

THE
REVELATION
FROM
JESUS CHRIST

God promises to bless the reader
of the book of Revelation

CHARLES K ROBERTSON

THE EXPLORATION BIBLE
series

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The Revelation from Jesus Christ and *THE EXPLORATION BIBLE*.

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The Revelation from Jesus Christ is part of *THE EXPLORATION BIBLE* series.

I dedicate *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* to everyone who has read the book of Revelation in the Bible, who is reading it now and who will read it before the second coming of Jesus Christ.

***The Revelation from Jesus Christ* is available free of charge for your own use and for distribution to as many people as you would like to send it to – and they in turn can distribute it free of charge to as many as they like.**

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BACKGROUND

Revelation is the last of the 66 books of the Bible. Its ‘... main concern is to give ... readers hope and encouragement, and to urge them to remain faithful during times of suffering and persecution.’ (Biblica. Holy Bible 2011: 1289) An important theme of the book of Revelation is Jesus’ successive victories over Satan and his followers. Another primary message is that believers who remain loyal until the end will enjoy victory with Him.

In the context of the Bible, the word *revelation* implies that God reveals truths to His children. He enables them, through the Holy Spirit, to see pictures of wonderful and mysterious secrets which not everybody sees. For instance, in Ephesians 1:18 Paul says, ‘I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened...’

The book of Revelation in the Bible is written for Christian men, women, and children to encourage them, and to help them to get to know their Saviour better and learn to love Him. The parishioners of the Early Church, to whom Revelation was sent, were ordinary people – most of them were largely illiterate. The approach of Jesus and John while writing the book of Revelation would therefore have been to keep the text and its interpretation as straightforward as possible, for those readers.

The Revelation from Jesus Christ (which you are reading now) is an explanatory study and interpretation of the book of Revelation, as I see and experience it. In this I focus on ordinary believers. I try to make everything as accurate as possible – also the unclear and strenuous passages. With *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* I endeavour to deal with vague and difficult sections, as well as with the rest of the book, the way the leaders and members of the Early Church probably understood it – which means that simple applications are used throughout.

I approached the writing of *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* as being part of an exploration Bible series. I am considering writing explanatory studies of more books of the Bible; and I envision that, in due course,

these may also become part of *THE EXPLORATION BIBLE*. Some of you may, in fact, wish to participate with me in implementing the task of writing explanatory studies of other books of the Bible – if so, please contact me. The basis of and approach with such explanatory studies and of *THE EXPLORATION BIBLE* (also with *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*) are and will be to,

- Apply the Word of God as accurately as possible, and without adding or omitting anything to the meaning thereof.
- Seek guidance from the Holy Spirit with explanations and interpretations, to enlighten the understanding of Scripture.
- Inquire from other reliable sources.
- Learn from and with others (via social media and otherwise).

Various parts of Revelation are being expounded by Christian leaders in more ways than one. In cases like these, in *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*, I choose the most likely interpretation and often I give a brief explanation why. In general, I do not discuss the various interpretations because it would have resulted in a voluminous publication. As reader you may differ from me in some of my interpretations, which affords you the opportunity to do further research on the topic, to discuss it with others, to pray about it and then to decide for yourself.

The Revelation from Jesus Christ is in a sense a book in the making which I cannot really finish because other believers should also include their contributions. I trust you will be inspired through reading it; I encourage you to add your own thoughts to what I wrote and discuss it with people in your network; and please read the book of Revelation itself carefully.

I have observed a few general tendencies, which I think are valuable to take note of and I point out a few biblical guidelines that can be useful and fruitful. These snippets (i.e., tendencies and guidelines) can only be deduced indirectly to what is conveyed in Revelation; yet I discuss these briefly in the end notes of the various chapters in *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* (in each instance inserted in a frame). The snippets are meant to prompt thinking and praying about the facets raised. They can also encourage discussions with others.

The Bible starts, in Genesis 1, with the story of how God created the heavens and the earth with everything in and on it, as well as human beings; and the story of creation is then repeated in the following chapter. The New Testament starts with the story of God who sent His Son to the world to offer human beings redemption and salvation. In the gospels this story of salvation is related four times. Important events and teachings are repeated once or more times in the Old and New Testament to help readers better to understand and internalise them. The Bible, with its 66 books, is concluded with the book of Revelation. In a general sense the first three chapters of Revelation contain *summaries* of other parts of the Bible. In this respect the first part of Revelation can be regarded as an *executive summary* of the Bible.

However, the biggest part of Revelation comprises of prophecies and concentrates on events which will happen in future – they are divine utterances which describe future events and explain how these will come about. As a book with prophecies, Revelation has helped many people during past centuries, and is still doing so, to keep their focus on the future of what the Lord intends with the heaven and earth and with humans. Furthermore, Revelation takes readers back to the preceding parts of the Bible in a special way, so that they can see the full picture. Revelation is best positioned at the end of the Bible, because it is both an *executive summary* and a book with prophecies.

The Bible proclaims God's legitimate and incontestable story, and His plan to make everything new. But the Bible story can also be viewed as a drama, performed (i.e., lived) daily by believers. One of the ways in which Christians *perform the bible*, is how they live their lives every day. The narrative does not end with the last verse of the Bible. In Revelation every Christian is encouraged to carry out his or her unique function to glorify the Lord and to serve others. With the acting out by believers of each of their daily lives, the Bible drama continues.

Before the creation of the universe and of human beings, or early during this era, the Lord permanently banished Satan and his wicked followers from heaven. God then established His omnipotence in heaven forever and ensured it was acknowledged as such. There is unanimity

in heaven – God is almighty, and He is acknowledged and worshipped in heaven as such. A salient focus of Revelation is on the Lord’s plan to establish His supreme power on earth in a similar way. Revelation is a dramatic narrative of how God’s wondrous salvation and judgment plan evolves. Jesus as the Lamb plays the lead in God’s plan, and Jesus’ first and second comings to earth form two important anchors in it. Against this background the book of Revelation, with its twenty-two chapters, can be categorized into the following six main parts:

- A. REVELATION 1–3: Jesus’ presence with believers.
- B. REVELATION 4–5: God and the Lamb in heaven.
- C. REVELATION 6–11: God’s salvation and judgment.
- D. REVELATION 12–18: Satan and his followers on earth.
- E. REVELATION 19–20: Jesus’ involvement on earth.
- F. REVELATION 21–22: Heaven on earth.

The complete script of Revelation (the New International Version – NIV UK) is contained in and inserted throughout *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* and is clearly marked. God promises to bless the reader of the book of Revelation (1:3). Please note that, to receive this blessing, you must concentrate on reading the text of Revelation – more than reading the interpretation provided in *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*.

Revelation 1–3

JESUS' PRESENCE WITH BELIEVERS

Christ met John where he was alone on the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean Sea (which was his jail). Every believer has or can have a place where he or she spends time alone with the Lord; for example, early in the morning with a cup of coffee in the kitchen, or in the car on the way to work, or alone preparing food. My time alone with Him was sometimes spent in the bathroom, or outside under a tree, or in my car outside my home. The Saviour yearns for times alone in communion with every Christian, and from the Word it is apparent that He wants believers to have communion with Him often (daily).

Genuine prayer and fellowship with the Lord are important ways for every Christian to enjoy access to Him. Walter Rauschenbusch experienced it like this: 'In the castle of my soul there is a little postern gate where, when I enter, I am in the presence of God. In a moment, in a turning of a thought, I am where God is. When I meet God there all life gains a new meaning, lowly and despised things are shot through with glory. My troubles seem like the pebbles on the road, my joys seem like the everlasting hills, all my fear is gone in the great peace of God. So it is when I step through the gate of prayer.' (Dodgen 2003: 225)

In the first three chapters of Revelation the focus is on the churches and church members, as receivers of Jesus' involvement with and love for them – and therefore also on present-day churches and believers. It deals here mainly with the Christian's relationship with the Lord and with other people.

REVELATION 1 – The revelation from God, through Jesus

Introduction to Revelation 1

The book of Revelation is a declaration from and about Jesus, written by John, the disciple whom He loved very much. In Revelation Jesus sends letters to seven churches (congregations) in the Roman province of Asia (currently Western Turkey) – they are representative of all churches. The churches are threatened by false doctrines, persecution, idolatry, dissoluteness, and spiritual stagnation. Jesus warns the churches and church members (parishioners) against Satan's sly attacks.

John provides a preface and introduction to Revelation, and he explains the role and meaning of the book. He receives his first vision – the vision of Jesus, the Son of Man, who gives messages to his churches and to parishioners. He also points out that God promises to bless those who read Revelation.

The time is near: 1:1–3

¹The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testifies to everything he saw – that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

1:1–2 Revelation from Jesus Christ:

The culmination of God's plan with the universe and the people will take place with Jesus' second coming to earth – this is one of the main themes of Revelation. The chain of events leading up to this apex of Christ's return started with His victory on the cross, His resurrection and His ascension. It is significant that, in contrast to the book Daniel (Daniel 12:4), Revelation

should not be sealed (22:10). Revelation was important for the believers of the first and second centuries, and is just as important for believers of later centuries, and for Christians today.

When the prophet Daniel had his visions and dreams, the Lord sent an angel afterwards to explain these to him (for example in Daniel 7). In Revelation God did not do that, but He provided the Holy Spirit to live in every believer; and all believers are privileged to have Bibles at their disposal today. They have fellow Christians who they can ask, with whom they can share and from whom they can learn. And they have the social media and other methods to communicate instantly and effortlessly with one another about Revelation (and about other parts of Scripture).

Christ reveals the visions which follow. This is God's revelation; He provides it to Jesus; Jesus gives it to the angel(s) and the angel(s) pass it on to John; John sends it to the churches (which include present-day readers); and they must pass it on to non-believers. The revelation or visions somehow focus largely on the crucified or elevated Jesus.

The book of Revelation evolves, piece by piece. There is no fixed pattern in which Revelation is set out from the beginning – a surprising element can be found in each new part. It resembles the peeling of an onion, from the outside until you reach the core – where you must remove ring after ring, and after every ring you encounter a new and even better ring.

1:3 Blessed:

God pronounces a blessing on those who read Revelation and who are obedient – it is the only book in the Bible with such a special promise to faithful and obedient readers. This is the first of seven blessings in Revelation. The others are found in 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14.

The final end of everything is near. All believers should live as if the Lord's grace, kindness, and support are with them all the time (which it is), while they wait for Jesus' second coming.

I believe in the literal interpretation of as much of the Bible as possible. However, a literal interpretation of Revelation is not always possible, because big sections of it are prophecies. Furthermore, parts of Revelation are visions, and some other parts are written to conceal the literal meaning of it from the Roman rulers of the time.

Destination: 1:4–6

⁴John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

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, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and 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.

1:4–6 Blessing from the Triune God:

There were more than seven churches in Asia Minor at the time when Revelation was written. The fact that Jesus selected seven implies completeness, and it suggests that He addresses the church as a whole (including today's Christians) by writing to seven churches.

The greeting of grace of the seven churches (which includes all present-day believers) is a wonderful reassurance: 'Grace is God's favor bestowed upon those who do not deserve it, pardoning their sins and bestowing upon them the gift of eternal life. Peace, the reflection of the smile of God in the heart of the believer who has been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, is the result of grace. This grace and this peace is *provided* by the Father, *dispensed* by the Holy Spirit, and *merited* for us by the Son.' (Hendriksen 1939: 67) But in a certain sense this greeting of grace goes with the prerequisite that Christians forgive others, as Jesus explains in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12–15). Stephen, for example, forgave even while he was being stoned to death (Acts 7:56–60).

The pronouncement of grace comes from Him who is, who was and who is to come. This is a special name for God. It signifies His infinite existence as Creator. He is the Eternal, the Permanent, the Unalterable, the Self-reliant (see Exodus 3:14–15). Furthermore, the blessing is pronounced by the Holy Spirit who is identified by His sevenfold or perfect activity in the church; and the blessing is declared by Jesus Christ. He was the faithful

and reliable witness with His first coming, crucifixion and resurrection, and He became the firstborn from death. At His second coming He shall be Ruler over all the kings of the earth. Over the centuries this threefold pronouncement of grace was, and still is, a reassurance – especially for those who find themselves in crisis situations.

The book of Revelation is a proclamation by Jesus, which He announced through His angel(s). Revelation is an apocalyptic document (just like Daniel 7–12), which describes the destruction of the universe and of all human beings, and the unveiling of believers' salvation from this evil world: 'In an apocalypse, a visitor from heaven uses vivid symbols to disclose the secrets of the unseen world and the future. This visitor typically takes the recipient of the vision on a journey through heaven and offers a review of history leading up to a present crisis between good and evil. The vision enables the recipients to understand the spiritual dimensions of their situation and to respond to the crisis by remaining loyal to God.' (Biblica. The Books of the Bible 2011: 425)

Revelation was written during 95–96 AD and is therefore the book of the Bible that was written last. The author is the apostle John, son of Zebedee. It is significant that a few centuries elapsed following Christ's crucifixion before the book was accepted as canon (in other words as part of the Bible). Revelation contains a number of aspects and stories of the Lord's immeasurable, everlasting, and world-shaking plan with His creation and with the people. Some of these seem like independent stories, but all of them are somehow related to one another, and in and through the Father all of these are linked.

Jesus is exalted, blessed, and praised. There are not many things which bring Christ as much joy as when Christians honour, glorify and worship Him – also when they exalt Him through songs of praise.

Second coming: 1:7–8

⁷'Look, he is coming with the clouds,' and 'every eye will see him, even those who pierced him'; and all peoples on earth 'will mourn because of him.'

So shall it be! Amen.

⁸'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'

1:7–8 God announces Jesus' second coming:

God Himself speaks twice in Revelation: Only here (1:8) and again in 21:5–8, which signifies the importance of the announcement made here of Jesus' second coming.

In verse 8 three titles are given to God:

- The Alfa and the Omega (the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet), which indicate that God is the beginning and the end of everything. This does, however, not mean that the Lord was from the beginning of time to the end of time, because there was no beginning of time for Him and there will be no end of time for Him; He always existed and He shall exist forever in the eternal future.
- He who is, who was and who is to come (as in 1:4) – He is the key to the past, the present and the future.
- The Almighty, which signifies that the Lord has authority and power over everything.

Instructions to John: 1:9–11

⁹I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

¹⁰On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.'

1:9 Hardship:

John identifies with Christians throughout the centuries – he empathises with what is happening to them. John also takes part, with all believers, in the kingship of Jesus, and therefore with His rule on earth. It is valuable to keep in mind Jesus suffered the same hardships, tribulations, and disappointments which Christians are subjected to.

The Romans deported John to the island of Patmos because he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. At Patmos John wrote and dispatched

the book of Revelation. Thus, the Lord turned his deportation into an astounding foundation stone for the advancement of the kingdom of God. I often experience situations where God turns crisis times in my life into opportunities to honour Him.

1:10 In the Spirit:

The Lord entrusted His revelation to John in a special manner. "I was in the Spirit," means the Holy Spirit took possession of John so that he was brought to a condition of ecstasy or rapture of senses. His consciousness was transported beyond the boundaries of space and time, and he could directly observe a special visual and auditory revelation in the spiritual world, free from the functioning of his corporeal vision and hearing.' (Greijvenstein 1957: 8) What is revealed in Revelation is God's proclamation, and He announced it through the Holy Spirit to John.

Over the centuries since Christ's death and resurrection, the Lord provided interesting visions and dreams of the end times to people, and fortunately some of these were preserved. Examples are, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (John Bunyan), other books by John Bunyan, *Heaven is so Real!* (Choo Thomas), *Angels on assignment* (Charles and Frances Hunter), some books by Rick Joyner, and some of Hal Lindsey's books.

1:11 Write down and pass on:

John is instructed by Jesus to write down what he sees, and to pass it on. In Revelation John received the instruction to write down twelve times.

Every Christian receives the same instruction today, namely, to write down and share with others, for example to write down his or her thoughts on Revelation and share them on the social media. In the current era believers have so many more opportunities to converse with one another about the remarkable messages of Revelation than John had, and in so doing, to enrich themselves and others. Most church members are probably not called to be preachers, but everyone is called to be a voice for Christ, for Him to speak and write through them – He wants to

offer teachings through each one. By writing down and sharing with one another what he or she believes the Holy Spirit says of certain aspects, is one of the ways to practically fulfill and apply this message.

The Father gives to each believer personal pictures of Jesus, and of many other aspects of the Bible; i.e., impressions of how he or she personally interprets and experiences these biblical aspects. He or she has the chance and scope to discuss his or her personal pictures or impressions of facets of Revelation and of the rest of the Bible with others. The participation of a believer in discussions about the book of Revelation is an excellent opportunity to gain more insight into the various dimensions of Revelation, and its points of contact with the rest of the Bible, and into other aspects of his or her daily life.

With the social media and in other ways Christians can develop networks of family members, friends, and acquaintances. They can, for instance, chat via social media with the various groups about the fast-approaching last days, about visible signs of it, and about their interpretations of these signs in accordance with Revelation and with the rest of the Bible. In addition, they can encourage the participants in these groups to read Revelation themselves (on their own or with others) – so such participants can be better equipped and get more comfortable to take part in conversations about Revelation, about the end times and about signs that the end is near.

The book of Revelation, as Jesus' letter-message through John, is sent in its entirety to every one of the seven churches. This letter-message was not sent to all the churches of the time, but only to seven of them, and from them the message (i.e., Revelation) was shared with others. The Lord blessed the sharing of Revelation to such an extent that it became part of the Bible and was therefore shared globally, throughout the ages since then.

Revelation was aimed at seven churches in Asia Minor. They were situated in the shape of a horseshoe, and the sequence in which the seven churches were addressed, is according to the route the delivery person would have taken. He would have started at Patmos, where John was imprisoned, and then moved to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Jesus among the golden lampstands: 1:12–20

¹²I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest.

¹⁴The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

¹⁹Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. ²⁰The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

1:12–16 Son of Man:

John accompanied Jesus for three to four years here on earth. In spite of this he was overwhelmed by Christ, whom he saw walking among the churches. From John's description, it is clear he struggled to find words to properly describe the wonder and magnitude of Jesus.

The seven golden lampstands represent the seven churches, and the seven stars in Jesus' right hand represent the leaders of the churches. Jesus among the lampstands signifies that He binds together His body on earth, which would eventually comprise the bride of Christ. It also symbolises that the churches have found unity in Him. Unity among Christians is very

important to Jesus, as indicated in John 17, elsewhere in Scripture and in Revelation. Jesus already enabled unity in the church through His victory on the cross, and this should be illustrated in practice by believers as members of His body. The lampstands (in other words the congregations or churches) must be shining lights in a dark world, and likewise every Christian (as individual) must be a shining light of the gospel.

Jesus moves and lives among the churches in His threefold role as Prophet, Priest, and King:

- As Prophet, who uses His Word like a double-edged sword.
- As Priest, who keeps the churches fervent with the Holy Spirit (oil of the lampstands).
- As King, who protects the churches and who rules.

Revelation is, to a large extent, directed at the last days, but the here and now is part of the last days and is therefore not overlooked in Revelation. For example, Christians should illustrate in their daily lives (in what they do, how they live and what they say), something of the great purpose of the Father with creation and with the people on earth.

1:17–20 He lives for eternity:

John fell at Jesus' feet as though dead, from fear and in worship. Jesus touched John with His right hand, and in so doing transferred authority and power to him. Christ encouraged him not to be afraid, because it was He. Jesus was about to tell John what he should write to the seven churches. This reminds of Matthew 14:27: 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' On that occasion the disciples kneeled before Jesus and said: 'Truly you are the Son of God.' (Matthew 14:33) Jesus wanted to help the disciples understand who He really was.

There is nothing wrong with being overwhelmed or afraid in the presence of the Lord. And with such an encounter it is possible He wants to put His hand on a believer's shoulder and empower him or her for the task that lies ahead – for what He wants him or her to do. Furthermore, Jesus reassures that He was dead, but was resurrected by God and that He will live forever and ever. And He holds the keys to death and Hades –

therefore, Christians have nothing to fear. Jesus is and remains in control of the leaders of the churches, of the churches themselves and of the lives of the members of the churches. He embraces and protects.

For Christians Revelation brings joy and the prospect of what is to happen shortly; and for the godless it is a terrifying end to the earth and of mankind.

Reflections on Revelation 1

Jesus, the compassionate Saviour, conquered death. Through His death and resurrection, He achieved victory and gained control over all dangers which have threatened and continue to threaten believers. He is the First and the Last and the Living One. He has the keys to death and Hades (1:17–18).

John was overwhelmed by Jesus' presence. He fell down at Jesus' feet; Jesus touched him and reassured him. During the past centuries, and still today, this episode remains a reassurance – especially in times of destitution. It is an encouragement to believers to remain loyal till the end. There are not many things which bring the Saviour as much joy as when His children praise, glorify and honour Him amidst the hardships they encounter (just as John did).

My own reaction while reading Revelation is, *Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!*

It is wonderful to know Jesus lives among the seven golden lampstands, which represent the seven churches, and which include the churches of today. In His right-hand Jesus holds the seven stars, which represent the leaders (in other words ministers, pastors, elders, and deacons) of the respective churches, as well as the leaders of the present-day churches.

Jesus' specific and introductory messages (through John) to the seven churches (in chapters 2 and 3), mainly address matters which already exist, while John's visions (in chapters 4–22) mainly address matters which will still occur.

The snippets at the end of the chapters are meant to stimulate thinking and praying about the aspects raised. They can also encourage discussions with others.

Snippets

One can generalize by putting forward a broad twofold frame of reference, in terms of which the Bible addresses the relationship of people with God and with one another on the one hand, and how people (especially Christians) fit into God's infinite plan for and with people, the earth, and the universe on the other hand. The Lord knew people, with their limited and finite capabilities and understanding, would be inclined to focus more on the person's relationships with Him and with one another (in other words on the Christian's relationships with God and others). I think this is one of the reasons why He promises to bless those who read the book of Revelation – in Revelation there is a greater focus on how people, and especially Christians, fit into God's infinite master plan.

Significant parts of Revelation are prophecies. Some of these prophecies were fulfilled during the past ±2,000 years since Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Many of these prophecies are being fulfilled in this present time. Some of them will be fulfilled with Jesus' second coming. For believers it is of particular significance to perceive which prophecies are currently being fulfilled, so they can be better equipped to partake in them and to communicate with others about them. But some of these prophecies are difficult to understand. In *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*, which is part of *THE EXPLORATION BIBLE*, I explain many of the prophecies and other aspects of the book of Revelation and give some examples. It is, however, important that you as reader ask the Lord for personal insight, knowledge and understanding to comprehend what Jesus wants to tell you through Revelation. And He promises to provide this wisdom freely and unconditionally. 'If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt ...' (James 1:5–6) I regularly ask Him for such divine wisdom – for every day.

The four gospels, Revelation and elsewhere in the Bible relate the story of Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, and ascension; and thus the foundation stones of our faith are laid. Furthermore, Christ helps believers to find answers in Revelation to important questions, for example: What am I doing here on earth? What is my role? Why am I still here? What does Christ expect from me here on earth? What do I really need except for my daily bread? Why are the circumstances I find myself in so difficult? How will everything be for me and for others when and after we die? Believers often cry out to the Lord to help them better to understand what is happening to them and to others, and to cope with the things happening with and around them. Some of these questions, yearnings and possible answers are discussed in *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*.

REVELATION 2 – Written to the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira

Introduction to Revelation 2

These are Jesus' personal letter-messages to the first four (of seven) churches. The seven churches represent the whole church of Christ, over the centuries since Revelation was written. In each of His letters Jesus starts with a greeting, after which He identifies Himself. He tells the church members He is aware of their love, caring, works, labour, hardship, or tribulations. He encourages them; and warns, threatens, judges, cautions, or reprimands them. And He gives them a promise.

It is important to note the complete book of Revelation was sent to every one of the seven churches (and to present-day believers). The seven letters are Jesus' personal messages to every one of the seven churches, but they are part of the book of Revelation and consequently form part of what was meant to be sent to everyone (and to Christians today).

To Ephesus: 2:1–7

¹To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶But you have this in your favour: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

2:1–3 This is what Jesus says:

The city of Ephesus was prosperous and beautiful and was known for the pretty temple of Diana. The Roman governor for the area had his headquarters there. The church in Ephesus was one of the oldest in the vicinity, and other churches looked up to Ephesus.

Jesus pronounced His satisfaction with Ephesus' conduct in life, their readiness to serve, their cheerful resignation in suffering, and their resistance to false prophets. There are few things which better illustrate a Christian's faith in the Lord than when he or she thanks and praises Him while he or she experiences hardship and suffering.

2:4–5 Your first love:

Paul was involved with the founding of the church of Ephesus, approximately forty years before John wrote Revelation, but the children in Ephesus (i.e., the next generation of church members) lost their first love for the Saviour and their enthusiasm for the gospel. They are cautioned to remember where they came from and to do what they did before, or else the church would be removed and be judged at Jesus' second coming.

Paul was a good teacher, and the indications are that his student, the young Timothy, also fared well in this respect. Paul guides Timothy about the laying of foundation stones for the advancement of the kingdom of God: 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.' (2 Timothy 2:2) Paul knew it takes good leaders to spread the gospel and to make true disciples of others. A considerable time before the writing of Revelation Paul died a martyr's death. Ephesus probably did not have good spiritual leaders at the time Revelation was written, and John now takes the proverbial baton from Paul and cautions the church members to mend their ways.

The same challenges of lovelessness towards Christ and others and spiritual barrenness as in Ephesus are encountered in many congregations today. The Lord yearns for true revival in the churches. Packer (2015) reflects briefly on aspects needed for a spiritual revival to take flame in South Africa (and elsewhere):

- An awareness of God's presence and that He is wondrously drawing closer to believers in His holiness, grace, and supreme power.
- The reaction to the Lord's Word is confession, faith, holiness, praise, prayer, testimony, and worship.
- An awareness of sin causes abundant confession.
- Wholehearted fellowship with other believers brings about love, open handedness, unity, joy, energy, a spirit of praise, prayer, and a passion to reach out and win others for Christ.

The Christians' passion and fervent love for the Saviour are important aspects of their personal relationship with Him, just as it was meant to be with the church members of Ephesus. Christ jealously keeps an eye on everyone to ensure they hold onto their first love for Him; and they should be just as jealous to retain it. From time-to-time Satan sets snares to stifle and destroy the believers' love for the Lord, for example:

- When they feel annoyed or when they take offence against someone, it blinds them to the love of Jesus.
- When they are deeply disappointed about something, it deadens their loving relationship with Christ.
- When there's sin in their lives, they become insensitive to the workings of the Holy Spirit.
- When they get so busy with things around them, they do not spend enough time with the Lord.
- When their belongings become very important, the possessions take their focus away from Christ.

The Saviour wants to help Christians to surmount these challenges, if they will let Him.

2:6–7 The conquerors:

The Nicolaitans tried to lead church members astray with idolatry and immorality. Nowadays the temptations of idolatry, immorality and other sins in churches are just as serious as in Ephesus, but often more subtle, like abortions, extra-marital relationships, and homosexuality. It is significant

that the Lord lays the blame for the sins of an individual believer at the door of the individual involved, but He also holds the church of such individual Christian accountable. This means the leaders of a congregation must censure an errant member; and eventually must expel the member who persists with such sins.

The churches are encouraged to lend an ear to the messages of the Holy Spirit. Every one of the personal letters and the complete book of Revelation are meant for all the churches (and for present-day believers). Those who conquer will inherit from the Father everlasting life in the new Jerusalem.

To Smyrna: 2:8–11

⁸To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

¹¹Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

2:8–9 The first and the last:

Smyrna was known as the first city of Asia, because of its beauty and size.

Jesus does not reprimand the church members of Smyrna. He assures them their poverty is limited to earthly possessions, and that they are rich in all other respects.

Opponents of the church in Smyrna tried to impoverish church members by excluding them from business and employment opportunities. Some of these opponents were Jews and some pretended to be Jews; they claimed they were doing what the Lord wanted them to do with actions of injustice to and persecution of Christians; but in fact, they were tools in Satan's hands.

At the time Revelation was written, most believers were Jews who accepted Jesus as Saviour. Christians were therefore often considered to be part of the Jewry. To try to distance themselves from Christians, Jews sometimes lay false charges against Christians and tried to harm them; and this led to increasing tensions between Christians and Jews. With such an incriminating approach individual Jews took part in what many others did and what became fashionable. Erroneous deeds in imitation of what others do are still problematic nowadays, and churches should guard against these.

2:10–11 Do not be afraid:

Severe afflictions will increase for the church of Smyrna and its members, but they are encouraged to persevere because their adversity will not last long. Those who remain loyal are given the assurance by Christ they will receive everlasting life in the new Jerusalem; He will use afflictions to refine everyone's faith and love for Him. The Lord said of Job he was pious and sincere, and that one will not find his equal on earth. Yet, after his bitter hardship and suffering, Job acknowledged: 'My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.' (Job 42:5) Affliction can draw a Christian closer to Jesus.

Satan often focuses his evil attacks on believers and their loved ones when they are involved with something which threatens his kingdom on earth. For instance, he (Satan) will then try to strike terror in their hearts. During such times it is even more important for them to pray, to continue to focus on Jesus, and to try to remain humble. There is no need for fear. They must only keep on believing. The Father is with them always, and His love will hold sway within and through them.

To Pergamum: 2:12–17

¹²To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

¹³I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.

¹⁴Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: there are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. ¹⁵Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

¹⁷Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

2:12–13 He who has the sharp sword:

Pergamum was Rome's capital for the province of Asia. Pergamum accommodated the sanctuaries of various religions; and Asclepius, the god of medicine whose symbol is a snake, was worshipped here. It was here where Antipas, the Bishop of Pergamum, and a loyal champion of the faith, died a martyr's death not long before Revelation was written.

Jesus is the bearer of the sharp double-edged sword. His verdict will certainly be implemented. He understood the circumstances in which the church of Pergamum was established, and He knew the faithfulness and works of the church.

2:14–15 False prophets:

Some church members were followers of heresies like the doctrine of Balaam, and some practised idolatry and immorality. This is a compromise mindset, to allow such false prophets to be part of the church, and it brings about an undesirable and dangerous setup. Jesus cautions them to discipline these errant church members.

Here, like elsewhere in the Bible, Christians are warned not to commit immoral sins, and that those who do must not be admitted to the church. Sexual sins are discussed in more detail in 1 Corinthians 6:9–20, and the practice of extramarital relationships and homosexuality are pointed out as sexual sins. Furthermore, it is explained that those who commit sexual sins will not inherit the kingdom of God, and believers are cautioned not to associate with those practising sexual immorality (2:20–23).

King Balak bribed the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites and to entice them to desert the Lord (Numbers 22; 2 Peter 2:12–16). Likewise, the corrupt practice of bribery causes the decay of modern societies. Believers must be mindful of it and not associate with people who commit sins such as these.

Christ desires that there should be a noticeable difference between the lifestyles of Christians and of non-Christians. Believers must realise the only access some people have to role models, are the lifestyles of and the way believers live every day.

2:16–17 A new name:

Today many churches pursue a *progressive membership approach* by overlooking the practice of certain sins such as idolatry, immorality, and the promotion of false prophecies. In doing so they try to make their churches more *accessible* to unbelieving church members and to non-believers. Jesus sounds a wake-up call for Pergamum (and for all present-day believers) to repent; and He warns the church to let go of this type of approach, or else He will destroy them. It seems as if churches all over the world who follow such a *progressive membership approach* currently lose significant numbers of members, and Revelation warns these churches will eventually come to an end.

The believers are encouraged to persevere, and Christ will feed them with invisible spiritual food. He will pardon their sins and give them a white touchstone as proof of their victory. On the touchstone He will engrave a new name for the receiver, and only he or she will recognize this name.

