



July 2019

Seeing God in a New Light

**Readings, Reflections, Prayers
from Revelation (1)**

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Monday, July 1: 1 John 4:7-21

Are you ready for some interesting reading this summer? How about giving Revelation a go?

Revelation is very different from the other New Testament documents. It is a very complex book, especially for us in the 21st century, separated by 20 centuries, 9,544 km (the distance from Lethbridge to Patmos), and a whole lot of cultural baggage. We do need to remember that Revelation was written FIRST by John for Christians suffering intense persecution in (what is now) western Turkey. He was writing to help them understand their experiences and their world and to encourage them to keep the faith. He wrote in the 1st Century A.D. He was not writing, primarily, to North American Christians in 2019.

Revelation is a book of "revealing." The Greek title is "*apocalupsis*" – from which we get the word "apocalypse." We typically think of apocalypse in terms of massive battles, natural disasters, and the end of all things. In fact the word literally means "uncovering," "unveiling," or (literally in Latin), "revealing" ("Revelation" is a literal Latin translation of the Greek title). There is a long Jewish tradition of apocalyptic literature (for example, in Daniel and Ezekiel) in which visions, dreams, symbols, fantastic creatures, and cataclysmic events are used to help reveal the spiritual powers, realities, and battles that are going on. These books "reveal" hidden spiritual events. The symbolism and images in Revelation, although obscure to us, would have been familiar to believers in the First Century: Revelation has more Old Testament allusions than any other New Testament book (not being as familiar with the Old Testament – especially the prophets – we miss most of this). The (to us) strange beasts, symbols, and visions would have been richly meaningful to suffering Christians in John's world.

Revelation also contains elements of prophecy. In the biblical sense, prophecy meant ***forth-telling God's truth into present circumstances*** as much or more than foretelling the future. The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 certainly fall into this category; they speak directly to the situation in those churches at that time. However there certainly are elements of unfulfilled future reality that we look forward to (Revelation 21-22). One of the BIG challenges in understanding Revelation is trying to understand what was intended for the specific situation in the churches to which it was written (it was NOT specifically written for Canadian Christians in 2019), and what is still to be fulfilled. Some passages are obvious. Others are trickier.

As we study Revelation let's never lose sight of the amazing love of God revealed to us in Jesus. Today I have invited you to read 1 John 4:7-21 (John also wrote Revelation) to help us set the context for Revelation.

1. It reminds us of God's incredible love.
2. It reminds us that we are called to live as God's people, His Kingdom ambassadors, reflecting His love and grace through our lives.

How do these great truths change your life? How can you live them today?

Our prayers this month are from www.faithandworship.com

*May this be a day of hope, of expectation,
of relishing each moment as a gift from you.
May this be a day of freedom, of breaking free,
of loosening the chains that still surround us.
May this be a day of peace, of wholeness,
of knowing that our lives are in your hands.
May this be a day of joy, of blessing,
of living in your kingdom as a child of God.
Amen*

Tuesday, July 2: 1 John 1:5-10, 1 John 5:1-12

We begin Revelation reminding ourselves of the glorious good news of new life in Jesus from one of John's other writings, his letter we call 1 John.

What do you learn in 1 John 1:5-10?

What do you learn in 1 John 5:1-12?

There is great news here about the new life we have in Jesus. It's good for us to keep these fundamental truths in mind as we begin to read Revelation, which has so much symbolism and "less obvious" truth in it.

People reading Revelation often approach it with different assumptions:

- Some people interpret the book as all yet to be fulfilled: it is almost entirely about events immediately preceding and following Jesus' **future** return. Certainly there are yet-to-be-fulfilled events (like Jesus' return), but this view means Revelation had nothing to say to the Christians to whom it was written, suffering intense persecution. It can lead us to try reading all the events from today's news into Revelation – people have been doing this for centuries and always been wrong.
- Some people interpret the book as almost all about the sufferings of the church in John's day. While, yes, Jesus' return is certainly yet to happen, these Christians would argue the other events described in Revelation all occurred in the first couple of centuries, when the church was intensely persecuted. This view can suggest Revelation has little to say to us today. Surely Revelation has meaning for us, too.
- Some would interpret Revelation as an unfolding history book, recording – in symbolic ways – the history of the church from the 1st Century to the present day. The problem is, we really don't know where we are on the timeline. Thankfully Revelation does have much to say to us today.
- Some people see the book as symbolic – the images, vision, and beasts are symbolic and had meaning in the 1st Century, but also have meaning in 21st Century, but do not refer to actual historic events. In truth, Revelation **is** far more symbolic than many of us understand since we don't know the imagery.

We will try to read Revelation on its own terms, trying to understand each passage as John records it for us. But as we begin, it's helpful to see the big picture tapestry that Revelation will reveal to us (so we don't get obsessed with little individual symbols or events and miss the real point God is making):

1. Our God is an awesome God. He is sovereign: in all things God is ultimately the King
2. Jesus' sacrificial death brings complete salvation to all who believe.
3. God's judgment on sin is real. No matter how things appear now, ultimately sin does not go unpunished. God will judge in righteousness.
4. God's people are called to be faithful. We can expect persecution. But it will be worth it.
5. God's plan and God's hope is for all people, from every nation.
6. We have hope. We look forward with confidence to Jesus' return and a new heaven and a new earth. What awaits us far exceeds our present struggles.

Keep this big picture perspective in mind as we work through Revelation. We will try not to get too sidetracked on any one interpretation, but to focus on the big themes God is teaching us through the book. Keep the truths in 1 John in mind, too, as we move forward ...

*Guiding God,
be with us in our going out
and coming home,
in our journeying and returning,
in our decision making and organising.
Guarding God,
be with us through the calm
and through the storm,
be our comfort when we're hurting,
be our helper when we're falling.
Gracious God,
walk with us every moment of this new day.
Amen.*

Wednesday, July 3: Revelation 1:1-8

The movie theatre goes dark. Very dark. And quiet. Eerily quiet. On the screen is a slide telling you to put on your 3D glasses. Suddenly BOOM. Dramatic music and banging sound-effects. Brilliant images and dramatic action. The story has begun. The excitement is electric. You are swept up in the action.

Without your 3D glasses, the image is blurry. You can make it out – sort of. But it hurts to try. With the glasses, everything is clear.

Revelation is like this. John is telling us to put on our 3D glasses, sit back, and get caught up in the grand narrative of what God is doing in the universe.



As we begin,

1. Notice whose *"apocalupsis"/revelation/revealing* this is ... God reveals **His** truth to Jesus, who gives it to an angel,¹ who passes it on to His servant John, who communicates it to specific churches ... and us. This is God revealing **His** truth. It is a witness/testimony to **God's** truth (1:1-2).
2. It is a blessing to read this book (I hope you still think so in a few days) (1:3). This doesn't necessarily mean it will be easy or fun, but you will be blessed by working through it.
3. *"The time is near"* (1:3). This has led all sorts of teachers/writers/speculators to get excited ... but remember the first readers of this read these words almost 2000 years ago. We honestly have NO idea what the timeline might be unless we are smarter than Jesus (Matthew 24:36-44). We always need to be ready and be about the business of actively living out His grace and peace (Matthew 25).
4. It is addressed to seven churches in Asia.² We do need to keep in mind that this is an extended letter to specific Christian churches in a specific place and time, facing intense persecution (1:4).
5. Everything is about Jesus. He is the central figure in the whole cosmic drama that is being revealed.

This is Jesus – not as we have met Him in the gospels, dusty and tired, hungry and sad, beaten and bruised, crucified on a Roman cross – this is the risen Jesus in all His glory. He is:

- the faithful witness to these things
- the first to rise from the dead,
- the ruler of all the kings of the world,
- the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end,³
- the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come – the Almighty One.

John gives us a foretaste of his vision of Jesus' return: *"He comes with the clouds of heaven. And everyone will see him – even those who pierced him. And all the nations of the world will mourn because of him"* (1:7)

On the one hand we should be blown away by the majesty and glory of Father-Son-Spirit revealed here for us. On the other hand, John wants us to remember God's amazing grace and peace to us:

- He loves us
- He has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us.
- He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father. Priests offer up prayers on behalf of people to God. But priests also bring God's grace and peace to people. As God's priests we pray for others ... but, in Jesus' name, we also love them in practical ways. How can we do that today?

¹ The Greek word we translate as "angel" is literally the word "messenger."

² The Roman province of Asia is what we now know as Turkey. The seven churches are identified in Revelation 2-3. There were many more than seven churches in all of Asia, but seven is a symbolic number meaning God's perfection (thus the sevenfold Spirit of God [see Isaiah 11:2], seven lampstands, seven stars, seven angels [Revelation 1:12-20, 3:1], seven eyes of the Lamb [Revelation 5:6]). These seven churches represent all of Jesus' churches, in all places and at all times (even Lethbridge in 2019).

³ Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet: Jesus is the A-Z – the sum total of everything.

*I do not fear this day,
for you are with me
wherever I might go,
your light to shine ahead,
your footsteps to lead the way.
I do not fear this day,
for your word will be my guide,
your strength will sustain me,
your love revive me,
this day and all days.
I do not fear this day,
for you are with me.
Amen.*

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Thursday, July 4: Revelation 1:9-20

If I were to simply say the name "Jesus" what picture comes to mind? If you were to visualize Jesus, what would He look like? Hold that image in your mind ...

Now read John's vision: *"I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast ... When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance" (1:10-16).* Did your first-impression mental picture of Jesus look anything like that? This is no *"gentle Jesus, meek and mild"* – this is the King of Kings in all His glory.

As we begin Revelation, John wants us to remember this book is all about Jesus. Read John's description of Jesus a few times. Try to picture Him in your mind. What is your response?

John's response was: *"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead" (1:17).* Not surprising.

But notice how Jesus responds to John: *"he laid his right hand on me and said, 'Don't be afraid.'" (1:17).*

Describing John's world in the 1st century, Tom Wright comments, *"Yes, the times are strange and hard, with harsh and severe rulers running the world and imposing their will on city after city. But the seven churches – seven is the number of perfection, and the churches listed in verse 11 thus stand for all churches in the world, all places and all times – need to know that Jesus himself is standing in their midst and that the 'angels' who represent and look after each of them are held in his right hand. And the Jesus in question has, as his credentials, the fact that he 'was dead' and is 'alive for ever' (verse 18). Like someone whispering to us that they know the secret way out of the dungeon where we have been imprisoned, he says, 'I've got the keys. The keys of death and Hades – I have them right here. There's nothing more you need to worry about.'"⁴*

Jesus is mind-blowing. He is the King of Kings. He is co-Creator of the universe. If we were to pull back the curtain and see Him as He is we would fall to the floor in worship alongside John. But He is also the One who says, *"Don't be afraid."* He is our good shepherd. He is our loving Saviour. He is our comforter. He is the One who helps us understand what is going on now ... and what will happen in the future (1:19).

John's suffering (his exile) gave him the time and the freedom to spend more time with Jesus – and have this amazing vision. God can bring something good out of any circumstance. Like Paul, in prison in Rome (from which he wrote several letters), John is able to experience God in new ways in his pain. Wherever you are at in life, spend some time with Jesus, today. Ask Him to speak to you. What is He saying?

⁴ Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, p. 8-9.

