

Shepherding Notes

Revelation

By Caleb Bunch

Today we start the last book that we will study this year. It is also the most challenging book of the New Testament to study. Revelation is jam-packed with vision imagery and fantastical symbolism. Before we begin, I would like to provide three disclaimers, then highlight seven key truths from this opening chapter.

Three Disclaimers

- There are a number of frameworks developed by theologians through which we can examine this book. I will approach the book from an amillennial perspective. If you hold to a different view, there will be some points of disagreement, but there will still be many general points of agreement. If you don't know what position you adhere to, I hope this is a good starting point.
- The book of Revelation and our overall understanding of eschatology (end-times theology) should not be a reason for division. Even if we don't align perfectly in our interpretation, we can certainly agree on the main point: Jesus is victorious in the end!
- Nobody has 100% of the answers about Revelation — even people who claim they do. (Maybe especially the people who claim they do.) I will do my best to present helpful, thought-provoking, and applicable gospel-centered notes each day. There will likely be many occasions when my response will be, "I am not sure."

Seven Truths

- The Greek word for Revelation is Apocalypse, which means "uncovering" or "unveiling." This book is God folding back one corner of the curtain to allow us to see into the unfolding of events from His perspective.
- Vs. 3 promises blessing to those who read and "keep what is written" (meaning "obey") the words of this book. This is not just a book filled with mysterious prophecies. It contains viable, applicable commands for us to practice every day.
- This book was written by the apostle John while he was enduring his sentence of exile on the isle of Patmos. The early dating of the book places it in the late 60s A.D.

- This book was initially given to John through a vision. The contents were to be written into a letter and sent to seven literal churches in the region of modern-day Turkey.
- Much of the imagery in Revelation is directly connected to Old Testament passages. Compare Daniel 7:9 to Revelation 1:14–15. Knowing the Old Testament, especially the books of prophecy, is incredibly helpful when studying Revelation.
- Revelation is filled with metaphorical images. Sometimes those images are left for us to interpret. At other times, the Bible provides a straightforward explanation. For example, in vs. 20: "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."
- This book is intentionally written in a figurative style. Much of the language is given in the form of apocalyptic literature, which is not intended to be read with a literal eye. The goal is to understand the symbolism when it is not presented clearly.

As we proceed, this book will give you numerous jaw-dropping moments of awe as we consider the incredible glory of King Jesus on display throughout these pages.

"Jesus is victorious in the end. That is the main point – and on that, every interpreter of Revelation agrees."

The book of Revelation was originally sent to seven churches that all existed in the modern-day region of Turkey. In chapters 2–3 we find specific commands addressed to each of these churches. The first four of these addresses are found here. Rather than summarize all four letters, I want to show you the structure that flows through each of them so you can see how to grow from them.

Each letter contains the same seven parts:

- To the church... — Each church is addressed directly and by name. More specifically, it says "To the angel of the church of..." The word "angel" in Greek is simply the word "messenger" — a reference to the pastor or a specific leader of the church in those cities.

- From Jesus... — Each of these seven letters informs the church that the letter is being sent by Jesus Himself — accomplished by reaching back into chapter one and grabbing one specific description of Jesus for each church.

- I Know... — Each church is evaluated by Jesus. In every case, Jesus reveals His omniscience by stating plainly an aspect of their lived experience. He has a deep awareness of all of their struggles and hardships.

- Praise / Rebuke — Jesus commends each church in the ways they are strong and admonishes them where they are weak or disobedient. All of these praises and rebukes are helpful to us as we examine our own personal lives and our local church.

- Exhortation — When there is a rebuke, it is followed by an exhortation to repent. For example: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first." (vs. 5)

- Command to hear — Every letter contains "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Only those who have ears to hear (saved people) will actually hear the Spirit. And Jesus is declaring that every saved person should listen to the commands made to all of these churches.

- Promise for Conquerors — Each of these seven letters concludes with a promise for those who conquer in the specific commands and exhortations presented in that letter.

"Jesus has a deep awareness of all the struggles and hardships of every local church. He commends what is strong and admonishes what is weak – because He loves them."

Today we read the letters to the final three of the seven churches. Our focus will be on the final letter, addressed to the church at Laodicea.

Background on Laodicea

In order to understand this passage, it is beneficial to know a little bit about the city of Laodicea. It was an incredibly wealthy town known for a few particular oddities. First, it was famous for a particular kind of eye medicine that was produced nowhere else in the world. Second, a breed of sheep in the surrounding hills produced an incredibly shiny wool, making Laodicea a fashion city on the world stage.

The third thing that will bring much clarity to this passage is that Laodicea was known to have terrible drinking water. Six miles north of the city was a hot spring known throughout the empire for its supposed healing qualities. These hot springs would bubble up and run into the river flowing through Laodicea. When the hot water joined with the river, it became lukewarm — and also contained excessive calcium carbonate that caused those who drank it to become ill. Meanwhile, Colossae was only eleven miles away and was famous for having the cleanest, most desirable cold spring water in the region. This water also ran down to Laodicea, but by the time it arrived it was lukewarm and muddy and no longer good to drink.