To THYATIRA: 2:18–29

¹⁸To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.¹⁹I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

²⁰Nevertheless, I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.²¹I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.²²So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways.²³I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

²⁴Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, "I will not impose any other burden on you,²⁵except to hold on to what you have until I come."

²⁶To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations – ²⁷that one "will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery" – just as I have received authority from my Father.²⁸I will also give that one the morning star.²⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

2:18–19 I know your deeds:

Thyatira was an important commercial city, with guilds or unions for various trades. The guilds were interwoven with heathen idolatry and regularly held pagan festivals and sacrificial banquets. It was a prerequisite for workers to belong to these guilds and to take part in the pagan activities. Christians who did not participate in them were expelled and persecuted.

Jesus is aware of and praises the deeds of Thyatira, of love, faith, good deeds, endurance, and perseverance. Thyatira's later deeds are more than their first, which indicates an upward curve in ministry and faith. This is a feather in the church's cap and is something present-day churches can pursue.

Thyatira works for the Lord, and they do their deeds with love. In other words, their hearts are focused on Jesus and on those they are serving, and He sees what they do. Similarly, the Lord saw David's heart when He chose him as king and leader. David was a competent man and a man after the Lord's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14).

Christ expects of believers to get to work and to do what He calls them to do, just like Thyatira, irrespective of whether they do smaller deeds or bigger ones. For example, God wanted to save the people, animals, and birds from the great flood He planned to inflict on the earth, and He called Noah to do it on His behalf. And Noah did this with abandon and perseverance (Genesis 6–9).

2:20–23 Jezebel:

Thyatira allowed Jezebel, who claimed to be a prophet, to teach church members her immoral and blasphemous practices. The Lord was dissatisfied with the church for not expelling or disciplining Jezebel. It is significant that quite a few of the seven churches of chapters 2 and 3 were threatened from within their own ranks, for example, Jezebel at Thyatira, false prophets (2:2), the Nicolaitans (2:6,15) and the false Jews (2:9).

Presently idols such as pride, money, fame, and sex are still being worshipped. Often such idols are worshipped in subtle ways by making compromises with the world, for instance Christians do not want to offend others and therefore take part in their sinful practices. Sometimes such compromises mean that believers try to serve two masters (God and for example pride, money, fame, or sex); both Christ (Matthew 6:24) and Paul (2 Timothy 3:1–5) solemnly warn Christians not to serve two masters, but only Jesus and Him alone.

An example of subtle idolatry was exposed by Roger Williams, 17th century colonist to the USA, who insisted fellow Christians should return the land they took from the Indians. When the colonists wanted to take him (Williams) captive and send him back to England, he fled to an Indian area, bought land from the Indians, and started a Christian settlement there (by the name of Providence), where everybody could worship freely (Dodgen 2003: 61).

2:24–29 Persevere until the end:

Christ will not lay additional burdens on those who persevere in faith. He promises that those who please Him till the end, will rule with Him over God's enemies and pass judgment on the evil ones. The Lord encourages Thyatira to persevere in faith until they achieve victory. Noah persevered for 120 years to build the ark, which was far removed from the sea or other water bodies and he did everything just as the Father commanded him to do. Noah's obedience to and co-operation with God contributed to Him changing the world. If present-day Christians fully obey the Lord, every one of them can also contribute towards His changing the world.

Jesus is called Morning Star (22:16; 2 Peter 1:19). The morning star appears just before dawn when the night is at its darkest and coldest. When the world is at its worst, Jesus will appear. With His light of truth, He will expose all evil. And He will reward those Christians who remain faithful, just as He promised He would.

Reflections on Revelation 2

Jesus draws attention to the strong and weak points of the churches and their members in Asia; and He does so with understanding and in a loving manner, even though He is strict. Christ continues to do this in the same manner today, for churches and individual believers.

Every one of the letters is concluded with a promise from Jesus to those Christians who are victorious, and with a reference to the Holy Spirit.

Snippets

In chapter 2: 9–10 it is explained that the church members of Smyrna lived in poverty, but in God's economy there need not be poverty (Deuteronomy 15:4). It is significant that all seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3 were sent to the churches in the relevant towns or cities. The Early Church had the belief and approach that the church and members were mutually responsible for one another and for one another's needs, as is apparent from various examples in Acts (2:44–45; 4:32, 36–37; 5:15–16; 6:1–3). Jesus expects from believers as members of His body, today still, to take responsibility for one another and for one another's needs, at least for those who live in the same town, suburb, or city. Christ alludes to the importance hereof with the parable He told of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31).

The way world economies and systems functioned over centuries and still do today results in a relatively small number of people becoming wealthier, while the vast majority remain poor or become more impoverished or stagnate financially. Furthermore, the economies of the world (including South Africa's) are fast moving towards mechanisation, automisation, and centralisation; and these trends cause an ever-increasing number of people permanently to lose their jobs, which means more impoverishment for more people. I believe South Africa (and the rest of the world) should levy a type of wealth tax, which should be applied as a monthly subsistence allowance for the poor. The churches should be involved in this, so that the needs of all poor people can be taken care of (as should have been the case with the church members of Smyrna).

During the period from 1948 to 1994 many South Africans benefited directly and indirectly from the Apartheid-related legal and other systems and how they were applied. In general, this occurred at the expense of others, who were disadvantaged and often impoverished as a result. Restitution is therefore necessary to ensure that just and fair amends are made. Similarly, serious evils were committed during the past in and by most other countries in the world, and restitution should be instituted there as well. When Zacchaeus met Jesus, he immediately realised he had to give away some of his belongings. There and then he gave half of his possessions to the poor; and to everyone from whom he took something unjustly, he returned fourfold (Luke 19:1–10). Restitution must be implemented in South Africa and elsewhere. The focus thereof should be to empower the poor; and for the same reason as with the payment of a subsistence allowance, the churches should be involved. Furthermore, Christian husbands must consider whether they owe restitution to their own wives. And believers should continue to remind themselves and one another that each one has a restitution debt to the Father and the Son (2 Corinthians 5:17–21).

REVELATION 3 – Written to the churches of Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea

Introduction to Revelation 3

These are Jesus' personal letters to the last three (of seven) churches. These three letters, like the previous four, give account of situations which often occurred in the churches; and which still occur nowadays. The churches are reprimanded where necessary; they are encouraged to persevere, and Jesus repeatedly makes a promise. These letters form part of the book of Revelation. All of them are therefore sent to the seven churches and to present-day believers.

It is significant that each of the seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3 starts with the command to John to write, and after he had written the letters, they (i.e., Revelation) were circulated. Similarly, the Father calls believers today to write, for instance, *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* is not complete because no one person can have full insight into the book of Revelation, and there is therefore the opportunity for readers to contribute. I invite you as reader to continue with the writing of *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*, by adding, and omitting, and to commence discussions with others on social media (and otherwise) about what you wrote and why you feel the way you do. The Lord gives to each Christian personal pictures of Himself, of the Saviour, of Jesus' second coming to the earth, and of many other aspects of the Bible. Believers can discuss their personal pictures or impressions of aspects of Revelation and of the rest of the Bible with others. Thus they can encourage one another, comfort one another, learn from one another, and listen together to what the Lord says in His Word.

To SARDIS: 3:1–6

¹To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ²Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.

³Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

⁴Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

⁵The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. ⁶Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

3:1 You are dead:

Sardis was an impressive, prosperous, and well-protected city, but its people were arrogant and too self-confident.

Jesus says Sardis has the name of being alive, but they are dead. This is a harsh message to give to a church, but unfortunately it was true for Sardis. And it is also true for many congregations and church members today.

The age of the Early Church largely came to an end when Emperor Constantine (who ruled from 306 to 337 AD) was converted to Christianity in 312 AD, legalised the Christian faith and church, and stopped the persecution of Christians. It also ushered in the period when the church became formalistic. Formalising the church soon led to the establishment of church structures, acceptance of confessions of faith, introduction of religious processes, and the construction of church buildings. Unfortunately, these factors caused stiffness in manner and lifelessness in the church during the centuries thereafter. Church is often *practised* instead of being the church in the world, and this is the case in many churches today. Jesus warns earnestly against these tragic situations of stagnation and decay in the church.

It is important to bear in mind who and what the Lord's church is. It does not consist of buildings, liturgy, management styles, and methods of ordaining for ministry. In 1 Corinthians 6:15–20 (and elsewhere) Paul explains the true church represents Jesus' body, which supernaturally comprises of the bodies (communally) of all Christians. This is one of the reasons why unity in the church is so important to the Lord. If believers allow the Holy Spirit (who abides in their hearts) to fully live in and rule

through them, and if they continuously and sincerely strive to achieve unity, the true church will emerge in a living and dynamic way; through all of them together.

3:2–3 Be watchful:

The message about reversal of spiritual deadness is clear. Wake up, strengthen those who remained, but are on the verge of dying, and return to your first love. The warning about what will happen if there is no reversal is also clear. Jesus finds their deeds imperfect – if they do not wake up, He will turn up when they least expect it.

Luke tells the story of the modest and very alert shepherds, who slept in the open fields to watch over their sheep. When the Saviour was born, angels appeared to them during the night. They were afraid, but were prepared to obey the heavenly command to visit the Child and His parents in Bethlehem. This they did despite the dangers of King Herod's ever-present spies and the risks of leaving their sheep unattended (Luke 2:8–20). The preparedness and conduct of the shepherds are an example of what Jesus means when He warns Sardis to be watchful. During the difficult present-day times, Satan and his followers try their utmost to lull Christians into a spiritual sleep, but Jesus warns they must be watchful and always be prepared.

Perseverance in faith, especially in a godless environment, is of great importance for churches and church members; and this is said to most of the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. 'Perseverance is the key to success in the faith' (Du Rand 2007: 130), irrespective of what may happen to the church or the individual believers here on earth. And perseverance in prayer should be a key focus area for Christ's followers, regarding their personal prayers as well as prayers with others. The prophet Daniel displayed perseverance in prayer in a special way when King Darius decreed anyone who for 30 days worshipped another god (except him, the king), should be thrown into the lions' den: 'Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.' (Daniel 6:10) This led to Daniel being thrown into the lions' den, and to the Lord miraculously protecting him (Daniel 6:16–23).

3:4–6 Profess their names before the Father:

A few believers are shining lights in the sinful environment of Sardis, and Jesus knows every one of them.

Church members are encouraged to brave sin, temptation, and persecution to the end. They will receive a pure, heavenly garment. Jesus Himself will acknowledge them before the Father and the angels as His own and their names will be written in the book of life.

Everyone receives the directive to be attentive to the Holy Spirit's teachings to the churches.

To Philadelphia: 3:7–13

⁷To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no-one can shut, and what he shuts no-one can open. ⁸I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no-one will take your crown. ¹²The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them 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 them my new name. ¹³Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

3:7–10 An open door:

Philadelphia was a strong military and commercial centre, and progressive agricultural activities were undertaken in the area around the city. Philadelphia was known as the gateway to the East.

Smyrna and Philadelphia were the only ones of the seven churches which did not receive divine reprimands. Both, though, took punishment in their everyday lives from hostile Jews.

Christ introduces Himself to church members as holy and true – He who holds the key of David. The door He opens is admission to the kingdom of God for believers and for those who accept the love of Jesus through them (irrespective of how sinful their former lives may have been). Even though they have little power, like Philadelphia, every Christian and every congregation should utilise this open door by bearing witness of the Lord through word and deed.

Christians are not shielded against persecution and immune from Satan's revenge. It forms part of the process of gaining victory over Satan and his followers. However, the Saviour will embrace them (believers) with His love amidst demonic wrath, and they will be protected against the Lord's judgment.

3:11–13 Hold onto what you have:

The Son of God will certainly come, and He will come soon. Jesus will reward Philadelphia in many ways because they are light bearers. The church members will gain victory over the Jewish accusers, and they (the Jews) will repent. Philadelphia will be protected in the hour of tribulation, they will be made steadfast and enduring pillars in the temple of God, and He Himself will write the name of God on them.

Jesus encourages the church in Philadelphia to hold on to the citizenship of the kingdom of God, to persevere, and to cleave to the Lord's protection amidst the attacks of Satan.

To LAODICEA: 3:14–22

¹⁴To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see.

¹⁹Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. ²⁰Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

²¹To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

3:14–17 You are lukewarm:

Laodicea was a large commercial and financial centre. The city was known for its textiles of black wool and its medical school. The residents of Laodicea were rich, and they knew it, and the church members of Laodicea had the same provoking and arrogant disposition.

Jesus reveals Himself as the One who imparts the plain truth, of what He sees. He warns Laodicea they are lukewarm, and He will spit them out of His mouth; but He has not done so yet, and there is still an opportunity for them to repent.

3:18–22 I stand at the door and knock:

The Saviour assures Laodicea that He disciplines those He loves, so they can be purified. Laodicea should be attentive to His loving involvement with them, and in this case His involvement implies punishment.

Christ has so much love for and patience with people that He stands at the doors of their hearts and knocks. He invites them to open their hearts so He can enjoy a festive meal with them. The festive meal is an awesome reward from the Saviour for those who open the doors of their hearts and repent.

For those who possess all human comforts and conveniences and who know with certainty they will have an income and their needs will be met every day, it is a challenge continuously to live in total dependence upon God and in full expectation of Jesus' second coming. For many Christians in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, their earthly existence is guaranteed, and they do not really need the Lord's daily intervening providence. But for Jesus everything is possible, even to make financially independent believers dependent upon Him (Matthew 19:23–26).

Christ's endless love reaches far. He promises something special, the crown of victory, to every member of the seven churches (in other words to every present-day believer also) who perseveres and achieves victory. Additionally, He promises to those of Laodicea who achieve victory that they will sit on the throne with Him, just like He (who achieved victory Himself) sits on the throne with the Father.

Reflections on Revelation 3

In chapters 2 and 3 the admonition to believers is repeated more than once to allow Jesus to remove the corrupt desires and the sinful nature of the flesh – so they can focus better on Him and on what He wants for everyone.

It is of interest that nowadays churches struggle with the same challenges which churches of the Early Church grappled with. Jesus gives clear guidelines to churches and believers on what must be done and how such challenges should be approached.

Chapters 2 and 3, and elsewhere in Revelation, describe how Christians suffered and will suffer as a result of murder, persecution, and hatred. But believers are encouraged to persevere because the Father is in control;

and because they know with certainty what the outcome of the final war on earth will be. In John 15 Jesus warns about persecution which Christians will suffer and they must persevere and remain faithful. Currently believers in many places in the world face serious afflictions again; and the encouragement offered in Revelation is particularly applicable in situations like these.

Snippets

The Lord gives to and blesses some people with earthly wealth and money; but He warns against an obsessive love for money (1 Timothy 6:8–10). In chapter 3:17–18 the futility of a confidence in and reliance on earthly possessions is highlighted. It is wise to be good stewards of the money and wealth the Lord entrusts to believers, and to give a portion of it for the work of the church.

Jesus loves people so much that He knocks at the doors of their hearts, wanting to come in and care for them (3:20). An example hereof is Him, on His way to Jairus' home, encountering a woman who had been subject to menstrual bleeding for twelve years. In terms of Jewish law and custom, she would have been unclean and untouchable, and therefore an inferior person and an outcast for all these years (Leviticus 15:19–28). When the woman touched His cloak, He healed her and set her free: 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.' (Mark 5:34) Christ appointed and empowered believers to continue with the work He did while He was on earth (Matthew 16:19). Christians should, in addition to administering physical healing, also set believers and non-believers free from the yokes they are subject to, for instance, inferiority complexes, rejection by others, loss of their dignities, being outcasts in their own and other communities, satanic bondages.

I find it elevating to praise and glorify the Father and Jesus. But my vocabulary is limited. There are many descriptions of Jesus in Revelation; and sometimes I enjoy using these images and descriptions while glorifying Him. The following are such descriptions in the first three chapters of Revelation:

- Him who is, who was and who is to come (1:4).
- The Faithful Witness (1:5).
- The Firstborn from the dead (1:5).
- The Ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5).
- He who loves believers (1:5).
- He who freed believers from their sins by His blood (1:5).
- He who made Christians a kingdom of priests for God, His Father (1:6).
- To Him be the glory, praise, grandeur, and power for timeless eternity (1:6).
- He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see Him (1:7).
- Someone like the Son of Man (1:13).
- The First and the Last and the Living One (1:17–18; 2:8).
- He who lives for ever and ever (1:18).
- He who holds the keys of death and Hades (1:18).
- He who holds the seven stars or preachers or messengers of the churches in His right hand (2:1).
- He who died and came to life again (2:8).
- The Son of God (2:18).
- He who holds the seven spirits of God (3:1).
- He who will never blot out the names of believers from the book of life (3:5).
- He who acknowledges the names of Christians before His Father and His angels (3:5).
- He is holy and true (3:7).
- He who holds the key of David (3:7).
- What He opens no-one can shut and what He shuts no-one can open (3:7).
- The Amen, the faithful and the true Witness (3:14).
- He is the Ruler of God's creation (3:14).
- He stands at the doors of people's hearts and knocks (3:20).
- He who will give those who are victorious the right to sit with Him on His throne (3:21).

Revelation 4–5

GOD AND THE LAMB IN HEAVEN

Revelation 4 and 5 serve as a type of anchor and point of departure for the rest of the book of Revelation. Here the focus shifts to the Lord's plans for the future, and the style becomes markedly prophetic. Revelation 4–22 deals largely with God's eternal plan for and with human beings, the earth, and the universe, and how Christians fit into these plans. It is important to note that the events described in chapters 4–22 do not always take place chronologically in terms of time.

In Revelation 4 John is given his second great vision of events which will come to pass. It starts with an open door in heaven which leads to the Father who sits on His throne; and He receives never-ending worship and praise. John is also given a vision of the Lamb who receives a sealed (but unknown) scroll from the Lord.

To fully experience a stirring musical performance like Handel's *Messiah*, a listener must carefully observe its melody. Likewise, to fully experience, understand and appreciate Revelation, the believer must carefully *listen* to its *melody*. This *melody* is Jesus Christ the triumphant Lord; He is the *golden thread* that runs through Revelation.

God's final timetable, of the past, the present, and of future events of people and of the earth, differs from mortal history. With their limited understanding it is difficult for human beings fully to comprehend God's timeframes; but it is wonderful to recognise all of this is in the Father's hands; and to know He has absolute control over everything. Promotion of the Christian's interests and of his or her future are not determined by human beings, but by the Lord; everything is directed by Him who sits on His throne.

The book of Revelation is a tremendous and powerful prophetic document. Revelation must be understood in the context of the Bible as a whole and must be seen against the background of prevailing circumstances during the first few decades of the Early Church (in other words when Revelation was written).

REVELATION 4 – God sits on His throne

Introduction to Revelation 4

The Lord is the Creator God, and He is continually worshipped in heaven. He determines and is in control of history and He executes His judgment over Satan and the wicked. Believers must always keep their eyes fixed on Him, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. The book of Revelation helps to open their eyes to the importance of worshipping God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Christians have been created to worship Him in and out of season, and to enjoy His presence forever.

Sometimes I ponder the apparent cruelty of God with the end judgment and the hellish fire where Satan and his followers will be tortured forever. However, the horror of His judgment is only one side of the coin. Satan and his wicked followers hate Jesus and believers. They persecute and murder Christians, and their focus is to extort control of the earth from God. The Lord continuously offers opportunities to Satan and his followers to repent, and I believe some of his followers will indeed be converted. But Christ's second coming and the judgment day when it will be too late, are fast approaching.

The Father gives everyone a free will to decide about their conduct; similarly, He gave the Egyptian Pharaoh a free will. Shortly after Pharaoh allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt, he decided to disregard his undertaking and to go after them, and to kill them. When Pharaoh and his military force caught up with the Israelites and cornered them at the Red Sea, God destroyed the Egyptians and saved the Israelites. If these events were witnessed by an Egyptian observer, he or she would have perceived it as very cruel, while on the other side of the Red Sea the Israelites shouted for joy and praised God for His miraculous intervention and divine care. This is how it will be with the Lord's judgment at the end time. What is important is that each person ensures that he or she is on the right side.

The establishment and acknowledgement of God's sovereignty on earth is highlighted in Revelation. Jesus' earthly life and ministry are summed up many times in the book of Revelation with a description of the Lamb. The amazing implication of this is that with the Saviour's death and resurrection He gave believers their salvation.

Concerning Christ's work and ministry on earth, Revelation deals mainly with His birth, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. It does not say much about His life, work, miracles, sermons, apostles, and followers on earth. Christians who read Revelation are afforded the opportunity to fill in the details, based on the rest of Scripture.

The heavens are open: 4:1–5

¹After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.'²At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.³And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.

⁴Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.⁵From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.

4:1–3 Come up here:

In chapters 1–3 the focus is mainly on the ministry of the glorified Jesus in and to His church on earth. In chapter 4 the scene shifts to heaven. Here the announcements are made of what will come to pass, and it is here where the revelations start. The narrations and events which follow should not always be perceived as succeeding one another chronologically in terms of time.

John is overwhelmed by the glory of God on His throne in the throne room. Here the Lord's sovereignty, omnipotence, everlasting rule, splendour, holiness, and power are being portrayed. John neglects to depict God exactly as he sees Him. It is as if he (John) is at a loss for words to describe the glory and wonder of the Lord. The open door to heaven signifies that Christians have free access to the Father and to His home.

Revelation gives an insightful God-perspective and a special understanding of the Saviour. Jerigo Mure Gebedsgids (2017) depicts the Lord's and Christ's glory when it tells of a preacher who on occasion stopped in the middle of his sermon and asked a boy to pray: 'The boy stood up and referred to Revelation 4:1 in his prayer. "Dear God, it feels as if I am looking through an open door. I see the Lamb in the middle of the throne, with the keys of death and hell on his girdle." He started to cry, looked up to heaven and exclaimed: "Lord, there is power there, set it free". The next moment a divine presence came over the congregation; many of them fell on their faces and cried out for mercy.' All believers have the same access as this boy did, to the Saviour and to the Father.

4:4–5 The seven spirits of God:

The twenty-four elders are indicative of the church of Christ. Twelve for the tribes of Israel (in the Old Testament) and twelve to indicate the apostles in the New Testament.

The flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder symbolise the execution of the Lord's judgment. The seven bright burning torches stand for the perfection and impeccability of the Holy Spirit. The number seven signifies perfection.

Heavenly worship: 4:6–11

⁶Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the centre, round the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and behind. ⁷The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. ⁸Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all round, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

"'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,'" who was, and is, and is to come.'

⁹Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰the

twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

¹¹'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'

4:6–8 Four creatures:

The bright ocean of glass stretching out in front of the throne of the Father points to the perfection of His creation. God always existed, He exists in the present, and He shall exist forever in the eternal future. The four living creatures around the throne represent God's entire creation. With their eyes they see everything and with their wings they are ever-present. The lion is known for its art of war, the bull signifies power, the human being is known for its intelligence, and the eagle excels in flying high and having clear-sightedness.

God's creation is too majestic and extensive to be fully understood and Jesus is so much greater and more wonderful than the creation – Jesus through whom the Father created everything and Who is the origin of God's creation. Important insights gained from Revelation are that God is the Creator, He is omnipotent, and He determines the past, the present, and the future. Christians must get to know and love Him more and more. Then they shall better understand how and where they fit into His eternal plan.

Furthermore, by reading Revelation believers gain greater appreciation of the Father and of His plans with the universe and the people on earth and in heaven. Revelation (along with the rest of the Bible) is the best source from which to gain knowledge, because Revelation unveils the hidden realities of God's astounding timetable of events of the past, present, and future; and makes it clear and understandable.

4:9–11 You are worthy:

It is significant that the Lord is praised, acknowledged, and esteemed continuously, in other words 24/7/365, by the living creatures who represent God's creation and by the elders who represent the church of Christ over the millennia.

Every person should worship the Father on his or her own, and should encourage others to do the same. Worship can take place during a Christian's personal devotions and when he or she shares fellowship with other believers. Worship of the triune God can and must become a type of lifestyle, in everything the Christian does, says, sings and thinks here on earth. With the Holy Spirit living in them (continuously), they can experience an ongoing consciousness of the Lord's presence with them.

I like the singing (especially the songs of praise) in the throne room, which occurs in many other places in the Bible. From time to time during the day and even at night, believers can sing songs of praise and make music of praise (on their own or with others); for example, by singing out loud, humming, whistling, singing in the heart, playing the piano, or listening to music in the background. I find songs of praise help me to cultivate a realisation of the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit.

In my own devotions I sometimes follow this pattern:

- Listen, by reading the Bible.
- Ask forgiveness for my own and others' sins.
- Intercession for my wife, our children, our grandchildren and for others.
- Praise, honour, worship and thank the Father; and singing.

The things Christians own are not theirs, even though they may claim *ownership*. These belongings are entrusted to them for a little while by the Lord. The elders put their crowns down at God's throne; and similarly, believers must return to Him what they have or think they have.

Reflections on Revelation 4

This chapter describes the starting point of the Father's implementation plan to establish His absolute and all-powerful rule on earth, and this plan will only be carried out in full with Jesus' second coming.

It appears the Lord has a few key objectives with the writing and distribution of Revelation. One of God's purposes with creating the universe and human beings, is to install His absolute and all-powerful rule on earth and to ensure everyone acknowledges it. Since Jesus' ascension He (Jesus) has been the Ruler and He continues to establish the Lord's complete rule on earth. He wants Christians to assist Him in this; and, in truth, they are doing so. Believers are working with Christ in this by

worshipping God, by believing in Him alone, by proclaiming the gospel of salvation, by placing their hope in Him alone, by living the Saviour's love to the full, and by living in Christ's joy despite their circumstances. In Revelation the Father explains these plans and processes to believers. This is one of His objectives with the book of Revelation.

A further goal with Revelation is to encourage and caution Christians, amid martyrdom, persecution, hardship, and misunderstandings. God does this so that they do not become discouraged or unfaithful and do not live in escapism, but live victorious lives in and through the Holy Spirit, amid the desperate circumstances around them.

Revelation was written a while after the establishment of the Early Church, when believers were subjected to serious persecution by the Roman rulers and others. 'Revelation must be understood as a political resistance document. The absolute control by earthly rulers, like the Romans, is denied and is replaced by the royal rule of God who sits on the throne, and the Lamb. The Lord, and not an emperor, controls history.' (Du Rand 2007: 68) Ruthless persecution was committed during the centuries and millennia after Revelation was written; and it is still happening at present. But amid the terrible hardship, Revelation helps Christians to know and understand the wonderful outcome of the final battle and war. Revelation was therefore also written to provide context to the gospel on earth and to what believers will encounter in heaven.

Snippets

1 Samuel 25 tells the story of David and his men who were refugees selling their protective services. Nabal, a wealthy businessman, felt no responsibility to pay for David's unsolicited services; and David decided to kill him. When Nabal's wife, Abigail, heard about this she immediately gave David a substantial restitution gift, which she took from her unknowing husband. Moreover, her insight, humility, charm, tactful manner, attitude of atonement, and gratefulness towards David enabled her to persuade him to abandon his (David's) murderous and sinful plan. With the various challenges and crisis situations which South Africa (and other countries) face, the active involvement of proficient Christian facilitators such as Abigail are now of vital importance.

The Lord's church on earth does not comprise of church denominations, buildings, and liturgies. The real church on earth comprises of the bodies, collectively, of all believers (1 Corinthians 6:15–20). It is therefore important for Christians to, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' *And to,* 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' (Matthew 22:37,39) Furthermore, believers should take charge of their own spiritual, emotional, psychological, and mental well-beings; and ask the Father (and others when required) to help them therewith. Also, it is necessary for them to accept responsibility for their physical bodies and health – regular exercise and other physical care are necessary.

Reverend Andrew Murray is one of my distant forefathers. As a young man, in 1822, he obeyed the missionary call to move from Scotland to South Africa. In July 2022 his offspring gathered in Graaff-Reinet (where Andrew and his young South African wife Maria were stationed) to celebrate God's acclaim and goodness to us, as a big extended family, over 200 years. During the commemorations I thought of Revelation 4–6, which marks the commencement of God's sole rulership on earth, established by Christ with the help of the Christians; and of parts of Isaiah 59 that focuses on the Father's blessings from generation to generation: "As for me, this is my covenant with them," says the Lord. "My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants – from this time on and for ever," says the Lord.' (Isaiah 59:21) The Father invites His sons and daughters to think and pray about and to plan for their respective future generations.

REVELATION 5 – Rejoice over the Redeemer

Introduction to Revelation 5

John receives a vision of the Father; and of the Lamb as Saviour who determines, provides, and ensures the future of Christians in the new Jerusalem. The Father and the Lamb are worshipped and praised together.

It appears the Lord imparted Revelation to John as a unit, in other words in one session or continuously. The whole book of Revelation was sent to all seven churches (and to present-day believers). It is therefore wise to interpret Revelation as a single and integral unit. Revelation (in other words this constituent unit) is the best source to become acquainted with the hidden realities of the divine history of human beings, the earth and heaven. This sacred history, in contrast with secular history, deals with the past, the present and the future.

God deals with time (in other words the past, the present and the future) in an open-ended and eternal manner. Exactly how this works is beyond human comprehension, but it is valuable to take notice of it; and it gives believers greater insight into how He acts.

God gave Jesus the scroll to open shortly after His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension to heaven – chapter 5:5 explains Jesus already gained victory at that stage. This means the Lord's judgment of the people and the world began just after Jesus' ascension; and is still ongoing. This is highlighted with the opening of the seven seals and the sounding of the seven trumpets, in chapters 6–11, and with the pouring out of the seven bowls of God's wrath on the world, in chapters 15 and 16. Currently God is therefore already carrying out His judgments over the people and the earth, even though a major portion of it will only be executed with Jesus' second coming.

The Lord's seal, trumpet and bowl judgments over the earth have some things in common, but His judgments advance in urgency and intensity, with worse retribution being added with every new series. With the overlapping Christ indicates that He is comfortable to repeat and repeat His actions to caution people. He never gets tired of them and He will not stop encouraging them and repeating His warnings for their benefit.

Who is worthy: 5:1–5

¹Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. ²And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, ‘Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?’ ³But no-one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴I wept and wept because no-one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. ⁵Then one of the elders said to me, ‘Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.’

5:1–3 The scroll:

The Lord has a scroll in His hand, which comprises His eternal plan with His whole creation and with all creatures, including human beings, throughout all of history until eternity.

Jesus came to the earth to become Mediator between God and the people; and this He continues to be after His ascension. Christ fulfills His mediation role by continuously pleading with the Father for and on behalf of His children. He intercedes for them in their past, present, and future histories.

5:4–5 The Lion from the tribe of Judah:

John weeps because there is no-one who can open this important scroll, so that God’s eternal plan can become recognized. Yet, the prophet Amos gives the assurance the Father will make His plans known: ‘Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.’ (Amos 3:7) It is noteworthy that John’s tears were unnecessary. If he had waited patiently, he would have seen how the Father brought the solution – Jesus is worthy to open the scroll. Similarly, much of human sorrow is caused by their limited insight.

It is touching that the Lion is a Lamb and it is critical that God does not gain victory through violence, war, or military force, but through the Lamb who was slaughtered because of His plan and through His doing. The Father's actual victory was achieved on the cross, in other words at the place of slaughter. God's conduct is significant – it illustrates to Christians how they should live.

You are worthy: 5:6–14

⁶Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying:

'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

¹⁰You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.'

¹¹Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.

¹²In a loud voice they were saying:

'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!'

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!'

¹⁴The four living creatures said, 'Amen', and the elders fell down and worshipped.