*Light of light, Lord of Lords,
God of this world and the next,
We give you thanks
for the promise of this day,
We give you thanks
for the challenge of this day,
We give you thanks
for the blessings of this day.
Light of light, Lord of Lords,
God of this world and the next,
We give you thanks
Amen.*

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Friday, July 5: Revelation 2:1-7

Jesus gives specific messages to each of the seven churches represented by the golden lampstands and shining stars in Revelation 1. Each message does speak directly to issues in each specofoc church in the 1st Century. However the principles Jesus communicates are timeless. They are just as relevant today as they were 20 centuries ago (not surprising since Jesus is "*the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come*"(1:8) – He never changes. Today we read his letter to Ephesus (to whom Paul wrote a letter we call Ephesians).

In Ephesians 6:10-17, Paul had written, "*Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*" They are doing very well. They are commended for these things.

What is Jesus message in 2:4-5? What is their "first love"? Of course we are to love Jesus. But we are also called to love one another. The two are inseparable.

- We love Jesus because he first loved us;
- We love one another as Jesus loved the church – sacrificially, unconditionally, at all times: "*Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God*"(Ephesians 5:1-2).

Jesus always holds these in tension. When tested to give the greatest commandment, He says: "*You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.*' *This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself*"(Matthew 22:37-39).

Have you known Christians or churches who work very hard, hold fast to truth, endure dreadful suffering – and yet are unloving? Hard? Judgmental? Legalistic? Hurtful? Angry? Gossipy? Cut themselves off?

Have you known Christians or churches who work very hard, hold to the truth, have gone through hard times – and yet are loving? Joyful? At peace? Patient? Kind? Good? Faithful? Gentle? Self-controlled?

This is the ideal to which God is calling us. We are called to love Jesus – passionately – but also to love our neighbour – just as passionately. "Integral mission" – the concept that people need to know God personally AND have their practical needs met is a key concept in God's call to us. We live the gospel in word and deed.

Pray that God will help you find ways to serve Him, keep the faith, endure tough times, and yet be a loving, joyful, peaceful (and peace-making), patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled person ...

*Yours, Lord is the Glory, in everything I see,
a country scene, mountain stream,
sunrise, sunset, rain and snow.
Yours, Lord is the Glory, wherever I might go.
Yours, Lord is the Glory, in everything I hear,
a roaring sea, bumblebee,
laughter, loving, a tender poem.
Yours, Lord is the Glory, wherever I might go.
Yours, Lord is the Glory, in everything I feel,
a special place, warm embrace,
accepted, helped to become whole.
Amen.*

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Saturday, July 6: Revelation 2:8-11

The second church God addresses in Revelation 2, is in Smyrna (Izmir, today). Smyrna rivaled Ephesus as the major commercial city in Asia. It was unrivalled in natural beauty. It was also unrivalled in its loyalty to Rome. Early in the first century, as Christianity was spreading, Roman emperors insisted that they be worshipped as gods. Every loyal subject was to offer incense to the emperor's image, saying, "*Caesar is my Lord.*" Christians refused; Jesus was their Lord. In ultra-loyal Smyrna, that refusal had serious consequences. Christians suffered. But they kept living their faith and looked outward in vision despite the consequences.

To incite Roman persecution, the Jewish leaders in Smyrna accused Christians of atrocities and disloyalty. Verse 10 refers to people waiting to die in the arena ... by gladiators, wild animals, burning, or worse. Within a few years of this letter, the aged Christian bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, would be arrested on the charge of being a Christian. Amidst an angry mob, the Roman proconsul took pity on him and urged him to proclaim, "*Caesar is my Lord.*" If Polycarp would make this declaration and offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue he would escape torture and death. To this Polycarp responded, "*Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?*" He was burned alive at the stake – some Jews even broke the Sabbath rules to gather fuel to burn him. Smyrna was a tough town.

Although Smyrna was one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world, Christians suffered dire poverty. Poverty went hand in hand with their faith. Many Christians were slaves (poor by definition); some of their homes may have been ransacked (Hebrews 10:32-34); they may have given self-sacrificially to help others; Christ's followers may have missed opportunities to get ahead as they refused to take part in worshipping the emperor.

Those of us who follow Jesus as our Lord may find ourselves in difficult situations, too. As long as we are lukewarm in our faith we can probably find enough ethical wiggle-room to thrive. But if we really commit to live for Jesus and to live like Jesus, by His ethics and values – and if we speak up and share the good news Jesus has brought in our lives – we can expect some challenges. Let's be honest. Being a Christian can be tough.

It still may not pay – in finances, prestige, or status – to follow Jesus: we are called to balanced lives, giving time to our families and to God (a quality of life emphasizing the importance of relationships and non-material things); we are called to standards of honesty and integrity that may cause us to miss some easy profits and forego some business opportunities. We give thank offerings to God to build the Kingdom of God and help others. God honors those who give the first fruits of their labor with a thankful heart.

God's message to His church is that those of us who live our faith, with integrity and generous hearts, are not poor at all. We are the richest people on earth. Our wealth may not be a bursting bank account, but the life, love, joy, peace, and contentment Jesus brings. Our riches are relationships with God and other people.

HOWEVER, Jesus emphasizes, "*Don't be afraid ... be faithful ...*"

- Be encouraged. God is in control. Bad things happen, but within limits (v.10). He who is in us is greater than he (Satan) who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

- Be encouraged. He is all-knowing. He reminds us, "I know your afflictions" (v.9). He meet us in the specific circumstances of each of our lives, bringing just the right help, healing, and hope ...
- Be encouraged. He is purposeful. When Paul writes, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him," he is NOT saying God causes all things, but God can bring blessing out of all circumstances (Romans 8:28).
- Be encouraged. He is generous. God's riches are different from ours. It is very possible to be poor in material things and yet be rich in terms of what matters most in life (relationship with God, relationships with other people). There are poor rich people and rich poor people.

How will we run the race of faith? Smyrna was famous for its games and athletes – it was the "City of Champions" in Asia - a "crown" or laurel wreath was awarded to victors (v. 10).

- How will we run the long, hard race of life? What distractions could take our eyes off God?
- How will we finish the long, hard race of life? Will we "hit the wall" and give up? Will we try to take the treasures we have stored up with us? Or will we keep our eyes on Jesus? Will we finish well?

*Creator God, we glimpse your beauty
in setting sun, mountain top, eagle's wing.
We sense your power in thunder crash,
lightning flash and ocean's roar.
Creator God we praise you.*

*Precious Jesus, we see your love
stretched out upon a cruel cross.
We stand in awe at your sacrifice,
pure love poured out for humankind.
Precious Jesus we praise you.*

*Holy Spirit, we see your power
in lives transformed, hearts on fire.
We listen for your still, small voice,
comforting, guiding, calling.
Holy Spirit we praise you.
Amen.*

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Sunday, July 7: Revelation 2:12-17

The first mark of a person who follows Christ - and of a church – is **love** (2:1-7). Love can result in **suffering** (as in Smyrna, 2:8-11), because the church stands for **truth** (2:12-17). In Pergamum the issue is truth.

Pergamum was the political capital of Roman Asia, famous for its spectacular altar of Zeus, its temples to Asclepius (the god of healing), Athena (goddess of civilization and war), Dionysius (god of wine and parties), and Roman emperors (as in Smyrna, loyal subjects had to offer incense to the emperor's statue and say, "Caesar is my Lord"). Good Pergamites, who wanted to be part of society and to develop their social-economic networks, would participate in banquets and sacrifices associated with the various temples and guilds.

With all the temples and religious phoo-phaera ("Where Satan has his throne ...") Christians remained faithful. Wonderful. Jesus is the way, truth, and life. John Stott writes, "To be a Christian is to accept Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. The irreducible minimum of Christian belief is that Jesus is the unique God/man who died for our sins and was raised from death to be the Saviour of the world" (What Christ Thinks of the Church, p. 46).

Stott continues, "We may not (in fact we do not) fully **understand** these truths about the person and work of Jesus Christ, but Christians **believe** them and **act on** them. Conviction leads to commitment. If Jesus is the divine Saviour, we must trust him as our Saviour." We live the truth. Even when it is difficult. More than just believing the right things about Jesus, believers in Pergamum were willing to live their faith, trusting Jesus with their lives (even to the point of martyrdom, in the case of a man named Antipas). True belief is more than just

accepting the right facts; true belief involves acting, in faith, on those facts: trusting, risking, obeying ...⁵

Does truth matter? Absolutely. Our calling is to know the truth – Jesus – and to live it. Does it matter how we live? Absolutely. We are called to think critically about our culture; to think deeply about our faith; and to make wise, thoughtful choices based on what we know is true and right. We are called to live as Jesus would live if He were living our lives. We are called to know the truth, live the truth: and the truth will set us free ...

*Creator of all things, Alpha and Omega,
Beginning and End, Father, Shepherd, Servant,
Brother, Priest and King.
Whose love poured out mends broken hearts.
Whose wounded hands reach out to all.
Whose Spirit waits to enter in.
You are the everything that we desire.
Be with us now.
Bless us that we might be a blessing to others.
Amen.*

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Monday, July 8: : Revelation 2:18-29

Think about a parent with a strong-willed child whom she loves dearly. Does she say, "*Whatever you want you deserve; that store owner should have let you walk out with the pop without paying for it ... Whatever you want to do is great: if you choose to play in the traffic or put your sister's finger in the outlet ... wonderful. I love you so much I will accept and affirm anything you choose to do*"? No. A loving parent provides guidance and instruction: about traffic, loving other people, and ethics. True love balances care and truth, compassion and discipline, welcome and correction, because some choices – that may seem wonderful – are, in fact, bad.

God does love us unconditionally – long before we loved Him, Jesus died for us. But does God's unconditional love mean He unconditionally approves of all of our decisions and behaviors? No. That would not be love. God's love, like any good parent's love, provides guidance and instruction, compassion and discipline, welcome and correction. God's love is all about welcoming unconditionally ... but it is not about affirming unconditionally. True love – as God shows it to us – never leaves a loved one unaware of the truth or unhealthy choices. Genuine love seeks to help people find truth, to lead them to true wholeness and health, and to realize all their possibility and perfection in Christ. Real love requires loving discipline (see Hebrews 12:1-13).

In Thyatira, God's praise doesn't get much better than this: "*I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance...*" Thyatira rivaled Ephesus in service and hard work, **but they kept their love, too**. They patiently endured suffering, like the Christians at Smyrna. They kept the truth that was in danger of being compromised at Pergamum. This is a growing church: "*You are now doing more than you did at first.*" But there is a cancer in Thyatira: they tolerate this woman, Jezebel (an Old Testament reference, not her real name), teaching people to live in ways that were not the truth. Thyatira had love: people could come with diverse backgrounds, issues, problems, challenges and be welcome. Praise God. But people were so welcome, they could teach and do whatever they wanted, too. Love was a carte blanche for anything goes ...

Paul encourages us to grow up. Jesus "*gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and **become***

⁵ And yet there was problem: this reference to Balaam and Nicolaitans (all referring to one issue). To Ephesus, God said, "*You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*" – great. But in Pergamum, they were welcome. Balaam was a prophet who sold his gifts of prophecy to King Balak of Moab to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22-25). God prevented Balaam from cursing Israel (his curses turned to blessings). Balaam came up with another scheme: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. He encouraged the Moabite girls to seduce the Israelite men with feasts and sexual favors. As a result, he reasoned, the Israelites would abandon the true God, following their stomachs and lusts to destruction. He was right. The Israelites were lured away from God, slipped comfortably into worshiping the Moabite gods and living the amoral lifestyle that went with it. 24,000 died. Apparently in Pergamum, some teachers were undermining the church in the same way. In their celebration of Christian love and freedom, anything went. "Freedom" in Christ meant you could follow your lusts wherever they took you (including temple prostitution and who knows what else) ... When you follow that path, you inevitably wander away from God.

mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things **grow up** into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." (speaking to the Ephesians, in Ephesians 4:11-15)

As we grow in our knowledge and experience of Jesus, we learn more and more how to walk the tightrope, finding the balance between truth and love. How do I need to grow up, spiritually? How do I unconditionally welcome everyone ... but don't unconditionally affirm every choice or decision? How can I love as Jesus loved?