Hot, Cold, or Lukewarm

With that background, notice that God is telling the people in Laodicea that they should be either hot or cold. Many people mistakenly assume that "hot" refers to godliness and "cold" refers to worldliness. This isn't right. God is saying with this metaphor that both hot and cold represent good, true, obedient, vibrant, healthy Christianity. Lukewarmness is going through the motions — never leaning upon, running to, or acknowledging God in your daily life. Yes, these people probably attended church. But the rest of their lives were marked with an ambivalence to God.

This is the only church to whom Jesus pays no compliment. He does not commend their character or their actions. His sole focus is that they have become like the water in their rivers — completely putrid. In verse 17, He makes note of the fact that they have become reliant upon their earthly wealth. Yet God points out that their gold is valueless, their eyes are blinded, and their clothing is actually a garment of shame. The very things that made their city comfortable and confident caused them to take their eyes off the Lord.

He says that if they want true eye salve or gold or clothing of real value, they need to get it from Him.

This is when we reach the most misunderstood part of the text. Jesus said that He stands at the door and knocks. At this point, Jesus is not speaking to unbelievers — He is talking to a local, lukewarm church. In His incredible patience, Jesus shows grace to lukewarm sinners by telling them to repent. What does it look like to repent in a situation like this? It looks like welcoming Jesus into every part of your life and worshipping Him as the center, rather than allowing your health, wealth, and stability to be a reason to ignore Him. "Be zealous and repent."

"Lukewarmness is going through the motions — never leaning upon, running to, or acknowledging God in your daily life. Be zealous and repent."

When turning the page from chapter 3 to chapter 4, you probably notice a significant shift. In musical terms, you could say the text moves from a minor key to a major key. John was taken in the Spirit to see a vision of heaven. The imagery in this chapter is mysterious and glorious. In many cases, the descriptions are unlike anything found anywhere else in Scripture. It seems that human language is too limited to fully describe the marvelous beings and astounding environment that John saw that day.

However, notice that as soon as his eyes fall on the throne, John realizes that all of heaven is focused on Jesus. Every creature, angel, or glimpse of scenery could excite our minds and spark our imagination. But if those were our focus, we would miss the main point of the text and the main person of heaven. Everything in heaven is centered on worshipping Jesus.

It's important to notice that this isn't the first time someone has been given a vision of God's throne room. Just like John, Isaiah also had a vision of that sacred place. Both saw Jesus on the throne, surrounded by angels with six wings. They both heard the chorus sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty..." However, a key difference exists: Isaiah saw Jesus on the throne before His incarnation, while John saw Jesus after the resurrection and His ascension to the throne.

The lyrics of the song in Isaiah 6 differ from those in Revelation 4–5. As we go through the next chapter, you will see that the song of heaven has grown to include the amazing work of Jesus Christ to redeem His people through the cross. Heaven never gets tired of the gospel.

In chapter 4, the focus of the song is on the essence of Jesus' nature, attributes, and works. The most notable aspect of Jesus' nature is that He is thrice Holy — the only attribute of God's nature that is repeatedly emphasized in this threefold form. He truly is holy, holy, holy. Heaven delights in this forever.

The song continues to highlight the eternal and unchanging nature of Jesus. He was, is, and is to come! John then emphasizes twice in verses 9–10 that Jesus "lives forever and ever," after which the 24 elders cast their crowns before Him. No one can challenge Jesus' authority. Everyone who has ever held any semblance of power will have to acknowledge that all power and rule belong to Jesus alone. Everything that exists — both in heaven and on earth — was created by Him and in full accordance with His will.

"Brothers and sisters, focus your thoughts today on the lyrics of heaven's songs. Let their worship inspire your own. Let their joy in the Savior be reflected in your heart."

The Scroll

At the start of chapter 5, the Lord gives John a heavenly challenge. He shows John an angel crying out, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" There is much debate about what this scroll represents. I believe it is a symbolic representation of God's purposes and plans throughout human history and the future. No one in heaven was qualified to open the scroll — even this holy, mighty, sinless angel has no power to open it. The point being made is that no one can bring human history to its divinely appointed end except the one who is worthy to open the scroll.

"Weep No More"

Heaven has every reason to be at peace because Jesus can do what needs to be done. When John saw that all the glorious, powerful beings in heaven couldn't open the scroll, he couldn't help but weep. He was simply told, "Weep no more." If you're afraid of the future, worried about the instability of world powers, concerned about the government, a political movement, or society's decline — weep no more. "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow... Because I know He holds the future..."

The Lion and the Lamb

Why was John told by the angel to dry his eyes? Because a lion stood before Him. The Lord was symbolically presented as a lion at this moment because lions represent royalty, power, and authority. He is the root of David, the royal line. He was a conqueror. He was from the line of Judah, from whom the scepter will never depart. Then, as John kept looking, he realized that standing there was a lamb. This lion and lamb are meant to be understood as the same person — the first image emphasizes power, while the second emphasizes sacrifice.

Just like the lambs Israel killed each year for Passover, Jesus was slain. Things that have been slain don't stand up — they lie in an ever-widening pool of cold blood. But this Lamb, as if it had been slain, was standing among all the most powerful beings in heaven. This small, battered, seemingly weak creature was meant to show the humility of Christ in His perfect sacrifice.