5:6–7 A Lamb at the centre of the throne:

The Lamb portrays the Saviour. He is the Mediator between the people and God. The redeemed receive their salvation through Him. He is humble, meek, and subjected to the will of the Father. He obtained the power and right to open the seals of the scroll. He goes closer to the throne and takes the scroll from the Father, with His pierced hand.

5:8–14 Sing a new song:

Each of the twenty-four elders brings a bowl filled with incense, which represents the prayers of the Christians, to the Lord on His throne. The prayers are a sweet and pleasant aroma for God and for everyone else in heaven. The Lord lends an ear to and answers believers' prayers, as can be seen in chapter 8:3–6 where He executes His judgment of the earth. The Christians' prayers have a decisive impact on what the Father does and how He does it.

For a few years Jesus' disciples were almost always with Him, while He was teaching and preparing them. Even though He was the Son of God He prayed often; and the disciples saw Him doing that. Once when He finished praying one of His disciples asked, 'Lord, teach us to pray ...' (Luke 11:1) This is a significant request; and Jesus gives them the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9–15), which is a significant answer. Jesus' intention was that this prayer should serve as a guideline, and not that those who pray must repeat it every time they pray.

One of the most critical things each believer should do in his or her personal love relationship with the Lord is to pray regularly, just like the Saviour did and taught them to do, and as is illustrated in chapter 5:8–10. Praise and prayer are of the most important activities which followers of Christ can engage in.

Richard Cecil, who lived more than two centuries ago, relates how the Lord used his mother's prayers in his life: 'I tried when I was a boy to be an infidel, but there was one thing I could never get over. I never could answer my mother's love and character. My father was an intemperate man, and my mother, when made miserable by his brutal treatment, would lead my little brother and myself to a spot under a hillside, and kneeling there, would commend us to God. Hardship and her husband's

harshness brought her to her grave. At the age of twenty-one I was vicious, hardened, utterly impenitent. Once I found myself near the home of my boyhood, and felt irresistibly moved to take another look at the little hollow under the hill. There it was as I left it; the very grass looked as if no foot had ever trod it since the guide of my infant years was laid in her early grave. I sat down. I heard again the voice pleading for me. All my bad habits and my refusals of Christ came over me and crushed me down. I did not leave the spot till I had confidence in my Saviour. My mother's prayers came back in answers of converting grace, and I stand today the living witness of a mother's faithfulness, and of a prayer-hearing God! (Dodgen 2003: 98–99)

The first time John refers to big legions in heaven is in chapter 5:11, and in this case they are angels. In chapter 7:9 the great multitudes are martyrs; and the vast multitudes of chapter 19:1 most likely are angels again.

The three successive songs of praise before God's throne in chapter 5 are significant, impactful, and wonderful. These are the song of praise of the twenty-four elders, the praises of the angelic choir, and the worship songs of all of creation. I find when I worship the Father, my focus is transferred from myself (for instance, from my anxieties, plans, problems) to Him, so I can focus completely on Him.

Reflections on Revelation 5

Since Christ ascended to heaven He sits at the right hand of the Father. Handing over the scroll in chapter 5 took place during the time shortly after Jesus' ascension. The scroll and the final events therefore do not refer only to the end times and to Jesus' second coming, but also to the present.

Jesus has been ruling in His capacity as King for more or less 2,000 years. He already saves; and the passing of the Lord's judgment of chapter 6 and further on in Revelation is already taking place.

Snippets

In chapter 5:6 John sees a vision of ‘... a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain ...’, which signifies Jesus had already paid the final price to give human beings freedom from their sins. Human sin started with the fall (Genesis 3), and thereafter God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (Paradise). He told the woman her pains in childbearing would be very severe, and her husband would rule over her; and He told the man he would eat his food by the sweat of his brow. This was a type of curse He pronounced over women and men as punishment for their disobedience.

The Lord removed this curse with Jesus’ crucifixion; and, since then, women and men perform their daily work mainly for two reasons. One is to earn an income to provide in the needs of themselves and of their loved ones, and the other is to perform work which has meaning for the Lord, for others and for themselves (intercession for one another is an example of this). The percentage of women in the workforce increased dramatically during the past century, among other, because of these two reasons. It is noteworthy that in many countries, for instance in USA and China with the biggest economies in the world, there are more women in their workforces than men; and nowadays women are often not financially dependent on their husbands.

Such an important worldwide societal shift has positive and negative impacts. In a negative sense, directly and indirectly it causes break-ups of marriages, inter alia because of sexual immorality (which was also part of the sinful teachings of Balaam, in chapter 2:14). God Himself established marriage; and happy marriages are particularly important to bring about family and other stability during such societal shifts. Christian couples will do well to bear the biblical model in mind, which is to keep the flame of love for the Saviour, for each other and for others burning forever.

Every man and woman have a great many germ cells. An immeasurable number of additional people could have been born; but these potential new people were never born, mostly because of the decisions taken by men and women about, for instance, marriage, intercourse, and birth control. It is clear the Father really meant that human beings should be co-creators with Him of new people. Yet, the Lord says He knew us before we were formed in the womb (Jeremiah 1:5). A question I have, which can provide further insight into life in heaven: Are some or all of the angels and other heavenly beings the spirits and glorified bodies of potential people (i.e., people who were never born)? For instance, in chapter 19:10 the angel says: 'I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters ...' If angels and other heavenly beings are, in fact, the spirits and glorified bodies of potential people, then human beings form a small percentage of the potential and get the opportunity to live on earth for an average of 80 years. In the life hereafter believers will, with angels and other heavenly beings, live and reign with God and Jesus forever.

A journalist tells the story of what happened when, some years ago, he visited an outdoor soup kitchen. There was a long line of hungry children, eagerly waiting to receive their plates of food. He moves closer to the tables where the food was being served and finds the grown-ups serving to be very concerned, because on the particular day there isn't enough food for everyone. Then he notices a small girl near the end of the line, keenly watching three toddlers playing a slight distance away. When the small girl reaches the table, she receives a single banana. That's the only food left for her today. She says, 'Thank you very much!' And she runs off to the three toddlers. She sits down in front of them, carefully peels the banana, neatly divides it in three pieces and gives a piece to each one. Then she herself eats the inside of the banana skin. The journalist concludes to say he saw Jesus that day – in the small girl.

Revelation 6–11

GOD'S SALVATION AND JUDGMENT

In this main section the focus is on the Lord executing His judgment, and on His redemption of believers.

Jesus' taking and opening of the scroll and breaking of the seven seals are done to reveal the Father's plans with humanity, earth, and the universe – a frightening future awaits the people, the earth, and the universe.

Since His ascension Jesus has been ruling as King and He has been establishing God's sovereignty on earth; and believers are ruling with Him. God has been carrying out some of the seal and trumpet judgments on humanity and the earth from the time when Jesus was taken up into heaven; and at present He continues to do so.

One of the manners in which Christians rule with the Saviour, is to *perform the bible* in their daily lives. In Revelation every Christian is encouraged to carry out his or her unique and important role – to glorify the Father and to serve other people. The narrative does not end with the last verse of the Bible. With the acting out by believers of each of their daily lives, the Bible drama continues.

Jesus' second coming is fast approaching, when the Lord will implement His full judgment on the people, the earth, and the universe. The execution of this judgment will wipe out everyone and everything and will be horrific and completely destructive. Christians will endure trials and hardship as Jesus' second coming approaches, but they must not lose faith in the Lord. Believers must continue worshipping Him, testifying of Him, and doing the works He calls them to do.

REVELATION 6 – The Lamb opens the six seals

Introduction to Revelation 6

Jesus, with His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension achieved victory over Satan and his evil forces; and believers share in this marvellous victory because it was secured for them. Satan's war against Christ and His church continues even though the outcome has been determined; and Christians are amid and part of this warfare. Believers must participate with Christ to establish God's kingdom on earth, and to realise His final victory over Satan. With the Lord's help each one can achieve victory over evil, in such a way that their lives demonstrate such victory; and they must tell others about what the Father is doing.

Since Jesus was taken up into heaven almost 2,000 years ago, God has continued to perform His righteous judgment over the earth and the people and the seal judgments are part of such retribution. The Lord's punishment will culminate with Christ's second coming to the earth. It is helpful for Christians to try to identify the judgments currently being implemented. It can strengthen each one's faith and stimulate discussions with others.

The opening of the first four seals: 6:1–8

¹I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, 'Come!' ²I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

³When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, 'Come!' ⁴Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.

⁵When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a black

horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, 'A kilogram of wheat for a day's wages, and three kilograms of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!'

⁷When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, 'Come!'⁸I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a quarter of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

6:1–2 The first seal:

The Lord now starts executing His judgments. While the Lamb is opening the first seal, John sees a white horse with its rider holding a bow and arrow. The appearance of horses with armoured riders announce strife and armed conflict. Military operations and warfare are not glamorous events, as they are sometimes presented – they are always accompanied by tragedy and grief.

Barclay illustrates the tragedy of military operations with a sketch from frontline troops: 'During the Spanish civil war a journalist told how he suddenly realized what war was. He was in a Spanish city in which the opposing parties were waging guerilla warfare. He saw walking along the pavement a little boy, obviously lost, and bewildered and terrified, dragging along a toy which had lost its wheels. Suddenly there was the crack of a rifle shot; and the little boy pitched on the ground, dead. That is war.' (Barclay 1959 Volume 2: 4–5)

All four horses with riders which appear with the opening of the first four seals go hand in hand with the same judgment process. It does not seem that the first rider on the white horse is depicted as bringing victory and fame, and it does not appear that they are the same horse and rider as referred to in chapter 19:11–16. The rider on the white horse of chapter 6:2 ushers in the terrible events and the frightening times of the Lord's seal judgments.

6:3–4 The second seal:

While the Lamb is opening the second seal the second horse enters, fiery red in colour. His rider has a big sword. Red symbolises blood. The red horse and its rider, therefore, symbolise warfare.

Wars always lead to bloodshed and terrible tragedies. I am certain there are few, if any, wars which were and are necessary to be fought. While I'm writing *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* in 2022, Russia invaded and attacked Ukraine. Jesus warned that the rider on the red horse will have power '... to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other.' (6:4) The war between Russia and Ukraine is an example of a seal judgment currently being carried out. Wars normally originate from poor national and political leadership, for instance from greedy and power-hungry rulers; and this war in the eastern parts of Europe is no exception.

Paul cautions Christians to pray for their leaders so that they and their countries can thrive. 'I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – ²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, ⁴who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.' (1 Timothy 2:1–4) Believers should take the Lord's adherence to heart and intercede continuously for their leaders and for all those in authority.

6:5–6 The third seal:

While the Lamb is opening the third seal, a black horse enters with a rider holding a scale. Black symbolises famine and the scale refers to impoverishment and extreme scarcity of foodstuffs.

The wage indicated for a full day's work is just enough to buy wheat, which is just enough food for one person for one day. The price of barley is a third of it, so the labourer can provide food for his family. But what about the other necessities for his family? The poor will be hard hit, which also is the case today; and such crises bring more opportunities for Christians to give to the poor and to practically apply their responsibilities in other ways.

Famines normally emanate from a lack of economic growth. Incompetent and shaky national (political) leadership is usually the cause for poor performance or default of a country's economy. Paul's plea for intercession for leaders also applies here (1 Timothy 2:1–4).

6:7–8 The fourth seal:

With the opening of the fourth seal, John sees a pale horse with its rider, which he calls death. The character and authority of the rider on the pale horse are those of the realm of the dead. To this rider the terrible and frightful power is given to kill a quarter of the people on earth with the sword, famine, fatal illnesses, and wild animals.

During 2020–2022 the world experienced the Covid-19 pandemic; and several million people died because of it. I am concerned about the hasty development and administration of vaccines for Covid-19; and about the possible exposure over the long term of the lives of hundreds of millions of people if the vaccines are defective. This is an example of the judgment of the fourth seal. With this the Lord gives a warning that Jesus' second coming is near.

The opening of the first four seals (of false propaganda, war, famine, and death) show similarities with human weaknesses of selfishness and the urge and desire to overpower others. Revelation calls believers to change such approaches and weaknesses by worshipping the Father and by loving their neighbours and fellow creatures.

The opening of the fifth and sixth seals: 6:9–17

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' ¹¹Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

¹²I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the

whole moon turned blood red,¹³ and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig-tree when shaken by a strong wind.¹⁴ The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

¹⁵Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. ¹⁶They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! ¹⁷For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?'

6:9–11 The fifth seal:

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees the martyrs, who have been killed for their faith, at the foot of the altar. They plead with God to avenge their deaths. In the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12–15) and elsewhere, Jesus teaches that believers must forgive, irrespective of what others do to them. It appears that Christ allows the martyrs, now that they are dead, to plead for retribution.

The Lord is faithful and just. He punishes sin. He sent Jesus to the earth and allowed Him (the Saviour) to die on the cross for everyone's sins and to redeem those who believe in Him. It is difficult for present-day Christians to understand the concept of an altar on which animals are sacrificed, but they understand and believe the cross is the ultimate altar, with Jesus as the Sacrificial Lamb slaughtered there for each of them.

Jesus warned that severe persecution and death for the sake of the gospel await His children (Mark 13:9–13). Part of the reality of the martyrs of chapter 6:9–10 calling out from the foot of Jesus' cross for retribution, is that these men, women, and children paid the highest price for their faith. The martyrs worship and praise the caring and faithful Ruler. They know the Lord will punish the ungodly. Their plea for retribution must also be seen as recognition and worship of the Father, asking Him to implement God's judgment soon. He is the righteous King who judges and punishes the wicked. The Lord's answer is to honour the martyrs

with white robes, and to ask them to wait patiently until future martyrs are added to their numbers.

Many believers are still being put to death for their faith today, as illustrated with this true story. 'The two Christian girls waited in the Chinese prison yard for the announced execution. Flanked by renegade guards, the executioner came with a revolver in his hand. It was their own pastor! He had been sentenced to die with the two girls. But, as on many other occasions in Church history, the persecutors worked on him, tempting him. They promised to release him if he would shoot the girls. He accepted. "Before you shoot us, we wish to thank you heartily for what you have meant to us. You also taught us that Christians are sometimes weak and commit terrible sins, but they can be forgiven again. When you regret what you are about to do to us, do not despair like Judas, but repent like Peter. God bless you, and remember that our last thought was not one of indignation against your failure. May God reward you for all the good you have done to us. We die with gratitude." The pastor's heart was hardened. He shot the girls. Afterwards he was shot by the Communists.' (DC Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs 1999: 109–110)

From chapter 6 and other parts of Scripture it is clear there will be more martyrdom. However, victory and the final outcome are guaranteed, and believers can live in a triumphant spirit. The actions of the early Christians amidst persecution, trials, and executions played an important role to eventually convince the Roman authorities that torture did not have the desired effect for them (the Romans). 'Even when the most severe torture was applied to break the determination of the accused, they stood by this: "I am a Christian; do what you want. I suffer for Christ!"' (Wegener 1965: 33)

6:12–17 The sixth seal:

When the Lamb opens the sixth seal, John sees frightful signs of the Lord's judgments which will soon follow, namely a world-shaking earthquake, the sun turns black, the moon turns red like blood, the stars fall on the earth, the heavens disappear, and every mountain and island is removed from its position. The book of Revelation informs believers of what to expect and prepares them for the Lord's judgments; and they must not beat a hasty retreat as unbelievers do when they face grave circumstances (6:15–16).

The opening of the sixth seal portrays God's terrifying judgments on the people and the earth. And chapter 6 ends with the question: '... and who can withstand it?' (6:17) Christ immediately assures believers, in chapter 7, He will help them to remain standing amidst hardship. He gives them a mark on their foreheads because they are God's property. Revelation 7 serves as an encouragement to persevere – to keep on keeping on!

Reflections on Revelation 6

The Lord is a loving and just Father. He created and continues to create everything good and right; and He wants human beings to maintain and manage it in this same manner on His behalf. He punishes disobedience. Since Jesus' ascension God is meting out His punishment and judgment. The seal judgments are part of such reprisal, and His punishment will culminate with Christ's second coming to the earth.

'Whenever in history the church is faithful to its calling and bears testimony concerning the truth, tribulation is bound to follow. Children of God do not escape the horrors of war, famine, and pestilence. The church needs these tribulations.' (Hendriksen 1939: 99) Christians should therefore expect more hardship.

Snippets

David and his men went out to battle. Afterwards they returned to Ziklag, the town where they left their wives and children, but found it destroyed by fire and everyone taken captive. David and his men wept aloud. 'David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the Lord his God.' (1 Samuel 30:6) In this time of crisis David realised he needed time alone with God (Psalm 103:1–5). The Father encouraged him and showed him what to do. With the Lord's help, David and his men defeated the enemy, saved their families, and recovered their wealth. In times of difficulty (and otherwise), believers should follow David's example, find a quiet place, and lift their souls to God in prayer (Philippians 4:6).

Believers are often tried and tested through (long) delays in the answering of their prayers (see also Habakkuk 2:3 and Joel 2:25-26). The book of Revelation prepares Christians to wait patiently for the Lord's outcomes and Revelation provides comfort and reassurance during such times of delay.

During the exodus from Egypt God led the Israelites to the Red Sea via a detour through the desert. He hardened Pharaoh's heart, so he (Pharaoh) persecuted them and cornered them at the Red Sea. Humanly speaking Moses and the Israelites were in a hopeless situation. But they prayed in earnest and called on God in desperation for help, and He adhered to their pleas (Exodus 14:15-16): 'Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. ¹⁶Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.'" God heard their prayers and wanted to help them, but they had to implement His commands. The time had come for Moses and the Israelites to stop begging, and to take the faith steps the Lord directed them to, fully trusting in Him. The South African church and the country (and elsewhere in the world) currently find themselves in dire straits, in some ways like the crisis situations referred to in Revelation 6. Christians must now demonstrate the same attitude and follow the same approach as Moses and the Israelites did, as described in Exodus 14.

REVELATION 7 – The mark of God

Introduction to Revelation 7

The Lord's seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments lead to horrific human and environmental disasters during the end times, as described in chapters 6–11 and 15–16. Prophecies about these catastrophes are portrayed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in various places in the Old Testament. The amazing love and patience of the Lord sways Him to allow the happening of some of these disasters during the present era (i.e., before Jesus' second coming), to give people another opportunity to mend their ways, to encourage them to return to Him, and to prepare the way for the creation of the new heaven and the new earth.

When Christ ascended to heaven about 2,000 years ago God started fulfilling His judgment over the people and the earth, and He continues to carry it out with increasing intensity. This results in many people becoming accustomed to these misfortunes, so they are not sufficiently attentive to what is lying ahead. In Matthew 24:36–44 Jesus warns we should be ready, because the last moments on earth will come like a thief in the night and nobody knows exactly when it will happen. Christ alludes to the time of Noah as a reminder that the people got used to Noah building the ark, and they simply persisted in their godless ways.

Preparations have been made for Jesus' second coming since His ascension; for example, He reigns alongside the Father, and the Lord is executing His judgments upon the earth and the people. But the Saviour wants His people to be ready continuously for the moment of His second coming.

Most of Chapter 7 refers to activities of believers in heaven. During the forty days between Jesus' resurrection and ascension there were special aspects about Him, for instance; He simply appeared to people and disappeared, when with men and women He communicated with them in a natural manner, His looks and appearance were the same as before His crucifixion, persons could touch Him and feel His body, He ate food. I think these aspects indicate how deceased Christians will be and live after they die. The lives of Adam and Eve and their walk with the Lord in the Garden of Eden also foreshadow what await believers in heaven.

The redeemed receive His seal: 7:1–8

¹After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. ²Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: ³‘Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.’ ⁴Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

⁵From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed, from the tribe of Reuben 12,000, from the tribe of Gad 12,000, ⁶from the tribe of Asher 12,000, from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000, from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000, ⁷from the tribe of Simeon 12,000, from the tribe of Levi 12,000, from the tribe of Issachar 12,000, ⁸from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000, from the tribe of Joseph 12,000, from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

7:1–3 A mark on their foreheads:

In chapter 7 the Father introduces an interval in the flow of the prophetic events, to bring hope and comfort to oppressed believers.

The mark or seal which will be applied to the foreheads of Christians will serve as their eternal protection; for example, as in chapter 9:4. It is important to note God’s seal does not protect believers from persecution and other bodily harm on earth; but He assures them of His help to persevere, so they remain standing until Jesus comes again, or until He fetches them.

God’s seal is not a physical mark, or, for instance, a microchip which is implanted. The seal is symbolic, to confirm they belong to the Lord, are protected by Him, and are entitled to privileges of being a child of God.

Furthermore, the seal confirms they are part of the body of Christ on earth, and accordingly have responsibilities to their Father and to fellow men and women. The Word of God, and particularly Revelation, makes it clear that nobody can be neutral – each one is either marked by God (7:3), or by the false prophet (13:16).

The seal used by God in chapter 7 should not be interpreted as baptism, because baptism is specific. The application of the seal on the foreheads of His followers signify they belong to the living God, and they exist through His power. The seal or mark of God should be seen as being filled with the Holy Spirit. Barclay explains this as follows: ‘Paul regularly talks about the Christian being sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The possession of the Holy Spirit is the sign that a man belongs to God. The real Christian is marked out by the seal of the Spirit which enables him to have the wisdom and the strength to cope with life in a way beyond the attainment of others.’ (Barclay 1959 Volume 2: 23)

Parts of Revelation are approached from a heavenly or the Lord’s perspective. It is instructive that He perceives the earth, and everything related to it, and humanity as inseparable. For instance, in chapter 7:1–8 the angel commands no harm be done to land, sea or trees before God’s servants receive His seal on their foreheads.

7:4–8 The 144,000:

The 144,000 children of the Lord who are marked with His seal should be interpreted symbolically. There are many more believers than 144,000, and all of them are protected by Christ. I am certain I am one of them.

The 144,000 of chapter 7:1–8 (and of chapter 14:1–5) are representative of all the redeemed on earth; they therefore signify the church (Christ’s body) on earth. Du Rand explains this as follows: ‘The number 144,000, which is symbolic of God’s complete number, can be compiled in the following way: 12 (Old Testament) x 12 (New Testament) x 10³ (ten to the power of three which depicts godliness and divinity).’ (Du Rand 2021: 265)

The multitude of redeemed in heaven: 7:9–17

⁹After 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 before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰And they cried out in a loud voice:

‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’

¹¹All the angels were standing round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹²saying:

‘Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!’

¹³Then one of the elders asked me, ‘These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from?’

¹⁴I answered, ‘Sir, you know.’

And he said, ‘These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵Therefore,

‘they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶“Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,” nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; “he will lead them to springs of living water.”

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

7:9–10 The multitude no-one can count:

In Revelation reference is made more than twenty times to nation or nations, which indicates how important nations are to the Lord. The Saviour loves each one of His children individually and personally. But He also loves them in and with their communities, regardless of the type, composition, and place of such groups. It is significant John mentions the diversity of the multitude, even though he would not have been able to see who were in the multitude: ‘... from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.’ (7:9) By implication the Lord calls believers to make disciples, not only of individuals, but also of groups of people in nations, tribes, races, and languages.

The Lord’s marking of Christians with His seal should be seen against the background of Jesus who paid with His blood for everyone – in verse 10 reference is made of the Lamb. It is meaningful to compare the seal on the foreheads of believers with the blood of the lambs the Israelites put on their doorframes (Exodus 12:12–13). The Lord’s seal on believers’ foreheads protects them against the terrible judgments described in Revelation, just like the blood on their doorframes protected the Israelites in Egypt.

The 144,000 of chapter 7:1–8 refers to all believers on earth, at any stage since Jesus’ ascension. And the great multitude in heaven of chapter 7:9–17 refers to all Christians who have died, and therefore gained victory and are in heaven. But Christ, and believers along with Him, desire a much bigger harvest. It is important for Christians to focus on taking the gospel to everybody, regardless of language, place, gender, age, culture, race, and economic status. And make them Jesus’ disciples.

The Father is preparing a heavenly home for each one of His children. It will be marvellous and more wonderful than they can ever dream possible. And heaven will have oceans, forests, trees, fruit, birds, animals, fish, rivers, and beaches. Comparing the biblical description of heaven with the Garden of Eden (in Genesis) gives a passing glance of how glorious and delightful heaven will be. God created the Garden of Eden as heaven on earth, which He wanted His children to enjoy continuously.

7:11–12 Songs of praise by the angels:

In chapter 7 Christians are encouraged, individually and corporately, to glorify, praise, and honour the Father with the countless number of believers in heaven, with the heavenly beings, and with other Christians on earth.

The deceased believers at the foot of the altar or cross of Jesus (6:9–11), receive white robes. They glorify, praise, honour, and worship the Father and Jesus on the throne, with the angels and other living creatures. It seems the question asked by the martyrs about how long it will be before the Lord carries out His judgment (6:10), is partly a rhetorical question (in other words the question does not require an answer). Yet, the question is answered in part in chapter 7:1–8. And in chapter 7:9–17 everyone glorifies and praises God for what He has done.

7:13–17 The Lamb is like a shepherd:

The great multitude in front of the throne which no-one can count is evidence of the deliverance brought about by Jesus with the price He paid on the cross. This multitude is not yet up to strength – more believers must be added.

Everyone in heaven shouts for joy and glorifies the Father. Indications are that ‘they who have come out of the great tribulation’ (verse 14) are the redeemed who died since Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Believers on earth have been oppressed over the centuries and will continue to be oppressed. Humanly speaking the lives of Christians on earth are not easy – from an earthly perspective it was not meant to be easy.

I find it difficult to imagine myself worshipping the Lord all day, every day, for eternity. And I realise that I’m not continuously worshipping Him while on earth, which is the main reason why I cannot envisage myself doing so in heaven. For me, this is an area where I would like to grow.

Many people find the milieu and circumstances in heaven too immense to understand fully. For instance, will they eat and drink? Will the sun shine and will it rain? Will each one have a house of his or her own to live in? How will each one feel towards his or her own wife or husband compared to other women or men? Some of these aspects are dealt with in *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*.

Christians know living in heaven will be completely different from their existence on earth. In heaven the Father will direct, guide, provide, and comfort every believer in a personal and direct way; He will ensure they have no more tears, pain, and suffering.

With the limitations of human understanding it is difficult to imagine what the destruction of the world will be like; and how believers who are still alive and the deceased who are in heaven will fit into this total devastation. It is clear Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension are in the centre of God's plan with the history of humanity and the universe. This forms the basis for believers' hope and their confident expectation of the resurrection of their bodies. Jesus will soon return to the earth when the Lord will destroy everything. Thereafter the redeemed will live and rule with the Father and with Jesus for all eternity. Paul gives good explanations of some of these fundamental truths, in 1 Corinthians 15:42–58 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Also read these with Revelation 21:4.

The life, witness, and conduct of Jesus on earth for the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20 and 21; Acts 1:1–11), are good indications of what and how believers' lives and bodies will be after their deaths; and of what the Lord has in mind with and for the redeemed.

Every Christian will receive a new or glorified body after his or her death, and they will recognise one another in these new bodies. The Father gave significant insight to believers into this matter the moment when Jesus died on the cross: '... the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.' (Matthew 27: 52–53) The inference is that the people in Jerusalem could identify those who were resurrected.

In the life hereafter believers will have direct access to the Father, and everyone will have a personal and unique love relationship with Him. They will personally experience the Lord's sovereignty and far-reaching greatness on the one hand, and His lovingkindness and intimate personal interest in each one on the other hand. He is and will be so special and majestic for everyone that factors like His gender or age or size or appearance will have no relevance.

Reflections on Revelation 7

Chapter 7 brings a better understanding of the differences between believers on earth and those in heaven, and of Christians' crossing over into life hereafter. In chapter 7:1–8 the focus is on those who received God's seal and form the body of Christ on earth (the church militant). And in chapter 7:9–17 the focus is on believers who have died and therefore victoriously reached their destination in heaven (the triumphant church).

Furthermore, chapter 7 describes the remarkable eternal home for believers who have passed on, with God and Jesus. Jesus' life and ministry on earth during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension model how believers' bodies will be and how they will live in the life hereafter.

Genesis' description of the Garden of Eden and of the intimate fashion in which the Father walked with Adam and Eve, gives a picture of heaven and what it will be like. This portrayal provides a better understanding that God meant to give the Garden of Eden to the people as a type of replica of heaven.

In chapter 7 Christians receive the assurance that when danger and distress on earth are at their worst, Jesus will be closest to each one, the Father will be present with each one in a powerful and forceful manner, and the Holy Spirit will work lovingly in and through each one.

Snippets

The book of Revelation highlights the role of Satan and his followers and their impact on believers on earth. Prayer is essential and support by fellow Christians is important to enable them to overcome the evil attacks. However, churches and individual believers should be careful not to give the devil the *honour* for bringing about all the difficulties they face on an ongoing basis. It is a reality of life that, for instance, people will get ill, there will be misunderstandings between them, loved ones will pass away, accidents will happen, difficulties will occur; and Satan may have nothing to do with some or all of such mishaps.

Various approaches about God instantly rapturing or taking believers from earth to heaven are supported by some Christians. None of these approaches question or change:

- The fact Jesus will soon return to earth.
- The believer's certainty he or she is a child of God, cleansed by the blood of Jesus.
- Their confident prospect to spend eternity with Him in the new Jerusalem.
- The expectation that Christians will suffer, be persecuted, and even be murdered for the sake of their faith.
- The necessity of believers persevering in faith until Jesus' second coming or until they die.
- The importance of Christians practising what the Lord called them to be and to do.

I am assured of my future in and through Jesus; and this applies to or can apply to every believer. I do not judge these rapture approaches; but I am not concerned about them.

I never took anything from anyone during the time of Apartheid (and at any other time). But I received benefits merely because of the colour of my skin, for instance, to attend better schools, to live in a better suburb, to earn a better salary. I knew such benefits often come at the expense of others, and I realised I personally must apply restitution. Many years ago, I inherited a farm in the George district from my late Father. I felt called to apply restitution by giving this farm to the Restitution Foundation, which is an organisation a few friends and I established during approximately 1999, to promote restitution and the restoration of the dignity of all South Africans. And herewith I also experienced the special privilege of giving.

REVELATION 8 – The seven trumpets

Introduction to Revelation 8

The Lord's seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments of Revelation are directed at the earth and the people. The earth and everything on it, as well as human beings, are God's creation and possession; and He values the earth as much as humanity. The people caused and continue to cause devastation with their pollution, excessive consumption, ill-considered utilisation, selfishness, neglect of the needs of the poor, exploitation of fellow human beings, and other factors. The Lord judges the earth and the people.

In essence the message of Revelation is that of conversion – a turning back of the people to the Father, and treating other people and the earth (and everything on it) in a God-honouring manner. Jesus gave them the Lord's prayer: '... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' (Matthew 6:10) This should be the Christians' prayer and they should live by it daily.

The Lord is already carrying out some of His judgments. It is good for believers to try to identify the judgments currently being implemented, and to discuss these with the Lord and with one another.

The incense 8:1–5

¹When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

²And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

³Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. ⁴The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand. ⁵Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

8:1 The seventh seal:

When the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven. One of the most important activities on earth for Christians, is to pray to the Lord. There is half an hour of silence in heaven when the believers' prayers, with incense, is offered to God, because this moment is so sacred. Chapter 8:3–4 gives a glimpse of how important and precious their prayers and worship are to God.

8:2–5 The angels with the trumpets:

Seven is the holy number, and it symbolises completeness. Seven angels announce seven judgments of God (in other words the complete judgment of the Lord), with seven trumpets. The basic function of the trumpet is to warn (Ezekiel 33:1–11). It is significant and wonderful that the Lord reaches out to and warns unbelievers to convert to Him, amidst the terrible disasters which are about to overwhelm the people and the earth.

The prayers of the deceased under the altar at Jesus' feet (6:9–11) and of the believers on earth, are offered with incense to the Father; and it is a pleasant aroma for Him. Immediately thereafter He responds by commanding the angel to use the same censer to pour out God's judgments over the people and the earth.