*God of majesty and power,
Who spoke and this world was,
Who breathed and this world lived,
Who counts the hairs upon our head,
Who sees our thoughts and reads our hearts,
Who loves us more than we deserve,
How can we not bring today,
Our sacrifice of praise?
For in the child at Bethlehem
Lies the promise of intimacy
With a Saviour who would die even for me,
And the promise of an eternity
In which to praise you more each day.
God of promise we praise your name,
Amen*

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Tuesday, July 9: Revelation 3:1-6

Sardis, considered by the Greeks to be one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, was the capital of the province (once the Kingdom) of Lydia. Sheer cliffs rise from the farmland below to a citadel above the plain. The Greek writer, Lucian, quipped that *"to capture the acropolis of Sardis"* was a metaphor for *"doing the impossible."* Sardis was famous in Greek legend as the place where King Midas washed off his Golden Touch, creating golden sands and fantastic wealth (gold was mined around the city). Later, King Gyges of Sardis minted the world's first coins. Sardis' glory had faded by the time Revelation was written, but the city still claimed to be the greatest city in the world, not to be outdone by young upstarts – like Rome.

Legend speaks of King Croesus of Sardis, who, eager to expand his kingdom, enquired of the Oracle of Delphi about war with Persia. The Oracle told Croesus that if he attacked Persia he would destroy a great empire. Croesus went to war. After a few indecisive battles, Croesus fell back to Sardis for winter. The Persians, unexpectedly, pursued him. Croesus had spent vast sums of money reinforcing the fortress so he wasn't concerned. But on the fourteenth day of the siege the fortress fell. A Persian soldier had climbed to a point, *"where no guard was stationed, for there was no fear that it would ever be captured at that place, for the acropolis is sheer and impregnable there"* (Herodotus). A great empire had been destroyed: King Croesus' own kingdom. Greek philosophers drew clear moral lessons from Sardis: pride comes before a fall; all the money in the world can't buy true security; true strength only comes by constant vigilance.

The church was a reflection of the city. The glory of the church in Sardis was its past: *"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive ..."* The church, like the city, looked alive and well. But there was a distinction between what people saw and what God saw: *"... but you are dead."* *"The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart"* (1 Samuel 16:7).

In Sardis, the fine looking, impressive church was vulnerable to attack. Not an open assault, but subtle, insidious sneak attacks. The people had been walking in white clothes ... but their clothes were getting dirty. They had not done anything obviously filthy (like the previous cities' compromises with idol worship, immorality, and "Jezebel"), but they had wandered into enough moral mud puddles that their white robes had become grey. They needed to *"wash their clothes"* – to clean up their act. They needed to examine themselves, ask God to show them their sin, confess it, and repent ... or sneaky enemies would destroy them. Spiritual pride can come

before a fall, too. Trusting in all the great things you have done in the past is not enough.

Sardis may be the first church of “nominal” Christians in history. They were Christians in name, not in heart.

Spirituality becomes just hollow, empty religion when it’s merely reputation without reality, form without power, and outward appearance without inward integrity. The word Jesus uses to describe good, religious people like this is “hupokrites” – a Greek word literally meaning “play-actor.” In Greek theatre, an actor would wear a mask to portray a role, character, or virtue; but it was just a role. “Hypocrisy,” at its root, simply means playing a role, wearing a mask, looking like something you’re not. Does that ever happen in church?

So what do we do? Take an honest look at ourselves. Who are you really? Forget the masks, roles, images you may show to other people – who are you, really, before God? Check your spiritual pulse: do you genuinely love God? Do you think about Him? Pray to Him? Spend time with Him?

God is saying to Sardis – and to us – if we really want to move forward in faith and outward in vision – if we want to live for God and make a difference in our community – then we need to be honest and authentic. We need to be honest about our struggles. We need to be truthful about our sins, confess them, and repent. In humility, we need to ask God to guide us, fill us, and empower us.

When Jesus says, “*Wake up ... strengthen what remains,*” He is inviting us to allow His Spirit to change us, to transform us from the inside out. We all possess God’s Spirit. The question is, does God’s Spirit possess us?

*Rejoice in the Lord always. Shout out his name.
For God is with us, our God is with us,
The God of our salvation, in whom alone we trust.*

*Rejoice in the Lord always. Shout out his name.
For God is our Father, He draws us home,
By streams of living water where we shall thirst no more.*

*Rejoice in the Lord always. Shout out his name.
He knows our thoughts, understands our hearts,
And enables us to become the people we were meant to be.
Amen*

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Wednesday, July 10: Revelation 3:7-13

Philadelphia (modern Alashehir, Turkey) was a military outpost. The city is strategically located at a crossroads from which you can travel north, south, east, or west. The church:

- had “*little strength*” (it was not wealthy, large or well respected like Sardis or Laodicea);
- faced strong opposition within the city from the Jewish community (3:9);
- feared impending future persecution: Nero and others? Jewish zealots? (3:10).

How could the church possibly survive? What hope was there? What future could this struggling little group of believers really have? What difference could Jesus make in their lives?

Some of us may feel like “second class Christians.” In our minds we perceive elite Christians – evangelists, missionaries, and the like – who are more “spiritual” than the rest of us (the Philadelphians probably looked to the wealthy Sardis and Laodicean churches that way). We have this mental construct – fed by religious television and the internet – that being a spiritual person means living on some “super spiritual” plane where we float through life oblivious and impervious to all problems and issues that assail lesser mortals (from illnesses to mortgages). These “victorious” people don’t seem to live the same kind of life I live.

Being a spiritual person – someone whose heart is focused on God – is not a big mystery. It is simply another way of saying “*following Jesus.*” It’s what Christians have been doing for two thousand years by going to church, worshipping God, learning to pray, reading Scriptures, sharing with one another, talking over coffee,

visiting, and telling their story. Note the key qualities of the hearts of the Christians in Philadelphia: they

- serve God (*"I know your deeds"* – note the text does not say "incredible" or "astounding" deeds, rather just "deeds" – faithful consistent stuff like fellowshiping and worshipping together, caring for the needy, visiting the sick, sharing the good news ...);
- are faithful (*"you have kept my word and not denied my name"*);
- struggle, yet persevere (*"You have kept my command to endure patiently"*).

These folks weren't "super saints" doing incredible things; they had no great spiritual secrets; they were definitely not healthy, wealthy or happy. They were just faithful people who loved God day-in-day-out, patiently enduring, faithfully serving, consistently affirming their faith. What pleases God? Their faithfulness, perseverance, and plain hard work. So God says, *"I'm setting before you an open door ..."* These are people through whom **Jesus** can do great things. They do NOT have the strength, money, or skills to do anything (on their own) for Jesus. But Jesus can do great things **through** them.

God doesn't require us to be "super saints" either; His desire for us is that we be faithful people who love Him day-in-day-out, patiently enduring, faithfully serving, consistently affirming our faith. God says, *"I'm setting before you an open door ..."* – the opportunity to live out and share our faith in our neighbourhood and around the world. We may look at ourselves and say we do not have the strength, budget, or skills to do much (on our own). That's the point. The issue is NOT what **we** can do for Jesus, but what **Jesus** can do **through** us.

Jesus' commands are: keep the faith (*"hold on to what you have"*) and share the faith (go through that open door). Our challenge is to pray boldly and step forward confidently. What challenge is God putting before you?

- A life decision: Career? Move? Relationship? Pray boldly, knowing God is present and powerful in your life; He knows what's best and can make it happen (but you have to be humble and obedient to accept His answer). Then go forward confidently.
- A lifestyle decision: things you know you need to change? New disciplines you need to adopt? Pray boldly, knowing God is present and powerful in your life; He can help you make those changes you need to make. Move forward confidently.
- A faith decision: To begin to pray? To believe in Jesus? To be baptized? Pray boldly, knowing God is present and powerful in your life; He will always be with you, guide you, and provide for you. Then step forward confidently.

*God whose love reaches to the highest heavens,
how can we keep silent?
God whose righteousness stands like the tallest mountain,
how can we keep silent?
God whose justice is deeper than any ocean,
how can we keep silent?
God whose grace flows like a never-ending river,
how can we keep silent?
How can we not proclaim your majesty
from generation to generation?
How can we not raise the lamp of your salvation
for all the world to see?
God whose love reaches to the highest heavens,
we praise your mighty name.
Amen.*

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Thursday, July 11: Revelation 3:14-22

The most expensive natural disaster in Canadian history was the southern Alberta flood of 2013: over \$5 billion damage. Because most of the damage was "overland flow," insurance didn't cover much. Thankfully the government stepped into help people who lost everything. We all – as Alberta taxpayers – pitched in. As we should as a community ... especially as Christians in community.

In AD 61 a devastating earthquake hit Asia. The Roman treasury offered to help: most cities gladly accepted Imperial aid. But Laodicea refused. They could manage on their own, thank you very much. Proud and rich, the Laodiceans wanted to show off their independence and felt they could afford – literally – to snub Rome.

Christians in Laodicea seemed to have the same fiercely independent attitude – they could snub God. In fact, they could leave Him (literally) out in the cold. Jesus has a pretty blunt message to the church in Laodicea.

- What might it mean for a church be lukewarm – neither hot nor cold? What might it mean for an individual Christian to be lukewarm? Where is Jesus in a lukewarm church? A lukewarm life?
- What might it mean for a church (or an individual) to say *"I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing"* ... and be wrong?
- Jesus says, *"I advise you to buy gold from me – gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich. Also buy white garments from me so you will not be shamed by your nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so you will be able to see."* What do you think He might mean?

Jesus' challenge is this: *"I correct and discipline everyone I love. So be diligent and turn from your indifference."* We don't like to think we need to hear that message, but we all make mistakes. We all have moments of indifference. What might Jesus be saying to you?

Jesus' good news is this: *"Look. I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends."* Isn't that incredible. Notice – Jesus is **NOT** saying this to non-Christians (how we normally interpret this). He is saying this to **the church** – to **us**. In the gospels there are several parables where Jesus is described as the Master, unexpectedly coming home: are His servants ready? He is the bridegroom coming: are the people awake, with oil in their lamps? He is knocking ...

Jesus' comments to Laodicea are particularly poignant given the geography of the area:

- Colossae, 18 kms from Laodicea, is at the foot of 2500 m (8000 ft) mountains (similar elevation to the mountains in Waterton National Park). The water that flows from Colossae to Laodicea is from clear, cold, mountain springs. Today we'd be bottling it and selling it at exorbitant prices.
- Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13), Pamukkale, 12 kms in the other direction, has world famous hot springs. The water that flows from Pamukkale to Laodicea is warm, sulphur-smelling, and impossible to drink (imagine drinking the warm, sulphur water from the hot springs in Banff, Radium, or Jasper).

These two water sources – cold, clear mountain water and hot, foul-tasting water – mix in the Lycus River at Laodicea. The water in the river below Laodicea is literally lukewarm ... and tastes awful. It's undrinkable.