Jesus has always been the lion of power, ruling the universe with unmatched strength throughout eternity. However, it is not His lion-ness that heaven praises forever — it is His lamb-ness that forms the everlasting chorus of heaven's song. According to this song, His self-sacrifice made Him worthy to open the scroll. He accomplished the mission of redeeming a people for God from every part of humanity. He transformed enemies of the Lord into reigning priests.

"Among all the things that heaven's inhabitants could be captivated by, they focus primarily on the gospel. They gaze at the cross and respond with unparalleled adoration: YOU ARE WORTHY!"

We have now reached the most controversial part of Revelation. This section extends from here to chapter 20. I will be more open about my eschatological framework as we approach this section. While most scholars agree with much of what I discussed in chapters 1–5, many of my later points are debated in seminary halls and pulpits everywhere. My goal is to maintain a general level of discussion and avoid the most contentious details.

Today we arrive at perhaps the most well-known part of John's vision: the four horsemen of the apocalypse. I believe that what we will see over the next several chapters is a depiction of human history that spans from the ascension of Jesus into heaven to His return in glory. These chapters provide various perspectives on history to show us what must happen before the end. To be clear, I believe we are living through these events today. However, I also believe that the world has been experiencing these things since roughly 30 A.D. It is my view — the amillennial perspective — that each different form of the vision John sees is God revealing to John the events of history from different angles. These are not separate events but different portrayals of the same events represented through different symbols. (Scholars refer to this as recapitulation theory.)

Today we see that there are six seals on the scroll that the Lamb was given to open. Each seal broken by Jesus results in judgment and suffering across the globe. It would be easy to walk away from a passage like this with fear or despair. Let's focus on how this passage is meant to bring us comfort and settle our hearts.

When war, famine, or natural disasters occur, most people's response is, "Where is God at a time like this?" Revelation 6 shows us the opposite is true. God is not unaware of suffering — He sends it. Regardless of your view of Revelation, we can all agree that God truly controls all events in history, even those that bring misery. As believers in Christ, we should have endless gratitude that these earthly, temporary, limited forms of suffering will be the only suffering we experience. The full, unvented fury of God's wrath remains forever over those who reject the Savior. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear any evil because our Shepherd faithfully leads us forward.

"God is not unaware of suffering — He sends it. Revelation 6 shows us He is in full control of all events in history, even those that bring misery."

Yesterday, we studied the opening of the first six seals. The final verse asks, "...for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" Chapter 7 acts as an interlude before the seventh seal, which will answer that question. The main point is this: God will protect all His people and bring them safely to heaven.

Numerology

Most of the time, when the Bible includes numbers, they are simply there for descriptive purposes. However, in apocalyptic literature like Revelation, John's visions contain all kinds of symbolism, including numeric symbolism. The number 12 is often used to describe aspects of heaven — it likely represents perfection or completion. When we consider the 12,000 from each tribe, this is meant to be a figurative number signifying the full measure of each tribe.

Seals

Since Jesus was just opening the first six seals in the previous chapter, it seems strange at first glance that the 144,000 are "sealed." However, in the ancient world, seals had two main purposes: to show authority and to show ownership. These seals symbolically indicate that these people belong to Jesus.

Tribes

We can be confident that we should not interpret the first half of this chapter literally because the twelve tribes listed here do not match the twelve tribes of the Old Testament. Jacob had 12 sons, but Manasseh — Jacob's grandson — should not be included by that reckoning. The tribe of Dan is also mysteriously absent. The reason John's vision of heaven differs from the twelve tribes in the Old Testament is that it is a figurative way of representing the fullness of God's people entering heaven, not a literal list of tribes.

Heard / Saw

One key to understanding some of John's visions is to realize that what John hears never matches exactly what he sees. In this chapter John hears 144,000 (vs. 4), but then he turns and sees a large multitude beyond anyone's ability to count, "from all tribes, peoples, and languages." This interpretive key reveals that God's actual work always outdoes John's

expectations. John thought that he heard 144,000. He saw an innumerable crowd that outstripped his wildest imagination.

The question asked at the end of chapter 6 is clearly answered by the song of the redeemed. They acknowledge that their salvation is entirely due to God's grace. We, who live through this life and enter into eternity clothed with the righteousness of Christ, will join in that song and recognize that the only reason we did not face God's eternal wrath is because salvation belongs to our God!

"Salvation belongs to our God! The only reason we did not face God's eternal wrath is because He graciously clothed us in the righteousness of Christ."

In order to understand what is going on in this chapter, there are a few essential things to keep in mind.

- These Judgments Are Not Chronological — The events depicted in Revelation are not chronological but represent different perspectives on the same period, from Christ's ascension to His return. Chapter 8 features an unusual chapter break, covering the last of the seven seal judgments and the first four of the seven trumpet judgments. These are best understood as different perspectives of the same events — the judgment of God on earth.
- These Judgments Are Not Literal — One of the most important words to notice is "like." If you just look at the section about the trumpet judgments, you'll see the word "like" used 15 times. These descriptions of judgment symbolize God's anger against sin expressed through various forms of earthly suffering. Just like Jesus said the message of the gospel is "like" a seed scattered on the ground, so also are we to understand these events as metaphorical comparisons.
- These Judgments Are Limited — You will often see fractions attached to these judgments. In this chapter, the fraction that appears 14 times is "a third." The main purpose of this percentage is not to highlight a specific number of people who will suffer, but to show that God has graciously delayed the destruction of 100% of His creation. Even during extreme judgment, God is showing patience and forbearance.
- These Judgments Symbolize God's Victory — Trumpets hold specific symbolism in the Bible — they symbolize God's strong coming of salvation for His people through judgment against His enemies.
- These Judgments Draw on Old Testament Events — The careful reader will notice that some of these trumpet judgments closely resemble the plagues God sent against Egypt. In the Old Testament, nations are often likened to mountains, and the idea of them being thrown into the sea is a depiction of God's ultimate judgment against them.