It is significant that Jesus' offering of His life on the cross (for all people) is a pleasant, agreeable, and sweet fragrance to the Father (Ephesians 5:2). Even though the Christians' prayers are sometimes lamentations, they are pleasant to God. Therefore, their worship, singing, thanking Him, listening, asking for forgiveness, and intercession are of great importance in how each believer practically lives every day, and of his or her personal love relationship with Christ.

Scent (smell) is important for the Lord. He hears the prayers of the believers, He sees them calling out to Him, and their prayers are offered to him as a pleasant aroma. Furthermore, this indicates that Christians will retain their senses in and with their glorified, eternal bodies.

The first four trumpets: 8:6–13

⁶Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them.

⁷The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down on the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.

⁸The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, ⁹a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

¹⁰The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water – ¹¹the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter.

¹²The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night.

¹³As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in mid-air call out in a loud voice: 'Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!'

8:6–7 The sounding of the first trumpet:

When the angel sounds the first trumpet hail and fire rain on the earth. This judgment is like the seventh Egyptian plague (Exodus 9:20–26). But in this case the hail and fire are mixed with blood because the judgment is so severe. A third of the trees and grass are destroyed.

The Lord does not wait until Jesus' second coming to implement His judgments, but He carries out some of them at present, all over the world. It is helpful to try to observe which judgments or disasters God is already implementing, to prepare believers, to strengthen their faith, and to serve as discussion points with others.

The blowing of the trumpet should not be associated with the Lord's judgment only, but also with His salvation (1 Thessalonians 4:16). The sounding of the trumpet is also a call to people to repent.

8:8–9 The sounding of the second trumpet:

The angel sounds the second trumpet. Something like a huge erupting volcano falls into the sea. A third of the sea turns into blood, and a third of all living creatures in the sea die. This is a terrible disaster which will have a big negative impact on the sea and the adjacent cities, beaches, and other territories.

This disaster resembles the first plague in Egypt, when the water of the Nile and the other water sources turned into blood (Exodus 7:17–21), but it will be much, much worse.

8:10–11 The sounding of the third trumpet:

When the angel sounds the third trumpet, a burning star falls from heaven. It poisons a third of the fresh water sources, and many people who drink the water, will die. South Africa is mostly a dry country, like Israel and the rest of the Mediterranean Basin countries. People from such dry countries can well understand how bad the contamination of all fresh water sources will be for human beings and animals.

This falling star reminds of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of April 1986 in Ukraine, which was part of Russia at the time. Chernobyl is the Ukrainian word for Wormwood, which is the name of the star to hit the earth according to Revelation 8:10–11. If I was as interested in Revelation then as I am now, I would have wondered what God had in mind for the future of Ukraine, of Russia itself and of communism. I suspect that, like me, the church of Christ all over the world did not at that stage strategically

approach the prophecies of Revelation and of the worldwide disasters and societal shifts to which it refers. Therefore, in a general sense, the church was not ready and prepared to fully utilize the excellent gospel proclamation opportunities when communism in Russia (and elsewhere) collapsed in 1989, which is a pity. With the war between Russia and Ukraine (which started in 2022), it is as if the Lord has more to say to the church in this regard.

8:12 The sounding of the fourth trumpet:

The angel sounds the fourth trumpet, whereafter a third of the sun, moon and stars turn dark; and it leads to darkening everywhere on earth. This disaster reminds of the ninth plague when total darkness descended upon Egypt (Exodus 10:21–23). The prophet, Amos, prophesied that there will be darkness when God exercises His judgment (Amos 5:18; 8:9).

The first four trumpet judgments primarily affect the earth, sea, water sources and heavenly bodies. The last three, which are to follow hereafter, will directly affect human beings.

8:13 An eagle flying in the air:

An eagle (which is translated as an angel in some Bibles) flies high in the sky where he can be seen and heard by all, and calls out in a loud voice. He warns everyone on earth that the result of the sounding of the remaining three trumpets will have horrific effects.

This (8:13) is the first woe (or adversity) judgment passed upon human beings. The Lord cautions again about the terrible impending disasters and warns unbelievers they must repent. This is typical of a loving and merciful Father, who warns again and again.

Reflections on Revelation 8

The Lord's implementation of His judgments over the people and the earth as punishment for their persistent sins is frightful, whether one interprets the judgments of Revelation literally or figuratively. This can be one of the

explanations why not many Christians read all of Revelation – they feel the outcomes of the judgments are too disheartening to handle. Yet, God wants believers to read Revelation to encourage them and to inspire them to practically live and proclaim the gospel.

Currently the Lord is already carrying out some of the judgments (disasters) of Revelation. It is valuable to try to identify such disasters and to communicate with one another about them. The Father's intention is, among others, that these disasters should appeal to the people to repent.

Snippets

One of the reasons why God blessed the Early Church the way He did and enabled the disciples to achieve so much success, was because of Paul's (and others') passionate and persistent prayers. For instance, in Galatians 4:19 he says, 'My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...' Paul's letters indicate that he continuously prayed these types of prayers for all those who accepted Jesus as Saviour through his (Paul's) work. And it is clear the Father answered these prayers; and He favoured and expedited the extension of His kingdom through these men, women, and children from the Early Church, most of whom traced their conversion (directly or indirectly) to Paul's ministry. The Lord calls all Christians to pray such passionate and persistent prayers for the extension of His kingdom.

The following are examples of disasters God sent or allowed to happen during the past number of years:

- The 9/11 destruction in 2000 of the World Trade Centre in New York.
- The ISIS wars in the Middle East since the early 2000's.
- The tsunami in 2004 in the Far East.
- The Fukushima Japan earthquake, floods, and nuclear disaster, in 2011.
- The Arab Spring Anti-government uprisings of the early 2010's.
- Extensive bush fires in Australia in 2019/2020.
- The 2020–2022 worldwide Covid-19 pandemic.
- The increasing tension, violence, and crises in the Middle East, which mostly involves Israel.
- Economic crises in many other parts of the world.
- Worldwide tropical and other storms.
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

When reading Revelation, Christians should be particularly aware of the approaching end times on earth and the Father's salvation, as well as the prophecies of the implementation of the Lord's judgments.

My wife and I have four children and eleven grandchildren. This extended family is a special blessing and a great delight. I think the Father gives us such marvellous families on earth to be a foretaste of what our lives in heaven as part of the bride of Christ will be like.

REVELATION 9 – The terrible judgments

Introduction to Revelation 9

Since Jesus' ascension, God has been sending some of the seal and trumpet judgments upon the people and the earth; in other words, some of the judgments are being carried out during the present era.

With His retributions the Lord continuously warns those who reject Him to repent. For example, with the sounding of the fifth trumpet the people are severely tormented; this is meant to be a wake-up call, because with the sounding of the sixth trumpet a third of all the people are killed. Still, most of the remaining two thirds do not repent, but continue with their idolatry (9:20).

Idolatry is, in a certain sense, the most condemnable sin for the Lord. With it people replace their worship of the Lord with the worship of other gods, such as sexual sins, money, fame, pride, other people, idols of stone, or wood, or gold.

Sounding the fifth trumpet: 9:1–12

¹The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. ²When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. ³And out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. ⁴They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵They were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes. ⁶During those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.

⁷The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. ⁸Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. ⁹They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. ¹⁰They had tails with stings, like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. ¹¹They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek is Apollyon (that is, Destroyer).

¹²The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come.

9:1–2 Unlocking the bottomless pit:

When the angel sounds the fifth trumpet, the shaft to the depths of the underworld is unlocked. This bottomless pit is a barren and eerie place full of evil and is a type of jail in which the Lord locks up Satan and his followers (20:1–3). The falling star is a heavenly messenger with a key, and he unlocks the bottomless pit to enable the evil forces to exit temporarily.

9:3–12 Demonic locusts:

With the opening of the bottomless pit, overwhelming clouds of smoke come out, like that of a furnace. The fire, which is the source of the smoke, signifies the Lord is fulfilling His judgments. Satanic locust monsters emerge out of the smoke; and they are released on the earth. Power is given to the demonic locusts to torture the ungodly people for five months.

These locusts are not allowed to eat grass or plants or damage the earth in any other way, as is their normal behaviour. As if they were scorpions, all the locusts must do is attack and torture the people who do not have the seal of God.

This temporary torture does not kill the people but causes severe physical pain and intense torment of their souls, because God wants them to change their hearts and their ways. The locusts do not refer to insects in a literal sense, but seems to signify modern armament. However, the locust plague can also be a disaster like the Covid-19 pandemic. The name of the leader of the army of demonic locusts is Destructor. The Lord allows Satan and his evil forces to punish the godless and to warn them.

The Bible underlines the importance to belong to Jesus and to have a love relationship with Him, amidst the terrible judgments being implemented on earth.

Sounding of the sixth trumpet: 9:13–21

¹³The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the four horns of the golden altar that is before God. ¹⁴It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, 'Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' ¹⁵And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶The number of the mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand. I heard their number.

¹⁷The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulphur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulphur. ¹⁸A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulphur that came out of their mouths. ¹⁹The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury.

²⁰The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood – idols that cannot see or hear or walk. ²¹Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

9:13–21 Soldiers on horseback:

When the sixth trumpet is sounded, John hears the Lord's voice from the altar, which signifies God's judgment is about to be implemented in answer to the prayers of the redeemed (6:10; 8:3–5). After the sounding of the sixth trumpet the description of a real war follows. This is a frightening war, in which a third of humanity dies; in other words, it can be more than two billion people who perish. It is important to note that Christians will also be physically impacted, because they will still be on earth when these disasters strike – but the Father will lovingly fold each one in His arms.

The violent extinction of such huge numbers of people is terrible and is difficult to comprehend. One should, however, bear in mind this devastation is executed by Almighty God, who is Creator of everyone and everything. He is blameless and fair and is too great and too wonderful to understand.

Just like with the demonic locusts, the description of these soldiers and their horses suggests armament for destruction; and in this instance their goal is to destroy. They are part of the Lord's preparation to implement His final plan, and He allows the satanic forces to commit the terrible slaughter. Despite the annihilation, the people who remain do not repent but continue with their idolatry and Satan worship.

An important part of Jesus' ministry of three to four years on earth was to teach His disciples and others; and with which (as with everything else) He did exceedingly well (Matthew 7:28–29; Luke 4:15). John was one of those who received such thorough training from Him, and who put it into practice. For example, the theme that the godless (and Christians) should repent runs like a thread through Revelation, which implies believers should actively proclaim the same message.

The ten plagues of Egypt (Exodus 7–12) played an important role in the establishment of Israel as God's people, and this has been celebrated as such during the millennia since then. This was how the Lord punished the Egyptians for their disobedience and how He effected salvation for His people. There are similarities between the ten plagues and the seven trumpet and seven bowl judgments. The ten plagues and what followed thereafter help one better to understand and appreciate the trumpet judgments (chapters 8, 9 and 11) and the bowl judgments (chapters 15 and 16), and the practical carrying out of it by the Lord.

Reflections on Revelation 9

The topic of conversion is important in Revelation, with warnings of God's imminent judgments over the godless and backsliders, for instance in chapters 9:20–21, 14:6–7, 16:8–11. Despite this, most of the people do not take notice of the Lord's warnings, but continue with their sinful lives and deeds as if God does not exist. The Father is loving and merciful and He is the Creator of every person and of everything else. He is holy; His integrity is impeccable; He is much greater than humans can comprehend; and He is completely just.

The Lord's terrible judgments over Satan, his followers, the godless, the unconverted people, and the earth with everything on and in it (everyone and all of which were created by Him), should be seen against the background of Jesus' continuing invitation to accept Him as Lord and Saviour. It is already known the Lord will achieve the final victory over Satan and his followers. This is an encouragement for the church amidst persecution, strife, and severe hardship.

Snippets

The Father is the creator of people, He loves them dearly, and He is involved in the lives of everyone. Isaiah 6 explains how the prophet Isaiah discovered this reality when God called him. '... I saw the Lord, high and exalted ...' 'Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go and tell this people..." (Isaiah 6:1, 8–9) In the same way the Father has a specific calling for each Christian. Similarly, He wishes him or her to see Him, to hear His invitation, and to respond, *I'll go, send me*. And He will then certainly give the charter to each believer to go!

Anselm, the church leader and writer who lived around 1100 AD, accepted everything with childlike faith as coming from God. And with his succinct prayer he helps Christians better to understand what will happen to them and to others, on earth and in heaven. 'I do not try to penetrate Thy mystery, O Lord, for in no way is my intelligence commensurate with it. But I desire to find Thy truth which I believe and love in my heart. I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I believe that I cannot understand unless I believe.' (Dodgen 2003: 33) The better believers know Jesus and the Word, the more fully He can impart His wisdom to them. And the better they will be able to understand the prophecies of Revelation of what is currently happening everywhere, and of what will still happen in future.

The Letter to the Hebrews agrees with the book of Revelation about the way Christians must handle challenges they are subjected to. 'So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" ⁷Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.' (Hebrews 13:6–8) It is comforting to know Jesus' hand is strong enough to take care of the heavens, the earth, and the people; and it is soft enough to dry the tears of all believers.

REVELATION 10 – The angel and the little scroll

Introduction to Revelation 10

The Father sends a mighty angel to proclaim that His final judgment will soon occur over the earth and the people. There is no more time left. Christians should passionately share the message of Jesus' love and unbelievers should repent.

There is a breather between the sounding of the sixth trumpet (9:13–21) and the seventh (11:15–19), like the interval between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seals (7:1–17). These interim scenes indicate, in a dramatic way, that the Lord patiently delays His final judgment to give unbelievers another opportunity to accept Christ as Saviour. And it serves as assurance to believers that the Father will protect them, as His property, during the traumas to follow.

The secrets of God: 10:1–11

¹Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. ²He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, ³and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. ⁴And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down.'

⁵Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. ⁶And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, 'There will be no more delay! ⁷But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.'

⁸Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: 'Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.'

⁹So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, 'Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but "in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey."' ¹⁰I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. ¹¹Then I was told, 'You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.'

10:1–11 Announcement of the end:

A restful scene follows between the frightening sixth trumpet judgment and the seventh. The Lord's intent with this interval is to encourage the oppressed Christians and to assure them their future has already been determined.

In this vision John is on earth and he sees an angel descending from heaven. The angel is robed in a cloud, which signifies the Father's presence. The angel plants his one foot on earth and the other on the sea. He has a little scroll in his hand. Its contents are very important; it contains part of God's plans.

People have always had the desire to know what will happen in future. In Revelation God reveals a little bit of it to John, but part of it must not be made known. An angel also told the prophet, Daniel, that all the visions he received should not be disclosed to everybody at that stage (Daniel 12:9). Jesus told His disciples nobody knows the time of the end, except God Himself (Mark 13:32–33). However, it is important to bear in mind the Father imparted to His children all they need to know to live their lives to the fullest for Him, for every moment of every day, for the rest of their lives on earth. With the sounding of the seventh trumpet God's secrets about the end times, to which Daniel refers (Daniel 12:9), will be announced; but the Lord will not disclose the actual date of Jesus' second coming at that time.

The angel makes the announcement that the seventh trumpet will be sounded soon. The Father created everyone and everything. He maintains His creation, and He rules forever. At the right time He will terminate everyone and everything on earth and the secrets regarding the approaching end times will be made known when the seventh trumpet is sounded. However, believers must keep in mind they have been and continue to find themselves in the end times since Jesus' ascension. Revelation discloses that the way to hold one's own during the end times, is to remain steadfast in faith amidst hardship (1:9; 2:2-3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). It is important for Christians continuously to be aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in each one of them; this is vital in their personal love relationships with the Saviour and helps to strengthen their faith.

The heavenly voice tells John to take the little scroll from the angel, and to eat it. Eating the scroll means to understand the Word of God and to take it to heart (Psalm 119:103; Jeremiah 15:16). The message of Christ must be proclaimed; and the positive response by people to the gospel is satisfying and leaves a sweet taste like honey in the mouth. Revelation explains the hardship, suffering, persecution and even martyrdom of Christians during the end times; and that is what turns the stomach sour. Believers will suffer hardship, but they must trust in Him and continue to do and be what He called them to, because they know with certainty the suffering will soon pass (2 Corinthians 4:17).

In the sixties of the previous century Maria shared the love of Jesus with her eighteen-year-old Russian friend, Varia; and helped her to accept Him as her Saviour. Varia immediately started proclaiming Christ's name openly; and not long thereafter the authorities began with harassment and sent her to a labour camp, from where she wrote to Maria: 'At work, they curse and punish me, giving me extra work because I cannot be silent. I must tell everyone what the Lord has done for me. He has made me a new being, a new creation, of me who was on the way to perdition. Can I be silent after this? No, never! As long as my lips can speak, I will witness to every one about His great love.' (DC Talk and The Voice of the Martyrs 1999: 101-102) Varia's testimony about Jesus, amidst her suffering, is an example of the sweet taste of the scroll which turns the stomach sour.

Many parts of Revelation are hard to understand, but these difficult sections can generate in a Christian the desire to know more (in other words to eat the little scroll), and so he or she can be pulled deeper into studying and understanding Revelation. 'A person is able to understand Revelation without having to explain every sub-section. Try to first understand the greater contours of its message and then the sub-sections and symbolism will fall into place.' (Du Rand 2021: 45) Believers should ask the Father for wisdom and insight; and they must consider all of Revelation (and all of the rest of the Bible) rather than only a few verses, to better understand God's purposes and what He wants to say. When they grasp the full picture, the interpretation of the difficult (and the other) verses become easier and more beneficial.

Prayerfully reading Revelation, with an open mind, helps Christians to grow spiritually. For me, reading Revelation in this manner feels like eating the solid food Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 3:1–3. Such an increasing exposure and spiritual growth help believers to develop a better understanding of Revelation and of the rest of the Bible, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and Christ wants to continuously assist them in this.

Reflections on Revelation 10

The purpose of the strong angel who comes from the Lord is to announce His final judgment over the earth and to explain that there is no more time left. The fact the angel's one foot rests on the earth and the other foot on the sea signifies his (the angel's) words concern the creation as a whole and not only portions of it, as was the case with the seal judgments (6:1–8:5) and the trumpet judgments (8:6–9:21).

Chapters 10 and 11 are key parts of Revelation, and of the Bible. The Father calls every Christian to proclaim His message and to make disciples of others. It will not always be pleasant and easy; and times of real hardship are drawing near, but they must keep on keeping on!

Snippets

Despite Jonah's disloyalty, reluctance, and selfishness, the Lord crowned him with one of the biggest evangelism successes ever. One day's preaching led to the repentance of the entire city of Nineveh (Jonah 3). This miracle began when Jonah sang a song of praise in honour of the Lord inside the belly of the fish (Jonah 2). After the fish had vomited him onto dry land, he received the necessary divine power. The same miracles can happen with the church. Christians, both individually and as church, have much more divine power than they are normally aware of – powers like that of Jonah and of the two witnesses (11:5–6). Paul highlights this miraculous power: '... and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead ...' (Ephesians 1:19–20)

When I read and study Revelation, I sense I'm being taught by the best teacher ever! The reason is that it's Jesus' revelation, and He is the best teacher and storyteller of all time. When a group reads, studies, and discusses Revelation, all the members gain wisdom, insight, understanding, and knowledge about biblical and various worldly truths. It is valuable to bear in mind that often it's not possible to reach consensus among a group of Christians with the interpretation of a prophecy such as Revelation. One person's understanding of a matter does not always correspond with how the others perceive it – which is okay. Believers can also learn much when they read and study Revelation on their own.

Howard Kelly was a poor boy who sold goods from door to door to pay his way through school. His life story illustrates how the Father works in mysterious ways to care for His children. One day Howard was hungry and thought of asking for a meal at the next house. On knocking, he found a beautiful young woman in front of him who opened the door, and he lost his nerve; instead, he asked for drinking water. The woman thought he must be hungry, so brought him a large glass of milk. As Kelly left her house, his faith in God grew stronger and physically also he felt strong. Earlier he had decided to give up and quit.

Years later, the young woman became critically ill. She was taken to a big city hospital since the local doctors were helpless. Specialists were called to study her rare disease; and Dr Howard Kelly was one of them. When he heard the name of the town from where she came, a strange light filled his eyes. Immediately he went to the patient's ward, dressed in his doctor's gown. He recognized her at once and decided to do his best to save her life. After a long struggle, Dr Kelly succeeded to provide a cure. He asked the hospital authority to pass him the final bill for approval before giving it to the woman. She feared to open it, for she was sure it would take the rest of her life to pay for it. Finally, she looked and saw these words written on it: *Paid in full with one glass of milk. (signed) Dr Howard Kelly.* Tears of joy filled her eyes as her happy heart prayed, *Thank You God, that Your love has spread abroad through human hearts and hands.*

REVELATION 11 – Bear witness of the Word

Introduction to Revelation 11

The sounding of the seventh trumpet brings an end to the trumpet judgments and to the first half of Revelation and introduces the second half of the book.

The two witnesses of Revelation 11 are symbolic of the body of Christ (the church) and of individual Christians. The proclamation of the gospel by believers will result in persecution and even death, but such suffering will lead to repentance by many unbelievers. The book of Revelation warns that the church of the Lord will experience hardship, for the sake of Christ and the proclamation of His gospel. Hence, Christians are encouraged by Him in Revelation. They belong to the Father, and He cares for them.

Not all the events of chapter 11 occur chronologically in terms of time; for instance, in 11:15–18 the angel confirms that the Lord's intention with everything, including humanity on earth, will become known when the seventh angel sounds his trumpet (10:7). Yet some of these judgments will only take place with Jesus' second coming to the earth.

The two witnesses: 11:1–14

¹I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, 'Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, with its worshippers. ²But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. ³And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.' ⁴They are 'the two olive trees' and the two lampstands, and 'they stand before the Lord of the earth.'⁵If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. ⁶They have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

⁷Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. ⁸Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city – which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt – where also their Lord was crucified. ⁹For three and a half days some from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. ¹⁰The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.

¹¹But after the three and a half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. ¹²Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here.’ And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.

¹³At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

¹⁴The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon.

11:1–2 A measuring rod:

The angel gives John a measuring rod with the instruction to measure the temple, in other words the true church on earth. The measuring signifies the church has bounds and is set apart for God and He will protect it against evil and hostile interference. The outer court and the outside of the temple are not measured and are therefore excluded. These refer to superficial Christians who do not have the Lord's mark. They are left out and will be trampled by the heathen.

11:3–12 The church on earth:

The angel tells John that Christ will appoint His two witnesses to proclaim the gospel faithfully in word and deed, for a period of one thousand two hundred and sixty days. The fact this is expressed in days implies

it's a long period. And it refers to the Christian era since Jesus' ascension, which includes the present time. At the end of this cycle, in other words with Jesus' second coming, the time of grace which the Lord gives to the godless and unconverted will expire.

The two witnesses can be regarded, firstly, as individual believers who are directed to proclaim the gospel, as is also expressed in chapter 10:8–11. This means the Saviour charges each Christian to take personal responsibility to proclaim His good tidings and to make disciples of others. The second witness can be seen as the body of Christ on earth. Believers are not alone in implementing these directives but must do so with other Christians; every believer forms part of the church and has both the privilege and responsibility to work with others. Jesus sent out the disciples in two's (Mark 6:7–13); similarly, He now sends out believers as witnesses, with others, to carry out His mandate.

The beast referred to in chapter 11:7 is the antichrist (see also 13:1–8). The antichrist can be regarded as a deceptive religious organisation, such as the Muslim faith. But the antichrist can also be an evil person who emerges from a misleading religious organization (or from somewhere else), and who focuses on deceiving people.

The era of the persecution of the church commenced with Jesus' ascension. The corpses of the two witnesses in the city street symbolise individual believers and the church, who are perishing in the world because many Christians are killed physically. Furthermore, the believers' testimonies are not accepted (just like in Noah's time). Worldly-minded people ridicule and hold the church and the Lord in contempt.

The time the corpses of the witnesses lie in the street is short (three and a half days); then the Lord restores them to life before everyone's eyes. The resurrection and ascension of the two witnesses signify that a resurrection and ascension await all believers. And this serves as encouragement to believers to continue fighting the good fight amidst hardship and persecution. The Lord's eventual final victory over Satan and his evil forces is already known, which is a reassurance to Christians.

11:13–14 A huge earthquake:

A severe earthquake follows these occurrences. The earthquake and its devastating effect are symbolic of the frightening events which will occur before the Lord's final judgment. Then many of the godless will bring honour and worship to God because of their horror and fear. King Nebuchadnezzar superficially praised the Lord (Daniel 2:47); similarly, their worship does not necessarily mean the godless have converted. However, amidst the ridicule of and disgust for the church, many unbelievers will accept Christ as Saviour. The Lord often uses the blood of the martyrs to bring the disobedient to repentance.

The second woe or warning for people to repent is given (11:14), after the interim scene of 11:1–13. And the announcement is made that the third woe will soon follow.

Sounding of the seventh trumpet: 11:15–19

¹⁵The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.’

¹⁶And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshipped God, ¹⁷saying:

‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.

¹⁸The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and for rewarding your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small – and for destroying those who destroy the earth.’

¹⁹Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe hailstorm.

11:15–18 The seventh angel sounds his trumpet:

Chapter 11:15–18 is a type of preview; in other words, it is a synopsis of the events to come. This synopsis stands alone – separate from the events which occurred before and those which will occur thereafter. By way of example: When the angel sounds the seventh trumpet, those in heaven sing; and heavenly visions are seen. It is noteworthy that the seventh angel announces the Lord's earthly sovereignty; but God's sovereignty on earth is only established with Jesus' second coming. This is illustrated with reference to the Lord being worshipped as 'who was, and is, and is to come' (4:8); while in chapter 11:17 the 'is to come' is omitted.

The Father rules everywhere, from eternity to eternity. His sovereignty has been acknowledged in heaven all along, but not on earth. As part of the preview, it is announced God's sovereignty is now also acknowledged on earth.

This significant announcement (see also chapter 21:3) is emphasized by the following events:

- It is announced by loud voices in heaven.
- It is offered as prayers to the Lord by the twenty-four elders, while falling on their faces before Him.
- It is confirmed when God's temple in heaven opens so the ark becomes visible. In the New Testament the ark symbolises the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant with His people.
- This is further highlighted by eruptions in nature, as was the case when God descended to Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16–20).

The twenty-four elders, who symbolise the church, bring their worship, praise, and adoration of the Father and of Christ, just like the angels did when they announced Jesus' first coming with songs of praise (Luke 2:13–14). The secrets about the end times, namely regarding Jesus second coming when He returns to the earth, are announced by the twenty-four elders as part of the preview. The godless are furious, but the Lord's final judgment is very close.

11:19 God's temple in heaven:

The ark in God's temple becomes visible. In the Old Testament the ark signifies the place where the Lord lives and where He meets His people. From this one gets a brief view of the Holiest of Holies, which helps to prepare believers for visions of the end times in the remainder of Revelation. It is meaningful that the glimpse into the Holiest of Holies is accompanied by a big natural storm – there are various examples in the Bible where He uses storms to communicate with people (Job 38:1; Psalm 107:24–32; Luke 8:24–25). With this glance into the Holiest of Holies, one gets some understanding regarding the fulfilment of the Lord's promise of chapter 21:3: 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them.'

Reflections on Revelation 11

The measurement of the temple (11:1), and the exclusion of the outer part which is averse to Him and to the church (11:2), signifies that the Father is part of the temple (the body of Christ), and He is deeply concerned about it. With the measuring of the temple and the worshippers God confirms that the church on earth and everything about it and its members belong to Him and are protected by Him; and with this He gives believers reassurance and comfort.

The two witnesses are symbolic of the church of Christ and of individual believers. The two witnesses proclaim the gospel to the people on earth with great success. The church will continue to have favourable outcomes with evangelism when it proclaims the gospel prayerfully, with passion, and in love; but the church's witnessing actions will bring ridicule, condemnation, persecution, and physical death. However, God uses the ill-treatment and hardship which Christians suffer to bring unbelievers to repentance. The bodies of believers, individually and jointly, are the Lord's temples here on earth.

Snippets

Joseph's life, which was filled with one difficult situation after another, encourages Christians to continue to trust and honour the Father irrespective of how burdensome their circumstances may be. As a boy, Joseph's brothers hated him, wanted to kill him, and then sold him into slavery. As a slave, he was falsely accused of rape and thrown into jail. 'The Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered ...' (Genesis 39:2) When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, he gave all glory to the Lord: 'I cannot do it ... but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.' (Genesis 41:16) Joseph received much more than anyone could ever imagine – he was put in charge of all of Egypt. Thereafter he was reunited with his family; and he was able to save them from starvation. After their father, Jacob, died, Joseph's brothers fearfully came to ask for his forgiveness again. He magnanimously responded: 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.' (Genesis 50:19–20)

Psalm 128 is a pilgrim song which, amidst all the hardship and pain everywhere, encourages Christians: 'Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in obedience to him. You will eat the fruit of your labour; blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife (*and husband*) will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots round your table. Yes, this will be the blessing for the man (*and woman*) who fears the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Zion; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem (*and South Africa*) all the days of your life. May you live to see your children's children – peace be on Israel (*and on South Africa*)'. The Christians' ultimate reward is eternal life with Jesus and the Father; and this is given to servants, prophets, believers, those who revere the Lord's name, both great and small (11:18). The fact that God does not discriminate between various groups and kinds of people is highlighted; those who accept Christ as Saviour receive salvation.

The Lord gave the whole Bible to the people. Everything in it is inspired by the Holy Spirit and is crucial for the Christians' learning. Jesus is the foundation stone of God's church on earth, as recorded in the four gospels, in the first three chapters of Revelation and elsewhere in the Bible. God's two witnesses (of chapter 11), Abraham, Sarah, Moses, David, Mary, Paul, Peter, and the other biblical heroes of the faith lay important bricks to build the Lord's church. They themselves are not and can never be foundation stones; only Christ can be and is the foundation stone. The lives and ministries of these heroes of the faith cannot be used by believers as perfect examples of what they are called to be; Jesus alone can be that, as Revelation shows.

Revelation 12–18

SATAN AND HIS FOLLOWERS ON EARTH

The Father existed and ruled forever in the past and He will exist and rule forever in the future. As seen from the human perspective, a part of this eternity is in the past, a part is taking place right now and a part lies ahead. With the finite understanding of human beings, it is difficult to comprehend this eternity.

Du Rand calls chapters 12–14 ‘the heartbeat of Revelation’, and he assists with an outline:

- ‘Chapter 12: the *past*: Victorious over Satan and the birth of the Christ child;
- Chapter 13: the *present*: The dragon wages continual war with the believers and the two beasts are on their journey to the final end;
- Chapter 14: the *future*: The Lamb and the 144,000 on Mount Zion, and the final judgment.’ (Du Rand 2021: 367-368)

It helps to keep in mind that the events described in Revelation are not always depicted chronologically in terms of time.

During the eternity before Jesus came to earth, Satan and his followers rebelled against God. The Lord expelled Satan and his evil angels from heaven and banned them to earth (see Luke 10:18). In His glorious righteousness and with His superior wisdom God gave Satan limited powers on earth, amongst other to accuse (he usually accuses falsely), to tempt, and to persecute people.

God and Jesus achieved a tremendous victory over Satan and his evil forces with Christ’s death on the cross, His resurrection and His ascension.

REVELATION 12 – Jesus is born

Introduction to Revelation 12

Chapter 12 deals mainly with the past. God expelled Satan and his evil followers from heaven. From that moment He has sovereignty in heaven, but the Father's kingship on earth must still be established and acknowledged.

