revelation of Himself and the place of fellowship with Him. It is a place of safety where God spreads out His tent over us. He who accepts God's revelation of Himself and lives in fellowship with Him "dwells in the shelter of the Most High [and] will rest in the shadow of the Almighty."²⁶⁵ Blessed is the man who lives in God's shelter!

Tribulation is depicted here in terms of hunger, thirst, and scorching heat. Those elements are, of course, an image of the whole picture. Man does not only suffer physically, but physical suffering is, probably, the least of all sufferings. Injustice and suppression of personal freedom are harder to endure than corporal privation.

Compensation is found in fellowship with the Lamb, Jesus Christ. He, who took our place and died for us, will lead us to springs of living water. This beautiful poetry is a combination of Psalm 23 and Isaiah 49:10. The shepherd, the comforter, is the Lamb. We are being shepherded by Him who Himself was led as a lamb to the slaughterer. If this was already sufficient restoration for the human soul in an earthly setting, how much more in heaven! Our Lord leads us in our tribulation and persecution on earth. In heaven He will await us at the springs of living water, and we will drink, and our thirst will be quenched in a refreshment that will never end. The Lamb will no longer be led to the slaughterer. He is at the center of the throne, in the core of omnipotence. And, comfort of all comforts, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." I am sure that, when I get to heaven, I will experience a wholesome gully-washer, a freeing cry. God will take my head between His hands, take out His handkerchief, and comfort me.

C. S. Lewis was asked the question: "Is theology poetry?" The answer is: "Of course!" All true poetry is theology! And poetry is the highest expression of truth. We find the same wonderful comfort at the end of this book when we partake of the New Jerusalem.

5. The Seventh Seal 8:1-5

It appears that the seventh seal is both the end and the beginning of a series. As was stated earlier, we believe that the seven trumpets are included in this last seal. We can discern three parts in it: the silence, the trumpets, and the sacrifice of incense.

John gives us no explanation as to the meaning of the silence. A perfect silence of one half hour is a marvelous experience. Even a one-minute silence seems long to us; a half-hour silence must be like an eternity. Lots of emotions can only be expressed in silence. Silence is sometimes more eloquent than sound. The effect of silence lies in combination and contrast. Silence in itself does not express anything; it creates

²⁶³ See Zech. Ch. 4

²⁶⁴ Ps. 84:4

²⁶⁵ Ps. 91:1

space for worship. As the psalmist states: "There will be silence before You, and praise in Zion, O God."²⁶⁶ For the inhabitants of heaven and the redeemed human beings before the throne this silence must be the highest form of fellowship and worship. For those without God, it is the silence that precedes the storm, the menace that goes before the sounding of the seven trumpets.

If we understand this correctly, this silence is not a time of non-activity. While silence reigns, the trumpets are handed out to those who will blow them and the sacrifice of incense is brought on the altar. This silence is caused by the cessation of the voices of thunder from the throne. No praise of the four living creatures is heard and the praise of the elders is interrupted, the saints remain quiet, but the action continues.

The bringing of the incense sacrifice is a very solemn sacrament. We read the guidelines concerning the golden altar and the sacrifice to be brought on it in the Book of Exodus.²⁶⁷ Here we see the reality the shadow of which was expressed in the ritual on earth. Earlier, John had called the incense "the prayers of the saints."²⁶⁸ Here it is stated that incense is offered together with the prayers of the saints. The two evidently belong together. We may say that in heaven something is added to the prayers of human beings on earth. The purpose of these prayers is, obviously, to spread a pleasing scent before the throne of God. As the apostle Paul states: "We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing."²⁶⁹

In our human experience odor completes the picture. Our vision and our hearing allow us to experience only part of reality. When we smell the scent of things it makes it real to us. God's experiences are, of course, never partial. It could be that the detail about the odor is given more for our benefit. We may assume that God experiences our prayers as a reality, in the same way as the odor of things gives to us the finishing touch to actuality. It is important to realize that the odor God smells is the aroma of Christ.

Our prayers have a two-fold effect: in heaven and on earth. The aroma ascends to God and the fire of the altar is hurled upon the earth with the effect of peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. What happens on earth and in heaven is the same thing, the same event. The difference is in the dissimilarity of the soundboard. Even as, in Paul's words, the aroma of Christ is for some people the smell of death and to others the fragrance of life,²⁷⁰ so the prayers of the saints means the perfection of loveliness in heaven and disaster and terror on earth.

The meaning is of the peals of thunder, the rumblings, the flashes of lightning, and the earthquake is not explained for us. We may deduct this from the contents of the seven trumpets. These trumpets must also be the immediate result of the prayers of the saints. In the same way as Israel's return from the Babylonian Captivity was the direct result of Daniel's prayer,²⁷¹ so the trumpets are sounded as an answer to our intercession.

We must note two things in regard to this. First of all, the prayers of the saint are received in heaven in perfect silence. Secondly, it seems as if these prayers aggravate the situation on earth instead of making things better. Appearance, however, can be deceitful. The ripening of an abscess will lead to its healing. Evil often remains because of lack of prayer. Evil often stays dormant when people do not pray.

B. The Seven Trumpets

Ch. 8:6-15:4

In the interpretation of the Seven Trumpets, we face the same mystery as with the Seven Seals. The result of the sounding of the trumpets differs from the effect of the breaking of the seals, but we have the impression that the events bear upon and in some way coincide with the conditions that are created by the breaking of the seals. John describes the blowing of the first four trumpets in rapid succession. We will group them together under one heading.

²⁶⁶ Ps. 65:1 (NASU)

²⁶⁷ See Ex. 30:1-10, 34-38

²⁶⁸ See Rev. 5:8

²⁶⁹ II Cor. 2:15

²⁷⁰ See II Cor. 2:16

²⁷¹ See Dan. 9

1. The First Four Trumpets 8:6-13

The blowing of the first four trumpets has more or less the same effect. In modern terms we could describe this as a nuclear disaster. Whether we should take this to mean that this planet will meet its end in a nuclear holocaust or whether we are looking at a material expression of a spiritual reality, I do not know. Maybe the trumpets show us the other side of the seals. The fact that John, at some points, gives names to certain phenomena would suggest that we are not looking at physical events, or at least, not exclusively. The division of the effects of these plagues, or as they are called “woes,” is artificial. With the blowing of the first trumpet, one third of the earth, one third of the trees is burned, as well as all the grass. The blowing of the second trumpet affects one third of the oceans, one third of all the creatures that live in them, and one third of all navigation on them. The third trumpet turns one third of all the drinking water bitter, causing the death of millions of people. The fourth trumpet reduces the light of the sun as well as of all other heavenly bodies by two thirds. It does seem as if these four trumpets depict four aspects of an enormous nuclear explosion. We can understand this much better in our time than John in his day. If the above is true, then we are looking here at a catastrophe of man’s own making. This is what mankind does to itself. It is not something God pours out over this world. In that sense the trumpets are of the same kind as the seals; they are not the cause but they reveal what happens in a world that has detached itself from God. We must, therefore, not interpret the voice of the eagle that flies in midair as a threat to the population of the world, but a cry of compassion. God’s heart bleeds for the world He created and that perishes before His eyes.

2. The Fifth Trumpet 9:1-12

This trumpet is called the first “woe” in verse 12 of this chapter. Evidently, the cry of the eagle is meant literally. According to Marcus Loan, archbishop of Sydney, Australia, John, in this “woe,” probably imitated the cry of the sea birds on the island of Patmos. The Greek reads: “*Ouai, ouai, ouai,*” which sounds like the cry of a bird.

The fifth trumpet reveals another aspect of the nuclear war, if that is what we are looking at here. We see an attack by the cavalry. The image corresponds to a huge locust plague as the one described by Joel.²⁷² John clearly brings out the demonic background of the event. The first four trumpets may reveal the self-destruction of mankind; the fifth trumpet does not differ from this in principle. It is possible that the locusts are an image of a tremendous world war, but the source of inspiration is the abyss. In this also, the fifth trumpet does not differ from the four preceding ones. Satan is behind all acts of self-destruction. In this case it is more obvious.

In the breaking of the seals, we saw the activity of the Antichrist, a man who called upon Satan to establish him as ruler over the earth. The devil and his demons were obliging enough to come to his help. But after helping the Antichrist to reach his goal, they do not withdraw. When Satan is called upon, he always comes to stay. This we see emphasized in the sounding of these trumpets.

What John describes is, first of all, a spiritual reality that is at the back of the visible events that occur on earth. The demons are released from the pit. This is the reason the nations mobilize and war breaks out.

I think of what happened in Germany in the nineteenth century. In the village of Möttlingen, in the Black Forest, a pastor by the name of Blumhardt, cast out a demon from a girl, named Gottliebin Dittus. After the demon had left her, a great revival began among the people in the area. This indicated how much the daily life of the people had been influenced by the presence of this demonic power. It had kept them from turning to God.

It is not clear whether the falling of the star from heaven refers to the original fall of Lucifer or whether this is another special interference of the devil in the things on earth. We read that this happened to Judas, prior to his betrayal of Jesus: “As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.”²⁷³

It is probably that, at this point in world history, Satan decides to personally take charge. It must be remembered, however, that in spite of this diabolic initiative, the controls are in God’s hand. It is God’s angel who blows the trumpet! In all his freedom of action, Satan dances, so to speak, to God’s piping.

²⁷² See Joel 1:4

²⁷³ John 13:27

As we stated before, this spiritual locusts plague follows the model of Joel's prophecy. The ecological balance is disturbed because the link between the Creator and creation is broken. Nature destroys itself, like a dead body that decomposes. This is not about locusts and grass but about demons and human beings. Only those who live in fellowship with God are immune to the sting of these scorpions. It is obvious that it is not God who tortures people and causes pain. Man who rejects God and becomes self-seeking falls into the hands of him who is a murderer of men from the beginning. For that reason people will try to commit suicide but they will not succeed. The lesson of these verses, therefore, is probably that there will be an unusual amount of demonic activity during this period. The locusts may be presented to us as an army, but if this were merely a human war, Christians would not be safeguarded either. If we try to imagine this horrible picture of the locust attack, we will have to admit that this nightmare can hardly be anything else but a vision of demons. The name of the general who is the supreme commander, Abaddon, or Apollyon emphasizes this.

Thus far the first "woe." May God protect us from it! For those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High applies: "it will not come near you."²⁷⁴

3. The Sixth Trumpet 9:13-10:14

We discern three parts in this section: 1) the four angels at the Euphrates, 2) John eating the little scroll, and 3) the two witnesses.

a. The Four Angels at the Euphrates River 9:13-21

Of the three parts in this first section, this is the one that is most clearly the direct result of the blowing of the sixth trumpet. The other two are probably not immediately connected to this, although we cannot state this with certainty. The explanation of the meaning of this first part is also more complicated than it is of the following ones.

The mention of the River Euphrates suggests, according to some commentators, that this section deals with political events in Iran and Iraq. There is the question whether these angels are God's angels or demons. If the star that fell from heaven in the first verse of this chapter is Lucifer, it may be that these angels who are bound at the Euphrates are also demonic powers. Why, otherwise, would they be bound? The effect of their being released does not sound like the work of God in this world either. The fact that the exact time of their release had already been determined centuries earlier in world history points to the same principle as that revealed in the seals. The devil acts and carries out his plan, but in all this he turns out to be nothing but a pawn in a chess game. God is the one who determines the strategy. The angels mobilize an army of 200,000,000. Is this a human army or are these demons? Most likely both!

It is not too clear why the voice is coming from the horns of the golden altar. As we saw earlier, the prayers of the saints were sacrificed on this altar. At the horns of the altar atonement was made by the application of the blood of the sacrifice.²⁷⁵ There may be a connection between the place of atonement and the prayers of the saints on the one hand and the release of the demons on the other. At first sight, it seems as if the prayers of the saints have an opposite effect. Evidently, what happens here is a necessary step in the direction of the finish line.

The result of the release of the four angels at the Euphrates is that one third of all mankind is killed. The weapons of the 200,000,000-strong army cause this mass destruction. John describes their weapons as "fire, smoke and sulfur." It seems as if an army of tanks uses conventional or nuclear weapons. The horsemen are not described in detail, but the horses are depicted in colors of fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur, with heads of lions and tails like snakes that bite. The impression is of a mixture of human and demonic forms. That is probably exactly the impression John wants to convey here. There is an army in our visible world 200,000,000 strong, and there is an army of demons in the invisible heavenly places, probably of the same strength. The special effect of the projection is achieved by superimposing the two images.

It could be that the seven trumpets do not show certain events in chronological order but that they highlight seven facets of the same episode. The same can then be said about the seven seals, which each emphasize a different aspect of the coming of the Antichrist. The main lesson of the seals, the trumpets, and

²⁷⁴ See Ps. 91:1,7

²⁷⁵ See Ex. 30:10; Lev. 16:18

the bowls of wrath is that what happens on earth does not bypass God. He is not the author of this evil, but He permits it in order to achieve His goal. It is Satan who does all these things; he is responsible, but God opens the door for him. It may seem sometimes to us that God causes evil things to happen, but this impression only occurs if we fail to see things in their proper perspective. That is what happens here: man has opened himself up for this demonic invasion, but God's purpose in it all is the conversion of mankind.

John is quite upset that this conversion does not occur. It is as if he says that if those things would happen to him, he would have turned to God in fear and trembling to receive help and healing. It is sometimes difficult for us as Christians to understand the perseverance of the unbeliever.

The place where these events take place is the place where the history of mankind began. It was in the vicinity of the Euphrates River that Adam disobeyed God's command for the first time. It is here that the first blood was shed when God killed an animal to clothe with an animal skin man who had sinned. We may assume that it was this act of God that bound the four angels so that His wrath over sin would not immediately consume creation. At this point the restrictions are removed and all hell bursts loose over mankind. Nazi Germany's concentration camps, the Gulag Archipelago of the Soviet Union, China's Cultural Revolution, and the atomic bomb on Hiroshima are combined and multiplied in this demonic madness. Yet, those who survive continue to bow to creatures that are lower than themselves. Man remains a murderer and continues with his occult practices. He continues to rape his neighbor's wife and to steal. What began with a bite of a fruit out of disobedience has come to irreparable and complete maturity. The cancerous growth is ripe.

b. John's Eating of the Little Scroll 10:1-11

This section, obviously, is as much a part of the blowing of the sixth trumpet as the previous scene. But the emphasis here is different. In Chapter 9, Satan demonstrated his power. What happened there came out of the abyss. Here we see a manifestation of the power and glory of God. In the story, previously mentioned, about the casting out of the demon from Gotliebin Dittus, Pastor Blumhardt exclaimed: "We have seen long enough what the devil can do; we want to see now what Jesus can do!"

These verses are full of the glory of Jesus. It could very well be that the mighty angel John sees coming down from heaven, robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head, whose face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars, is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. We would assume, though, that John would have recognized His Lord, as he did that morning at the Sea of Tiberias.²⁷⁶ In any case it is the Shechinah, the glory of God, which is present. For a moment, this angel casts his shadow over the whole world. We assume that this is what is meant with "He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land." And he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. The prophet Amos had said six centuries before: "The LORD roars from Zion."²⁷⁷ In answer to the lion's roar, the seven thunders speak. John states this as if, at this point, we ought to be familiar with these thunders. He simply calls them "the seven thunders." We learned earlier about these thunderclaps that they came from the throne of God.²⁷⁸ And when the seventh seal is opened, peals of thunder are heard on earth when the angel throws the fire of the altar upon earth.²⁷⁹

We understand this to be the same thunder. Every time this is mentioned, only the sound is spoken of and not the content of the words. Here, John is even specifically ordered to "seal up what the seven thunders have said." This is, evidently, a reference to Daniel's experience. The angel that gave Daniel his revelation, told him: "But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end."²⁸⁰ If we understand this correctly, the message of the seven thunders is the same mystery of God as the one the angel mentions in verses 5-7. In the case of Daniel, the topic was the Great Tribulation at the end of times. God's mystery here turns out to be His punishment for the wicked: His wrath over His enemies. But

²⁷⁶ See John 21:7

²⁷⁷ Amos 1:2

²⁷⁸ See ch. 4:5

²⁷⁹ See ch. 8:5

²⁸⁰ Dan. 12:4

when the mystery is revealed at the blowing of the seventh trumpet, it is the revelation of God's glory. That which is unspeakable joy to those who are saved is, at the same time, a panicky fright for those who are lost.

The oath the angel pronounces is very impressive. Here he stands with one foot on the earth and another on the sea, with his hand raised to heaven, swearing by the Name of the Creator that there is an end to God's patience for those who live in sin. Throughout the ages people have interpreted God's patience as a sign of weakness. The picture of this strong, impressive creature, whose shadow covers the whole earth, shows that God was not patient out of weakness. The apostle Peter explains God's patience: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."²⁸¹

God's servants, the prophets, know His mystery, as David sings in one of the Psalms: "The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him."²⁸² And Amos said: "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets."²⁸³

The angel does two things: He swears that the end is coming, and he gives a scroll to John. As we stated above, the revelation of God's secret has a different effect upon the believer and the unbeliever. We pray for this revelation when we say: "Your kingdom come!"²⁸⁴ and: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."²⁸⁵ As far as the unbeliever is concerned, if he takes this seriously, he considers the coming of God's kingdom something to be avoided. Man tends to believe that the circumstances in which he lives are permanent. The angel's oath shatters this illusion. The content of the secret, however, is not only that this world, as we know it, will come to an end, but also that invisible things will become visible. We will see more of this in the next chapter.

John is ordered to go to the angel and to ask him for the scroll. He identifies the voice that speaks to him as the one he had heard before. This could refer to the conversation one of the elders had with him previously,²⁸⁶ or, as is more likely, it may be the voice of Jesus Himself, who spoke to him at the beginning of this book.²⁸⁷ It seems that, at this point, John finds himself back on earth, because the voice he hears comes out of heaven.

The scene looks like a replay of Ezekiel's vision.²⁸⁸ Ezekiel was also told to take a scroll and eat it. In that case it is clearly stated that the prophet had to digest the scroll so that it became part of him. That is obviously the primary meaning of the image. In his book *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis writes a little ditty at the head of one of the chapters: "It is a funny thing, as funny as can be. What Miss B eats, turns into Miss B." We become what we eat, both in a physical and spiritual sense. Undoubtedly, the scroll represents the Word of God in these passages. It is an interesting detail to see how one of the authors of Scripture, the apostle John himself, has to eat what is partly his own work. God gives him some of his own medicine.

In a way, the fact that we have a written account of God's acts in this book is a result of sin. If death had not entered creation, it would not have been necessary to repeat these truths from generation to generation. We would also not have suffered from a loss of memory, which makes it necessary to have the facts in black and white.

The important lesson in this section is twofold: There is the testimony of the scroll, which is meant for "peoples, nations, languages and kings," and, secondly, the testimony has to be a living one. The message has to be flesh and blood in those who open their mouth and proclaim it. God expects His children not only to be good preachers of the Word but also to live it. We must "live the life." Also during the Great Tribulation the important thing will be that those who confess the Name of Jesus Christ demonstrate with

²⁸¹ II Peter 3:9

²⁸² Ps. 25:14 (NKJV)

²⁸³ Amos 3:7

²⁸⁴ Matt. 6:10

²⁸⁵ Rev. 22:20

²⁸⁶ See Rev. 7:13

²⁸⁷ See Rev. 1:10 ff; 4:1

²⁸⁸ See Ezek. 2:9-3:3

their lives that they belong to Him. The apostle Paul commands us in the Epistle to the Philippians: “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.”²⁸⁹

If we digest the Word of God so that it becomes part of our being and nature, “our flesh and blood,” it will purify our life and make our paths straight. The speaking of the Word will then follow naturally. If we put the emphasis upon the speaking and prophesying to the neglect of lifestyle, we will enter upon dangerous ground.

Both Ezekiel and John testify that the eating of the scroll was a pleasant experience. The taste was sweet as honey. In one of his psalms, David sings about the ordinances of the Word of God: “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.”²⁹⁰ Being occupied with the Word of God is enjoyable and refreshing; it does us good. This remains true, even though, with John, it turned sour, or bitter in his stomach. The latter is a picture of the result of the Word of God causing pain and difficulty. It is a tall order to be “blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation.” It would be worse, however, to be infected by evil and go along with others on the road that leads to destruction.

It is amazing to realize the importance of the role played by a handful of people who read their Bible and live in fellowship with God in a world in which hordes of demons and humans, 2,000,000,000 strong, rave and rage, and in which one third of all men perish.

c. The Two Witnesses 11:1-14

In the first two verses of this chapter, several lines of prophecy converge again. The basic prophecy is found in chapters 40-48 of Ezekiel, in which the prophet follows an angel who takes the measurements of an imaginary temple before the eyes of Ezekiel. “Imaginary” is not the proper word. The temple Ezekiel sees is actually more real than any building that can be seen by human eyes. What Ezekiel saw was a representation of God’s revelation of Himself on earth. It was a picture that could easily be understood by the Old Testament Jew. It could not have been portrayed more clearly to the Israelites who had been taken away into captivity. It represented the revival of a hope that had been shattered. It stood for resurrection from the dead.

In the same manner John is brought back to the place of revelation. Three things are mentioned in connection with the measuring that is carried out: the temple, the altar, and the worshippers. The NIV reads: “Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and *count* the worshipers there.” The word “count” is inserted arbitrarily. The Greek reads literally: “Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein.” The suggestion is that the measuring is done symbolically. One cannot take the measuring of people literally. The point that is being made is that, during the time of destruction of the foundations, there will still be a revelation of God on earth: the temple. The altar, the place of atonement, will still be there, and there will be people who will accept this revelation and atonement and who will serve and worship God. The exclusion of the outer court in the taking of these measurements has a profound meaning. This is obviously a reference to the Great Tribulation, symbolized by the three and a half years, called here: “42 months” and “1260 days,” and later “a time, times and half a time.”²⁹¹ These words are borrowed from Daniel’s prophecy.²⁹²

It is interesting to note that the Antichrist’s physical penetration into the sanctuary does not actually give him access into it. The apostle Paul predicts about this man: “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming

²⁸⁹ Phil. 2:14-16

²⁹⁰ Ps. 19:10

²⁹¹ See Rev. 12:14 (also vs. 6)

²⁹² Dan. 12:7

himself to be God.”²⁹³ This, however, does not make him a partaker of the holiness of God. Those who worship God are included in the measurement of the sanctuary; the rest remain outside.

Asaph foretold the penetration of the heathen into God’s sanctuary in one of his psalms: “O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.”²⁹⁴ Nothing of the kind ever happened during Asaph’s lifetime. As far as we know, the first heathen desecration took place when King Nebuchadnezzar ordered the destruction of the temple. After that, Antiochus Epiphanes defiled the temple by having swine sacrificed on the altar. Titus destroyed the last known temple in 70 AD. Whether the Antichrist will have himself worshipped in an actual temple building, or whether he will merely demand divine honor for himself, we do not know. We do not expect the rebuilding of a temple. Satan’s man will not need brick and mortar to proclaim himself to be a god. The ultimate destruction and rebuilding of the temple occurred in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.²⁹⁵

God’s revelation will continue even in the darkest period of world history. John uses in this context Zechariah’s vision of a lampstand and two olive trees.²⁹⁶ In Zechariah’s day, when the rebuilding of the temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel was interrupted, the lampstand let its light shine in the darkness as an organic and living testimony of the Holy Spirit. The essence of the message that rings through John’s words is “ ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”²⁹⁷ John sees two olive trees and two lampstands. We do not know whether this doubling of the lampstands has any particular meaning. The implication seems to be that John sees twice as much light as Zechariah. Earlier in this book, the lampstands represent the church of Jesus Christ.²⁹⁸

The two witnesses prophesy in sackcloth. This suggests that the content of their message is repentance. They themselves are dressed in sackcloth and they preach in it. Their being in mourning is, in the first place, proof of their own sorrow. They represent those of the Second Beatitude: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”²⁹⁹ The condition of the world is such that it makes them weep. The fact that the Lord promises to comfort them does not diminish their grief. Their wearing sackcloth is, at the same time, an example for those who need conversion. These witnesses do not stand above the sinners as accusers; they are fellow-sinners who stand next to their fellowmen. Their witness is the light of the lampstand, which is fed directly by the oil from the olive tree. The light of the Holy Spirit shines through them at the darkest hour of world history.

But the testimony of these men does not consist only in being a shining light and preaching a powerful message, there is also power to perform miracles. John mentions three kinds of wonders, each of which has a parallel in the Old Testament. There is the fire that killed Elijah’s enemies who wanted to harm him.³⁰⁰ During the greatest tribulation this world will ever witness, these two witnesses will enjoy God’s personal protection. Nothing can harm them. Everyone who places himself under God’s protection experiences this in some way. The Psalmist states: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.”³⁰¹ This does not mean a complete exemption from suffering. Ultimately, the two witnesses are also killed. But this does not happen outside the will of God.

A second parallel with the life of Elijah is the power these two have to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time of their prophesying. They can cause a worldwide drought. There is even a parallel between Elijah’s three-and-a-half years and the period of the Great Tribulation. Elijah’s initiative was meant

²⁹³ II Thess. 2:4

²⁹⁴ Ps. 79:1

²⁹⁵ See John 2:19-21

²⁹⁶ See Zech. 4:1-6

²⁹⁷ Zech. 4:6

²⁹⁸ See Rev. 1:12, 20

²⁹⁹ Matt. 5:4

³⁰⁰ See II Kings 1:9-15

³⁰¹ Ps. 91:1

to give a demonstration of divine power, which could cause the nation of Israel to turn from their idolatry to the service of the living God.

Their third mandate was Moses' demonstration of power before Pharaoh, the "Egyptian Antichrist." These witnesses will stand before the enemy and demand in the Name of God: "Let my people go."³⁰² God demands that the enemy keep his hands off man who is created in His image. In a way, the testimony of the two witnesses will be in vain. The Antichrist will not change and mankind will not repent. This testimony will ultimately redouble judgment. Even the testimony of Jesus during His lifetime was ineffective; it bore fruit only after His death and resurrection.

The mention of "the beast" in verse 7 is proof that John's vision consists of cycles. The beast does not appear until Chapter 13 of this book. His mention here indicates that what happens in this chapter coincides with what is described later. We are not given a report of consecutive events, but different facets of the same period are being highlighted. The same principles govern the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of wrath. The beast here is the same as in Chapter 13; the horseman on the white horse in Chapter 6 is the same as Apollyon in Chapter 9 verse 11.