- These Judgments Remind Us That God Is God — What gives God the right to send suffering and misery into the world? A flawed perspective inflates the position of man by assuming that God is required to cater to the desires of the very people who have actively rebelled against Him. God, as the Creator and Judge of the earth, has the authority to send judgment. Fortunately, He is also a God of mercy who will preserve all those sealed by His grace. If you are in Christ, you do not have to fear God's judgment.

"If you are in Christ, you do not have to fear God's judgment. He preserves all those sealed by His grace."

Chapter 9 describes the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments. While this chapter contains many mysterious symbolic elements, there are three main points to focus on.

These Judgments Deal with Demonic Oppression

As you examine these two judgments, it should be evident that God's way of judging involves allowing evil spirits to carry out evil against mankind. It starts by stating that they were imprisoned in a bottomless pit and bound at the great river Euphrates. This is not a literal geographical description — it is a symbolic way to say that these agents of hell will emerge from a place foreign to mankind. Accompanying them will be an army of two million strong. It is possible that the destruction caused by this demonic army and their leader, Apollyon, is reflected in real-world warfare and plagues.

These Judgments Will Never Touch the Saints of God

If you are in Christ, you are protected from all forms of demonic attack. These judgments are meant to be inflicted only on "those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads." (Rev. 9:4) This truth should have two strong impacts on us. First, it should provide great comfort to know that God will guard us against such evils. Second, it should motivate us to be passionate in evangelism, urging others to know the mercy and grace of the Lord so they can be spared from judgment.

These Judgments Reveal Man's Unwavering Refusal to Repent

The last two verses of chapter 9 reveal the painfully sad truth that even after experiencing overwhelming degrees of demonic judgment, people will still choose to worship demons through false gods, false religions, or material possessions. Human hearts remain steadfast in their devotion to evil, refusing to accept the warnings that judgment offers. No matter how much an unbeliever suffers, they won't turn to the Lord unless God intervenes with grace. Suffering should make it obvious to the unsaved that they need the Lord — but that's not the natural response of the human heart.

"If you are in Christ, you are protected from all forms of demonic attack. These judgments are meant only for those who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads."

After all the chaos of the previous two chapters, today offers a clear reminder that we know who is truly in control. Chapter 10 draws many direct parallels to the prophets of the Old Testament.

Who Is This "Angel"?

Remember that in the Bible, the word "angel" simply means "messenger." When we get to chapter 10, a messenger descends from heaven, but this mighty messenger is not like the others. Compare the description of this angel to Ezekiel 1:28 — "Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." This messenger "angel" speaking to John here is the Lord Himself.

Seal Up the Message

John was instructed to seal some of the message given to him: "Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down." (vs. 4) This is exactly what the Lord told Daniel regarding some of his prophecies. This indicates that certain details about the final trumpet call are to remain hidden. These undisclosed truths show us that God is fully aware of what is to come — He simply chooses not to reveal all the details to us. He will return exactly on time. It is our job to always be prepared.

Eat the Scroll

There is a strange image of John being told to eat the small scroll he was given. This closely parallels the commissioning of Ezekiel, who was told to open his mouth and eat the scroll given to him, after which "it was in my mouth as sweet as honey." The meaning is straightforward: John was being told that it was necessary to internalize the message that the Lord had given to him. It was to be both believed and declared. John was commanded to go beyond a passing interest in this message to a point of digesting it — then to find delight in speaking it as the Lord commands.

"God is fully aware of what is to come — He simply chooses not to reveal all the details to us. He will return exactly on time. It is our job to always be prepared."

Today marks two milestones. First, if you finished the reading today, you have made it halfway through this monumental book of prophecy. Second, today you have encountered what may be the most debated chapter in the entire New Testament. Most of the discussion centers around questions like these:

- Who are the two prophets/witnesses? Are they Moses and Elijah?
- Are they figuratively defining the entire church?
- Will they really breathe fire? Or is this a metaphor about powerful preaching?
- Will they literally be killed and rise again?
- Why is Jerusalem referred to as Sodom and Egypt, historic enemies of God?
- Are the 1,260 days literal?

Those are certainly interesting questions. However, if that is the main focus, I believe they are missing the point. There are three big-picture truths that the Lord is teaching us in this passage.

The People of God Will Always Be Given What Is Necessary to Expand the Kingdom

I personally believe that the prophets are likely symbolic of the church. But, even if they aren't, this point still holds. When the church needs faithful figures to rise up and preach the gospel with power before the world, God will raise people up for that purpose. Throughout church history, we have seen God powerfully equip men and women for ministries that have shaken the world. This will continue to be God's way of operating.