What is Jesus saying to you? He wants to come in and have a party – a feast – with us (of course, this is a reference to communion, but it is also a foretaste of the great banquet that is to come (Revelation 19:9)). He wants to share His throne with you (3:21) – we cannot comprehend what this, but it sounds pretty awesome.

Jesus really wants to share life with you. To guide you. To encourage you. To teach you. Will you let Him in?

*Awesome One, creator of all,
the light of your glory fills the heavens,
the breath of your Spirit blows through the skies,
stars above stand silent witness to the power of our God.
By your word all things were made.
By your breath are all things sustained.
By your hand we were moulded as a potter caresses the clay,
formed from earthly dust into an image of the divine.
By your Grace we stand here,
your creation worshiping its creator
with this our sacrifice of praise.
Amen.*

Friday, July 12: Revelation 4:1-6

Jesus wants the Laodiceans to open the door and let Him in ... so we can have a wonderful time together (*"I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends"*(3:20)). As John begins his vision, he sees an open door, leading into a heavenly temple, a throne room, God's presence. We are joining John as God invites him into the throne room of heaven.

John's readers were all too familiar with temples and "throne rooms." The Roman Emperors were building temples all over the place with huge images of themselves seated on thrones inside. People were expected – required – to go into these awe-inspiring edifices and worship Caesar. John is helping them (and us) appreciate that earthly powers – be it Roman temples, the Houses of Parliament, or the Capitol – are crude parodies of the real power beyond the universe – the Creator God, the King, the Almighty. For John's contemporaries, suffering vicious persecution by Caesar, it was good to be reminded that what we see and experience on earth is not all there is. Ultimately, God – the real God – is very much in control.

John's readers, also familiar with the Old Testament, would have recognized that John is writing in the great prophetic tradition of Isaiah or Ezekiel who found themselves in God's very real, overwhelming, indescribable presence. John will try to describe what he sees, but it is so far beyond words he struggles to find vocabulary that is any way adequate to what is going on here. Words like "awesome," or "amazing" simply fall short.

John uses a myriad of imagery and symbols that have rich biblical meaning:

- An emerald glow circled his throne like a rainbow – evoking God's promise of mercy to Noah (Genesis 9)
- There are 24 elders – representing all believers (people have tried to account for the number 24 – but without real success. 12 is a significant number (12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles of the church). 2 x 12 may simply refer to the whole church – Christian community who believe in Jesus – Jewish and Gentile.
- They are dressed in white – symbolizing purity.
- They wear crowns – crowns were also the reward for victors in athletic competitions. They are symbolic of believers who persevere to the end (see the end of each of the letters to the seven churches).
- There is thunder and lightning – symbolizing God's glory and power (Exodus 19:16, 20:18).
- Solomon's temple had a "bronze sea" – a bowl for the priests to wash in (1 Kings 7:23-44) – to show God ruled the entire cosmos, land and sea. The "sea" gives a sense of the incredible glory of the heavenly throne room and God's all-encompassing power (Ezekiel 1:24, Psalm 104:3, 148:4).

It is good now and then to be absolutely awestruck by God. These days we do well at encouraging people to approach God as a loving Saviour, as our divine Friend, and as our Comforter – all good and wonderful things. But it also good now and then to remember who this loving, personal, forgiving, caring, compassionate God also is: the Almighty King of Glory. When we face tough times, this is the God who is with us and is for us. *"Nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow – not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below – indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38-39). That is GREAT news.

*Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come.
Darkness covers the earth and its people,
but the radiance of God's Light burns away its shadows,
illuminates the smallest corner,
and heralds in the start of a new dawn,
where hearts no longer fear,
souls might be set free,
and sister shall follow brother,
nation shall follow nation,
and kings and princes bow down in awe
before the one who comes to reign.
Arise, shine, for the Light of the World has come.
Alleluia. Amen.*

Saturday, July 13: Revelation 4:1-11

In the old Westminster Catechism, the first question asked is "*What is the chief end of man?*" or what is our fundamental purpose in life? How would answer that? Keep that in mind as we read today's passage ... John is in exile on a remote island. But John can see beyond his limitations. He gets way beyond the scruffy little island of Patmos and is invited into God's Temple/throne room in heaven. What is going on there?

Four creatures representing humanity, wild animals (king of beasts – the lion), domesticated animals (king of which is the ox), birds (king of which is the eagle) are all praising God.⁶ We tend to think of worship as a uniquely human activity, but **ALL** of creation worships Him. Non-human creation does not worship God as we do, of course, but it does worship Him in its own unique ways (see also Psalm 19:1-6, 103, 148, Job 38-42). We are reminded that, although humans are different from any other created being (we are created in the "image of God" (Genesis 1:27)), we are intimately interconnected with the rest of creation. Part of the meaning of the image of God is that we are to be wise steward of all creation (Genesis 2:15). We – and wild animals, domesticated animals, birds, and everything else in all creation – are all beloved and precious to God.

There is another difference between humans and non-human creation, however. Notice the two praise passages. The four living creatures express great praise to God: "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty – the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come*" (4:8). It is a wonderful straightforward song of praise. The 24 **human** elders exclaim, "*You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power because you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased*" (4:11). People are able to express **why** God deserves this worship. The elders can see the broad scope of creation, history, and salvation and, thus, are able to praise God in a profound and rich way, expressing *why* God is worthy of praise.

Let's go back to that question from the Westminster Catechism: "*What is the chief end of man?*" In the Catechism, the answer is, "*Man's chief end – our fundamental purpose – is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*" How does that strike you?

Especially in my younger days, I would have answered that my real purpose is to grow in my faith, serve God in all sorts of ways, read Scripture, talk with people about Jesus, volunteer at the food bank, lead this group and that class, raise money for a mission project, write this study ... These are all good things. Necessary things. But in my busy-ness I can sometimes forget what – WHO – it is really all about. I forget to take time simply to worship God ... I forget to take time to reflect on WHY I worship God ...

Today's reading is a call to simply take time to worship God. God is holy. He is almighty. He existed before creation and will outlast it. And He is the One who delights to love us. Praise Him.

*God of healing, God of wholeness,
we bring our brokenness, our sinfulness,
our fears, and despair,
and lay them at your feet.*

*God of healing, God of wholeness,
we hold out hearts and hands, minds and souls
to feel your touch,
and know the peace only you can bring.*

*God of healing, God of wholeness,
this precious moment in your presence and power
grant us faith and confidence
that here broken lives are made whole.
Amen.*

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⁶ Old Testament imagery and references to compare with this passage: Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1

Sunday, July 14: Revelation 5:1-7

Back in my geography days I ordered some topographic maps from the Ordnance Survey, the British government office responsible for such things. They arrived in a very official looking envelope with large black letters across the top: "**ON HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S SERVICE.**" I wondered if I was worthy to open something from the Queen (well, not really from the Queen, of course, but it kind of felt like it). I actually kept that envelope for years because it made me feel really special.

John is in God's throne room. In God's right hand⁷ was a scroll with seven (the divine number again) seals. The invitation goes out to all of creation: "*Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?*" We are not totally sure what the scroll represents. Perhaps it is the Lamb's Book of Life, containing the names of all of us who believe: who can open it so we can receive God's blessing of life? Perhaps it contains God's plan for salvation and a new heaven and new earth: who can open it so the plan can be put into effect?

But there's a problem. No one, in all of creation, is worthy to open it. Think way back: in Genesis 1 and 2, God created human beings, in His image, to tend and care for His creation. They sinned. God called the people of Israel to be His true humanity, modelling His life and His way for the whole world. They failed. It seems like God's great plan of salvation and redemption is doomed. No one is worthy. John bursts into tears.

But one of the 24 elders says to John, "*Stop weeping. Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory.*"⁸ *He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals.*"

Who does John see when he looks for the **Lion** – the King of Beasts – of Judah? A **lamb**. A slaughtered lamb. A slaughtered lamb standing where God sits, on the throne. This slaughtered lamb is all powerful (the seven horns) and all-seeing/all-knowing (the seven eyes). This, of course, is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who died – sacrificially – for us so that our sin might be forgiven, we might have a renewed relationship with God, we might experience eternal life, and that all of creation might begin to be made new ...

"What John has HEARD is the announcement of the lion. What he then SEES is the lamb. He is to hold what he has heard in his head while gazing at what he now sees; and he is to hold what he is seeing in his head as he reflects on what he has heard. The two seem radically different. The lion is the symbol both of ultimate power and of supreme royalty, while the lamb symbolizes both gentle vulnerability and, through its sacrifice, the ultimate weakness of death. But the two are now to be fused together, completely and forever. From this moment on, John, and we as his careful readers, are to understand that the victory won by the lion is accomplished through the sacrifice of the lamb, and in no other way. But we are also to understand that what has been accomplished by the lamb's sacrifice is not merely the wiping away of sin for a few people here and there. The victory won by the lamb is God's lion-like victory ... over all the forces of corruption and death, over everything that would destroy and obliterate God's good, powerful, and lovely creation" (Tom Wright, 53-4).

Jesus is the lion – what does that mean to you? Jesus is the lamb – what does that mean to you? Jesus, alone, is worthy – what does that mean to you?

*This earth, full of your glory, praises your name
through unspoken words of beauty and peace, reveals your love
through hand of stranger and gift of grace.
This earth, full of your glory, praises your provision
through living water and food to eat, reveals your Word
through daily blessings and breath of life.
This earth, full of your glory, praises your name.
Amen*

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⁷ In ancient cultures, right hands were the symbol of power and authority (Latin – "*dexter*" from which get dextrous, a good thing). Left hands (Latin – "*sinister*" – really, look it up.) were a symbol of lesser power, even of evil.

⁸ "*Lion of Judah*" is a description of the anticipated Messiah (Genesis 49:9-10, 4 Ezra 12:31-21 (this is in the Apocrypha, which we are unfamiliar with, but John's readers would have known very well)). "*Root of David*" is another Old Testament description of the Messiah, appointed to rule all nations with God's power and peace (Isaiah 11:1-10; Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15; Zechariah 3:8, 6:12).

Monday, July 15: Revelation 5:6-14

Think of it as dinner theatre. I have only been to a dinner theatre once, but it was a brilliant experience. As dinner ended, the room went black. A flute began to play quietly. The lights came up a bit – you were dimly aware of shadowy figures. Other instruments joined in. The lights got brighter; the scene got clearer. The music became fuller and louder. And you suddenly realized there was no stage – you were the stage. The entire play took place in and around the tables. Actors would interact with guests, asking questions, and improvising by working with our answers. We were part of the plot, the script, and the story ... Of course some people were a bit uncomfortable with that, but I thought it was fantastic.

In John's vision, the 24 elders – representing all of us, God's people – are on stage ... falling down in worship ... and ...? Holding harps and presenting bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints. We are on the stage, too. Our prayers – our anemic, stuttering prayers – are here in Jesus'/God's presence. And our worship, represented by the harps – off-key and faltering – is here in Jesus'/God's presence. In all our weakness and imperfection, **we** are on stage with the Lamb of God; we're part of the divine drama. No more sitting in the stands as spectators. We are "in the game" of life, serving God in His Kingdom, whether we want to be or not.

The elders – with us there through our worship and prayers – sing three new songs:

In the first song, the 24 elders (and us) celebrate we are saved by the lamb's (Jesus') sacrificial death. Why? So we might be "a kingdom and priests to serve God ..." (5:10). We are saved – for a purpose. To reflect and share God's love and grace with all people. To model a new Kingdom way of living. To praise and glorify God.