It is the Antichrist who will murder the two witnesses of God. This will not be easy, as is evident from the fact that he must overpower them in a well-planned attack. There will probably be a public execution. In all this the two will follow the example of their Lord. Sodom and Egypt are not localities where Jesus was crucified; they are conditions for a crucifixion.

It is important to note that the execution will not take place before the testimony of these two witnesses is finished. Satan does not cut short the work of God. He cannot strike before God is finished. It seems as if God discards His servants when He no longer needs them. Even Jesus was shocked when He heard that John the Baptist, the greatest of those born of women before the coming of the Kingdom,³⁰³ had been beheaded to pay a little girl for her dancing during a birthday party. This impression, though, distorts the picture. First of all, God does not throw away anybody. It is the devil who is the cause of death. But death is a necessary preparation for resurrection. God Himself went that way for us in Jesus Christ. We can hardly say that Jesus' death at Golgotha, which brought about the atonement for the whole world, was an act of God's rejection of His Son. When in life we find ourselves at a dead end, we ought to consider three things: 1) Is our work on earth finished? 2) Did Jesus go the same way? 3) Are we ready for the resurrection?

The place where all this happens is "in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified." The first thing that strikes us in these words is the poetry. The subject is not beautiful, but the manner of expression is sublime. This poetry causes us to ask if we are looking at a physical, literal execution of two human beings in the city of Jerusalem, or whether this reveals the principle that the enemy murders those who testify for God. Nowhere is Jerusalem depicted as "the great city." The picture of sexual deprivation that is exemplified in Sodom, never applied as such to Jerusalem. "The great city, Sodom and Egypt" is too big for a literal Jerusalem. We believe rather that this description fits the empire of the Antichrist. It stands, not so much for a certain local, as for the condition of life outside God, as it is evinced everywhere.

After the execution a disgusting celebration erupts. People send each other presents and cards as if celebrating Christmas: "Joy to the world; they are dead!" The torment to which the inhabitants of the earth had been subjected was the torture of their own conscience. People now felt free from this suffering. Long live liberty; the watchdog is killed!

What happened with the testimony of our Lord also happens with His witnesses. They fall in the earth like a grain of wheat and die in order to bear fruit. The Spirit of God brings them back to life. It has been suggested that the execution and the following exhibition of the dead bodies would be made visible to the whole world by means of television. If that is true, God uses the media to His own advantage in reporting this resurrection. The whole world will witness this resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit. The terror of the watchmen at Jesus' tomb, when the angel came from heaven to roll away the stone, will be little in comparison with the reaction of the whole world to this event. The three-and-a-half day long flush of victory will come to an abrupt end. The whole world will witness not only the resurrection, but also the ascension of these two.

The two witnesses were murdered because of their testimony of Jesus Christ. This ought to have been the end of the affair. How terrible it must be when a murder victim comes back to life and confronts his

³⁰² Ex. 5:1

³⁰³ See Matt. 11:11

murderers! For the guilty party the resurrection is the most terrible thing imaginable. This is the reason the word “enemies” is used in this context.

Even if this section is not about the testimony and the murder of two individuals, the principle remains the same. It becomes actually worse, because it means that the enemy who murders God’s witnesses will end up defeated when death is reversed in the resurrection. That which Satan and his cohorts must have experienced in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ will be multiplied infinitely in all who come to life through the Spirit of God. The earth shakes and quakes under this event. Seven thousand people will be killed in this earthquake which causes the collapse of a tenth of the city. This is the “second woe.” Earth was not meant to be able to stand these shocks. For the first time some light breaks through in the heart of the survivors. They realize that God sits on the throne and that He must be taken into account. There is, after all, still hope for planet earth.

4. The Seventh Trumpet 11:15-15:4

The sounding of the seventh trumpet produces images that are even more difficult to interpret than the preceding ones. We discern: 1) The heavenly hymn of praise; 2) The woman, the child, and the dragon; 3) The beasts emerging from the sea and the earth; 4) The Lamb on Mount Zion; 5) The announcement of judgment; 6) The gathering of the harvest; 7) The Song of Victory.

a. The Heavenly Hymn of Praise 11:15-19

We may consider these verses to be the climax of the book. In verse 7 of the previous chapter, the importance of the blowing of the seventh trumpet had already been mentioned. The opening of God’s temple in heaven and the revelation of the ark of the covenant constitute the focal point of world history. The importance of this event is immediately recognized in heaven. We are not told whose are the loud voices that sing antiphonally with the elders. This is the point in time that has been eagerly anticipated by all of creation. The kingship over the earth, which God had entrusted to Lucifer, falls back to the Creator.

It is amazing to see that this is not something that happens automatically. The voices in heaven proclaim: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.” In practical terms, this means that the devil is forced to hand back the mandate of this world, or that it is forcefully taken away from him. It is clear that our Lord Jesus Christ has played a decisive role in this matter. At His ascension, He obtained the position of King, with the mandate to subdue all rebellion against God. David stated in the Psalms: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”³⁰⁴ And the apostle Paul adds: “For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.”³⁰⁵ Following this, he mentions that Christ will subject Himself to the Father, “so that God may be all in all.”³⁰⁶ It is clear, however, that our Lord Jesus Christ will not lose His royal status in all this, because our text states: “and he will reign for ever and ever.” We never lose what we give to God.

This hymn does not clearly state which phase of Jesus’ kingship is meant. But the implication is that it will mean the end of rebellion. When the time has come at which the dead are judged, death will have to surrender the ones he kept in captivity. This is the end of his power, his final reckoning. In the words of the apostle Paul: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”³⁰⁷ This is the day of death’s dethroning. It is also the day of God’s ultimate revelation of Himself. In the mighty prophecy of Psalm Two, David describes men’s rebellion against God and God’s way of putting an end to it in His Son. God scoffs and mocks at the human conspiracy against Him when He reveals His wrath. The Son puts an end to all rebellion by His resurrection from the dead and His judgment over the rebels.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁴ Ps. 110:1

³⁰⁵ I Cor. 15:25

³⁰⁶ See I Cor. 15:28

³⁰⁷ I Cor. 15:26

³⁰⁸ See Ps. 2:1-12

Thus God's plan with man is complete. God had created Adam to rule over His creation. When Adam fell into sin, the plan was continued and carried out in Jesus Christ. It is a human being who restores the Kingdom to God. We must remember this when we pray "Your Kingdom come!"

As a result of the announcement by the heralds, the twenty-four elders fall on their faces before the throne of God in worship and gratitude. This is the fourth time John mentions the elders doing this.³⁰⁹ These elders are not puppets whose strings are being pulled. These people wear royal crowns and they are seated on thrones. On earth we would not expect to see such agility from older people who move with dignity. In a biography of the life of George Mueller, it is stated that Mueller threw himself prostrate on the floor in worship when he realized that God had answered his prayer in a very literal way.

The action of the elders emphasizes the profound emotion of the moment. We worship so little because we realize so seldom what God does in our lives. It would have been impossible for these elders to remain seated in solemn dignity because they fully understood the importance of the situation. They thank God because He accepted the Kingdom. That which was lost that evening in Eden, when two naked people stood before God, is found and restored here.

Evidently, there was a possibility that God would refuse to accept the reign. "You have *taken* your great power" is the rendering of the Greek word *lambano*, which can be rendered "accept." Praise be to God! He accepted!

God is addressed here as: "Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was." When we read that God has taken His great power, this does, of course, not mean that at one point God would not have been all powerful. But the fall of Lucifer constituted an attack on and a challenge to God's omnipotence. God's holiness and love were also in danger of being compromised. God accepted the challenge. He responded to the enemy and won the victory.

As we saw already, the words of the elders, "The nations were angry," are a reference to the Second Psalm. What began as a transgression by one single person has grown to total world revolution. In the words of the apostle Paul: "Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...."³¹⁰ Those individuals who laid down their arms and accepted God's offer of peace in Jesus Christ are not mentioned here. These verses deal with people who decided to continue the war, those who see God's right to rule the world as chains and fetters of oppression and as a yoke that must be thrown off.³¹¹ This is the moment, which the prophet Isaiah called "the day of vengeance of our God."³¹² When Jesus read Isaiah's text in the synagogue of Nazareth, He closed the scroll half way through to indicate that "the year of the LORD's favor" had arrived and "the day of vengeance of our God" had not yet come.³¹³ Here, the Lamb opens the scroll again.

The day of God's vengeance consists of two parts: There is punishment for those who deserve punishment and reward for those who love God.

The words "destroying those who destroy the earth" apply, first of all, to Satan and his demons. But humans will also be involved in this. There are the Antichrist and his false prophet who are human and there are others who have sold themselves to commit evil. God created the universe of which our planet is a part and the devil wanted to destroy it. There is a Dutch poem in which God asks that man give back to Him the beautiful things of this world, which He had given them to enjoy. "Give back to Me My trees and My flowers."

All this occurs at the sounding of the seventh trumpet. This constitutes the end of the mystery of God and the completion of His revelation. This is represented in the opening of the temple in heaven and the becoming visible of the ark of the covenant. Actually, this already happened earlier on earth on the day Jesus died. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to

³⁰⁹ See Rev. 4:10; 5:8, and 7:11

³¹⁰ Rom. 5:12

³¹¹ See Ps. 72:3

³¹² Isa. 61:2

³¹³ See Luke 4:16-20

bottom.”³¹⁴ The ark was no longer present in the Holy of Holiest on the day of Jesus’ death, but that does not lessen the importance of the symbolic tearing of the curtain. The Holy of Holiest was still the place in which no ordinary human being was allowed to enter. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.”³¹⁵ Thus is conveyed to us by way of image the revelation of complete fellowship with God through the death of Jesus Christ.

We can understand that what happens on earth is an image of what happens in heaven. What is more difficult to grasp is the relationship, time-wise, between the heavenly occurrence and what takes place on earth. The shadow appears before the actual event. Our problem is our concept of time. God’s revelation of Himself is eternal. This is expressed at a point in time in the death of Jesus. But the Bible also states that the Lamb was slain from the creation of the world.³¹⁶ The fact that the temple is open and that the ark becomes visible means that all obstacles for direct fellowship with God are removed. The author of Hebrews calls these obstacles “The first tabernacle.”³¹⁷

The real obstacle for fellowship with God was, of course, sin. Adam broke the bond of fellowship with God. He no longer enjoyed the walk with God in the garden in the cool of the day. The fact that the ark becomes visible, however, is a greater and richer revelation of God than what Adam ever experienced. There is more involved than atonement of man’s sin; there is also the ripening of man.

The ark represented the holiness of God, expressed in the pure gold of which it was made and in the fact that the two tablets of the law were kept inside. The ark is also an image of fellowship with the Lord of glory. God had said to Moses: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”³¹⁸ The very fact that the infinite eternal God said this about a surface of a few square feet is almost as unbelievable as the miracle of the Incarnation, in which the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.³¹⁹ In essence the two are the same. Jesus said to Philip: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”³²⁰ For those who know Jesus Christ, heaven is already open and the ark is visible. All we need is for our eyesight to improve. God can hardly reveal Himself more clearly to us than He has already done.

Yet, there is something extraordinary in this revelation, caused by the time element. God’s revelation is eternal, but at the point where time and eternity intersect, there occur “flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.” This is the fourth time in Revelation that we find mention of flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, and an earthquake.³²¹ The hailstorm is a new element in this list of phenomena. At the first mention of the flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder there is a connection with the throne of God. They are manifestations of God’s glory and majesty.

In the fact that the ark becomes visible, we see God’s revelation as an invitation to fellowship with Him on the basis of atonement. This speaks of God’s love, holiness, faithfulness, and grace. The flashes of lightening and peals of thunder are images of God’s majesty. They give us an image of God’s greatness, omnipotence, and glory. The flashes of lightning are also part of the revelation of the ark. But the ark is named “the ark of His covenant,” the symbol of God’s friendship with man. God has made His covenant with Abraham, with Israel, and with us in Jesus Christ. His calls us “friends” and the bond of our fellowship

³¹⁴ Matt. 27:51

³¹⁵ Heb. 10:19-22

³¹⁶ See Rev. 13:8

³¹⁷ See Heb. 9:8

³¹⁸ Ex. 25:22

³¹⁹ See John 1:14

³²⁰ John 14:9

³²¹ See also Rev. 4:5; 8:5; 10:3

is more intimate than that of a marriage relationship. Our friend is God, the Almighty, the God of lightning, thunder, and hail.

According to the announcement by the angel, this is the fulfillment of God's mystery.³²² This implies that there are certain things God has kept secret. It is true that God tells the man who cares, as A. W. Tozer stated. But there are things God does not tell, or has not yet told us. Now, everything has been said. The mystery of God allowing evil to exist, the hardening of the hearts of some people, the content of glory, and all the other things of which we had only a vague inkling, will be totally clear. The revelation will be complete and it will satisfy us completely on a spiritual, intellectual, and emotional level. It will also transform us. As the apostle John states: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."³²³ If the copy of this ark, which Moses made in the desert, transformed him temporarily so that he reflected the glory of God,³²⁴ how much more will the ultimate revelation of the real ark make us real, healthy, and glorious people!

We see here also that the revelation evokes the smell of death and the aroma of life.³²⁵ The flashes of lightning and the peals of thunder are part of the throne of God; they are manifestations of His glory. The earthquake and the hail are manifestations on earth of destruction; they are images of judgment.

"God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant." I do not think we are presently ready for this yet. This temple and ark are the reality of which Moses and David had made copies on earth. This had been their model.³²⁶ This heavenly ark cannot have stood at the same time in a tabernacle and in a temple. Yet Moses and David must have both seen the same object. Moses expressed this in the erection of a tent and David, or Solomon, in a building of stone. The reality, however, was not made of cloth or stone; it was a spiritual reality in which God revealed Himself in a special manner. Moses and David experienced the same reality, but each in a different way, according to their own circumstances. There is a variety of experiences as there is a variety of gifts, but it is the same Spirit. The apostle Paul states: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit."³²⁷ The diversity is a manifestation of God's riches as well as of our individuality. There need be no change of circumstances or personality to allow us to have fellowship with God.

What effect will this have on us when we see the temple open and the ark of the covenant become visible? In Tolkien's book *Lord of the Rings*, the author describes how two hobbits approach "the crack of doom" in order to throw the ring into it. They do this under the very eye of Sauron. The presence of Sauron fills them with an overwhelming sense of evil. In the opposite sense, the presence of God in the Old Testament must have been tangible and verifiable by the senses. Jacob may have been an exception when he awoke from his sleep at Bethel and said: "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."³²⁸ The normal thing is that a person is aware of the fact that he is in the presence of God. At the dedication of the temple by Solomon, the priests could not remain in the temple when the glory of the Lord filled the building. We read: "When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple."³²⁹ And the apostle John testifies: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead."³³⁰

³²² See Rev. 10:7

³²³ I John 3:2

³²⁴ See Ex. 34:29,30

³²⁵ II Cor. 2:15

³²⁶ See Ex. 26:30; I Chr. 28:19

³²⁷ I Cor. 12:4

³²⁸ Gen. 28:16

³²⁹ I Kings 8:10,11

³³⁰ Rev. 1:17

b. The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon 12:1-18

The first question that begs an answer is, of course, “Who is this woman?” Roman Catholic theologians may see in her the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven. In a sense, this is true. But if we hold on to this, to the exclusion of any other thought, we run into trouble in verse 17 where we read about “the rest of her offspring.” If the child to whom she gave birth is Jesus, who are then the others? A more plausible view is that the woman represents Israel out of which the Messiah came forth.

But then this Israel represents more than the Jewish people on earth, the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The glory of this woman far surpasses anything Israel on earth ever was. This woman is God’s ideal. She is Eve, not only in her uncorrupted state, but glorified. She is God’s perfect instrument of revelation. The picture of this birth reveals the essence of what it means “the Word became flesh.”³³¹

God must have had the birth of His Son before His eyes when He created Adam and Eve. We cannot assume that God looked for an emergency solution when He spoke these words in Paradise: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”³³² This birth of Jesus Christ as it is depicted in John’s vision is what God had in mind originally. Man’s fall into sin changed some of the details but not the basic structure.

Yet, we get the impression that what we witness here is more a symphonic poem than the description of a historical fact. The facts of history are present but they are arranged with some poetical liberty. The only feature in this picture that deviates from God’s ideal is the labor pains. It was only after Eve had sinned that God said to her: “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children.”³³³

The scene here reminds us of Velishowky’s book *Worlds in Collision*, in which the author expounds the theory that the planet Venus entered our solar system as a comet. The comet’s train must have swept over the earth like the fiery tail of an enormous dragon. He believes that the mythological representations of dragons can be traced back to this phenomenon.

The historical fact expressed in this vision is the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus Christ. Throughout the ages, Satan has tried to prevent this from happening. Chronologically, the clock is turned back in this picture. Evidently, in the blowing of the trumpet, the facts are not given in their actual sequence. It could be that John retracts his steps in order to put the Great Tribulation in its proper perspective. Actually, John reaches much farther back into history than to the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem. The dragon’s tail sweeping a third of the stars out of the sky and flinging them to the earth may be seen as a representation of the prehistoric fall of Lucifer and his minions. Jesus’ birth is also an expression in time and space of God’s eternal revelation of Himself. In the same way as the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world, so the Word became flesh in eternity, before time was ever created.

What happens on earth is always a reflection of a heavenly reality. John sees this sign appearing in heaven, but the meaning of it is the coming of the Messiah on earth. It is impossible to misunderstand the meaning of the birth of “a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” This prophecy can only be applied to Jesus Christ. The life of Christ between His birth and ascension is omitted in this picture. The emphasis is on the instrument God uses to bring His Son into the world, that is the nation of Israel. It is not clear if we must take this to mean the nation of Israel in the limited sense as Israel as we know it. Considering the heavenly glory of this woman, we must rather think of God’s ideal, what the apostle Paul calls: “the Israel of God.”³³⁴

A wider interpretation of this vision reveals that the devil resists God’s revelation in any form or shape. With undying energy he opposes every human being in and through whom God’s revelation in this world becomes visible. The culmination of this resistance will be in the time of 1260 days which is called “The Great Tribulation.”

The seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns on the heads of the dragon point in the direction of certain world powers which he is able to manipulate in order to defy and darken God’s revelation. Although

³³¹ See John 1:14

³³² Gen. 3:15

³³³ Gen. 3:16

³³⁴ Gal. 6:16

there are features in this vision that are difficult to interpret, the principle of God's revelation and demonic resistance is abundantly clear in this sign. John's picture is very meaningful.

We ought not neglect to look at the literary form of this section. As far as poetry and powerful imagery is concerned, this passage has no equal. John calls the appearance of the woman "a great and wondrous sign." Great and wondrous it is! It is great and wondrous in glory and significance, because it is a sign of God. We cannot say the same about the appearance of the dragon. That is quite another sign.

It is again difficult to establish the chronological order of verses 7-12, especially as far as the hurling down from heaven of Satan is concerned. In the same way as with the principle of God's eternal revelation of Himself in the appearance of the woman, so also in the war between Michael and the dragon, we are looking at more than one single incident in the future. The devil fell from his high position as archangel when sin appeared in his heart. This is expressed in Isaiah's prophecy about "the King of Babylon": "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!"³³⁵ This prophecy may actually refer to two falls, one before the creation of men and one after the world had become populated. Ezekiel speaks about the same event in his "Lament over the king of Tyre": "You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings."³³⁶

Another fall occurred during the great "Spring Cleaning" Jesus performed in Galilee and Judea, when He and His disciples cast out legions of demons. At that occasion, Jesus stated: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."³³⁷ Now again, Satan is defeated in this war with Michael and by those who confess to the power of the blood of the Lamb. Whether this whole vision pertains to a specific event in history in the past or the future, we do not know. It is quite possible that Satan never gave up his efforts to infiltrate heaven and that he must be evicted more than once.

The name Michael is also mentioned in the Book of Daniel in connection with a struggle with demonic powers.³³⁸ We are given the impression that the conflict is localized just within or close to the atmosphere of our planet. It could be that Satan tries to break out of the space of his confinement and that the struggle described in this chapter is meant to push him back. C. S. Lewis has based his trilogy of the space series upon this assumption. In any case, a great clean up occurs in heaven with the result that there is a greater concentration of demonic power on earth. This creates conditions that are favorable for the appearance of the Antichrist on the scene.

This brings us to the same point as at the end of the previous chapter, where God's temple in heaven was opened and the ark of the covenant became visible.

A loud voice announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God and the coming of Christ in power, which means salvation for mankind. The difference between this scene and the one at the end of the previous chapter is the fact that there God revealed His secret in the opening of the temple, while here the Kingdom is revealed in the victory in the lives of "our brothers." "The accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down." This profound statement ought to penetrate deeply in our hearts and minds. We do not know whose voice it is that calls us "brothers." It may be an angel's or the voice of the Lord Himself. If it is an angel, the words are Jesus' words. We are the brothers of Jesus and we are not related to angels, but to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

The victory mentioned here is a moral victory. It is not the victory of one angel over another angel but of human beings over an angel. It is man, who is accused by Satan, who conquers Satan. The image of the accuser is borrowed from Zechariah's vision, in which the prophet sees the high priest Joshua, dressed in filthy clothes, standing before God. There the angel of the Lord said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you,

³³⁵ Isa. 14:12

³³⁶ Ezek. 28:14-17

³³⁷ Luke 10:18

³³⁸ See Dan. 10:20,21

Satan.”³³⁹ Here it is not the angel of the Lord that speaks. The question of how God rebukes Satan is answered in this chapter of Revelation. Satan is rebuked by the human beings he accuses. Man, who had become the devil’s victim, whom he had tortured and trodden down in body and soul, arises here and crushes his adversary.

In Zechariah’s vision we see that the devil does not bring in trumped up charges. Joshua *was* dressed in filthy clothes. The fact that the soiling was Satan’s own doing does not change the fact. Only by means of Jesus’ perfect obedience, by His payment for our guilt with His own life, we are again put on a solid basis of legality. We plead guilty to the things of which Satan accuses us, but then we show him our proof of payment: the blood of Jesus Christ. As it turns out the devil is very susceptible to this. There is a story of an experience Martin Luther had with the devil who presented him with a list of his sins. Luther ordered Satan to write across the page “atoned for by the blood of the Lamb.” This caused the devil to flee immediately. Facing our accuser stand the *Paracletos*, the Holy Spirit, the advocate God has assigned to us. But even the Holy Spirit would have no ground to stand on without the blood of Jesus Christ. Charles Wesley states in one of his hymns: “His Spirit answers to the blood and tells me I am born of God.”

The section reminds us of the fact that sin remains a problem in the lives of God’s children. We are forced to agree with Satan, however nonsensical this may sound. Pleading the blood of Christ does not constitute a denial of the reality of our sin; it rather confirms it. The kingdom will come through us and will silence the voice of the Evil One. That is the most surprising aspect of the kingdom. We can say that without victory in our personal lives the kingdom could not come.

The hurling down of Satan constitutes a step further than refuting his accusations. The breaking down of Satan’s power in my own life will ultimately result in the total collapse of his kingdom. There is a parallel between God’s holiness and sin. God’s holiness does not tolerate sin and Satan cannot tolerate holiness. The blood of Jesus does not only provide payment but also cleansing and rehabilitation.

Satan’s accusation “day and night” is proof of his indefatigable activity. He never ceases trying to infiltrate and undermine. Holiness is also untiring. We read of the four living creatures, “day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’”³⁴⁰

It appears that the onset of the Great Tribulation will be, at least partly, the result of our victory over the Evil One. This is confirmed by what we read elsewhere. In Chapter 8:3-5, we saw that one of the results of the prayers of the saints that rise before the throne of God was an outburst of thunder, voices, and flashes of lightning on earth. God, obviously, did not create us in order to preserve the status quo on earth, but to force a breakthrough in the heavenly realms.

The victory is won in three phases: the basis is the blood of Christ, the application of the principle is our confession, and the way in which this becomes effective is in our willingness to give our life for the Lord. Without the death of Christ there would be no legal basis. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”³⁴¹ Guilt is the bridgehead Satan uses in every human life. Christ’s payment delivers us from guilt and its consequences. Thus the roles are reversed. We are no longer fleeing; Satan loses his grip on our lives. The Bible puts this in the active mode: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb.” Not only Jesus’ death is important but also what we do with it. If the Israelites had not applied the blood on their doorposts in Egypt, they would have been unprotected from the angel of death. The cleansing of our life is brought about by the application of the atonement. The hymn writer states: “There at the cross where my Savior died, there to my heart was the blood applied.”

The word of our testimony is a natural and necessary consequence. It is natural because “out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”³⁴² It is impossible to experience a genuine cleansing of the heart and remain silent about it. Peter and John stated before the Sanhedrin: “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”³⁴³ It is also a psychological necessity; we need to see the confirmation of our own testimony. It is much easier to forget and deny that which we never put in words. But a spoken word cannot

³³⁹ See Zech. 3:1-3

³⁴⁰ Rev. 4:8

³⁴¹ Heb. 9:22

³⁴² Luke 6:45

³⁴³ Acts 4:20

be revoked without damage. God holds us to our word and so does the devil! Our testimony does not need to be given in terms of flowery language. I heard the story of a simple man, who after listening to eloquent words of people who stated that they had been saved, stood up and uttered the words: "Me too!"

The ultimate breakthrough is in the last clause of verse 11: "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." This means either that they died for the cause of Christ, or they were willing to do so. Such willingness means the end of Satan's power over one's life. The devil's plan to exterminate the Jewish people by means of Haman, and so extinguish God's revelation in this world, shipwrecked at the moment Queen Esther said: "I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."³⁴⁴ Satan becomes powerless when we give ourselves over into death in Jesus Christ and when we are willing to give our life for Him in a physical sense. After all, that is what He did for us! It is the fear of death that makes us slaves of the devil.³⁴⁵ When that fear is conquered in Christ, the devil loses his power, both in our personal lives, as well as around us. There are more important things than our life. David said to God: "Your love is better than life."³⁴⁶ And the girl in The Song of Solomon states: "Love is as strong as death."³⁴⁷ There is nothing wrong in loving life. There is, however, a point at which we have to choose between God and ourselves. That is the moment at which he who loses his life will find it. May God keep me from saying these things now and waver at the critical instant! I hope to be able to flee to the Lord at that point.