With His crucifixion and resurrection, the Lamb of God achieved conclusive victory over Satan. But the war with Satan and his evil followers is ongoing. In chapter 12 this battle between the Lord and Satan and his evil forces is portrayed. The intensity of the battle will increase as the history on earth, as seen from a human perspective, moves towards its end. He protects His children and the church against Satan and his followers. With Jesus' second coming to earth God will gain final victory over Satan and his followers; and He will cast them into the eternal lake of fire.

The woman and the dragon: 12:1–6

¹A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. ²She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. ³Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. ⁴Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. ⁵She gave birth to a son, a male child, who 'will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.' And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

12:1–2 A sign in heaven:

An important sign appears in heaven, of a pregnant woman in labour. The pregnant woman symbolises the Lord's loyal Old Testament followers (mainly Jews), who longingly looked forward to Jesus' coming. The Child to whom she gives birth symbolises Jesus (12:4–6) and the woman's other loyal descendants symbolise all Christians since Jesus' ascension, including present-day believers (12:17).

12:3–4 A big dragon:

John sees a further vision – of a monstrous red dragon thrown from heaven to earth. The dragon is Satan. A third of the angels were expelled from heaven with Satan; and they became his diabolical followers on earth.

Chapter 12 explains an important time slot in the Lord's plans with humanity and the universe, and of God's intervention to establish these plans:

- The Lord removes Satan and his evil followers from heaven.
- God is acknowledged and praised by everyone in heaven, as the sovereign King.
- Satan is banned to earth, where he has certain limited abilities to torment people – given to him by the Lord.
- The Father sends Jesus to earth.
- Through His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension Jesus gains conclusive victory over Satan.
- With the price He paid, Christ frees believers from sin and eternal death and gives them everlasting life with God and Himself.
- Jesus ascends to heaven, sits on the Father's right hand and rules with Him.
- After Pentecost Christ, with the church, begins the process of establishing the Father's kingship on earth.
- Every Christian, as a member of the body of Christ, takes part in founding God's sovereignty on earth.

With the seven crowns on the dragon's seven heads Satan imitates Christ's supremacy (19:12). This imitation reminds of aspects of the Moslem faith. For example, many mosques and other Moslem holy places are established alongside or near places in Israel which are precious to Christians.

Revelation describes several spiritually contrasting situations; and the vision of Satan as the great dragon is an example. The conduct of Satan and his evil forces lead to continuing chaos, persecution, and distress for Christians. Yet, since His ascension, Jesus, with the co-operation of the believers, has (simultaneously) been building successfully towards the founding of God's kingdom on earth – as is evident in the book of Revelation (see also 1 Corinthians 15:24–28).

12:5–6 The woman and the Child:

Revelation 12:5 reports, 'And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne,' as if He was snatched away directly after His birth – but it refers to Jesus' ascension about 33 years later. This is an example of how God deals with time (with the past, present, and future) – in an open and infinite manner.

The Christ child is born under divine protection. The Lord thwarts all Satan's plans to devour the Saviour, for example: Herod tries in vain to murder the Child in Bethlehem. Satan fails to seduce Jesus in the desert. On the cross Jesus commits His soul to the Father so Satan cannot snatch it. His resurrection and ascension are further examples of God's victory.

Revelation 12 is a highlight for Christians, because it records how Jesus came to earth and offered salvation for all. Christ is the good Shepherd who cares for believers, His sheep (John 10:11–15). This He does by, amongst other actions, managing them with a shepherd's staff. He protects them, His sheep, against attacks and brings back those who stray from the flock. Murray Jansen says God farms with compassion; this is how I experience it every day! Christians, as the Lord's church on earth, encounter His protection against Satan's attacks, particularly during times of hardship (i.e., when they're in the desert).

In John 10:16 Jesus says He has other sheep who are not of this fold, and who also listen to His voice. According to Ezekiel 48:30–34 and Revelation 21:12–13, the new Jerusalem will have twelve city gates. This indicates there are many *church pathways* by which people can come to the kingdom of God (see also Isaiah 11:10–12). Isaiah 54:1–3 explains how believers' homes and churches should be expanded by stretching their tent curtains to make room for everybody. I suspect God will have many pleasant surprises for Christians about unlikely people who will be encountered in heaven one day.

War in heaven: 12:7–12

⁷Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back.

⁸But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. ⁹The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient snake called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.

¹¹They triumphed over 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.

¹²Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.'

12:7–12 Victory over the evil forces:

Michael and his angels warred in heaven against Satan and his angels. Satan and his angels lost the battle and were thrown onto earth. When Satan was still in heaven, he had access to God to charge believers (Job 1:6–12), but after he was expelled from heaven, his access to God was precluded forever (12:10). Yet, Satan continuously tries to convince Christians of his accusations to the Lord, which is part of his lies.

A song of triumph and rejoicing is sung in heaven for salvation by the Father through the blood of the Lamb, and for victory over Satan with the testimonies of the Christians. Believers do not love their lives much and are prepared to die at the hands of Satan, and some are in fact killed.

Most demonic activities referred to in Revelation, in the gospels and elsewhere in the Bible, concern Satan's frustration and fury. His rage, as in chapter 12, results from him losing at every turn, for example: The Jesus Child is snatched away from Satan (12:5); the woman (the church of Christ) successfully flees from Satan to the desert (12:6); Satan and his angels are expelled from heaven (12:9); through the Saviour Christians gain victory over Satan (12:11).

The third woe is given (12:12), which is a further warning for people to repent.

War on earth: 12:13–17

¹³When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the snake's reach. ¹⁵Then from his mouth the snake spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. ¹⁶But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. ¹⁷Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring – those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

12:13–17 God protects His followers:

Satan persecutes the woman (the church of Christ), but she flees to the desert. The desert signifies that the church will be subjected to hardship. Satan spews a stream of water to overtake the woman and to sweep her away, which symbolises the many temptations, persecutions, and spiritual outpourings used by Satan to entice and overcome believers. The overwhelmingly negative impact (spiritually and otherwise) of the worldwide media, especially on Christians, is an example of the stream of water spewed by Satan to sweep believers away. The dragon (Satan) continues to wage war against the other descendants of the woman, who symbolise New Testament (including present-day) believers. But the Father protects the church against the evil attacks.

An example of the loving manner in which the Lord looks after His children, is of a prominent Pakistani woman whose husband left her, and who then accepted Jesus as Saviour. Soon afterwards, the local Moslem community started targeting her and her young son, Mahmud. One day, two of his friends recounted how the people of the town planned to kill his mother after the prayers of that Friday. Mahmud, terrified, came to her crying; and this is her recital: "My dear child," I said, "let me tell you a story." And I recounted to him the tale of Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth, when the crowd became so angry and determined to stone Him. "Mahmud," I said, "Jesus passed through the midst of them. There wasn't a thing anyone could do to Jesus until and unless the Father allowed it to happen. The same is true with you and me. We have His perfect protection. Do you believe that?" *He asked:* "Do you mean we will never be hurt or harmed?" *I continued:* "Jesus was hurt. But only when His time had come to suffer. We do not need to live a life of constant fear that something terrible will happen to us. For it cannot happen to us until our moment has come. And maybe that will never happen. We will simply have to wait and see. But in the meantime we can live in great confidence. Do you understand?" Mahmud looked at me and his brown eyes softened. Suddenly he smiled, wheeled on the spot and ran off to play, shouting happily. (Sheikh 1978: 136)

God creates each person unique and different from any other and entrusts special talents to him or her. He gives to each one personal pictures of Himself, of Christ and His second coming to the earth,

and of many other aspects of the Bible; i.e., how he or she personally understands and perceives these biblical aspects. Over the centuries Revelation has been and continues to be a book of comfort, especially in times of oppression and despair. Christians can share and discuss, via social media and otherwise, their personal pictures of aspects of Revelation with others. Thus they can encourage one another, comfort one another, learn from one another, and listen together to what the Lord says in His Word.

In the Ten Commandments God gives a meaningful undertaking to His sons and daughters when He says that He will show ‘... love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.’ (Exodus 20:6) The Lord really wants to bless faithful Christians and their future generations. He works generationally and He wants believers also to think of and plan for their future generations.

Children of the Father already know, and Satan knows, that he (Satan) and his followers will lose the battle against God. Every believer must passionately participate with Jesus in waging this war against Satan and his followers until success has been achieved; and they must also ensure they do not lose the war for their own souls.

Reflections on Revelation 12

In this chapter there are two visions of wars where the dragon (Satan) is conquered decisively. Both visions describe how the woman (Christ’s church) is protected in the desert (during hard times) after these battles. These two conclusive wars refer to Jesus’ incarnation (Him assuming a human body), His obedience, the price He paid by dying on the cross, His exultation by triumphing over death, and His ascension. With His crucifixion and resurrection Christ conquered Satan, and therefore disqualified him (Satan), the great accuser of believers before God. Jesus’ rule, from where He sits at the Father’s right hand, has been established in heaven; and is now being installed on earth.

The pregnant woman of chapter 12:1–2 symbolises the loyal Old Testament believers (mainly Jews); the Child symbolises Jesus; and the woman’s other descendants symbolise all Christians (including present-day believers). And the Lord protects all of them.

Snippets

In chapter 12:11 the voice from heaven declares: ‘... they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.’ This occurred because of the believers’ love for the Father and for others. While Jesus was on earth, He summarised God’s commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37–39) The well-known outline of love in the Bible is Paul’s *Song of love* in 1 Corinthians 13. But Paul, who received the Lord’s insight and ability to write this amazing legacy of love, had a serious disagreement with his good friend, Barnabas, which led to their separation (Acts 15:36–41). It is not possible to determine how this disagreement influenced the people around them; for instance, the impact it had on those who heard the gospel, but did not believe. It is a pity the two former friends could not settle their differences, because deeds speak louder than words. The proof of love lies in what Christians do. Yet, it is valuable that this sad episode is included in the Bible, because to this day, due to sin and other factors, things do not always work out the way they should; and it accentuates the reality that no human being is perfect. The fact that Paul and Barnabas both continued doing evangelistic outreaches, underlines the importance for believers to focus on Christ and on the practical implementation of their calling, especially during crises like these.

Jesus' friend, Lazarus from Bethany, died. A few days later He went there to comfort Lazarus' mourning sisters Martha and Mary. When Martha heard He was coming she went out to meet Him. He asked her about her belief, and she responded: "'Yes, Lord,'" she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." (John 11:27–28) Here Martha accepted Him as her Saviour, and then she went to tell and invite someone else. This same approach, of going to tell and invite someone else, should be followed by Christians.

The Bible places a big emphasis on *giving*. For instance: 'Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures for ever."' (2 Corinthians 9:7–9) The lives of believers should be characterised by a spirit of generosity.

REVELATION 13 – The two beasts

Introduction to Revelation 13

Chapter 13 deals mainly with the present; in other words, the period after Jesus' ascension (and which includes the current era). In chapters 12 and 13 the stories are told of Satan (the dragon) and his two evil helpers, the beast from the sea (antichrist) and the beast from the earth (false prophet). They wage war against God and His followers. These two chapters elaborate on the evil work done on earth by Satan and his companions: Satan's hate for Jesus (12:12–13) and for Christians (12:17); Satan's power and authority (13:2), and his popularity among unbelievers (13:4); and Satan's blasphemy against the Lord (13:6), his war against Christians (13:7), and his ability to deceive (13:14).

Satan wanted to destroy the Jesus child at birth, but he failed (chapter 12). He then tried something else. Satan tempted Jesus three times in the desert (Matthew 4:1–11); his (Satan's) plan was to rule the world through Christ; but Jesus refused to give in to Satan's temptation. Satan did not stop. Chapter 13 explains how Satan directs his attention to the two terrifying creatures. He gives political power to the monster from the sea (the antichrist); and he gives the monster from the earth (the false prophet) the power to do miracles. Along with Satan, these two beasts form an evil trinity who work together to try and take over control from God of the whole world; and who desperately try to overthrow the Lord's kingship.

The beast out of the sea: 13:1–10

¹The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. ²The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. ³One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been

healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. ⁴People worshipped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshipped the beast and asked, 'Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?'

⁵The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. ⁶It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling-place and those who live in heaven. ⁷It was given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. ⁸All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.

⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear.

¹⁰'If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed.'

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people.

13:1–10 The beast from the sea as the antichrist:

John sees a vision of a beast coming out of the sea. The sea symbolises the unbelievers, and the beast symbolises the antichrist. Satan uses the beast from the sea as a horrible instrument in his battle against the church. The beast, with its slanderous remarks and demands to be worshipped, is an opponent of Christ's sovereignty on earth.

In his vision the prophet Daniel saw four monsters coming from the sea (Daniel 7:1–27); and these monsters symbolised earthly kingdoms. The Revelation 13:1-10 monster from the sea is a compilation of the four monsters in Daniel's vision. The monsters represent those earthly kingdoms which insist on absolute loyalty and trust from their subordinates and compel them with force.

Chapter 13:1–10 and other passages in Revelation warn Christians will suffer, be persecuted, be conquered, and even be killed; but such hardship will be confined to physical pain and suffering. God affirms in Revelation He will limit Satan's power over believers, He will ensure satanic afflictions do not continue for very long, and Satan will not be able to harm believers spiritually. The Lord encourages Christians to remain steadfast and loyal to Him until the end.

About one and a half century ago John Todd touched upon a further (and somewhat different) dimension of hardship faced by Christians; i.e., the anticipation of dying and the process of the final departure. Both his parents passed away when he was six, and he went to live with his aunt. Many years later when she was on her deathbed, she wrote to him and asked questions about death. In his answer he explained death and *the journey to death*.

'It is now thirty-five years since I, as a little boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. You sent me word that you would give me a home and be a kind mother to me. I will never forget the day when I made the long journey of ten miles to your house in North Killingworth. I can still remember my disappointment when instead of coming for me yourself, you sent Caesar to fetch me. I well remember my tears and anxiety as, perched high on your horse and clinging tight to Caesar, I rode off to my new home. Night fell before we finished the journey, and, as it grew dark, I became lonely and afraid. "Do you think she'll go to bed before we get there?" I asked Caesar anxiously. "Oh, no," he said reassuringly. "She'll stay up for you. When we get out of this here woods, you'll see her candle shinin' in the window."

'Presently we did ride out into the clearing, and there, sure enough, was your candle. I remember you were waiting at the door, that you put your arms close about me and that you lifted me – a tired and bewildered little boy – down from the horse. You had a fire burning on the hearth, a hot supper waiting on the stove. After supper you took me to my room, heard me say my prayers and then sat beside me till I fell asleep. You probably realize why I am recalling all of this to your memory. Someday soon God will send for you to take you to a new home. Don't fear the summons, the strange journey or the ... messenger of death. God can be trusted to do as much for you as you were kind enough to do for me so

many years ago. At the end of the road you will find love and a welcome awaiting, and you will be safe in God's care. I shall watch you and pray for you till you are out of sight and then wait for the day when I shall make the journey myself and find my Savior and you waiting at the end of the road to greet me.' (Dodgen 2003: 129–130)

The beast out of the earth: 13:11–18

¹¹Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. ¹²It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. ¹³And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. ¹⁴Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honour of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. ¹⁶It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, ¹⁷so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

¹⁸This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.

13:11–18 The beast from the earth as false prophet:

John sees a second vision, of a beast which comes out of the earth. This beast is filled with a satanic spirit from the depths of the earth. The Holy Spirit, by contrast, originates from heaven.

The beast from the earth is the false prophet. He forms part of the evil trinity, which consists of Satan, the monster from the sea (antichrist), and the monster from the earth (false prophet). The Lord allows limited space only to the false prophet, to perform his evil actions. To this monster from the earth (false prophet) several tasks are given by Satan and the antichrist, namely, to wield power on behalf of the antichrist, to motivate the people to worship the antichrist, and to do miracles on behalf of the antichrist. He must command the people to build a statue for the antichrist; and breathe life into it so it can speak. He must compel all people to put a mark on their right hand or forehead; and no-one without this mark must be allowed to buy or sell.

Breathing life into the statue is an imitation of what God did, when He provided lifegiving breath to the two witnesses of chapter 11:11. The Bible tells the true stories of many miracles, often as proof of the Lord's power, but chapter 13:14–15 tells of faked miracles, meant to deceive. These remind of the imitation-miracles by Pharaoh's magicians (Exodus 7:10–12 and further). Miracles on their own can be deceiving. What is needed, are God-inspired miracles, which lead people to Christ.

The mark of the beast symbolises loyalty of thought (on the forehead) and loyalty of work (on the right hand) to Satan.

The wisdom, insight, understanding and knowledge needed to live to His honour can only come from God. James 1:5–6 encourages believers to ask for wisdom, which He promises to provide in abundance and James 3:17–18 explains the nature and extent of true wisdom.

The use of the number 666 and how it is calculated suggest gematria was applied. Gematria is an ancient code, where letters of the Hebrew alphabet are substituted with corresponding numerical numbers. In gematria the number 666 is used to signify Satan, the antichrist or evil in general. The early Christians applied the number 666 to the Caesar, Nero, who was a symbol of the evils of the Roman Empire when Revelation was written. Nowadays Christians will be wise to be on the lookout for wicked leaders, in other words taking note of what they do and plan to do. And some of the names, plans and actions of these evil leaders will add up to 666 in terms of gematria. These malicious leaders promote and implement, amongst other, secularism (where religion has no place) to try to force believers to become more and more like the world.

Reflections on Revelation 13

As part of the plans of the unholy trinity, Satan is regarded as equal to God; the beast from the sea (antichrist) as equal to Jesus; and the beast from the earth (false prophet) as equal to the Holy Spirit. However, believers know their plans will not succeed; and chapters 19:19–20:10 record what will happen to the unholy trinity and their evil followers.

Jesus told the people the parable of the sower; and thereafter He encouraged them to listen and to comply (Luke 8:8–15). He gives the same warning and encouragement in chapter 13:9–10. Christians are cautioned they will suffer hardship, but they must persevere and endure. And they are given the assurance the godless who kidnap, abuse, or kill them, will eventually receive the same punishment.

The Father made everything and all human beings; and He wants to occupy the hearts and lives of every person. Everyone who responds positively to this invitation and who desires, pursues, and maintains a personal love relationship with the Saviour, has the assurance that his or her name is written in the book of the Lamb.

Snippets

The mark of the beast (13:16–17) should not be seen as a physical mark, or, for instance, a microchip which is implanted. The mark is symbolic, to indicate these people belong to the antichrist. He (the antichrist) will, however, probably use force to try to achieve his objectives. By way of example: Indications are that the government of one of the big countries in the world considers tracking and compelling its citizens via their respective mobile phones to adhere to its Covid-19 lockdown (quarantine) regulations. Furthermore, the same government developed its own digital currency, which can turn the country into a cashless society; herewith the government will be able to track the spending and may try to guide the behaviour of its citizens; and even control or punish them as it sees fit. It is clear that Christ's return to the earth is drawing near.

In the book of Revelation the Lord warns His children they will encounter crises but assures them He will always be there to help and to encourage. Mark 4:35–39 explains how Jesus and the disciples got into a boat one evening and sailed to the other side of Lake Galilee; and there were other boats with Him. During the night, a furious storm came up and the boat was about to go under, while Christ continued sleeping. They woke Him. He got up, admonished the wind and waves, and it became completely calm. I think He got up to rebuke the wind and waves, even though He could have done so while continuing to lie down, so that those in the other boats nearby could see Him. It is of importance to note that others look up to believers, and they (the Christians) have a responsibility in what they do in all situations, and how they do it.

The believers' times of intimate personal fellowship with Christ can take place in many ways, and other people can be involved in it; and in most instances childlike faith plays an important part. Mark describes the actions taken in faith by others for the sake of a paralysed man: ³Some men came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. ⁴Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralysed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" (Mark 2:3–5, 11–12) The paralysed man's deepest need was to receive forgiveness of his sins. He himself did not say so, but Jesus knew it and dealt with it first. Prayer and fellowship with the Lord are deeper than words – it is primarily about the attitude of our hearts.

REVELATION 14 – The final destiny of believers

Introduction to Revelation 14

Chapter 13 describes the vicious attacks on Christians by Satan and his evil followers. Chapter 14 deals mainly with the future and gives a glimpse of eternity with Christ which awaits believers, but they must persevere. The first half of chapter 14 reassures Christians – those who achieve victory will stand triumphantly on Mount Zion with Jesus, the Lamb of God.

The life of Saint Patrick is an example of such perseverance in Christ till the end. According to tradition, he (Saint Patrick) was captured by pirates during the last part of the fourth century and taken to Ireland as a slave. After six years he escaped and went to his home in England. However, he decided to go back to Ireland as a missionary. He persevered to preach the gospel, and eventually made such an important contribution to establishing the Christian faith in Ireland that he became known as the *Apostle of Ireland*.

Saint Patrick wrote and prayed a wonderful prayer, which still serves as a guideline to Christians, to encourage them to persevere and to do what Christ wants, as described in chapters 13 and 14: 'Christ to protect me today against poison, against burning, against drowning, against wounding, so that there may come abundance of reward. Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me. Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.' (Dodgen 2003: 29)

In Revelation the Lord gives four portrayals of His final judgment and the destruction of the people and the earth; and they will occur simultaneously with the second coming of Jesus. The first of these, namely the gathering of the wheat and grape harvests, are described in the second half of chapter 14 and the other three follow in chapters 15–20. The reasons why God recounts this cataclysmic event four times seemingly are to emphasize the dreadfulness and finality of it and to bring it to everyone's attention.

The Lamb and His redeemed: 14:1–5

¹Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ²And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. ³And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No-one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among mankind and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. ⁵No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.

14:1–5 On Mount Zion:

The 144,000 people with Jesus on Mount Zion represent all believers who have suffered persecution and worshipped Him with devotion. God writes the names of Jesus and the Father on their foreheads, which is a sign that they belong to Him and are protected by Him.

Mount Zion outside Jerusalem is not really a mountain. It is a hill located across the Kidron Valley from the temple mount (today the Dome of the Rock). Jerusalem, and Mount Zion next to it, have special significance for Christians and Jews. Revelation uses Mount Zion to signify the eternal citadel of the Lord and believers. Jerusalem and Mount Zion should be seen as symbolic.

Singing the Father's praises with fellow believers is one of the pleasurable aspects of going to church on a Sunday. The great multitude singing a new song together (chapter 14:2–3), is a delightful picture. I cherish the prospect of taking part in the singing in heaven, and of being able to sing for ever and ever.

Christo Nel recounts a beautiful story of three people, whom I think may one day be part of the great multitude singing a new song together

(of chapter 14:1-3). One of the three describes what happened on the particular day: 'Walking up to my new car, I notice a small boy there admiring it. The moment I open the car's door, the boy asks: "Is this your car, Sir?" "Yes, it belongs to me." "How much did it cost?" "I do not know, son." He looks at me searchingly: "You do not look like the type of person who would steal a car. But where did you get it, Sir?" "My brother gave it to me." A longing expression comes in the boy's eyes, and he says: "I wish ..." I expect him to say: "I wish I have such a brother," but he ends his sentence differently, and it touches my heart deeply: "I wish I can be such a brother," he says. My heart starts pumping wildly and immediately I decide to please him. "Come, jump in and feel how it rides." He tries to stop me: "I will dirty your car, Sir." I think to myself: "Your clothes may be dirty, but your heart is snow-white". I insist and he keenly gets into the front of the car, next to me. "Will you please stop in front of my house, Sir?" he asks urgently. I stop at a stairway in a backstreet.'

'Like a small deer he jumps out; and after a while he returns with a smaller boy in his arms. The smaller boy's body is badly distorted because of polio. He puts the smaller boy down gently on the pavement at the bottom of the staircase. "There she is. His brother bought it for him. One day when I am big, I will buy you a car like this. Then you can drive by yourself to look at the shop windows." Tears well up in my eyes and I get a lump in my throat. "Come on, you two. Both of you will see the shop windows today." I put the crippled boy on the front seat, next to his brother and me. I drive to the biggest shopping mall in the city. I park the car; and carry the crippled boy in my arms, with the other one following us. "Choose whatever the two of you would like to have." They lavishly use my offer and take what they want. The next few hours in their company are the happiest I have ever experienced. I realise the reward of giving to others can be bigger than material gain.' (Nel 2017) Jesus explained that Christians must do everything out of love for Him and for others, when He summarised the Lord's commandments in Matthew 22: 37-39.

The 144,000 redeemed refer to men, women and children who are spiritually pure. They remain loyal in following Christ; no lie come over their lips and their conduct is irreproachable. This depicts perfection, and no-one can achieve it; but God hears the Saviour's continuous prayers for every believer and forgives them. In Romans 7 and 8 Paul explains how they were before, and how He made them new.

The 144,000 believers, who therefore can include every Christian, receive God's reward of freedom purchased with Jesus' blood. And they become the first fruit of the Lord's harvest, like Stephanas and his family were the first to be converted in Achaia (1 Corinthians 16:15). The reference to first fruit indicates a further, greater harvest will still be brought in (through, amongst other things, persecution and murdering of Christians).

The three angels: 14:6–13

⁶Then I saw another angel flying in mid-air, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth – to every nation, tribe, language and people. ⁷He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.'

⁸A second angel followed and said, "'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great," which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.'

⁹A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: 'If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, ¹⁰they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. ¹¹And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name.'¹²This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus.

¹³Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write this: blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.'

'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them.'

14:6–11 The messages of the angels:

Three angels fly high in the sky and announce their tidings with loud voices, one after the other.

The first angel declares in a manner all people on earth can see and hear, that the Father gives everyone who does not know Him a chance to repent, to accept Him as Lord, and to honour Him. It is important to note that Jesus seeks conversion and for such believers then to become His disciples (Matthew 28:18–20).

God's intention is that every part of the Bible be responded to seriously: '... the words of scripture are not meant to be read as beautiful and engaging prose, descending directly from heaven. They are, rather, words that come alive, find their shape, and are given birth out of the struggle with God for the sake of God and God's creation, a witness which is authenticated by God and in which the Spirit reveals God's life-giving power.' (Boesak 1987: 23) Some people find it difficult to take the step of faith in God; and they grapple with Him. In His great love for every human being, He allows the struggle – but He wants everyone to take the step of faith in and surrender to Him. Jacob also struggled with God and would not let Him go until He blessed him (Jacob) (Genesis 32:24–30).

The second angel announces the fall of Babylon. Babylon is the godless kingdom which destroyed Jerusalem and took the people into exile; and for a long time, it was the Israelites' greatest enemy. John was exiled by the Romans to Patmos. He was careful about referring to the Roman Empire as the greatest enemy of the Christians; and he therefore refers to Babylon as the great seducer and enemy of God's people.

The gruesomeness of the Lord's judgment is difficult to grasp, but it is just. Christians, however, experience Him as loving, merciful, long-suffering, forgiving, patient, and full of understanding, but for Satan and his evil followers who reject Him, and who pursue worldly idols such as money, power, sex, pride and pleasure, God's terrible and never-ending torture awaits.

The third angel is also a messenger, who gives the people a final warning to repent and convert to the Lord.

14:12–13 Blessings declared over believers:

It is meaningful that, amidst the description in Revelation of the Lord's terrifying judgments over the godless, John pauses every now and then to encourage Christians to persevere, and to assure them of the Father's love and faithfulness.

It is significant, even though believers cannot take any of their earthly possessions with them when they die, their good deeds will be remembered by the Father; these will therefore, somehow, go to heaven with them.

On Sundays when the pastor pronounces a blessing over the congregation, I stretch my open hands forward to acknowledge that I accept and receive the Lord's blessings over my loved ones and me. In chapter 14:13 the second of seven blessings in Revelation is proclaimed. The assurance is given to everyone who loves the Lord and serves Him, that he or she will be blessed if they die in Christ. All will die, and it is a consolation to know this blessing awaits Christians. God's blessings are proclaimed over certain believers in seven places in Revelation:

- 1:3 – Blessed is the one who reads this prophecy, and those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.
- 14:13 – Blessed are those who die in Christ from now on.
- 16:15 – Blessed are those who are awake and dressed and are ready for the Lord.
- 19:9 – Blessed are those invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.
- 20:6 – Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection.
- 22:7 – Blessed are those who obey the prophecy of this book (Revelation).
- 22:14 – Blessed are those who accept salvation and obey His commands.

The sincere desire of my heart is that all my loved ones and I, and everyone who reads *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*, will be among the believers over whom these blessings from God are proclaimed.

Harvesting the earth: 14:14–20

¹⁴I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like a son of man with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, 'Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.' ¹⁶So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

¹⁷Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, 'Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe.' ¹⁹The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. ²⁰They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.

14:14–16 The wheat harvest:

In a vision John sees the glorified Christ sitting on a white cloud with a sharp sickle in His hand.

In Matthew 13:24–30 Jesus tells the parable of the harvesters who gather the wheat, referring to the Christians, and bring it into the Lord's barn. Similarly, in chapter 14:14–16, Jesus gathers the wheat with His sickle of death, meaning He fetches the Christians from earth and takes them to be with Him in heaven.

14:17–20 The grape harvest:

After fetching the Christians, God sends an angel with a sharp sickle to gather the grapes from the earth's vine. The grapes symbolise the godless, who will be thrown into the winepress of the Lord's wrath; and their blood

will flow for hundreds of kilometres. This prophecy reminds of Joel 3:12–13 when the Lord gathers the nations in the Valley of Jehoshaphat to judge them, because the harvest is ripe, and their sins are many.

The gathering of the grape harvest implies the brutal death of many millions (if not billions) of people. This is very disturbing and difficult for humans to comprehend, but the eradication is done by Almighty God. He is righteous, and too great and wonderful for them to understand.

Reflections on Revelation 14

The question arises whether present-day believers qualify to be part of the 144,000 people on Mount Zion with Christ? I believe the 144,000 refer to all faithful Christians in the present dispensation; i.e., since Jesus ascension. Paul explains how the Father mercifully redeems and enables victory for His sons and daughters: ‘... their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.¹⁴ If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames.’ (1 Corinthians 3:13–15) The body of every person who has a personal love relationship with Christ is a temple of the Lord and they have His assurance that they will be saved, but as through fire.

The extent and fierceness of God’s wrath is moving. He loved the people so much He sent His only Son to die on a cross for them, but the ungodly respond negatively to His love, with rejection, disgust, and persistence with godlessness. Such godlessness comprises, amongst other things, the persecution and martyring of Christians. The Father hears the prayers of the martyrs and other believers, as described in chapters 6:9–11 and 8:3–5; and through His love and righteousness He judges the godless and the earth. This reminds of the Lord’s judgment over the Egyptian army when He allowed the Red Sea to engulf and destroy them (Exodus 14:15–31).

The Father’s love and mercy is even more gripping. It is difficult to understand – but it is wonderful – that we as sinners will be spared His judgment because of the price Jesus paid on the cross for us.

Snippets

Not all things which happen in the world today are bad news. Many of God's people continue to plead with Him to change His mind about certain matters, and they ceaselessly work towards bringing about such desired changes. A case in point is saving the lives of countless millions of unborn babies through anti-abortion legislation. In January 1973, the United States Supreme Court made the well-known decision *Roe v Wade* in terms of which abortion was legalised, and this unfortunate decision gradually spilled over into many other countries of the world. In June 2022 the same US Supreme Court, with *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization*, overturned *Roe v Wade*. With the 2022 decision abortion is no longer the undisputed right of every expectant mother. It is a major victory in the fight to protect unborn children, and the Lord alone should receive the honour and glory for this.

Abraham and his family lived in Haran when the Lord called him to move to Canaan. God promised to bless him, and he had to be a blessing to others (Genesis 12:1–5). With Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension the Father established a new Jesus-oriented and victorious dispensation on earth and extended the blessing to all believers; but the condition for the continuous receipt of this blessing is that each one must be like a water pipe passing on the blessing to others, just as it was with Abram (who became Abraham). Revelation explains these blessings; and it also explains how the Lord works through Christians to bless non-believers.