The second song – in which thousands upon thousands, ten thousand times ten thousand, angels join – moves from what the lamb has **done** (saved us and established us as His new Kingdom), to what the lamb **deserves** – all the honour and glory and praise in the universe. Note: all power, wealth, wisdom, and strength belong to **Him**, not us. Jesus is not just the source of our comfort and hope – He is the One to whom all our money, time, energy, wisdom, education, position, employment, health – truly belong. Any good gift we enjoy in life ultimately belongs to Him. We continue to be called as wise stewards – not owners – of all we have.

For the third song, every creature – on land, sea, and air (and under the earth.) – joins in to praise not just the Lamb, but God the Father (the One who sits on the throne) as well. Feeling overwhelmed yet?

Take a moment to catch your breath and step back ... what are we learning about ourselves?

1. We are created to worship and praise God – Father, Son, and Spirit.
2. We are called to be a kingdom and priests serving God ... living His Kingdom values and principles, sharing God's love with others, and lifting up prayers and praises to God for ourselves and others.
3. All we have – every good gift – comes as a blessing from God, to be used to build His Kingdom.

What is God saying to you, today? How do you need to respond?

*Thank you, Lord God, for the opportunity of worship,
for the freedom to be amongst your family
meeting together in your house,
and in the warmth of your embrace.*

*Thank you that in worship we can put aside,
the uncertainties of this world and rest
upon the certainties of the Kingdom,
for your promises are not changeable
as those of a politician might be,
but immovable and eternal.*

*Thank you that we can bring to your feet
all the hurts and fears that trouble us,
and leave them there,
knowing that your strength and assurance
are all that we require.*

*Thank you that as we draw near in worship,
we are transported
from a world of concerns and fears,
to a place where we can be at peace in your presence,
find healing, wholeness and refreshment.
Thank you Lord God for the opportunity of worship.
Amen*

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Tuesday, July 16: Revelation 6:1-8

I am basically illiterate when it comes to classical music. But I like Handel (of *The Messiah* and *Hallelujah Chorus* fame). What I like about Handel is that he often has several different tunes/lyrics going on simultaneously. It's all very confusing and very beautiful at the same time. All the various themes somehow work together in brilliant – but unpredictable – ways. The book of Revelation is a bit like Handel: although we read about the seals (and later trumpets and bowls) in a certain order in text, we may want to think of it as several musical themes all going on at the same time.

Here we come to the (in)famous four horsemen of the apocalypse. It seems jarring after the incredible visions of Jesus and worship in heaven we have just experienced. How do we deal with this?

As a pastor, I have the privilege to work with people who have “issues” in their lives (my kids remind me “Everyone has issues” – even me). What I have discovered over the years is that the problem a person comes in with is important, but we may need to dig a little deeper. The current stress is often the symptom of something further under the surface. Treating symptoms is not enough.

God is helping John see the problems – the real problems – in our world. Only when those are dealt with can we know the real joy, hope, love, and peace God wants us to experience.

To us the horsemen seem very strange. But, again, we have to think like John's readers. They did not expect to see four literal horsemen riding through the streets of Ephesus. There is a lot of symbolism which they would have understood much more clearly than we do because John is using imagery familiar to 1st century people:

1. The white horse, with a rider with a crown and bow, was a familiar caricature of foreign armies (especially the Parthians) – rampaging, pillaging, peace-destroying, war-making invaders.
2. The red horse exposes the false sense of security of the “Roman peace” – the Roman empire was crumbling and warfare (the white horse) and bloodshed were becoming more common (6:4).
3. The black horse brings economic chaos. In times of war and unrest, everyday items shoot up in price while luxury items stay the same: the poor get poorer, the rich get richer.
4. The pale horse represents death – which, of course, accompanies all of the above.

God is exposing the root evils in our world: war, a false sense of “peace” leading to complacency, economic injustice, and death – which happen all too often to people who are far too young in many parts of the world.

- We know we live in a time of war. It is hard to know what we can do about that, except to pray.
- We also know that in Canada, we feel pretty good about ourselves. We feel pretty secure. But are we complacent? Do we just take it for granted? We live in a time when politicians routinely lie to us and free speech is less free ... and we tolerate that as normal. We live in a country where the rich do get richer and the poor are getting poorer ... and we accept that as normal. We live in a country where the “safety net” for those with mental and physical health issues is disappearing ... and we're ok with that. What would it take for us to get passionate about anything to make us stand up for something?

- We are called to be God's Kingdom and His priests in this troubled world ... how do we authentically live for God in these times? How do we speak and live God's truth these days?

*God of Grace, in whom I put my trust,
Be my rescuer when sins ensnare.
The liberator of my soul.
The still small voice that says, 'Be free.'*

*God of Love, in whom I put my trust,
Be my joy and comfort at all times.
The source of all my thoughts and words.
The still small voice that says, 'Rejoice.'*

*God of Peace, in whom I put my trust,
Be my tranquillity in times of turmoil.
The steadying hand in raging seas.
The still small voice that says, 'Be calm.'*

*God of Power, in whom I put my trust,
Be my confidence when faith is challenged.
The sword and armour that protects.
The still small voice that says, 'Be strong.'
Amen.*

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Wednesday, July 17: Revelation 6:9-17

I am not a patient person. I don't want to wait in line at Costco; I don't want to wait for the doctor to get my lab results; I don't want to wait 161 more days till Christmas ...

With so much evil going on the world, why doesn't God just do something about it? Why allow wars in the Middle East? Why allow climate change to continue to cause droughts and hurricanes, wildfires and floods? Why not find an instant cure to HIV/AIDS or Ebola? Why not now? Right now. *"How long before you judge the people who belong to this world and avenge our blood for what they have done to us?"* cry out those who have been killed for their faith in Jesus (6:10). Like many of us, they cry out for justice. They want God to act – now.

But God is patient. Why? For good or for bad, none of us can begin to comprehend the mind of God. Perhaps He is waiting for more people to come to faith in Him? Perhaps this time is an opportunity for us to grow in our faith? Perhaps there is another purpose we cannot comprehend? In every age people have struggled with this.

What we do know from this passage is:

1. Those of us who die, with faith, are safe in God's presence. We don't know much about the present state of believers who die, but here we have a comforting image: they are dressed in white (a symbol of purity and holiness – all their sin is forgiven, cleansed by Jesus), and they are under the altar in God's Temple (at once, both sheltered by the shed blood of the sacrificial lamb, Jesus, and protected by God's grace and love symbolized by the altar itself).
2. There will be cataclysmic events in world history that shake us up and cause us – perhaps – to turn to God. In our own time we can think of tsunamis in Japan and southeast Asia, 9-11, and many more.
3. Ultimately God (the One who sits on the throne) and the Lamb (Jesus) know what is going on. Nothing is hidden from them. He is watching and waiting. And He is not happy: those who are evil try to hide from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb ... they can't.
4. One day, some day, there will be a reckoning. Evil will not go unpunished.

It may seem hard to find encouragement from this passage, but there is great hope here ... Throughout the Bible we are called to be patient, to endure, to fight the good fight, to keep the faith. Ultimately, our future is to be safe and secure in God's presence. Our loved ones are clothed in white, in His holy temple.

One day God will set things right. That is His job, not ours – thankfully. (*"Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the Lord."*(Romans 12:19)). All will be right with the world. That is God's promise. Like the saints in Hebrews 11 we look forward to that time, in faithful confidence in the holiness, justice, and love of God.

*For those weighed down by ill health,
bring wholeness to body, mind and spirit.
For those weighed down by worry,
bring wisdom, peace and reassurance.
For those weighed down by fear,
bring freedom, release and liberation.
For those weighed down by sadness,
bring comfort, strength and joy.
For all whose hearts are troubled
at the start of this new day,
be the voice that they hear,
the warmth that they feel,
the wisdom they seek,
the strength they require,
and the one in whose arms they rest.
Amen*

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Thursday, July 18: Revelation 7:1-8

We're waiting expectantly for the seventh seal ... Those seven seals keep the scroll rolled up – once the seventh seal is broken, we will be able to read it. But God keeps us hanging in suspense.

He is talking about seals here, but not the ones on the scroll. Instead of **breaking** a seal on the scroll, God is **placing** a seal on His faithful people. Remember we are thinking symbolically here: these are not literally 12,000 people from the literal 12 tribes of Israel.⁹ As we shall see in 7:9, these people represent *"a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb."* John **hears** the number 144,000 broken neatly down into tribes; he **sees** a vast crowd (7:9). Just as John hears of a lion and sees a lamb – one and the same person, Jesus – John hears of 144,000 and sees a great multitude – one and the same gathering of God's people. John wants us to celebrate that we are part of a great multitude of people who believe in, love, and are faithful to Jesus.

Unfortunately, we who are sealed by God will still suffer ... but ultimately we are safe in God's hands.

Writing to Ephesus (one of the churches to whom Revelation is also addressed), Paul writes: *"God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ – everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, and he makes everything work out according to his plan.*

"God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring praise and glory to God. And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him." More literally, *"In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, **were sealed with the promised Holy***

⁹ The New Jerusalem has the names of the 12 tribes of Israel inscribed on the gates while the foundations have the names of the 12 apostles (Revelation 21:12-14): 12+12=24 (the 24 elders??? Only God knows.). Jesus, Paul, Peter, and John recognize that the new Israel are those who accept Jesus as their Saviour, regardless of their bloodlines: salvation is by faith in Jesus, not ethnic inheritance. Jehovah's Witnesses take these numbers – but not the tribes – literally – the first 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses will be in heaven, the rest of us – at best – can live in paradise on earth. We have to be careful – and consistent – how we interpret the symbolism in Revelation.

Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:9-14).

"The Lord watches over the path of the godly ..."the Psalmist writes (Psalm 1:6). May we rest secure in that knowledge ... We are sealed with His Spirit. We are safe in His hands. Lord, help us live as Your people ...

*Love has its source in you, Creator God.
Flows from you like an ocean,
into a world as unyielding as any shoreline cliff.
And like the ocean which batters,
erodes, and wears away
even the hardest stone,
your love persists,
finds cracks and inlets in hardened hearts,
flows inside and works a miracle.
Who would think that water
was more powerful than granite,
love mightier than the hardest heart.
Thank you, Creator God, for the power of your love
Amen.*

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Friday, July 19: Revelation 7:9-17

What makes a person a hero? Culturally, heroes are great warriors – think of the *Marvel* world of Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Black Widow. But Revelation gives us a radically different perspective on heroism. The great army of God turns out not to be powerful soldiers who slay the wicked in the name of God, but an army of martyrs who die proclaiming God's message. Living as we do in a time of intense violence and warfare, how do we respond to challenges like ISIS, Boko Haram, the Gaza-Israel conflict, and so much more?

Karina Kreminski writes, *"Despite our theologies and positions on war and intervention, despite our national loyalties or non loyalties, despite our cultural, historical and institutional sensitivities, surely all of us must strive to respond in a Christ like way to the situation in Iraq today?"*

Mourn With Those Who Mourn: As I was reflecting on Romans 12:9-21 last week and thinking through what it means for us and for persecuted Christians to 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them' (v14), the verse that actually stood out to me was the one that came after, 'Mourn with those who mourn' (v15) or 'weep with those who weep'. There is a lot of grief, mourning, sorrow and weeping happening in the Middle East right now especially coming from our brothers and sisters in Christ who are being persecuted for their belief in Jesus. Can we imagine the grief experienced after having lived in a land which is your home then suddenly being forced to move out? Can we imagine the sense of threat that we would feel if three options were given to us by a cruel authority; convert to another religion, be permanently treated like a second class citizen or face death? Can we think about what kind of future children have in a situation like this? We need to grieve, weep and mourn for our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Middle East right now. Now is a time to sing songs of lament in solidarity and empathy with the global church.