The victory is a reason for exuberant joy in heaven and great sadness on earth. Maybe, we must not see this as a purely geographical distinction. Those on earth who belong to heaven will be able to rejoice also, even if they go through the Great Tribulation on earth. Evidently, what happens in the heavenly places forms the basis for the event on earth, which we call the Great Tribulation. Satan is extremely infuriated by his finale expulsion from heaven. More than ever he is determined to take his anger against God out on the inhabitants of the earth. Woe to our poor planet! We have seen some of this anger demonstrated, for instance, in the inhuman cruelties the Nazis committed in their concentration camps during World War II.

In the last verses of this chapter (Verses 13-18), we see how the dragon concentrates his rage upon the woman. If we see in this woman "the Israel of God," we could conclude that the church would go through the Great Tribulation on earth. The deeper we enter into this problem, we must confess that, ultimately, we do not know.

We understand that the woman and her children, those "who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus," are the brunt of Satan's anger. That description can hardly be applied to the nation of Israel in its present condition. If these people are not the church of Jesus Christ, they strongly resemble it. It is very difficult to distill anything that resembles a fact of history from this highly symbolic presentation. We are given the impression of a severe testing under impossible circumstances in an inhospitable area. It reminds us of Israel's crossing of the desert on their way to the promised land, as well as of the temptation of our Lord. That does not sound like the Great Tribulation during which the church would fall into the devil's clutches, but it does not resemble the rapture of the church either. Yet the duration of the Great Tribulation of 3 ½ years, "a time, times, and half a time" is stated. But the place indicated is "out of the serpent's reach." In spite of the fact that he makes furious efforts, the devil cannot reach her.

Certain elements of the image are clear enough. God allows deprivation and hardship but, at the same time, the woman is kept under His protection. This reminds us of promises in the Psalms: "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you."³⁴⁸ And: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."³⁴⁹ Yet, the total picture is very difficult to understand. There is a suggestion in it of Elijah's experience when God protected him supernaturally from the power of

³⁴⁴ Esther 4:16

³⁴⁵ See Heb. 2:14,15

³⁴⁶ Ps. 63:3

³⁴⁷ Song of Solomon 8:6

³⁴⁸ Ps. 91:7

³⁴⁹ Ps. 23:5

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and kept him alive at the brook in the Kerith Ravine, and later in the house of the widow in Zarephath.³⁵⁰ It is a wonderful thing to be kept alive by the Lord “out of the serpent’s reach”

We assume that Verses 6 and 14 are identical. In Verse 6 we read that the woman fled and in vs. 14 that she was given wings. It is not always bad to flee. The battle in the heavenly places always begins with a flight. In the Psalms, David calls God “our refuge and strength,” which implies that he flees to God for protection.³⁵¹ Every victory over Satan begins with a fleeing from him. To accept the full armor of God, after all, means that we put ourselves under God’s protection, which is the same as fleeing to Him.

We saw before that the desert represents those conditions in which human life is virtually impossible, yet where humans survive. It also stands for a pilgrimage. Israel trekked through the desert to enter and possess the Holy Land. The image shows some interesting symbolic complications in which the dragon unsuccessfully tries to destroy the woman whilst nature itself comes to her succor. It is difficult to interpret the meaning of all the details. It is also challenging to determine where to draw the line between what happens to the woman and her offspring. Satan’s powerlessness becomes the reason for his boundless rage that leads to the horrible manifestations of evil during the Great Tribulation. We are again reminded of Jesus’ words in Matthew’s Gospel: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”³⁵² Only those whose souls are hidden in Jesus Christ can say “amen” to such things; otherwise, the torture of the body can damage the soul.

c. The Beasts Coming out of the Sea and out of the Earth 13:1-18

It seems as if Satan receives his inspiration during a walk along the beach. This can happen to the best among men also. Hudson Taylor received his vision for The China Inland Mission during one of such walks. The awesomeness of space and water, which makes the people of God aware of God’s presence, has the opposite effect upon the devil.

Several of the elements that form the content of this chapter are borrowed from the Book of Daniel and its seventh chapter. Daniel saw “the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea.”³⁵³ John does not mention a storm at sea, but we can imagine that this horrible creature comes out of an ocean that is as smooth as a mirror.

It would be nice if we could simply skip this section of the Book of Revelation. As the opening of the temple and the becoming visible of the ark of God forms the highlight of the book, so this event represents the deepest point in the history of the universe. Both occurrences are part of the blowing of the seventh trumpet. We may see in the sea a picture of the raging of the people of the world. In the Book of Daniel, we read about the rise and fall of four kingdoms. In King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream he sees these kingdoms in the form of a beautiful statue; Daniel sees the same in his vision of four monsters coming up out of the sea.³⁵⁴ That which Nebuchadnezzar saw as splendid is horrible in God’s eyes.

What Daniel sees in the form of four beasts, John sees as one. The implication of this is, probably, that the Antichrist, who is obviously the one pictured here, combines within himself all the features of the Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, and Roman empires. The ten horns with the crowns probably correspond to the ten toes in Nebuchadnezzar’s statue. We will not lose ourselves in speculations as to whom the ten horns can be applied. It is beyond doubt that there is a correlation between the seven heads of this monster and the seven heads of the dragon. This beast is a human being to whom Satan gives his power, his throne, and his authority. This is only possible if this man opened himself without reservations to the devil to place himself at his disposal. Satan does not respect human personality. We suppose that this transfer of power and authority will take on the form of demon possession. Yet, Satan will probably leave a great deal of freedom

³⁵⁰ See I Kings 17:2-16

³⁵¹ See Ps. 46:1^b

³⁵² Matt. 10:28

³⁵³ Dan. 7:2

³⁵⁴ See Dan. ch. 2 and 7

to this person in order to reach his goal. But, in the final reckoning, no love will be lost between the Antichrist and his master. When push comes to shove, Satan will drop his man like a hot potato. All this is a parody of the Incarnation. It is no incarnation at all, because the devil does not possess the power to create a human body, not even for the Antichrist. All demon possession means a robbery of what belongs to God, even this ultimate manifestation of godlessness.

One of the heads of the beast was deadly wounded, but the wound healed. This may be seen as a parody of the killing of the Lamb of God. John introduced Jesus to us as “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain.”³⁵⁵ It is impossible for us to predict how the healing of this deadly wound will manifest itself when the Antichrist actually makes his appearance. It could look like an instance of divine healing. During World War II, when the plot of Stauffenberg to assassinate Hitler failed, because the bomb exploded behind the leg of the table, thus saving Hitler’s life, the Fuehrer piously attributed this to the intervention of “Providence.” But at this point, the Antichrist will probably have given up all pretense of religion. Initially, he presents himself as the Christ in order to seduce religious people. But here he indulges in blasphemy. Each of his seven heads carries a blasphemous name, and he is given a mouth to speak proud and blasphemous words. Blasphemy is the peak and end result of all sin. It is the sin against the Holy Spirit. Adam by disobedience opened the door for sin to enter the world, but, as far as we know, he never blasphemed. In the Antichrist, sin has reached its climax. Adolph Hitler never showed any inclination of obedience to God, but he never openly used blasphemy. It is, however, possible to commit blasphemy and maintain an appearance of religion at the same time. Otherwise, Jesus’ warning about sinning against the Holy Spirit would make no sense.³⁵⁶ Man has arrived here at the deepest point in his fall, even without any pious outward appearance.

The mention of a period of 42 months brings us back to the time of the Great Tribulation. All this happens during the time frame of 3½ years: the ministry of the two witnesses, the persecution of the woman, and the revelation of the beast. If we do not assume that they all occur simultaneously, we would be looking at a period of 14 years total. This again proves that, even in the description of the blowing of the trumpets, John does not follow a chronological order of events, but that he highlights different facets of incidents that occur simultaneously.

Three things characterize the rule of the Antichrist. He has the gift of demagoguery. He makes tremendous speeches in which he puts the blame on God in such a way that sweeps people off their feet. In the days of Adolph Hitler people, understandably, often referred to Revelation chapter thirteen, trying to identify him with the Antichrist. He may not have been it, but he definitely was one of his forerunners.

The second point is that the Antichrist succeeds in conquering the saints. Whether this means that he overcomes resistance by mass executions or that he stops the mouth of the church in another fashion, we do not know. In George Orwell’s book *1984*, the main character has a conversion experience of sorts when he hears a radio broadcast about one of “Big Brother’s” military victories. But that is not the kind of victory over the saints the Antichrist wins, which is referred to here. Those whose names are written in the Book of Life will never worship the beast. The saints will be shackled and slain; they will be defeated. This is the lowest point of world history. Yet, there is a victory: Those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life will not worship the beast! All inhabitants of the earth will worship the devil and the beast. Satan will be worshipped because of his great sacrifice. Hear this nonsense! The devil’s great sacrifice! What a parody of the love of God! “Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast.” Mankind has fallen so deeply that they fall for this caricature. They realize all of a sudden what kind of “superman” they have in their midst. He had achieved what those who sought God never achieved before. He dares to look God straight in the face and tell Him off. “Such a person is worthy of praise,” they will say.

Ultimately, his military might is so absolute over the whole world that resistance is useless. “If you cannot fight them, join them!” But the children of God, who have applied the blood of the Lamb at their doorposts, who know that God has written down their names with non-erasable ink, will not fall for this nonsense. The Antichrist will not corrupt people; he only snares those who are already corrupted. He gathers his own harvest. He takes only what already belongs to him. It is as Aleksandr Solzenitsyn states in his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, that it is not the prison that corrupts people. But people who already have corruption in their hearts become worse. God “is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] before his

³⁵⁵ See ch. 5:6

³⁵⁶ See Matt. 12:31,32

glorious presence without fault and with great joy.”³⁵⁷ Our warrantee is that our names are written in the Book. Whether we will go through the Great Tribulation or not is not the important thing. Important is that we have no reason to fear the Antichrist.

The text states that the Antichrist “was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.” These words correspond to what we read in Ch. 7:9 – “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.” The wording suggests that the Antichrist does not have absolute power. Evidently, some of every tribe, people, language and nation will slip through his fingers. These are those whose names are written in the Book of Life. Jesus had already mentioned this book to His disciples when “the seventy” returned after their victory over the devil and He said to them: “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”³⁵⁸ The last time we find this book mentioned is on the last Day of Judgment, when John states: “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”³⁵⁹

The Greek grammar allows for two interpretations of the words “from the creation of the world.” They can apply to “the Lamb that was slain,” or, to “all whose names have not been written in the book of life.” The theological problem in the interpretation that states that the names were written in the book of life before the creation of the world is that the human will and conversion become a farce. It is, of course, true that God knows everything eternally, but the writing down of a name makes the matter irrevocable. One would wonder if even God would be able to do such a thing in eternity if the conversion has not yet taken place in time. We do not honor God if we state that God’s decree reduces man to a puppet. Man’s free will is not subjected to God unless the person who possesses that will desires to surrender it. This is the reason we do not hesitate to choose the interpretation that connects “from the creation of the world” to “the Lamb that was slain.” That is still enough of a mystery, but it is an acceptable one. The Son has surrendered Himself in eternity to the Father out of love. The blood that flowed on Golgotha was the blood of the eternal covenant. This is what the author of Hebrews meant when he wrote: “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep...”³⁶⁰ That the eternal God created a human body for this purpose and allowed the devil to introduce death into His creation defies my wildest imagination! Augustine was correct when he spoke of “the blessed fall of Adam.”

Our understanding that our names are written in the book of the Lamb is the basis of our knowledge of salvation. If we lack this knowledge, we become uncertain and paralyzed in our struggle against the Evil One. We do well to mark the point in our life where we decided to surrender our life to God, so that we can resist the temptations the devil wants to subject us to. I once heard the story of a farmer, who had just been converted, who was plowing his field when he felt assailed by doubts about his salvation. He stopped his plough and planted a stick in the ground, saying: “I am saved.” When Satan came back and tried to make him doubt again, he pointed to the stick as a monument.

The people who find themselves assailed in the Great Tribulation need a foundation of faith that allows them to see through the outward appearance of sham and falseness of the beast. They know whom they have believed and they will not be put to shame, not even when they face the gallows or the firing squad, when the beast is given power to conquer them. But woe to them who worship the beast! In connection with this, the Holy Spirit says more than ever: “He who has an ear, let him hear.”

The Spirit first spoke those words through the mouth of Isaiah, when the people had grown too accustomed to hearing the Word of God. God said to the prophet: “Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”³⁶¹ Jesus repeated this to His disciples, when He

³⁵⁷ Jude 24

³⁵⁸ Luke 10:20

³⁵⁹ Rev. 20:12,15

³⁶⁰ Heb. 13:20

³⁶¹ Isa. 6:10

disclosed to them the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven at the critical moment of Israel's history.³⁶² The Holy Spirit says it to the church today, as He said it to the seven churches in Asia Minor.³⁶³ And during the Great Tribulation, while the noise of the kettledrums and the beating on pot lids is going on in the adoration of the beast, He will whisper it into the ears of the saints. The message is: Do not resist the Evil One; do not try to pay him back in the same currency. Violence will boomerang. We will conquer him, not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of God, as the Lord said to Zechariah.³⁶⁴ Gandhi of India had at least understood this part of the Gospel. At this point and in this manner the endurance and faithfulness of the saints become apparent.

In the last part of the chapter, another beast appears out of the earth. At a later point in this book, he is called "the false prophet."³⁶⁵ He resembled the Lamb with his two horns, but he spoke like the dragon, which is Satan. Again, we see a transfer of power. This false prophet possesses the same supernatural powers as the Antichrist and the dragon. This fact will augment the astonishment of those who are not rooted in the truth. This unholy trinity: the dragon, the Antichrist, and the false prophet, which evokes the image of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, will stir up in mankind a vague feeling that there must be something in religion after all.

There are three things on the devil's program: first the manifestation of the above mentioned powers; secondly, the making of a statue that can speak; and third: the marking of the right hand and the forehead of everyone in order to be able to participate in the flourishing economy. The first point of the program is the manifestation of supernatural powers. We must not forget that this is the same period in which God's two witnesses, "the two olive trees and the two lampstands" are on earth, performing their miracles of fire, drought, and plagues. There is a repeat of what we saw happen in Egypt in the days of Moses. Moses performed miracles in the Name of God and Pharaoh's magicians imitated him up to a certain point.³⁶⁶ The devil can give a good imitation of the power of the Holy Spirit.

The second supernatural phenomenon is the speaking statue. John describes this as supernatural, but it is quite possible that we are dealing here with the perfection of a computer. In that case the required worship would be a worship of human intelligence, as a breakthrough of technical achievement. The concept of the statue comes from the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. We read in the Book of Daniel that Nebuchadnezzar had a statue of gold erected that served the double purpose of symbolizing his royal power and of being an idol. We must remember that always, when man elevates and glorifies himself, he does not actually serve himself but Satan. The adoration of the speaking beast, this super computer, is actually the worship of the dragon. It is quite possible that mankind will not conceive this in terms of metaphysical dimensions but will see this merely as an expression of awe for the unbelievable achievements of the human mind. Those who would be put to death because they refuse this worship would be accused of hindering the advancement of science. In modern terms, holding on to mythological fables such as the Genesis record of creation, would be enough reason to make people face the firing squad. Blessed will be in those days the Shadrachs, Meshachs, and Abednegos, who refuse to worship the image, even if God decides not to save them!³⁶⁷ We suppose that at this point, the angel of the Lord will not descend to rescue those who become the victims of the Antichrist. We read: "He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them." It will, however, be a temporary and empty victory for him. He who kills a child of God opens the door of heaven for him. In C. S. Lewis' book *The Last Battle* there is a stable in which the victims of Tash are thrown. As it turns out the stable is infinitely larger on the inside than on the outside. It is also full of light. It is the beginning of new life for those who belong to Aslan.

Much speculation has been made concerning the number 666, which stands for "the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name." Everyone will be forced to identify him- or herself with

³⁶² See Matt. 13:11-17

³⁶³ Rev. 2:7,11,17,29;3:6,13,22

³⁶⁴ See Zech. 4:6

³⁶⁵ Rev. 19:20

³⁶⁶ See Ex. 7 and 8

³⁶⁷ See Dan. 3:17,18

this number in order to be able to buy or sell anything. It will be an identification necessary for a person to stay alive, a kind of obligatory identity card. During World War II the Nazi government imposed such identification upon the citizens of their conquered countries in order to be able to easily identify those who were Jews. The three-digit number probably stands for the unholy trinity of the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth. It is likely that the number stands for the letter value of the name of a human being. Evidently the Hebrew value of the letters that spell the word Caesar Nero add up to 666. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* ridicules this interpretation (in my opinion, unjustly so) by stating: "The number 666 given to the Beast (Rev 13:18), though presumably readily understood by the writer's immediate public, has proved a riddle capable of too many solutions to be now readily soluble at all. The favorite explanation Neron Qecar (Nero Caesar), which suits numerically, becomes absurd when it implies the attribution of seven heads and ten horns."

The Fausset's Bible Dictionary provides a more elaborate explanation, which is worth copying: "The number of the beast' is 666, i.e. 6, the world's number, in units, tens, and hundreds. Six is next to the sacred seven, which it mimics but falls short of; it is the number of the world given over to judgment. There is a pause between the sixth and seventh seals, the sixth and seventh trumpets: for the judgments of the world are completed in six; at the seventh the world kingdoms become Christ's. As twelve is the number of the church, so six, its half, symbolizes the world kingdoms broken. The radicals in Christ are CH, R, and ST (chi, rho, and sigma); Antichrist's monogram impersonates it, but falls short of it, Ch X St (chi, xi, and sigma) (666). It is curious that the only unquestionable 666 (1 Kings 10:14; 2 Chron 9:13) in the Old Testament is the 666 talents of gold that came in yearly to Solomon, and were among the correcting³⁶⁸ influences that misled him. Moreover, the only two Greek nouns in the New Testament, whose value numerically is exactly 666, are precisely the two expressing the grand corrupters of the church and sources of idolatry, 'tradition' (*paradosis*...), the corrupter of doctrine, 'wealth' or the pursuit of it (*euporia* ...), only in Acts 19:25), the corrupter of practice (Col 3:5). The children of Adonikam are 666 in Ezra 2:13, but 667 in Neh 7:18. Adonijah, bearing the name of the Lord Jehovah, rose up against the Lord's anointed, and so is a type of Antichrist. The Hebrew letters of Balaam (type of the false prophet whose spiritual knowledge shall be perverted to Satanic ends; Rev 2:14 favors this, also the fact that Antichrist mainly shall oppress Israel, Dan 8; 9; 11; 12) amount to 666. The Greek letters of Lateinos ... Rome's language in all official acts, amount to 666. The forced unity marked by Rome's ritual being everywhere in Latin is the premature counterfeit of the true unity, only to be realized when Christ, God's true Vicar on earth, shall appear, and all the earth shall 'in a pure language serve the Lord with one consent' (Zeph 3:9). The last Antichrist will be closely connected with his predecessor (as the second beast is with the first in Rev 13), and will arrogate all Rome's claims besides those peculiar to himself."

Less complicated, however, seems to apply the number to the person of Nero, whom John uses as a type of the Antichrist. At the moment of John's writing of the book, Nero had already become history. It is part of the principle of biblical prophecy to take images of the past and project them upon the future.

d. The Lamb on Mount Zion 14:1-5

There stands the Lamb on Mount Zion, together with those who belong to Him. We are not told how they arrived there. It could be that they had been there all the time and that John only saw them at this moment. This is the same group we met already in Chapter Seven, when at the opening of the sixth seal, the angel who comes from the direction of the rising sun, seals them with the seal of the living God. We are not told whether this Mount Zion is the place on earth, or whether it is the real Zion of which David's citadel on earth was the shadow. To state this specifically would not have been necessary; we are here in God's reality. Above and amidst the corruption on earth, the total destruction of spiritual and moral values, stands the Lamb of God with that part of mankind that has been redeemed from their sins by His payment. They are full of the life, the holiness, and the attributes of the divine nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They bear the Name of God on their foreheads. Their names are no longer "Tom, Dick, or Harry," but "Father, Son, and Spirit." The holiness and sinless condition that is attributed to them is not their own achievement. Originally, they were sinful human beings, who believed that the Lamb took their sins upon

³⁶⁸ I suppose this is a typographical error in the text. It should probably read "corrupting."

Himself. These are people who are clothed with the righteousness of God in Jesus. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”³⁶⁹

The NIV’s “they kept themselves pure” is the rendering of the Greek *ouk emolúntheesan parthénoi*, meaning literally “they are undefiled virgins.” This should, of course, not be taken in the sexual sense of the word. Although the wording would make us believe that the crowd exists only of males, we may safely assume that there will be at least as many females as males among the redeemed of the Lord. The majority of these people will have been married during their life on earth. If there were any reference to sexuality it would be to extra-marital affairs. We rather hold, however, that sexual relations in Scripture are often seen as an image of our relationship with God. The virginity here is then a symbol of the pure love and faithfulness of this relationship. It stands for the surrender of all our heart and all our soul and all our mind in love to God. Jesus adds to this “all your strength.”³⁷⁰ This pure consecration to God is called spiritual virginity, which is the result of our redemption from sin. As the bride of the Lamb, we may not give ourselves to anyone else. Paul expresses this when he writes to the Corinthians: “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.”³⁷¹

This purity of the redeemed is also expressed in absolute obedience. “They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.” We wonder if these words were written for heaven or for the earth. If absolute obedience is that important in heaven, how much more on earth! These redeemed must have learned their obedience while they still were on earth.

There is also great comfort for those on earth in the fact that we never have to go anywhere alone. The reward of obedience is “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”³⁷² That is our choice when we feel lonely and alone in this world. As the happiness of a wife is in the following of her husband, so there is no greater happiness for us than in the following of the Lamb wherever He goes. Mark the emphasis on the word “wherever.” This is unconditional obedience, under all circumstances, without prejudice or reservations. “Lord Jesus, I want to follow you wherever you go!” It is therefore not our going somewhere, but the Lamb’s going that is important. All I have to do is follow.

The fact that these people are called “firstfruits” proves that they are the church of Jesus Christ. That is what James calls us: “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”³⁷³ We are the firstfruits of the harvest to come; the first members of a new creation that came into being by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit that began in the heart of man at his new birth is here complete. These people can no longer tell a lie; they are blameless. This is God’s work. We cannot work ourselves up to this state of existence. Jude tells us that only God “is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.”³⁷⁴ Without this guarantee no creature would have a chance.

Now for the new song! Without the above, there would be no reason for this new song that John hears at this point. David prophesied about this new song in one of his psalms: “Hallelujah. Sing to the LORD a new song.”³⁷⁵ That prophecy is being fulfilled here. John hears this as a voice from heaven.

The development of musical instrumentation in John’s time was at a lower level than it is at present. In John’s description we find frequent references to “the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder” in an effort to describe that which defies description. This is the perfect choir and orchestra, giving a rendering of the perfect cantata. We have nothing on this earth that could compare with this concert. When musicians on earth play a piece by Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven, they have to rehearse carefully and painstakingly what those great composers have written. A spontaneous concert of improvisation by a choir

³⁶⁹ II Cor. 5:21

³⁷⁰ See Mark 12:30

³⁷¹ II Cor. 11:2

³⁷² Matt. 28:20

³⁷³ James 1:18

³⁷⁴ Jude vs. 24

³⁷⁵ Ps. 149:1

and orchestra of 144,000 who give a rendering of their own composition would be inconceivable on earth. These people sing on the basis of their personal experience; it is the elation of their hearts: "Cantata Domine!" "Exultata, Jubilata," "Hallelujah!" One cannot copy this from someone else, or sing what someone else has written. Only when one has this song in his heart and belongs to the choir, can one sing it with a clear and pure voice, because "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."³⁷⁶

As we saw earlier, these 144,000 represent a symbolic figure for those through whom God reveals Himself in this world. It is probably the same as "great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language." If the number is again mentioned here, it means that the emphasis is upon the revelation aspect. After all, this book is called "The Revelation of Jesus Christ." He reveals Himself in the lives and in the praise of those He bought and who have given themselves to Him in obedience.

e. The Announcement of Judgment 14:6-13

There probably runs a line of separation between this section and the following. In the announcement we see three angels appear. The first angel proclaims the Gospel, the second announces judgment over Babylon, and the third issues a personal warning to those who follow the Antichrist.

This is the only place in Scripture in which we read that an angel, and not a human being, is charged with the preaching of the Gospel. One televangelist saw in this angel who is flying in midair a symbol of radio broadcasts beamed off a satellite. Whether such an interpretation is permissible from the point of view of hermeneutics is debatable. But if the huge mountain that is thrown into the sea in Chapter Eight stands for a nuclear explosion, the angel here could very well represent a satellite. In that case the proclamation of the Gospel would still be in human hands. It may also be, however, that God breaks the rules at this point because no human being who remained faithful to the Gospel can be found anymore. If the Antichrist succeeds in silencing the saints to the point where no one can testify for God, the only testimony remaining is their blood that will soak the ground.

The Gospel is called here "the eternal gospel." Abraham, Moses, Paul, and we all hear the same message. The Lamb was slain from the creation of the world. At this point the proclamation will reach every nation, tribe, people and language. This would speak in favor of the satellite theory. If there comes a point in world history at which the proclamation of the Gospel of the kingdom as a testimony to all nations would no longer be in the hands of man, the urgency would cease to be. Then we would no longer be responsible to bring back the King. This end, about which Jesus speaks in Matthew's Gospel,³⁷⁷ seems to have arrived here. Maybe we ought to pay more attention to the audio-visual possibilities than we have so far.

The core of the Gospel is the fear of God, His honor and our worship of Him. In our preaching of the Gospel, we often put so much emphasis on the salvation of man that we create the impression that it is about humans only. Our salvation is the shortest way to God's glory, nothing less, nothing more! The goal is God, not us. It is only possible to honor God if we are saved by the blood of Jesus. The Bible states emphatically that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."³⁷⁸ The only thing that is required of man in this chapter is that he acknowledges God as creator, from whose hand he receives life. God does not demand that we fully understand the way of salvation, but that we act according to the light we possess. This will ultimately lead us to Jesus Christ.