The Enemies of God Will Not Succeed in Their Efforts to Destroy the Church

In this chapter, we see the two powerful prophets being brutally killed, and their bodies treated like war trophies to be desecrated by the evil one. Even so, these prophets are raised to life after three and a half days. I personally believe this describes the church experiencing violent persecution, even unto death, yet ultimately being raised again. No

weapon formed against you can prosper.

"The Kingdom of the World Has Become the Kingdom of Our Lord"

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." (vs. 15) This quote is one of the most powerful statements in all of the Bible — and you have likely heard it many times because it is the main chorus of Handel's Messiah. As I mentioned in chapter 1, the point is that Jesus wins. We can't see Him or His rule in a visible way right now, but that doesn't mean Jesus isn't working and reigning today. As we wait for His return, we look forward to the moment when Christ's perfect rule is fully realized and revealed.

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." — Revelation 11:15

Once again, our chapter begins with a highly debated question. Who is the woman? Some scholars say it is Eve. The Roman Catholic Church believes it is Mary. The Christian Science movement claims their founder, Mary Baker Eddy, is the woman. Some suggest she is Old Testament Israel. Others say she represents the church. And finally, some argue that the woman symbolizes all faithful followers of God from the time of Abel to today. I personally lean toward the last view.

The dragon in this chapter is clearly a reference to Satan — described as the "accuser of the brethren." (Accuser is the literal meaning of the word "Satan.") Some interpret the war where he was cast down as the rebellion and fall of Satan before the temptation of Adam and Eve. That is possible, or it could refer to the destruction of Satan's power that occurred at the cross.

Here is some good news: there are clear truths in this chapter we can understand even if we are not certain about the mysterious events it describes. The core message remains the same: Satan is trying to accuse, conquer, and destroy God's people. As Jesus said about him, "He was a murderer from the beginning." (John 8:44) Still, "No weapon formed against us shall prosper." (Isaiah 54:17)

Romans 8:37–39 teaches us that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." We are victorious not because we are inherently powerful, but because His love for us is unfailing, unfading, and unaffected by any possible obstacle.

This vision of John makes clear for us how it is that we can stand firm in the day of evil: "And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." (vs. 11) The way that we stand is first based upon the powerful saving blood of Jesus. Satan's very name refers to him as the accuser. Now that we have been bought by the blood of Christ, there is nothing left for him to hold over our heads — we are perfectly purified.

We also stand by the word of our testimony. Your story of how God sought you, bought you, redeemed you, restored you, adopted you, befriended you, forgave you, and cleansed you is a powerful weapon to wield against Satan's devices. When you are beset with distress, besieged by doubt, bombarded with discouragement, or beleaguered by

desires, call to mind the mighty hand of God that reached down and saved your life from the pit.

"They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." — Revelation 12:11

In order to get our footing on solid ground while traversing a potentially overwhelming chapter like this one, allow me to offer a few basic thoughts.

- The final verse of the previous chapter states that Satan has declared war on God's people — those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. He is figuratively standing on the seashore as chapter 12 concludes, and he will be there as the beasts emerge from the sea in chapter 13.
- John's vision closely parallels Daniel 7, in which four great beasts came up out of the sea. Those four beasts of Daniel symbolically represented four nations that rose in succession: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.
- The first beast of Revelation displays the physical traits of all four beasts of Daniel. Many believe that this beast will appear as a government, cultural, and economic system that is satanically committed to destroying the church. In John's time, this was true of Rome. It has remained true throughout history.
- The second beast initially appears almost completely opposite. I tend to agree with scholars who connect this second beast to all false teachers claiming to follow Christ, but whose words are those of the evil one.
- Verse 14 shows that these two beasts are "permitted" to carry out their evil acts against God's people. Just as we see in the book of Job, even God's greatest enemies can only do what the Lord allows. They are on a leash, and God will never let them go beyond His control.
- I do not believe that the mark of the beast is a literal implant or brand, any more than I believe that the beast who gives it is a literal lamb or that the first beast is a literal sea monster. In chapter 7, all of God's redeemed saints are sealed with a mark on their forehead — and everyone agrees that is symbolic. I believe that Satan's followers are marked in the same spiritual way.
- The mark of the beast is probably the most famous part of this chapter. Notice that the number is based on the number 6, which John states is the number of man. In other words, this is not a code — it is a description of character. The beast will be marked by extreme worldliness.

- One very clear statement that John provides makes the point unmistakably straightforward: "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." (vs. 10) The reason God has given you this information is to encourage your faith and help you persevere.

"Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. The reason God has given you this information is to encourage your faith and help you persevere."

REV. 13:10

Today, it's important to remember that the book of Revelation is a cohesive document, with some concepts repeatedly recurring throughout. The first five verses reference back to the "144,000" redeemed from the earth. This number is not meant to be literal — it is a symbolic figure representing all of God's covenant people across history. They are described in terms of their sexual purity, but virtually no scholar from any theological perspective believes this should be taken literally. It is clearly a deliberate contrast to the unsaved, best understood as a way the Lord speaks about the purity and holiness of God's people. The text provides three other distinguishing features: they follow the Lamb, they are honest, and they are blameless.