Practice Peace: Jesus said that we are blessed if we are peacemakers. Surely, especially during times of upheaval, it is an opportunity to carefully look at what we have tolerated in our theology and practice which has led to violence or hatred. Jeremy Courtney says 'We need a long-term plan, not just a short-term fix. There are agencies helping Christians, Yezidis, Turkmen, Shabak and others, and those services are necessary. But this isn't only about what Obama or Maliki must do now. The Christian church needs to reconsider its relationship with violence; that is part of what has landed us and others in this dire situation. We cannot carp about Christian persecution and not talk about violence and our use of violent solutions. We need a 40- to 50-year plan so that when the time comes to overthrow the next dictator, we are not as blind to our own complicity and stuck with short-term gains.' Apart from applying this examination to what is occurring in Iraq, how can we Christians in the West practice daily peace? How can we practice peace as we post and debate on Facebook? How can we practice peace in our neighbourhoods? How can we practice peace in our most intimate relationships?

Engage In 'Shalom Activism': Often, engaging in the practice of peace making has the connotation of being passive. However this does not have to be the case if we model ourselves on Jesus who often used words and took actions that were subversive, provocative and intentionally confrontational. I have often wondered for example, why Jesus decided to heal on the Sabbath, knowing full well that it would upset some people in those days. I have heard the term 'shalom activism' used to describe actions undertaken by Christians which function to bring peace and wholeness into our world.

"These acts can range from writing to our national leaders to ask for a greater intake of refugees in our nation to help those fleeing persecution, which many Christians have done over the last weeks regarding the situation in Iraq, to staging peaceful protests regarding the build up of hatred and injustice in Iraq and other places under threat. Prayer is a subversive act that threatens the powers that exist as they begrudgingly recognise the reign of God which will eventually be clearly revealed and will fill our reality. Are we interceding like that persistent widow in the Gospel of Luke for situations where there is hatred, cruelty and bloodshed such as in Iraq right now?

Practice Loving Enemies: As a part of my doctoral project I asked a group of Christians from our church to regularly engage in missional practices, one of which is engaging in acts of 'radical hospitality'. A few weeks ago one participant decided as a part of showing hospitality, to leave some dried dates for a group of Muslims who were praying in the room next to where we worship on a Sunday as they broke their fast for Ramadan. A note was left saying 'God bless'. The other day, one of the praying Muslims came into our worship gathering to gift us with some cakes and sweets in response to our act of hospitality. It gave me hope in the midst of the tensions of today especially between Christians and Muslims.

"Many voices in our culture and our religions would unhelpfully try to convince us that we are enemies. However, even if we sometimes are enemies such as in the case with ISIS and Christians today, we are told by Jesus to love our enemies. Will we take his words seriously and practice them or will we write them on pretty plaques and place them on our freshly painted walls in our comfortable houses as mere ideals to aspire to? No one is saying this is easy, least of all for those poor people fleeing persecution right now. But our one distinction as Christians is not primarily our anger, our passion, commitment or even our hold on truth. As important as those qualities are, our one unique mark is supposed to be the practice of Christian love. This is a love that emulates the love of a God who gave his life for the world even when the world was his enemy. Even within the context of abounding hatred today, how can we practice loving our enemies?"¹⁰

"Salvation belongs to our God." (Revelation 7:10). That is good news. Ultimately the victory is His – and He has won it. For people in the brutally persecuted churches of John's day, for people in the viciously persecuted churches in Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria in our day, for people in churches that (alas) may be dreadfully persecuted in the future, this is good news.

Ultimately the greatest hero of history – the slain Lamb – the Lion - is our Good Shepherd who cares for us.

*We pray for all whose lives have been touched by tragedy,
whether by accident or a deliberate act.
For those who mourn, immerse them in your love
and lead them through this darkness into your arms, and light.
For those who comfort, be in both the words they use
and all that's left unspoken; fill each heart with love.
We ask this through Jesus Christ,
whose own suffering brought us life, here and for eternity.
Amen*

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Saturday, July 20: Revelation 8:1-4

The world is a noisy place. Silence – real silence – is so rare. And when you do experience it, it can be

¹⁰ <http://www.missionalliance.org/a-christian-response-to-iraq-and-isis-islamic-state/>

incredibly profound. I recall such a silence looking at the 20,456 names inscribed in The Air Forces Memorial, Surrey, England: men and women, from Canada and other parts of the British Commonwealth who have no known grave anywhere in the world, who died in air operations during World War II. Silence can also be incredibly uncomfortable (I find it so hard not to fidget during a prayer or symbolic moment of silence).

As the seventh seal is opened, as the scroll is about to be opened, there is silence – 30 minutes of silence. The thunder is silent. The four living beasts stop their 24-7 praise. The elders are silent. The tens of thousands of angels are silent. The vast army of heaven is silent.

Following the half hour of silence (which sounds like a short time, but would seem like an eternity – try it), the noise – of worship and judgment – will return. But for these moments, meditate in the silence.

See the seven angels standing with seven trumpets. Waiting. In silence. 30 L O N G minutes of silence.

See another angel enter with a golden censer (a vessel for burning incense). The sweet smell and the scented smoke of the incense fills the Temple. And, with the incense, the angel presents the prayers of all God's holy people – you and I – your prayers, my prayers – are placed before God. Your prayers from today are there.

Does prayer matter? Does it do anything? Why bother praying? Doesn't God know what we need anyway? These are all valid questions. And there are good answers. Prayer, if nothing else, helps us think through and express to God what is going on in our lives. Prayer shapes us as we work through our hopes and fears, needs and worries, dreams and issues and turn them over, in faith, to God. But in a profoundly mysterious way, there is so much more to prayer. Your prayers come, like aromatic incense, into God's presence. Your prayers are here in this profoundly holy silence, before the King of Kings and the Lamb upon the throne. Your prayers are here in the presence of God and His heavenly host. There is an eternity of time for your prayers to be heard ...

Spend some time in silence (if you can) today. Spend some time in prayer today. Bring everything and everyone in your life before God. Lift them up to Him. Give them over to Him. Like sweet incense, the angel is lifting your prayers up to God. Your prayers are here in God's Temple. He hears. He knows.

*God of wholeness, God of Grace,
to you we bring our thanks and praise.
To a world that searches you are a lamp that shines,
to a world that is hungry you are food that sustains,
to a world that suffers you are hope of release,
to a world that's broken you are one who restores,
to a world full of hate you are love that forgives,
to a world that denies you are truth that endures.
To you we bring our thanks and praise,
God of wholeness, God of Grace.
Amen.*

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Sunday, July 21: Revelation 8:5-13

The silence is over. The angel filled the incense burner with fire from the altar and throws it down upon the earth. Thunder crashes. Lightning flashes. There is a terrible earthquake. The seven angels with their trumpets begin to make loud blasts. More chaos and mayhem follow.

Think back to your Old Testament history (as John and his readers would have done): when were trumpets blown with devastating effect? Jericho. What did Jericho represent? The final victory as the children of Israel came out of slavery and Egypt and into the Promised Land. Reading about Joshua and Jericho as we do – from the "good guys" perspective – we forget that for the people of Jericho this was not good news of deliverance – this was a time of judgment and death. The people of Jericho would have told a very different story about trumpets. The trumpets of Jericho brought salvation or judgment, depending on your relationship with God.

As you read Revelation 8, the other Old Testament imagery we cannot escape is the story of the salvation of the Israelites from Egypt. Hail and fire, water turning into blood, poisoned water, and overwhelming darkness are all direct echoes of the plagues God cast on Egypt. Other images – a giant star falling from the sky echoes with deliverance from Babylon (Isaiah 14:12). Mountains being thrown into the sea resonate with Jesus' teachings (Mark 11:23). 1st Century Christians would have made all those connections. Are these literal or figurative? Who knows? What matters is the perspective with which we see all these cataclysmic events.

If we see them from the point of view of the Jerichoites, the Egyptians, or evil oppressors of John's – and our – day, we see judgment, destruction, and death. The "world" being destroyed is the world of Nero and ISIS, of Hitler and Boko Haram, of economic oppression and ethnic cleansing, of sexual exploitation and slavery, of injustice and intolerance, of racism and oppression, of human trafficking and environmental disaster. But if we see these events through the eyes of God's holy people – His saints – we see that these events are like the exodus from Egypt, the fall of the walls of Jericho, or the return from exile in Babylon. From the perspective of God's people these are visions of deliverance, hope, and new beginnings – purged of evil and sin.

Doesn't this seem like a lot of wanton destruction (even it is symbolic)? Doesn't it seem overly harsh? We could say the same things about the exodus and Jericho, too, of course. Here are a few thoughts:

1. Sin and evil are serious business, far more serious than we perhaps can appreciate. We would like to think that world is basically a great place with a few little blemishes (like Syria, Gaza-Israel, Nigeria, Ebola, HIV/AIDS, South Sudan, First Nations issues, homelessness, human trafficking, climate change, mental health issues, cancer, etc., etc., etc., etc.). Jesus, John, and the early churches remind us that evil is EVIL – and there is lots of it. We cannot just gloss over it.
2. Bandages are not enough. The world needs major surgery. Most scholars interpret these images as highly symbolic rather than literal. Symbolically or literally they speak of the radical overturning of "the normal way of doing things" – economically, socially, environmentally – and a need for radical change.
3. From the perspective of Christian faith, these judgments are words of purification, hope and healing. These are words of deliverance and salvation. Think of the hope of the Israelites in the Promised Land, as it was meant to be. Think of the (upcoming vision) of the pure and holy New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22). It's only as evil is swept away that God's holy Kingdom can truly come.

As the people of God we are still called to be His Kingdom and His priests. Despite the evil in the world we are called to live as His people and to do our best to see that His Kingdom does come on earth as it is in heaven. We will NEVER get there. But we try. Because through our witness and our example people see the real power and real Person of God reflected (albeit imperfectly) in us.

*May this be a day of hope, of expectation,
of relishing each moment as a gift from you.
May this be a day of freedom, of breaking free,
of loosening the chains that still surround us.
May this be a day of peace, of wholeness,
of knowing that our lives are in your hands.
May this be a day of joy, of blessing,
of living in your kingdom as a child of God.
Amen*

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Monday, July 22: Revelation 9:1-12 (Joel 2:12-32 for background)

"It was a dark and stormy night ..." This is how Snoopy always begins his yet-to-be-written novel in the comic strip, *Peanuts*. As the fifth angel blows his trumpet, it is a dark and stormy night in Revelation 9, too.

Many people in the ancient Near East believed there literally was a geographical location somewhere on earth called the Abyss (similar to the Greek concept of Hades, or the Underworld). So what John sees is an image echoing other literature of his time that we are not familiar with, but which his readers know well (1 and 2 Enoch, the apocalypse of Zephaniah). Out of that horrible Abyss come locusts which John describes in more

gruesome detail than any other creature in Revelation. The hideous locusts represent the violence, evil, oppression, and death associated with one grotesque regime after another in human history.