The second angel announces the fall of Babylon. This theme is further developed in Chapters 17 and 18. The arrangement of material in this section proves again that the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of wrath fit into each other. It confirms the theory that the book of Revelation develops as a spiral. The contents of the seventh seal, the seventh trumpet, and the seventh bowl are identical. The perspective may differ, but not the facts. The destruction of the devil's citadel relates to the prayers of the saints. We saw this earlier, when the prayers of the saints rose before God as incense and thunderstorms and earthquakes occurred on earth.

Apparently the third angel receives the most attention in this chapter. He sends a serious warning to the address of those who follow the Antichrist. Man deceives himself when he thinks that association with God's enemy is harmless. He who chooses for the devil, or chooses for himself (which is the same), chooses

³⁷⁶ See Matt. 12:34

³⁷⁷ See Matt. 24:14

³⁷⁸ Prov. 1:7

against God. The warning proves that man is responsible for his acts. No one is forced to follow the Antichrist or to accept him as lord of his life. Even Satan cannot bend the will of man. God holds responsible those who receive the sign of the beast and worship his image. This seems unfair. The pressures of the Great Tribulation will require a superhuman effort to resist. Only those who are filled with the Holy Spirit will be able not to fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.

Physical and psychological suffering are weapons against which we have little or no defense. The point is that those who bear the sign of the beast and worship his image have decided, at one point in their lives, not to surrender to God and serve Him. This does not always come in the form of a radical decision. In C. S. Lewis' book *That Hideous Strength*, there is a man named Mark, who never had placed his life upon a solid foundation. When under pressure of the evil company N.I.C.E. he began to give in and when he began to commit his first-ever criminal act, he hardly realized that he did it.

God is not unjust. This is not about people who never had a chance to understand what it was all about. They knew what they were doing. Every single one of them was willing to let someone else die in order to stay alive themselves. It is absolutely important for man to give his heart to God. When we do not, we cause our own suffering. Our heart only finds its rest in God.

It almost sounds as if the Lamb and the holy angels find pleasure in torturing defenseless souls and that they enjoy their "sweet revenge." It remains true, however, that the Lamb was slain to keep human beings from getting to this point. These people cause their own pain. Who is to blame when someone commits a crime and afterwards suffers intense remorse? Can we say that God is to blame for creating man's conscience?

At this point, God's children will have to give their all. This is the time of the endurance of the saints. Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel: "If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened."³⁷⁹ We understand this to refer to physical survival. Every one of God's children would be murdered if the Antichrist had enough time to carry out his plan. God will shorten the time so that some believers will be alive when our Lord returns. Yet, it appears that most of the saints will give their lives for the Kingdom. They are "the dead who die in the Lord." This means that they die in fellowship with Him and for His sake. The Holy Spirit does not mention these people here specifically. Their lives will be like a monument of God's righteousness in a crooked world.

It is as if the camera pans back and forth here over the scene of world history. If the 144,000 are the same as the multitude no one can count and as the redeemed by the Lamb in this chapter, then we see them at the same time as the suppressed, the martyrs and as the ones who are saved.

The scene looks like a multi-media presentation. This technique, if we may use that word here, gives us an impression of eternity. We see people as God sees them. As elsewhere in the Bible, we see here also God's compassion with suffering mankind. Often, when the Holy Spirit announces severe suffering, this is accompanied by expressions of deep commiseration. We see this, for instance, in connection with the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem. Five hundred years before it happened, the Holy Spirit intoned a dirge through the prophet Jeremiah. We read in Matthew's Gospel: "Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'³⁸⁰ In the same manner here, the Holy Spirit prepares comfort for those who will go through the Great Tribulation. Our suffering never leaves God indifferent. God's message to a suffering world ought not to leave us indifferent either.

f. The Gathering of the Harvest of the Word 14:14-20

The central figure in this vision is our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He is the "Son of Man" who comes with the clouds of heaven. Daniel saw Him in this fashion in his first vision of future events.³⁸¹ Jesus identified Himself with this image in His defense before the Sanhedrin, when He said: "I say to all of you: In

³⁷⁹ Matt. 24:22

³⁸⁰ Matt. 2:17-18

³⁸¹ See Dan. 7:13,14

the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”³⁸²

The purpose of His coming here is to gather the harvest. The harvest appears to exist of two parts: the wheat harvest and the wine harvest. We are given the impression that this involves recompense and punishment. It expresses God’s favor and His wrath. It comes under the symbols of bread and wine.

What happens finds its origin in the temple that is in heaven. Two angels come out of the temple to give the order for the harvest. So all this is still part of the blowing of the seventh trumpet. The harvest is a picture of judgment, both in the positive and the negative sense. There is the harvesting of wheat as well as the burning of weeds.³⁸³ Grapes are crushed to make wine. This last part especially is an expression of the wrath of God over man’s sin. Isaiah saw this in a similar vision as expressed here: “Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? ‘It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save.’ Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress? ‘I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year of my redemption has come. I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me. I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground.’”³⁸⁴

Other parts of Scripture supply information that shows how redundant the negative aspect of this figure is. Each of the two images is, in one way or another, connected to the work and the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He comes to us under the symbols of bread and wine. In Him, the bread is broken and the wine is poured out. The judgment that ought to have fallen on us, fell on Him. He trod the winepress outside the city walls, when He took our sins upon Himself in His own body and nailed them to the cross. “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.”³⁸⁵ This judgment was carried out in the past; it is finished. It is absolutely unnecessary for us to undergo this anew. That is why Jesus Himself says: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”³⁸⁶ Consequently, we may see in this announcement of judgment a declaration of the grace of God. If anyone falls under God’s judgment it is because that person insists on paying personally for his own sin.

The result of the atonement is overwhelming. The blood that comes out of the winepress covers everything for miles and miles and is deep enough to completely envelop every human being. It rises as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia. TLB paraphrases this: “Blood flowed out in a stream 200 miles long and as high as a horse’s bridle.” If that is not enough to cover some people it is because they stand too tall in their own eyes. If we bow our heads and bend our knees, we will be covered completely by this blood.

John’s vision sheds a new light on some of Jesus’ parables. In Matthew’s Gospel, we find two parables about wheat that is being sown and harvested.³⁸⁷ In another parable in the same Gospel, we read that the owner of a vineyard sends his servants to collect his share of the wine harvest.³⁸⁸ It is God who harvests, not Satan. God reaps what He has sown. He holds people responsible and He calls them to account. The harvest is the essence of the Kingdom of Heaven. The cry: “Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth’s vine, because its grapes are ripe” is the answer to the prayer: “Your kingdom come!” As far as the wheat harvest is concerned, we see Jesus as the great reaper of the harvest. He

³⁸² Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62

³⁸³ See Matt. 13:30,40-43

³⁸⁴ Isa. 63:1-6

³⁸⁵ Isa. 53:5

³⁸⁶ John 5:24

³⁸⁷ Matt. 13:3-9; 24-30

³⁸⁸ Matt. 21:33-46

said Himself: "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man."³⁸⁹ Now He harvests what He had sown. He is the sower, the reaper, the grain that is sown, and the bread of life. No one is more qualified to gather in the harvest than He is.

Yet, this whole harvest is set within the frame of judgment over sin. At that moment, the Antichrist is ruling the world. It seems as if the field of this world is completely overgrown with weeds. But this vision speaks about much more than about the measure of iniquity being full. God harvests wheat and grapes; He makes bread and wine. The result is positive, not negative.

The angel who comes from the altar that is in the temple in heaven is an interesting character. He is in charge of the fire, which probably refers to the fire on the altar. He is probably the same person who previously presented the prayers of the saints together with the incense to God.³⁹⁰ His coming from the altar connects the prayers of the saints with the gathering of the wine harvest. After all, we were the ones who prayed: "Your kingdom come!"

g. The Hymn of the Victors 15:1-4

Again, the pieces fit together so snugly that it is almost impossible to say where the seventh trumpet stops and the seven plagues begin. It is obvious that the transition takes place somewhere in this section. These seven plagues mark the end of God's wrath. This is also part of the end of God's mystery, as was that which occurred when the last trumpet was sounded and the temple in heaven was opened and the ark of the covenant became visible.³⁹¹

John calls the appearing of the angels "another great and marvelous sign." This does not mean that the plagues that are described in the next chapter provide a reason for rejoicing. As we will notice when we study that section, the plagues are probably the result of what man does to himself. The great and marvelous part of it consists in the fact that God's wrath will be finished.

Sometimes we act as if it would not be appropriate for a holy God to be indignant about sin. Several years ago, a girl was raped by a group of boys in broad daylight in a park somewhere in the United States. A group of people stood by and witnessed this without doing anything. This caused a public outcry. A young African American boy, who was the only one indignant about this, jumped on his bike and warned the police. He was later interviewed as a hero on television. God's wrath about sin is, in fact, nothing else than indignation over demonic and human brutality and injustice. It is, therefore, not wrong when we, as human beings, are indignant. Why would we be and God would not?

God's wrath, however, is more than mere resentment. It is the absolute reaction of perfect holiness to all sin. The tension caused by the fall between God's perfection on the one hand, both in holiness and love, and sin on the other shouts for a solution. God's wrath was completed at Golgotha. What we see happen here is the fall-out. The fact that God's wrath is completed and that consequently His holiness and love have been rehabilitated is indeed "a great and marvelous sign."

John describes a scene that resembles the condition of the people of Israel right after they had crossed the Red Sea, when the dead bodies of Pharaoh and his army washed ashore. True poetry always depicts reality. The interesting feature in this version of the event is that the order is reversed. In Egypt, the ten plagues led to the exodus. Here it begins with the victory, which is followed by seven plagues. The battle is fought from the standpoint of victory.

After their crossing of the Red Sea the Israelites, under the direction of Moses, sang the hymn: "I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea."³⁹² The people had thought they would die, either by the sword of the Egyptians, or by drowning in the sea. This psalm expresses the praise of those who have experienced deliverance from their fear of death through the death of Jesus Christ. Their slavery is over; the devil is hurled from his throne.³⁹³ That is the reason that

³⁸⁹ Matt. 13:37

³⁹⁰ Rev. 8:3-5

³⁹¹ See Rev. 10:7;11:19

³⁹² Ex. 15:1

³⁹³ See Heb. 2:14,15

those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name stand here at the edge of the sea of victory and sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

The devil still acts in this world as if he is almighty. We can imagine what effect the singing of this hymn must have upon him. He was there when Pharaoh drowned and he was witness of the crucifixion. We can see his balloon emptying and his inflated image shrinking to nothing. "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."³⁹⁴

This hymn is a hymn of faith. It is being sung at the shore of the sea in which the Antichrist has not yet drowned. In a way, the victors of the beast are the ones that drowned. Their victory consists in the fact that they left their lives on the other side of the sea. They were slain, as was the Lamb, and so they become the victors of the beast. The more we look at it, the more glorious this picture becomes.

In this hymn of praise, the enemy is not even mentioned. The topic is God's great and marvelous deeds and His holiness. This is evinced in the fact that those who were conceived and born in sin have come to the point of surrendering their lives for their Lord, whom they love, and in the fact that those who died are now risen from the dead. Like the Lamb that was slain, they now live for ever and ever. This is not stated in so many words, but the hymn is based on those facts. Satan killed Jesus on the cross, which made him the loser. Satan resembles a chess player who captures all the pieces of his opponent but loses the game.

Note the unity between the Lamb and the victors. They all sing the same song. They are like He is, because He became like them. He was oppressed as they were and they are risen from the dead as He is. They are victors, because He won the victory. It is the same hymn they sing. God's deeds are, in fact, great and marvelous and God is holy. All nations will recognize them and adore Him. Nothing is more encouraging and comforting than this truth: that we will once stand at the shore of this sea, after we have gone through the fire and the water. We will take up our harps, or sit behind our piano, and we will perform this song of Moses and of the Lamb. We may already begin to hum it now!

C. The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath - Ch. 15:5-19:21

We can distinguish at least five parts in this section:

1. The Seven Plagues (15:5-16:21)
2. Judgment over Babylon announced, executed, and celebrated (17:1-19:5)
3. The Marriage of the Lamb (19:6-10)
4. The Victor (19:11-16)
5. The Victory (19:17-21)

1. The Seven Plagues (15:5-16:21)

What happens in this section is still the result of the blowing of the seventh trumpet. It is the completion of the mystery of God. The seven angels that are the instruments of God's wrath come out of the temple. John calls it "the tabernacle of the Testimony." This rather strange name seems to combine Moses' tabernacle with the temple of Solomon. As we saw earlier, both the tabernacle and the temple represent the same heavenly reality, which may be what John wants to indicate here. God's revelation of Himself is eternal and immutable. Yet, the Nomadic tribes of Israel saw Him as a fellow-inhabitant of tents and the kings of Israel saw Him as Lord of the Temple. The coming out of the temple of the angels, therefore, is part of God's revelation of Himself. The angels are symbols of God's holiness.

We read for the second time that the temple was opened. The first time this happened, the Ark of the Covenant became visible.³⁹⁵ The second time it reveals God's wrath. The first revelation was a revelation of God's holiness and grace in the forgiving of sin and restoring of fellowship. The second revelation is a revelation of God's holiness in the purification and removal of evil.

The clothing of the angels reveals God's holiness in terms of white and gold. The total majesty of God confronts the sin of man.

One of the four living creatures hands out the bowls of wrath to the angels. This living creature is part of the throne of God. The very fact that God lives eternally stands in sharp contrast to the mortality of

³⁹⁴ Rev. 12: 11

³⁹⁵ See Rev. 11:19

sinful man. As was the case at the dedication of Solomon's temple, so here the temple is filled with the glory and power of God so that no one could enter the temple.³⁹⁶

The pouring out of the bowls of wrath results in a total collapse of the whole world and its inhabitants. It seems, however, that much of what happens is man's own doing. The symbolism is so deep that it is difficult to know what exactly takes place. There is a striking resemblance of the first four trumpets to the first four bowls of wrath. The first trumpet brings down from heaven hail and fire, mixed with blood. The first bowl causes cancer-like tumors on man and beast. The second trumpet produces a mountain of fire that changes the sea into blood. The second bowl has the same effect. The third trumpet changes all the earth's drinking water into blood, as does the third bowl. Both put an effective halt to the provision of drinking water for all of earth's inhabitants. The fourth trumpet and the fourth bowl are both related to the sun. The result of the blowing of the trumpet is darkness; the pouring out of the fourth bowl causes scorching heat. All these phenomena could be explained in our day in terms of a nuclear catastrophe. There could be an enormous pollution that disturbs the ecological balance and threatens the health of mankind: a massive contamination of the atmosphere that blocks the sunlight and burns the ozone layer of the earth. That would make the sun's ultraviolet radiation very hazardous to human life.

It seems as if images of the same film are projected before our eyes for the second time but with different filters. In Chapter Eight, the emphasis seems to be on the demonic background behind these occurrences. This is especially obvious in Chapter Nine. Man had called up demons. Chapter sixteen demonstrates that the events are the result of the fact that God has left man who has left Him. It is the ultimate consequence of a broken relationship. God's wrath is in fact built-in into creation. It takes effect automatically when the conditions that determine the purpose of creation are disturbed. A lifeless body will inevitably decompose.

If, however, we are looking here at a demonstration of nuclear power, it would be impossible for the effects to be limited only to those who worship the beast, unless the church of Jesus Christ were no longer present on earth at this time. This may be one of the stronger arguments in favor of an early rapture of the church. It is also quite possible that the pouring out of the bowls of wrath is not done in the chronological order in which it appears here, but that it represents God's wrath over the various aspects of human life. The break down of fellowship with God affects man in his health; it disturbs the ecology and the balance of the cosmos in general.

At one point a strange character appears, who is called "the angel in charge of the waters." Some primitive tribes on earth believe that there is a spirit of the water and a spirit of the earth. Is it true that a certain angel is charged with the provision of water for our planet? Maybe we could say that the water testifies that God is right. It agrees that man is no longer worthy to drink water. That which used to be symbolic of neighborly love, a cup of cold water,³⁹⁷ is no longer available for man.

Man's need of water is the most elementary of all his wants, and this is what God takes away from him. When man declares God to be dead, the fulfillment of his most elementary needs begins to decompose. Water, which is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, becomes the symbol of man's devastation. The drinking of blood here may be more symbolic than physical. There seems to be a clear link between man's spilling of blood and the drinking of it, or, for that matter, the drinking of polluted water.

The Creator who made man in His own image and likeness is the One who gave man water to drink. Creating and sustaining go together. But man severs the relationship with his Creator by murdering his fellowmen. What happens here is the right retribution. Man receives what he deserves. Even the altar, the symbol of atonement and reconciliation, the place where Jesus died, testifies of the righteousness of this payback. The place where love and justice meet each other bears witness to God's righteousness.

Why is it that God's righteousness is so strongly emphasized here? Because man will, and always has, blamed God for the outcome of his own evil deeds. We tend not to feel responsible for the evil that is in the world, and at the same time, we make no efforts to distance ourselves from it. We commit evil and then blame God for it. The devil likes to play us out against God in this. Job's experience proves this. Satan blamed God for what he did to Job himself, and he accuses us before God for the sins into which he leads us himself. Yet, God holds us personally responsible, and all of creation testifies to the fact that He is right in doing so.

³⁹⁶ See II Chr. 7:1-3

³⁹⁷ See Matt. 10:42; Mark 9:41

It is good to hold on to God's righteousness in a world that is disjointed and in which the standards have been turned upside down. Abraham asked rightfully: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"³⁹⁸ God does not need to defend Himself; we do it for Him.

The fourth bowl changes the earth's relation to the sun. The scorching heat may be caused by the burning of the ozone layer of the earth or by the shortening of the earth's distance to the sun. If we are dealing with a nuclear catastrophe, the burning of the ozone layer of the earth may be the most logical explanation. Such a disturbance of the balance would be enough of a clarification for the burns and cancerous tumors mentioned in Verse 2.

The most important part of Verse 9 is the statement "they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him." This proves that every human being knows of the existence of God. It would make no sense to curse that which does not exist. This shows a different picture from a condition which, at present, is prevalent in Western Europe. Many Europeans are atheists or agnostics, saying that one cannot be certain about the existence of a God. In this verse, mankind has taken at least one step closer to the truth. At least man takes God seriously enough to curse Him. But he still justifies himself and does not turn to his Creator whom he ought to honor and worship. This pertains to the fundamental relationship between creation and Creator. The acknowledgment of this relationship forms the basis for all other things. A person who does not honor God is lost. Man's lack of repentance is emphasized twice in this section. In Verse 9 it pertains to a relationship, in Verse 10 to the giving up of sinful practices. What those practices are is mentioned only in passing in Verse 6: persecution and murder of believers. In the next two chapters, this will be further elaborated on.

The fifth bowl is poured out over the throne of the beast. The result is an Egyptian darkness. In the physical sense this could also be the consequence of a nuclear phenomenon. A massive pollution of the atmosphere can block out all sunlight and steep the whole world in darkness. This would increase the intensity of the agony of the tumors. Not only is pain worse in darkness, but the matter that causes the darkness can also increase the pain.

We have the impression, however, that more happens than a mere physical event. The bowl that is poured out over the throne of the beast steeps his empire in darkness. All of a sudden the power of the Antichrist is taken away from him; he is cut off from his source of power. The powers of darkness become darkness themselves. The beast and its followers have become weak. Isaiah's prophecy is being fulfilled here: "You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us."³⁹⁹ We have seen this happen with the glory of the Nazi regime in Germany. This is what will happen with the glory and power of the Antichrist. God's wrath will leave the powerful powerless. Even in their weakened condition people will not turn to the Lord. Yet, I know of several Nazis who became Christian.

We are not told here what will actually happen. We read in Chapter Thirteen that the dragon had given his power to the beast.⁴⁰⁰ It could be that, according to plan, Satan takes back here what he had given earlier. There will not be any love lost between Satan and the Antichrist. Yet, this is an act of God. But we do not read that the devil is seized and imprisoned at this point and that his power is taken from him.

An argument against the theory that Satan had planned to take back from the Antichrist the power he had given to him could be the fact that, in the next episode, the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet each produces an evil spirit in the form of a frog. This, however, does not necessarily mean a cooperative effort.

We now come to the sixth bowl of anger. A way is prepared for the coming of a huge army from the east. The preparation for this event is symbolically represented as the drying up of the River Euphrates. This great invasion is somehow related to the weakening of the empire of the Antichrist. The rest of the world is mobilized through occult influences as a counter measure to this decline. The result is the last war this planet will ever see: the battle of Armageddon. This name is probably derived from *Har Megiddo*, which means "mountain of Megiddo." Megiddo was the famous battlefield where some of Israel's most important battles were fought. Barak defeated Jabin at Megiddo.⁴⁰¹ Saul and Jonathan perished there.⁴⁰² King Josiah

³⁹⁸ See Gen. 18:25

³⁹⁹ Isa. 14:10

⁴⁰⁰ See Rev. 13:2,3

⁴⁰¹ See Judges ch. 4; 5:19

⁴⁰² I Sam. 31:1-6

was killed there when he fought Pharaoh Neco.⁴⁰³ So Megiddo was a place filled with historic markers. The actual Megiddo is not a mountain, as John seems to indicate, but a valley. In view of the historic and symbolic meaning of the name, it is not difficult to understand why John would elevate it to be a mountain. It is an important principle of futuristic prophecy to reach back to examples from the past in order to illustrate the future. Ezekiel did this in his prophecy about Gog.⁴⁰⁴ John's reference to Megiddo does not necessarily mean that the last battle on earth will be fought at that particular place. At this point the similarity between the sixth trumpet and the sixth bowl is abundantly clear. Both mention the River Euphrates and an advancing army. Chapter Nine fixed the number of troops at 100,000,000.

This is obviously the moment of the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Vs. 15 mentions His coming "like a thief," meaning totally unexpectedly. Those are also the words of the apostle Paul in his epistle to the Thessalonians: "For you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."⁴⁰⁵ The suddenness of Jesus' return is meant to be a warning to those who are not watchful. For those who are expecting the Lord's return, the moment will not be one of panic, but the fulfillment of a hope.

Watchfulness consists in holiness. In the life of each of us there are things for which we would be ashamed if they were not covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Holiness does not equal being sinless; it means: "being well covered." There is a reference here to Jesus' letter to the church in Laodicea, where He said: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."⁴⁰⁶

Feeling of shame for physical nakedness is the direct result of a broken relationship with God.⁴⁰⁷ There is no other logical explanation for a feeling of shame for being naked, yet we feel ashamed when we are thus exposed. We can only conclude that this feeling of shame is symbolic for the experience of being naked before God. Our feeling of shame before God, before each other, and especially before ourselves, reveals that we know more about ourselves than we are willing to admit. We all know God's standard of holiness, and we know exactly where and how much we fall short. How good and kind it is of the Lord that He is not willing to expose us. He is not interested in putting us to shame. We find an illustration of this principle in the story of David's ambassadors who were sent to the court of the king of Ammon and were treated in a very humiliating fashion.⁴⁰⁸

We read nowhere in the Bible that those who are redeemed return to the condition of innocence of Adam and Eve before the fall. Even in a condition of being reconciled and enjoying undisturbed fellowship with the Father, we will obviously always be covered with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Yet, this will not mean that we have reason to be ashamed. True love is naked, and our relationship with God will be one of perfect love. It could be that the image of clothing is maintained because, in our present condition, we have no other images that would do justice to our future state.

If we understand this correctly, the situation that is created by the pouring out of the seventh bowl of wrath is the same as that which resulted from the breaking of the sixth seal,⁴⁰⁹ and as the one described in the latter part of Chapter Fourteen.⁴¹⁰ The first result is the appearance of voices, flashes of lightning, and thunderclaps, which manifestations emanate from the throne of God. We find them mentioned for the first

⁴⁰³ II Chr. 35:20-24

⁴⁰⁴ See Ezek. Chapters 38,39

⁴⁰⁵ I Thess. 5:2

⁴⁰⁶ Rev. 3:17,18

⁴⁰⁷ See Gen. 3:7,10,11

⁴⁰⁸ See I Chr. 19:1-5

⁴⁰⁹ See ch. 6:12-14

⁴¹⁰ See ch. 14:6-20

time in Chapter Four⁴¹¹ and later in Chapter Eight.⁴¹² In this last reference, the earthquake is also mentioned. We see the same phenomena again in Chapter Eleven.⁴¹³ So, they are related to the last seal, the last trumpet, and the last bowl of wrath. This reinforces the impression we expressed earlier that we are looking at the same facts in each of these scenes.

God's speaking, which is what is articulated here, is polyphonic; God speaks with more than one voice. It consists of a variety of voices, but John distinguishes particularly the voice that says: "It is done!" This is not the same Greek word Jesus used while hanging on the cross. Then He cried in a loud voice: *Tetélestai!*⁴¹⁴ "It is finished!" Yet, the words are close enough to be considered similar. There is again a straight line that connects judgment over the world with judgment over the Son. It is the same kind of judgment that we saw in an earlier chapter.⁴¹⁵ He underwent judgment in our place. Here judgment only hit those who have not considered themselves to be included in Him.

Judgment is symbolically represented under the form of an earthquake. This does not mean that there might not be a literal earthquake, but the meaning of it is spiritual. The prophet Amos announced God's judgment in the shadow of an earthquake that was so tremendous that people still remembered it two hundred years later when Zechariah makes mention of that earthquake.⁴¹⁶ There are also other similarities between the fourteenth chapter of Zechariah and this chapter of Revelation. John establishes this by mentioning that the great city split into three parts, without mentioning the name of the city; but it seems almost as if he gives us a replay of Zechariah's vision. This is probably also what Haggai referred to when he announced: " 'I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty."⁴¹⁷ The writer of Hebrews places this in the correct light in applying it practically to the present by stating: "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken-that is, created things-so that what cannot be shaken may remain."⁴¹⁸

It is difficult to determine what is meant to be symbolic and what should be taken literally. "Babylon the Great," which is the topic of the next two chapters and partly also of the third, is evidently not a particular geographical location. But it is quite possible that a nuclear explosion on a cosmic scale causes the earthquake. The fleeing of the islands, the disappearance of the mountains, and the unusually severe hailstorm would point in that direction. We repeat that what man does to himself is a manifestation of God's wrath over sin.