Three angels then deliver three distinct messages to "every nation, tribe, and language." (vs. 6) The first messenger is there to preach the gospel. The good news is that God sends messengers to preach good news — nobody could ever claim that God is not a patient, long-suffering, merciful God.

The second angel delivers a message of sorrow and lament against Babylon. It might seem odd that this city is mentioned, since Babylon fell to the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 BC. However, Babylon had become a symbol for the enemies of God's people among the Jews. Moving forward, Babylon should be seen as representing everyone in the world who is not a believer in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the promises of eternal judgment pronounced against Babylon throughout this book are promises against the entire worldly system.

The third angel describes nothing but the overwhelming wrath of God that will be poured out against His enemies. The descriptions of eternal conscious punishment in verses 10–11 are horrifying. They depict the unrelenting judgment awaiting all who reject Jesus' Lordship. Once again, this passage ends with a call for everyone who names the name of Jesus to stand firm through faith and obedience. Unlike those who follow the evil one, those who die in the Lord are blessed. (vs. 13)

"God sends messengers to preach good news. Nobody could ever claim that God is not a patient, long-suffering, merciful God."

Today we have reached the shortest chapter in Revelation, yet many scholars view it as the hinge on which the final judgments swing. Chapter 15 is the heavenly prelude to the seven bowls. Before a single drop of wrath is poured, heaven sings. This is the last calm before the storm. If you've ever wondered why worship precedes judgment, this chapter answers: God's justice magnifies His glory, and His glory ignites worship.

These bowls are not to be seen as a future seven-year tribulation. They are the final, exhaustive form of the same judgments we've seen in seals and trumpets — recapitulation, not chronology. The church is not waiting to be raptured out; she is standing on the sea of glass, singing.

The Sea of Glass Mixed with Fire

G.K. Beale argues that this is to be seen as the final Red Sea. After the Exodus, Israel stood on the shore singing, having witnessed Pharaoh's drowning (Exodus 15). That is why this song is called the Song of Moses and of the Lamb. One day, the church will stand on crystal singing after Satan is defeated. The saints stand in the fire, not burned by it. Revelation 15 is an updated version of Exodus 15, incorporating cross-centered language.

Who Will Sing?

The western cultural canon has depicted dead Christians as standing in white robes, playing harps. That imagery comes from Revelation 15:2. The harps are representative of celebration and victory. The key theme being declared is that all who stand firm in faith to the end will one day celebrate like the liberated Israelites did, singing for joy that the great enslaving enemy has been ultimately defeated.

Seven Angels, Seven Plagues

Vengeance isn't ours to carry out — it belongs to the Lord. He will deliver justice and judgment against His enemies at the proper time. Our cries to the Lord are heard, and they are collected. This chapter describes God's justice against the enemies of the church as seven angels, dressed in priestly robes, going forth to spread the wrath of God in the form of plagues. Literal or not, these judgments reveal that God will always vindicate His people.

The Glory of God

The temple described in heaven is said to be filled with smoke, just like Sinai, the tabernacle, and the Temple of Solomon. These occasions of smoke represented God's presence in a way that nobody could remain near. As I once heard someone say, "The smoke is always temporary, but the glory is always eternal."

"Before a single drop of wrath is poured, heaven sings. God's justice magnifies His glory, and His glory ignites worship."

We have now reached the portion of Revelation that speaks about the fullness of God's judgment against His enemies. The seven bowls are poured in rapid succession. No interludes. No pauses. The end has come.

Consider the ratios. The seals were described as 1/10th judgments. The trumpets were said to be against 1/3rd of the people. The bowls are 100%. This is the final form of God's wrath on earth — exhaustive devastation.

I agree with the theologians who argue that Armageddon is not a future battle in Israel. It is every battlefield where human pride gathers against God (G.K. Beale, Dennis Johnson, Sam Storms, William Hendricksen, Leon Morris, etc.). These are not literal sores on bodies or seas of blood. Just like we have seen many times in Revelation, the word "like" is very important — it appears 12 times. This is apocalyptic poetry, not meteorology.

The Lord again appears to be making an intentional parallel between the Exodus of Moses and the Exodus of the church. We see this in the bowl judgments of bowl 1 (boils), bowl 2 (water turning to blood), bowl 5 (darkness that covers the land), and bowl 7 (hailstones). In each case, the hearts of unbelievers are exactly like the heart of Pharaoh — hard and unrepentant. We see them suffering to the point of gnawing their own tongues, yet they refuse to relent and bow the knee to the Lord.

Some might look at these extreme forms of judgment and ask why God must send such cruel forms of punishment. The key is that even these are merely a foretaste of the ultimate wrath that sin truly deserves. The weight of sin is not only measured by its impurity, but also by its target. All sin is ultimately and primarily directed at the Lord. But the tragedy is not the plagues or even the judgment — the tragedy is the hardness of heart that is on display after each judgment. Just like Pharaoh, humanity doubles down on their sin.

One of the most well-known aspects of this chapter is the war of Armageddon. This Hebrew word literally means "mountain of Megiddo," which was home to a very successful battle in Israel's history. Those who read Revelation with a literal eye believe there will one day be a literal war in the Middle East. Those who read these words symbolically, like myself, believe this to be a symbolic final stand of mankind against their Creator.