The life of Joseph is a *type of Christ* (Genesis 37–50). Both Jesus and Joseph were loved by their fathers, sent to their brothers, hated without reason, severely tempted, and achieved ultimate victory. God used Joseph to provide bread when people needed it in the famine. The Lord wishes to mould Christians into His image, so that they can minister to others in need. People's most urgent need is to receive their salvation, and believers are called to present Jesus to them as the bread of life.

REVELATION 15 – The seven angels with seven plagues

Introduction to Revelation 15

Earlier visions in Revelation start with revealing the Lord's heavenly dwelling place (4:1; 8:1–2; 11:19). Similarly, the seven bowl judgments or plagues begin with a scene of praise and worship of God by believers. The seven plagues contain the last of the three cycles of disasters (in other words seals, trumpets, bowls) which will strike the earth, and with that the Lord's wrath over the godless people will be completed. The worshipping Christians share in the victory of the Lamb, while God's heavenly dwelling place is being opened.

God has been fulfilling many of the seal and trumpet judgments or disasters since Jesus' ascension 2,000 years ago; and He presently continues to fulfill some of these. The seal and trumpet judgments are the serious disasters which have occurred, and will continue to occur with progressive intensity, at many locations in the world. Examples of such disasters are droughts, storms, cyclones, floods, pestilences, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados, fires, political instability, economic crises, famines, wars, uprisings, and eruptions of violence.

However, the pouring out on the earth of the bowls of the Lord's anger refers to the terrible disasters which will strike the earth and the universe simultaneously with Jesus' second coming. With the fulfilling of the bowl judgments everything (and everyone) will be destroyed quickly, to make space for the new heaven and the new earth.

The implementation of the last judgment: 15:1–8

¹I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues – last, because with them God's wrath is completed. ²And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God ³and sang the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb:

‘Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations.

⁴Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.’

⁵After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple – that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law – and it was opened. ⁶Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes round their chests. ⁷Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. ⁸And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no-one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.

15:1–4 Songs of praise by the conquerors:

John sees a huge and breathtaking sign in heaven of seven angels who bring the seven last plagues. Together these plagues encompass the full punishment and effect of the divine wrath over the godless and the earth. After this John receives another vision, of a sea of glass, which reminds of the crystal-clear sea of glass before the throne (4:6); but in this case it is mixed with fire. The conquerors standing on the beach of the sea of glass are the triumphant church (i.e., believers who died and therefore victoriously reached their destination in heaven). With the Lord’s help, they refused to worship the image of the antichrist and triumphed over the attacks by Satan and his evil followers.

The Father gives the conquerors harps to play songs and to sing to His honour and glory. From this it can be deduced the Lord deems singing of songs and music to be very important. He created people in His own image; it is therefore understandable that singing and music will be important to believers. In Psalm 22:4 David calls out and sings: ‘In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.’ Believers often experience their most wonderful times of worship when they sing

hymns of praise, or when they bring glory and honour to the Lord, or when they do so with others. It seems He lives in the songs of praise and in the glory and honour believers bring to Him. I love beautiful music very much.

It is meaningful that there are many songs and poetic phrases in Revelation; for example, in chapters 4, 5, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 19; and the exquisite song of praise in chapter 15:2–4. It is clear that making music and singing songs of praise form an important part of what is done in heaven; and I look forward to it.

It is significant that the conquerors sing the Song of Moses (15:2–4). Shortly after Moses and the Israelites departed from Egypt, Pharaoh regretted letting them go, and persecuted them with his military forces. He trapped them at the Red Sea and planned to destroy them the next day, but during the night the Lord made a path through the sea; and the Israelites fled on dry land. When the Egyptians gave chase, the Lord commanded the sea to return, and they all drowned. The next day Moses and the Israelites sang the Song of Moses (Exodus 15:1–19). Forty years later, just before they entered Canaan, the Israelites sang the Song of Moses again (Deuteronomy 32:1–43). Now, in Revelation 15 after God's victory over Satan and his evil followers and with the entry of the redeemed into heaven, the conquerors sing the Song of Moses. The song is also called the Song of the Lamb because Jesus paid the final price by sacrificing His life as a lamb on the cross (5:6,9).

Israel's exodus from Egypt and entering Canaan were of the most important redemption episodes in their history. The Lord saved them from calamity, destroyed their oppressors and led them into Canaan, the promised land. Revelation describes the exodus and entry events of the end times; in other words, the end of human history on earth and the entry of believers into heaven. Some of these events have already taken place, some are taking place now, and some will take place with Jesus' second coming.

Death and *the journey to death* await all human beings. I find Revelation's analogy of the exodus from a life of slavery in Egypt and the entry into the Promised Land by God's people comforting. We can look forward to what the Father has in store for us in the life hereafter and we

do not have to fear the journey to get there – He takes care of every step of it for every one of us.

The believers are the conquerors of chapter 15:2–4; and they are the Father's followers, led by the Saviour from earth to heaven. Jesus is the Passover Lamb who had to die, and has already died, on the cross. Satan and his evil followers are thrown into the lake of fire and the earth and everything on it is destroyed. The believers live and rule with Christ, forever and ever. It is significant that the conquerors sing the Lord's praises and thank Him, and do not celebrate their own perseverance. They are unselfish and realise these remarkable events cannot be attributed to their own doing. This is part of the loving relationship Christians enjoy with the Father. Believers must respect, have reverence for and fear God, as they do for their earthly fathers and mothers. Unbelievers should fear the Lord because they have reason to fear Him.

15:5–8 Angels with golden bowls:

John has a further (third) vision and sees the inner sanctuary of the Father's dwelling place in heaven.

God gave His people the Ten Commandments. He wrote it on two stone tablets and instructed Moses to put them in the ark (Exodus 25:16). He (Moses) put the ark in the tabernacle, which the Lord called the tent of meeting (Exodus 40:1–3) and it was in the tabernacle that God made His presence known to the Israelites. The Lord is always everywhere, but human beings are bound to place and are limited in understanding. Therefore, God used these symbols to help the Israelites better to understand Him and His interactions with them; and these still help believers today. Chapter 15:5 manifests the vision of the temple or tabernacle in heaven which is the Father's dwelling place, being opened. It is significant that with this picture He takes believers back to the exodus from Egypt and to the desert.

The temple is now open for the seven angels (or messengers) to come to the fore to facilitate the seven final plague or bowl judgments, which will precede the end time events on earth.

The dazzling white clothes of the angels give a preview of the holy beauty of the bride at the wedding of the Lamb, in chapter 19:7–8. The

early Christians lived Revelation's picture of the wondrous beauty of the body of Christ to the full in their daily lives. Cyprianus, the well-known Christian writer, martyr, and Bishop of Cartage, described the Christians (the Early Church) as follows: 'But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their own souls. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians – and I am one of them.' (Dodgen 2003: 20)

With the consecration of both the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10-11), the manifested presence of God's glory was so strong that no-one could go into the secluded parts of either of these. The same happens in the heavenly temple when the seven plague or bowl judgments with the Lord's wrath are given to the seven angels. No-one can go into the heavenly temple before the seven plagues have been completed. The seven plagues which go with the seven bowl judgments conclude the Lord's judgment. This judgment is so intense and absolute that it brings an end to the earth and to human history as we know it.

Reflections on Revelation 15

Various signs are given in the Bible, and with every one faith and trust in God is required to understand them. Chapter 12:1 and 12:3 describe two signs of strategic importance in the end-time struggle and judgment, of the woman (the church of Christ) and of the dragon (Satan). Another great and wondrous sign in heaven, of chapter 15:1, signifies an important turning point in the war between Jesus and Satan. This is God's final triumph over and the eradication of Satan and his evil followers, described in chapters 15 and 16.

Revelation 15 gives background to and an overview of God's final bowl judgments, which are fully described in chapter 16. With this all the people and the earth will be destroyed, to make way for the establishment by Him of the new heaven and the new earth.

Snippets

God-honouring music plays an important part in Revelation 15 and elsewhere in Revelation. Johann Sebastian Bach has been cited as the *thirteenth apostle* because of the beautiful sacred music he composed, during the eighteenth century. In the margin of his Bible, at 1 Chronicles 25 (the chapter where King David appointed temple musicians to serve with singing and music), he wrote this chapter was the true foundation of all God-honouring music and music pleasant to God. He said music would be the only aspect in heaven which would remind him of the earth.

The Lord's glory and the Lord's power are, among other things, celebrated in Revelation – and is clearly disclosed in chapters 15 and 16. The glory of God and the power of God are used in the Bible alternately, but do not always have the same meaning. For example, when the Lord asked Moses to speak to the rock, He wanted His glory to be manifested, but Moses was disobedient and hit the rock, and God's power was revealed. He (the Lord) was not satisfied with Moses' reaction and reprimanded and punished him (Numbers 20:11–12). The point is that God's glory is greater than His power because His glory not only includes His power, but also His mercy and righteousness.

Martin Luther once made the remark that every time before God gave him a good ministry opportunity to carry out, He gave him a trial. Believers must expect hardship.

REVELATION 16 – Pouring out the seven bowls

Introduction to Revelation 16

The plagues in Egypt reached a climax with the implementation of the Lord's judgment over the godless, but also with the exodus from Egypt and thus the salvation of God's people. Likewise, the plagues of chapter 16, announced in chapter 15:1, signify the final judgment of the Lord over the godless and over the earth, and lead to the entrance of believers into the new Jerusalem.

A quarter of the earth is destroyed when the seals (chapter 6) are opened and a third of the earth is destroyed when the seven trumpets (chapters 8 and 9) are sounded. With these two cycles of judgments the earth is seriously impacted and a third of the people are killed. Some of the seal and trumpet judgments have, in a general sense, been executed during the era after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The two groups of judgments will continue to be carried out during the present time and will reach a climax with Christ's second coming. In the present era Christians will therefore experience these disasters continuously (and with heightening intensity) striking the earth and the people.

The bowl judgments are final; they hit the godless and the earth; but believers will then still be on the earth and will also be impacted. This brings an end to the old earth, to make way for the new heaven and the new earth. The bowl judgments will take place with Jesus' second coming, following in close order of one another.

It is important to note three further portrayals of the annihilation of the people and the earth are described in Revelation, namely the gathering of the wheat and grape harvests (chapter 14); the destruction of Babylon, which refers to all cities and towns of the world (chapters 17 and 18); and the final judgment and extinction of the world and Satan (chapters 19 and 20). All three of these further portrayals of final destruction will also take place with Jesus' second coming and will be implemented almost simultaneously with the bowl judgments (as described in chapters 15 and 16).

The first four bowls: 16:1–9

¹Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, ‘Go, pour out the seven bowls of God’s wrath on the earth.’

²The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly, festering sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped its image.

³The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead person, and every living thing in the sea died.

⁴The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:

‘You are just in these judgments, O Holy One, you who are and who were;

⁶for they have shed the blood of your holy people and your prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.’

⁷And I heard the altar respond:

‘Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.’

⁸The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire. ⁹They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.

16:1–2 Pouring out the first bowl judgment:

A loud voice from the temple instructs the angels to pour out on the earth the bowls filled with the Lord’s wrath. It appears that the loud voice is the voice of God. The end is near at hand.

When the first bowl judgment, of malignant and painful boils, is poured on the earth it does not hit the earth, but the godless people who have the mark of the beast and who worship his image. This is in contrast with the first trumpet judgment (8:7), when the earth is struck. The first bowl judgment is like the sixth plague, of boils, which hit Egypt (Exodus 9:8–12). God’s intention with the first bowl judgment is to warn the godless and unbelievers; and to give them another chance to repent.

16:3 Pouring out the second bowl judgment:

With the pouring out of the second bowl judgment the sea turns into blood; and all living creatures in the sea die. The first plague which struck Egypt turned the water of the River Nile into blood, and all the fish died (Exodus 7:20–21); but the second bowl judgment (16:3) takes on alarming and worldwide proportions.

The bowl judgments are devastating. They are meant for the godless, but there will be Christians on earth, who will also be impacted. With this a further warning is given to the people to repent, and even at this juncture I believe some will repent. The bowl judgments will take place with Jesus' return to the earth; and will follow one another in close order. The Christians will also die at this stage and will join the deceased believers to become members of the bride of the Lamb.

16:4–7 Pouring out the third bowl judgment:

The third angel's bowl judgment turns the rivers and fountains (in other words all sources of drinking water) into blood. This angel of the waters declares: '... you have given them blood to drink as they deserve' (16:6), referring to the godless who shed the blood of the Christians (17:6). It is significant, as far back as in the time of Isaiah, the Lord warned that Israel's oppressors will get drunk from their own blood (Isaiah 49:26).

The heavenly altar, at the foot of which the martyrs are harboured (6:9), agrees with the third bowl judgment and this is an echo of the Song of Moses (15:3–4). The altar itself responds, which signifies that everyone and everything will praise the Lord, and they will acknowledge His righteousness and perfect judgment.

16:8–9 Pouring out the fourth bowl judgment:

Fulfillment of the fourth angel's bowl judgment is terrible. It intensifies the scorching heat of the sun on the earth. Such damaging heat was not part of the plagues which struck the Egyptians (Exodus 7–12). The serious heat disaster is a foretaste of the lake of fire (20:10,15) which awaits those who refuse to repent and honour the Lord (16:9).

The last three bowls: 16:10–21

¹⁰The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in agony ¹¹and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

¹²The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. ¹³Then I saw three impure spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. ¹⁴They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

¹⁵Look, I come like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and remains clothed, so as not to go naked and be shamefully exposed!

¹⁶Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

¹⁷The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'It is done!' ¹⁸Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since mankind has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. ¹⁹The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. ²¹From the sky huge hailstones, each weighing about forty kilograms, fell on people. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.

16:10–11 Pouring out the fifth bowl judgment:

The beast's kingdom turns into total darkness with the outpouring of the fifth bowl judgment. This is just like the three days of complete darkness with the ninth or penultimate plague the Lord sent over Egypt (Exodus 10:21–27). In the case of the kingdom of the beast, the darkness is permanent.

By pouring out the bowl judgment on the throne of the beast or antichrist, the fifth angel signifies the beast's throne is not immune to the Lord's justified anger. It is necessary to bear in mind the beast's kingdom, throne, and power are false and temporary, because God alone has all power at His disposal. It is fitting that a kingdom built on fraud, blasphemy, and persecution (13:3–17) be wrapped in darkness.

The refusal of the godless to convert to the Lord (16:9,21) shows the righteousness of God's judgment and eternal punishment (20:2-15).

16:12–14 Pouring out the sixth bowl judgment:

Ancient Babylon depended on the Euphrates River for its defense. With the pouring out of the sixth bowl judgment the water of the Euphrates dries up and this prepares the way for God's final war which will take place there. The Lord removes everything (symbolically) which may stand in Satan's way to implement his (Satan's) global conspiracy against God and the church (20:7–9).

Impure spirits, which look like frogs, come out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. These are the spirits of demons which perform miracles, and they conduct a propaganda programme to assemble the kings of the world to make war against the Lord.

16:15 Blessings declared over those who remain vigilant:

This is the third of seven blessings declared over believers in Revelation. In John's vision Jesus cautions Christians to be spiritually vigilant; this reminds of His admonitions to the apathetic congregations of Sardis and Laodicea (chapter 3). He warns He will return as unexpectedly as a thief in the night. He draws an analogy with a soldier who must always remain clothed or

have his clothes at hand. Therefore, believers must not be unconcerned about and be misled by Satan's propaganda programme. Christ's warning means if Christians are not spiritually prepared, they will in truth be naked. And if this is the case, they will be sided with the evil kings of the earth to make war against God, and He will then destroy them with the evil kings at Armageddon or Megiddo (20:7–10).

16:16–21 Pouring out the seventh bowl judgment:

When the seventh bowl judgment is poured out, a loud voice calls from the Father's throne in the temple: 'It is done!' (16:17) The Lord proclaims with it that His secret plan is completed (10:7), His revenge on the devil and his evil followers is accomplished (15:1,8), and Christ's rule over the world is established (11:15). A great earthquake strikes Jerusalem (16:19), the great city (11:8), and divides it in three parts. The cities of the nations fall. The Lord punishes Babylon the Great with extreme hardship (18:2–8). And the islands and mountains simply give way. After the Lord's judgment nothing remains standing (20:11). Hailstones of more than 40 kg each fall from the sky on the people, but the godless continue to curse God and refuse to accept Him as Lord and Saviour.

Reflections on Revelation 16

The bowl judgments cause the terrible destruction of the people and the earth. This destruction is carried out by Almighty God. He is the Creator of everything, He is just, and He is too wonderful and majestic for people to understand.

The bowl judgments introduce several insights into the final eradication of the first heaven and earth (21:1). The first four bowl judgments focus on the same spheres of God's sentences as the first four trumpet judgments (8:7–12), namely the earth, the sea, the rivers and water sources, and the sun. The six trumpet judgments (the seventh did not cause specific destruction) were limited to one third of every sphere (8:7–12; 9:18); but with the bowl judgments the destruction is complete. Contrary to pauses during the seal and trumpet judgments (7:1–17 and 10:1–11:14), there is no pause between the sixth and seventh bowl judgments. The final phase has arrived of God's retribution on the earth and the people.

Snippets

Moses was a champion of the faith who demonstrated and taught how believers can and should trust in the Lord alone and persevere in all circumstances: 'By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.' (Hebrews 11:27) Moses endured the contempt of Pharaoh, he tolerated the grumbling of the Israelites, he accommodated the criticism of Miriam and Aaron (his own family), and he handled the negative report of the spies. This was only possible because of his childlike faith in Almighty God. Moses' life and leadership motivate believers to persevere always.

I sometimes ask the Father to tarry a while before sending Jesus back to earth, because the churches, and individual members, have not performed well in proclaiming the gospel to all of mankind; nor of making disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:19). I trust He will indeed wait for a while and give believers another chance.

Many Christians pursue the personal goal of making a strategic contribution towards positive change in the world. The church (in other words all believers together) can, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, realise this goal. Towards this end, it is necessary for believers to understand why the Father created human beings, and what the original covenant is (Genesis 1:26–28). When Jesus came to earth, He illustrated His purpose with people as His creation: '... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Matthew 20:26–28) Therefore, Jesus demonstrated how to live and how to propagate God's image on earth.

REVELATION 17 – Babylon’s power and opulence

Introduction to Revelation 17

Revelation 17 describes the nature of the great prostitute, Babylon, which symbolises the Roman Empire. The Romans were the rulers of the familiar world during the time when Revelation was written; and they persecuted Christians in a cruel manner. Therefore, John avoided reference to Rome, but Christians and other readers knew what he was referring to.

The Roman Empire included all countries and nations of the then known world. The description of Babylon (chapter 17) and her destruction (chapter 18) was therefore applicable to all cities and nations when Revelation was written; and is applicable to all cities and nations of today.

The reference to Babylon in Revelation should also be understood as the enticement of all people by the commercial world and money. This is the world in which believers live and continuously participate in, and they should do so in a virtuous and honest manner. Christians will be personally impacted by the Lord’s judgment of Babylon.

The second half of Revelation has four descriptions of final destructions of the people and the earth. These will occur simultaneously, with Jesus’ second coming:

- The first is the gathering of the wheat and grape harvests, of chapter 14.
- The next is the carrying out of the seven bowl judgments, of chapters 15 and 16.
- The third is the destruction of Babylon, which includes all other cities and nations in the world, of chapters 17 and 18.
- The last is the judgment of the world and of Satan, of chapters 19 and 20.

The great prostitute: 17:1–18

¹One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. ²With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.’

³Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. ⁵The name written on her forehead was a mystery:

BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

⁶I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. ⁷Then the angel said to me: 'Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. ⁸The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come.

⁹This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. ¹⁰They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for only a little while. ¹¹The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

¹²The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. ¹³They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.'

¹⁵Then the angel said to me, 'The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. ¹⁶The

beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. ¹⁷For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to hand over to the beast their royal authority, until God's words are fulfilled. ¹⁸The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.'

17:1–6 The blood of the martyrs:

One of the angels of the bowl judgments carries John away in the spirit into the desert. The Lord wants to show John the serious judgments which will be carried out over Babylon. Babylon, which refers to the Roman Empire, is portrayed as an immoral prostitute who commits her abhorrent deeds with the evil kings and others on earth.

The prostitute sits on a scarlet animal (the antichrist), covered with blasphemous names against the Lord. They ride on many waters, which refer to the peoples, tribes, nations, and languages of the world ruled by Babylon (17:15). The prostitute is dressed extravagantly and in scarlet, and is adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls. The prostitute is drunk from the blood of Christ's martyred witnesses and between her eyes is the name of the great Babylon, the mother of prostitutes. The meaning of the secret name of the prostitute is that she represents the antichrist.

17:6–9 The beast is a deceiver:

The angel explains to John that the beast or antichrist imitates Jesus as Lamb of God, but God-given insight is necessary to understand it.

On various occasions God and Jesus are referred to as who is and who was and who is to come (1:4,8; 4:8). Satan, however, misleads. In chapter 17:8 it is said of the beast it once was, and now is not. In chapter 13:14 '... it deceived the inhabitants of the earth.' And in chapter 20:8 it '... will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth ...' Satan continues to deceive the people on earth in various ways.

17:9–11 The beast's seven heads:

The seven heads of the beast on which the prostitute sits refer to the seven hills (also called mountains) on which Rome is built. The beast's seven heads symbolise seven kings. These kings refer to seven Roman emperors. The beast or antichrist itself will be the eighth king. This indicates the antichrist is entwined with unbelievers and earthly rule. It suggests the antichrist has complete power over people whose names are not written in the book of life, but this rule and the abuse of power will only last a short while before the antichrist, with Satan and their followers, will be destroyed.

17:12–14 The Lamb destroys the beast:

The number ten symbolises completeness. The beast's ten horns refer to ten kings; but the ten horns relate to all kings, princes, and evil rulers of the world, and not to ten only. The antichrist meets with and seduces the world's evil kings and unbelievers, for a final battle against the Lamb of God and His followers. The reign of terror of the antichrist and its compatriots is of short duration before they are conquered and totally destroyed by the Lamb, who is the Lord of lords and the King of kings.

17:15 Persecution:

The prostitute refers to Babylon or Rome and it symbolises domination on earth. One of the biggest evils committed by these rulers and their subjects is to persecute Christians (of all peoples, nations, tribes, and languages).

Christians no longer have Jesus in person on earth to whom they can go for help when they are struck by persecution and other crises, but they have one another, as members of His body, to whom they can go for help and comfort.

17:16–18 Destruction of the prostitute:

I have sometimes observed how, when a few people plot and scheme together to do wrong things, they eventually turn against one another. In a similar manner, the satanic alliance of the prostitute and the beast (i.e., the godless city and ruler) will ultimately disintegrate. At that stage the beast will strip, via military or other powers, the prostitute (i.e., the economic system) which he helped to establish.

Reflections on Revelation 17

In chapters 17 and 18 (and elsewhere in Revelation) the prophecy against Babylon also refers to the enticement by the commercial world, of all people. Christians find themselves in Babylon and should therefore live close to the Lord every day, partake ethically in the commercial world, and not be allured by the attractions of the world.

Satan and his evil followers continuously focus on misleading rulers and people from all nations, tribes, and languages with their lies and other shrewd tactics. To achieve their objectives, Satan and his followers pursue abominable practices, for instance blasphemy, persecution, murder, sexual malpractices, immorality, fame, and pride, but with these malpractices they expedite the final day of reckoning for themselves.

God is the Creator and the Ruler, and He is the only One with the power to determine everyone's destiny. This also applies to Satan and his followers. With (or near) Jesus' second coming to the earth, the Lord will allow the alliances amongst Satan, the antichrist, the false prophet, the evil rulers of the world, and Babylon (or Rome) to disintegrate; and they will destroy one another.

Snippets

When God created people on earth, He determined they would eat plants (Genesis 1:29). After the fall the Lord saw that human beings became like Him by being able to differentiate between good and evil; and He banished them from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:22–24). Many lived for hundreds of years, but because of their wickedness, He decided they would only live for 120 years (Genesis 6:3). After the flood He allowed human beings to eat from all the living creatures (Genesis 9:3). I think one of the reasons for this was to limit people's age. In the 21st century technology and other factors enable a development stage to be reached where people will become much older through, for instance, diets, lifestyle and organ transplants. One of God's purposes is to establish the new heaven and the new earth. I wonder whether God will terminate the old earth and old heaven when, amongst other, vast numbers of people reach ages of more than 120 years again?

I believe God will, before Jesus' second coming, give Christians an extra opportunity to be and to do what He called them to. They should, as individual believers, as congregations and as church of Christ in the world, focus on prayer, on making disciples of all people and nations, and on healing and building up. Continuous prayer is crucial. With the proclamation of the gospel, the focus should be to make disciples of all people of all nations and races, as the early Christians did and as Joseph Mattero proposes (see page 186). On healing and building up, firstly, they should address people's pain, especially with poverty relief, for example through job creation and existence grants (see pp. 32–33). On healing and building up, secondly, they should address caring for the environment. I perceive the earth, with the people and everything else on it, to be God's *special painting*, which He created to be perfect. He allows people to continue painting on His *special painting*, but like toddlers they scribble badly on it with big marking pens; and thus deeply disappoint Him. Christians should mend their ways and help to protect and rebuild the environment.

There came a day in Abram's life when he was tired and at the end of his strength. He fell asleep and '... a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.' *However*, 'On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land ..."' (Genesis 15:12,18) Christians sometimes find themselves overwhelmed by difficult circumstances, and they feel unable to overcome. However, they have the assurance God is with them to lift them up again, to give them a new promise and to love them, as He did with Abram. 'I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.' (Psalm 32:8)

REVELATION 18 – The fall of Babylon

Introduction to Revelation 18

A heavenly messenger, with authority and dignity, announces the imminent eradication of mighty Babylon. Another messenger warns the Christians to leave Babylon and not to associate themselves with Babylon. God, who applies just and honourable judgment, will repay Babylon in full for her arrogance and cruelty.

In the prophecies of chapters 17 and 18 (and elsewhere in the book of Revelation), the reference to Babylon should also be interpreted as the seduction by the commercial world and by money. Somehow, all Christians continuously participate in this world and they will therefore be personally impacted by the Lord's judgment of Babylon. A further implication hereof is that believers are admonished to participate in the commercial world in a righteous and fair manner.

Chapter 17:12–14 describes the Lord's victory over and ruin of Babylon; and this includes the ruin of all the other cities and towns in the world. Chapter 18 relates the lament which follows over Babylon's complete destruction, by the groups who benefited most from Babylon's power and wealth – the kings of the earth, the merchants of the earth, and the seamen. But the heavens and everyone in it rejoice over Babylon's punishment and eradication.

The judgment over Babylon: 18:1–24

¹After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendour. ²With a mighty voice he shouted:

“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!”

She has become a dwelling for demons and a haunt for every impure spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal.

³For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries.

The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.’

⁴Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

“Come out of her, my people,” so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues;

⁵for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.

⁶Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Pour her a double portion from her own cup.

⁷Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself. In her heart she boasts, “I sit enthroned as queen. I am not a widow; I will never mourn.”

⁸Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her: death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

⁹When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. ¹⁰Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:

“Woe! Woe to you, great city, you mighty city of Babylon!

In one hour your doom has come!”

¹¹The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no-one buys their cargoes anymore – ¹²cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; ¹³cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves.

¹⁴They will say, “The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendour have vanished, never to be recovered.” ¹⁵The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn ¹⁶and cry out:

“Woe! Woe to you, great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!

¹⁷In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!”

‘Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all

who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. ¹⁸When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, "Was there ever a city like this great city?" ¹⁹They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:

"Woe! Woe to you, great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!"

²⁰Rejoice over her, you heavens! Rejoice, you people of God! Rejoice, apostles and prophets! For God has judged her with the judgment she imposed on you.'

²¹Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:

'With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down never to be found again.

²²The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again. No worker of any trade will ever be found in you again. The sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again.

²³The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world's important people. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.

²⁴In her was found the blood of prophets and of God's holy people, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth.'

18:1–3 Announcement:

The heavenly Messenger, who seems to be Jesus, announces the ruin of Babylon. This announcement echoes the prophecy of 14:6-11; and it's the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 21:9. The fall of Babylon will be final and complete, and it (Babylon) will become the habitation of demons and the prison of impure and deceptive spirits. The reasons for the downfall and ruin of Babylon are that the nations drink of the wine of her sexual immorality, the kings of the earth commit sexual deeds with her, and the merchants of the earth are enriched through the blindness of other people she causes.

It is significant the Father is not neutral about, but is deeply touched and hurt when His children are persecuted by Satan and his evil followers. He ensures truth and justice will prevail, as is the case when Babylon collapses. This is a wonderful comfort and an encouragement to Christians.

18:4–8 Leave Babylon:

The Lord advises Christians to leave Babylon, so they will not be destroyed with the city and the godless (Isaiah 52:11); and to separate themselves from the city's sinfulness and godlessness. Spiritual separation from godlessness is always essential for Christians. God may advise them physically to leave a city or church because of its godlessness. However, the real meaning of this warning is that believers must not become too at home in the consumer-friendly and excessive commercial world in which they all work and live (i.e., their Babylon); and believers must take part in the commercial world in a righteous manner.

18:9–10 The kings lament her destruction:

The kings who committed sexually immoral acts with Babylon and who elevated themselves to gods, lament her destruction. They observe this heartbreaking spectacle of devastation from a safe distance and call out in self-pity.

Various woe (or adversity) judgments are passed in chapter 18, owing to the decay and downfall of Babylon. Although there is virtually no time left, the Lord still alerts the people about the terrible impending disasters and warns them to repent. This is typical of a loving and merciful Father, who admonishes again and again.

18:11–17 The merchants lament:

The merchants who became rich because of Babylon lament over her ruin, because there will be no-one left to buy their many articles. They (the merchants) mourn from a safe distance, because all their wealth is lost in one hour.

The bodies and souls of slaves are part of the shiploads of merchandise who will no longer be offered for sale in Babylon. It is a reference to the evil system of slavery; and to the unfortunate practices of many slave-owners who claim ownership of the bodies and souls of their slaves. Physical slavery is not generally undertaken in the world today. However, this also refers to the many enslavement activities which are nowadays continuously practised in the commercial world.

18:17–19 The seamen lament:

The seamen stand far away to lament Babylon; and they throw dust on their heads to indicate their mourning. Through Babylon they built businesses and became rich.

18:20 Joy in heaven:

The heavens and all Christians, apostles and prophets are invited to celebrate the Lord's judgment of Babylon. Many believers have been murdered for their faith in Jesus, and many more will still be murdered. God is just, honourable, and faithful. He promised to revenge their deaths, which He now does with the extermination of Babylon (6:9–11). Long ago Jeremiah prophesied Babylon will be destroyed; and heaven and earth and everything in them, will rejoice (Jeremiah 51:47–49).

18:21–24 Babylon will sink:

Jeremiah wrote a message on a scroll about disasters which will come upon Babylon, and gave the scroll to staff officer, Seraiah, who was exiled to Babylon with the other Judeans. He (Jeremiah) asked Seraiah to read the message aloud when they reach Babylon, then to tie a stone to the scroll, and to throw it into the river Euphrates. Jeremiah said Babylon will, like the stone and the scroll, not rise again (Jeremiah 51:59–64). In Revelation 17 and 18 this prophecy is being fulfilled. The pleasant scenes and sounds of everyday life, such as music, work, preparation of food, lamplight, and love in marriage, will never again be seen and heard in Babylon. God will soon destroy Babylon and conquer the beast; and thus He will revenge the persecution, murdering and spilling of innocent blood of the prophets and other believers.