In the center of the judgment stands the judgment over "Babylon the Great." God directs a broad beam of His strobe light upon her. The geographical place Babylon had no longer been in existence for centuries. We find various facets of John's prophecy, such as God's burning wrath and the great earthquake, in the prophecies about Babylon by Isaiah,⁴¹⁹ and Jeremiah.⁴²⁰

While Jerusalem splits into three parts, God thinks of "Babylon the Great." The NIV reads: "God remembered Babylon the Great." The Greek reads literally: "Babylon [the] Great came in remembrance before God," as if God would have forgotten about her. What this probably means is that God allows His

⁴¹¹ See ch. 4:5

⁴¹² Rev. 8:5

⁴¹³ Rev. 11:19

⁴¹⁴ John 19:30

⁴¹⁵ See Rev. 14:20

⁴¹⁶ Cf. Amos 1:1 and Zech. 14:5

⁴¹⁷ Hag. 2:7

⁴¹⁸ Heb. 12:25-27

⁴¹⁹ Isa. 13:9-13; ch. 14

⁴²⁰ Jer. Ch.50,51

creature to take the initiative at this point. Redeemed mankind says to God: "What are you now going to do with Babylon?" Those who remember Jeremiah's prophecy will realize that this is the time of its fulfillment.

2. Judgment over Babylon announced, executed, and celebrated (17:1-19:5)

a. Judgment over Babylon announced

In these verses, John is introduced to Babylon under the figure of a prostitute. We must ask ourselves concerning what John actually saw, how much of it is metaphor and what means the image.

In a way, the heading over this section: "Judgment over Babylon" is misleading because no judgment is pronounced at this time. The judgment here consists in the fact that the existence and character of Babylon are revealed. John's amazement when seeing this vision is proof of the fact that the matter was not well known. The vision is a revelation of a mystery. Babylon exists, but most people are not aware of its existence.

The name Babylon suggests, first of all, a city, the capital of the land in which Israel was held in captivity. The relationship with Israel is an important feature in this image. We find the name Babylon mentioned for the first time in Genesis in connection with the beginning of the power of Nimrod, who was "a mighty hunter before the LORD."⁴²¹ In another chapter of Genesis, Babylon increases in prominence because it is the city where the people wanted to construct "a tower that reaches to the heavens."⁴²² Babylon became the symbol of the false security people try to build for themselves, apart from God, in order to protect themselves against God. It became a monument of rebellion. That feature is probably the most important one in this image. Babylon stands for man strengthening himself against God.

In connection with this truth, it is striking that the image does not represent a male figure but a female one. This is not a man, armed to the teeth, but a woman, whose main characteristic is that she surrenders herself to every man who comes across her path. That is probably not the way Babylon would look upon herself; it is the way God sees her. Babylon thinks herself to be a man; God sees her as a woman who is corrupted in what ought to be particularly feminine: her loveliness and grace. That is what makes a woman honorable. This is probably the feature that amazed John the most. In his book *That Hideous Strength*, C. S. Lewis remarks about our masculinity: "What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it." If we reverse the image, we see that our true security and strength is in our abandoning in love to Him who has a claim to our lives. Over against this prostitute stands the bride of Christ.

There is a parallel between John's vision and the one Zechariah saw of a woman in a measuring basket. In Zechariah's vision the emphasis was upon godlessness as it is evinced in commerce. The woman who represents Babylon here has filled her measure to the brim. Her title of Prostitute suggests, first of all sexual immorality, infidelity, and materialism. A whore practices her trade for the money. Prostitution is often presented in the Bible as an image of infidelity in the relationship with God. It depicts a person who abandons God in exchange for a relationship with demons. This, in the eyes of God, is adultery. As a pure marriage relationship is an image of fellowship with God, so whoredom stands for a breaking up of that fellowship.

The emphasis in this section is on one particular aspect of this rupture, which is abuse of power. The ones who indulge in this prostitution are the kings of the earth. These kings do not see themselves as rulers by the grace of God, but as omnipotent themselves. They do not rule "under God" but instead of God. Power has corrupted their lives. Power has an intoxicating influence from which few people can escape. Not only can kings and presidents become a prey, but everyone who occupies any position of responsibility in this world is a potential victim. We all think from time to time that our life is our own. That is why Jesus warns us: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."⁴²³ We must realize that we have our lives on loan from God. Power is a strong wine that intoxicates whoever drinks of it.

John sees this woman in a desert. Everything is dry, withered, and dead for lack of water. This depicts this world without fellowship with God. The beast upon which the woman is seated has the same characteristics as the Antichrist in Chapter Thirteen. That is, of course, no coincidence because it is the same

⁴²¹ Gen. 10:9,10

⁴²² Gen. 11:4

⁴²³ Luke 12:15

beast. The Antichrist is the foundation that upholds the woman. That foundation is blasphemy. It stands in sharp contrast to the worship and praise of God and of the Lamb, which is brought voluntarily by redeemed humanity. God, the holy One, the glorious One, is here desecrated and soiled. This makes the adornment of the woman such a parody. We see this if we compare this vulgarity of this jewel bedecked creature with the bride of the Lamb and her ornaments, which are the glory of God. The golden cup in this woman's hand symbolizes her food and drink; she nourishes herself with pollution and murder. She is drunk with the blood of the martyrs. The reference here is probably to the mass executions that take place during the Great Tribulation. But the principle is much more general; we find it throughout world history in every age.

This is what amazes John the most. In the fifth chapter of Zechariah, it was the angel who seemed to be amazed at seeing the woman in the measuring basket. It was difficult for a holy angel to imagine that a person, created in the image of God, could fall so deeply. John's amazement is different. He knows from his own experience what sin is. That a human being can fall to such a depth is not new to him. What is new is the analysis of that which, to the human eye, is impressive, great, and desirable. He must have had the picture of the Roman Empire before his eyes, and he must have been impressed by its display of power. Seeing the empire as God sees it was what was so shocking to him. He had never looked at the situation that way. In the Book of Daniel, we find two representations of the empires of that time: King Nebuchadnezzar saw them as a statue with a golden head and feet of clay. God saw them as a bunch of wild animals.⁴²⁴ As human beings, we never completely escape Nebuchadnezzar's illusion. Seeing reality as God sees it is always shocking to us. That fact is, again, hard to grasp for angels.

The explanation the angel gives to John is somewhat difficult to follow. The name of the woman, "Babylon the Great, Mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth" is the clearest. The apostle Peter uses the name Babylon as an indication for Rome, the center of the world of his time.⁴²⁵ John probably also thought of Rome as he tried to digest the meaning of this vision. In Verse 9, the seven heads of the beast are called "seven hills." The city of Rome was built on seven hills.

But the many-headed beast with the woman on its back is not a stationary statue. It is alive and it moves. This influences the shape of the images so much that they change all the time. The beast is there all the time, but he is not always visible in his original form. Sometimes we can see him as Babylon, sometimes as Rome, or Berlin, or Moscow, or Beijing, or Washington. We saw this beast appear earlier in Chapter Thirteen, where the supernatural healing of one of its heads was mentioned. That resembled a resurrection from the dead, which left the world astonished and baffled. Some scholars interpret this as the revival of the old Roman Empire. This interpretation is as difficult to sustain, as it is to refute. People have tried to apply the picture to the European Common Market, the Roman Catholic Church, or the World Council of Churches. We can easily lose our own head in trying to figure out the meaning of the heads of the beast. The same expressions and concepts are used here as in Daniel's prophecy.⁴²⁶ The safest seems to be to leave the details aside for the time being and concentrate on the principle. The city symbolizes man in his rebellion against God. In that respect, cities and empires have risen and fallen throughout world history, but the principle has always been the same. As C. S. Lewis states in his series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there are white witches and green witches, but they all do the same things.

An important facet of this image is the mutual hatred and inner divisions among the powers that constitute the picture. The beast with its many heads and horn will, ultimately, turn against the woman, attack, and destroy her. After all, prostitution is a parody of love in marriage. We can say that prostitution is based upon hatred. A prostitute will hate the man with whom she is sexually involved. And the disrespect is usually mutual. In relationship to the Evil One all love is surrogate. The demonstration of unity and oneness of spirit is only temporal during the struggle against the common foe. We see here the Second Psalm being fulfilled before our eyes. The battle is "against the LORD and against his Anointed One."⁴²⁷

A theme that keeps on returning in The Book of Revelation is the victory of the Lamb over the powers of darkness. It is the main theme of the book. We see this in the sixth seal. The seventh trumpet

⁴²⁴ Cf. Dan. ch. 2 and 7

⁴²⁵ See I Peter 5:13

⁴²⁶ See Dan. chapters 2,7,8

⁴²⁷ Ps. 2:2

announces it in the various songs of praise. It is the subject of “the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb,” sung at the sea of glass.

The pouring out of the bowls of God’s wrath is proof of the fact that the initiative belongs to God and not to Satan. That is, of course, also true in the breaking of the seven seals and the blowing of the seven trumpets. The determining factor is the character of God; the victory is assured on the basis of who He is. He is “Lord of lords and King of kings.” That is the guarantee of victory. As His character guarantees resurrection from the dead,⁴²⁸ so it guarantees final victory over evil. Light is always victorious over darkness because it is light. This is also our glory because we have been included in this victory. We are “his called, chosen and faithful followers.” Note the order!

The marvel, that which is so incomprehensible to us, is the fact that the powers of darkness fulfill God’s Word in everything they do. During His suffering Jesus took comfort from this fact. When the disciples wanted to resist His arrest, He said to them: “But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”⁴²⁹ It may be our comfort also.

b. Judgment over Babylon executed 18:1-24

From the viewpoint of poetry, the scene that is depicted in this section is unparalleled. The great city is destroyed in one hour. As a Dutchman who lived through the horror of the Second World War, I am reminded of the Nazi bombardment of Rotterdam. We could also point to the dropping of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. Sorry to say, there are hundreds of incidents that could illustrate the event depicted here in modern terms.

The emphasis in this chapter is different from that in the previous one. There we saw a prostitute who evinced to the extreme the corruption of love, fidelity, and purity. Here the picture is one of greed, dishonest profit, deceit, and egoism in the form of a prosperous city, the commercial center of the world. We often fail to notice the display of godlessness that is so obvious in a booming economy. As in the previous chapter the condemnation was not about sexuality, so this chapter does not condemn commerce as such. It condemns people who have broken off their fellowship with God, who demonstrate their rebellion against Him in sins of sex and greed.

We hear in this chapter the sound of three kinds of voices which sing about the fall of Babylon. In Verses 1-8, the angel announces the fall of the city and warns God’s children. In verses 9-19, the kings of the earth and the merchants of the earth intone a lament. In Verse 20, the saints, apostles, and prophets, those who had been Babylon’s victims, burst out in shouts of victory.

John sees another angel, who was not involved in the pouring out of the bowls of wrath, coming to announce the fall of Babylon. The picture is awesome to the extreme. The angel exudes light and power. The way the future is here projected on the past suggests an element of eternity. That which has not yet occurred is presented as an accomplished fact. The whole picture is steeped in terms of Old Testament prophecy. The demons, evil spirits, and unclean detestable birds parallel the jackals, owls, wild goats, and hyenas of Isaiah’s prophecy over Babylon.⁴³⁰ The city is depicted as uninhabited. Corruption has already begun its work. Two categories of people are mentioned: kings, who have abused their power, and merchants, who indulged in excessive luxury. Both sins are depicted as a form of adultery.

The admonition to the people of God to leave Babylon is an indication that an eternal principle is meant here. If we would look at this from a dispensational viewpoint and try to place this event into the diagram, somewhere between the rapture and the beginning of the millennium, none of this would make much sense. Leaving the city becomes a picture of the sanctified or separate life; it represents separating ourselves from sin. This warning is valid for all places and all times. We must flee Babylon as Lot fled Sodom.⁴³¹ The angel’s words are a direct quote of Jeremiah’s prophecy: “Flee from Babylon! Run for your lives! Do not be destroyed because of her sins. It is time for the LORD’s vengeance; he will pay her what she

⁴²⁸ See Matt. 22:32

⁴²⁹ Matt. 26:54

⁴³⁰ See Isa. 13:21,22

⁴³¹ See Gen. 19:15-26

deserves.”⁴³² Jeremiah’s words seem rather to refer to Israel’s return from captivity. The general rule is that he who drinks Babylon’s wine and enriches himself in Babylon’s commerce will also share in Babylon’s destruction. If the desire for power, prestige, and influence goes to our head, we lose that which gives content and value to life in fellowship with God. One cannot, at the same time, be a citizen of Babylon and Jerusalem.

Verses 5-8 clearly express that justice and righteousness mean receiving what is due. Every sin must be paid for to satisfy the demands of God’s justice. When the measure is full, payment is due. There have been several instances in the history of the world when the measure of iniquity was full in God’s sight. There was the flood in the days of Noah, the building of the tower of Babel, the conquest of Canaan, and the captivity of the Jews. The words “her sins are piled up to heaven” are a reference to the motto of the builders of the tower of Babel: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens.”⁴³³ Here the builders have reached their goal!

Recompense and vengeance are principles that are consistent with human dignity. C. S. Lewis has written several essays about the dehumanizing aspect of imprisonment for corrective purposes. The modern philosophy does not want to punish a criminal, but to correct him. This means that the individual is forced to become what he does not want to be. It is more worthy of human dignity to take responsibility for one’s acts and bear the consequences than to be forced to become better. Thus God treats Babylon, its kings and merchants, with respect.

We should not interpret “pay her back double for what she has done” to mean that Babylon receives more in punishment than she deserves. We find a double comparison: “Give back to her as she has given,” and “Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself.” The measure used is the same as the measure returned. What is doubled is the pain Babylon already possesses. Even the very incarnation of sin and injustice does not produce unadulterated satisfaction. Babylon knew its own bitter aftertaste. That is what is doubled. God also demonstrates His grace in that the punishment is swift: total destruction comes in one single day.

Babylon lived with an illusion; she thought that her prosperity would last forever. A Dutch seventeenth century poet wrote two poems about the city of Amsterdam. One describes Amsterdam as the one who bears a crown as the empress of Europe. The other one complains: “Where are the oak trees in Amsterdam? O, miserable purse that never had enough! What fragrance your place lacks!” The seventeenth century is usually called “Holland’s golden age.” I believe, however, Holland’s golden age was the century before it became a rich country, the sixteenth century, when the Dutch were burned at the stake for embracing the Reformation. It was certainly not the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when people enriched themselves through slave trade and colonialism. We seldom see ourselves as we are.

The principle is again evinced that victory rests upon the character of God. The explanation of the judgment is: “For mighty is the Lord God who judges her.” This does not only mean that God is strong enough to carry out His threats, but also that He is the measure of all strength. Babylon was a fortified city but she was not strong enough. When compared with the strength of God, Babylon has to concede that God is the victor and she disintegrates.

Our salvation will ultimately consist of the fact that we become partakers of God’s glory. Our perdition would be that we do not measure up to His glory. Babylon is not only not strong enough, she is not glorious enough either. Paul’s classic definition of sin is “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”⁴³⁴ Babylon’s sin was not her glory but her lack of it. We read about the bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem “It shone with the glory of God.”⁴³⁵ In spite of Babylon’s very high opinion of herself, she cannot pass the comparison with God’s glory. That is why she goes up in smoke. She perishes because of her inferiority.

In Verses 9-19, we read the reaction of the kings, the merchants, and the sailors upon Babylon’s destruction. The kings bemoan the loss of their power, the merchants and sailors the loss of their prosperity. The inventory in Verses 12-14 of all kinds of beautiful merchandise is impressive. What spoils it all is the

⁴³² Jer. 51:6

⁴³³ Gen. 11:4

⁴³⁴ Rom. 3:23

⁴³⁵ Rev. 21:11

mention of “bodies and souls of men.” That part of commerce is indicative of the rottenness of commerce. Babylon’s glory was merely external. The city was only strong on the outside. She was *covered* with gold, precious stones, and pearls. The New Jerusalem is *built* with gold, precious stones, and pearls. The peoples of the earth used to bring their merchandise to Babylon. In the new heavens and new earth they will bring their glory and honor to Jerusalem.

Verses 20-24 contain an incitement to God’s people to rejoice over the destruction of Babylon. We tend to feel a mixture of relief and melancholy when facing such a destruction. It seems that when Babylon goes under, the fine arts also disappear. Will there no longer be any string quartets or piano concertos, no more Bach, Mozart, Rembrandt, or Shakespeare? That is not so. All real art is related to the person and character of God. The New Jerusalem will be full of beauty.

During Israel’s captivity, the psalmist wrote: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget [its skill]. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.”⁴³⁶ The picture is one of captivity. For those who have suffered in foreign prisons or concentration camps, the matter is clear: God will put an end to all human cruelty, heartlessness, and injustice. What the Jews had to do symbolically with Jeremiah’s prophecy, tie it to a rock and throw it in the Euphrates River as a representation of Babylon’s fall, God does here Himself. The large boulder, the size of a millstone is thrown into the sea. That is God’s answer to those who believe in Him and His victory.

Our circumstances can overwhelm us to the point that we lose sight of God’s promises. This act of God does not imply that God abolishes art and industry and that there will no longer be any enjoyment of life and happiness, but it means that all that is good and noble and beautiful and lovely will be purified from all demonic influences. After all, Babylon is the incarnation of repression, impurity, corruption, and egoism. Babylon’s drowning in the ocean does not mean the end of music, enjoyment, and pleasure. Those things will no longer be heard in Babylon, but they will elsewhere. “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy”⁴³⁷ remains. God will do justice. Art and beauty must be based upon the foundation of justice and righteousness. We, therefore, accuse that kind of “art” that violates righteousness. Not all modern art fits into this category. Some pieces of art are an indictment of unrighteousness in themselves. We have the right to accuse and to reclaim for God that which has denied those foundations. God will do justice: the music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters, the sound of a millstone, the light of a lamp, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be there again, because they are ours.

c. Judgment over Babylon celebrated 19:1-5

John hears again the singing of the choir of the triumphant church of Jesus Christ. Does he hear it again, or does he still hear it? If the judgment, as it is played out before our eyes, is in reality one single judgment, maybe this singing of God’s praises is also one. But how can a human being, who lives in a three-dimensional world, listen to multi-dimensional singing? He is forced to listen to it from various angles.

The hymn differs from the other one inasmuch as it begins with “Hallelujah.” That is wonderful! Hallelujah is the keyword to the brotherhood of mankind. In the words of Schiller’s *Ode to Joy*: “All men become brothers where “joy” spreads her kind wing.” As human beings there is nothing better we can say to God than “Hallelujah.” The word is the spark that ignites our emotions. According to the British preacher John Stott, “Hallelujah” is never used in the Bible without the stating of a reason; it is always placed in the context of “because.” For instance, Psalm 136 states: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love endures forever.” In a sense, Bill Gaither’s “Hallelujah, hallelujah ...” is not biblical because it does not involve any reason; it moves merely in the realm of emotions. The real “Hallelujah” involves reason and logic. It opens both the heart and the mind. It satisfies the whole human being.

⁴³⁶ Ps. 137:1-6

⁴³⁷ Phil. 4:8

The most important part, however, is that it praises God. That is the point around which the whole creation evolves. When I say “Hallelujah,” I recognize that God possesses those perfect and eternal attributes that make Him God. I also acknowledge that He has an exclusive right to these attributes.

This hymn tells us *who* God is: He is salvation, glory, and power. It tells us *what* He is: He is true and just in His judgments. It tells us what He *does* and *how* He does it. He judges the prostitute and avenges on her the blood of His servants. In doing so, God displays the basis of all judgment, which is a comparison of all human acts with His own character of truth and righteousness. It shows God’s attitude toward sin. God cannot accept or tolerate sin. He demonstrates His love toward His children by reclaiming their blood that was spilled. God does not stand by motionless when human beings are murdered. He avenges their blood. He is not a God of the dead but of the living. That makes the word “salvation” with which this hymn opens, so important. Salvation means the restoration of man who is lost. God does us justice by rehabilitating us. If He possesses salvation, glory, and power, and if we are His heirs, then those characteristics belong to us also.

The Bible tells us consistently that judgment and punishment are eternal phenomena. This may shock us. We think that, in glory, every trace of sin, suffering, and pain, even if it pertains to others, should be wiped out. The Bible states that this is not so. According to Isaiah, the monuments of horror will not be torn down. The last verse of his book reads: “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”⁴³⁸ In His description of hell, Jesus borrows this language about the worm and the fire from Isaiah.⁴³⁹ The inhabitants of heaven do not seem to have a problem with this. To the contrary, the words: “The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever” is preceded by a “Hallelujah!” In Luke’s Gospel, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham and Lazarus can see the rich man in the fires of hell.⁴⁴⁰ Evidently, nothing will be covered up or hidden in heaven. Heaven is the ultimate reality. We may have to get used to that idea.

The hymn of praise and the worship continue. The elders and the living creatures fall down before the throne of which they are a part, and we are admonished to do the same. A voice coming from the throne (which means that the voice is part of God and His might) invites us to join in with the worship. The invitation is given to “His servants ... who fear Him, both small and great!” David defines, in one of his psalms, what constitutes a servant. We read: “O LORD, truly I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your maidservant; you have freed me from my chains.”⁴⁴¹ A servant of God is someone whose chains God has removed. The fear of God is formed in a confrontation with the reality of His greatness, glory, and majesty. In joining in this threefold “Hallelujah,” we find the fulfillment of all our human ambitions. But that is not the main part of this section. It is about Him, not about us. Yet, His fullness will fill us also!

3. The Wedding Supper of the Lamb 19:6-10

The fellowship between God and the human beings He created, justified, and sanctified, will surpass all human words and images. If this fact is represented here in the form of a wedding, it does not mean that our human experience of marriage fully expresses this union. Some of the reality of glory, joy, delight, satisfaction, surrender, pleasure, freshness, thrill, playfulness and seriousness of the union between the Lamb and His bride is, however vaguely, reflected in a human marriage. As in a marriage of husband and wife the sexual aspect is an important part, so in the real union, there will be an aspect that will absorb us completely. Our sexuality will turn out to be a hazy shadow of this experience. That is why Jesus explains that the distinction between male and female will be abolished in heaven. We read: “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.”⁴⁴² Since, however, marriage is an expression of an eternal principle, there will always be love, surrender, caressing,

⁴³⁸ Isa. 66:24

⁴³⁹ See Mark 9:48

⁴⁴⁰ See Luke 16:19

⁴⁴¹ Ps. 116:16

⁴⁴² Matt. 22:30

and satisfaction in heaven. As human beings, who have been redeemed and washed in the blood of the Lamb, we will all be the female element in this relationship.

The wedding commences with the triumphant announcement that God has taken up the reign of the Kingdom. This proclamation was already given twice before in connection with the rebellion of Satan.⁴⁴³ Here it is given in the context with the marriage of the Lamb. God is here depicted, not as the conqueror of His enemies, but as the head of the Kingdom of Love. He is King in the lives of those who have surrendered to Him. The real marriage relationship cannot be separated from this rule and surrender. Our fellowship with Jesus rests on our obedience to the Father.

God does not force His reign upon us. We come to Him in our surrender as we invite Him to be the Lord of our lives. He will only take the reins of our lives if we hand those to Him. This is the beginning of the preparation of the bride for the wedding. The final result will be that she will shine with the glory of God.⁴⁴⁴

The words: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!" remind us of the words of the father of the prodigal son to his older son: "We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."⁴⁴⁵ There will be in the marriage of the Lamb an echo of these words to remind us of the fact that we were lost and have been found.

The glory belongs to God because all this is His work. The festive wedding dress consists in the glory of God. John states: "fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints." This is the translation of the Greek word *dikaioomata*, which is the plural of *dikaionoma*, "righteousness." Hence the rendering "righteous acts." It could also be interpreted as meaning "being made righteous." We must realize that any acts of righteousness we perform are expressions of the grace of God who justified us because of our faith in Christ. It is never what we do, but what God does through us that adorns our lives.

The beatitude: "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" is one of eight blessings we find in the book of Revelation.⁴⁴⁶ Here the reality seems to differ from the picture. At an earthly wedding it is the guests who are invited, not the bride, as is the case here. Evidently, heaven does not differentiate between the bride and the guests.

Before we continue, we must review where the bride appears in the Book of Revelation. In previous chapters, she emerges in the form of the 144,000 sealed and as the "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language."⁴⁴⁷ She is also represented as the ones who "were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb."⁴⁴⁸ She is also in the picture of those who are standing at the shore of the sea of glass and fire as "those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name."⁴⁴⁹ She is "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."⁴⁵⁰ She weaves in and out throughout this book as a moving and glorious theme in a symphonic poem about the revelation of Jesus Christ.

It is amazing to see how sharply God's truth contrasts with the devil's lie. What we see here is reality. There is a bride who is adorned for her husband and there is a bridegroom who, in order to acquire her, has paid the bride price with His own life. This is true, both in the heavenly reality as in the earthly shadow in which we live. The prostitute, who is called Babylon, however, is a lie. There is no bridegroom for her. Or did Satan pay for her the price of his own life? Or will he do anything to save her from destruction on the day of her doom? We, who are still living on earth, ought to keep this truth constantly

⁴⁴³ See Rev. 11:15; 12:10

⁴⁴⁴ See Rev. 21:11

⁴⁴⁵ Luke 15:32

⁴⁴⁶ See Rev. 1:3 (2x); 14:13; 16:15; 20:6; 22:7,14

⁴⁴⁷ See Rev. 7:4-9

⁴⁴⁸ Rev. 14:4

⁴⁴⁹ Rev. 15:2

⁴⁵⁰ Rev. 21:2

before our eyes. We must gear our lives toward our wedding day. As the angel says to John: “These are the true words of God.”

At this point, John becomes confused. Twice in this book, he tries to worship the angel who shows him around.⁴⁵¹ Twice, the angel has to tell him: “Worship God!” In both instances, the prophets are mentioned. Here the angel says: “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The Good News Bible renders this: “The truth that Jesus reveals is what inspires the prophets.” TLB reads: “The purpose of all prophecy and of all I have shown you is to tell about Jesus.” Jesus Christ is the subject of all prophecy! This is never expressed so clearly as in Peter’s words: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.”⁴⁵²

⁴⁵¹ See also Rev. 22:8,9.

⁴⁵² I Peter 1:10-12

4. The Victor 19:11-16

Again John sees the heavens being opened. How different our lives would be, if we could state truthfully: "I saw heaven standing open." That is the essence of God's revelation. It is the key to fellowship with God. It is the realization of the redemption we have in Jesus Christ. The author of the Book of Hebrews states: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith"⁴⁵³ Without that precondition, it would have been impossible for John also to see what he saw.