But there is a personal aspect to this, too. Human beings were created by God to bear and to reflect His image, to be good stewards of His creation, to model His love, to be His people. But how far of those lofty ideals we have fallen. How much has the image of God, in people, been disfigured by sin.

Think about locusts in the Old Testament context: when do we see them? Locusts were one of the ten plagues on Egypt before the children of Israel were set free (Exodus 10:13-14) – a symbol of judgment on the Egyptians and of hope for the Israelites. Even more reminiscent of Revelation is Joel 1-2 – a locust army invades Israel and lays it waste. Significantly, despite the suffering of God's people, the good news in Joel's prophecy is that God will deliver His people and bless them with new life in a restored and purified country. I have encouraged you to read from Joel 2 as well. Undoubtedly John's readers would have made this connection. It is good for us to hear the good news associated with these locusts as well.

In Joel 3, the Lord goes on to pronounce judgment on the evildoers who have oppressed and attacked His people. God takes sin very seriously. Those who kidnap, rape, torture, economically oppress, and kill innocent people will pay for their crimes.

But for God's people there is hope. The good news of Revelation and Joel is God's people will come through these brutal times ... albeit sometimes as martyrs. *"That is why the Lord says, 'Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead.' Return to the Lord your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love"* (Joel 2:12-13).

The dreadful images of judgment in Revelation and Joel (1) assure us of God's (ultimate) justice on those who are evil, and (2) are a call to all people, everywhere, to repent and put their faith in the great, good God of salvation. *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,"* Joel says (2:32). That is great news.

*Bless the hands that bring wholeness to lives blighted by sickness.
Bless the saints who in sad and desperate places bring a sense of hopefulness.
Bless the Christians facing daily opposition, showing a faithful witness.
Bless the generosity of the rich and powerful, for the gift of thoughtfulness.
Bless the peacemakers working in conditions that are often hazardous.
Bless the politicians whether good or bad, for their decisions affect all of us.
Bless our words and actions as we carry your light into places shrouded in darkness.
Bless your children, whoever they might be, with the warmth of your love and grace.
Amen.*

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Tuesday, July 23: Revelation 9:13-21 (Joel 3 for background)

Back in my youth the great fear was global thermonuclear war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact (Soviet Union aligned) countries. In the James Bond movies of the day, the Soviets were the bad guys. Now the great fear is either radical Islamic terrorists or white supremacist/white nationalist terrorists.

Back in John's day the nightmare scenario was an invasion by the Parthians – the descendants of the Persians (remember Cyrus, Darius and the Persian Wars against Greece?). The Parthians were skilled horsemen and archers (see the first horseman of the apocalypse). They were based north of the Euphrates River in modern day Iran. John's description of the barbaric cavalry in Revelation 9 is a dramatic exaggeration of what a Parthian invasion might look like: to people in his day it was a nightmare scenario they could really imagine if the Parthians were to sweep south across the Euphrates.

The "point" of the locusts and the army (like the point of the exile into Babylon) was so that people turn to God and repent (see 9:20-21).

Tom Wright comments, *"Well, one might say, it didn't work, did it? All those threats, all that torture, all that death, and still people didn't repent. But that is a common enough observation, both in the Old Testament and in the new (e.g. Romans 2:1-11). For many Jewish and early Christian thinkers the sequence of thought goes like this. Given the deep-rooted and destructive wickedness which emerges from the depth not only of the individual human heart but even more so from the systems of domination and oppression that humans together create, what is God to do? If he were to simply wipe out his creation, the whole thing would be a massive failure. But if he allows people space to repent, to come to their senses, to worship him as the source of life rather than demons and idols which are the source of death (verses 20-21), that patient mercy always risks the possibility that people will use the breathing space to make matters worse. The result is that the human systems and individuals that continue to rebel will simply make themselves all the more ripe for eventual judgment ..."*

Similarly, Joel 3 speaks to God's ultimate judgment of all that is evil. But there is great hope for the ultimate vindication and deliverance of God's people as well. As God's people we need to hear the hope and salvation for God's people implicit behind the doom and judgment on evil. John is showing us the destruction of those who *"still refused to repent of their evil deeds and turn to God. They continued to worship demons and idols made of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood – idols that can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their witchcraft or their sexual immorality or their thefts"* (9:20-21).

But beneath the surface, God's people thrive: *"But the Lord will be a refuge for his people, a strong fortress for the people of Israel. 'Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, live in Zion, my holy mountain. Jerusalem will be holy forever, and foreign armies will never conquer her again. In that day the mountains will drip with sweet wine, and the hills will flow with milk. Water will fill the streambeds of Judah, and a fountain will burst forth from the Lord's Temple, watering the arid valley of acacias ... Judah will be filled with people forever, and Jerusalem will endure through all generations. I will pardon my people's crimes, which I have not yet pardoned; and I, the Lord, will make my home in Jerusalem with my people"* (Joel 3:16-21).

May God give us His hope today ...

*God of Love, God of Peace,
This fractured word cries out in pain,
Burns deep into my soul,
And challenges me to make a difference.*

*God of Love, God of Peace, God of this world,
Scarred by grief and tears, ignorance and fear,
Soften hearts of stone,
And begin with mine.*

*God of Love, God of Peace,
Create within me a heart for people,
A desire for change,
For new beginnings to start this day.
Amen.*

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Wednesday, July 24: Revelation 10

We are awaiting the seventh trumpet ... and we are kept waiting, again ... (the last big wait, if you recall, was between the 6th and 7th seals – do you sense a pattern here?).

The awesomeness of the angel reminds us of the Throne Room in Revelation 4-5 once again. Our God is an awesome God. Though it may appear that the world has gone crazy, this incredible God is still very much, ultimately in control. He just doesn't do things the way we might like Him to.

The thunder reminds us that we do not know all we would like to know. There are mysteries we cannot begin to comprehend. We do not know all the details of the future. We cannot predict dates and times. We have to accept that even though we may not like it.

As Christians we can easily poke holes in the theology of Jehovah's Witnesses who take the 144,000 number of saints in heaven literally and have used the text of Revelation to predict the return of Jesus on several specific dates ... only to be wrong each time. But other Christians – especially evangelical Christians – are often just as fascinated with fancy end-times schemes and prophetic teachers who seem to have it all figured out, too ... only to be wrong each time. There are things we just do not – and cannot – comprehend.

The promise of *no more delay* reminds us that though we wait now, God's delay will not last forever. We have no idea when, but one day, some day, God will fulfill all His promises, Jesus will return, and judgment – and reward – will occur.

Also, "*We should follow John's example, obeying even when the message we are called to proclaim proves bitter or makes no sense to us. Some circles, especially those that emphasize prosperity, condition audiences to expect only pleasant things from God, but his message is not always pleasant, though he always provides the obedient grace to endure it (see Jeremiah 39:18, 45:5)*"(Craig Keener).

Finally, the message of Revelation – both judgment and hope, both destruction and salvation – is for all people, of every nation. This is not just a message for one people group, but for everyone. Back in Revelation 7, John saw, "*a vast crowd, too great to count, **from every nation and tribe and people and language**, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, 'Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb.'*" No matter who you are, you are welcome to come and know the Lamb-Lion.

*In my heart I have known such intimacy with you Lord,
known you are always within my reach.
I have heard your glorious whisper
breaking through the clamour of the world in which I move,
spent time in silent worship,
in places of tranquility and peace.
But there are moments when, deep in my soul,
you seem so far away,
when the moments of my day
are consumed by my own self-interest, ambition and pride,
when my heart judges and declares my guilt.
Draw me close again,
restore the love I first knew,
that I might worship you in spirit and truth
not only with my lips
but with each moment of my day.
Amen.*

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Thursday, July 25: Revelation 11:1-14

Revelation is a challenging book to understand. The most challenging passage in Revelation may be this one. What do we take literally and what do we understand symbolically?

John is called to measure a Temple – but the Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed, so it cannot be that Temple. In Jewish thought, by definition, the Temple of God symbolizes God's actual presence. It is defined by where His presence is. As John is writing, Christians understand the Temple to refer to the Christian church – the people among whom and in whom God actually dwells by His Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16, Ephesians 2:18-22, 1 Peter 2:5). It's not an easy time to be the church, however. As we noted in the Jesus' letters to the seven churches and Christians in the Middle East know today – following Jesus can be tough.

The two witnesses/prophets are reminiscent of Elijah (power to shut the sky so no rain falls) and Moses (power to turn the rivers and oceans into blood and strike the earth with every kind of plague). Most commentators

suggest they refer to the church – as the church we are God’s witnesses, telling people of the love of God revealed in Jesus. And as the church, God’s people, we often do suffer for our faith. As God’s faithful people we know that even if we die for our faith, we have the certain hope of resurrection life.

It all sounds very grim. But notice

- When God judged Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:32) He was going to destroy 100% of the residents; He would have spared them if only 10 righteous people were there; in Revelation 11, however, only 1/10 is to fall and 9/10 are to be saved. This is much better.
- When God was judging Israel through Elijah, only 7000 were found faithful; in Revelation 11 only 7000 are killed and the vast majority is saved. This is much better.

God does take the rebellion and corruption in the world seriously. But He is also a God of mercy. He is determined to rescue and restore His creation. God wins His victory – not through the conquest of armies or military might – but through the faithful death and resurrection of the Lion/Lamb – Jesus. And He wins His victory through the faithful witness and (unfortunately sometimes) the suffering of His people in the church.

Dr. Martin Accad, a professor at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, reflects on the challenges of being a Christian in the Middle East, and of what it means to be a faithful witness in tough times: *"We do not choose where we are born. Many do not get the opportunity to leave. Most who do, have left. There are about three times more Lebanese immigrants around the world than there are inhabitants in Lebanon. There are two types of Lebanese living in Lebanon: those who have not (yet) gotten the opportunity to leave, and those who have decided to stay for a cause. If you could leave but do not, then you have chosen to stay. My family and I belong to that second category, at least for the time being ... Well, my children don't have the choice. One day they will have to make that decision for themselves. But I have discovered over the years that if the staying is to make any sense, it has to be supported by a 'theology of staying.'*

"Now theology of presence is a theme that has been explored to some extent in Christian spirituality as well as ministry. The presence of God with us through his Spirit, in turn inspires our own incarnational ministry alongside other human beings. Such thoughts may be straightforward enough. They are directly inspired from the incarnational model of Jesus, who lived his life alongside the poor and the outcast of society. Jesus walked with the needy (read: those who recognized their own needs) as they journeyed towards inner freedom, freedom from sin, and moved closer to God. They discovered God's Fatherhood as they experienced being his children. As the Apostle Paul put it, 'in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19). God, then, by his continual presence among us, powerfully manifested historically in Christ, is our great model of incarnational presence as we seek to serve our sisters and brothers in the world around us. But if thinking theologically about presence is fairly straightforward Biblically, what about a theology of staying? As important as it is to have a solid foundation to BE somewhere, it seems just as important as well to understand why we stay.

"First, a theology of staying is rooted in a fundamental trust in God. It reflects the recognition that God is Master of all, that my life first and last belongs to him; that I am primarily a steward of it. Of course I am invited to develop a healthy sense of ownership over my life, one that will motivate me to take care of it and put some reasonable structure and order into it, but I can never really 'save it.' Jesus put it like this: 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for me will save it. What good is it for a person to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?' (Luke 9:24-25). Risk is all around us, wherever we live. I incur risk when I cross a street in Switzerland, but I manage that risk because I know it is safer to cross on green than on red. We do not flee risk, we manage it."¹¹

Thankfully we are not experiencing the suffering Christians did in John's day or Christians in Iraq, Syria, and North Africa do today. Pray for our sisters and brothers in the Middle East, North Africa, and other troubled areas around the world. It is (a little bit) "risky" living for Jesus in our communities, too. How can we be faithful to the call God has placed on our lives where we do live?