The destruction of Babylon and the other cities of the world is devastating and alarming and cause the deaths of very many people. This ruin is effected by Almighty God. He is blameless, honourable, and magnificent. He is too great and too wonderful for people to understand.

Reflections on Revelation 18

Babylon also refers to the enticement by the commercial world, of all people. The prophecies of Babylon's downfall therefore refer to the destruction of the commercial world as it is known today. It will negatively impact (in a very serious way) upon all believers and non-believers.

The Lord applies His righteous judgment, and fully repays Babylon (which includes all other cities and towns in the world) for her wickedness. In the exercise of His powerful damnation, He brings plagues of death, sorrow, famine and burning through fire over Babylon in a single day.

Babylon and its people hold the Creator God in contempt. They mislead the nations of the earth with their witchcraft. They will be eradicated, and then the normal business and cultural activities of the people will not be practised there anymore.

Snippets

The Lord judges and destroys Babylon because of the way they conduct business and other activities. This, however, does not mean economic activities are wrong; on the contrary! In Luke 19 Jesus tells the parable of a man of noble birth who travelled to a distant country to be appointed as king: "So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. "Put this money to work," he said, "until I come back." (Luke 19:13) Upon the return of the new king, he summons the servants to find out how much profit they made: "The first one came and said, "Sir, your mina has earned ten more." "Well done, my good servant!" his master replied. "Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities." (Luke 19:16–17) With this parable Jesus deals primarily with loyal believers who utilise opportunities to proclaim the gospel. However, by telling the parable He also demonstrates that conducting business and making money are good.

Zacchaeus the tax collector was a businessman who made the most of what was entrusted to him, and who seemingly became wealthy. Then the Saviour went to his home, and he had a genuine change of heart. This resulted in Zacchaeus distributing to others a substantial portion of his wealth (Luke 19:1–10). The gifts Zacchaeus gave to the poor and others will have had a substantial positive impact on them; and it will have had a stimulating effect particularly on the economy of Jericho. Every city and town in South Africa (and elsewhere) need many bigger and smaller prosperous Christian businessmen and women and professionals, so that the Lord can bless these cities and towns through them.

Robert G. LeTourneau is an example of a businessman who had a positive influence on proclaiming the gospel. He was a well-known American businessman, who was among the first road construction contractors to introduce machinery to move earth. He donated more and more shares in his company (later 90%) to promulgate the message of Christ in word and deed, globally. He said, 'God needs businessmen as partners as well as preachers. When He created the world and everything in it, He didn't mean for us to stop there and say, "God, you've done it all. There's nothing left for us to build." He wanted us to take off from there and really build for His greater glory' (Dodgen 2003: 278)

Revelation 19–20

JESUS' INVOLVEMENT ON EARTH

The Revelation from Jesus Christ has its origin in my quiet times, while I applied myself to Revelation. Shortly after I had commenced with this study, I realised how strategically important the book of Revelation is for God and for believers; and that I would like to share my insights with others. I started making notes. During these quiet times I struggled in particular to understand the difficult parts of chapters 19 and 20. Consequently I spent more time with these two chapters than with any other part of Revelation; and in the process chapters 19 and 20 became highlights for me.

Revelation 19 and 20 describe God's final judgment over and destruction of everyone and everything. William Barclay explains why the Lord is glorified amidst the frightening judgment and the devastation portrayed in these and other chapters of Revelation: 'God is praised because He has exercised His just and true judgment on the great harlot. Judgment is the inescapable consequence of sin. T.S. Kepler comments: "The moral law can no more be broken than the law of gravity; it can only be illustrated." It is said that the judgments of God are true and just. God alone is perfect in judgment for three reasons. First, He alone can see the inmost thoughts and desires of any man. Second, He alone has that purity which can judge without prejudice. Third, He alone has the wisdom to find the right judgment and the power to apply it. The great harlot is judged because she corrupted the world. The worst of all sins is to teach others to sin.' (Barclay 1959 Volume 2: 169)

It is meaningful that these two chapters describe some of the special occurrences the Father has in mind with Jesus' return to the earth. For instance, believers being prepared as bride of Christ, the wedding feast of the Lamb, God's final victory over Satan and his evil followers, Jesus' return to and His reign on earth.

REVELATION 19 – Praise the Lord

Introduction to Revelation 19

The Lord's dreadful judgments, as described in this and other chapters of Revelation, are difficult to grasp. However, these portrayals help believers better to understand the Father's glory, His greater plan, His righteousness, His holiness, His sovereignty, His supreme power, His involvement with people and His remarkable love for them and for creation. It is an encouragement for Christians that the description of the Lord's final victory over all evil is to be found in this chapter, as well as the invitation to the wedding feast of the Lamb, and Jesus' second coming to and His reign on earth.

Revelation 19 affords believers better insight into God's plans with them as people and with the earth; and of the immense importance they, in other words the bride of Christ, have for Him.

Hallelujah: 19:1–5

¹After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:

'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
²for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.'

³And again they shouted:

'Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.'

⁴The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried:

'Amen, Hallelujah!'

⁵Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

'Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him,
both great and small!'

19:1–5 Rejoicing in heaven:

In his vision John sees a big crowd of people who represent every nation on earth, and who stand in front of the Father's throne in heaven. They celebrate His honour with hallelujahs and acknowledge that salvation belongs to Him alone (7:9–10).

Jesus gave His life on the cross so every person who believes in Him will receive everlasting life, so nations can be saved, and so everything on earth can be made new (Matthew 28:18–20). It is awesome that believers have been appointed to proclaim the gospel to enable others to accept Him as Saviour and become Christ's disciples; and in so doing to participate in implementing the Father's plan on earth.

The Lord's judgment over the prostitute Babylon is legitimate, just, sincere, and equitable, because she corrupts the earth and spills the blood of the Lord's followers.

The heavenly crowd praise and glorify God for His salvation, His splendour and glory, and the power which belongs to Him. Each of these amazing characteristics of the Lord calls forth a special reaction in the hearts of Christians. His salvation evokes deep gratitude. His splendour and glory bring praise, honour, worship, and gratefulness towards Him. His power is always applied with His love, which gives believers complete trust in Him. The thankfulness, worship and trust they (Christians) experience are important aspects of their praise of Him.

The smoke of Babylon which rises for timeless eternity, symbolises the irreversible judgment of the Lord. The heavenly hallelujahs and praises to God for His retribution should be understood against the background of the continuous evil deeds, and of God's great and wonderful dignity being slandered by Babylon.

Many parts of the book of Revelation capture people's imagination. Revelation has inspired (and continues to inspire) many musicians, writers, poets, artists, and playwrights; and it also inspires me. Hallelujah means Praise God! Or Praise the Lord! It occurs four times in the New Testament – in Revelation 19:1,3,4,6. My family and my hearts' place is our holiday home at the seaside at Glentana near George. We named it *Halleluja*, because when we are there, we have a real desire to praise the Lord.

The Hallelujah Chorus is a climax of Handel's *Messiah* – this is when the audience stands. The Hallelujah Chorus has its origin with John's vision of the multitudes in heaven praising, exulting, and worshipping the Father. John himself heard and saw these multitudes singing; and it must have been a moving experience!

The elders represent the church of Christ throughout the ages, and the living creatures represent the entire creation. The affirmative acclamations by the elders and living creatures create a link with the earlier vision of God and the Lamb (5:8–14). The instruction to all, big and small, to praise Him for His character and authority is specific and clear and this same mandate applies to each Christian today. The Father knew believers will find and experience their greatest joy and peace on earth with their songs of praise to Him. This applies to Christians of all intellectual capabilities and social ranks, and of all stages of devotion to Christ.

Wedding of the Lamb: 19:6–10

⁶Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

⁷Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

⁸Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.)

⁹Then the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'

And he added, 'These are the true words of God.'

¹⁰At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, 'Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus.'

19:6–8 The wedding feast:

I think God wanted to secure a bride for His Son, and so He decided to bring one into existence. He did this by creating the universe, the earth with everything on it, and the people.

The voices from the throne sound like a great multitude, like the rumble of rushing waters, and like piercing peals of thunder. These are the voices of a huge crowd in heaven who, similar to chapter 14:2–3, sing the Father's praises in unison. Almighty God reigns forever, and He has been ruling throughout all of history. Here, like in chapter 11:15–17, He is praised, and His name glorified because He will establish His kingdom on earth with Jesus' second coming, as Paul prophesied in 1 Corinthians 15:24.

At this stage '... the wedding of the Lamb has come ...' (19:7) And the church is preparing for the wedding of the Lamb, as bride of Jesus Christ. The great prostitute, Babylon, will have been destroyed by now.

It is significant that nine times in Revelation God is referred to as the Almighty. There was never a time in history when so many evil forces revolted so forcibly against the church as when Revelation was written and never was there a time when Christians endured such suffering and faced such continuous threats of cruel deaths. Yet, under these circumstances, God is referred to as the Almighty.

Satan was one of the special angels in God's kingdom. He rebelled against the Lord, and many angels followed him in this rebellion. God banned Satan and his followers from heaven, to the earth. It appears that God created human beings during the time when, or after Satan rebelled against Him (Genesis 3:1–5).

The selfishness and sinfulness of the people resulted in God sending His Son to the earth, to die on a cross for their sins. One of the Saviour's greatest desires is for all believers to be one (John 17:20–21). Sometime after he had written Revelation and when he was an old man, John was released by the Romans from Patmos, his island prison; and he went to live in Ephesus. Saint Jerome, a priest and Bible translator who lived during the fourth and fifth centuries, wrote about John's focus on Christians loving one another. 'Jerome tells a famous story of blessed John, the evangelist, in extreme old age in Ephesus. He used to be carried into the congregation in the arms of his disciples and was unable to say anything except "Little children, love one another." At last wearied that he always spoke the same words, they

asked: “Master, why do you always say this?” “Because” he replied, “It is the Lord’s command, and if this only is done, it is enough.” (Stott 1974: 49)

Christians in the Early Church understood what was necessary to please the Lord, to bring about unity amongst themselves, and to expand their numbers (Acts 2:42–47). The culmination of what God wants and what the Early Church practised is for Christians to become one, in preparation for Jesus’ wedding with all believers as His bride (19:5–9). And for His bride to live and rule with Him and God for all eternity.

The Lord created man and woman in the Garden of Eden, gave them to each other, and bound them together through marriage to become one flesh (Genesis 2:18–24). Revelation describes the final wedding and union between Jesus and all believers, as His bride. This unification is one of the pinnacles of the Father’s involvement with human beings. Unification cannot take place without intimacy, between Christ and each Christian. The union takes place with every individual believer, but also takes place collectively, with all believers.

There are some important characteristics of a good marriage, to ensure it always remains strong; and these also apply to the relationship between Christians as His future bride (both individually and collectively), and Christ:

- True love.
- Intimate fellowship and unification, where man and woman become one flesh: The relationship between the believer and Christ must be the most intimate of all.
- True joy and complete happiness: The joy of loving and being loved.
- Loyalty and chastity, in other words marital fidelity.
- Servanthood: This is an important factor in marriage and also in the believer’s relationship with Jesus.
- Selflessness, which is of primary importance.

19:9–10 The fourth blessing:

It was necessary for John to be alone and away from all other people to hear the Father’s voice clearly, to understand the messages from the Father fully, and to convey these messages properly to the recipients of Revelation. There are times when each believer wants to be and must be

alone with the Lord. Jesus also applied this principle of withdrawing from the multitudes, and even from His disciples, to spend time alone with God. For example, before He selected the twelve apostles (Luke 6:12–13); before He introduced Himself to the disciples as Son of God (Luke 9:18–20); before He gave the disciples the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:1–4); and before His crucifixion (Luke 22:40–46).

In the book of Revelation John receives four instructions from heaven to write what is being given to him: With the instruction to send the letters to the seven congregations (1:11); when he sees the glorified Jesus (1:19–2:1); with the pronouncement of a blessing over those who die in the Lord from now on (14:13); and with the pronouncement of a blessing over those who are invited to the wedding of the Lamb (19:9), which is the last instruction of the four. This is also the fourth of seven blessings proclaimed in Revelation. True believers have the astounding privilege to belong to the body of Christ (which is the church on earth) and therefore, one day to be part of Jesus’ much-loved bride, and be invited to His wedding feast.

I love delicious food. Believers will have the entitlement to eat in heaven; and not only to eat, but to celebrate! It appears that this feast will carry on and on! There was and is great anticipation of the wedding feast of the Lamb, in the Old Testament (Isaiah 25:6–9), and in the New Testament (Luke 14:15–24).

The Father alone can and must be worshipped. The angels are co-servants of human beings and must not be worshipped.

It is the Holy Spirit who talks to the congregations and to the Christians; and it is the Holy Spirit who talks to the world through the congregations and through Christians.

The horse and rider: 19:11–21

¹¹I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. ¹²His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no-one knows but he himself. ¹³He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. ¹⁴The armies of heaven were following

him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. ¹⁵Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron sceptre.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. ¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

¹⁷And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in mid-air, 'Come, gather together for the great supper of God, ¹⁸so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and the mighty, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, great and small.'

¹⁹Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army. ²⁰But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshipped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulphur. ²¹The rest were killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

19:11–21 Christ and His procession on white horses:

In his vision John sees an open heaven, much the same as the visions of 4:1, 11:19 and 15:5. Similarly, Stephen (Acts 7:56), Peter (Acts 10:11), and Paul (2 Corinthians 12:1–4) saw open heavens. The vision of an open heaven indicates that believers will, in heaven, have free access to one another, to other heavenly beings, to Christ and to the Father. Jesus' real name remains hidden for human beings with their limited understanding – until His second coming. Then His name will be announced, and He will write His name on every Christian.

John now sees Jesus riding on His white horse, with the heavenly multitudes following Him on their white horses. Here, in the second half of chapter 19, the final battle between Christ and the evil forces, His victory over them, and their complete destruction are described.

The detail of this battle is too terrible, overwhelming, and devastating to comprehend fully. With this final battle God fulfills His judgment. He is the Creator of everyone and everything, He is majestic, and He is too great for humans to understand. With these victories Christ triumphs absolutely, He receives acknowledgement for His superiority over and destruction of the evil forces, and He then reigns fully and gloriously in heaven and on earth.

I believe some of the participants in this final battle will repent and accept Jesus as Saviour, even at this late hour and amidst the terrible judgment and destruction that will occur around them. It is relevant to note that there will still be believers on earth at this stage, who will also be impacted by the horrible final happenings.

The wonder of it all is that Christians know the outcome of this final battle and of the related happenings; and therefore, they can prepare themselves. They have the responsibility to tell unbelievers of these events so that, irrespective of how sinful their lives may be, the unbelievers can consider accepting Jesus as personal Saviour and becoming His disciples. Believers have the indescribable privilege to live and reign with Jesus for all eternity.

This part of Revelation manifests the fulfillment of the Lord's promise, of one of the single biggest occurrences in the world's history, namely, Jesus' second coming to and His reign on earth.

Reflections on Revelation 19

The Father's relationship with and instructions to Christians are collective (in other words to the congregations), but also personal with and specific to each individual believer. For instance, He gives particular tasks to every Christian to perform such as intercession, telling others about Jesus, helping others – and these tasks nobody else can and will perform. Therefore, each believer must trust in Him alone, persevere in faith, and continue with what He called each one to do.

While I was busy preparing the manuscript of *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*, I asked a few people for their input. My sister sent me some valuable insights, and we started discussing these via email. I realised many parts of Revelation do not necessarily have right or wrong answers. No human being can have a complete understanding of the book of Revelation; but

believers can gain better insight into Revelation by having discussions about it with other believers.

Chapter 19 comprises of some of the highlights of Revelation. For instance, the heavenly hallelujahs about the fall of Babylon; the wedding feast of the Lamb; the preparation of the church on earth as future bride of the Saviour; Christ on His white horse (with the heavenly multitudes on white horses following Him) achieve final victory over the evil forces; Jesus' second coming to the earth; He rules in heaven and on earth; believers live and rule with Him forever.

Snippets

The Lord instructs John twelve times in Revelation to write down. At present every Christian receives the same instruction, i.e., to write down and share with others. I encourage you as reader to think about, discuss with others and pray about choosing a book of the Bible and writing your own explanatory study and interpretation thereof (the structure of which can, if you wish, be roughly like *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*). And then to publish it free of charge on social media and elsewhere. I assure you that you as writer will find such a labour of love to be a real personal blessing.

Every day the Lord gives healing and satisfies believers' needs, in answer to their prayers. When Christians earnestly ask Him to do something, they may persuade Him to change His mind and intentions. For example, when Abraham negotiated with the Lord, He did not change His plan and He wiped out Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:20–33), but Moses persuaded Him not to destroy the Israelites as He intended to do (Exodus 32:7–14). Jonah 3 tells the fabulous story of how, based on Jonah's prophecy, the heathen city Nineveh repented and appealed to God: 'When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.' (Jonah 3:10) Believers should continue to ask of Him, trusting that He will adhere to their pleas.

Generally, Christians did not and still do not perform well with the proclamation of the gospel and the making of disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). Many attend church, but few daily apply their Christianity in the secular world, in a tangible and proficient manner. The Early Church took the Bible seriously, and practically applied its principles. Sometimes I ask God not to remove the old heaven and old earth too soon, but to give us another opportunity to cooperate with Him better to prepare His bride for the new Jerusalem. I believe He will give us another chance (see page 186).

REVELATION 20 – One thousand years

Introduction to Revelation 20

Various *literal* interpretations about how Satan will be bound for 1,000 years have been given by prominent writers and others since the book of Revelation was written. However, most spiritual leaders believe this part of Revelation should not be interpreted literally; and I concur.

With His crucifixion and resurrection Jesus conquered Satan and bound him. Since Christ's ascension about 2,000 years ago, Christians live in God's era of mercy on earth, which is the period of 1,000 years during which Satan is bound. The Holy Spirit lives in the heart of every believer. Believers are members of the body of Christ on earth and have direct access to God and Jesus. It is wonderful to know that Christians collectively reign with Christ, because the Father is establishing His kingdom on earth through them. It is precious that they can bring freedom to sinners through their testimony. This is possible because Jesus bound Satan, so his (Satan's) rule and ability to tempt believers are limited. It is exciting to know that I, and every other true believer, are already part of what Jesus is doing, namely establishing the Lord's kingdom on earth.

It is significant that God gave Revelation to John in approximately 90 AD; in other words, at that stage the Early Church had been ruling with Christ for quite a while.

It seems that the short time Satan is set free (20:3) occurs from time-to-time in every Christian's life, when he or she is severely tested. Jesus allows such relentless trials to ensure they retain their faith in Him, and that their faith remains pure. Human nature unfortunately causes the believer's dependence on Him to decrease when things go well. He or she then enjoys being on earth and his or her focus on an everlasting life with Him becomes blurred.

Satan is bound: 20:1–6

¹And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ²He seized the dragon, that ancient snake, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

⁴I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

20:1–5 The victors reign with Christ:

John sees an angel descending from heaven with a chain and key in his hand. The angel grabs Satan, binds him, and hurls him into a bottomless pit for a thousand years. The thousand years refer to the period from Jesus' ascension to His second coming, which therefore includes the present period. The binding of Satan means his (Satan's) powers are confined by the Lord; and believers are given the opportunity to rule with Christ on earth, and to bind or free sinners spiritually. Furthermore, John sees loyal believers on thrones, who rule and judge with Jesus.

During the first century Aramaic was used in Israel. And most of the first believers of the Early Church were converted Jews, from Israel. There are indications the New Testament was originally written in or at least retold in Aramaic to Aramaic speaking Hebrews. I sometimes use *Die Pad van Waarheid tot die Lewe*, which is an Afrikaans translation of the Bible, with the Old Testament translated from Hebrew and Aramaic and the New Testament from Aramaic. There are a few passages where this translation differs significantly from standard Bible translations. Chapter 20:4 is such an example, where *Die Pad van Waarheid tot die Lewe* refers to judgment by loyal Christians; and not only by those beheaded for their faith as in most other Bible translations (Coetzee 2017: 1522).

In this world, those who remain faithful to Jesus are often judged by unbelievers. In life hereafter these roles will be reversed, and those who thought they could judge others will be judged themselves.

20:6 The fifth blessing:

This verse contains the fifth blessing, of seven, in Revelation – blessed are they (the Christians) who share in Jesus’ resurrection. For them, their physical death is not something to fear. They are God’s and Jesus’ priests and have free access to the Lord’s presence; and they will rule with Him. The first death refers to bodily death, and the second death refers to eternal punishment in hell.

When I read Revelation to gain insight from the Lord, it feels as if He lifts me up from the ground so I can see better and further and can get a better perspective. I receive a blessing from Him, so to speak, so I can see some of what He sees.

Satan is defeated: 20:7–15

⁷When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth – Gog and Magog – and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. ⁹They marched

across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹²And 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. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

20:7–10 Release of and victory over Satan:

After his symbolic 1,000-year imprisonment, Satan is set free. The Lord gives him a last chance to launch his (Satan's) attacks against Christ and Christians.

Contrasting situations are presented in some of the passages of Revelation, and this here is an example. Satan is conquered by Jesus through His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension and he (Satan) is bound until he is thrown in the lake of fire (20:10). But simultaneously, Satan and his adherents are released to persecute Christ's followers and to tempt them.

Satan now mobilises the nations of the world to make war against the Lord and His followers. The number of soldiers who camp around God's people and Jerusalem for the final battle are as numerous as the sand of the sea. God will, probably during a period of a day or so, devour them

with fire from heaven. The destruction of these enormous military forces is not described in detail here; and one can hardly imagine how horrible it will be. This devastation is fulfilled by Almighty God; and He is righteous. He is too great and too wonderful for people to grasp.

The invitation to repent (and the fact the Lord postpones His judgment numerous times), is woven like a golden thread throughout Revelation. I am convinced some of the soldiers from these enormous armies will repent, possibly minutes before their deaths; just like the criminal on the cross alongside Jesus (Luke 23:40–43).

I understand God's greater plan and the passage of time as follows:

- After Satan's rebellion, the Lord cast him and his evil angels from heaven.
- Thereafter He created people.
- Satan and his followers were banished to the earth.
- This meant He, in His righteousness, granted Satan a reasonable degree of rulership on earth.
- Satan misused his power by misleading the people.
- Then God sent His Son to the earth.
- Jesus achieved a decisive victory over Satan through His crucifixion and resurrection. With that Satan was bound so he does not have unrestricted rulership.
- The binding of Satan is symbolically referred to as being for a period of a thousand years, which is the present-day era, until Jesus' second coming.
- From time to time during this period, Satan and his followers are given freedom by the Lord to persecute and tempt Christians (like in Job 1).
- Since Jesus' ascension, believers have been reigning with Him and preparing the way for God's absolute rulership on earth and for Christ's second coming.
- From the time of Jesus' departure to heaven, God has been judging the people and the earth.
- Believers go to heaven when they die where they await the wedding of the Lamb, when all will be united as bride of Christ to live in the new Jerusalem and reign with Him for all eternity.

- The final eradication of the people and the earth will occur with Jesus' second coming. This destruction is portrayed in Revelation in four different ways (chapters 14–20).
- Thereafter God will judge all people who have lived since He created Adam and Eve, all of whom will be dead at this stage. Those whose names are written in the book of life will receive everlasting life with God and Jesus; and those whose names are not in the book of life, will be cast into the lake of fire.
- Satan will also be judged by the Lord; and he, with the beast, the false prophet, and his other followers, will be cast into the lake of fire and tortured day and night for timeless eternity.
- Then death itself will be judged by God and thrown into the lake of fire.

20:11–15 God's judgment:

John sees a vision of a great white throne and of Him who sits on the throne; heaven and earth try to flee from Him, but they cannot. This is the Lord's revelation to John (and through John to everyone else) of His final judgment – first of the righteous, and then of the godless. With this vision the Father announces that He finally brings an end to the history of humanity and of the earth.

The Lord's judgment is announced in chapter 11:18. God starts with the removal of the old heaven and the old earth (6:12–17; 16:18–21; Hebrews 12:25–28), to make room for the new heaven and the new earth (21:1–5; Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:10–13). Then follows the Lord's judgment of the people, one after the other. Judgment will be of the deceased because all people will have died by now; believers, unbelievers, and from big to small. God opens the scrolls, in which every man, woman and child *will have written their own futures* during their lives on earth through their deeds, words, thoughts, and remissness, and will thus have determined what will happen to them in their lives hereafter. Everyone will receive a new body in which to appear before the Lord, notwithstanding how and where they died. Those whose names are written in the book of life will enter the new heaven and the new earth because they are set free by

Jesus, the Lamb of God who was killed for them and for the forgiveness of their sins (3:5; 21:27).

Death and the underworld are destroyed by the Lord and cast in the lake of fire. The first death refers to when people die physically, and the second death is eternal punishment in the lake of fire or hell. Christians often regard their acquaintances as good people, based on the good deeds they perform on earth, but the inconvenient truth is that their names will not be written in God's scrolls if they do not accept Jesus as Saviour; and then they will be cast in the lake of fire with Satan and the godless.

The question can be asked about predestination, and whether the Lord decided beforehand whose names will be written in His scrolls. It is important to note God sent Jesus to die on the cross for all people. Therefore, it was the Father's purpose and desire that the names of all people be written in His scrolls, but it is necessary for every person to accept Jesus as personal Saviour to be saved by a merciful Father – a voluntary decision is required from everyone (also read Luke 19:1–10). Furthermore, it is important that every person starts doing good deeds, in appreciation of what God did. Therefore, a person is predestined by Him when he or she accepts Christ as Saviour and commences doing good works out of gratitude.

Reflections on Revelation 20

Revelation helps believers, in a special way, to gain insight into how wonderfully they were made by the Father in their mothers' wombs, but also, to understand that He knew each one since the beginning of time and determined precisely how, where and when everyone would live. With Jesus' coming to earth and His death on the cross, He engraved as it were the names and DNA of each believer on His pierced hands. Furthermore, Revelation helps Christians to appreciate where they fit into God's plans with heaven and earth, with other people, and with the church on earth as the body of Christ. Such better understanding can help each one better to fulfill his or her God-given purpose.

This was the last of four descriptions in Revelation of the complete destruction of humanity and the earth:

- The first was the gathering of the wheat and grape harvests (chapter 14).
- The next was the bowl judgments (chapters 15 and 16).
- Then the complete destruction of Babylon and of the other cities and nations of the world (chapters 17 and 18).
- Thereafter follows the fourth and last judgment, when Satan and his followers make war against the Lord, and they all are killed and destroyed by Him (chapters 19 and 20).

The four final judgments and the destruction of all people, and everything, will take place more or less simultaneously, with Christ's second coming to the earth.

Snippets

'During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel ... lived in safety, everyone under their own vine and under their own fig-tree.' (1 Kings 4:25) This means each family was employed and was able to provide in their own needs. The Lord called Solomon to rulership at that time and gave him wisdom (1 Kings 3:5–14). He now calls the church and individual believers to rulership; and similarly, He will provide the necessary wisdom. What is required is for each Christian (and church) to find out what he or she is called to do in a practical and implementation manner, begin to carry out as He directs, and help others to implement likewise. The Father will then enable each family in South Africa (and elsewhere) to become employed, provide in their own needs, and assist others also to do so.

One of the ways in which each Christian can portray the image of the Father on earth, is to cry and to pray at His feet about his or her personal disloyalty to Him, the disloyalty of other believers, the decline of the church, the suffering of many people, and the ruinous condition of the environment (which is God's creation). Each Christian can ask Him for forgiveness, and to give him or her another chance to rectify these before He sends Jesus back to earth. Each believer can live a life of glory and praise to God, proclaim the gospel to others and help them to grow spiritually, make a personal contribution towards poverty relief, and become involved personally with rebuilding the environment (for example, to live more sustainably and to act more responsibly in all he or she does, daily).

In the Gospel of John, John describes himself as *the disciple whom Jesus loved*, for example in John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7,20; and it is the same person who wrote Revelation. I am excited because I can, like John, consider myself to be *the disciple whom Jesus loves*. This applies to or can apply to every Christian. Revelation helps him or her to live daily with the knowledge every believer is Christ's loved one. He loves each one absolutely (John 3:16). Deuteronomy 33:12 describes this relationship as follows: 'Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long ...' I belong to the Lord, and nothing can separate me from His love.

Revelation 21–22

HEAVEN ON EARTH

God created the universe and the earth, with everything in and on it, and human beings; and all of these, including the bodies (of flesh) of all the people, will be destroyed, or removed by Him at the end of time. This is to make way for the new heaven and the new earth. Revelation explains these events, but with people's limited understanding, it is not possible to fully comprehend the nature of the new heaven and the new earth. The Bible does not spell out all the details of this; however, it provides an excellent basis for Christians to live by in faith and victoriously every day. Revelation and the rest of the Word make it clear the Father will have thrilling surprises for all about the wonder and joy in the life hereafter. It appears not all of heaven and earth will be destroyed at once with Jesus' second coming, but some of it will be changed and made new.

The Father wants His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, especially in terms of how each Christian lives for Him, for one another, and cares for the environment. In the Lord's prayer Jesus teaches: '... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' (Matthew 6:10) Every Christian should read the book of Revelation and apply its teachings with the approach that it (Revelation) spells out his or her personal end-time history.

The legitimate and supreme reality for every believer should be continuously to live in the presence of Christ; and not only to pursue that which he or she can see and feel. Two of the most important actions each believer should focus on daily, is to glorify the Lord in his or her thoughts, words, and deeds; and to share the gospel of Christ with others. I find reading, meditating on and better understanding of Revelation helps me.

REVELATION 21 – The new heaven and the new earth

Introduction to Revelation 21

Revelation 21 deals with the destruction of death itself, which is the last remaining enemy. This last judgment leads to the final transformation of everything the Father created (i.e. heaven, earth, and the people), for His transformed creation to become the perfect home of the Lamb of God. Jesus will live here forever with His bride – who are the people He saved from all nations through His death on the cross.

A central message of Revelation is that Jesus always achieves victory over Satan and his evil forces; and believers win with Him. The lives of Christians are the best proof of these victories, for instance, the prayer lives of believers, and their intimate relationships with Christ. They persist in faith while suffering, they help and serve others, and they remain loyal to the end. Christians are not absolved from persecution and suffering (and even death), but they are encouraged to persevere while in the middle of these tribulations.

Hardship and affliction is illustrated by the story told of a farmer who, during the Cold War, tried to smuggle a mother and her small son out of East Germany under a big load of straw on his wagon. The farmer and mother repeatedly warned the little boy not to move or say a word, no matter what happened. At the border post the guards thrust their big forks into the straw to ensure no-one was hiding there. They noticed the farmer gasping, which was an indication for them to remove all the straw. When the guards reached the little boy, he was covered in blood from their stabbing. He cried out softly: 'Mummy, I did not say a word'. He was loyal, despite his pain and suffering. His mother was also silent because she died when the fork pierced her heart.

God's dwelling-place is now among His people: 21:1–8

¹Then 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. ²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death" or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

⁵He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'

⁶He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. ⁷Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.'

21:1 Removal of the old earth and the sea:

God now transforms everything. He removes the old or first or present heaven and earth, to make room for the creation by Him of a new cosmic order where sin, suffering and death will be banned forever. Images used suggest the possible recreation of the existing heaven and earth, for example believers will receive resurrection bodies (1 Corinthians 15:35–44).

Human beings have limited insight, and this appears to be one of the reasons why Jesus refers to recreation in Revelation and elsewhere in the Word. He wants to help believers better to understand that the existing heaven and earth will be removed, and that He will create the new heaven and the new earth.

The sea, as we know it, will be removed, but there will be significant bodies of water on the new earth (21:6; 22:1–2). The sea is symbolically regarded as a source of rebellion. For example, the beast of chapter 13:1 ascends from the sea; but on the new earth this source of rebellion will not threaten the perfection and excellence of the Lord's creation.