He sees the real rider and the white horse appear. This person is not the imitation we saw in Chapter Six.⁴⁵⁴ This is the Lord, who rides His stallion as the commander in chief of the heavenly armies.

We find in these verses an interesting paradox in the names given to Jesus. In Verses 11,13, and 16 the names given are respectively "Faithful and True," "the Word of God," and "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." But we also read in Vs. 12: "He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself." The given names are the names that are used to call Him; the secret one refers to His identity. The revealed names represent the acknowledgment by all of creation that His character is "Faithful and True." It means that His function is to reveal God as the *Logos* and that He possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. This, however, is not an exhaustive revelation of the Third Person of the Trinity. He is the Eternal One. The limited brain of created beings, whether human or angelic, will never be able to grasp completely who God is. An eternal mind is needed to fully understand who the Eternal One is. Nobody but God fully knows God. That is why God said to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM."⁴⁵⁵

This is also the reason why nobody knows the Name of Jesus beside Jesus Himself. Yet, this Name will be revealed to us on the last day. The Lord promised to the brethren in Pergamum: "I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it."⁴⁵⁶ And to the victors in the church in Philadelphia, Jesus said: "Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name."⁴⁵⁷ This new name, which is not being revealed, is a written name, not one that is only conveyed orally as the one mentioned in the Pergamum Epistle. In connection with Philadelphia, this meant writing in stone, as a sculpture on a pillar. The idea conveyed is one of permanence and something not erasable. This suggests God's edict, as in the scroll that was written on both sides. It will take all of eternity to understand the identity of Jesus Christ. If it is already so fascinating on earth to know unbalanced and sinful human beings, what will it be when we are being confronted with the full riches of the character of the eternal God! In the meantime, we may occupy ourselves with the study of the Names of the LORD as we find them in the Scriptures.

The first name is a pair that belongs together, "Faithful and True." "Faithful" speaks of the good characteristic that determines a relationship between two persons. "True" relates to a given promise. It speaks of reliability, love, and self-sacrifice. "Faithful" describes God's relationship with us. We use the word in connection with a marriage relationship. It means dedication to each other. The Greek words are *pistos* and *alēthinos*. In English, as in Greek, the word "faithful" is derived from "faith," the element that assures us of our salvation. "True" and "truth" are identical. Truth and holiness go together. Jesus, while praying for His disciples, said: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."⁴⁵⁸ As Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God, He is also the incarnation of truth. Our whole being acknowledges God's faithfulness and truth as we enter into fellowship with Him. In the words of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The

⁴⁵³ Heb. 10:19,22

⁴⁵⁴ See Rev. 6:2

⁴⁵⁵ Ex. 3:14

⁴⁵⁶ Rev. 2:17

⁴⁵⁷ Rev. 3:12

⁴⁵⁸ John 17:17

Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.’”⁴⁵⁹ And Jeremiah exclaimed in his distress: “Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”⁴⁶⁰

On a human level, it is possible to remain faithful to a cause that is not worth it. King Herod remained faithful to the godless oath he swore and felt obliged rather to murder John the Baptist than to go back on his promise.⁴⁶¹ In Jesus Christ, God gives us the litmus test of faithfulness and truth. God Himself is the ultimate truth; He is the measure of truth and reality. The devil is called “the father of lies.”⁴⁶² He distorts reality. God is real, and true, and genuine. This is the reason He is called: “Faithful and True.”

This fact establishes the basis for judgment and for the war against injustice. While His fiery eyes pierce through all scam and deception, He judges the lie and fights injustice. This also explains why a sharp sword comes out of His mouth. His Word pierces the soul. It opens the abscesses of the heart and the spirit. It reveals what is hidden. “The nations” is the rendering of the Greek word *ethnos*, which refers, in this context, especially to pagan, non-Jewish tribes. They are not one particular race, but people from all languages, tribes, peoples, and nations, who reject God’s revelation and rebel against Him.

We should compare this description of Jesus with what John says about Him at the beginning of this book when he first sees Him. Here He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood. This is a gruesome and offensive detail in the picture of the conquering commander in chief. The sword kills the enemies and their blood splatters on His uniform. We must remind ourselves of the fact that the picture places us in another dispensation from the one in which we presently live. This does not happen in “the year of the Lord’s favor” but “the day of vengeance of our God.”⁴⁶³ In the dispensation in which we are, the blood spilled is the blood of our Lord Himself. To this fact we, who follow Jesus, owe our robes of “fine linen, white and clean.” The blood that is spilled here is the blood of those who purposely reject the first blood of forgiveness and reconciliation. What is depicted here is the execution of murderers. These people had taken pleasure in killing God’s servants and prophets.

We must also realize that Jesus is not depicted as going around cutting people’s throats. The sword is not in His hand; it comes out of His mouth. The wounds that cause death are spiritual. These people lose their humanity, not their physical life, at least not initially. That does not make the scene any less horrible. To be slaughtered physically is little in comparison with losing one’s soul! The sword of God’s righteousness slays the human soul. Actually, we could say that these human beings commit suicide. Only the unrighteous are the victim of God’s sword of righteousness. The image of judgment is horrible, much more so than it appears to be initially.

The appearance of this rider on His white horse, when compared to the appearance of the Antichrist on his horse in Chapter Six, places the latter in its right perspective. How puny is the Antichrist, with his borrowed crown, killing people in mass executions, compared to the real Rider on a white horse, whose Name is KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS! This scene best highlights Jesus’ warning to us: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”⁴⁶⁴ How reassuring for us, who know this Lord, to realize that we will no longer fall under this judgment!

It is obvious that the scene here parallels the one in Chapter Fourteen, where the grain and grape harvest of the earth is gathered in.⁴⁶⁵ There is a clear connection between the seventh trumpet and the seventh bowl of wrath. It would be hard to believe that the same winepress would be trodden twice.

As far as the Names of the Lord are concerned in this chapter, He is called “Faithful and True” in connection with the judgment. Judgment consists in the placing of those who bear the image of God next to

⁴⁵⁹ Heb. 13:5,6

⁴⁶⁰ Lam. 3:22,23

⁴⁶¹ See Matt. 14:6-10

⁴⁶² John 8:44^b

⁴⁶³ See Isa. 61:2; Luke 4:19

⁴⁶⁴ Matt. 10:28

⁴⁶⁵ See Rev. 14:14-20

the original. The comparison reveals the difference between our unfaithfulness and His faithfulness, our unrighteousness and His righteousness. Volumes could be filled with examples of our deceitfulness and lies. When we pass through God's judgment, infidelity and lies lose their grip on us.

The second Name given to our Lord here is "the Word of God." This brings us back to the prologue of John's Gospel. In it, the Word is introduced as the Creator who becomes creature. "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."⁴⁶⁶ The emphasis there is on our salvation. Here we see the Word in connection with God's judgment. It is the Word that became flesh that judges all flesh. The comparison made in the judgment is here not between the Creator and His creatures but between the Creature, Jesus Christ, and other creatures. God compares each human being to "the Son of Man." Ultimately, we will be the ones who compare ourselves with Him and thus we will condemn ourselves.

We are used to comparing ourselves with others, which is a form of judgment. In doing this, we usually deceive ourselves. We look at other people from a prejudiced angle with the intent to compare favorably. This is not possible when we are put side by side with Him who is faithful and true. If we would make it our habit to have ourselves judged by the Word of God during our stay on earth, we would spare ourselves the pains of this last judgment. A daily reading of the Bible and obeying what it says works sanctification. That is why Jesus prayed: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."⁴⁶⁷

The third Name given to Jesus here is "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." These Names express absolute power. Jesus had stated: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."⁴⁶⁸ This statement is important in connection with judgment because it pertains to the essence of rebellion. The devil and mankind had disassociated themselves from God's sovereignty. They even went so far as to challenge God's authority and His right to the throne of the universe. Here is the man, Jesus Christ, clothed with God's omnipotence. He has taken the place Adam tried to occupy illegitimately. His Name corresponds to the many crowns He wears on His head.

The Calvinists proclaim correctly that Jesus must be Lord in all parts of life. In the nineteenth century, a Dutch theologian and politician, Abraham Kuyper, founder of the Christian Reformed Church, became prime minister of the Dutch government. He tried to apply his theology to the running of the secular government without success. The problem was that he wanted to put into operation on earth what had not yet been confirmed in heaven. In this chapter, the heavenly reality is revealed: Jesus is LORD OF LORDS AND KING OF KINGS. Eventually, the shadow of this reality on earth will conform itself to this fact. In the chronology of world history this revelation of Jesus Christ will take effect at the end of the reign of the Antichrist. That is the moment of the seventh seal, the seventh trumpet, and the seventh bowl of wrath.

All of creation is divided into two sections. There are "the armies of heaven [who are] following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean." They participate in His victory and glory. There are the rebel pagans who will fall under the judgment of His flaming eyes and will be defeated by the sharp sword that comes out of His mouth. They will feel the pressure of His iron rod, and they will be crushed and trampled in "the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty." They are the ones who disregarded David's warning in the Second Psalm: "Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him."⁴⁶⁹

It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast than one between those who are with Christ and those who oppose Him. The heavenly army exudes purity, authority, and majesty. The pagans constitute a mass of miserable gray creatures without beauty or individuality. David's prediction of earlier centuries is fulfilled here: "Blessed are all who take refuge in him."⁴⁷⁰

5. The Victory 19-17-21

⁴⁶⁶ John 1:3,14

⁴⁶⁷ John 17:17

⁴⁶⁸ Matt. 28:18

⁴⁶⁹ Ps. 2:10-12

⁴⁷⁰ Ps. 2:12

It would be possible to draw the dividing line between this section and the following at the third verse of the next chapter. The victory will be complete when Satan is bound and thrown into the abyss. On the other hand, something can be said for the division as it is: extermination of unrighteousness on earth is not the same as the imprisonment of the devil. The latter will have a cosmic effect. It will intone the renewal of all things.

In Verses 17 and 18, we see the same repulsive picture as was suggested in Verses 12-15. Both depict a battlefield. The condition here is further advanced. The bloodbath is finished, and the field is covered with dead bodies: cadavers and rotten flesh all over the place! The angel, who is standing on the sun, the center of the universe, invites the vultures that fly through space, to pick the corpses clean. The picture is gruesome and awful. We sense, correctly, that this does not belong to the glory of God revealed in this chapter. I believe that God borrows this image from our human world on purpose to impress upon us the incongruence. It reveals what humanity has done to God's creation. In a way, we may see this as an example of divine irony.

We must remember that what is shown here is a parable. There are no vultures that fly through space and no angel stands on the sun. The picture represents a spiritual reality. Furthermore, it depicts a situation that has not occurred yet, neither in the spiritual realm, nor anywhere else. This is an announcement of judgment to come. And God's announcements of judgment are always meant to be acts of grace, because they leave the door open for conversion. God hopes that people who are still alive will get the mental picture of the vultures cleaning off their corpses and that they will call to God to prevent this from ever happening. That is the reason this picture is painted so realistically.

Then follows the last scene of world history, as we know it. We are here at the same point as at the sixth and seventh trumpet. The Antichrist gathers his troops at the place called "Armageddon."⁴⁷¹ We cannot imagine that this would happen anywhere else but somewhere on earth. If this is meant to be symbolic then we have no guarantee that the Book of Revelation deals with anything that pertains to our planet at all. Even though the ultimate victory is won in heaven, there will be a concentration of armies under the command of the Antichrist on earth. There is even a suggestion that victory consists in the fact that two powers from different strata combat each other. The meeting of forces is totally unequal. It is like a race between a pedestrian and a jet airplane. The Antichrist and his cohorts do not have a chance against Christ and the heavenly armies. He and his prophet are arrested and are thrown alive in the place of eternal torture. Verse 20 elaborates in detail the exploits of the Antichrist's minister of propaganda. We do not read that their case is officially taken to court, but the content of the whole verse sounds like a verdict. It is a justification of this terrible punishment.

A complicated feature in this verse is the word "alive." The difference between the Antichrist, the false prophet, and later Satan himself on the one hand, and all their followers on the other, seems to be that these are thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur, while the other ones are killed first. Their destination, however, is the same. We read about the followers: "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire," and: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."⁴⁷² What then is the difference? It does not seem likely that death here means physical death. The sword coming out of Jesus' mouth, that is the Word of God, kills those who die. The death they die is a moral and spiritual death. But how can a soul that is no longer alive be weeping and gnash its teeth? Whatever the case may be, it will be a matter of moral and spiritual decomposition. Gehennah is the place where the human being decomposes spirit, soul, and body. The vultures will not only eat the flesh. They have already eaten the seed that fell on the wayside that could have saved the human soul.⁴⁷³ We see here the end of what used to be a human being. I do not know what this means and I hope I never will know.

IV. The Renewal of All Things

- Ch. 20:1-22:21

⁴⁷¹ See Rev. 16:16

⁴⁷² Rev. 20:15; 21:8

⁴⁷³ See Matt. 13:4,19

- a. The Final Judgment 20:1-15
 - 1. The Binding of Satan 20:1-3
 - 2. The First Resurrection 20:4-6
 - 3. The Condemnation of Satan 20:7-10
 - 4. The Last Judgment 20:11-15
- b. The New Jerusalem 21:1-22:5
- c. Conclusion 21:6-21
- a.

The Final Judgment 20:1-15

1. The Binding of Satan 20:1-3

This section is probably one of the most controversial in all of Scripture. Theories regarding the binding of Satan, the time and length of his being bound, and the meaning of the Millennium have divided Christians throughout the ages. Augustine believed that the Millennium began when the emperor of Rome accepted Christianity. Many Calvinists judge that Satan is bound at present. One of my teachers at the Brussels Bible Institute used to say that if that is true, he is put on a very long chain. We can hardly maintain that Satan is powerless at present. Peter's statement: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour,"⁴⁷⁴ invalidates this. Also, if Satan is powerless at present, Paul's warning: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms,"⁴⁷⁵ would be redundant. It would mean that, as Christians, we would no longer be in a state of war. Our daily experience tells us differently.

There will come a time when Satan is bound and thrown into prison. This event will be the beginning of the Millennium. There is no reason to believe that symbolic language is used in the description of the facts, apart from the image of the chain and the lock of the abyss. It seems also logical to assume that the chronological order is important. We saw the demonstration of Satan's power on earth, culminating in the coming of the Antichrist. The revelation of Christ occurs at the end of the Great Tribulation.

The important question to ask is how it is possible for Satan to come out of his prison? We will have to take a closer look at this in connection with Verses 7-10.

Evidently, there will be a Millennium and it will be on earth, after the Antichrist and his follower and the powers that inspired and supported them have been removed from this planet. We must bear in mind that, even though the Book of Revelation comes to us in the form of a symphonic poem, the facts it deals with are real concrete and historical facts.

What seems so amazing is that such an important event as the Millennium, which will be extraordinary in the history of our planet and of the universe, is only mentioned here in passing. This is the only passage in the New Testament in which it is mentioned. The Millennium is not even the subject of these verses. The topic is judgment. In contrast to this period of one thousand years stands the fact that the largest section of the Book of Revelation, chapters 6-19, is completely taken up by a period that lasts, approximately, three-and-a-half years. The only conclusion we can draw from this is that John limits himself primarily in this book to the subject matter he is supposed to be treating. One cannot reproach an author for doing such a thing. It should, however, caution us not to build too much theology on such a small basis. We know too little about the Millennium to say much about it. It could be that the Lord wants us to talk about something else!

2. The First Resurrection 20:4-6

Verse Four speaks about a group with whom we are supposed to be familiar. We are not even told whether they are angels or human beings. The Chiliast outline of the events pertaining to Christ's return could come in handy at this point. Paul's remarks about the rapture in his First Epistle to the Thessalonians explains: "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."⁴⁷⁶ If those who sit on the throne and are given authority to judge are not the believers in Christ, the members of His body, the church, who participated in the first resurrection, the meaning of the scene will not be clear. Evidently, the martyrs of the Great Tribulation join the assembly at this point.

⁴⁷⁴ I Peter 5:8

⁴⁷⁵ Eph. 6:10-12

⁴⁷⁶ I Thess. 4:16,17

These thrones remind us of Daniel's prophecy: "As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened. Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.) In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."⁴⁷⁷

Obviously, those who sit on the thrones are human beings. The apostle Paul mentions the role believers will play at this point in history. He writes to the church in Corinth: "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!"⁴⁷⁸ These thrones are meant for the church of Jesus Christ.

It is also strange that John does not tell us who is being judged. Actually, the very mention of the thrones at this point is odd, because that seems to fit better in the scene of Verses 11-15. But some kind of judgment, obviously, takes place. The subject of these verses is the resurrection. A line is being drawn between those who partake of the first resurrection and those who will suffer the second death. As mentioned above, the Millennium is only mentioned in passing. Judgment is required to determine who will rise from the dead at the beginning of the thousand years and who at the end. That, however, does not seem to be determined by human beings sitting on the throne. According to Jesus' words, the transition from death to life takes place at the moment a person fixes his faith upon Jesus Christ, the Lord. We read in John's Gospel: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."⁴⁷⁹ What happens to the dead body is determined by that transition. For those who believe in Christ on the day of resurrection, judgment will have passed long ago. The first resurrection encompasses our conversion, our regeneration, and sanctification, as well as the resurrection of our dead body. Those elements make us the beneficiaries of the beatitude pronounced in Verse Six "Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection." As mentioned earlier, we can find seven of those beatitudes in the Book of Revelation.⁴⁸⁰

We must pause a moment to reflect on the meaning of the Millennium. As said above, this is the only place in Scriptures where it is mentioned directly. But in the first seven verses of this chapter it is mentioned six times. Three times it refers to the duration of Satan's imprisonment; twice it relates to the reign of those who are partakers of the first resurrection, and once it refers to the waiting period for the other dead.

We do not know if the thousand years are meant to be a literal mathematical span of time or a period that is called so symbolically, as it seems to be endless. From a human point of view one thousand years is a very long time. One thousand years ago, the Middle Ages in Europe had not even begun yet. Western Europeans had not yet discovered the North and South American continents. In our human experience we can hardly imagine such a time span. Whether meant literally or figuratively, a thousand years seems like eternity.

This time will be characterized by a complete absence of evil and by the reign of Christ and those who belong to Him. It is obvious from the mention of bodily resurrection, that those who reign with Christ are not angels but human beings. Angels cannot die and, consequently, they cannot partake in a resurrection either.

It seems a logical conclusion that all the portions of Scripture that speak of the restoration of fallen creation apply to this period in world history. What Paul states in his Epistle to the Romans, undoubtedly,

⁴⁷⁷ Daniel 7:9-14

⁴⁷⁸ I Cor 6:2,3

⁴⁷⁹ John 5:24

⁴⁸⁰ See Rev. 1:3; 14:13;16:15;19:9;20:6;22:7;22:14

refers to this time. We read: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."⁴⁸¹ Isaiah's vision of the new world where "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious"⁴⁸² clearly describes the Millennium.

But John does not say anything about this here; he acts as if all this is well known. It is, after all, a logical effect of the Gospel that man who had been caught in the devil's trap, and who then is saved and rehabilitated, would again receive the royal dignity that had originally been reserved for him. It is also logical that creation, which had been man's responsibility, and which he had dragged with him in his fall, would be restored and given back to God. Paul's conclusion is also a logical one that "If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him."⁴⁸³

When the Lord Jesus said to Pilate "My kingdom is not of this world,"⁴⁸⁴ He did not, necessarily, mean that it would never be established in this world. We do not know how this will all come about. It is also not clear who or what will be the subjects of this reign. We must, however, not merely look upon this thousand-year kingdom as a symbol of the salvation and rehabilitation of those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior.

If in Chapters 21 and 22, we see the church of Jesus Christ "prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband," as "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God," and shining with the glory of God, then we have to conclude that this church still has a lot to learn before the time comes. The royal dignity and universal priesthood of the believers during the Millennium seems to be a good school to learn. We must keep in mind, though, that the Millennium is only mentioned in passing in this chapter. The subject is the resurrection and the key verse is Verse Six "Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection." This beatitude pertains to all who have put their trust in Jesus. This is what the Lord Jesus Christ meant when He gave the threefold assurance: "I will raise him up at the last day."⁴⁸⁵

3. The Condemnation of Satan 20:7-10

"When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison." We ask ourselves why and how this can happen? It will not be because of Satan's superior strength. The only reason we can imagine would be that God is forced to release him on moral grounds, because the devil acts as if he repents of his sins. Earlier, Satan had contested on moral grounds God's right to sit on the throne of the universe and he had accused God of binding human beings to Himself by paying them. In the Book of Job, he had asked the question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?"⁴⁸⁶ Evidently, he will succeed in morally forcing God to let him go free.

⁴⁸¹ Rom. 8:18-23

⁴⁸² Isa. 11:6-10

⁴⁸³ II Tim. 2:11,12

⁴⁸⁴ John 18:36

⁴⁸⁵ John 6:39,40,44

⁴⁸⁶ Job 1:9

From Seiss' *The Apocalypse: Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, we copy the following comment: "It seems like a great pity, after the world has rested for a thousand years, that this archenemy of its peace should again be let loose upon it. But there seems to be some sort of necessity for it. The statement to John was, that 'he must be loosed a little time'... Some interest of righteousness and moral government renders it proper that he should be allowed this last limited freedom. If for nothing else, it is not unimportant that he should have this opportunity to prove how little an imprisonment of a thousand years had served to change him, or reform his malignity. Even the Devil is granted a final trial to make a better record to himself, if so minded. But neither judgment nor mercy has the least effect. He is, and remains to the last, the same depraved and wicked being, and employs even the little time of freedom before he is cast into perdition in tempting, seducing, and deceiving the happy and peaceful world. Perhaps, too, it was necessary for the millennial nations to be taught that, even after having been so far redeemed as to live a thousand years of holy obedience, they still are unable to stand without the special help and grace of Almighty God. At any rate, this brief period of Satan's last freedom proves, that he is still Satan, and that man is still man, after a thousand years of bonds and imprisonment for the one, and a thousand years' experience of the next thing to Paradise for the other; the Devil being just as eager to tempt and deceive, and man liable to be tempted and deceived. Nor can it be of small account to the after ages, or for the generations to whom it is foretold, that the full demonstration of these facts should be made before things are finally settled into the eternal state. Hence, Satan is let loose for a little time."

Satan's own *conversion* and that of his demons, as well as of the millions who had followed him, seems a reasonable possibility. This freedom would be like some sort of parole in which Satan could prove that he was serious in his intentions and that he was willing to undo the enormous damage he had caused. It could even be that this conversion is not a fake or a put-up job. It would, of course, be simple for God to unmask deceit. We could imagine that, as soon as the former adversary is let loose and is restored to his previous glory and authority, his original temptation would assert itself again also. The same pride that made him make a dash for the throne before could become too powerful. The same would happen to those who had followed him and who had converted and had sworn to the same renunciation. Evidently, the Antichrist and his prophet are not included in this party. A mass rehabilitation of those we now consider to be lost, would give an explanation for the millions who, all of a sudden, come marching across the breadth of the earth to conquer Jerusalem. All of this is, of course, mere speculation, but it could give us a reasonable explanation for facts that are difficult to interpret otherwise.

If all this were true, it would mean that there would be a "second chance" for all creatures; although these verses suggest that such would be of no avail. If a person who lives in the present dispensation of "Moses and the prophets"⁴⁸⁷ does not become a new creature through the Holy Spirit, it will be of little advantage to him if he were given a second chance in the resurrection of the dead. Even if a person is given the opportunity to do his life over again, there is no guarantee that he will do any better. It remains true that the day of salvation is today. The difference between life and death is not in the opportunities that are given to us, but in the surrender of our will.

If, however, the above would be true, it would mean a revolutionary period in the history of heaven and earth. In theory it would mean that all of mankind would have the opportunity to pass from death into life. But if anyone would be saved in that manner, he or she would probably be the exception.

John mentions the names of Gog and Magog in connection with the deception of the nations of the world. The names are a reference to Ezekiel's prophecy.⁴⁸⁸ Gog is the name of the prince of Meshach and Tubal and Magog is the name of the land. In Ezekiel's prophecy, the prophet makes a comparison between a future event and a historic incident: the invasion of Gog that occurred before the Babylonian Captivity.

Some commentators believe that John erroneously used the names of Gog and Magog for two nations instead of for a nation and a country. But the text does not warrant this conclusion. John's description of the facts is brief but vivid. He writes like an eyewitness. His changing from the future tense to the past tense would indicate deep emotional involvement. The scene before him is breathtaking. He is in a hurry to say all he has to say and he cannot allow himself the time to depict sweeping parallels. Thus, there is only a sketchy reference in two words (Gog and Magog) to Ezekiel's prophecy for the purpose of placing the events in the right perspective of eternity.

⁴⁸⁷ See Luke 16:29-31

⁴⁸⁸ See Ezek. Ch. 38,39

It seems unlikely that the description is one of a literal war with horsemen and horses, with a siege, and an attack upon a city. The picture evokes images on a cosmic scale of the repeat of the invasion of the Garden of Eden. The difference will be that, at that time, God's paradise will be full with people who have already eaten from the tree of life and who have been fully satisfied with its fruit. Here, the Evil One no longer has any chance of success. The fire from heaven that God's saints have kindled themselves falls upon the enemy and devours him. Compared to this, the nuclear explosions during the time of the Great Tribulation will be like child's play.

4 The Last Judgment 20:11-15

Then follows judgment. The devil who was the source of all temptation is punished for the first time ever. We do not read that there will be an elaborate court case in connection with this. It will not be as in the following verses in which the people are judged. Since Satan has violated his parole, no hearing is needed anymore. He is immediately sent to the place of agony he had prepared for others. We are not told whether the presence of the Antichrist and the false prophet will be of any consolation to him.

Verse Ten should actually have been included in this section since it introduces the following verses. This time of judgment differs from previous session in that no human jury or judges are involved in this, as was the case in Verse 4. It is God alone who reaches the verdict. This, probably, means that we have passed the previous stage. It could also mean that the unity among the Father, the Son, and redeemed humanity is such that no distinction needs to be made anymore.