"The tragedy is not the plagues or even the judgment. The tragedy is the hardness of heart on display after each judgment. Just like Pharaoh, humanity doubles down on their sin."

Before diving into today's notes, I want to remind you of the need to exercise caution when making definitive statements about the symbolism found in apocalyptic literature. I believe we will fully understand the meaning of these things when we are in heaven. This might be the chapter I am least confident about in the entire book. For that reason, I will rely heavily on quotes from commentators.

Who Is the Beast?

The amillennial position is that the beast figuratively represents Satan's anti-Christian empire — the political, economic, and cultural system that opposes God and persecutes the church. G.K. Beale writes: "The beast is the worldly power that the dragon uses to war against the saints... essentially the Roman Empire in John's day, but typifying all anti-God governments throughout history." William Hendriksen agrees: "The beast represents the totality of secular power in its opposition to Christ." Amillennial theologians see the beast as an ever-rolling cycle of world empires echoing Daniel 7. Rome was the immediate fulfillment, but every anti-Christian regime since that time serves as the ongoing expression of the beast.

Who Is the Woman / Prostitute?

The amillennial perspective is that the woman is apostate civilization in its seductive, religious aspect. She represents the cultural allure that rides and manipulates the beast. G.K. Beale calls her "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth... the worldly system in its economic and religious seduction." Sam Storms explains it like this: "She is not a literal city but the spirit of Babylon — idolatry, luxury, immorality."

Where Is Babylon?

Babylon was destroyed centuries before the book of Revelation was written. John is not using Babylon as a geographical location, but instead to represent a state of spiritual rebellion. Babylon is the umbrella term for the entire world system that is opposed to God and the gospel. G.K. Beale argues that "Babylon is the code name for the satanic world system, just as 'Sodom' and 'Egypt' were in 11:8." This "Babylon" is not just speaking about a future system — it exists in every age.

"Babylon is the code name for the satanic world system. It does not refer to a future rebuilt city in Iraq – it exists in every age." – G.K. Beale

Revelation 18 is written in the form of a funeral dirge for the world system called Babylon. This chapter serves as the elegy of the end of the age. Where chapter 17 revealed the heights of Babylon and the woman, chapter 18 describes their downfall. Heaven rejoices; earth mourns. Amillennial theologians do not view this as a prophecy about a future rebuilt Babylon in Iraq or a one-world economy. It is instead a description of the fall of every single civilization that rejects Jesus.

In verse 2 we hear, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" This probably echoes Isaiah 21:9 and Jeremiah 51:8, both of which speak of the fall of the Babylonian Empire. By quoting these passages, John's vision is intended to highlight the eventual destruction of not only the system of this world, but also all the idols it clings to. Everything that the world is looking to as a support or anchor will be eliminated.

The Wrong Kind of Sorrow

Did you notice that there are three groups of mourners found in these verses? They are not mourning because of their sin. They are not sorrowful in repentance. Instead they are mourning their own personal loss. The kings mourn their loss of power. The merchants mourn their loss of markets. The sailors mourn their lost cargo. They can't see beyond the end of their own existence. Everything is filtered through the reality of self-gratification by way of worldly power, success, and wealth.

Holy Separation

One of the key teachings from Revelation 18 is the command that God's people be distinct from the people of Babylon. "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins." (vs. 4) William Hendriksen explains this well: "This is a call to spiritual detachment — not physical escape, but refusing to love the world's values." Christian, we are called to spiritually detach from this world. Don't become Babylonian. Although we live in the world, we are called to be radically different from it.

The heaviest part of this chapter is in verse 5: "God has remembered her iniquities." Compare this horrific idea to the blessings described for believers: "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." (Psalm 32:1) "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." (Hebrews 10:17) Babylon's sins will be remembered. Those who hold fast to this world and its wickedness will not experience the blessing of having their sin washed away and permanently forgotten.

"Come out of her, my people. This is a call to spiritual detachment – not physical escape, but refusing to love the world's values."

REV. 18:4

The Song

We open this chapter with a song of celebration, rejoicing that Babylon has finally, totally, and permanently fallen. Those whom the grace of God has redeemed will rightfully rejoice in the destruction of the world along with its God-opposing system of idolatry. Heaven will one day stand at the edge of eternity, looking down at the destruction of God's enemies, and the cry that will arise will be to praise the justice of God with a song.

The Supper

The song quickly turns from a war cry of victory to the song of a wedding celebration. Heaven begins to sing with delight that the day of the wedding has finally arrived. The church, the bride of Christ, has made herself ready. Just like a woman prepares herself for her wedding, beautifying herself for her husband, so too does the church, through its spiritual growth. The church is described as wearing fine linen, bright and pure — identified by the choirs of heaven as having been made holy and ready for the wedding day.

The Servant

At the sight of the marriage supper of the Lamb, John was overcome and fell at the feet of the angel. He prostrated himself as the angel told him to write, "These are the true words of God." I don't want to be hard on John because I think that any one of us would make the exact same mistake. The angel rapidly replied, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." Angels are incredibly powerful, incredibly beautiful creations. But they are just that: creations. Worship is only ever to have one target — God Himself.