¹¹ <https://imeslebanon.wordpress.com/2014/03/20/when-the-state-starts-crumbling-a-theology-of-staying/>

*We want for nothing if we listen to our God,
his gentle whisper breaking through the storms of life.*

*We want for nothing if we rely upon our God,
his grace enough to bring healing into broken lives.*

*We want for nothing in the service of our God,
in blessing others through our lives so we are blessed.*

*We want for nothing in the worship of our God,
his Holy Spirit, the comforter, will satisfy our souls.*

Amen

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Friday, July 26: Revelation 11:15-19

We've been waiting with baited breath for the seventh trumpet (Revelation 8-9) ... After the struggle of God's people to live faithfully, we have this dramatic proclamation: *"Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices shouting in heaven: 'The world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.'"* The victory is won.

The book of Revelation seems to come around in circles, telling the story of the church's suffering, God's overwhelming victory, and judgment on evil, time and time again. It's as if John is looking at the same cosmic realities from different perspectives and helping us see the pain and struggle – and the victory and celebration – from various viewpoints. Rather than being a linear series of sufferings and victories, John may be describing the same basic events over and over using new images. He really wants us to understand that life, as a faithful follower of Jesus, can be challenging. He also really, really wants us to understand that in the end, God's justice and mercy always prevail. There is no doubt. No question.

The song the elders sing is one of praise and of judgment. The concept of judgment makes us uneasy sometimes because we worry that good people will suffer. But look closely at who and what is being judged and cast out: *"It is time to destroy **all who have caused destruction on the earth**"* (11:18). It is those who are destroying God's creation – the evil ones and the evil they do – who are cast out. Judgment is only judgment of evil. God's people are not only saved, but enjoy God's blessing.

Reflecting on the situation in the Middle East, Dr. Martin Accad continues, *"Secondly, a theology of staying is founded on a fundamental belief in the equal value of all human life. I always find it slightly insulting when foreigners jump on the first flight out of the country every time the security situation gets rough in Lebanon. When well-meaning members of NGO's and mission organizations, who have come on a mandate to offer physical and spiritual support to those in need, are only able or willing to do so in times of peace and stability, it becomes slightly demoralizing for those who stay back. At a deep level, leaving at times of greatest need communicates to those staying – no doubt unintentionally – a downright message of 'my life is more valuable than yours.' Therefore, a theology of staying affirms fundamentally: 'my life is as valuable as every other life, not more and not less.'*

Thirdly, a theology of staying is rooted in a mature acceptance of the mysterious nature of evil. Fleeing is a capitulation to the black and white worldview. It explains away the source of evil by avoiding asking the tough questions underlying the reasons for danger. 'People around me are bad and they are doing bad things; therefore I must leave.' Perhaps one of the cruelest lessons of the horrifying Syrian conflict is that it offers no clarity on who is the 'good guy' and who is the 'bad guy.' Who are Syrian refugees in Lebanon fleeing from, and which/who is the evil that has driven them out? Do I have to stay in order to find out?

This leads me to my fourth principle that is closely related to the third: a theology of staying is realistic in recognizing the all-embracing nature of sin. If I were to leave, what would I be fleeing from, seeing as I am so hopelessly interwoven in the humanity that produces all this evil that so terrifies me? Someone recently said to me, seemingly seriously puzzled: 'We know Bashar... He's the bad guy. But who are the good guys? Who do we support in this conflict?' But it is perhaps this simplistic 'good guy/bad buy' worldview that fosters the evil that continues to grind at our humanity. In this view, we are always the 'good guys' of course. And the other

guys who disagree with us must necessarily be the 'bad guys.' If we get rid of them, then good will prevail. And we will have done this all in the name of morality and the greater good. But aren't such statements the stuff that constitutes the rhetoric of war?"

We do live in challenging times. It is good to remember that, *"The world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (present tense), and he will reign forever and ever."* Even in the midst of the chaos of our times, God reigns supreme. He will sort it all out. There will be justice for those who destroy God's creation – people, creatures, and the environment. In the meantime, we are called to live in faith and to wrestle with serious – difficult – issues as Dr. Accad is doing. How do we live as God's holy people, who fear His name?

*May God the provider
of green pastures and quiet waters
be the peace in our hearts today.
May Jesus our guide
on mountain top and valley deep
be the hope in our hearts today.
May the Spirit of truth and knowledge,
comforter and friend,
be the strength in our hearts today.
Amen*

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Saturday, July 27: Revelation 12:1-6

Sam Chaise, former Executive Director of Canadian Baptist Ministries, writes, *"I used to read the book of Revelation as a detective, trying to ferret out details and establish a chronology of what was going on, with the goal of understanding what would happen at the end of time. This is how I had been taught to read it, as if it was a novel containing a mystery that had to be solved. This was the era of Hal Lindsey's "Late Great Planet Earth", whose theology and eschatology (doctrine of last things) found later expression in the fictional series "Left Behind", by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.*

"Sadly, by reading Revelation that way, I missed most of what it was designed to do in me. I missed the deep hope that is found in it. I missed the calls to worship that are embedded in the text. I missed the invitation to wonder, to grow strong and courageous, and to persevere. It occurs to me that these are the sorts of things we need more than ever today, as we grapple with the world's brokenness and seek to live lives that participate in God's inbreaking Kingdom.

"Over the years, I have learned to read Revelation as a worshipper. Revelation is full of images and poetry and action scenes, all of which pull back the curtain on deep reality and allow us to take a peek. Of course we don't understand it all or "get it". The fact that deep reality would overwhelm our ability to understand it is one of the reasons God chose to become present on the planet not as raw Trinity but as a human being.

"We see the glory of God's reign, in the Throne Room. We see battles between the forces of Heaven and the forces of evil. We see things and hear sounds and smell smells – it's a bit like performance art. And we see how the Story ends.

"A while ago I was reading Revelation 12, which is what the Christmas story looks like from the perspective of deep reality: a dragon waits to devour a child who is about to be born, but the child is snatched up to heaven and war breaks out between the angels of heaven and the angels of the dragon. (I have yet to see this version of the Christmas story enacted in a Christmas pageant.) Here we see the epic-scale of the battle between good and evil, and how central to that battle is the birth of Christ.

"All of the misery and suffering and corruption that we experience today are echoes of that story. Still, today, the dragon waits to devour all that is good and to vandalize God's good creation. Evil can't create, it can only de-create. Revelation 12 continues to echo in our lived experience. In the story, the dragon is cast down to the earth. For the moment, evil is overcome. But the story continues, as the dragon pursues the offspring of the woman . . . the Church. The battle continues.

"We do know how the Story ends, however. In Chapter 22 of Revelation we see that God's home, the Holy City, arrives on planet earth, the new dwelling place of God and His people. Throughout human history God has been gardening glory in the nations of the earth, and all of that is now brought into the Holy City. At the end of time, God triumphs.

"In the diversity of the Church we may have many different ways of reading and approaching Revelation. But surely one way to "test" our readings is to see whether they produce hope, obedience, joy, courage, perseverance, and expectation. If they don't, i.e. if they don't produce the fruit of the Spirit in us, we should abandon those ways of reading.

"If we read Revelation as worshippers, we will discover that it takes on the character of devotional literature, strengthening our devotion and filling us with God's life. In times of trouble, and indeed in all kinds of times, we need to be reminded of how the Story ends."¹²

We began our study of Revelation reminding ourselves of the amazing love of God revealed to us in Jesus (we read 1 John 4:7-21, also written by John). God loves us – an incredible amount. We are also called to live as God's people, His Kingdom ambassadors, reflecting His love and grace through our lives. As we read of these cosmic struggles, how can we "live it out"? How does our faith shape our lives?

*May this be a day of hope,
of expectation,
of relishing each moment as a gift from you.
May this be a day of freedom,
of breaking free,
of loosening the chains that still surround us.
May this be a day of peace,
of wholeness,
of knowing that our lives are in your hands.
May this be a day of joy,
of blessing,
of living in your kingdom as a child of God.
Amen.*

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Sunday, July 28: Revelation 12:7-18

We have noted the book of Revelation comes around in circles, telling the story of the church's suffering, God's overwhelming victory and salvation, and judgment of evil, time and again. John is looking at the same cosmic realities from different perspectives and helping us see the pain and struggle – and the victory and celebration – from various viewpoints.

Here we go again. Only this time we are not seeing so much of the actual struggle against flesh and blood as the spiritual battles being fought in the background. From this perspective, it is the dragon – Satan, the devil – and his army of fallen angels – not actual flesh and blood people – who are driving the persecution of Christians on earth.

We have the most amazing Christmas story (birth-of-Jesus) and life-of-Jesus in Revelation 12. As Sam Chaise noted yesterday, we don't often see this played out in Christmas pageants.

Satan is called the "accuser" or the "deceiver." On the one hand he deceives the whole world by blinding people to the truth of God's amazing love, revealed in Jesus. On the other hand, he also is behind the false accusations made about Christians through the ages. In John's day, Christians were accused of everything from cannibalism (Jesus had said of the meal they ate together, *"This is my body ... this is my blood ..."*), to amoral lives (they called communion a "love feast" – an unfortunate name.), to treason (they would not offer incense to Caesar

¹² <http://cbminor.wordpress.com/2014/08/20/comfort-for-troubled-times-the-book-of-revelation/>

and called Jesus their Lord). As a result Christians were brutally persecuted.

Tom Wright comments that this passage, *"only just avoids descending onto a comic-strip cosmic car chase. The dragon spits out a jet of water like a river to carry the woman off; the earth opens up its mouth to swallow up the river; the woman escapes; and the dragon, angry, turns his attention elsewhere – precisely to the woman's 'children', further defined as 'those who keep God's commands and the testimony of Jesus.'* In other words, once again, you too (John is saying to his readers) are part of this drama. Don't be surprised that the dragon is out to get you, with more of his foul but powerful accusations, spat out like a flood. Trust that the God of creation will look after you ...

"You must expect, though, that more is to come: more persecution, more attacks, more false accusations ... The decisive battle has been won, and the devil knows it; but his basic nature of 'accuser' is now driving him, more and more frantically, to the attack, to accuse where it's justified and where it isn't, to drag down, to slander, to vilify, to deny the truth of what the creator God and his son, the Lamb, have accomplished and are accomplishing. This is the ongoing battle in which all Christians are engaged, whether they know it or not" (Revelation for Everyone, p.112-3).

Revelation helps us prepare for difficult times. Billy Graham notes his wife grew up in a missionary family in China and saw how God prepared His church during times of trouble before the Communist revolution so they could withstand the even greater troubles under communism. In China, hardships strengthened individual believers and the church so they could make it through more intense persecution.

As James notes: *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing"* (James 1:2-4).

When you face tough times ... allow those intense moments to draw you closer and closer to Jesus so you will have an even stronger foundation for the future.

*Ever-present God,
you walk with us through good times and bad,
mountain top, and valley deep,
your footsteps our guide,
hands our support.*

*Ever-present God,
you are close to us when life is smooth or rough,
in wholeness and brokenness,
your healing our hope,
your touch our desire.*

*Ever-present God,
bring comfort and peace and the warmth of your presence
and I shall fear no thing,
for you are with me, always.
Amen*

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