We are not given a detailed description of God here as in Chapter Four, but the portrayal is overwhelming. John depicts God and His throne as seen through the eyes of a rebellious creation. "Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them." The naked man who stands before God comes to the frightening discovery that there is no longer any covering for him. A Dutch poet once wrote a eulogy for a fellow poet in which he said that this man was for one moment "a flame that charred the face of God."⁴⁸⁹ John's picture of God reveals the sheer nonsense of such a statement. Both Dutch poets, the one who wrote the eulogy and the one who was being eulogized, have learned this for themselves in the meantime.

The Israelites who were camped at the foot of Mount Sinai experienced some of the awesomeness of God's presence. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews comments on this: "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.'"⁴⁹⁰ The same Epistle states: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."⁴⁹¹ God turns that side of His personality toward the unbelieving and rebellious creatures. But those features are also present for those who have been renewed by His grace. We may enjoy an intimate fellowship with God, but there can never be any casualness or vulgarity in that relationship. We will understand that God is not the kind of person whose face one can scorch. But for us, He is also not the One from whom we have to flee. He is our refuge and our hiding place. That is quite a difference.

John sees "the dead, great and small, standing before the throne." According to what we read in Verse Five, these "dead" are alive, or at least, they have been resurrected. Yet, they are still called "dead." This is the resurrection for the purpose of condemnation, mentioned by Jesus in John's Gospel. We read there: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."⁴⁹² If these are people who violated their parole together with the devil, as suggested above, then they are doubly guilty before God. It is not difficult to imagine their feeling of terror, standing before this great white throne of the Judge of all the earth. These are millions who stand trembling before their

⁴⁸⁹ Herman Marsman, *Willem Kloos*

⁴⁹⁰ Heb. 12:18-21

⁴⁹¹ Heb. 10:31

⁴⁹² John 5:28,29

Creator. Their judgment amounts ultimately to this that they stand as dead before a living God. They may have been roused from their slumber of death, but in comparison with God they are dead. Their names are not in the Book of Life because they never signed their names in it. They never made a contract with Life and signed it.

John speaks of two kinds of books that are opened, but only the Book of Life is mentioned by name. Every person is judged on the basis of his works. As Evangelical Christians, we often read these words with some prejudice. We think that, as long as our names are written in the book of life, it does not really matter what we have done. We may owe this misunderstanding to Luther, or at least, to a distortion of Luther's theology. For those who are recorded in the book of life, the works are important also. Jesus states clearly in the verse we saw above: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come *out-those who have done good will rise to live*, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."⁴⁹³

If, at the beginning of the court session, it would already have been determined that a person is proven guilty and condemned, the whole case would be a travesty. This would not suit the character of God. Abraham asked the question: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"⁴⁹⁴ These verses do not put "God in the Dock," to borrow C. S. Lewis' words. We must remember that every tree produces the fruit that fits its kind. The person whose name is written in the Book of Life will also bear the fruit of life. This fruit is not the reason for the registration of our names in the book of life but the result of it. Consequently, when God judges people on the basis of their works, He is absolutely fair. We may assume, therefore, at least in theory, that there could be people who would be declared innocent. In practice, it will be evident that no one can stand before God and not come short of the glory of God apart from God's grace in Jesus Christ.

It is remarkable to read that "death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire." The reading of the KJV as "hell" instead of "Hades" seems unwarranted, since the lake of fire seems to be the same as hell. The word "Hades" is borrowed from Greek mythology as the place where the dead were gathered. It conveys the idea of death as the place in which Satan exercises his power: the kingdom of death. The way our text renders it, death and Hades are treated like independent personalities. This is probably a poetic way of expressing that there will never again be any such things as dying and death. We are, however, given the impression that more is involved. Paul also treats death as if it were a person. We read in his First Epistle to the Corinthians: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."⁴⁹⁵ Yet, death is not a person. The first death becomes the victim of "the second death." There is similarity between the first death and the second as there is between being born and being born again.

The lake of fire is called "The second death." The first death is separation between a creature and the Creator. This caused a separation of man from himself and from his fellowmen, which ultimately results in the separation of soul and body. The second death is probably the ultimate breakdown of harmony in every form. Even the remains of harmony left by the first death will decompose. The only thing remaining is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We seldom realize sufficiently how great is our salvation which saves us from this second death. As Jesus wrote to the church in Smyrna: "He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."⁴⁹⁶ Praise our risen Savior who makes us participants of His resurrection!

B. The New Jerusalem 21:1-22:15

1. Summary 21:1-8

John gives us in these verses a short version of his last vision. In Verse Nine he obviously returns to what he said in Verse Two. He sketches, in a few rough lines, the revelation of a new heaven and a new earth. In the following section, 21:9-22:15, he details what he outlined before.

We can distinguish five parts in this section:

⁴⁹³ John 5:28,29

⁴⁹⁴ Gen. 18:25

⁴⁹⁵ I Cor. 15:26

⁴⁹⁶ Rev. 2:11

- a. The Vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth
- b. The New Jerusalem
- c. The Word of God
- d. The Participants
- e. The Non-Participants

a. The Vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth 21:1

Isaiah already prophesied about a new heaven and a new earth. We read: “ ‘As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,’ declares the LORD, ‘so will your name and descendants endure.’ ”⁴⁹⁷ Peter also expresses the expectation that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. We read in his Second Epistle: “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”⁴⁹⁸

John’s remark that “there was no longer any sea” seems puzzling to us. Peter remarks in passing that “the earth was formed out of water and by water.”⁴⁹⁹ In the Genesis account of creation we read that the whole earth was initially covered with water.⁵⁰⁰ One of God’s first acts of creation was to create order out of chaos. If the theory about the cause of this chaos as being the result of Satan’s fall is correct, we can understand that there would no longer be any place for a sea in the new creation. It would be hard, though, to imagine a world without any water at all. That, however, is not what we read here. The falling away of the oceans would provide sufficient living space to all the human beings that ever lived on this planet. But, maybe, John means something quite different here.

Bible commentators have voiced different opinions about John’s statement, none of which explain the concept sufficiently. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “Now, the seas and oceans occupy about three-fourths of the surface of the globe, and, of course, to that extent prevent the world from being occupied by people—except by the comparatively small number that are mariners. There, the idea of John seems to be, the whole world will be inhabitable, and no part will be given up to the wastes of oceans. In the present state of things, these vast oceans are necessary to render the world a fit abode for human beings, as well as to give life and happiness to the numberless tribes of animals that find their homes in the waters. In the future state, it would seem, the present arrangement will be unnecessary; and if man dwells upon the earth at all, or if he visits it as a temporary abode ... These vast wastes of water will be needless. It should be remembered that the earth, in its changes, according to the teachings of geology, has undergone many revolutions quite as remarkable as it would be if all the lakes, and seas, and oceans of the earth should disappear. Still, it is not certain that it was intended that this language should be understood literally as applied to the material globe. The object is to describe the future blessedness of the righteous; and the idea is, that that will be a world where there will be no such wastes as those produced by oceans.”

Some commentators believe that this vision is basically a repeat of what John saw in Chapter 20, and that the description pertains to the Millennium. The suggestion of chronology in these chapters prevents us from supposing this to be the case.

We are given the impression that God is creating something completely new, even if He uses part of the old creation.

b. The New Jerusalem 21:2

The details of this vision are worked out more fully in the following section, beginning with vs. 9. We must emphasize that here, as in Verse 9 the city is depicted as a bride, the bride of the Lamb. The Bible is consistent in the use of this image. It describes the church in her relationship to Jesus Christ. John the Baptist calls himself “the friend of the bridegroom.”⁵⁰¹ We read: “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend

⁴⁹⁷ Isa. 66:22

⁴⁹⁸ II Peter 3:12,13

⁴⁹⁹ See II Peter 3:5

⁵⁰⁰ See Gen. 1:2,6-10

⁵⁰¹ NKJV

who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete."⁵⁰² In his talk with the elders of Ephesus, Paul speaks "of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."⁵⁰³ And to the church in Corinth, he writes: "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him."⁵⁰⁴ And speaking about sexual relationship in marriage, he states: "This is a profound mystery-but I am talking about Christ and the church."⁵⁰⁵

If the New Jerusalem is the bride of the Lamb, it is not a picture of heaven but of us. We will not walk the streets of gold; we are those streets!

c. The Word of God 21:3-6

We hear two voices speaking in these verses. We do not know who is the first speaker. It is probably the voice of one of the angels. The second voice is the voice of the One who sits on the throne, the Creator of heaven and earth, God Almighty. The angel speaks of the fellowship with God in terms that are related to the Old Testament and the New. The image is of the tabernacle that was used during the desert crossing of Israel on her way to the Promised Land. The Greek word, rendered "dwelling" is *skene*, which means: "tent," or "tabernacle." The same word is used in the Prologue of John's Gospel where John states about Jesus: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."⁵⁰⁶

These expressions are, at the same time, easy to understand and beyond comprehension. We see some of this contradiction reflected in John's lack of understanding. As a man who had only recently been redeemed from sin, it was difficult for him to imagine what it would be like when the church as a whole would be filled in every one of its atoms with the glory of God. We do not know what it will be like. Another difficult question is, whether, apart from the church, apart from the Kingdom of God, will there be other nations who, although they are blessed, will not be part of the church and the Kingdom?

One thing is sure, the presence of God will henceforth be uncovered. There will no longer be a sanctuary, part of which blocks the entrance to the Holy of Holiest. There will no longer be a curtain that separates. There will no longer be any "likeness of sinful flesh"⁵⁰⁷ that covered the glory of God in the Person of Jesus Christ. The sun of God's glory will shine in all its brilliance.

We note that the passing away of the old order of things consists in the absence of factors that are negative: no more tears, or "death or mourning or crying or pain." We see the love and compassion of God for the condition of life as it is now. We read earlier, in connection with the Great Tribulation: "[God Himself] will wipe every tear from their eyes."⁵⁰⁸ This depicts the total healing of our emotions.

Then God Himself speaks. His words are a condensation of the Gospel, as we now know it. "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' " In our present experience it is so that if He is seated on the throne of our life, He will, even now, make everything new for us.

After all that happened in the universe, the great revolt, the challenge by the adversary as to who has the right to occupy the throne, we read that all this is past and God sits on the throne. God says that, in the time in which we live now, the principle of renewal is already at work. The matter has been decided. The enemy has been defeated at Golgotha. We now live in a transition period.

The words, spoken by the Father: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End" indicate that the Father and the Son speak in unison. God orders John: "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." It is important that, not only John's immediate surrounding that could hear his spoken words is informed, but also the larger circle and generations to come. We would never have known this if John had not taken pen and paper and written down the Words God spoke. The apostle Peter recognized the

⁵⁰² John 3:29

⁵⁰³ Acts 20:28

⁵⁰⁴ II Cor. 11:2

⁵⁰⁵ Eph. 5:32

⁵⁰⁶ John 1:14

⁵⁰⁷ See Rom. 8:3 (NKJV)

⁵⁰⁸ See Rev. 7:17

importance of the written word when he wrote in his Second Epistle the words “So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.”⁵⁰⁹ Evidently, God thinks it is important for us, in the age and circumstance in which we live, to keep our goal and destination before our eyes. Our hope will consist in this, that during our journey through this world on our way home, we will constantly think of the moment at which we will cross the threshold and feel God’s handkerchief on our teary cheeks.

The order to write confirms that the written Word must guide our faith. Not only are we not eyewitnesses of the things John saw, but our circumstances tend to point us in a direction that is completely opposite of the truth. It is nigh to impossible for us to see that we travel in the direction of the renewal of all things. The tendency of life at present is degeneration and destruction; we are all moving toward death. We need the written Word of God to see through the outward appearance of our state of affairs. It must be evident that none of us were created for the condition of the world as it is now. A Dutch poet once wrote: “One begins by accepting life, and ends by accepting death.” Even those words constitute a cry of rebellion. Our heart is supposed to resist the approach of death. Our greatest danger is accepting the present condition as normal and to stop thirsting. We must keep resisting the devil’s propaganda. God promises to quench our thirst, but this is of no avail to us if we stop thirsting! God’s Word serves to keep our memory alive. The worst that could ever happen to us would be to forget who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.

God not only orders John to write, but He also says “these words are trustworthy and true.” We repeat that all we hear in this world is Satan’s version of affairs. The Word of God protects us against the tendency to believe his nonsense. During World War II, when I lived in the Netherlands, people risked their life and freedom to listen to the BBC radio to a program called *Free Netherlands*. The people felt they needed this to resist the flood of lies issued by Hitler’s minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. Moses knew the importance of the written Word of God. Before Israel’s entry into Canaan, he stated: “They are not just idle words for you--they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”⁵¹⁰

The words “I am the Alpha and the Omega” are found three times in the Book of Revelation.⁵¹¹ They mark the beginning and the end of this book. They throw a new light on Paul’s doxology, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.”⁵¹² God is the origin and the ultimate goal of all of creation; He is also the beginning and purpose of my life and personality! We will probably never fully understand that, with our own free will, we can say “amen” to these things and surrender to Him in love. The opening of the seals, the blowing of the trumpets, and the pouring out of the bowls of wrath make us understand who God is and how glorious He is.

In a commentary on Revelation by Mounce, the author explains that “alpha and omega” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “aleph and tau.” The first and last letters of the alphabet are representative of the whole. When we use the expression “A-Z” in English, we mean the whole. When we say that God is “A-Z” we declare that He is all there is to say. “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”⁵¹³

d. The Participants 21:7

The statement: “He who overcomes will inherit all this” could tend to discourage us. We envision a superhuman effort that we would be expected to make. Paul answers his own question: “And who is equal to such a task?” with: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our

⁵⁰⁹ II Peter 1:12-15

⁵¹⁰ Deut. 32:47

⁵¹¹ Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13

⁵¹² Rom. 11:36

⁵¹³ John 1:3

competence comes from God.”⁵¹⁴ The victory God expects from us is the same as Jacob’s victory at the Jabbok when he struggled with the angel and pleaded for mercy.⁵¹⁵ Now it is true “Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city,”⁵¹⁶ but we can hardly maintain that confession of our sins requires a superhuman effort. We must get used to the idea that, what we consider to be a defeat, our surrender to God, is our victory in God’s eyes.

We must not forget that God is ultimately only interested in whether our lives bear fruit or not. We will be evaluated according to our acts, not according to what we pretend to be. The only thing that counts will be whether the righteous requirements of the law are fully met in us, because we do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.⁵¹⁷ The victory that must become evident in our life is the victory Jesus won. If our competence would not come from God, our position would indeed be desperate.

“He who overcomes will inherit all this.” What “all this” stands for is explained in the seven letters Jesus ordered John to write to the seven churches in Asia. To the church of Ephesus, Jesus had said: “I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”⁵¹⁸ The church in Smyrna would not be hurt at all by the second death.⁵¹⁹ To Pergamum, He wrote: “I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”⁵²⁰ The church in Thyatira received the promise: “I will give authority over the nations- [you] will rule them with an iron scepter; [you] will dash them to pieces like pottery’-just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give [you] the morning star.”⁵²¹ About the church in Sardis He wrote: “They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”⁵²² To the overcomers in Philadelphia He promised: “I will make [him] a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”⁵²³ And the promise to the church in Laodicea was: “I will give [you] the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”⁵²⁴ All of this is condensed in the promise given here: “I will be his God and he will be my son.” All this is comprehended and condensed here into the words: “I will be his God and he will be my son.” In a sense, this relationship already exists. Our sonship is the immediate result of our regeneration. “To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”⁵²⁵ The striking part of this pronouncement is that it does not state a relationship father-son, but God-son. Luke uses this expression in connection with Adam, while he was still in paradise. Tracing Jesus’ genealogy, he states that Jesus was “the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.”⁵²⁶ The expression applies, of course, particularly to Jesus Christ.

⁵¹⁴ See II Cor. 2:16: 3:5

⁵¹⁵ Gen. 32:24-31; Hos. 12:4

⁵¹⁶ Prov. 16:32

⁵¹⁷ See Rom. 8:4

⁵¹⁸ Rev. 2:7

⁵¹⁹ Rev. 2:11

⁵²⁰ Rev. 2:17

⁵²¹ Rev. 2:26-28

⁵²² Rev. 3:4,5

⁵²³ Rev. 3:12

⁵²⁴ Rev. 3:21

⁵²⁵ John 1:12

⁵²⁶ Luke 3:38

This means that the relationship will be a vehicle for God's revelation through us as it was in Jesus. It will be the perfection of that which is already ours.

e. The Non-Participants 21:8

The last part of the announcement is fear provoking. Lack of this relationship with God will result in cowardice, unbelief, vileness, murder, sexual immorality, and spiritual immorality. When God judges a person, He judges him according to the relationship he has with God or according to the lack of it. The condemned will end up in the fiery lake of burning sulfur, which is hell itself. The Greek does not state that those people will go to hell but that their part, or portion, will be hell. Satan and his demons have always been partakers of this condition; these people will partake of the devil. It is not a real change of condition, only an ultimate worsening of it.

2. Description of the City 21:9-27

These verses give us the details of what was introduced in Verse 2. There, John only mentioned that he saw the city. This portion of Scripture is, undoubtedly, one of the summits in the whole Bible. There is a strong resemblance between these verses and the last eight chapters of Ezekiel's prophecy. Both convey the same message. Ezekiel states about the city: "And the name of the city from that time on will be: THE LORD IS THERE."⁵²⁷ John states: "It shone with the glory of God." The fact that Ezekiel describes the temple in great detail and John observes: "I did not see a temple in the city," does not constitute a contradiction if we understand that the temple was the material expression of a spiritual reality.

It is significant that one of the angels who was an instrument of God's wrath accompanies John in this vision of glory. We consider wrath and love to be each other's opposites, and we find it difficult to understand that the same person could represent both. But the contradiction we see is in us, not in God.

In connection with Verse Two, we already observed that the New Jerusalem could not be an image of heaven but that she is the symbolic representation of the church, the bride of Christ.

John sees Jerusalem "coming down out of heaven from God." This city is not static, but dynamic; she is moving constantly from heaven to earth. This same principle is found in the prologue of John's Gospel. In the phrase "The Word was God. He was with God in the beginning," the Greek word *pros* is a preposition of direction. It is hard for us to imagine an eternal movement of two persons or two objects one towards the other. We understand the principle of "growing together," and as such we can envision that God would send a constant stream of revelation of His glory from heaven to earth in the form of the church. Thus the motion of descent never ceases even when Jerusalem reaches the earth. Only dead cities are fixed permanently on earth. Jerusalem is alive; she shines with the glory of God!

The *Shechinah* that was present in a covered mode in the tabernacle and the temple, which became incarnate in Jesus Christ and which John described in Chapter Four of this book, here fills the church. It had been God's purpose for man, ever since creation, that he would bear the image of his Creator in all its fullness. Satan acted as if he showed Eve a shortcut when he presented her with a "surrogate." Here, man has reached the goal of his creation, the fulfillment of his being, which is to be like God. He reaches this goal, not through usurpation, but through surrender. One finds life by losing it. Only those who place their crowns before the throne of God will possess the glory of God. In chapter four, John described the glory of God with the words "The one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian." Here we read: "Its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal." Evidently, mere words are not enough!

It would be easy to get lost in the imagery of verses 12-21. Everything is expressed in terms of gold, pearls, and precious stones. Maybe it is John's intention that we would get lost in this. This glory is unimaginable. It is already breathtaking on earth to see a diamond <BIBLE>of several carats. This city is said to be 12,000 stadia long, wide, and high. The measurement is approximately 1400 miles. The Living Bible renders Verse 16: "When he measured it, he found it was a square as wide as it was long; in fact it was in the form of a cube, for its height was exactly the same as its other dimensions-1,500 miles each way." It is difficult to imagine a diamond of such dimensions, and pearls with a diameter of 72 meters! Yet, there is a strong suggestion that the immeasurable glory of God, as it is expressed in the church, will be measurable, both for humans and angels. Paul refers to this paradox when he writes in his Epistle to the Ephesians: "I

⁵²⁷

Ezek. 48:35

pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.⁵²⁸

All nations enter the city via Israel; the names of the twelve tribes are written on the gates. This is, of course, a reference to the unique role Israel plays in God's revelation of Himself, which culminated in the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ultimately, He is the only gate through which every human being enters. The twelve apostles, the preachers of the Gospel to the whole creation, form the foundation of the wall that surrounds the city.

The gates are represented as pearls. A pearl owes its existence to suffering. The pearl oyster secretes a fluid that encases a grain of sand that enters its shell and causes pain. Thus a pearl is formed. Each of Israel's tribes is presented under the figure of an enormous pearl, referring to the glory of God that results from its immense suffering. Jesus Himself, as the foremost of all Israelites, sets the tone for this figure. This leads us to the definition of glory (a phenomenon which we do not yet fully know on earth) as the reaction of God's grace to suffering. Considering this, we could say that the devil makes a considerable contribution to our glory.

The precious stones and the gold with which the city is built are valuable elements. They represent value to us in our material world. Here they are symbolic representations of spiritual values, of the ultimate reality. The foundation of the city is adorned with real, eternal, spiritual values. The city is founded upon something that is so valuable that it cannot be expressed in human values. All the worlds' diamonds together would only form a fraction of the glory of this city; they would be a soft shadow of the heavenly diamond. Actually, the diamond on earth would not be hard enough to be used in the New Jerusalem.

The twelve precious stones that form the foundation of the city remind us of the twelve stones in the breastplate of the high priest.⁵²⁹ If we compare the list of stones in Exodus 28 with the stones in Revelation 21, we get the following list:

Ex. 28

1. ruby
2. topaz ⁹
3. beryl ⁸
4. turquoise
5. sapphire ²
6. emerald ⁴
7. jacinth ¹¹
8. agate
9. amethyst ¹²
10. chrysolite ⁷
11. onyx
12. jasper ¹

Rev. 21

1. jasper
2. sapphire
3. chalcedony
4. emerald
5. sardonyx
6. carnelian
7. chrysolite
8. beryl
9. topaz
10. chrysolite ⁷
11. jacinth
12. amethyst

We see that eight of the stones in the first list correspond to one in the second list. The fact that the names of the stones in Exodus are written in Hebrew and the ones in Revelation in Greek may account for the slight discrepancy between the two lists.

As mentioned earlier, the greatest difference between Ezekiel's vision and John's is the absence of the temple in Revelation. Ezekiel's prophecy mainly consists of a detailed description of the temple, and John states that there is no temple. The temple was an expression of the presence of God. In the New Jerusalem God is present in full reality, not under the guise of symbols. This reality needs no longer to be expressed symbolically. There is in the Bible a progressive line of revelation. The first images of revelation consisted of a tabernacle with a court and a holy place, which kept man separate from the holy of holies. In Jerusalem even the holy of holies is taken away; only the full reality of the presence of God remains. In

⁵²⁸ Eph. 3:16-19

⁵²⁹ Ex. 28:15-21

Tolkien's book *Lord of the Rings*, the evil presence of Sauron is tangible. How much more will the presence of the Shechinah engulf us!

Three negatives characterize the city: no temple, no light shining in from outside, and no night. A fourth negative element may be added: "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful." Thus far, man has only been able to define holiness in negative terms. For us who are still influenced by the pressure of sin, to express God's holiness in positive terms eludes us. This does, of course, not mean that the glory of God would only consist in the absence of negative things. It is overwhelmingly positive and not merely not negative.

Physical light, such as sunlight or lamplight, is an image of the true light that is spiritual. The image may resemble reality but what ultimately counts is reality itself. We want that which is eternal. Because of the presence of the glory of God, the city is full of light. As Jesus could say on earth: "I am the light of the world,"⁵³⁰ so is He the one here who illuminates the city; He is the lamp of the church.

The reference in Verse 24 to the kings of the earth who will bring their splendor into the city is borrowed from Haggai's prophecy during the rebuilding of the temple. We read there: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."⁵³¹

It is difficult to get a clear picture of what is meant here. It sounds as if there will be kings and nations outside the city, which does not sound likely. It could be that John uses this figure of speech to establish a link with the above-mentioned prophecy by Haggai.

The fact that the city possesses the perfect glory of God does not mean that no glory could be added to it. Nations and kings will bring their splendor and glory into the New Jerusalem. Man possesses honor and glory because God made him.

When we compare this portion with the lament of the merchants and sailors over the fall of Babylon,⁵³² these verses come into the right perspective and they exude a radiant light. Babylon's economy was based on dishonesty and egoism. The foundation of the New Jerusalem is pure and altruistic. The commerce of the New Jerusalem will be like the putting down of the crowns of the elders before the throne of God.⁵³³ The presentation of the merchandise by the merchants is an act of surrender. Both merchandise and commerce will be glorious. It may seem strange to us that trade and economy could become images of a heavenly reality. What we see on earth is often a caricature of the real thing. We can, however, understand God's intent here sufficiently to reconstruct the picture. Things as we know them on earth are all shadows of a heavenly reality.

No sin or sinner will enter this city. Everything and everybody will be founded on the basis of the new life Jesus Christ made available in His death and resurrection. The Book of the Lamb will be the foundation and the rule for all.

The eternal character of the New Jerusalem is probably best expressed in the absence of night. The gates of the city will never be shut because there will no longer be any night. We are presently so conditioned by the rhythm of life in which day and night follow each other that the thought of an absence of change would make us feel tired. There will, however, be no fatigue in eternity. It is also impossible for us to imagine a situation in which there are no contrasts, in which light is not set off by shadow or darkness. We need this kind of tension in our present condition. Darkness is a negative entity; it is absence of light. The fact that God used that, which in essence is a curse, and bent it towards our benefit, allowing us to relax and refresh in sleep and darkness, should not close our eyes to the fact that darkness is a negative. "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."⁵³⁴ In the same way as the light we know is an image of a spiritual reality,

⁵³⁰ John 8:12

⁵³¹ Hag. 2:6-9

⁵³² See Rev. 18:19-21

⁵³³ See Rev. 4:10,11

⁵³⁴ I John 1:5

so is also darkness a picture of a spiritual negative actuality. Darkness belongs to the devil. This truth is expressed in the writings of John, who writes about our walking in the light or in the darkness.⁵³⁵ That which ceases to exist is the real night, not the shadow we know now.