21:2–4 The new:

Old Jerusalem is one of the most exceptional cities in the world; and I can understand why the Israelites are so emotionally attached to it. By the time Revelation was written, Jerusalem had been completely destroyed by the Romans. Revelation explains that the new Jerusalem will be the city in the new heaven and the new earth where believers will live forever in their glorified bodies with the Father and Christ, after the Lord's judgment is concluded.

It is amazing that certain forms and concepts are already in existence in their perfect formats; for example, God will simply move the new Jerusalem down from heaven. The Father is the Source and Maker of all, also of human beings and of perfect formats; and He made everything immaculate and beautiful. John O'Donohue explains: 'When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world. We were created to be creators. At its deepest heart, creativity is meant to serve and evoke beauty ...' (O'Donohue 204:17) Every believer can dream with the Lord about what He has already initiated and what He will still make; and they can begin to create themselves.

One of the greatest blessings of the new heaven and the new earth is that Christians will have free, continuous, and perfect togetherness, communion, and interaction with the Father: 'God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.' (21:3) He reverses the curse which originated with peoples' sin by destroying and banishing

death, suffering, heartache, and pain. The marriage of the Lamb and the bride of Christ (i.e., the deceased believers) takes place and God and Jesus reign forever.

Since God created human beings, He has had the longing to enjoy togetherness and closeness with them. With the fall in the Garden of Eden this unrestrained togetherness came to an end (Genesis 3). When the Israelites travelled through the desert to Canaan, the Lord instructed them to build a tabernacle so that He could live among them (Exodus 25:8), but as a result of the sinful nature of people this potential togetherness was not satisfying and it failed. Centuries later the Father sent His Son to the earth to die on a cross to cleanse people from their sins. Christ rose from the dead after three days, and a few weeks later ascended to heaven. A few days thereafter God sent His Holy Spirit to live in every Christian's heart. This brought about fellowship between the Father and His people; and this fellowship will be perfected in the new heaven and the new earth.

21:5–8 God on His throne:

It is significant the Father Himself now speaks. He makes seven proclamations:

- *I am making everything new!* (21:5a): He brings about a new creation.
- *Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.* (21:5b): The Lord gives this same assertion to each believer, about writing down what he or she perceives and learns from Revelation and from the rest of the Bible. For example, choose a passage from *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*, add or take something away, send it to others, and discuss it with them.
- *It is done.* (21:6a): The eradication of God's enemies and the salvation of Christians have been completed. In other words, with Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension Satan and his evil followers were conquered and freedom given to believers.
- *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.* (21:6b): This does not mean the Father existed from the beginning of time to the end of time, because He always existed and He shall exist forever in the eternal future. However, He is the Origin and Source, the Finalisation and Final Purpose of everything. The Lord created the

universe, the earth, and human beings; and in this way He started everything. He now judges and ends it with destruction and salvation. God is the I am (= now), and not the I was, or I will be. Everyone must go to Him in prayer daily and spend quality time alone with Him.

- *To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.* (21:6c): The water of life symbolises eternal life given by God in the new heaven and the new earth.
- *Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.* (21:7): Every Christian who remains faithful to the end will inherit eternal life with the Father; and will be a son or a daughter to Him. With this the Lord gives a one-sentence summary of Revelation.
- *But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.* (21:8): With this God refers to the eternal punishment of those who are clearly evil; but also, of those who deny Him and who refuse to accept Him as Saviour. The inconvenient truth is that many who are regarded by Christians and others as good people will be among those banned to eternal death – because they did not accept Jesus as Saviour.

In Isaiah 55:1–5 the question is asked about the well where the biggest thirst will be quenched. God answers this in chapter 21:6. He will let those who are thirsty drink from the fountain of lifegiving water; but along with Isaiah's question comes the practical question asked of every Christian. Do they establish water wells to quench only their own thirst, or also to quench the thirst of others? The story is told of a South African farmer touring the Australian Outback. From the main road he notices cattle standing in small groups, but with no boundary fences. He stops at a farmhouse. The Australian farmer explains they dig wells to water the cattle, the cattle then remain near the wells, and they do not need boundary fences. Christians should grapple with the question of how they, as individuals, families, congregations, and small groups, can dig wells that others can also drink from, rather than merely to erect protective boundary fences around themselves.

In Revelation John explains that the victors, in other words Christians who endure till the end, will receive many gifts, awards, and characteristics from the Lord, for example:

- They will eat from the tree of life, which is in God's paradise (2:7).
- They will not be struck by the second death (2:11).
- They will receive the hidden manna, and a white stone with a new name engraved on it (2:17).
- They will receive power over the nations (2:26).
- They will receive white garments to wear (3:5).
- His or her name will never be taken from the book of life (3:5).
- Jesus will declare before the Father and His angels that he or she belongs to Him (3:5).
- They will be a pillar in the Lord's temple (3:12).
- They will sit alongside Christ on His throne (3:21).
- They will receive access to the new heaven, the new earth, and the new Jerusalem, where there will be no tears, death, suffering, sorrow, and pain (21:1–7).

New Jerusalem: 21:9–27

⁹One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.'¹⁰And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. ¹¹It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹²It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. ¹³There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. ¹⁴The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. ¹⁶The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is

long. ¹⁷The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick. ¹⁸The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. ²¹The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

²²I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. ²⁵On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

21:9–27 The bride of the Lamb:

Long ago the Lord promised His people: 'You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. ⁵For your Maker is your husband – the Lord Almighty is his name ...' (Isaiah 54:4–5) The Father fulfills this promise in chapter 21. John is carried away in the spirit and the angel shows him the bride, the wife of the Lamb. The deceased believers in the new Jerusalem are the bride of Christ.

There is always joy when one sees a bride. It signifies a wedding is about to happen and the bridegroom must be in the vicinity: 'I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom ...' (Isaiah 61:10) The amazing light of the new Jerusalem is the light of the lives of millions of believers: 'Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ...' (Philippians 2:15) The purpose of the high wall around the new Jerusalem is to radiate the glory of the Lord.

The twelve gates and twelve foundations symbolise the comprehensiveness, universality, and diversity of the church of Christ. There are many church pathways which take people to the kingdom of God. The names of the twelve tribes of Israel on the gates and the names of the twelve apostles on the foundations of the wall symbolise the unity, continuity, and everlasting nature of the church of Christ. The God of the Old Testament is also the God of the New Testament.

The golden measuring rod represents an undefiled and the truest means to measure the city. This symbolic act is carried out to measure the spiritual character of the new Jerusalem. The length, width and height are the same, in other words it is in the shape of a cube. The size is 2,220 km, which is very big and far. It signifies there is more than enough space for everyone in the new Jerusalem. Everything and everyone who can endanger the safety of believers in the new Jerusalem have by now been cast into the lake of fire. Yet, the big, high, and wide wall conveys the extent of complete security. The outstanding quality, beauty, and magnificence of the many-coloured building material of the new Jerusalem, symbolises the magnitude of the Father's glory and the majestic way in which He beautifies the bride of the Lamb.

There is no temple in the new Jerusalem because it does not need a temple; God and the Lamb are present at all times and believers have direct, immediate, and continuous access to and communion with the Father. There is a further significant dimension to the absence of a temple. The church of the Lord is not found in a building, liturgy, version of management or method of ordaining for ministry. The real church is the body of Christ, which comprises the bodies of all believers (1 Corinthians 6:15–20). When Christians each have a relationship with Jesus and have the Holy Spirit in their hearts, they jointly comprise the church of Christ.

The new Jerusalem will have no need for the sun and the moon because the presence of God and the Lamb will continuously illuminate it – never again will there be any darkness. The light of God and the Lamb will be so effective that nations will live by it and the kings of the earth will bring praise and honour to the new Jerusalem. The gates will always be open, which signifies believers will enjoy eternal and free access to the presence of and closeness with the Father, but those whose names are not written in the book of the Lamb will not have access to the new Jerusalem.

Reflections on Revelation 21

It is special that God created a world population of every description, for example, men and women; young and old; many cultures; many languages; a variety of personal looks; a variety of skin colours; big and small; introverts and extroverts. I think this resulted largely from the Lord scattering the people all over the earth after they had started building the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9). The Father desires to create a very diverse bride for His Son; and this gives Christians the opportunity to achieve unity amidst diversity already here on earth.

One of the Lord's purposes with creation is to have people dwell in His presence, to glorify Him through a variety of activities and in many ways, and always to enjoy Him and His presence. God's story of creation starts with Him, who abides in eternal glory and it ends with the Father, Jesus and His people who abide in eternal glory. Central to this is the cross, with the Lord who manifests His glory through His Son. Within God's story of creation, is the salvation of His people which He brought about and will still bring about.

The Lord settled Adam and Eve in His sanctuary, the Garden of Eden. A considerable time later He established the Israelites in Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, but first Adam and Eve and later Israel, failed to be God's good, loyal, and obedient managers; and both were kicked out of the sanctuaries He brought into existence for them. Then God sent His own Son to the earth; and Jesus was loyal and obedient to the Father. The people killed Him, but God resurrected Him, which means God and Jesus defeated death. God sent the Holy Spirit to live in Christians and to be with them always. With this He implanted Jesus' resurrection victory into sinful people; and in that way He created new people in Christ on earth.

Believers who are in Jesus move through the bodily or earthly death to and into new life, and into glory in the Father's sanctuary – to experience and enjoy His and the Saviour's presence there forever.

Snippets

Peter, John and James were in the inner circle of Jesus' disciples. Even though they were not perfect, they had a deep desire to live and be close to the Saviour. For instance, He invited them to participate in certain special events. They were present when He brought Jairus' daughter back to life (Luke 8:51–55). They witnessed His transfiguration on the mountain (Matthew 17:1–8). On the Mount of Olives, He answered their questions and gave them special teaching (Mark 13:3–13). In the Garden of Gethsemane, He took them with when He went away to pray (Matthew 26:37–41). Christ continues to invite those believers for whom intimacy with Him is the most precious prize, to be part of His inner circle.

Nowadays most people live in big towns and cities, and are not in regular contact with farm animals the way people were in biblical times. Some Christians find it difficult to fully grasp the roles of Christ as good shepherd and as Lamb of God. It is beneficial to be exposed from time to time to farm life and farm animals.

Christians hold the key to bringing about positive change in all fields on earth. Joseph Mattero of Resurrection Church in New York (Mahlobo 2017: 245–256) briefly explains the purposes of and a few crucial aspects on which the church should concentrate to change communities, society, and civilization positively:

- The focus should be on the elite who are the top 3–5% of the population, in other words those who influence civilisation and culture. For example, Moses was an Egyptian prince when the Lord called him to lead the Israelites to Canaan (Exodus 2:10; 3:2–10); Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer when he was called to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1:11–2:8).
- The country's laws should be changed, to be in accordance with the Lord's directives as contained in the Ten Commandments. For example, abortion and same sex marriages must be declared unlawful.
- The church must relinquish political extremism.
- Churches must establish kingdom-directed (alternative) groups, for example, by the establishment of faith communities where biblical principles are practically applied, and which are open for non-Christians who want to engage and join.
- Successful/rich businessmen and women must be part of kingdom-directed initiatives, so the necessary funds can be made available (Deuteronomy 8:18).
- There must be true unity in the church. The various church leaders should, for instance, deal with the practical implications of where Jesus would send a letter to (as in chapters 2 and 3) in the relevant city or town (John 17:20–23; 1 Corinthians 1:10).
- Firm and close kingdom partnerships amongst pastors and leaders from, for instance, the business, political and educational communities are necessary.
- Continuous revival and reformation are necessary.
- There is the need for unceasing prayer.
- It is essential that the spiritual leaders have a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit and undergo real spiritual change.

Humanly speaking, the successful implementation of these purposes and practices will be impossible during present times, but the carrying out of it was just as impossible during the times of the Early Church; and yet they successfully focused on many of these essential purposes and practices. God used them in miraculous ways to completely change communities, society, and civilisation and He wants to and can do it again today.

REVELATION 22 – Yes, I am coming soon

Introduction to Revelation 22

This chapter is the glorious culmination of the book of Revelation and of the Bible. It describes the new Jerusalem, and the awesome lives believers will lead there forever with the Father and Jesus. Christ makes seven far-reaching announcements and the yearning is expressed for Jesus to return to the earth soon.

There are significant contrasts between the end of Revelation and the beginning of Genesis. Genesis starts with the creation of the sun, moon, and stars; the entrance of sin into the world; the pronouncement by God of the curse; Satan's triumph on earth; and the exclusion of people from the tree of life. Revelation's end, on the other hand, describes a world or a time where there will no longer be any need for the sun; where there will be no more sin; where the curse will have been removed; where Satan and his sovereignty will have been thoroughly conquered and where he will be no more; and where there is access to the tree of life.

The river of life: 22:1–5

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵There 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.

22:1–5 We will see Him face-to-face:

Israel generally is a dry land. Against this background the Lord provides a perennial and clean river with pure water of life. This is part of the abundant life He gives to His people, and believers can enjoy it any time and forever. Furthermore, this symbolises the glory of God, and the mercy and salvation He provides to believers.

The street, river, and tree of life should be seen in the plural; in other words, the new Jerusalem comprises of many parks with streets and trees, and with rivers running through it.

Revelation portrays a beautiful picture of the new Jerusalem. It will be an exceptional privilege always to live in such a place. For health reasons I have been a vegetarian for more than forty years; and it is a pleasant thought that fantastic fruit and vegetables will grow near my home throughout the year. There will be no need to spray them with insecticides to control pests. I, and everyone else, will be able to pick and eat when and as much as we like. The deceased believers will live in the new Jerusalem, and will at that stage have been healed spiritually and physically; and this is accentuated by the leaves which bring healing.

No-one on earth can see God (John 1:18); but everyone in the new Jerusalem (i.e., the departed believers) will see Him face-to-face. His name will be written on the foreheads of redeemed Christians which will prove they are His property; and they will enjoy close and ongoing fellowship with Him.

The Father sent His angel to deliver the prophecies of Revelation, of events which will most certainly happen in future. In the book of Revelation, He gives insight and wisdom to His sons and daughters to understand the prophecies and the impact of it on them and on the earth.

Jesus is coming soon: 22:6–21

⁶The angel said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God who inspires the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.'

⁷'Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.'

⁸I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. ⁹But he said to me, 'Don't do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your fellow prophets and with all who keep the words of this scroll. Worship God!'

¹⁰Then he told me, 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll, because the time is near. ¹¹Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile; let the one who does right continue to do right; and let the holy person continue to be holy.'

¹²'Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

¹⁴'Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs, those who practise magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practises falsehood.

¹⁶'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.'

¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

¹⁸I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. ¹⁹And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.

²⁰He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

²¹The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.

22:6–12 Make this prophecy widely known:

This section of chapter 22 highlights that the Father is in control of human history, and He initiates and guides the course of all events.

The book of Revelation, and especially its last few verses, is God's *grand finale* of the Bible. Also, in these last verses the trustworthiness of Revelation is reaffirmed. Furthermore, a blessing is pronounced over those who adhere to the warnings in Revelation and the imminence of Jesus' second coming is stressed. These verses are a type of epilogue of Revelation; and the themes of the prologue (of chapter 1:1–8) are repeated in them.

In verse 7 the Saviour emphasises that He will come to the earth again soon. John was there when Jesus died on the cross. Still, He first appeared to a woman, Mary Magdalene, after His resurrection; and John himself relates this story in John 20:11–18. Mary did not recognise Jesus immediately, until He called her by name. He asked her to go to His disciples and tell them that He was ascending to the Father; and she immediately did so. Likewise, Christ addresses each one of His children by name; and He gives to each one special tasks to perform, which they should attend to immediately.

In the last two chapters of Revelation, it is repeated seven times that the words of God are unique, true, worthy to be followed, unchangeable, deserving to be proclaimed and trustworthy (21:5; 22:6,7,9,10,18,19).

God's words and the centrality, authority, completeness, and eternal truth of it are fundamental to the whole Bible, from the first words of Genesis to the last words of Revelation.

It is significant that Revelation is directed primarily at Christians, who must apply the message and pass it on to non-believers. A blessing is pronounced over everyone who adheres to the message of Revelation, which is a timeless promise to Christians of every generation. This is the sixth blessing (of seven) proclaimed over Christians in Revelation.

John saw Jesus many times after His resurrection and before His ascension. Yet he (John) was so overwhelmed by the wonder, splendour, glory, and majesty of the ascended Christ that he fell down in reverence.

Revelation emphasises that believers must worship the true God alone, the One who created heaven and earth. He is the Lord who gives freedom to everyone through His Son if they accept Him as Saviour. He is Creator of everything and everyone, and also of every Christian. They must not deify angels, people, money, prosperity, health, pride, and other things; they must worship Him and Him alone.

The Father created every human being to be unique and different from any other. He entrusts intelligence and talents to every person. He gives to each one personal pictures of Himself, of the Saviour, of Jesus' second coming to the earth, and of many other aspects of the Bible. The personal pictures one person has do not always and everywhere correspond with the personal pictures others have, but that does not matter. Revelation is precisely the book in the Bible where the Lord affords His children the opportunity to dream, to read what others say, to study, to listen to His voice, and to form their own opinions about the things which are not completely clear. Furthermore, they have the chance and scope to discuss their personal pictures of aspects of Revelation and of the rest of the Bible with others. In this way they can commiserate with and encourage one another, learn from one another, and listen together to what the Lord says in His Word.

The words and messages of Revelation must not be kept secret, but must be proclaimed, because Jesus' second coming is near. Over the centuries Revelation has been and continues to be a book of comfort, especially in times of suppression and despair. By forming own personal pictures of aspects of Revelation and sharing these via social media and

otherwise, the believer helps to ensure that Christ is the source of support for the recipients and for him or herself.

The Lord warns Jesus' second coming, in other words the final end, is near, but the current world with its sinfulness will continue to exist until the final end – on the one hand those who commit wrongdoing will go on doing so, while those who live righteous and holy lives will go on doing so.

22:12–19 Jesus' seven proclamations:

In this penultimate section of Revelation (and of the Bible) Christ makes seven important declarations.

- *Look, I am coming soon!* (22:12): Jesus gives a reminder – everyone must accept Him as Saviour (irrespective of how sinful their former lives may be), live a life dedicated to Him and fitting for their conversion, and then they shall be rewarded with eternal life with Him.
- *I am the ... First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.* (22:13): Reference to God and Jesus as the Beginning and the End (Alpha and Omega in Greek, and Alef and Tau in Hebrew) occur four times in Revelation (1:8,17; 21:6; 22:13), and this is the last time. The Father brought about the current creation, and He will also bring about the new creation. Christ is establishing the church as His body on earth, and with His second coming He will bring the church to its culmination, as His bride. The Saviour was present when God created everything, He was the first to be resurrected from death, He is our Intermediary with the Father, and He is the Bridegroom. The human vocabulary is too limited adequately to glorify God and Jesus. The descriptions in Revelation, as in the rest of the Bible, assist immensely herewith.
- *Blessed are those who ... have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.* (22:14): Jesus pronounces seven blessings in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7,14) – this is the seventh and last blessing. The focus of all seven blessings is that those who belong to Christ, follow His directives, and persevere in Him (in other words until His second coming or until they pass away), will receive and enjoy eternal life with Him.

- *I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches.* (22:16a): In chapter 1:1–2 God gives the revelation to Jesus; He gives it to one or more angels; the angels, as messengers, give it to John; he (John) writes the book of Revelation and thus gives the revelation to the congregations and therefore to all Christians since then. Now (verse 22:16a) Jesus repeats His instructions about dispatching the revelation to the congregations, and in so doing to all believers.
- *I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.* (22:16b): The ‘I am’ applied by Jesus is a general self-proclamation used by God and Christ in the Bible. Jesus’ title, Root of David, also occurs in chapter 5:5 and is taken from Isaiah 11:1: ‘A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.’ The title for the Saviour of bright Morning Star signifies the Father’s absolute assurance of the new dawn which will come in His new creation.
- *The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’* (22:17): The theme specifically to invite and urgently encourage all people to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour runs like a golden thread through Revelation (for example, 1:7; 11:13; 14:6–7; 21:6; 22:17). The threefold repetition of the *come* invitation (i.e., the missionary message) in chapter 22:17 suggests the urgency of the invitation. Up to the fifth last verse of Revelation (and of the Bible), the Saviour invites those who are thirsty to come and drink from the water of life, for free. In addition to being an invitation to non-Christians, this is also directed at believers. The reference to, ‘The Spirit and the bride say ...’ (22:17) indicates all Christians (because they will become part of Jesus’ bride) are co-responsible for the committed and enthusiastic proclamation of the missionary message.
- *I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.* (22:18–19): Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and over a period spanning more than two centuries God manifested to the leaders of the Early Church which books should form part of the Bible. This is enough for believers to accept every word of Revelation and of the Bible, and

only that, as the inspired Word of God. This is what Jesus means when, in chapter 22:18-19, He admonishes that nothing must be added or taken away from the Word of God. Du Rand and Nel emphasise the necessity to abide with what the Bible determines: 'God's Word always showed us the boundaries within which God expects us to live. And this is not in consideration of our own preferences and comforts, but in honour of the Almighty God.' (Du Rand and Nel 2016: 264)

I experience Jesus as friendly, patient, loving, likeable, engaging, understanding, fun-loving and compassionate; that is also how Jesus is portrayed in Revelation and in the rest of the Bible; but it is just as clear that He is strict, that He means exactly what He says, and that believers must do (execute) what He asks them to do.

22:20–21 Come, Lord Jesus

John explains that Jesus, who came to earth as a human being (John 1:10–14), actually was the Word (or Message) of God (John 1:1-3). Jesus existed since the beginning of everything and has been part of the Father even before the creation of people. The Bible is therefore somehow part of the Lord Himself. God sent Jesus to become a human being, of flesh and blood like us, to be with us. The Lord gave His children the Old and New Testament, which together form the Bible. And He gave them the Holy Spirit, which is also part of Him, to be with and in every believer every moment. Now, in chapter 22:20, Christ says He will soon come to the earth again, to us as human beings. This is one of the most amazing promises to and prospects for Christians.

Jesus says three times in chapter 22:6–21 (the third time in 22:20), 'I am coming soon.' It is a marvellous emphasis that His second coming is at hand. Over the centuries since Jesus' ascension Christians (the church) respond prayerfully, with smiles and through the Holy Spirit to this promise by the Saviour: 'Amen (let it be so). Come, Lord Jesus.'

Revelation (and therefore the Bible) concludes in verse 21 with what is the most remarkable blessing in the Bible (and anywhere else): 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.'

Reflections on Revelation 22

Chapter 22 is the *grand finale* of the book of Revelation and of the Bible. In it the new Jerusalem is described and also the astounding lives believers will lead there forever, with the Father and the Saviour. Jesus makes seven important pronouncements. Christians plead for Christ soon to return to the earth.

It helps better to understand the Lord's purpose and future with each Christian (as also explained in Revelation), by considering why He made human beings: 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule ...' (Genesis 1:26); and 'So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them.' (Genesis 1:27) The Father created people in His image so that they can and will be responsible for the earth, for all the creatures on it and for all fellow human beings. Therefore, it is important that everyone personally considers both the short- and long-term future of his or her own life and determines his or her personal responsibility from the perspective of God's purpose with the creation of human beings (Genesis 1–2).

Snippets

During the three or so years of His ministry Christ demonstrated how believers should participate with Him to establish the Father's kingdom on earth. Christo Nel observes that corruption was rife in the top structures of Jewish spiritual leadership when Jesus was on earth; He wanted to cut off the flow of income to the temple; tax collectors played a role in the flow of funds to the temple; He therefore desired to have access to the hearts and minds of tax collectors. He called Levi (Matthew), a leader amongst the tax collectors, to become His disciple. On one occasion Levi invited numerous other tax collectors to his home to meet Jesus; they in turn invited others; and many of them accepted Christ as Saviour. Sometime later Jesus visits the tax collector Zacchaeus at his home, who also accepts Him as Lord; and the same process repeats itself (Nel 2022). Christians should pray for wisdom and ask the Holy Spirit to guide them to act with strategic intent in what they do and say, as Christ did in His ministry.

In *Fishing for the Village*, the authors describe the importance of applying the broader gospel approach of the Early Church: 'We needed to experience their worship, their time together, their sharing of financial burdens, their passion to reach the world, their compassion for those in need, their transparency, their study of the Word, their discipline, and so on. I was convinced that true discipleship-making is the only strategic answer for our world in need.' (Carstens and Kellerman 2020: 15) The authors continue by explaining why true discipleship is so important and what it implies: 'If you want an easy, unopposed, persecution-free life, then you should keep your faith to yourself and not make disciples. But if you want the world to change and Christ to rule in and through everyone and everything, disciple-making is the only way. Disciple-making requires total attention and devotion to becoming like Christ, and helping others to become like Christ, not only believing in Christ. In the Gospels, following Jesus and making disciples is seen as one thing. We must ask ourselves: can we be called Christians if we do not make disciples?' (Carstens and Kellerman 2020: 21) But the authors warn true discipleship may lead to persecution. They point out the importance of handling hindrances such as money, sex, and power, in a God-fearing manner.

A lack of humility can also be an obstacle. If believers become too important in their own eyes, they should ask Christ to place robes of humility over their shoulders.

In line with the Father's blessing of chapter 22:21, may you as reader also receive the following blessings from Him:

- May the peace of God be with you.
- May God's favour enfold you.
- May God's goodness and loving kindness enclose you.
- May you be content.
- May all your needs be met.
- May you be whole as a person.
- May you enjoy harmony with others and the environment.
- May you be saturated with well-being.
- May you have good health and safety.
- May you receive a joyful heart.
- May God work through you.
- May you enjoy the constant awareness of God's presence.
- May you experience the abundance of God's blessings.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The Bible message can, broadly speaking, be divided into two *streams*: On the one hand, the Word deals with God's relationship with believers and the relationships of believers with one another. On the other hand, the Word deals with God's infinite plan for the universe and for people and how Christians fit into His plan. Both of these *streams* are important, but with the limited insight and abilities of human beings, Christians are naturally inclined to pay more attention to their relationships with the Father and with one another. I think one of the reasons why God promises a blessing to readers of Revelation is because most of the book of Revelation concerns the Lord's infinite plan with the universe and with people; and He wants believers also to focus on this aspect.

The Revelation from Jesus Christ will help readers to gain a better understanding of the book of Revelation, to facilitate discussions with others, and to do further research into Revelation. And in a general sense, it will stimulate prayer and petitioning the Father for more wisdom. The snippets in the frames at the end of the chapters will encourage readers to think and pray about the matters raised.

John received the instruction to write down twelve times in Revelation. Today every believer receives the same instruction from the Saviour to write down, and this instruction relates to the whole Bible. I wrote an explanatory study and interpretation of Revelation, as I see and experience it – *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*. I am contemplating writing explanatory reviews of more Bible books; I foresee that, in the course of time, these may become part of *THE EXPLORATION BIBLE*; and some of you may decide to participate with me in implementing such a task. Furthermore, it will be wonderful and very valuable if many Christians each choose a book of the Bible and write the same type of study and interpretation on the particular book; and then publish it free of charge on social media and elsewhere.

An important dimension of Revelation is to help Christians to find out how and where each one fits into God's plans; and what He would love everyone to be and do in this regard. William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, deals with this when he describes his life's dream and

passion for Christ and others: 'I will tell you the secret of my success. God has had all there was of me. ... from the day I got the poor of London on my heart and caught a vision of what Jesus Christ could do with them, I made up my mind that God should have all of William Booth there was. ... God has had all the adoration of my heart, all the power of my will, and all the influence of my life.' (Dodgen 2003: 173) It is not always easy to live a life fully surrendered to the Lord, but it is possible as shown by our ancestors from the Early Church and by William Booth.

The Father expects true obedience from each one of us; only then can He use us. I find the worship and reverence He really wants from me, is myself – more than what I do for Him and for others. On occasion the Saviour visited two sisters. Martha was busy preparing to serve Jesus and the other guests, while Mary sat at Jesus' feet; and He explained Mary chose the best part (Luke 10:38–42).

Jesus is eagerly waiting for each believer to begin with and continue to nurture the love relationship with Him. He wants me to surrender and allow Him to put me on His lap just as I do with my grandchildren. He hankers after me (and each believer), spending quality time alone with Him daily and maintaining a continuous awareness of His presence.

When I go through difficult spells, I sometimes find myself taking cover in the book of Revelation, and therefore in the Saviour. I experience that meditating on Revelation helps me to strengthen my relationship with Christ; and this brings acceptance and comfort. From time to time we all experience difficulties and hardships, sometimes daily. I suggest that you read and re-read Revelation and make it your own. The book of Revelation was, in the first instance, sent to bring comfort to Christians of the Early Church – who were tested, persecuted, and killed like at no other time in the history of the church.

I find the book of Revelation to be the most exciting, informative, blessed, and beautiful book in the Bible. No other book puts forward such a comprehensive insight of Jesus; and of Him as King of kings, Prince of peace, and our Saviour. Christ as the Lamb who was slaughtered is the central theme in Revelation. The book of Revelation helps believers to understand Jesus as the triumphant Lord, it explains the final conflict between the forces of good and evil, and it spells out the eventual outcome of this conflict. Also, Revelation describes how Christians will be living forever with the Father and

Jesus. The book of Revelation is a combination of an executive summary of the Bible (chapters 1–3) and a prophecy of events which will certainly occur in future (chapters 4–22). Furthermore, the Lord provides a one-sentence summary of the book of Revelation: ‘Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.’ (21:7)

Many parts of Revelation are devoted to praising the Lord. In this same vein Psalm 145 is a psalm of praise by David – he says: ‘One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts.’ (Psalm 145:4) Moreover, the book of Revelation emphasizes God is a God for all generations, and He wants one generation to proclaim His goodness to the next. He invites His sons and daughters to think and pray about and to plan for their respective future generations.

The Lord promises to bless Christians who read the book of Revelation; I presume this is because the reading of Revelation is important for the reading, studying, and understanding of the Bible. To receive this blessing from Jesus, you as reader must please concentrate on reading the text of Revelation; more so than on the interpretation I offer in *The Revelation from Jesus Christ*.

The angel said to John, ‘I am a fellow servant with you ...’ (22:9) As writer I am a fellow servant with you as readers. While writing *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* I realised how sadly I am lacking in what the Lord expects of me as believer. Fortunately, I and all Christians have a merciful Father and a glorious Saviour who forgive our sins; and the Holy Spirit who lives in us to take each one by the hand, and patiently help us to grow nearer to Him.

The Bible as a whole can be viewed as a narrative. The 66 books are put together to tell God’s true and indisputable story, and His plan to make everything new again. However, the Bible story can also be regarded as a drama. The implication of this drama is that it should be performed (in other words lived) daily by every Christian. The Bible story does not end with the last verse of Revelation. Every believer already acts out his or her part while performing the Bible drama (i.e., living it). Each one is encouraged in Revelation (and elsewhere in the Bible) to continue carrying out his or her unique and important function. Every day each one should ask Jesus what his or her role for the specific day should be; and then we must live it!

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There are many good books and other publications written about Revelation and related subjects. Some of these which I refer to, consulted, or found useful in writing *The Revelation from Jesus Christ* are listed in the bibliography on the next pages. The interpretations of the various aspects of Revelation by various authors differ from one another, but the fact that the interpretations in a book differ from ours does not mean we should not read it. By reading various interpretations we are able better to understand Revelation and to make it our own.

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My wish for and blessing to you

‘The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people.’ (22:21) This is my wish and desire for each one of you. May God bless you abundantly!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles".

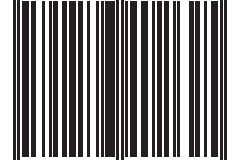
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