The Savior

Perhaps the most enduring visual that stands out from the book of Revelation is that of King Jesus riding on a white horse. We are so used to seeing Jesus in the gospels as a mild and gracious ruler. His patience towards His enemies is evident as He endured their disbelief, rebuffs, and even their violence. This image of Him is quite different. His robe is dipped in the blood of His enemies, displaying that He has gone out to battle and come back victorious. The visuals are extreme as Jesus is described as treading the winepress

of God's fury, as if He crushes all of the rebellious under His feet.

The Sword

The primary weapon of Jesus described here is the sword that comes from His mouth. This is, of course, not literal — it speaks of the words that come from His mouth. How appropriate. We learn that God created all things through Jesus, who spoke all things into existence. Jesus Himself is described as the logos, the Word. At His trial, He opened not His mouth. But now, at the right time, Jesus opens His mouth and pronounces judgment against His enemies. Even the great enemies described here as the beast and the false prophet will have no power to overcome His sword of judgment. His word will cast them into eternal punishment.

"As a person who has been forgiven, you will never experience the judgment that we read about in Revelation 19. You will only ever know Jesus as gentle and lowly."

Revelation 20 is the most debated chapter in the book. Your understanding of this chapter necessarily shapes your understanding of the rest of the book. The big question to answer is this: Is this chapter talking about a literal, future, one-thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth? Or is it speaking of a figurative, present, ongoing reign of Jesus through the church on earth right now?

Saints

Those who believe that the thousand-year reign is figuratively speaking of the church believe that the deceased saints and martyrs of God are currently reigning with Him in glory until the consummation of all things. This is corroborated by how Paul understood what happens when we die, according to 2 Timothy 2:12: "If we endure, we will also reign with him..." Although there is a sense in which we are already "seated with Him in heavenly places" (Eph. 2:6), there is also a future reality we will experience if we follow Christ to the end of our lives. "To the one who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne." (Rev. 3:21)

Satan

Throughout this book, we have seen the insidious, villainous character called "the dragon." He is now identified as "that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan." In Matthew 12, Jesus described His power to cast out demons as proof that the Kingdom of God had come, and that He had bound the "strong man" in order to plunder his house. In Revelation 20, we find that Jesus has bound Satan so that he can no longer "deceive the nations." I take this to mean that the gospel message is able to go forth into the entire world, unhindered by Satan. He cannot stop the church's expansion. Or as Jesus put it, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Before the final judgment of all people, Satan will be cast into the lake of fire to receive his eternal punishment.

"All of human history is in His hands. Even your greatest enemy has no power of authority over you because Jesus has come and bound him."

What is the big picture story of the Bible? What is the overarching metanarrative of all creation? The story can be told simply as follows:

- God created man in order to dwell with him.
 - Man fell into sin, creating separation from God.
 - God sent His Son to restore fellowship with man.
 - At the conclusion of all things, God will once again dwell with His people.
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Revelation 21:3 describes the final chapter of our story. "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'" This is what everything else in the Bible has been leading to. This is the goal, the purpose, the final result of God's mission to redeem a people for Himself. He has done everything necessary for unworthy people like you and I to dwell with Him forever.

What is described in this chapter is a sort of resetting of the universe to its factory settings. Everything broken by sin is restored or replaced. The Lord who is Alpha and Omega declares, "Behold, I am making all things new."

The centerpiece of this new creation is a new Jerusalem. This is likely not speaking of a literal eternal city. John says in verse 9 that this is a representation of the church — or more literally, "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." Literal or figurative, this city has certain notable qualities. It is going to be a place where no sin ever enters. Its doors will never be shut — in heaven there is perfect and permanent peace.

The glory of the earthly Jerusalem was the temple. The glory of the heavenly Jerusalem will also be the temple, but of a very different kind — Revelation 21 states that there will be no physical temple. Instead, God Himself will be their temple. At the very least, this means that He is the center of all worship. There will be no ceremonies or symbols that serve as avenues of worship to God. Instead, we will worship the Genuine Article directly. He is the glory and the light of our eternal home.

*"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." —
Revelation 21:3*

The story of Scripture begins with a tree. Adam and Eve were told not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or they would surely die. But, there is another tree that is easily overlooked in those early pages of the Bible. Genesis 2:9 says, "And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

After the fall, Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden of Eden. "Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever — therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden... He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life." (Genesis 3:22–24)

In Revelation 22, we find that at the conclusion of all things, the tree of life is once again part of the story: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him."

The idea is that the eternal life Adam and Eve forfeited by their sin will be restored for those who trust in Christ. The promise that there will no longer be anything accursed indicates that the curses God proclaimed over creation will finally be fully abolished. Sin will be no more, so the accompanying curses will also be no more. The first created thing was light. In eternity, we will all be fully and forever illuminated by the light of God Himself.

Jesus concludes His words to John by promising that He is coming again soon. His definition of soon is not always the same as ours. But the promise remains. In His perfect timing, Jesus will return and will make all things new, redeeming and restoring, with life and light for His people — forever and ever, amen.

There is a very short, three-word prayer found in the penultimate verse of the Bible: "Come, Lord Jesus!" May this be the prayer of your heart today.

"Come, Lord Jesus! He will return and will make all things new, redeeming and restoring, with life and light for His people – forever and ever, amen."