3. The River of the Water of Life 22:1-5

This river corresponds to the brook Ezekiel saw coming out of the temple.⁵³⁶ The difference in description of this river is not in the river itself, but in the personalities of both prophets. Ezekiel saw the spiritual reality in its earthly form, although it could not exist as such on earth. John saw the reality with a clearer eye, but still also in a symbolic form. Ezekiel saw the beginning of the river as a trickle coming from the sanctuary, growing into a broad and deep stream. John sees a full-grown river streaming from the throne of God. At this point there is no longer an element of growth. Fullness and completeness exist from the very beginning. The river consists of fresh crystal clear water, perfectly pure and whole. It is so basic and vitalizing that it is called “the water of life.” It is about this river that the Psalmist said: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”⁵³⁷ This water is life from God Himself that flows from His throne toward man. This is God’s Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity.

John’s Gospel clarifies what this means in Jesus’ invitation. We read: “On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.”⁵³⁸ This water flows from the throne of God. If God is enthroned in our life, this water will stream out of us also. In these verses in Revelation, God sits on the throne in the midst of the church and the water, therefore, streams through the city and out of it.

The tree of life grows on both sides of the river; not just one single tree as in Paradise, but a whole orchard. John speaks about the fruit of the tree and the healing virtue of the leaves. When we look at the Genesis account of Paradise, we understand that Adam and Eve had a choice between two trees. We do not learn what would have happened had Adam first eaten from the tree of life, apart from the fact that he would have acquired physical immortality.⁵³⁹ In eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam rebelled against God and declared his independence. Eating from the tree of life at an earlier stage would have meant a declaration of dependency upon God, a demonstration of love and surrender to Him. Evidently, the principle of eating of the tree of life remains the same throughout time and eternity. The new man, the church, the New Jerusalem will keep on eating from the tree of life to full satisfaction, not in order to obtain eternal life but to maintain and sustain it. Evidently, possession of eternal life will not be a mechanical reality that will continue by itself without our effort. We will have to keep eating to stay alive. As in all fellowship of life, there must be a continuous declaration of love and surrender to God.

“And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” The problem with this statement is that we are also told that there will be no more sickness or death, probably even no more “nations.” Maybe we can see this as John’s projection of the present upon the screen of the future. From the viewpoint of a sinful human being, looking at heaven from a sick world, John sees the tree of life as a means of healing. Speaking from a perspective of time, we can say that healing is already behind us when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth.

The way John describes this puts the emphasis on the meaning and implication of the vision. John constantly draws lines from what he sees in heaven to the situation in which we live on earth. This gives us the opportunity to compare ourselves with the heavenly reality. This was Ezekiel’s intent in his description of the new temple. God said to him: “Son of man, describe the temple to the people of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their sins. Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make

⁵³⁵ See John 3:18-21; 8:12; 9:4,5; 11:9,10; 13:20; I John 1:5-7; 2:8-11.

⁵³⁶ See Ezek. 47:1-12

⁵³⁷ Ps. 42:1

⁵³⁸ John 7:37-39

⁵³⁹ See Gen. 3:22

known to them the design of the temple-its arrangement, its exits and entrances-its whole design and all its regulations and laws. Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations.”⁵⁴⁰ So, John repeats for us in various forms certain facets of his vision. He resembles a composer who, at the end of his symphony, repeats the main theme with certain variations.

The climax of the whole book is in Verses Three and Four: “The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”

The throne of God is mentioned twice in the first five verses, first as the source of the river of the water of life and then as the core, the realization of all power, the center of worship and adoration. God, the Father and the Lamb are enthroned in the middle of the church. This represents, at the same time, the realization of our abandon. God’s reign is not enforced; it is not a form of enslavement. Jesus said: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”⁵⁴¹ Our surrender to God is based upon friendship and love. God has authority over our lives as a husband over a wife in the good, pure, and glorious sense of the word, not as a tyrant but as someone who is ready to give his life for the other. Jesus’ authority over my life rests on the fact that He loved me and gave Himself for me.⁵⁴² It is my greatest honor to say, as the Hebrew slave: “I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free.”⁵⁴³ That is the foundation of my being His servant; because of this I want to serve Him eternally. I do not speak for myself alone but for all of the New Jerusalem!

We must not lightly gloss over these words “They will see his face.” God had said to Moses: “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”⁵⁴⁴ And John states in the Prologue of his Gospel: “No one has ever seen God.”⁵⁴⁵ Man’s fall into sin put these restrictions on our mortal bodies. But for those, who have passed through death and have risen from the dead, these restrictions are no longer valid. Seeing God is an experience that will completely absorb our spirit, soul, and body. It will be the most overwhelming event ever to take place. This is the final goal of all God’s revelation that we experience God. For that reason we were created; this is our “raison d’être.” To see Him from whom I have come forth, the Father Himself, will be the fulfillment of my life. It would be better to die a second time than to miss this. Actually, in a way that is what we will do. To see Him from whose presence the earth and sky flee, will keep alive the tension between the Creator and the creature. What do I know about it? I don’t know what I am saying! I, John Schultz, will see God together with Job, who said: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes-I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!”⁵⁴⁶ My heart yearns together with his. The apostle John says: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”⁵⁴⁷ I will see God; I will see God, and Jesus Christ “who loved me and gave himself for me.”⁵⁴⁸ I cannot get enough of this!

God’s name will be on our foreheads. This, and the new name that will be given to us, are proof of ownership. This divine stigma will say “Property of God.” As the apostle Paul states: “The world or life or

⁵⁴⁰ Ezek. 43:10,11

⁵⁴¹ John 15:15

⁵⁴² See Gal. 2:20

⁵⁴³ Ex. 21:5

⁵⁴⁴ Ex. 33:20

⁵⁴⁵ John 1:18

⁵⁴⁶ Job 19:25-27

⁵⁴⁷ I John 3:2

⁵⁴⁸ See Gal. 2:20

death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.”⁵⁴⁹ And: “If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”⁵⁵⁰ We must realize that we will bear God’s stamp because of our living and dying for the Lord. In one sense, we already bear this name now, but then it will be totally justified in us. Bearing God’s Name and seeing His face will change us. He who is called by the Name of God will partake of His nature. God will be all and in all.⁵⁵¹ This will not mean a loss of identity. Our identification with Him and His identification with us complete our personality. It is like when a man and a woman give themselves to each other, they become more human.

In Verse Five John wraps up the description of the New Jerusalem by repeating what he said before. “There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.”⁵⁵² The matter of light and darkness is solved here once for all. The light of God will enlighten us. This is the light that gives us insight and that will enable us spiritually and morally to do the right things and make the right choices. This will result for us in royal dignity. The New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, will reign as a king, not for a few years or even for a millennium, but eternally.

This takes us back to the beginning of the book, to the place where we are now, where the revelation of Jesus Christ begins with the words: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”⁵⁵³

C. Conclusion 22:6-21

We hear at least three voices in the last verses of this book. Jesus speaks in Verses 6,7,12-16 and 20. John speaks in Verse Eight and the angel speaks in Verses 9-11. It is not too clear who the speaker is in verses 17-19; it could be John. In Verse 20 the Lord speaks and John says “Amen.”

In the three instances where Jesus speaks, we read His assurance: “I am coming soon!” After more than twenty centuries have gone by, these words sound strange in our ears. We do not know when Christ’s return in space and time will occur. It remains important that we live and work as if He will come tomorrow. Our attitude toward life will be governed by our expectation of His return and our longing for it. If the tension between our service for the Lord and our anticipation of the Lord’s coming slackens, we will open ourselves up to all kinds of danger. The worst that could happen to us would be to live as if the Lord would not come back during our lifetime.

Jesus calls Himself in Verse Six, “the God of the spirits of the prophets.” This sounds like a strange title. Peter, in his First Epistle, speaks about “the Spirit of Christ” in the prophets. We read: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”⁵⁵⁴ In Jesus’ words, “spirits” is used in the plural. This leads us to believe that this does not speak about the Holy Spirit but about the human spirit of these prophets. They have surrendered to God in obedience their spirit, the organ of spiritual fellowship with God. Paul says about the prophets: “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.”⁵⁵⁵ The person, who surrenders to God, body, soul, and spirit, does not lose control over himself. Loss of control only occurs with demon possession, not in being filled with the Holy Spirit. Evidently,

⁵⁴⁹ I Cor. 3:22-23

⁵⁵⁰ Rom. 14:8

⁵⁵¹ See I Cor. 15:28

⁵⁵² See Rev. 20:6; 21:23,25

⁵⁵³ Rev. 1:5,6

⁵⁵⁴ I Peter 1:10,11

⁵⁵⁵ I Cor. 14:32

prophecy is the result of the cooperation of the human spirit, which has been surrendered to God, with the Holy Spirit.

Christ explains in these words something of the mechanics of prophecy. He sent His angel to His servants to show the things that must soon take place. This does not contradict what Peter says about the work of the Spirit of Christ in the prophets. After all, an angel is also a spirit. Then also, the service of an angel was needed to make the Book of Revelation into the piece of art it is. Revelation pertains to more than prophetic insight only. Certain historic and future events on earth are linked in it to the heavenly reality and the struggle that takes place in the heavenly places. When God said to Amos: "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets,"⁵⁵⁶ He meant much more than that He showed them future events. God's revelation involves content, meaning, and perspective of history. It is of the greatest importance that we all, like Abraham, see "the day of Jesus Christ" in our daily events.⁵⁵⁷ That is true prophecy! This is the reason John constantly draws lines from situations from the time of Nero and Domitian to the throne of God and back to earth. Everything that happens on earth is governed by what takes place in the heavenly realms. That is the reason the Book of Revelation calls insight in the content of this book and the application of it on earth: "Blessedness." We read: "Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book." It is not by accident that these words are found on the last page of the Bible; they pertain to all of Scripture.

John mentions again his own name as he did in the first chapter of this book.⁵⁵⁸ We do not find here the anonymity of the Gospel of John, where he only called himself: "the disciple whom Jesus loved."⁵⁵⁹ No reason is given for this difference.

It is rather strange that John concludes his glorious testimony in this book with such a very human blunder: he worships the wrong person! We can understand the astonishment and lack of understanding on the part of the angel. John's lack of spiritual insight is probably the best example that can be given of the fallen state of mankind. If someone had fallen down before John to worship him, he would have protested in horror, as Peter did in Cornelius' home,⁵⁶⁰ and Paul and Barnabas in Lystra.⁵⁶¹ Paul's experience is indicative of the background of this kind of "mistake." In his case, the people came with bulls and wreaths which they wanted to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. When Paul refused this worship, they stoned him and left him for dead. It was probably at that time that Paul had the experience of being taken into the third heaven where he heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell." This proves the demonic background of these kinds of acts of worship. Otherwise it is inconceivable that one who refuses to be worshipped is stoned to death because of it. Satan tried to make the apostle Paul fall into sin, and when this did not succeed, he tried to kill him. Wreaths and bulls are not sufficient to pay homage to a human being who serves God. God Himself honored Paul with an honor that would, for years to come, keep him speechless. Think what Paul would have missed, if he had accepted Satan's "honor."

John's problem was the opposite of Paul's. According to the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "All angels [are] ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation."⁵⁶² In God's order of creation, angels are of a lower rank than human beings. We may have some problems coming to grip with this truth when we enter eternity. The important fact is that we worship God. When we do this, the last vestiges of rebellion will be erased from our heart.

Verse Ten shows the opposite of the order given to Daniel. Daniel was told: "Close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end."⁵⁶³ For John, the time of the end was at the door. We live now

⁵⁵⁶ Amos 3:7

⁵⁵⁷ See John 8:56

⁵⁵⁸ See Rev. 1:4,9

⁵⁵⁹ See John 13:23

⁵⁶⁰ See Acts 10:25,26

⁵⁶¹ See Acts 14:11-15

⁵⁶² Heb. 1:14

⁵⁶³ Dan. 12:4

in the time when nothing stands between us and the Second Coming of Christ. It could happen anytime. In the waiting period in which we live now, the people who sin and those who have been cleansed from their sin will each continue in the way they have chosen. In both directions, a ripening process is at work. In both cases, the Bible speaks about what one is and what one does. Righteousness and unrighteousness consists of acts; vileness and holiness speak of a condition. One is what one does, and vice versa. The increase of holiness, however, is not the result of our own efforts. We can be vile and make ourselves viler, but we cannot make ourselves holier. We are made holy. The active role we play in this consists in our surrender. The order given to us is to be righteous and become holy. The way the angel states this, it sounds as a natural and inevitable development. There will, however, always be the possibility that we fall into sin.

As we saw already, Jesus announces His return three times in the last part of this book. The first time there is a connection between Jesus' return and our keeping of His Word. In the second instance, there is the mention of the reward for good deeds done. We note the relationship between our keeping of God's Word, our good deeds, and our expectation of Christ's return. It is a human characteristic to slow down. It is of vital importance that we keep awake the hope of Christ's return. We must live as servants who are waiting for their master's return. The realization that we will have to give account of our deeds provides a healthy basis for our actions. Solomon concluded his profound observations in Ecclesiastes with the words: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."⁵⁶⁴ He also said: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge."

At Christ's return all our acts will be evaluated. We are not responsible for the possession of our gifts, but we are for the way in which we work with them. At this point there is nothing threatening in the announcement: "My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done." The reward is not a punishment in disguise. Some people are confused about the value in eternity of their deeds. At no point will our good deeds compensate for a lack of confession of sin and conversion to God. Paul expresses this very clearly by saying: "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."⁵⁶⁵ Faith in God will result in good works. The fruit of our fellowship with God will be put as a credit on our account. Without Jesus, we would not be able to do a thing. Yet, God holds us responsible for what we do in fellowship with Him. He even pays us for our acts. This sounds so unbelievable to us, yet the Bible constantly confirms this. At Christ's return we will receive what is due to us, even if we think that God owes us nothing. At this point also, some of the first will be last and some of the last first.

In connection with this, Jesus makes the statement: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." He is all there is to say as far as our deeds are concerned. Only those acts that are performed in fellowship with Him and out of love for Him will be those that the Lord will reward us for. All we do must be expressed in the alphabet; otherwise it will not make sense.

Jesus refers to this principle several times in John's Gospel. He says: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing,"⁵⁶⁶ and "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."⁵⁶⁷ Our actions, and with that our whole life, will only have significance in as much as we are focused on God. From the reference to the washing of our clothes it is clear that this does not speak about our achievements. We are inherently dirty, and we need to be cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Washing our robes is symbolic of confession and faith. It means that we confess our sins, and we trust that the death of Christ is sufficient payment for our sins. In the natural, we seldom see confession of sin as an expression of something positive. It seems like a paradox to us to equate confession of sin with cleansing. We find the same kind of paradox in the beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

⁵⁶⁴ Eccl. 12:13,14

⁵⁶⁵ Rom. 4:4,5

⁵⁶⁶ John 15:5

⁵⁶⁷ John 3:20,21

There Jesus connects blessing to matters that, in the natural, are considered undesirable. Such is the blessing of the washing of our robes.

Another paradox is the fact that the washing of our robes gives us the right to eat from the tree of life. In the beginning of the Bible, the tree of life stands as an alternative to the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This is symbolic of man's choice. Here the tree of life is symbolic of man's right. The tree of life represents life in fellowship with God. Those who confess their sins and have their lives cleansed by the blood of Jesus have a right to fellowship with God. A married woman has a claim upon the love and fellowship of her husband.

It sounds strange and contradictory that a human being would have a claim upon God. When man fell into sin, God deliberately closed the way to the tree of life.⁵⁶⁸ Here, that way is deliberately opened again. But the opening is by far more glorious than before. God recognizes our rights because we are created in His image. A person who does not serve God has no rights. We obtain God's rights by giving them up!

Verse Fourteen is filled to the brim with decisions. Entering through the gates is an act of the will. We begin life with God by entering through the narrow gate that leads to life,⁵⁶⁹ and we end up by entering through the gate of the New Jerusalem. The second entering is as much a matter of choice as is the first. The first may be the more difficult of the two because it is a first time. We often more stumble through the narrow gate than enter it with dignity. We will enter the New Jerusalem because we have a right to do so. We can enter majestically and victoriously. Then we will become part of the city and reflect the glory of God. Strange as it may sound, we have a right to do so!

As in Verse Eight of the previous chapter, there is in Verse Fifteen a negative reference to those who have been rejected. The most characteristic features of these people are that they love and practice falsehood. The universal definition of sin can be applied to them: they "fall short of the glory of God."⁵⁷⁰ For Westerners, who only know the dog as a pet, the words "outside are the dogs" do not seem appropriate. We do not know the dog as the people in the Middle East and parts of Asia and Africa know them, as animals that feed on the refuse of society. To the eastern mind, the dog was symbolic of man in his fallen condition, sick, emaciated, malicious, knowing the difference between good and evil but choosing evil. "Those who practice magic arts (the NKJV calls them "sorcerers") are those who try to use the power of the devil for their own benefit. By doing this, the human being, thinking to manipulate Satan, falls into his trap by his own egoism. Murderers are the incarnation of human hatred. They sacrifice the life of a fellow human in order to survive themselves. The idolater is the person who turns his back to the living God and bows down to things or creatures that are on a lower level of creation than he is himself. In the midst of the glory of this chapter, we should not waste too much time to look at this section! This verse is meant as a warning to those who are alive.

Verse Sixteen places, for the second time, the whole authority of Him who has all power in heaven and on earth behind the prophecy of both Old and New Testament. Undoubtedly, that which is said about the Word of God in this last chapter of the Book of Revelation can be applied to the Bible as a whole.

Jesus calls Himself here "the Root and the Offspring of David." David was the man after God's own heart.⁵⁷¹ The Offspring of David, therefore, are those in whom God is well pleased. Jesus identifies Himself here with David and his offspring. In the physical sense of the word, Jesus is David's offspring. David, as a man after God's own heart, was only a shadow of a heavenly reality. To put it plainly, God loved David because he reminded God of His own Son. Jesus is the source of all that is pleasing to God. David grew up as a tree of which Jesus Christ is the root.

In the same way, Jesus is for us the true vine and we are the branches. The branches and vine are one. We are only acceptable to God because of Jesus Christ. He is God's pleasure within us. We note that the reference in Jesus' Words is to the line of royalty. The offspring of David consist of people who have a claim to the throne and who possess royal dignity. In that regard also, Jesus is the root and the stem, the beginning and the end. He is the source and manifestation of God's authority in us.

⁵⁶⁸ See Gen 3:22-24

⁵⁶⁹ See Matt. 7:13,14

⁵⁷⁰ See Rom. 3:23

⁵⁷¹ See I Sam. 13:14

Lastly, the offspring of David is the line of hope. One of David's sons, who would be born, would be the Messiah, the salvation of Israel and the blessing of the world. If Jesus is in us, we are sons of David, and therefore, the fulfillment of the promise.

The same expectation is expressed in the image of the Morning Star. Peter uses the expression in his Second Epistle in connection with the fulfillment of prophecy: "And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."⁵⁷² A new day will dawn for us and the morning star will rise in our hearts. The Book of Proverbs confirms this. "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."⁵⁷³ The revelation of God's glory will not occur without us. The Morning Star will first rise in our own hearts. Even at present, we still speak of the Star of David. This star is composed of two triangles, which together form a star. Some people see in this the combination of the two trinities, the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the human trinity of spirit, soul, and body. That symbol would, in fact, be a fitting expression of the Person of our Lord, as Son of God and Son of Man. Jesus is the shining Morning Star, the fulfillment of all prophecy, the beginning of God's new day. Zechariah saw Him as such. At the birth of his son, John the Baptist, he sang: "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."⁵⁷⁴

Thus the Holy Spirit together with all who belong to the Lord turn to the world with the greatest invitation ever given: "Come!" This unique little word expresses both the depth of God's grace that invites us as well as the responsibility of man who must get up and come. The message of the Book of Revelation and of the Bible as a whole is articulated in the four letters of this word: "COME!"

For the church, as the bride of the Lamb, this means that her whole life must be a translation of this invitation. We must continuously ask ourselves the question whether our lives draw people to God or not. The whole point of the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia was that the Spirit wanted to speak His "Come" through them.

"And let him who hears say, 'Come!' " These words refer to the expression with which each of the seven letters end: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This "hearing" is like the tuning in of a radio to the right frequency. We need spiritual fine-tuning to be able to speak our word of testimony to others. We can only say "Come" if we hear that word spoken to us by the Holy Spirit. In our testimony we only repeat what we hear the Spirit say to us.

At the construction of the tabernacle in the desert, we read that there had to be a curtain made with "blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen--the work of an embroiderer."⁵⁷⁵ The church's invitation ought to be in colors that are attractive to people, colors that draw attention.

"Whoever is thirsty, let him come" in order to quench the deep thirst of his soul for the eternal fellowship with God for which he has been created. The only condition that is stated is thirst. And hasn't sin made us all thirsty? That is the reason Jesus cried out in behalf of us all: "I am thirsty."⁵⁷⁶ John adds to this the words "so that the Scripture would be fulfilled." Our salvation consists of three parts: thirst, come, and drink.

It should be noted that the word "come" plays an important part in the concluding verses of this book. There is the threefold "I am coming soon," spoken by Jesus Himself. There is the threefold testimony: "come" by the Spirit, the bride, and those who hear. Then there is the coming by those who are thirsty. Finally, the "amen" that consists of the words: "Come, Lord Jesus."

The statement in Verses Eighteen and Nineteen are no effort to cause panic; the alert confirms the tremendous importance of the prophetic Word. This warning pertains, not only to the Book of Revelation,

⁵⁷² II Peter 1:19

⁵⁷³ Prov. 4:18

⁵⁷⁴ Luke 1:76-79

⁵⁷⁵ See Ex. 27:16

⁵⁷⁶ John 19:28

but to the prophecy of the Bible as a whole. We must be careful not to do violence to the Word of God as it was spoken by people who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. If we do we will suffer eternal damage for ourselves. Those who undermine the Bible will fall down like a hollow tree. The theories of Bible critics will crumble like a house of cards. As Luther wrote: “That Word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth.”

Adding to the Word of God means placing human wisdom, and traditions, and carnal insights, next to it or above it. This is an indication of a lack of surrender and a trusting in self instead of in the Spirit of God. The Bible warns us against this. We read in the Book of Proverbs: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”⁵⁷⁷ This is what Billy Graham did when he put himself under the authority of the Word of God, which God honored by making him one of the most powerful preachers of all time.

We find an illustration of this tendency to add to the Word of God in Jeremiah’s prophecy. Jeremiah says about the false prophets of Jerusalem: “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?”⁵⁷⁸ These prophets proclaimed their own dreams with such assurance and authority as if they really spoke the Word of God. The modern tendency to reduce absolute truth to something relative surely fits into this category. If people drop the “gold standard” of God’s truth and call that good which they themselves consider to be good, they elevate a subjective standard to the level of the of God’s objective standard. That opens the door for acceptance of such things as “alternate lifestyles” and degradation of marriage and family. If one becomes his own judge, what happens to the law? Such additions or subtractions invite God’s plagues. Moving away from the truth that the Bible is the inspired Word of God will have far reaching consequences.

Subtracting from the authority of the Bible is based upon the same principle as adding to it. It makes man the editor in chief of the Word of God. Theologians who demythologize the Bible and despise the blood of the Lamb (as one Dutch theologian commented: “Give my share to pooch!”) are those who subtract and contribute to the ruin of the discipline of theology and of the church. God says that for such people there will be no fruit from the tree of life. This means that God has reserved a part of the tree of life and of the New Jerusalem for each living person; otherwise it could not be said that God would take away his share.

We read already in Verse 14 that people who wash their robes have a right to the trees and to the city. This suggests that we can lose our rights by allowing our robes to remain filthy. If we mess around with the Word of God we soil ourselves.

The Lord who reveals Himself in this book says: “Yes, I am coming soon.” In the beginning of our study of Revelation, we noted that the topic of the book is not about events that are about to take place, but about the revelation of Jesus Christ. The emphasis is upon a Person, not upon things. The events are, of course, important and historical in the past and in the future. They are events that occur in time and space, but more important than what happens is who the Lord is. Everything that happens only has value in as much as it pertains to Him. He is the meaning and purpose of history. Even in His return, it is only He who is important. The fact that He will make all things new is not irrelevant, but it is incidental.

When I initially wrote the notes for this study, I was away from my wife. She was in the United States of America and I was in the Netherlands. I eagerly anticipated the moment when I could see her and hold her again in my arms. The things we would do together would be the consequence of our reunion. It would come naturally. The important part was that we loved one another as persons and would be able to express that love. It will be the same when Christ returns. In the three instances in which “I am coming soon” is stated, obedience, reward, and love for the Lord are mentioned. “But the greatest of these is love.”⁵⁷⁹ All who love the Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love will be able to say: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” That is the voice of the bride.

The last word of the whole Bible is “grace.” This word is given in the form of a benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.” The Greek word *charis* has a broad meaning in the

⁵⁷⁷ Prov. 3:5,6

⁵⁷⁸ Jer. 23:16,18

⁵⁷⁹ I Cor. 13:13

New Testament. Paul, James, and Peter each put a different emphasis on it in the context of their epistles. Paul places “grace” over against our human efforts to obtain our salvation. In the Epistle to the Ephesians, we read: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast.”⁵⁸⁰ James uses “grace” as an equivalent for God’s rehabilitation of man. We read: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” and: “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”⁵⁸¹ Sin makes man rebellious and proud. We humble ourselves for God in our conversion, upon which God bestows His glory upon us in grace. Peter defines the most difficult form of “grace” for us. We read: “For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”⁵⁸² “Commendable” is the rendering of the Greek word *charis*. Unfortunately, the English does not express clearly what Peter intends to say. A better translation would be “For it is grace if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is grace before God.” This means a reversal of human evaluation; it is also a very practical recommendation. The apostle Paul had already made this discovery when he wrote to the Philippians: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.”⁵⁸³ The Greek here has the word *charis* used as a verb, in English rendered “granted.”

This last shade of meaning seems to be the most appropriate for the understanding of this last verse of Revelation. After all, the book is meant for Christians, people who love Jesus and who are looking forward to His return, who are at the point of entering into the Great Tribulation. It is for those who suffer unjustly and who praise God for it. That is grace!

This brings us to the end of our study. What I wrote is merely a shadow of an unspeakable experience. I felt as John must have felt when he wrote: “There before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice ... speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’”⁵⁸⁴

⁵⁸⁰ Eph. 2:8,9

⁵⁸¹ James 4:6,10

⁵⁸² I Peter 2:19,20

⁵⁸³ Phil. 1:29,30

⁵⁸⁴ Rev. 4:1-2